

Chapter 1

Stilling a Stone

Dayton Winstead

Health Camp Waco, November 30, 2020

He felt more than desperate to walk into that Health Camp. He was desperate and stupid to enter a deadly place. But Dayton's wife, Melissa, was trapped there among 38,317 people, all infected with HIVE-5, and some even with AIDS Ultra. She volunteered to go get testimony to make the government release them, restore their rights. Another stupid idea.

He corrected himself. He didn't walk in, it was more like breaking in. Nobody just walked into one of these government camps, set up by the hundreds across the country to quarantine a virus people transmitted by touch. 13 million more each month in a Camp or dead, for more than a year. "I walked into the Camp, one of hundreds where millions more every month are locked away." That was the kind of bullshit stretch he'd use in his reports for *Viral Times*. He knew how to say it with a straight face for the cameras, the soundcasts, everything that media hub was using. He figured blurring up his reports with a little bullshit didn't really matter. Truth was, people cared more about the feelings than the facts.

He looked across the wide and dusty meadow, filled with scuffed khaki army surplus tents set up across the former Bush Presidential Ranch. Another kind of Camp X-Ray, a little joke on the dead ex-Prez. His rescue plan started to feel like a bad joke. Dayton didn't know who to approach first. He thought of the setup. A guy walks into a Health Camp, spots a sick lady and says, "Where can I find another sick lady?"

It didn't play out any funnier when the woman in the denim skirt and a brown bandana yelled back at him. "What, I'm not sick enough for you?" She glared. "Look at these eyes, runny and red. Hell, Pavarotti couldn't cough this good."

A splatter of mucous overload spilled onto her hike boots as she bent down to cough, her hands on bony shins. He logged the evidence of HIVE-5. Or New Flu. But when she looked up, she was already on a roll.

"I can see you're new in here." She wheezed with a sound that cut the morning mist.

"Lady, I know you're sick enough. But you're not my sick wife." She looked at him like he was a frog crawling out of a blender. "I know," he said, "bad joke, you're not my wife. But walking in here on her own, that was another bad joke. I'm just trying to fix her punch line."

"She walked in? And you're walking in after her?"

Just how love is, he thought. "Yeah, on her own. She's a lawyer. The feds say she's sick now, maybe dying." He threw the last bit like a hook in the water, hoping to snag her help with a little sympathy. The kind of trick that worked with the celebrity journalism that he knew. This real news was so different, harder.

"Be dying. That's what people say all lawyers should do."

"Not that kind of lawyer. ACLU. For the people's rights."

The woman wiped her forehead and lifted one brow. "That one. I know her, and so maybe I know you."

"You know me? I mean, her?"

"Been looking for you, too. You look fresh as washed khakis. That sticks out in a place where people are getting sent to die."

His mind raced, trying to turn the conversation to something he could use to find Melissa. "Dying in a Health

Camp. Another bad joke.” He looked around, scanning the row of tent doors flapping open across the brown acres of grass.

“You ain’t gonna find her searching like that, fella.” She grabbed his shoulder. “I heard of her. Met her, actually. She came through Friday, talking to a lot of people.”

“To you maybe, like an interview? That would be Melissa. Deposing, she might have called it.”

This is taking forever, he thought while reaching for a short-cut. Maybe an hour or two until Ultra could kill Melissa, given the 24 hours ago the Healthland goons said she got the virus. “I’m running behind again,” he muttered, but this bandana woman was all he had to work with. She reached to try to grab his hand. He pulled back, knew she was carrying HIVE-5 at the least. He dodged and tried to make her surrender what she was hinting at.

“Got to keep moving. I don’t have this much time.”

“Not much manners either, mister. My name’s Lucy, and you didn’t hear me good. I said I saw her come through here. You got a learning disorder or something?” She hacked up a wad of phlegm and spat away from him.

“Sorry, I get in a hurry. That’s what my editor yells at me for.”

“You, a reporter?”

“Why not?” He looked down to see if his fly was open, or he had viral wipe paper trailing from his boot.

“You don’t look as bright as those guys who I see reporting on us. But I’m taking your word for it. You wanna know what we talked about, this Melissa of yours?”

“Just need to know where she is now. Camp officials said she’s bad sick.”

“Then she’d be down at the Vortex. Came in looking as fresh as you, though. Not sick enough for the Vortex.”

“I can’t figure it either. Only in here two days. So what about that Vortex? I gotta get there if she’s there.”

“She got sick quick, but she said she couldn’t help it. She wanted me to tell you that she didn’t cheat on you in here. No details, mister. Maybe she thought better of bringing it up.”

They’d talked about the risk before she volunteered to depose the inmates. He knew, everybody did—quickest way to get HIVE-5 and Ultra was to have real sex, the deadly stuff. Melissa’s beautiful, Melissa is driven. What might she trade to get a witness to open up? Last night, when they sent word out that she was infected and not coming back out, he thought of what Healthland Security might do to her if she was injecting hope into the Camp. How they’d make it happen, and fast. He tried to put that kind of sex out of his mind.

Lucy pulled on the edge of his anti-viral cloak, the thick orange Tyvek with the Kevlar ribs. “She just walked into the wrong place, mister. She figured you might find her if something went bad, I guess. You can figure for herself how she got the Ultra.”

But then I do what, he thought. Beam the both of us up? Nobody leaves these camps except when they’re dead—like there’s no exit ramp. He didn’t have a great plan on the back end of his rescue mission. Unguarded fence again, maybe, like the one this morning. Long shot, though—they guarded a lot tougher against escapes than anybody getting inside.

Lucy snapped her fingers in front of his face.

“Hey reporter-boy. You kinda checked out on me there. Let me explain it to you. Vortex, bad.” She shook her shoulders slow, as if her bones might crack if she moved too fast. “It’s out against the Wind Wires.”

“Wind Wires?”

“We call ’em that. People stand there, hoping for somebody to come out of treatment. Wind’s always out

of the south on that end of the camp. It whips through the wires on the fence tops down there.”

“Why the singing sound?”

“Dunno. We don’t want to hear that sound, mister. Means you’re walking toward the dying. They make sure the dying happens inside there, so the rest of the guards and staff don’t get infected. You don’t want to go in there. If you’re not already bad sick, you’ll be that way soon enough.”

“Hey, I’m not afraid of New Flu,” he lied, “or Ultra, either.”

“Well if you’re not afraid, you ain’t even as bright as I thought. It’s your funeral. But if you want me to tell you any more, you gotta help me back to my tent. I’m feeling a little weak.”

He looked at his watch. She’d helped so far. Couldn’t spend much longer on her. A lot of his sources he’d blow off after a couple of minutes. But this one, he hoped she was a teller, not just a talker. With 83 acres of Camp Waco, he needed to get smart quicker.

“You talk any faster than this?” he asked.

“When I’m sitting down, not coughing.”

“So which way to your tent?” He started dreaming up a lead to his story.

On the way we passed people who looked like the medless bums on the streets back in Austin, hell, in every city by now. Okay, so bums isn’t fair. But even the medless didn’t look this bad, the smell of their sweat like a stale smack of a hand across my face. I remember wrapping my kerchief tighter while we walked past the mottle-skinned men and women and kids. Not many kids. Everything was damp, sticky like after a sneeze. Thousands of respiratory glands running overdrive. It was like

walking through a nuke strike zone. I didn’t want to think about what I might be catching; I had to catch up to Melissa. If I could spring her, she’d be the first ever to get out. I darted a glance at three guys who started to follow us, each as broad-shouldered as a widescreen, somehow, even while the rest of the camp looked scrawny. The wolves feeding off the sheep of the infected.

Dayton picked up his pace, looking straight ahead like when he’d bluff his way past movie stars’ security goons, behaving like he belonged. He followed Lucy close enough to smell the grime coming off her denim skirt that was stiff with dirt and smelled of unwashed sweat that could clear an Austin metro car. The stories about the Health Camp inmates like her weren’t accurate. What he could see and hear was much worse. Sounds of moaning carried on the baked wind moving between the tents. He had his hour to the deadline to find Melissa and get her out. Deadline would have a literal meaning for him if he couldn’t get himself out quick, too.

The three hulks stopped just outside Lucy’s tent like dogs against an invisible fence. Dayton saw kids moving inside. He felt like a schoolkid, dodging bullies by staying in the shadow of a parent. This felt nothing like the celebrity news he practiced before today. Nobody here was botoxed-up or face-lifted or hawking a movie or a book that wouldn’t matter in a few months.

Lucy stopped at a cot where a brown boy played with an auto-kite remote. No kite in sight, but that didn’t stop the tot’s play. People got that crazy with the New Flu, seeing things that weren’t there, running into traffic, or overdosing on hero-caine.

She watched him look at the boy. “He’s not sick, reporter-man.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“You were, but that doesn’t matter to my boy. Inside here, you’re no better off than either of us.”

He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes inside already, just to get to this lecture hall she was running on her ratty cot. At the bunk he saw pictures pinned on the gray tent wall: A man in a construction jumpsuit, smiling under a broad mustache, another of her smiling in a garden in front of a double-wide trailer. A votive candle flickered on the chipped field table next to the bed. A Bible lay open on a table, the page marked with a Jesus-shaped bookmark.

“I’m better off than some, Lucy. Maybe like my wife. How do I get to her? I’m not sick yet.”

“Stay here long enough and you’ll be like any of us.” She pulled out a faded orange SafeKerchief, the kind that Healthland gave out to people on the way to the camps. Lucy rubbed her eyes with it.

He winced. “Now that looks healthier.” The kind of crack that might’ve drawn a laugh on a movie set. But here it widened Lucy’s eyes.

“Play doctor on me one more time, go ahead. I wouldn’t even be helping you if she hadn’t given me one of these. She told me how you gave them to her.” She held open her palm to show off a diamond earring, one of the pair that Melissa never took off since he proposed to her with them.

“She took them off?” He remembered his wife swearing they’d only come off if she was leaving him. Kind of was, if he didn’t find her soon.

“Yeah, she took ’em off when she came back to my cot later on, looking a lot worse. Bad by then, like she’d been roughed up by somebody. Already had the signs of the flu, and told me you’d come find her.”

A favorite old movie for them, *Last of the Mohicans*. “I will find you, the hero said. Dayton made his reply slowly. “So she gave you those earrings because...”

“So you’d know it was really her that I met, not some bullshit story I’d tell so you could get served up for mugging by the likes of those goons out there.” She glanced over his head, and he turned around. “Naw, don’t look, fella. They can see us but not hear, and the kids in here keep the place safe. Even the Healthies will bust heads if the kids are in any danger.” She patted a pocket on her Swiss dotted blouse. “She and me, we had a deal. I could keep one of the earrings, to help get things for my boy. You don’t know how much a thing like this can buy in here, maybe save that kid’s life.” She leaned back on the cot.

“Healthier food. Protection. Cleaner water.”

“Medicine, too, I bet.”

“You don’t want to take a chance on the medicine in here. Making you well is not what this place is all about. Your wife said we were lab rats. It’s all in here.” She reached under the Bible and pulled out a Depose-a-Corder, that pocket recorder lawyers and cops and yeah, even some reporters used. “Said you could get this thing outside, then tell its stories. Maybe I can keep my little Puco healthy enough ’til you get ’em to close all this down, let us out.” She handed the recorder, thin and small as a watch, over to him with a shaky grip.

“I don’t care about any stories, or about closing down the camp. I just want to get Melissa out. How do I get to where she’s at, that Vortex?” He popped up off the cot while he rose his voice.

“A real hero, you are. Well she must’ve loved you anyway, ’cause she insisted I give you this earring.” She dropped the jewel into his palm by putting her hand over his, so he didn’t jerk back. “Rescue-boy, there’s about 40,000 people in here. None of them wants to go near the Vortex, so you’re gonna stick

out, making a beeline for it. But follow the latrine trench straight down the camp's middle road. When the people start thinning out, you know you're getting close. It's a dead-end road, so you can't make a wrong turn."

Not a walk along any red carpet, shouting questions to make a starlet turn. This time he didn't want anybody to notice him. Lucy picked up a tattered blanket and shook it out high, so he could use the distraction to slip away, out of the goons' glares. He started to head to that dead-end, hoping for somebody still alive.

He stopped and handed her back that earring. "Here. You might need this one, if you get a chance to get out."

"Hey mister. She told me something else. Only her husband would give that other diamond back."

"What else?"

"Said she loved you. And never thought it would end like this."

The edge of the recorder jabbed him while he bolted across the Camp. His eyes darted while he loped. He ran through the passages between the dorm tents, his thighs pounding and hungry to extend his stride. He knew the burn from his cycling, but this run stretched different muscles.

He was sure that she knew how to evade the obvious: The graze of touch from a stranger, sweat or tears of someone at close range, especially the passions of sex. And sex killed quickest.

Rape.

So if Melissa dies from Ultra, forced on her by someone infected—maybe someone sent on a mission—it would be murder, too.

He was being chased by the clock. Now his usual short-cut ways couldn't shorten his chase to Melissa.

He crossed out of the dorm sector and into what Lucy called the Meat Meadow. A flock of emus darted away from him. The frantic birds were supposed to provide food for the camp's inmates. While he toiled up the hill that lead away from the meadow, he glanced at the towers against the south-most fence line. From the distance, maybe the guards would think he looked like just another emu. He used the birds for cover. When he got closer to the Wind Wires he slowed to a brisk walk and then fought to control his panting.

The squads of Healthies popped up thicker as he neared the Vortex tents, until every other person seemed to wear the purple and gold of the security force. He dropped his head and coughed every few moments while his eyes crawled along the tops of his lids, searching for the entrance. The Viral Vortex, they called it in yesterday's statement. Drama he usually wrote when he was short on facts. He remembered the black humor from his info-digger Milo back at the *Times*. "Vortex, well—couldn't call it a Death Center, could they?"

Melissa must have already passed under the red V's of the Vortex banner. As usual, he felt like he was past deadline—the drop-dead A literal use of the phrase. If she was dying, how could he change that? He couldn't see the next section of the story, but he wanted a last glimpse of her alive. It felt foolish and essential all at once.

The smell slapped him across the face as he closed to within yards of the Vortex entrance. He saw no smoke, but something was burning, ripe and fresh and organic. The wind dispersed the scent of roasted pork. These tents were striped red and white, like they'd run out of surplus and decided circus stock would match the red Vs. Then he saw the bags, stacked in tiers six bodies high. Dozens of orange and black striped bio-haz

shrouds, shaped like butterfly cocoons, faced a wide pyramid of red drums. Healthland contract workers lifted the drums onto a cargo transport. They wore gray clean-room suits to hide evidence of the cremains, and their gloved hands shuttled slow, as if underwater. They took care not to disturb a shroud and risk infection.

The Healthies vanished inside the next tent, where about one body in 10 wasn't dead. You had to be Safe-Suited to be protected here, but safe was far from his mind. A worker walked away from a steel funnel running off an incinerator that delivered a stream of ashes into a drum. The man stepped clear of the dust of the dead in the heat. Dayton was sweating just from running in the wan November sun.

His rage boiled up. He crept towards the man just as he began to take off his hood. Dayton swung both hands clenched in a fist toward the man's head, landing a blow at the temple. The guy crumpled just like in the self-defense video they made staffers watch at the *Times*. The worker's clean-suit came off easy, but the next part could be really hard.

He entered the striped tent trying not to attract attention, passing stacks of shrouds and then into another section, crowded with tables that bore corpses. He swore at himself for missing obvious steps to find her faster. He was a celebrity writer, with every fact dished out to him. This stuff in here, nobody wanted to tell. He hoped for his usual luck. Every step he took was one closer to finding Melissa alive.

I could taste the sweat in the air even through the suit's filters. I looked left and right, then saw her on the table closest to the far door. Melissa lay as still as when she'd drift into the release of sleep, after hours of reading mysteries.

I clung to that image of peace until I got near her. Her face was masked with swelling amid the stamp of red and blue carcinomas from Ultra's final stage. Somehow her eyes were still open, and I felt a kick in my stomach when I looked into them. I imagined she could see me one last time.

I slid my hands under her now lifeless body. She was lighter than the last time I lifted her, the day I carried her back to the jeep after she turned an ankle on the Lost Mine Trail in Big Bend. I walked in that stolen suit along the path to the incinerators using the smallest of steps, savoring every moment of the last time I could hold her.

I whispered her eulogy. "This wasn't a mistake. You were right about that part. But I didn't want your damn mission." I could feel the same catch in my throat as when I got caught in a lie about a story. I glanced at the racks of bodies. "See, I was right about how it could end when you went in. But you were right about why you had to go."

Inside the tent he held her closer and clutched a hope he might draw her essence into him. The whine of an atomizing furnace crept into the helmet. The blast of sound matched the howl he felt bubble up. He'd never again wake to her grinding coffee for both of them, or listen to her shoulders dip through the waters of Balmorhea Lake, or hear her snicker at the bouncy baritone of his soundcasts. Her guff about his lightweight reporting, "toadying to the system." Now her death tossed that do-gooder challenge right in front of him.

Like any other worker he tucked her into a striped shroud, moving slow as he dared. Each tug of the Tyvek fabric covered another part of her. He crossed her arms over her heart, then sealed the bag with a swift tug. He slipped her body into the furnace. He wanted to be the last human to hold her. When the

blast started searing his helmet he turned away. He had to force one foot in front of the other to will himself outside and strip off the suit.

He bolted off to find an escape back through the fence. The skies opened up and started to spray a cold rain onto his already-damp face. The drops sang off the crew-cut buffalo grass like a smack on a herocaine junkie's forearm. Hot rain with viruses, or not? He had to get out of it and out of the Camp. He hunted for a gap along the fence-line, maybe another broken-sensor spot. Stupid, thinking he'd be as lucky as that. It only happened in the movies, the ones he watched on his mom's lap as a boy.

The recorder jabbed at him as it bounced in his cloak pocket. He stopped and reached inside to rearrange it. Then he felt that stone Milo pressed on him the night before at the *Times* cubicle. Dead weight, that stone, crazy, no bigger than a shooter's marble. To get out of here, he needed to put his finger on a real miracle. Maybe down along the river bluffs.

The storm rose to a howl while he squinted at the fence-line. That stone in his hand felt like a pebble against his rushing river of fear. He put it back into his pocket. The rains blotted out the daylight, making it tough to see even as far as the tower on the fence corner. He paced toward the black clouds in the west, but couldn't find any gap between the bottom of the fence and the gully.

When he found an opening at last, it was jammed with debris. A torrent of water coursed around the scrap metal. The Healthies had found the hole he used to get inside and plugged it. He kept walking past it, felt the pain in his chest where the stone rubbed against him, pressing where the fear was stabbing.

The Healthies would be hunting whoever struck down that worker back at the Vortex. He pulled out the stone.

He searched his memory for what Milo said about it. That genius down in the cubicle in the *Times* office had his tricks about him. Outliving AIDS marked him as a rare species. Everyone wanted to interview and test him: the hospice agencies, the Empire of Spiritual Comfort, scores of pharma scientists. After their amazed diagnosis, Milo said he felt healthier inside the virtual world he had shaped. He'd rock their world with a grin and his patter that he lived in "a digitized community populated by avatars of fellow-AIDS survivors." Just scientist-speak for the cyber-spot where Milo connected using "a fellow who looks elegant, not a man caught in a wheelchair with lifeless legs." Living in that virtual world gave Milo a sandbox for his passion to explore and crack data vaults.

Dayton couldn't even hope to get inside the Camp without Milo's magic. Like a wizard, he gave Dayton what he called a bloodstone, "a little relic for courage." He insisted Dayton take it, trilled at him from his dim cubicle. "You simply don't want to be prodding into that kind of place without some extra courage." He didn't take time to explain much more than that. Milo was as much a spirit as a savant. Dayton heard his sermons as often as Milo's analysis.

The stone, polished and shaped like a rhomboid, rested in Milo's palm down in that cubicle. Dayton picked it up. "What's this rock got to do with courage?"

He shook his head. "Everything. Bloodstone connects to your primal chakra energy. Survival, you know? I wear one next to my heart in an amulet." He tugged open his tunic, waved a a sweat-stained leather bag at him.

Dayton rolled his eyes. "From when I first got AIDS. Back then it was not Ultra, but bad enough to take away the dancing in

these legs.” He pointed at the limbs dangling in his wheelchair. “Polio.”

“Damn. Not much of that around.”

“AIDS, buddy, will plump up any other disease. AIDS is a Syndrome, stupid, 29 different kinds of sick from pneumonia to whooping cough. When my immunity dropped, I got bullied by polio.”

“And this bloodstone made you braver?”

“If AIDS doesn’t kill you, it sure will make you braver, you gorgeous hunk.” Milo re-buttoned his tunic. “I believe in bloodstone. When those paralyzing cramps came at my legs, night after night, I squeezed the shit out of that stone. Even prayed to it.”

Prayer, great. He took the stone to shut Milo up, so he’d give him the help to get past the fence line and into the Camp.

Back in the hiss of the rain that wrapped around the bark of thunderclaps across the Camp, prayer didn’t seem so bad an idea. He dropped to his knees and held the bloodstone under his bowed head. “No,” he said, “I don’t want to die in here too. Please. Somehow, I gotta find a way out.”

He tasted the salt from his tears and sobbed out whatever came to mind. “Please, help me. Somebody, give me a hand here.” He squeezed the bloodstone to his chest, thinking of Milo’s prayers during his worst time. His own chest ached with a desperate prayer. So this was faith?

Then he heard a chirp and felt the recorder inside his cloak whir to life. Its speaker squeaked out, “You need a hand, fella. But you’re nowhere’s near the way out.”

Was that Milo’s voice? It sounded muffled, like it was coming from inside his cloak. He opened his palm to see that bloodstone glowing, a faint pulse of green light that suffused the

red whorls across the stone. The closer he brought the stone to the recorder, the brighter it pulsed.

“That’s better,” Milo said. “I get a stronger signal that way.”

“Milo, how...” He tried to think of what he wanted to ask. How a stone could act as a transmitter. How the recorder could communicate with a rock. How Milo knew that he’d...

“Dayton, are you still there? All I can hear is the rain, and that sounds too much like static. Talk to me, fella.”

“Milo, how is this even possible? Where are you?”

“Out along the mag-lev rail stop. They’ve got me in a *Viral Times* truck, like in some old Bond flick. It’s just so spy-movie.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“Didn’t, until you started squeezing that stone. It doesn’t talk to the recorder until you do. I figured no matter what, nobody would want to take a stone away from you. The recorder, well, I had a feeling you’d get your hands on one.”

Melissa’s recorder. Her name pushed a wave of nausea through Dayton. A lightning flash snapped him out of a stormy memory, the one where she stood in the rain rolling off the porch in Fort Davis, trying to coax her terrier away from a squirrel that the barking dog had treed. The thunder sent his heart pounding and he pushed out a grunt as he stood up. He shook his head and heard Milo again.

“Dayton, there’s a way out. But you have to hurry. I can’t talk you over there much for longer than a few more minutes. At least that’s what my cousin says.”

“Cousin?”

“Don’t ask. Talk about real spy movie—he made up the bloodstone gadget. Says it’s only got about five minutes of transmit time before it goes dead.”

“Better it than me. Quick now, where’s the way out? The culvert under the fence-line is blocked. Water, metal and garbage—I’d never get back under there without drowning.”

“You’re at the fence now, right? At least that’s what the GPS says.”

“Standing right at it. I can barely see a tower about 50 yards to my left.”

“Oh, that’s not good. You’re between towers now. They’ll be able to scan you once the rain slows down. And that ought to be in about a minute or less, by the radar.”

Just as Milo’s words left the recorder, the hissing died off. Dayton began to steal away from the tower he could see, keeping to the fence-line. Barking rose up on the wind behind him.

“I can use some help right now, Milo.”

“Right.”

“Well?”

“No, I mean turn to the right.”

“I already did.”

“Keep moving. There’s a storm sewer coming up ahead of you.”

“I don’t want to drown in shit, Milo.”

“Calm down, antsy boy. It’s not in use yet. Just dug and piped, from what I can tell from these plans.”

Dayton nearly tripped on a sluiceway built up above ground level. “Shit!”

“So you found the gate, I take it. Use the lever on the right. It raises the gate.”

As the barking grew louder, he pulled on the metal bar. It didn’t move.

“It’s stuck.”

“Well, I can’t do much about that here. What direction are you tugging in?”

“I’m pulling.”

“Push, mister.”

He heaved himself on the lever and the gate rose. He climbed in and lowered the gate. The dogs were close now. He clambered down a ladder, and then dropped off at the bottom. The mud splashed onto his cloak and his chin. “Lovely.”

“You’re breaking up, fella. Don’t go anywhere just yet. Probably lose you in that sewer pipe.”

Now he could hear voices along with barking. “Better make it fast. What’s next?”

“The pipe leads toward the river, it looks like. Make for the end of it. I’ll talk to you after you get down there, out of the pipe’s cover.”

He started down the 8-foot wide pipe while boots scrabbled at the gate over his head. The barking grew manic and overpowered the voices. He stooped to run, lifting his knees like he had in track drills. He could see a faint light ahead when he heard the Healthies. “Just throw the damn dog down in there. He’ll get him.”

Claws scratched out on wet concrete. He remember his coach’s voice. “Kick, Winstead. Kick hard.”

He pulled up short at the end of the pipe and teetered on the lip. Below him the Brazos River was a swirl of mud and foam. Behind, the thumping of the dog’s lope rose in his ears. He heard the growl and leapt off the end of the pipe. He lurched for a limb of a juniper perched on the side of the bluff. He dove for the drenched branch. At the pipe, the dog sailed into the river, paddled and barked.

Later, inside the jet-copter, sorrow sat like a stone in his chest. He knew he shouldn’t be alive, should feel lucky the jet-copter pilot had picked him off that tree. He looked into the cockpit of the craft that the *Times* broke out for big stories, heard

the thump of the blades and the growl of the jets lifting them on a course across the river. Light drifted through the windshield and bounced off the cross dangling from the pilot's ear. He winced at that gleam. Melissa's diamonds sparkled like that when she wore them. What he carried beside his heart in a pocket was now only Milo's rock. He squeezed it, trying to wring out more of its courage.

Chapter 2

Acting Gods

Jenny Nation
PharmAlliance Atlanta lab, November 30, 2020

A lab coat's shoulder brushed her face and smothered her prayers, the ones Jenny was mumbling when she ran into Cortez. Greasy little Tier II Gen Tech, that one. Kept his coat wide open, an insult to the profession. She scowled and pulled back a half-step in her open-toed heels but broke her stride, shaking her head at the smell of his sanitized coat. He grinned at her and then eyed her hair, her face and then her figure. When she saw him drink in the whole package, imagining under her buttoned coat and upswept hair, she smiled back. The young techs, all in her thrall. Plenty they would do for her, hoping to get closer.

She paused to return his look. He had skills in genome reconstruction and she had a deadline gap on her project. "Bartholomew, isn't it?" She watched him take a deeper breath, thought she could see the shiver. Good. The ones she threw off balance were easier.

"Yes, Dr. Nation."

"Call you Bart, can I?"

The grin grew into a beam. "I, sure. I mean, your work here, I'm surprised. Somebody like you, knowing somebody like me."

She ran her hand through her hair so he'd look at her eyes. "Bart, everyone here is important to our mission." She'd call the work a mission, as often as she could use the word to lead the drones like him on her path. Not the

path the Pharma VPs logged on her Nobel media updates. The one she hid in plain sight from these drug peddlers, all working outside God's wishes.

He stepped closer and she backed up against the Idea Wall in the Geno-Shift wing. She put a hand behind her back and canted a shoulder toward him. She looked left and right and sighed and unfastened the top button of her coat, watched him eye her manicured fingers. "It's just so hard to keep up, with all we need to do." She reached out to adjust his tie and smooth his lapels.

"Dr. Nation..."

"You can call me Jenny, Bart. It's only a Nobel, not a sainthood in science." God's cradle of health, this place. But they had the Defense funding and oversight so lax it seemed like a sin. A perfect place to perfect a miracle.

He was blushing. "I hear about your Praizone project. Sometimes I catch myself wishing I could be a part of the team."

"It's not all about the official team, Bart. There's a tsunami of sequences I've got to run by Saturday evening. I just don't have the manpower." She stressed the first syllable just an instant longer.

"Weekend. I don't know. There's this play I've got a couple seats for. Would we be working together on the sequence?"

"Of course. It's crucial. Even the Review Jury knows that." Now the pleading look. He had some super-server credits, she'd checked that much. "Can you?"

"I'll change my plans. It's great to be part of Praizone."

"Not a word aloud about that, Bart. You're on my team now, the one I keep track of myself." She lifted her perfect arcs of blond brows. The directors didn't have a

prayer of discovering the true aims for the drug. Drones like Cortez kept quiet to stay in her inner circle.

“Saturday then. I’ll send your savant-station the sequence parameter. Now don’t you disappoint me.”

“See you then,” he said while he wrapped his coat around his hips. She muttered toward his back, “God’s will be done then.” Simple-minded sheep in God’s own cradle of health. So easy to move them.

She put on her absent-minded look while she trawled through the aimless crowd in the break room. The glass-walled chamber teemed with technicians and biologists, creatures thick as penicillin on a culture dish. The crowd was transfixed on a Video Vision screen that occupied half a wall, a blade-thin panel recessed inside the frosted glass wall. On that screen live video unspooled of a man in a Health Camp, looking up at the camera through a rainstorm. When the crowd pulled close to the screen, Jenny darted behind them to reach the Caffé Motion bar, just as the glass walls faded from orange to blue. She looked back to see her assistant Frieda a few steps behind her—her usual position.

“God’s will be done for that man on the screen,” Jenny said in a soft sermon for Frieda’s benefit.

Frieda took her post just behind Jenny’s shoulder. “No matter what, His will is always done.”

The crowd made Jenny cringe. She could hear her mentor Dr. Collins and his reminder. “Social time is important to navigate the politics of corporate research, Jenny. God meant for us to mix.” She didn’t want to appear aloof in the lab. Corporations always struggled to deliver breakthrough science, but they did offer all the

budget any scientist could desire. After her Nobel work at UC Irvine’s Neurobiology Memory Labs—brain maps that tracked emotion centers—she wanted to create and discover more than anyone. Especially these rivals ensconced in the break room before her, just getting their mid-morning Caffé Motion. She still permitted herself a caffeinated vice, because its energy was crucial to compress the drug testing that could prove her theories. Science meant discovery to her. Any step after that was just engineering.

More than any other pharmaceutical vendor, PharmAlliance had engineered the outcome of its steps. Although the legal system and the media railed against the merger of SmithKline Glaxo, Merck and Pfizer, then allied in syndicates with Aetna, Blue Cross and AIG, the Viral Wartime Powers Act of 2018 swept aside all challenges. The country pinned its hopes of viral survival on the three largest pharmacos and the biggest trio of insurers. Compounded into a single entity, PharmAlliance swept aside competitors and funding controls. Some called it a monstrosity. But a drug had to fell the viruses. She called the Atlanta labs a home for holy work. The directors didn’t have a prayer of discovering her true aims for the drug she was creating.

She fidgeted in the break room. Did remaining here in social time fit with her faith, the evangelical drive to spread the word of Christ’s salvation? Sometimes she wondered how to make faith work inside science, a world so full of uncertainty. She knew how to solve a problem for a given answer. The other scientists spent endless time discovering what would happen next in their work and their lives. God had plans for all of them. If only they could hear Him like she did.

Frieda remained on Jenny's heels, the ones on her white shoes with sensible soles that Frieda said were more fitting to a nurse than a Nobel winner. "Are you staying, Jenny?"

"Yes, but only for a little while. I do like my Motion, especially here in crunch week." She glanced at the break room walls, now turning light blue during the middle 10 minutes of the break period. It was silly to herd bright people into a space on a schedule. Most of them understood the colorization of the glass walls was designed to move them in and then out, starting with a pale yellow that invited, then moving across the color spectrum, emotions finally manipulated down to ultraviolet expulsion. Blue was still soothing, the peak of social enticement. Jenny always took her Caffé Motion at blue time.

She hated the enterprise of crunch week. Every quarter presented a window for announcements that would pump up the stock, the time closest to the quiet window for publicity before financial results were reported. PharmAlliance even called it Crunch Week, for their numbers were crunched in preparation for injecting them into the marketplace. FDA regulation bottomed out during the virus wartime, just as she joined PharmAlliance. The enterprise needed plenty of drugs in the approval pipe. New products produced new profits, growth for the country's economy. "Another set of magic bullets to fire into the virus wars," she would say aloud in the boardroom, as well as her prayer group.

PharmAlliance's strategies filled the break room with brainpower. The Alliance's array of insurers out-paid any chair endowment that the scientists had enjoyed in academia. Through the largest wall's floor-to-ceiling

window, Jenny could ponder the scenery of Atlanta's wooded suburbs, patches of gated parkland and sculpted lakes surrounding the red-bricked Emory campus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention unfurled a scruffy parade of buildings in an array further north.

No one in the break room eyed that landscape, though, or the colors on the walls. The knot of scientists drank in the drama unfolding on the screen. Jenny turned up the volume on the Mozart in her WiPod, the music receiver implanted in her skull behind the ear canal. It caught the music of the Heavenly Choral channel. Now she blanked the Video Vision's narration or the chatter in the room. The music inside her head lifted her above the high-test coffee, song notes written by God and sent to Mozart's hand.

She grabbed a taco-burger and held it to her nose. Still safe from bacterial compromise, and gooey good. She elbowed her way out of the jam of bodies. The genome compares, encrypted for her eyes by Arthur, king of PharmAlliance mainframes, waited in her office for review. Some of God's work was done better alone.

She spent nights in solitude. Like Jesus in the desert, she told herself. She could have any company she wanted after dark. Her blonde hair, usually braided but sometimes draped loose down her back, drew covert looks from male colleagues when they walked past her office. Most of the time these people—the lonely people, she thought of them—just wanted a piece of her power, the fame delivered along with her Nobel.

They looked lonely because she knew their lives were empty of faith. Only Frieda responded to her call to

form a prayer group to meet over the lunch hour. She formed one anyway, the two women standing as the only persons of faith in the PharmAlliance Neural Adjustments Division. More than 200 lonely souls in the building, all lost to the promise of everlasting life.

She allowed herself the guilty pleasure of antique Beatles music during her long nights in the office when no one was around. The music was not devout. She couldn't sing along during the day, not with the chance of Frieda overhearing and misunderstanding. So she hummed along with the sermon that no one seemed to hear. She touched her screen to flip through table after table of field trial data. The raw reports and medical commentaries were rolling in for Praizone. But the project to stand on the shoulders of her Nobel remained behind her schedule for manufacture.

She looked over her shoulder and then popped open the private workspace screen. She appraised the three-dimensional floating model of the drug that could turn off the brain's depression centers. She would pitch it as the latest defense against the HIVE-5 that was herding millions toward Ultra's sudden death.

She hummed the chorus again. She'd code-named her drug Praizone, hid its powers to unleash praise of God's word. The lonely people were afraid in their retreat from diseases. So many suffered under depression, fear that shrank their hippocampus. They had to cross the darkness to live in the light. Praizone's power would reverse depression's darkness, but she crafted it to lift the praise out of those lonely souls. She mapped every neuron's route in the brain with her Laureate work. Praizone would open hearts along those routes, to alter minds.

"Nice little tune."

The words made her jump and scoot back from her screen. She heard her Aeron Web chair scrape and stopped, then turned to see Bart. He was 18—too young to know the melody as a Beatles song, the one she knew from a church camp with working with that misguided counselor.

"Thank you, Bart." She locked her eyes with his. "It's nothing special."

"Sounds familiar, somehow." Cortez wandered the lab some nights, wanting to talk with her at close range like so many men. She could almost smell his desire to unbraided her hair, then see the light in his eyes while he leaned close enough to brush against her. She cast a hard glance to throw him off balance, the flag she raised to refuse his desire.

She watched Cortez melt away down the hall. But his voice she'd hear from behind had startled Jenny like all male voices did. "I'm inside a corporate complex," she whispered to herself. Not in that dark forest where she first heard her Savior's voice. She had crossed enough of her own life's darkness to enjoy virtuous days in God's light. No man would lead her back across that crevasse.

Jenny couldn't look at any man the same after those days lost in that Tennessee thicket. The jet-copter crash in those woods killed her parents but hurled her clear. While her head throbbed and she stumbled through brambles, she sang hymns to keep from shivering, wandering until Jesus and his heavenly father appeared on her trail at dusk, dressed as hunters. She could not resist the holy love they ministered onto her all through that night.

Whenever that memory seemed unclean, she rubbed her forearms until her skin turned pink, the hue she remembered all around her that night in the forest. She never felt such a tingle with the men like Cortez who wanted to touch her. Since the night she served her Savior in that thicket, she was His alone. Her skin glowed after she rubbed it, a feeling she focused upon to keep the lies about those hunters from bubbling up in her stomach.

The next morning she woke heeding her dreams. Dr. Collins taught her that God's gifts came to some through pre-conscious visions. Sleep could inspire an initial heading on Arthur's mainframe computational cluster. Inspiration was essential to all pharma creations—an ear-hair removal formula might combine with a glaucoma-reduction compound so they might yield a cure for something pathogenic.

Jenny had committed Collins' ideal to memory. "Like choosing an opening Bible passage for a sermon," Dr. Collins said, "selecting a starting point is the art that lives inside science." A blind search through the scope of available drugs could still outstrip the power of the data warehouses, and servers that PharmAlliance overworked on the acres of its chilly Finland Computational Campus.

She looked into her bathroom mirror and practiced her opening for the day's peer meeting. "I have already isolated the brain sector that controls belief. It is linked to the imagination pre-cortex, a network I have isolated with the Agilent nanoneural analyzer."

PharmAlliance would never proceed with tests, trials, and manufacture of a drug to elevate faith. Her drug

would make people believe—or reduce reasoning that resisted God's law. She had to mislead the panel toward Praizone's ability to erase depression centers.

She dressed to win approval. The blouse was high-collared with blue pearled buttons down its front. She chose yellow, done in a faux silk fabric that had become popular with the upper class. Her shoes had heels enough to shape her calves, but no hint of an open toe. The slacks were powder-blue, the same color as those break-room walls, but tailored with pleats on her thighs. A narrow white belt completed the look to spotlight her 25-inch waist.

In the boardroom she answered questions about expenses and whether Praizone was just another mood stabilizer. No, she could see the route of synapse exchanges to opened emotional lobes. Believing in yourself could help heal you. Praizone created emotions, she explained. A drug could induce love, she added, and then the room grew very quiet.

"Not just stabilizing moods already there?" said Dr. Wonesta, the only woman on the panel. "That's something that Healing ArtCo hasn't been able to produce." The petite brunette mentioned the European Union rival, then looked at each panelist beside her. "Emotion induction—a result of your mapping?"

"Just so, Doctor. My Laureate techniques permitted me to discover more about how the brain communicates than our EU competition knows. The formula relies on that advantage." She played her Nobel ace when a project was closest to her heart. Jenny prayed to pave a way for her corporate design's true target: service to God.

#

Three months later, Jenny could see she wore the wrong top to the unscheduled review of Praizone trials. She'd usually wrap a featherweight cashmere sweater around her toned biceps. She could be strong, but these men didn't want to look at it. Their loss on most days, but too bad for her on that afternoon.

She faced a pop meeting on pivotal testing. The rumors had it that something went wrong with the ultimate round of trials for her Praizone. No, not wrong, just unexpected. She reminded herself that science doesn't judge results. She tried to shed her pessimism; maybe the drug's application really wasn't in jeopardy.

There were questions from the panelists, including an odd one about blessed side effects. Jenny heard that phrase like a blessing from Jesus on side effects, at first. Then she realized that Brandon Coyle, VP of Current Trials, was describing the mother lode of pharma creations: a side effect of its own new product, one that it could market. Like the classic glaucoma-to-eyelash enhancer of 30 years earlier.

Coyle wanted to know about libido and its relationship to the joyful sectors of the cortex. Whether she'd ever mapped a path between them.

"Doctor Nation," he said. "Jenny, the results of the trials, well, we found it just so damned fortuitous, to be frank. This side reaction is plain to see in the current formula. The subjects in trials gave us results that, well—you'll see for yourself in a little while." He walked out without another word.

"You might help me by summarizing what you've observed. Unless it's anecdotal," she added.

Dennis Falbert, VP of Consumer Desires, smashed an ace in reply to her offhand lob. "If that's your attitude,

we'll keep you updated on subsequent results." He shook his head and rose to follow Coyle to the door. When she caught his eye he crooked a finger to lead her to his office.

Falbert nestled in the leather sofa of a corner suite in the North Wing. Falbert sipped his high-test Caffé Motion, but Jenny was the object in motion, pacing back and forth in front of him.

"We don't know if your Praizone compound is going forward as our Happy Drug."

"What do you mean you don't know?" She squeaked out the words, throttling the shout that swelled up from her gut. She hated the gossipy slur about Praizone. She'd always described it as a way to induce joy and confidence in consumers who used it. They'd be ready with self-praise, she said, and that was why she called it Praizone.

"We can't help it, Dr. Nation. The side-effects include consistent libido elevation. In every subject group." He stood and walked to the flatscreen wall, then punched up a video. "You can see it for yourself. Here's just one sample of the elevation."

The subjects were in the coffee shop set which the labs built for interactive encounters. Dates, the labbies insisted. Jenny saw the subjects were dressed as if on a Sunday morning.

"We picked them up after services," Falbert whispered.

She watched small talk devolve into hand holding, and then the man in the brown suit and tie started to stroke the forearm of the woman in the high-necked blue dress. The talk fell away once she scooted her chair next to his. Their kisses grew more lurid, until buttons were

snapping off the clothes of two people who'd only met earlier in church. Or so Falbert said. When they were both up on their feet, limbs entwined and their moaning the loudest sound in the room, Jenny leaned in to jam off the video.

"Even the most chaste, the holiest subjects," Falbert started. "They found each other irresistible." He returned to the sofa and sat at its center, crossing his legs. He took the smallest of sips on his Caffé Motion. A smirk escaped his pursed lips. "Oh yes, a whole new definition of blessed side effect. And it's not like we want to say, 'Contact your doctor if you experience sexual desire for strangers.' There are consumers who'd buy Praizone just for that, if they could just find a SafeSex outlet—online—to use it."

She felt a stab in her heart when she heard this kind of praise for her creation. The blasphemy. Jenny stumbled upon the horror that they meant to put it to work alongside those SimSuits. "I didn't create an aphrodisiac, Falbert, and you know it. You can't be serious about releasing my creation for that."

"Not your creation." He re-crossed his legs and dropped the smirk. "The property of PharmAlliance, engineered and manufactured and tested at great expense and risk. To become a product, for our profit."

Her knees started to buckle at the idea of what Praizone might do inside those garments of lust. She turned so that Falbert couldn't see her face and walked out. Once in his reception office, she lifted her hand to the exit control and saw her fingers shake. She studied her hand while she stood frozen at the doorway. Outside that door lived an organization whose glove was too

small to fit her grasp of science, or her grip on faith. Her creation was slipping out of her hands.

She drove home replaying the showdown all the way down Ted Turner Parkway. The formula, God's work, twisted to a profit addiction. Her hands trembled, so she held her car within the speed limit, even while the long-haul turbo tractor-trailers and bullet speed-cars lapped her. She didn't like being the only one to follow the rules. She pushed the Cooper into overdrive.

The officer who stopped her was just doing his job, she had to admit. Perhaps some polite speech would be a good Christian act to offer in atonement. While she idled, waiting for him to come up to her window, the toll warning rang on the Cooper's leather dash, measuring her available balance against the upcoming toll segment. She waited for the mellow approval chime to follow the chirp. Instead, a staccato beep poured from the speakers.

She programmed that new monthly transfer to the toll server just yesterday, after the rates had changed. Must be a system malfunction. She could explain it with good manners to the speed-cycle cop who'd waved her to the turnout.

The cop waved his iBadge when he heard the beep. "License, and your debit scan, lady." The vehicles thundered past, the sound pushing a wall of pain up into her forehead.

"Thanks for recognizing me as a lady, officer. There's been a mistake."

"The only mistake is going to be yours, real soon. Let's see those IDs." He pulled off a glove and flipped up his visor.

“Not so fast, mister. You can ask me politely.” She could see her jaw clench in the side mirror.

“Polite? For real?” The cop, a thickset man past 50, started to laugh.

She felt her heart rate race up match the flashes of his lights. “Can it, you shit-ape. You’re not paid to abuse a woman with your scorn. Not along a public highway we pay for.”

“Hey now, lady—”

“Enough with that lady bullshit. Here’s my cards. Ring ’em up, you toad.” She didn’t care what the fine turned out to be. She threw the ticket out of her window before he drove off.

Inside her home she snatched up the lab log she was using for the project. She told her music system to choose gentle and sad. She sang along with the guitar chords that wrapped around the oldest living Beatle’s voice, then took her notes. When she ran out of air with the note, Jenny fought to force out a sob, but only felt her chest ripple. She rattled out the words that made up the day’s log entry.

She held the line’s last note, letting her pitch drop as she ran out of air. The sound acted like a shield, a barrier to keep away the day she’d survived. Her dream didn’t, although it had been alive in the morning. PharmAlliance took her vision of saving souls with science and smashed it like a matchstick under a sledgehammer.

She woke up for weeks with nightmares of God hurling her into infernal fire. The combination of SimSuits and what PharmAlliance marketed as Number

Nine sparked a godless ride into the world of the 1970s. Sex, not love of anyone, especially God.

“He has another plan for me,” she said into her mirror. Jenny stoked the faint hope with her everyday prayer.

PharmAlliance kept her on its staff as a trophy, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist who built the roots of Number Nine. She put her Laureate prize stipend, all \$1.8 million of it, into freshwater futures, spiking it into more money than she’d need for the rest of her life. That wouldn’t be very long one, if she could bring God’s plans to fruition.

One day she told her lab team she was taking a sabbatical.

“Like a paid vacation for months and months, right?” Frieda asked at the farewell mixer.

“If you want to think of it that way.”

“Do you have to come back soon?”

“Not really. It’s a year, with an option for another two.”

“So what are you doing, then? Writing your memoirs, or maybe a textbook?”

“Not anything as pedestrian as books. Something more spiritual now. Sort of a religious science.” Jenny saw Frieda cock her head and blink—the look she wanted to spark, a chance that someone of faith could shoot across the quantum field of possibility.

Chapter 3

Shore Leavings

Angie Consoli

Assateague Island, December 1, 2020

Angie felt the waves poke her awake. The insistent surf rubbed the small of her back, the spot where her new tattoo stung from the salt water. She knew she'd drifted on her Seacraft Wakeboard a long time. The sun had beat down on her and that personal float-craft all day, but the light was low and down in her eyes. Her forearms glowed red, fastened into the riding cuffs and stretched along the edges of the board.

The sky would grow dark before much longer. She waited for the blackness to deliver her to a place where she'd worry about life no more. First her sacrifice, then the shame, and those years of sex for pay. Sorry.

The splash of the surf took her back to the sound of delivering her tiny boy in a birthing pool. A baby, long ago adopted out to parents more fit. After that, she moved away from the shaming until she lashed herself into a life of fucking in front of a camera. She leaned against the sand and felt the bruises from her journey onto the beach, when she went overboard off that sailboat's white deck.

Instead of underwater, the waves dragged her into the moist sand. She kicked by instinct, stretching to beach herself like a razor clam burrowing to hide. As the deep shoreline gave way to a sloping beach she felt her knees scrape. The last time her legs touched something, she

was kneeling on the deck with her head bent over. When, yesterday?

When she closed her eyes she could see a day still fogged in a dose of Wild Shadows. Drugged on that boat she reached up for nearly-naked Lowell Braston, master of her career, his sweatpants down around his ankles while he loomed over her. The trails from the drug glowed in her eyes. She could see Lowell bend his knees and lean into their sunrise ritual, this producer who delivered her into the grimy dazzle of skin video. He captained the boat, her body, and the fortune his company was earning from her. All of Lowell's boats, sail or ski, cruised as party vessels. She was a vessel for anyone on board. She bobbed her head onto him, a performer acting submissive, restrained with one arm in the wakeboard. While Braston's brother Lou struggled to helm the 40-footer, Lowell planted his bare feet on the deck to deliver his morning release into her.

Then like unleashing a bride, the gusts gave her away. The boat yawed its bow upward, pitching in the swells, its nose leapt and Lowell's heels must have left the deck. As he slipped out of her mouth she reached to grab him and missed. Clamped with one of her wrists in her board's riding cuffs, she sailed out on the gust. With only her 105 pounds to counter the wind, she flew off the deck into mid-air. She looked down to see the deck pitch and Lowell's head hit the winch hard. The boat turned away quickly from the spot where she splashed down. She looked up to see the boat heeling over pretty hard.

On the beach she rolled her face away from the setting sun. She must have blacked out awhile. The tides in the blue water probably pulled her board into the currents and toward this shore. She looked at her wrist to

see she'd slipped her other arm into a riding cuff, but that didn't make sense. She should've been glad to die after the wind dropped her into the anonymous ocean.

The white foam of the shoreline scampered around her numb feet and across her back. The board was slipping back under the water, yanked by the undertow on the shore break where she was jammed onto a sandbar. She lifted her head just in time to inhale a mouthful of saltwater, spilling over her body and back into the sea. Another wave broke across her head while she wriggled one arm free out of the board's cuffs.

The pebbles below the sand were filling her wetsuit on the backwash, sucking her down out of her fucked life. She grimaced at the feeling, gritty as any of her videos. Life was fucked because of all her fucking, sex acts she performed with enough flair that millions had paid hundreds of millions to watch. She did well at bodies, starting with her quick study of them in sophomore biology before her motherhood. She learned her own, then those of the other sex workers in scenes, how to stretch and bend and coax out a money-shot orgasm loud and long.

The salt water ran up her nose, down her throat and stole the breath from her. Different than when she fought off gagging as the cameras rolled. Here the noise rushed inside her head. She'd drown in a few inches of surf after floating all day through water a thousand times deeper. She laid her dyed dreadlocks down on the board and waited for the end that she wanted for months.

Yapping startled her. She turned her dreads out of the surf, tilting her head up just before a wave covered her. The dog stood beside her on the shore. He pointed at her with his brown snout, his legs planted in the sand. He

kept peering back up the beach. Damn dogs, love ya more than you love yourself. Like Rascal back in Jersey, snuffling her awake after she passed out stoned out of her head, flat on her face and with puke starting to choke her.

She heard footsteps splash onto the receding waters. Maybe this was what crossing over looked like. She didn't feel any embrace of Jesus like Grandma Consoli told her on First Communion day.

"Sherlock," a husky female voice called. "Good boy. Now stay."

Found. Fuck.

She rolled her onto her side and lifted her free arm, and a strong hand released the other from the board. The white foam rushed at her face again, wriggling up her nose. She closed her eyes at the salt sting, started to cough and then squinted to see a stout woman holding her.

"Had to happen sometime, huh boy?" The woman wore chopped red hair cut close to hide curls and talked to her dog while she freed up the other ride-cuff. The wave board bounced out into the surf, now half kite and half float, being yanked away by the shore-break's waves.

Who was this ugly bear, yanking her out of her finale? The face was square, pocked on its cheeks, nose broad enough to pass for a prizefighter's. She wasn't going to fight back, though. Just more bad luck on what might have been her last day, if not for this meddler.

She felt that strong grip under her arms. She spit water out and hacked it onto the woman's wide chest as she felt lifted, a water lily pulled from a pond. Maybe it was a divine intervention. She squinted at the hulking form. "Jesus?"

“I’d say,” the woman snapped. “Few more of them waves and you’d a been chum for the tiger sharks off this beach. Been Jesus next for you, for sure.”

Angie’s stomach heaved. She spit up the Beluga caviar, the last thing she swallowed on the boat, and not off a spoon, either. The woman held her at arm’s length.

“Go ahead, get it all up. Probably mostly seawater in there anyway. Good minerals, sure. But that potent, they make you ralph it up.” She pulled Angie’s hair away from her face when she tried to retch again.

“Not just seawater sick. Let’s get you off the beach, see what else is ailing you. You don’t feel cold enough to me. Hot, for somebody who’s been in that 78-degree ocean awhile.”

Angie’s tongue felt thick, but the puking had brought it to life. “Are you a doctor or something?” She raised a hand to her eyes to ward off the sundown’s light, then wiped water off her brows.

“Not exactly a doctor, but I heal. I’m Delta. You’re on my bit of beach, the one I steward.” Angie forced herself to focus to try to make out Delta’s expression. “What washes up here comes into my life.”

When Angie put a knee down onto the sand her head reeled. She felt herself slip into a darkness, different somehow. This Delta woman was snatching her up with a strong grasp.

Angie woke when the smell of rotten leaves hovered under her nose.

“Drink,” Delta said, holding the mug to her lips.

“Are you kidding?” She felt her throat croak in pain when she forced the words past her lips.

“I never kid about healing, kiddo.”

“And this will heal me? Smells sick to me.”

“You smell sick. This compounded tea mirrors your chemistry. Drinking it draws the toxin out of you.”

“What the fuck.” She hesitated and looked around the room. Quilts on the walls. Woody beams, stained dark brown from the moist air. Maybe even real wood, the way they creaked, so the place had to be old. Or built with old stuff, anyway. The beams croaked in the wind that floated through the open door. A candle fluttered on each side of the sleigh bed where she was propped up with pillows covered with fur.

Not the fake fur either, like the costume she wore in the last video she made with Lowell’s brother and that chubby gaffer. It was rough, doing her head and tail all at once, filming and fucking down in the boat’s galley, the White Shadows kicking in while she took them together.

The smell rose up out of the mug and Angie shook away her head, like she wanted to that morning in the boat galley while the men did her. “Well, I’m glad I got it, ya know?” she squeaked. “Maybe I gave it to both of them. They could die, too.”

“Gave what, and to who?” Delta put the calloused back of her palm against Angie’s forehead. “You kind of drifted away on me there, kiddo. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Angel. Angel Lash.” She read the look on Delta’s face, then lifted the lip of the mug and sipped at the foul liquid and winced. “Okay, I call myself Angel. So what? I got to be anybody I wanted.”

“Why do you say ‘got to be,’ Angel? What did you leave in that past?”

“My life. Even after drinking this terrible shit, it’s gonna be over.” She drained the mug in a gulp, felt her stomach heave. She cocked an eyebrow at Delta. “No worse than anything I swallowed on camera.”

“On camera, huh? You an actress or something?”

“More like the something. I made skin videos. Lots.” She spit back into the mug. “Runner-up, Best New Female Hetero Performer. That was the first one. Two years ago, but hey, an eternity in that swamp. I wanted to move up to girl-on-girl, safer, kind of. But Lowell wouldn’t have it. Less money, he said. Hardly matters now. I won’t be around to compete in the next Skin Star Examiner contest.”

“Retiring?”

“Dying. Ultra, for sure.”

Delta wrapped her arms around her. The scent of strong arms made her close her eyes, reminding Angie of the nights when mamman would rock her back to sleep in the scratchy green armchair after a nightmare. Old lady smell.

“You’ll be okay here, Angel.”

“Where’s here?”

“Assateague Island. Down from the Great Jersey Spill. The shore’s still kinda okay here, on days when the current cooperates.”

She wriggled inside the hug and opened her eyes.

“My name’s Angie.”

She felt a chill coarse through her, an echo of the surf that pounded her onto the beach. She shook my head and broke away from Delta’s grasp. “You know my real name now. So no bullshit anymore, okay? I’m not gonna be okay, am I? No cure for this Ultra shit, is there?”

“Calm your body. Stress kills more of the Ultra kids like you than anything else.” Delta broke off her hug and took the mug off the bed where Angie had tossed it. “We don’t know how bad off you really are. So why imagine the worst?”

“Delta. In my neighborhood we had a saying. Don’t wait for the footsteps behind you to run.”

“Tough neighborhood.” Delta fluffed the pillows and rearranged them, working to prop Angie higher. The fur felt good with the tangy sea air streaming through the doorway and windows. Angie settled back into the bed and Delta smiled at her. “Better. You can stop running here. Just rest in the now, this moment, our afternoon.”

“Jesus. Afternoon. How long did I sleep?”

“Not long enough, yet. It’s time to mend.”

She turned away from her. “But I’m ready to go.”

“Really. Well, be brave. I’ll get more toxin tonic brewed. You’ll need all that, even some courage, if we can heal what’s wounded in you.”

“It’s hopeless. I deserve to die.”

Delta perched on the edge of the bed. Angie saw the mattress sag under the woman’s weight. Big thighs, muscled, strong. But a bottom and shoulders to match. She searched Delta’s eyes, close-set under a uni-brow in a face that could slap a truck off the highway. The woman had pulled her out of the ocean’s jaws. Now this hefty gal, as Uncle Nick would say to be polite, she was trying to tug at Angie again, to yank her from a punishment for past mistakes.

“Wait a minute,” Delta said. “I’ve got something for you to see. Something about hopeless.” She reached above Angie and pulled down a small picture frame off a shelf overhead. As the woman reached past her Angie

could smell Delta's scent of work, like Uncle Nick's after a day on the container ships. She handed over the frame. "Just take a look at him there in the picture."

Angie blinked the sleep from her eyes and looked at a picture of a thin, mangy dog. When Delta touched the frame's Go Button the dog's pose came alive. The tail tried to wag. She heard a whimper, even imagined the smell of dead, matted fur. She looked up to see Delta's face set in a thin-lipped stare at the picture. "How much longer did he last, before you lost him?"

Delta's stare crept into a small grin. She put two fingers in her mouth and bellowed a whistle. A 70-pound version of the dog in the frame bounded into the room, then put its paws on the bed between Delta and Angie.

"Down, Sherlock." The dog curled itself round Delta's foot, then wagged its tail with a thump on the floorboards.

She looked at Angie, then down at the dog. "Nobody ever deserves to die, kiddo. Not if they want more of that pursuit of happiness, like Jefferson called it." She cocked an eyebrow, softened her face. "What did you do to deserve death? Make a mistake? Hurt someone?"

"All that," Angie said, while a tide of pain swell through her chest. Like fists pounding. "I gave away somebody I loved. Had to."

Delta stood up and leaned over her. "Tuition, all that hard stuff. Part of learning. Part of life."

"You some kind of counselor or something?"

"No. But we lose everything we love eventually. That doesn't mean we have to pay with our lives, too." She smoothed back Angie's hair. "If you were supposed to die, I guess Sherlock wouldn't have lived beyond the week I took that Go Picture of him. Out there when the

light on the beach was getting weak, Sherlock wouldn't have found you."

The dog thumped its tail on the wood again when Delta spoke his name. Angie looked around the room while the candles guttered in the wind rising at sunset. The pain in her chest still thumped, a hurt she'd tried to end yesterday. Maybe if she could say something drippy, this woman might go now, maybe leave her to linger away.

"You could well be right," Angie said, reaching for the phrase mamman used so often. That old gal was trying to assure her, too—on that day Angie walked to the adoption center. Yes, the 10-month baby in Angie's thin arms would be better off. Mamman was so different from Mother, without that judgment sewage that flowed through the Consoli family. "It's all just life," she'd say, "and life is nobody's fault." Angie took a breath and watched the dog's tail, maybe an echo of the hope mamman handed out while Angie gave away her boy.

"Well, that all sounds like a good start," Delta said. "Your first little step toward the light. So tell me about who you lost. And why that left you on my beach."

Before Angie could answer, her eyes fluttered again.

"Sleep then." Delta patted her with a thick, rough hand. "A story for a time when you're stronger."

Chapter 4

Stuck on You

Fort Davis, Texas
September 11, 2021

The old man was up early, but especially on his son's prized day. It was already later in New York, two hours and two thousand miles from Ruff Winstead's Big Bend, the most Western stretch of Texas. Ruff coughed while he pored over his tablet's screen. He felt his great belly draw inward then hurl out the hack of his voice, a noise that he spilled most mornings onto the oak walls and the cracked leather of the couch facing his desk. He looked at that leather's cracks, then put a hand to his cheek and felt the stubble upon his own creases.

I'm old, he thought, but does that mean old as in former, or famous? Compared to all that Dayton reported during the last nine months, everything felt old to Ruff. He looked down at the page. The award story would be there soon on the mylar screen of this tablet, flat as a man's belt. The page was textured to feel like fresh newsprint. Simulation was everywhere, a buffer of safety from the viruses. Simulation was even soothing his son with married memories, a stay of execution from the killing sorrow of loss.

Ruff's screen was dimmed under a gray veil over the words of a story. His name now glowed in the user panel, one of two boxes on the page's foreground.

Dayton Winstead

Woodruff Winstead, Emeritus

The honorific suffix was Ruff's joke about himself, his final station on the rail line of a long life. He added the Emeritus

when Dayton returned the tablet to him as the young man moved away to Austin. A NewsPad, they called these toys. Ruff bought liked the heft of it enough to give it to the best young newsman he knew. Two Christmases ago, when everyone in the family was still alive, Dayton became the first Winstead to log-in to a NewsPad, inscribing his name like jotting one onto a bookplate.

Hah, bookplates, throwbacks old enough to be useless as buggy whips. Hmmm, maybe an editorial in that idea somewhere. Ruff tapped his name box on the tablet to apply his fingerprint. The screen glowed up and re-opened with an animation of a turning page. A thin bar wiped down the length of the page, checking for an update on the prize. Nothing yet. Only the time in New York's zone, scrolling down the screen inside a bar.

Ruff tabbed back to Dayton's original story. Hard writing after a hard lesson from life. Writing like Ruff did for his own Pulitzer after an old-fashioned storm, instead of one full of viruses. He re-read Dayton's editorial that *Viral Times* packaged with the winning reports. Ruff read like the biased judge that only a father could be. The story drove a warming flush into his chest as he read the cold words.

Death's Smallest Dealer

By Dayton Winstead

The virus remains the most mysterious and powerful organism in today's world. It needs no food and is not alive by human standards. It can remain dormant for years, waiting for its chance to inhabit a host. It will abide in a body but not kill it

knowingly until its host is empty. We understand too little of its nature and habits. Even after we've acquired some knowledge, it either doesn't apply to every virus—or the impact of those discoveries changes as the New Flu mutates.

Clerics and community leaders call the behavior of the virus god-like. The world has struggled to comprehend viruses like scholars have grappled with the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran. People who battle viral illness eventually pray. But before the end comes to the ill, their prayers are being offered up to a deity who will not—maybe cannot—spare them from a virus. Some then pray to the virus itself, trying to reason and plead and yes, even communicate with it. Although it is too small to see with any but our most powerful microscopes, the virus is the largest thing in the world today.

Ruff's Burmese cat bounded onto the desk from the top of the bookcase. Reaching over to scratch behind the brown cat's ears, he didn't lift his eyes from the page. Such summary in so short a space—the cardinal rule Dayton first learned from him.

After the Camps, the SimSuits fill middle-class closets to replace the touch of a tongue or swish of a kiss, spraying the thrust and lurch and clutch across a vast network. The suits have saved sex and even lovemaking for some. For others, Suits have birthed the prowl of lust. Lovers wear skins of actors, icons and porn stars on the SexNet.

Couples run to rut.

Ruff felt his bowels rumble in their usual daybreak

dance. Hmm, the kid's sidebar could have mentioned the flu masks, so ubiquitous in big cities that Prada had launched a designer line. "Great luck for anybody with bad teeth," his son joked.

When the sun seeped through the window, the old newsman started the recorder in his ScribePad and mumbled out a few lines for that column. "The virus perishes in the heat of deserts like our own Sonoran, crushed under the shield of the sun. Our arid sanctuary makes our Big Bend real estate, already inflated up by the flooded coastlines, soar beyond the price of the people who won it and cleared it."

He felt relief as his wind escaped. He laughed at the sound in his empty office, down the hall from his bedroom. An old man's rump acting as Greek chorus to the boy's overinflated words. Before he had to move on to the bathroom, he read a bit more.

The virus is a relatively new visitor to humans. Since it hasn't evolved enough to co-exist in our biology, it often kills its hosts. Human survival is of no concern to the virus that sparks the New Flu. Any drug-related cure or vaccine will not erase either the arborvirus, or HIVE-5 from our lives. The pandemic we feared is upon us, despite all Federal measures.

Ruff closed his eyes at the last line. Melissa, his beautiful and brave daughter-in-law, deposing the sick and dying in the Health Camps. Dayton's vengeance, to expose a government that created Camps to corral victims for stealth drug testing. Nothing was saved but the profits of the PharmAlliance. Melissa's death

delivered a prize-winning story to his son, at the cost of Dayton's faith in love. He railed at his government's answer to the pandemic of HIVE-5.

"No better than the fucking Katrina response," Dayton shouted during Christmas dinner after her death. "Or our damn African colonial military bases." Ruff reminded him there was no harder holiday for any man to bear than the first after losing a love. It was a story Ruff played out himself, losing his brother Pete in that tornado. He watched his son retreat into work and drive his investigative stake deeper every day, even after this story had closed the Camps. In his Pulitzer series conclusion, Dayton had stooped to the typical broadcast editorializing. "We must keep attacking the vampire of the drug empire. New Flu chokes our chance of survival."

At this phrase Ruff felt his lungs start to twitch in another cough. He stood quickly. This one felt like a series of hacks coming on. He grabbed his Thera-Respire dispenser and bent over to inhale between the wracking sounds.

His wife of 40 years, Helena, appeared at his door. Her long hair, its black now streaked with silver, ran in a braid across her yellowed lace nightgown. She knotted her dark brows at the sound of Ruff's coughing. He lifted his head to watch her eyes embrace the effort to breathe.

"Ruff, you should be in bed," she said. She padded over to him and placed her hand gently between his shoulder blades. "Not up so early."

"But it's already later there, where our boy is."

"I know you're proud today. I am too. But you, Ruff—I worry about the sounds coming from you."

"It's not the New Flu. Just clearing my morning crud out."

She wrapped her arms around him. He felt a hug that contained a small shudder. He didn't want to leave her too soon, not even to the loving arms of her family, a community just across the border. Ruff took a deeper breath and stood, rising up like that morning he earned his Pulitzer. That was only good writing in a cause of community's safety, he thought. Today the Winstead torch was being passed. He couldn't make the New York trip to the ceremony to witness Dayton's honor, now less than 90 minutes away, the Pulitzer's Silver Spire for wide-casting, writing plus broadcast. Better than a Peabody. It seemed that the profession expected no less, especially from the fruit that fell from Ruff's tree. When he took another whiff from the Thera-Respire, the editor felt as withered as that catch-phrase about fruit trees.

New Jersey, September 11, 2021

Dayton went to bed last night just like every one since Melissa died. He wanted to fall asleep and never wake up. Well, maybe a coma, not die. So many millions buried their families, friends and lovers during this pandemic. He buried his heart with her.

The Suit was saving his life, though, 10 months after her murder. He could rejoin her in bed, touch her warm, brown skin in digital dreams of simulation. Last night he replayed her in the SimSuit, running the Lost Lover program that captured their touch. The device evaded True Sex, the same kind that Healthland forced on her in the camp to kill her.

In his Palisades apartment Dayton was paying for the last night's replay. His arms lay frozen in place. He tried to lift them to rub his eyes crusted with sleep. He smelled the odor that hovered in his bedroom, that yeasty smell of the nano-bacterial computers that lined the inside of the suit. Damn it, I fell asleep in it again.

He needed the Suit, its fix of hearing and touching and tasting her. He rushed to his dreaming in the suit, those nights where her tresses still sparkled as black as the West Texas sky where he grew up, the place they met while he reported on the courthouse beat. But he was rushing nowhere now, so very different from his haste in his work. In this Jersey bed he was tied as fast as any calf in a Big Bend ranch rodeo. He could manage a glance at the clock.

Dayton reported on his own viral times, and the work earned acclaim. They were awarding him a Pulitzer across the Hudson in New York, where he was supposed to be on stage when the ceremony began. Less than 90 minutes from now. His news achievement would be on exhibit, the stories about contracts to experiment with drugs built by PharmAlliance.

He squirmed his hips and flexed his forearms. Nothing. The suits provided safety and he felt lucky to own one, but not this morning. Damn little bacterial computers inside it tightened right down into stasis, the slick bastards. He could see the orange-lettered warning stamped on his forearm, the limb frozen in place and draped over the pillow on the bed. He read the lettering aloud.

“Do not sleep in this simulator. Sultan Model auto-shutdown engages after 30 minutes of no movement.”

Nothing for it but to dislocate that shoulder, again. He'd have to escape the suit with the trick he learned after his gymnastics accident at Fort Davis High. He'd had more than a few girlfriends to squirm over since those days, but only one wife.

He wriggled his elbow to begin. When the pain shot through his arm he distracted himself with a vision of Melissa's elbows, a shade darker than his own. His arms that he'd wrap around her brown body, enfolding her while they slept spooned. Since her death, he usually woke up wrapped around a Faux Pillow, a body-length substitute which lay more still than she'd ever slept. He took deep breaths and smelled the jasmine on the pillow, her favorite essence.

The dirty secret was waking him from the thirty-second straight night that he SimSuited himself to sleep. He knew the name for this kind of poor bastard who couldn't unjack for even one night. On the newsblogs they were calling the addicts Suit Hangars.

Like Houdini in a straightjacket, Dayton squirmed to first loosen an arm. One touch of that red reset button and he'd be mobile. “Shit!” The swearing didn't help. Suits didn't respond to voice commands, with too many shouts and cries during sex to filter out. People came in late for work because of bullshit like this.

He felt sticky as he struggled. The suit delivered enough realism to come, the climax of his nightly replays. If he could just reach the console on the night-table. Great joke. He was trying to touch something now,

unlike everyone who recoiled from touch today, trying to stay safe from HIVE-5 and Ultra. Maybe there was a better angle to extend his arm away from the suit. He looked at the mirror over his bed at the suit, a garment that still reminded him of a wetsuit covered in purple sateen. Yeah, this was a smooth operation, all right, developing a SimSuit wide-cast for *Viral Times* without much reporting. Once again, it could be all first-person.

He felt an artery thumping against the suit collar. In the evenings he'd get inside and run *My Lullaby*, the Melissa program he concocted from their experimental night last year. That first story about using suits was a fluff feature, using a borrowed pair during the one night Melissa humored him while they made love. But she didn't call it lovemaking. "It's having sex—it's just that different," she told him afterward.

Sex or lovemaking, she felt alive to him when he wore the Suit, kissing him everywhere, touching the tops of his ears, the confluence of his hips and thighs. More nights than ever, he slept with her full-sensory simulation wrapped around the hole in his heart.

He using a voice command to switch on his video set that was auto-muted on startup. The chrome box sprawled across the bedroom wall of the 500 square-meter Hyatt suite, where he'd been staying on temporary assignment before the awards. The phone rang and he knew he could answer it without solving his SimSuit crisis. Good thing, too. He didn't want to be discovered waking in the Suit like a drunk sobering up in jail. The phone's echo continued to bounce over the chrome countertop. That pricey Home Valet communication

unit, plus a remodel of the suite for his extended stay—all off the back of the *Times*' largess. A bribe, really. They didn't want him to wander off to the FoxNet, not after his Camp series got short-listed for the Pulitzer. Not many eyewitness video reports made it into the finalist group, even though the Pulitzer had been stretched to include wide-cast media. The written word still enjoyed favor with those juries.

Finally the Valet lowered its ring tone. "Do you want this call in your return file?" a British voice, the fourth generation of the GPS narrator from Jaguar's sedans.

If he stretched his neck he could just see the screen. There was Milo's picture, flashing next to his number and current location. He was in his Fifth Street loft in Austin, not yet burrowed into his Times cubicle and digging up data.

"Answer, no camera," Dayton said.

Milo's voice recoiled off the chrome. "Morning, mister winner." It was a phrase he started to use once Dayton was short-listed. "Don't see your face on my screen. Big night out?"

"Milo. What do you want?" The last thing to start his day would be any admission. He couldn't explain the addiction to the Suit. It was like what? Loving mock turtle soup, instead of the real thing. He couldn't touch the real thing anymore, couldn't taste the warmth of her tongue on his.

"Dayton, my man, you've simply got to see this."

"See what?"

"Turn on Sat Seven. Oh, I see you're already tuned in. It's on Media Mash-up.

Canting his head toward the TV, Dayton shouted. “Un-mute, sound to six.” The rumble of Anderson Cooper’s voice, rusty with his declining years but full of his trademark fury, filled the room.

“For his groundbreaking series, which led to the closure of the reviled Health Camps, the jury will award the Silver Spire Pulitzer to Dayton Winstead of *Viral Times*. Eyewitness reporting bulwarked the emotional stories.” Yeah, Cooper should talk about emotion, after his own Katrina close-up.

“Hey!” Milo said. “I’ve never dug for a Pulitzer winner before. I’ll be spinning down to the Rusty Pen, so I can celebrate.”

“Yeah, celebrate.” Dayton muted the TV. “Guess they didn’t have anything better to vote for.”

“It’s well beyond better. We’re talking new contract here, bucko. More than just the coin the *Times* pitched you over the summer for making the short-list. Hey, why do you have video darked out? Got a little sweetie in there with you, or just wanking off in the damn suit again?”

He groaned as he tried to unfreeze the suit.

“Why you’re still a-bed, aren’t ya?”

“I’ll see you soon enough, Milo. Don’t spill too much champagne.”

He signed off and arched his back. The arm came free while the pain bolted up at him like a farm dog at a fence. He hit that release button. Hell of a wake-up call.

The ferry’s engine growled across New York Bay. The blue watch cap Dayton wore had been Melissa’s gift, a present for his trip to see Ohio grandparents. He made himself wear it, even if the sight of it made the ferry’s passengers glare at him. It was, a memorial, he’d say, one she deserved on his Pulitzer day most of all. Without her Camp interviews, he would have told only the story of her death and his escape. Not an expose of the Health Camps.

“Hey buddy, why’re you wearing the hat?”

He turned to see a fireplug of a man, one arm mechanical from the elbow down. The ferry hand’s other pea coat sleeve dangled empty. He held the end of a hawser with his mech hand and frowned. “Mister, don’t you know what today is?”

Dayton turned away from the wind that gusted off the bow. “Everybody knows what today is. Monday.”

“You sonofabitch. I gave up—naw, lost an arm and a half in Pakistan for the likes of you.” The ferry hand tossed the hank of rope at Dayton’s feet.

“Easy there, Sarge.” He held his palms open, took a half step toward the man. “I gotta wear this cap, especially today.”

“Buddy, take it off.”

“She wouldn’t want me doing that.” He touched the cap, two fingers extended in a salute. “She gave me this, before she died. It stays on me, out here anyway.” He slipped backward and grabbed a rail when the ferry pitched in the swells.

“What does that shit matter? It’s 9-11, Patriot Day. Everybody goes hatless today.” He squinted and shaded his brow against the sun. “Hey, aren’t you that guy?”

Dayton was waiting for the revelation. Since his broadcast series, people knew him. “Yes, I am that guy.”

I lost a wife, he lost arms. I could get another wife. His arms, they’re gone. But for me, they cook up a prize. Yeah, I’m the hero for telling a story. He’s just a guy with half an arm left. And he’s about to punch me in the face with it.

“Dalton Winstead, that’s you. I saw you on the news. During that Health Camp mess. You’re on the tube. You should know about honor and goin’ hatless.”

“Dayton. Dayton Winstead is the name, Sarge.”

“How’d you know I was a sergeant?”

“I bet you lost those forearms after Bin Laden died.”

He tried to pitch a look of sympathy, one of those reaction takes he was taught in the celebrity interviews.

“I can understand why you’re pissed.”

“I didn’t lose these for nothing.”

The silence between them grew tight.

“Tell me your story, Sarge. Mine’s not worth a shit.”

He took off the hat slowly, hoping the Sarge could take off his look of hate. Dayton listened out on the cold ferry. A tough break for a guy who looked tough enough to make him take off Melissa’s hat. It came off, until his story was told and he’d walked out of sight.

It was easier with the other news, he decided. The celebrities were always eager for the attention.

Thirty-five minutes and the usual flash colon probe later, he stood in the Columbia Journalism School’s Anderson Cooper Theatre. Throne of Dame Vanderbilt’s fortunes, he thought looking around. The place was a tomb for a dying industry that didn’t realize it was in the crypt already. On the front row sat the Herschel Sayne, the only living winner of the WSJ team that won the prize for 9/11 reporting. Back when dead trees carried most of the news about dead people.

Dayton stood in the other corner of that truth, exposing a government’s killing. Well, maybe not the phrase he wanted to start an acceptance speech with. He felt the room expand, his view swollen wide like it always did when he panicked.

The place grew silent. He realized the theatre was drawing still to deliver the one-minute tribute to the Fallen Ten Thousand. “Three in New York, seven in LA, all to maintain our guard.” That 2015 Superbowl after-shock. Great place for a smallpox cloud, sprayed through the AC of the new SoCaliDome.

His editor Roni poked at his ribs. “Go on, boy-o,” she whispered. “This is your minute at their mike.” He stepped forward to applause that floated down from the balcony, saw his colleagues stand. Those at the back, even those up front, they became tiny bodies in his vision. The anti-viral scent stung his nose as the fumes wafted up from the cloaks in the crowd. He was handed his Pulitzer Silver Spire, just as he managed to recall his opening line.

“Silence can soothe survivors, and honor the dead. But stories make us remember forever.” He fingered the

cap in his hand. “More important, a story makes us mark the why of what has happened, not just the way it happened. The epidemic, the fear and isolation, it happened to us all, not just me. I was an eyewitness. I thank you all, my peers, and the Pulitzer jury...” Then the rest of the speech flew out of his head. Think of them all naked. Okay, maybe not Mike Wallace in the front row, still creeping beyond 100 years old.

He could feel his throat thicken up, the wall of stings building behind his eyes. He didn’t want to cry. He’d done enough of that during the stories on camera. He scrambled for something to break the sudden silence. “In a moment like this,” he fudged, “words are too small. Not important.” He looked down to see himself shuffling his feet. “C’mon, stick to your mark,” he muttered, then looked back up at the crowd. “I’d like to thank my information digger, Milo Sensei. My editor, Roni Martinez. My father Ruff, who you once honored like me, and all the others, offering the aid that...”

“Winstead. Dayton Winstead!”

The voice rang in from the wings. A stocky man appeared in a NYPD uniform. As he got closer, Dayton made the guy’s uniform for a pretty good fake. He waved a folded blue paper, swinging a prosthetic right arm. A mechanical forearm. The deck hand.

The crowd buzzed when he paused. “Yes, that’s me. How did you get in here?”

The man turned away from the question to address the crowd. “Dayton Winstead, the Court for the Southern District of New York summons you in a lawsuit.” The man didn’t mutter, raising his voice to bark toward the

mike. “A suit levied against damages from your falsified reports about PharmAlliance.”

He touched the paper to Dayton’s chest. Dayton held his prize spire in one hand and the summons with the other. The deck hand turned his back to the crowd and leered with a grin that showed a US flag stamped onto a false tooth.

“You’ve been served, you hat-wearing hoax.”

The man stalked out as catcalls hounded him. Dayton looked down at the summons, striped on its long edge with the official holographic seal. He spied Cooper in the front row and Wallace. His hair wasn’t as white as the old CNN anchor’s, but both of their heads were bowed. Cooper glanced at the crowd behind him, a move that revealed the bald spot that the cameras always avoided. Dayton wanted all the cameras now trained on him to develop the same kind of blind eye.

Dayton heard Roni call his name. He snapped away from the surge of reporters trying to clamber over the Columbia stage, recorders waving.

“Don’t just stand there,” she hissed, “get your arse out,” Ready in the wings to give him a hug of congratulations, she had a ringside view of the summons and suit. Dayton bounded offstage away from the wave of micro-cams that snatched clips of his exit.

She grabbed him by the wrist and tugged him along. “I know a way up.”

“Up? Not out?”

“Up, like when I was here with your Da. Years ago when he won his prize. We had a smoke together, up the stairs. Follow me.”

Journalists were balancing cameras on the lip of the stage, the nimble ones already up on their elbows. Dayton and his editor took the stairwell steps two at a time.

She was in a trot and he puffed after her, surprised a woman of such an age could move so fast. At the top they loped down a catwalk that led to a door. Then the steel flooring came to a dead end. She turned on him and pushed back the way they'd run.

"Must be down on the other end. Been too long. Retrace, laddie."

"So just up the roof? Too easy."

"Nah. They expect you to dart out a side door, onto the street. Not up to the building top. Especially when those skies look so ready to rain."

A downpour would keep all but the more daring cowboys off the roof. The water might cascade down full of viruses. For him, better to be up onto the roof and avoid the even hotter questions. While he ran, Dayton ran through the maze of the claims. What proof did Pharma concoct to call his stories a hoax? Why file suit in Southern NY district, unless Pharma was riding the financial clout there? He didn't see any of it coming. No comment was the last thing he wanted to say on camera. Like saying you're guilty.

When he stepped onto the roof Dayton skidded on the terrazzo tile that fanned out to the edge of the building. He could hear snarls and shouts of the media pack down on the street, kindred wolves before today. Roni had fallen back, huffing behind him.

He slipped the Pulitzer with its crystal spire into a pocket of his Safe Cloak. The skies began to spit rain. A spell embraced him the further he walked toward the roof ledge. The rain rolled off his cloak hood while he felt an ache in his chest. The roof's edge called to him. Hunting the Pharma had become the only spark in his life.

Roni burst through the roof's door, then opened an umbrella that bloomed over ample shoulders. The amber plastic kept the hot rain off her gray hair. She took a step toward him while he stood at the ledge and stared down at 139th, the pavement only eight stories below. Enough stories to let him end his, and miss rewards like the one he was getting today.

He looked up at the rain, but held his hand up to shield his eyes. Hot or not, he didn't want his exit to be the kind where he was stuck with tubes in a hospital bed. Ultra might take weeks, like it sometimes did, if it moved into him though the softer tissues of eyelids, mouth or ears.

Despite the showers, Roni tilted her umbrella and walked in a relaxed step toward him. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sure, take a minute or two up here, if you like. But there's no sense in getting onto the street that way. That'd make it easy for 'em to catch you, sure."

"I'd be a lot crappier interview that way. Better than a no-comment."

"Seems like a lot of trouble to avoid a statement. They'd make one about you, though."

“I’m not exactly making it a proud day for my dad, ya know?”

“He fought outta tough spots too. Maybe you were too young to remember. Besides, you’d just let these Pharma ghouls take one more life. Maybe one with more still to say.”

“I wasn’t going to jump.”

“If you say so, then. Why not step back a little? It’s a mite too breezy up here for me.” She turned and walked back, tightened her umbrella, then wiped her crew cut and face with an antiviral kerchief.

They headed downstairs, hoping to sneak through the broken up crowd. Halfway down they heard steps coming up at them.

Dayton stopped and whispered. “More than one pair of shoes.”

“Boots, boy-o. What’s that tell you? Sure not newsies.” She stopped to crack her knuckles, setting the umbrella on its point while she rocked her elbows forward. He watched and headed down the steps past her. She reached for his shoulder, but he wriggled away.

A man in a steelsuit, the kind built for close combat with its padded panels, rose up from a crouch in front of Dayton. “Running from trouble, hey?” He reached up and grabbed Dayton under the jaw, lifting him. He looked to memorize the thug’s description, white man with a thin-stripe black goatee and a scar across his lip.

“Let me help you back up to that roof,” he said with a laugh. Dayton saw no rank or insignia on that arm’s sleeve. He planted both arms on the railings, using them like a pair of balance beams. He swung up with

gymnast’s abs and kicked the man in the face with a heel. He raked his other knee across his jaw.

A crunch of bone upon stone rattled off the wall. He released his grip on Dayton, who yelled out a ki-yai chant while he boosted up off the railings, planting both feet onto the man’s face to push him. Blood poured out of the thug’s nose and mouth as he fell. Dayton stomped on his head like a forest ranger snuffing a brushfire.

“Get the fuck off. You don’t win, fucker.” A stomp with each line. “Jackal bastard.” More bone crunched. The steps now felt slick, and he saw broken windpipe, spotted the carotid artery, ratcheted up his arm for a kill.

He felt an arm snare his elbow.

“Enough,” Roni said. “He’s not stopping us anymore. You don’t want a murder warrant on you. You’re popular enough for one day.”

He caught his breath, tasted the sour tang in his mouth while the man on the ground wheezed. He bubbled blood from his mouth, a thin trickle that dripped down onto a step. A sound of more boots snapped up the stairs in quick-step time. He turned looked back at Roni. She’d run up a half-dozen steps to a landing. She used her umbrella handle to smash open a firebox and release an axe. She tossed her umbrella to him and snatched the axe, then hefted it above her head with both hands.

She held it like the field hockey winger she always told him she was, with hands just as thick as the handle. Dayton snatched the umbrella and watched her canter down the steps to him and charge past with the axe chest-high, aimed broad and at two men reaching up at her with steelsuited arms. He caught up to her to see one

of the men swinging a Taser baton. The thug braced himself with a grip on the railing and swung a shielded shoulder against the axe handle.

Roni spun the axe and brought the blade down on his hand. Dayton saw fingers fly along with the blade's sparks off the railing. But when the man's partner jabbed his Taser into Roni's leg she screamed then crumpled.

Dayton snatched the axe from her and swung at the man's baton arm. The blow sliced it to the bone. As he screamed, the baton clattered along the wall and rolled down on the railing. Both the assassins were on their knees. The baton discharged against the steel rail, the sound of the arc masking the second man's scream.

Dayton drove his foot into the downed man's chin again. Roni rose up on a burned leg in a storm of curses and pushed the second man down a dozen steps to hit the landing below. She dropped down to rub her thigh. The odor of a singed pant leg filled the stairwell.

Dayton grabbed the baton and rose it over the man he'd kicked. She shouted, "No. Leave it, leave something alive here so's there's somebody to be questioned. We stand a chance to prove we were attacked, that it was defense. Better get home and pack up."

"Flee? Thought I was gonna fight 'em."

"Another time. There's gonna be trouble over this dust-up, devil's my witness. These guys can't be traced. They might not have known it, but they were supposed to be toasted up here. We did what PharmAlliance planned for us."

"What the hell? Fucking pharma."

"Put a sock in that. This didn't happen, we'll say. Get yaself snuck downstairs, but be sure that crowd has cleared out, sweeping the streets for you. Pull up your cloak hood."

"Very professional. Skulking away."

"Just get back across the Hudson, if anybody can after all this."

"How about them, while I'm running away?"

"Black baggers, these three. Good thing we had the high ground on 'em." She lifted a tired grin at him.

"Hadn't hit anybody like that since field hockey. Hey, they're not gonna be missed. You, on the other hand--"

"Just won a Pulitzer."

"And stomped that fella half to death. If he lives."

"They'da had me up here if not for you. Saved me."

"I'm just a tightwad. Don't want to lose a writer I've broken in. Now go, so you can save yourself a lockup, or some grotty homicide clip on the News-Post network, or the Empire Daily News Terrorism Page."

He reached to squeeze her hand, then put his baton into a liver-spotted paw. He jumped over the crumpled man who was writhing on the landing. Looking back, he saw the one with the missing fingers start to get up.

Roni poked him with the Taser, dropping him again. "Ya rogue bastards." She rose up on her umbrella and began to hobble down the steps, then called out to Dayton. "Just make it back to Jersey, lad. We'll try to think up something for you by then."

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