

Chapter 1

Heat in the Night

Dayton Winstead
Austin, November 29, 2020

While the rains fall, we fall back in retreat from disease.

I type those words into my ScribePad and wipe sweat off my brow. I'm sweltering in my apartment while my Condo Cooler is forced to idle. I'm not supposed to be home now, a journalist writing in his private journal while the sun sets on a Texas hot with climate and viruses. Government clocks cycle our energy to rein in the temperatures. But in these times, nothing we've tried controls the viruses.

They fall on us from the skies in rainstorms and leap between us in casual touch. These times have caused love to fail. A half-century ago people had sex—dad would say make love in one of his editorials—with no fears if they used simple precaution. Even when I grew up, sexual disease needed blood to cross between bodies. But HIV-5 is more aggressive than its viral ancestors. It enters the body while you battle the Blue Flu, a disease with an airborne range of 10 feet that's soared into a 19-month pandemic. Nobody gets close now without designer masks, antiviral clothes, viro-screen gel. In the ultimate of social distancing, the lucky ones can suit up and go virtual for sex. Secure Sex, they call it, breeding faster than mosquitos in a holding pond.

I write to disinfect myself from tomorrow's mission and leave behind this record.

First the Flu, then HIV, and at the last, AIDS Ultra. Can love survive the terrors of touch? Nobody has an answer yet, although the new Simulation Suits mimic touch to make sex safe again. General Connectrics owns the field of haptics, game touch technology grown up to serve sex.

Real sex now means death, not joy or peace or rest, or even work. Germs work to kill off sex with an AIDS any man or woman can catch. Small bugs bust up large towns and break down long lives. Have sex and die, or don't and feel your heart grow cold.

I can't push that kind of writing past my editor Roni at *Viral Times*, my latest media outlet. I skip work tonight to write this testimony. Tomorrow I have to risk everything on a mission I can't dodge, to try to break into the Government Health Camp outside Waco. The camps pen up the infected. Healthland Safety says the detentions ensure national security. I report these official lies because they need light to wither.

To crack into that Camp I'll be on the move in tomorrow's wan light, a dim path compared to the quartz lights of show business video stages. My celebrity stories at SatNews were easier. Entertainment people liked to talk to me about themselves, their projects. Then my wife Melissa swept into my life and challenged my charm. "Do more good," she said. A fat lot of good her legal doings have brought our dreams. She started fighting for the rights of the sick. The feds fought back by locking her up in the Health Camp where she went yesterday to depose Ultra victims.

I wipe sweat off my forehead and onto the table. We missed that wetness, the smell of us, the one night we played with prototype Suits. They record sex, too, but I don't have the stomach yet to replay that episode into a Suit. I won't need the replay if I can get her out, somehow.

SimSuits surfaced when HIV hit the rich. You can use them now if you know the right people. The right people are fucking each other now in SimSuits, safe from disease and stimulating each other across their bodies. Outside the suits, people are dying. Inside, freedom, and maybe addiction.

People cocoon indoors, order basic needs, receive their work online and deliver it. A few, the lucky, open a package in a SafeFoyer at their front door from General Connectrics. The Suit connects them so they can touch each others' bodies. You don't risk being corralled into a Camp with Ultra if you can have sex in a Suit.

Melissa wants to stop the detentions, even empty the camps. She always wants something for somebody else. We could've had it easier, if she didn't always want to do the hard thing. "Hard is what makes it good," she told me. "If it were easy, everybody would do it."

Ultra crams sex into the back alley of the Suits. After just nine months, they're already leading a revival of the screw—anything '70s. Low-cost SimSuits, in viral times, to hook up anonymously—well, there will be nothing to stop a leap into what preachers call the wanton wasteland.

The Evangelical Party rails against "hell-bearing acts of filth in a populace linking up in full rut." But words can't stop sex, not even with the fear of God. What difference can sermons make? Not even, "God has a plan to wipe out this state of lust — to restore the blessed order of man and woman rejoicing in safe, married relations."

I feel my head grow wet, but not with sweat. The rain patters against my skylight, where a small crease admits drops. I duck out of the way and disinfect with viro-screen wipe, then spray down the table. I throw up a sealer blob

against the skylight to patch the hole. The viruses can travel in the rain, drops of nature nobody can be sure are safe. I gotta rescue Melissa from the viruses raining through that death camp. I want to talk God into saving her.

I do more than pray for luck to extract Melissa. Milo Sensi down in the Times info-digger bullpens helped me snare the Camp's GPS maps, then used his probability algorithms to trace her trail inside since she entered. I check the seals on my protective SafeCloak, then stretch to ready my muscles, both slow-twitch and fast, the strength of a high school gymnast and speed of a cyclist. All that strength and desperation might not be enough to rescue my lover. I can at least die trying to save our dreams.

When I wake in the hour before dawn, I rise to find my brown journal, the one with all my bad courting poetry and good memories. The fountain pen feels different in my hand. But applying ink to paper suits my dim wanderings among words. A dream has sparked memories I grope to recall.

I wanted to make Melissa my wife, so I knew the kissing had to go well. I couldn't be sure how I'd done on our first kiss. It was late that night, well into the cricket-and-cicada movement of the evening symphony. I wanted to hear her moan on the next kiss. That sound would be certain.

She giggled on that first kiss. This was no laughing moment to me, not this early in our courting. Through the threat of flu, kissing had become serious, dangerous, mysterious. I wanted all three from her.

She stood at the tip of Enchanted Rock that faced the charcoal canyon, the stone growing darker before the moon would rise. I wanted her facing away from that canyon, so her eyes would be focused on us, not on the dying vista. But I needed the beauty of the rocks in my view to romance the moment. The rest was up to me.

I held her close, our breaths still coming short after our climb onto the tip of the rock. She grabbed my arms while I gripped her waist. Then she cocked her head back. I thought of horses at a racecourse start, eager for the gates to fly open and begin the gallop.

I rushed to her lips, but then I remembered her complaints on the habits of kissers she'd known. I didn't want to know how many of them, only what she disliked.

"Too hasty at the start," she'd said earlier, over coffee in a café beside those crickets. "Most guys are in too much of a hurry." I took it to heart.

On the second kiss I pressed our lips tight, my fingers playing the wide chords of her back. I inhaled her breath as our mouths nibbled then lingered, tongues still not touching. How many moments could I make out of one kiss? She helped me find more than I knew. On the whisper of the canyon wind, I heard the moan I desired, drawn out of imagination and into my ear.

Chapter 2

Stilling a Stone

Dayton
Health Camp Waco, November 30

Getting inside didn't turn out to be hard. Finding my wife produced the pain.

The day after Melissa entered the Camp, she got out a message about a witness she deposed. A woman named Lucy, a widowed mom confined with a little boy. I had to start in the dim light before dawn to find her. I crawled through a gully and squeezed under a warped sensor on the Camp fence. I asked questions to locate Lucy, but my soft-news practices got me stalled. Soon enough the inmates found me, though, then led me to the best link to my wife.

Healthland would say nothing about where Melissa was inside the camp. They reported that she was infected overnight with HIV-5, and was now diagnosed with Ultra.

The timing didn't make sense. Most everybody contracted HIV-5 after catching the Blue Flu. It took several days at least. You didn't check in healthy like Melissa did 48 hours ago, then come up positive on an HIV scan. Something else infected her.

At Lucy's bunk I saw pictures pinned on the grey tent wall her bed was pushed against: A man in a construction jumpsuit, smiling under a broad moustache. 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 the table under a Jesus-shaped bookmark.

She told me Melissa had bolstered hope for freedom throughout the Camp. After she got infected she gave Lucy her diamond earrings to help her and the boy survive, maybe trade for the antiviral kerchiefs and better food. All in exchange for a promise to pass me the recorder she hid from Healthies.

"She said you could help us," Lucy told me while she lowered her voice. "You can take out our stories on this recorder, maybe. Said you'd know what to do. And she made me promise to give you this." She handed me one earring.

“So you’d know I wasn’t making it all up. And you’d believe me.”

“Believe you? About what?”

“Where she is now. I don’t know for sure if she’s dying or not.”

She started to cough. Lucy dropped her head between her knees and crouched, still holding her son’s hand. I felt a sting scrape me like a dull razor while I waited for her to catch her breath. She looked up at me.

“She got sick quick, but she said she couldn’t help it. She wanted me to tell you she didn’t cheat on you in here, mister. But then she thought better of bringing it up.”

The quickest way to get HIV was to have real sex. Melissa’s beautiful, Melissa was dying, Melissa is driven. What might she trade to get a witness to open up? Then I thought of what Healthland might do to her if she was injecting hope into the Camp. What they’d put inside of her, and then how they’d make it happen. I tried to put that kind of sex out of my mind.

Lucy pulled on the edge of my cloak, the thick orange Tyvek with the Kevlar ribs. “She just got into the wrong place last night, mister. Maybe she figured you might find her, I guess, so she could tell you herself how she got the Ultra.”

My ears began to ring. “You mean she might be alive?”

“Might be. Might not, too. I just know they took her out of the Dorm Tents and into the Treatment Center.”

“When? Where?”

“Early this morning, so early it was dark.” She stood up as if her bones might crack if she moved too fast. “The Center’s out against the Wind Wires.”

“Wind Wires?”

“We call ’em that. You stand there, waiting 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.”

The she spoke in a reedy voice, a whimper like those I heard when I did that Penitentiary Chorus feature. The breeze picked up her voice, then battered it back onto us. “They sound like that. So you’ll know you’re getting close to ’em.”

“Why the singing sound?”

“Dunno. We don’t want to hear that sound, mister. Means we’re walking toward the dying.”

I looked over my left shoulder at the rising sun. Due south would be straight ahead. I belted up my Cloak. “Thank you,” I mumbled. “How far?”

“Don’t know. Takes me about an hour to walk down there. But I guess I move slower these days.”

I ran toward Lucy’s clue.

The edge of the recorder jabbed me while I bolted across the Camp.

Melissa's court recording device, small as a river-stone, held her work inside the breast pocket of my Safe Cloak. It bounced against my heart along with one of her diamond earrings. The other one I left with Lucy, just as Melissa promised, to help that brave Camp inmate who had just helped me.

My eyes darted while I loped. I ran through the passages between the dorm tents, my thighs pounding and hungry to extend my stride. I knew the burn from my cycling, but the run stretched different muscles. I had to stretch myself now in a different direction, to learn what the camp officials would hide if she died.

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

I didn't run hard enough to forget what Lucy said. Melissa didn't cheat. If she was dying this soon, it must be from sex-borne Ultra. The Healthies didn't try to keep Camp sex consensual, not with certain death at hand for the inmates. The alternative to consensual sex jabbed as hard as the diamond's tip. Rape. I ran and opened my rage. So if Melissa died from Ultra, forced on her by someone infected and on a mission, it would be murder, too.

Heads turned as I passed inmates standing along rows of tents. Nobody ran in Camp, and I knew my pace would draw attention. But I couldn't slow and risk missing her last breath, not if there was a chance. My knees started to throb the way they did in the first half-hour of a run or a ride, But I hurt worse in my chest.

I crossed out of the dorm sector and into a broad meadow. Emus ran away from me, the crazy birds that were supposed to provide meat for the camp's inmates. I churned up the hill that lead away from the meadow, then glanced at the towers against the south-most fence line. I hoped the guards up there would think I was just another emu, if I ran fast enough. When I drew up closer to the treatment center and the Wind Wires, I slowed to a brisk walk and fought to control my panting.

The squads of Healthies popped up thicker as I neared the Center's tents, until every other person seemed to wear the purple and gold of the security force. I dropped my head, coughed every few moments while my eyes crawled along the tops of my lids, searching for the part of the center where the most critical patients were taken. The Vital Vortex, they called it in yesterday's statement. I remembered the black humor from my info-digger Milo, the researcher back at the Times. "Vortex, well — couldn't call it a Death Center, could they?"

Melissa might have passed under the red V's of the Vital Vortex sign. So what was I after? If she was dying, no one could change that. I was risking being caught and murdered, stripped of her evidence in the recorder, just for a

last glimpse of her alive. It felt foolish and essential all at once.

The smell slapped me across the face when I closed to within yards of the Vortex entrance. I saw no smoke, but something was burning, something ripe and fresh and organic. The wind dispersed the scent of roasted pork. Then I saw the bags, stacked in tiers six bodies high. The orange and black striped bio-haz shrouds, shaped like butterfly cocoons, faced a wide pyramid of red drums. Haz-mat workers lifted the drums onto a cargo transport. They wore grey clean-room suits, and the workers' gloved hands shuttled slow, as if underwater. They moved with patience, taking care not to disturb a shroud. The bodies in the bags and cremains in those drums had run out of time.

The Healthies had vanished in 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 my mind. A worker walked away from a steel funnel that delivered a stream of ashes into a line of drums. The man pulled off his clean-suit hood when he was clear of the dust of the dead. Maybe it was hot in those suits.

My rage boiled up alongside the burning scent that roared off the ovens. I crept toward the man when he took off his hood, looking tired and staring outside the fence line. Easier for me now, maybe. I swung both hands clenched in a fist toward the man's head, landing a blow at the temple. He crumpled just like in the self-defense video that they'd made made all us staffers at SatNews watch. The worker's clean-suit came off easy, but I would only have a little while.

I acted out my part like playing in a war movie. The uniform stolen from the Nazi stronghold. I was Trevor Howard, creeping into the heart of the evil headquarters. I walked slowly into the white tent, trying not to attract attention to myself, past the stacks of filled shrouds and into a room crowded with tables of corpses. Every step I took was a step closer to seeing Melissa alive.

I could taste the sweat in the air right through the suit's filters. I looked left and right as I walked. Then I saw her on the table closest to the door. A Healthie stood on the other side of the doorframe. Melissa lay still, as motionless as after we made love, a time she always retreated into the release of sleep.

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

I slid my hands under her body. She was lighter than the last time I lifted her, carrying her back to our jeep after she rolled her ankle hiking the Lost Mine Trail in Big Bend. I walked in that suit along the Vortex path using the smallest of steps, savoring every moment of the last time I could hold her.

I spoke to her in a whisper. "This wasn't a mistake. You were right about that part. I didn't want to it be true about your damn mission. But I was right

about how it could end. You were right about why you had to do it.”

My breath fogged the Mylar faceplate of the helmet. The heat and steam made the fog run in rivulets that mirrored the ones I felt on my cheeks. There was a stab in my throat and I closed my eyes against the sting behind them, then felt a shudder ripple through my legs. I looked at hers, so still, and put my hand under that sensitive spot behind her knees. She'd giggle, a sound so rare, when I touched her there. For an instant I recalled how she wrapped those legs around me when I carried her to the honeymoon bed.

I held her closer inside the tent and clutched a hope that I might draw her into me. I opened my eyes and noticed through the streaks on my faceplate that nobody was looking at me embrace a corpse that would not exist in a few minutes. The whine of an atomizing furnace cranked up to full blast crept into my helmet. The sound matched the howl I felt bubble inside me. Never again would I wake to hear her grinding coffee beans for the both of us, or watch her shoulders dip through the waters of Balmorhea Lake, or hear her snicker at the bouncy baritone of my broadcasts. She always gave me guff about my lightweight reports.

But her rebellion had become mine as I hefted her body. Her death gave me her do-good challenge along with the curse of grief. I tucked her into a striped shroud as slowly as I dared. Each tug of the Tyvek fabric covered another part of her. I crossed her arms over her heart, then sealed the bag in a swift tug while I turned my face away. I had to force one foot in front of the other to will myself outside and then strip off my suit.

Once I couldn't carry her body anymore, I could carry her work. I ran to look for a way to escape back through the fence with her evidence. The skies opened up and started to sizzle a cold rain onto my damp face. The rain sang down off the crew-cropped buffalo grass like a slap on a Herocaine junkie's forearm. Hot, or not? I had to get out of it and out of the Camp. I hunted for the gap along the fence-line, my broken-sensor spot from last night.

Her diamond earring stabbed me as it bounced again in the cloak pocket. I stopped and reached inside to rearrange my pocket's contents, checking on the recorder and her diamond. Then I felt that crazy stone that Milo gave me during our last talk at his *Viral Times* cubicle. I was reaching for a miracle.

Chapter 3

Acting Gods

Jennifer Nation

PharmAlliance Atlanta labs, November 30

A lab coat smothered my prayers. I bumped into a colleague in the PharmAlliance hallway and pulled back, the smell of the sanitized cloth around his shoulders lingering in my nose. But I remembered to apologize. Another unsaved researcher at our battleship of drug genesis, God's own cradle of health. I realized I'd drifted into my personal vision of the corporation and looked at the man. "Sorry, it happens to me." I flashed my social smile, the one that I learned could disarm any man, even scientists.

Plenty of creative people got lost in thought and then disconnected from their surroundings. I didn't mind looking absent-minded if it kept me out of mindless crowds like the one gathered in the break room. I watched from outside the glass-walled chamber as the technicians and biologists, creatures thick as like penicillin on a warm culture dish, swarmed in the space. My co-workers looked transfixed while they pressed toward a video screen on the wall, where I saw live video of a man in a rainstorm in a Health Camp, looking up at the camera. The crowd pulled close to the screen and cleared a path, giving me an opening to reach the Café Motion bar just as the glass walls faded from orange to blue. I looked back to see my assistant Frieda a few steps behind me, her usual position.

"God's will be done for that man on the screen," I said in a soft voice, a sermon that I hoped she heard. "No matter what, His will is always done."

I could hear my mentor Dr. Collins and his reminder: "Social time is important to navigate the politics of corporate research. God meant for us to mix, too, Jennifer." I didn't want to appear too aloof in the lab. Corporations always struggled to deliver breakthrough science, but they offered all the budget any scientist could desire. After my Nobel work at UC Irvine's Neurobiology Memory Center -- my brain maps tracked emotion centers -- I wanted to create and discover more than anyone. Especially my rivals arrayed

there before me, just getting their mid-morning Café Motion. I still permitted myself that caffeinated vice, because its energy was crucial to compress drug testing that could prove my theories. Science meant discovery to me. 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, allied with Aetna, Blue Cross and AIG, the Viral Wartime Powers Act of 2018 swept aside all protests. The country pinned hopes of viral survival on the three largest pharmacos and the biggest trio of insurers, all compounded into a single entity. Competitors and funding controls were swept aside for PharmAlliance, and we were on a roll. Some called it a monstrosity, but I called it home for my holy work. The directors didn't have a prayer of discovering my true aims for the drug I was creating.

I fidgeted at the break room door. Did this social time fit with my faith, the evangelical passion to spread the word of Christ's salvation? Sometimes I wondered how to make faith work inside science, that world so full of uncertainty. I 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 I did.

"Going inside, Jennie?" Frieda was right on my heels, the ones on my white shoes with sensible soles she said were "more fitting to a nurse than a Nobel winner." I rolled my eyes and gave her a social reply.

"Yes, but only for a little while. I do like my Motion, especially here in crunch week." I glanced at the break room walls, 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 and then moving across the color spectrum, emotions finally manipulated down to ultraviolet expulsion. Blue was still soothing, the peak of social enticement. I took my Café Motion at blue time.

I had to respect 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 results were reported. PharmAlliance called it Crunch Week, for the numbers were crunched in preparation for injecting them into the marketplace. Crunch Week provided these elite scientists an endless corporate maw to fill with new drugs. FDA regulation bottomed out during the virus wartime, just as I joined PharmAlliance, and it needed plenty of drugs in the approval pipe. New products produced new profits, growth for the country's economy, and another set of magic bullets to fire into the virus wars.

The PharmAlliance strategies filled this break room's chamber with brainpower. The Alliance array of insurers outpaid and trumped any chair endowment or department leadership these people had enjoyed in academia. My co-workers huddled around the room's VideoVision screen, a blade-thin panel recessed inside a frosted glass wall. Through the largest wall's floor-to-ceiling window I could ponder the scenery of Atlanta's wooded suburbs, patches of gated parkland and sculpted lakes surrounding the old Emory U campus. The Centers for Disease Control unfurled their scruffy parade of buildings in an array further north.

Nobody was watching those scenic views or the colors on the walls, though. All eyes were trained on the drama unfolding on the screen. I turned up the volume on the Mozart in my WiPod, the music receiver implanted in my skull behind the ear canal. The WiPod caught the music of the Heavenly Choral channel. I couldn't hear the VideoVision's narration or the chatter in the room. The music in my head lifted me higher than the high-test coffee with its notes written by God and sent to Mozart's hand. But the jam in this room was going to throw off my schedule to review the genome compares running on Arthur, king of PharmAlliance mainframes. I worked better alone.

I spent nights in solitude, like Jesus in the desert. I could have any company I wanted after dark. My blonde hair, usually braided but sometimes draped loose down my back, drew looks that I saw male colleagues sneak when they walked past my office. Most of the time these people -- the lonely people, I thought of them -- just wanted a piece of my power, the fame delivered along with my Nobel.

They looked lonely because I knew their lives were empty of faith. Only Frieda responded to my call to form a prayer group over the lunch hour. I formed one anyway, meeting with her as the only other person of faith in the PharmAlliance Neural Adjustments Division. More than 200 lonely souls in our building, all lost to the promise of everlasting life.

I felt like the minister in that Beatles song. I allowed myself the guilty pleasure of that antique band music during my long weekend nights in the office when no one was around. The music was not devout. I couldn't sing to that song during the day, not with the chance of Frieda overhearing and misunderstanding. So I hummed along with the sermon no one ever seemed to hear. I touched my screen to flip through table after table of field trial data. The raw reports and medical commentaries were rolling in for what I was telling the directors was Formula Gamma. My formula, a project to stand on the shoulders of the Nobel, was not scheduled yet for manufacture.

I looked over my shoulder and then popped open the private workspace on my screen. I appraised the three-dimensional floating model of the drug

that could turn off the brain's depression centers. I would pitch it as the latest defense against the HIV-5 that was herding millions toward Ultra's sudden death.

I hummed the chorus again. I code-named my drug Praizone, a secret because it would unleash praise of God's word. The lonely people were afraid. So many suffered under depression these days, fear that shrank their hippocampus. I knew they were afraid of the faith they needed to love the Savior. They had to first cross the darkness to live in the light. Praizone's power would reverse depression's darkness, but its main mission would enable praise to escape dark, lonely souls. I had mapped the every neuron's route in the brain with my Laureate work. Praizone would open hearts along those routes to alter minds.

"Nice little tune."

The words made me jump and scoot back from my screen. I heard my Aeron Web chair scrape and stopped with a start. I turned to see Bartholomew Cortez. At least he was too young to know the melody as a Beatles song.

"Thank you, Bartholomew." I locked my eyes with his. "It's nothing special."

"Sounds familiar, somehow." Cortez came to the lab some nights, wanting to talk at close range like so many men. I could almost sense his desire to touch my hair, see the light in his eyes while he leaned close enough to brush against me. I cast a hard glance to throw him off balance, the flag I raised to refuse desire. I had crossed enough of my own darkness already to enjoy a virtuous life in God's light. No man would lead me back across that crevasse. I watched Cortez melt away down the hall. But his male voice that rose up from behind me startled me like all men did. I had to remind myself that I sat inside a corporate complex, not in that dark forest where I first heard my Savior's voice,

I never wanted to look at any man the same after my days lost in that Tennessee thicket. The jet-copter crash in those woods killed my parents but hurled me clear. While my head throbbed and I stumbled through the brambles, I sang to keep from shivering, wandering until Jesus and his heavenly father appeared on my trail at dusk, dressed as hunters. I could not resist the holy love they ministered onto me all through that night.

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

The next morning I woke heeding my dreams. God's gifts came to some in science, Dr. Collins taught me, and my visions in my sleep could inspire

an initial heading on Arthur's computational cluster. Inspiration was essential to a pharma creations --an ear-hair removal formula might combine with a glaucoma-reduction compound, and together they might yield a cure for something pathogenic. Like choosing an opening Bible passage for a sermon, selecting a start point was the art. Searching the scope of available drugs could still outstrip the acres of data warehouses that PharmAlliance overworked in the cool hills of its Iceland Computational Campus.

But I believed God could show me the right steps. He was my mentor in the search, a lab director in flowing robes of white like the coats PharmAlliance issued.

I looked into my mirror and practiced my oral treatise for the day's peer meeting. "I have already isolated the brain sector that controls belief. It is linked to the imagination pattern, a sub-network I have isolated with the Agilent nanoneural analyzer."

I customized my analyzer's pre-viz scan of brain functions, the route of synapse exchanges to opened emotional lobes. A drug to make them believe -- or reduce their reasoning that resisted God's law.

PharmAlliance would never proceed with the tests, trials and manufacture of a drug to elevate faith. I knew this as certain as a preacher knows that fresh sins will follow confessions. I had to point the corporate peer panel at Praizone's ability to erase depression centers in the brain.

I dressed to win approval of my creation. The blouse was high-collared with blue pearled buttons down its front. I chose yellow, done in a faux silk fabric that had become popular with the working class. My shoes I wore to the meeting had heels to shape my calves, but no hint of an open toe. My slacks were powder-blue, tailored with darts on their thighs. A narrow white belt around my waist might captivate the men on the panel.

I stepped away from the podium to face Derek Ralston's first question, the one which provided another opportunity to promote my story about the drug's intended use. "Dr. Nation, your estimates of manufacture run outside the norms for project approval. What will this compound give us to justify the unprecedented expense?"

"Good will in a bad time, Dr. Ralston."

His brows, wooly and gray, drew together like a pair of mice. "How so?"

"Studies of Ultra show that immune system response levels drop after the onset of depression. The new formula can induce extra immunity with positive belief in oneself."

Ralston cleared his throat. "Positive belief. At a risk of megalomania?"

"Field trials show under two percent, Doctor, except in an overdose situation. This drug is intended to produce a sense of safety. People are more likely to fear less and love life under a prescription."

"That's been a corporate article of faith here since before you arrived

with that Nobel,” said Lamar Wilson, who I noticed had been looking at my belt. “How do we differentiate its effects from our mature family of mood stabilizers? Those third-generation products, well, they’re still producing ample profits as well as results.”

“Sir, the formula is an agent to induce brain behavior. It creates emotions rather than stabilizes those in place, based on the pinpointed from my Laureate work. Instead of repressing unwanted feelings, it induces loving behaviors.”

The room grew quiet, silence cloaking the walls like fog on a cold windowpane. I knew the idea was profound, that a drug could induce love. I couldn’t help it. I looked around the briefing room, its corners white and sharp, the logo of the corporate sweeping blue arc across the front of the dais shining in golden lights that mimicked the sun. My hopes for Praizone required the assent of men in the room. More men than women on this panel. I glanced at each panelist’s eyebrows, one after another, the near-look that would engage but not threaten, the one I’d learned in psych courses.

“Inducing behaviors,” said Ellen Wonesto, one of the women I chatted up at company mixers. “Something that Healing ArtCo hasn’t been able to introduce in their product line.” The petite brunette brought up our European Union rival and looked to each panelist at her side. “Emotion induction -- that’s a result of your mapping success, right?”

“Just so, Doctor.” I remembered to smile first at the brunette, then at the two panelists that flanked my ally. “We know more about how the brain communicates than our EU competition. This formula relies on that advantage.” The Nobel was my ace I played only when a project mattered the most. Praizone needed every edge for my secret, holy challenge: to keep this corporate creation on target to serve God.

Chapter 4

Shore Leavings

Angie Consoli
Assateague Island, December 1

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

All through the day, I remembered lifting my head away from the steady wash of the waves. But I knew that the sky would grow dark before much longer. I waited for the blackness to deliver me to a place where I'd worry about life no more. First my sacrifice, then the shame, and then years of sex for pay. Sorry.

But instead of underwater, the waves dragged me toward the moist sand. I kicked my legs by instinct, stretching to beach myself like a razor clam burrowing to hide. As the deep shoreline gave way to a sloping beach I felt my knees scrape. The last time my legs touched something, I was kneeling on the sailboat's white deck with my head bent over, perched on the bow. When, yesterday?

The splash of the surf took me back to the sound of delivering my tiny boy in the birthing pool. My baby, long ago adopted out to parents more fit. After that, I moved away from my parents' shaming until I lashed myself into a life of fucking in front of a camera. I leaned against the sand and felt the bruises from my journey onto the beach as well as before, the years of sex work that I left behind when I went overboard off that sailboat deck.

I closed my eyes to recall that yesterday that was shrouded in a fog of a dose of Wild Shadows. Drugged on that boat I reached up for nearly-naked Lowell Braston, master of my career, his sweatpants down around his ankles while he loomed over me. The trails from the drug glowed in my eyes. I could see Lowell bend his knees and lean into our sunrise ritual, this producer who

delivered me into the grimy dazzle of skin video. He captained the boat, my body, and the fortune his company was earning from me. All of Lowell's boats, sail or ski, cruised as party vessels. I was a vessel for anyone on board. I bobbed my head onto him, an aspiring performer acting submissive. While Braston's brother Lou struggled to helm the 40-footer, Lowell planted his bare feet on the deck to deliver the morning's release into me.

Then like releasing a bride, the gusts gave me away. The boat yawed its bow upward, pitching in the swells, its nose leapt up and Lowell's heels must have left the deck. As he slipped out of my mouth I reached to grab him and missed. Clamped with one of my wrists in my board's riding cuffs, I sailed out on the gust. With only my 105 pounds to counter the wind, I flew into off the deck into mid-air. I looked down to see the deck pitch and Lowell's head hit the winch hard. The boat yawed away quickly from the spot where I splashed down. With my wetsuit unzipped to my waist, the ocean slapped my exposed skin even harder than the winds that plucked me off the bow. I looked up to see the boat heeling over pretty bad.

I must have blacked out awhile. On the beach I rolled my face away from the setting sun. The tides in the blue water must have pulled my board into the currents and toward this shore. I looked my wrist to see I'd slipped my other arm into a riding cuff, but that didn't make sense. I was glad to die after the winds dropped me into the anonymous ocean. Why did I reach for redemption and cuffed in to ride the currents?

The white foam of the shoreline scampered around my numb feet and across my back. The board was slipping back under the water, yanked by the undertow on the shorebreak. had jammed onto a sandbar. I lifted my head just in time to inhale a mouthful of saltwater. Another wave broke across my head while I wriggled an arm free from one of the board's cuffs.

My efforts felt halfhearted. The pebbles below the sand were filling my wetsuit on the backwash, sucking me down out of my fucked life. I grimaced at the feeling, gritty as any of my videos. Life was fucked because of all my fucking, sex acts I performed with enough flair that millions had paid hundreds of millions to watch. I did well at bodies, starting with my quick study of them in sophomore biology class before my motherhood. I learned my own, those of the other sex workers in scenes, how to stretch and bend and coax out a money-shot orgasm loud and long. When the sales numbers came in, Lowell joked that I "made a bad mother, but was making us us all lucky fuckers."

Now I had the luck to drown on a beach in water not even seven inches deep. The saltwater ran up my nose, down my throat and stole the breath from me. Different than when I fought off a gagging while the cameras rolled. Here the noises rushed inside my head. So, drown in a few inches of surf when I'd floated through water a thousand times deeper all day. I laid my dyed dreadlocks

down on the board and waited for the end I had wanted for months.

Yapping startled me. I turned my dreads out of the surf, tilting my head up just before a wave covered me. The dog stood beside me on the shore. He pointed at me 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 me awake after I passed out, stoned on my face and with my puke starting to choke me.

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

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

Found. Fuck.

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

"Had to happen sometime, huh boy?" The woman wore red hair cut close to a square scalp 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 yanked away by the shorebreak's waves.

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

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

"I'd say," the woman snapped. "Few more of them waves and you'da been chum for the tiger sharks off this beach. Been Jesus next for you, sure."

My stomach heaved. I spit up the Beluga caviar, the last thing I swallowed on the boat, and not off a spoon, either. The woman held me 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 my hair away from my face when I 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."

My tongue felt thick, but the puking had brought it to life. "Are you a doctor or something?" She raised a hand to my eyes to ward off the sundown's light, then wiped the water off my brows.

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

When I but a knee onto the sand my head reeled. I felt myself slip into a darkness, different somehow. This Delta was snatching me up with that strong grasp.

I woke when the foul smell hovered under my nose.

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

“Are you kidding?” I felt my throat croak in pain when I forced the words past my lips.

“I never kid about healing, kiddo.”

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

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

“What the fuck.” I hesitated and looked around the room. Quilts on the walls. Woody-looking beams, stained dark brown from the moist air. Maybe real wood, the way they creaked, so this 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 I lay, propped up with pillows that were covered with fur.

Not the fake fur either, like those costumes I wore in the last video I made with Lowell’s brother and that chubby gaffer. They did me rough, head and tail all at once. Those boys loved shooting that scene so much they repeated it down in the boat’s galley, the White Shadows kicking in while I did them together.

The smell rose up out of the mug and I shook away my head like I wanted to that morning in the galley. “Well, I’m glad I got it, ya know?” I 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 my forehead. “You kind of drifted away on me there, kiddo. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Angel. Angel Lash.” I read the look on Delta’s face, a reaction that unreeling doubts about the name. I lifted the lip of the mug then sipped at the foul liquid, smelling like damp leaves, 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.” I drained the mug in a gulp, felt my stomach heave. I cocked an eyebrow at her. “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.” I spit back into the mug. “Runner-up, Best New Female Hetero Performer. Two years ago, but hey, that’s 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’s contest.”

“Retiring?”

“Dying. Ultra, for sure.”

Delta wrapped her arms around me. The press of strong, sour smell reminded me of those nights when mamman would rock me back to sleep in the scratchy green armchair, after a nightmare. Old lady smell. I closed my eyes at the scent of the hug.

“You’ll be okay here, Angel.”

“Where’s here?”

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

I wriggled inside her hug and opened my eyes. “My name’s Angie.”

I felt a chill coarse through me, like an echo of the surf that pounded me into this place. I shook my head, 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 Ultra kids like you than anything else.” Delta broke off her hug and took the mug off the bed where I had tossed it empty. “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.” I watched her fluff the pillows and rearrange them, working to prop me higher. The fur felt good with the tangy sea air streaming through the doorway and windows. I settled back into the bed and she smiled at me. “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. Time to mend.”

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

“Really. Well, be brave. I’ll get more toxin tonic. 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. I saw the mattress sag under the woman’s weight. Big thighs, muscled, strong. But a bottom and shoulders to match. I searched Delta’s eyes, close-set under a uni-brow in a face that could slap a truck off the highway. Then I looked away from this woman who found me lost in the surf, then pulled me out of the ocean’s jaws. Now this hefty gal,

as Uncle Nick would say to be polite, she was trying to tug at me again, to yank me from a fate I splashed into, my punishment for past mistakes.

“Wait a minute,” Delta said. “I’ve got something for you to see. Something about hopeless.” She reached above me and pulled down a small picture frame off a shelf overhead. When the woman reached past me I could smell Delta’s scent of work, like Uncle Nick’s after a day on the container ships. She handed me the frame. “Just take a look at him there in the picture.”

I blinked the sleep from my 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. I heard a whimper, even imagined I could smell a brackish scent of matted fur.

I looked up and saw 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 her fingers in her mouth and bellowed a sharp 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 me.

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

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

“All that,” I said, while I felt the tide of pain swell my chest. Like fists pounding. “I gave away somebody I loved. Had to.”

Delta stood up and leaned over me. “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 own lives.” She smoothed back my hair. “If you were supposed to die, I guess Sherlock wouldn’t have lived beyond the week I took that Go Picture. Out there when the light was getting weak, Sherlock wouldn’t have found you yesterday.”

The dog thumped its tail on the wood when Delta spoke his name. I looked around the room while the candles guttered in the wind rising at sunset. I was quiet for a minute. The pain in my chest still thumped, a hurt I wanted to end yesterday. If I could say something drippy this woman might go away now, maybe leave me to linger away.

“You could well be right,” I said at last, reaching for the phrase mamman used so often. I remembered the old gal trying to assure me -- even on that day I walked to the adoption center -- that the 10-month baby in my thin arms would be better off. Mamman was so different from my mother, holding

back the judgment that flowed like a sewer channel through my family. It was all just life, mamman would say, what happened, and life was nobody's fault. I took a breath when I remembered the hope she handed me on that hard day.

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

Before I could answer, I felt my eyes flutter again.

"Sleep then," she said. She patted me with a thick, rough hand. "A story for a time when you're stronger."

Chapter 5

Running Blood

Dayton
Health Camp Waco, November 30

The storm rose to a howl while I squinted at the fence-line. That bloodstone in my cloak's pocket felt small as a pebble against boulders of fear. The rains blotted out the daylight, making it hard to see even as far as the tower on the fence's corner. I paced slowly toward the north, but couldn't find my way back to the gap between the bottom of the fence and the gully.

When I finally found the opening, it was jammed with debris. A torrent of water coursed around the scrap metal. The Healthies had found my hole and plugged it. I kept walking past it, felt the pain in my chest where the stone rubbed against me, pressing hard on the spot where my fear stabbed me. I pulled out the stone. The Healthies would be closing in on whoever struck down that worker. I was lost and unable to evade them long enough to find another way out.

I searched my memory for what Milo said about the stone. He 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. Even after their amazed diagnosis he felt healthier inside the virtual world he shaped, community populated by the avatars of fellow-AIDS survivors. In that world he created a visage that looked elegant, not a man caught in a wheelchair with legs wizened by AIDS-induced polio. Living in the virtual world gave him the discoveries and passion to explore and crack data vaults.

I couldn't even hope to get into the Camp without his wizardry. When I left his cubicle he gave me what he called a bloodstone, "a little relic for courage." He insisted I take it, trilled at me from his dim work space. "You simply don't want to be prodding into that kind of place without some extra courage."

The stone, polished and shaped like a rhomboid, rested in his palm. I

picked it up. “What’s this rock got to do with courage?”

He shook his head at me. “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 leather bag at me. “When I first got AIDS. Back then, not Ultra, but bad enough to take away the dancing in these legs.” He pointed at his that dangled off his wheelchair. “Polio.”

“And the bloodstone made you braver?”

“If AIDS doesn’t kill you, it sure will make you braver, fella.” 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.”

I took the stone to shut him up.

I walked slower, searching the fence-line. No other gap at its bottom. The hiss of rain wrapped around the bark of thunderclaps. I dropped to my knees and held the bloodstone under my bowed head. “No,” I said. “I don’t want to die in here, too. Please. Somehow, I’ve got to find a way out.”

I tasted the salt from my tears and sobbed out whatever came to mind. “Please, help me. Somebody, give me a hand here.” I squeezed the bloodstone to my chest, thinking of Milo’s prayers in his worst time. My prayer felt sad and desperate. So this was courage?

I heard a chirp and felt the recorder inside my cloak whirl to life. “You need a hand, sure. But you’re nowhere near the way out.”

Was that Milo’s voice? It sounded muffled, like it was coming from inside my cloak. I opened my palm to see the bloodstone glowing, a faint pulse of green light that suffused the red whorls in the stone. The closer I brought the stone to the recorder, the brighter it pulsed.

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

“Milo, how--“ I tried to think of what I 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 spy movie. It’s just so dishy.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“Didn’t, until you started squeezing the 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 that little treasure from Melissa.”

Her name pushed a wave of nausea through me. A lightning flash snapped me out of a memory, one where she stood in the rain just off our porch in Fort Davis, trying to coax her terrier away from a squirrel the dog had treed. The thunder sent my heart pounding, and I pushed out a grunt as I rose to my feet. I shook my head and heard Milo again.

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

“Cousin?”

“Don’t ask. 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 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 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. I began to steal away from the tower I could see, keeping to the fence-line. Barking rose up on the wind behind me.

“I can use some help 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. I had a better option before you chimed in.”

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

I nearly tripped on a sluice-gate built up above ground level. “Shit!”

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

I pulled on the metal bar as I heard the barking grow louder. 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.”

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

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

Now I 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.”

I broke out in a trot down the 8-foot wide pipe while boots scabbled at the gate over my head. The barking grew manic and overpowered the voices. I stooped to run, lifting my knees like I had in track drills. I could see a faint light ahead when I heard the Healthies.

“Just throw him down in there. He’ll get him.”

Claws scratched out sound on wet concrete. I heard my coach’s voice. “Kick, Winstead. Kick hard.”

I pulled up short at the end of the pipe and teetered on the lip. Below me the Brazos River was a swirl of mud and foam. Behind, the thump of the dog’s lope rose in my ears. I heard the growl and leapt off the end of the pipe. I lurched for the limb of a juniper I saw perched on the side of the gulch, stretched out below me. I screamed as I dived for the drenched branch.

Later inside the copter, sorrow sat like a stone in my chest. I knew I shouldn’t be alive, should feel lucky the jet-copter pilot had picked me off that tree. I 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 above the river. Light drifted through the windshield and bounced off the cross dangling from the pilot’s ear. I winced at that gleam. Melissa’s diamond sparkled just like that when she wore it. What I carried beside my heart in a pocket was now only a rock. I squeezed Milo’s bloodstone and wished for its courage.

Chapter 6

Beast of Beauty

Jennifer
Atlanta, December 2020

I connected with no one as much as my God. My Cooper Super Coupe was connected to the proper lane by its cameras, reading the guide lines painted to the left and right when I finally followed the highway signs home in the steep dark. I locked in the Coupe's naviguide system to take me beyond the traffic around Norcross. I smiled at the rear-view camera that I used as a makeup mirror, applying eye shadow with a brush, one of the skills that my mother shared with me.

Eyes as perfect as Elizabeth Taylor's, she told me. In the mirror I appraised Cobalt Blue, my latest iris shade, a product of the in-trials Color-Now prescription that worked its way through the sclera and ciliary body in my eyes. The magic of Color-Now brought them to their original color but more intense, the kind of fine-tuning I saw as evidence of God's grace in my life.

I blinked and turned my gaze back to the road, my manicured nails resting on the tops of the car's joysticks. I cleared the clutter of Norcross and took back the driving myself with faith, certain of my safety despite the high casualty rate on this stretch of I-4170. God wouldn't take me now, with so much to do.

When the car's pedestrian sensor trilled, I looked ahead to see a stray dog along the highway edge, its mustard coat matted and damp. My lights caught the dog limping along the shoulder and looking into traffic. The animal might leap in front of a car, causing damage or a wreck. I slowed to a stop and eased out of my door beside the collision rail. The whip of vehicles buzzed in my ears as I approached the dog. It had Golden Retriever in its pedigree, though how much was hard to tell. The dog's big tail wagged when I got close. I sealed the deal with a Meet Treat, pulled from the bag I carried in the car's cargo console, then lured the confused creature into the car. I sped home to the gated towers of Magnolia Place. my night brimmed with the prospect of a new visitor, a creature full of unconditional love.

The gate-bot gave me the greeting programmed for tenants who brought any kind of visitor into the complex. “Showing off your happy home, eh?” The synthetic voice lifted on the last syllable, a twist added to encourage a reply. My voice would be scanned before I could enter the gate. Safety check, perhaps, but also audio evidence for lawsuits against the Magnolia Place security. My reply was proof that I invited this visitor.

“Yes, Wilson. I’ve got a little friend here I’ve picked up.” I ran my hand through my hair out of habit, a gesture to disarm doormen or the clerics who judged churchgoers. It was lost on the door-bot.

“Well, don’t do anything I wouldn’t,” sang the tinny voice. Whoever I brought in, the canned wisecrack was the same. The picture the gate-bot took was filed for the complex’s protection. I smiled for the camera and thought God watched over me so much better than this machine or its masters.

I opened my fridge to survey its usual spare contents: Kelvinated water for anti-viral defense, a tin of old-style caviar, facial regeneration cream, a Hi-Pro beef-sub steak and three frozen Snickers bars. I reached far back into the freezer and placed my hands on the vintage blend coffee tucked into antique tea tins. I counted the nine 200-gram cans. Two pounds a week, a lot but not too much for the fresh-grown kidneys I rented on the PharmAlliance Care Policy.

On other nights I might dig deeper into my music collection, plucking the country and western ballads, the Travis Tritt and Welton Walsh that reminded me of the Virginia where I grew up. I skipped over a subtle stash of Beatles from the Twentieth, by no means the biggest stretch of my music. Tonight it would be Mozart, the man’s most sacred compositions.

But I didn’t want to listen and read in bed and doze off, then awake and struggle back to sleep, my mind buzzing from the nightmares. I knew I needed exercise, even if it was already late.

I sent a prayer of thanks for finding the stray, a companion to make me sleep more peaceful. After I gave him a feeding that looked long overdue, I harnessed him into the treadmill, then switched the machine to human-sync so my body movements could control its speed and we could take a little trot together. I stepped alongside onto my own treadmill. I turned up the music in the room so the dog couldn’t hear anything but Mozart’s Mass in C Minor, not even the hum of the machine he ran on.

This was better than last night’s run. The golden had a big heart. I knew the animal could match my pace and observe the joy on my face. I closed my eyes and loped, my feet bouncing like a deer’s atop my treadmill’s trackpad. My usual meditation soon came after the moments I counted away, one breath after the next. I was being embraced by my savior. He touched my hair, stroking my locks away from my eyes.

I opened my eyes to see the dog curling its lips back in a snarl. Its tongue dangled from its mouth while the treadmill dragged under its hind legs. I blinked back tears, then shouted out the command to slow the dog's machine. I'd run too fast again on our matched treadmills, so lost in my visions. The golden wasn't mine to keep that night. I turned up Mozart's Requiem in D and felt spent, tired from more than just the running.

After I carried the dog's carcass to the Bio-Cycle, where organic garbage was mulched and pressed into Planting Paddies, I took a long shower. I stripped off my elbow-high black gloves, peeled out of my gray Exersuit and stepped directly into the icy needles of water. I set the timer for 11 minutes, each one raising the water temperature by 2 degrees. Lobster Pot, I'd named my program, because it encouraged me to stay put in the warming water so my mind could grow calm. I watched the drops rain down off sculpted shoulders, over my chest, across my waist and around my hips. I closed my eyes and shuddered at the image of the dog's tongue, blue and thick. In spite of the hot water, I felt a cold spot across my chest.

I could see I wore the wrong top to the unscheduled trials review. I usually wrapped a cashmere sweater around my toned biceps. The PharmAlliance VPs at the meeting might expect such shoulders on their customers, but not on a research director. The average genome designer in my division--men, of course--muttered their distaste for a woman who looked, one told me, "like you could bench-press me and my desk, too."

I looked out from my podium that faced the review board and swore it would be the last time I wore my black shell top with scalloped sleeves to a meeting without adding the cliché of a lab coat. But the top had been the only clean one in my tiny closet. I overslept and rushed out the door, the donned the coat at the labs that would make those shoulders anonymous. But an hour later the climate system died, a victim of a smart-building data-virus. The temperature was pushing past 80 in the hallways. The coat had to go. Shoulders were one thing, but body odor would offend more.

I had reason to sweat. They'd called me for a pop meeting on the pivotal testing update, something wrong with the Phase 3 trials for Praizone. No, not wrong. Unexpected, I reminded herself. Science doesn't judge results. Maybe the New Drug Application wasn't in jeopardy. I tried to shed my pessimism, until I saw clinical deputy director Elaine Watkins wriggle in her seat on the dais of the presentation theatre. The tiny strawberry woman was flushed, her eyes dilated. Watkins was staring at me like she just dished me onto a dinner plate.

I felt my shoulder muscles twitch after a few of those looks. She was under the influence of something that made her look hungry. I watched her cat-like

eyes dart from one colleague to another along the horseshoe-shaped table. I stood in the middle of the shoe, feeling like a lollipop center about to be bitten.

Watkins spoke first in a tone that sparked dismay. “Jennifer,” she said, drawing out the final consonant slowly. Heads at the table turned toward her. “I mean, Dr. Nation. We’ve got results we want to share with you.”

I watched Watkins rub her foot along Falbert’s leg. He looked away and adjusted his bow tie. “Unexpected results,” Watkins added with a smile. “Good news.”

Falbert locked his eyes with mine and cleared his throat. “Our colleague means to tell you she’s been experimenting with the Praizone formula,” he said. “Or a derivative, I should say.”

I could feel the perspiration begin under my arms. “Excuse me. A derivative?”

“Modification, really.”

“Of my formula?”

“Of the Pharmacorp intellectual property, Dr. Nation. Yes, a derivative. It’s really a very rich field for us to expand into. What you’ve given the corporation, I mean.”

By now I could see that Watkins had put her hand on the inside of the man’s thigh. Her jaw twitched again, like a tic.

I couldn’t believe a review panelist was taking a drug still in clinical trials. Convicts, graduate students, fallen ministers, unemployed morning news hosts, lousy weather forecasters -- those were the kinds of people who stooped to clinical tests of trial drugs. Not a PhD with oversight of an important segment of the country’s top pharma and its newest product line. Certainly not in the time of an epidemic like Ultra.

Sex or not, this was irresponsible. I stared at Watkins for a moment until the looks from the rest of the panel made me break off the gaze. I shifted my weight from foot to foot feeling my armpits grow damp in the room’s failed climate control. “Why are you using a drug still in trials, Dr. Watkins?” The question could not be couched.

“For the joy of it.” I watched a silly grin creep onto Watkins’ face. “It’s all about the joy, isn’t it?”

“The drug induces joy, yes.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“Wouldn’t it be more prudent to wait for the field trials to end? Isn’t it a bit--” I struggled for the word, decided on “--hasty to use the drug on yourself?” I struggled to come up with a reason for ignoring the trial protocols. Why were the other panelists so quiet?

“Who could wait for this rush?” She looked down the panel at the men, then back out at me. “My Henry, god love him. My husband’s never looked

better to me. I give praise to your creation.” She stood and applauded, and I watched the others wince.

I felt the stab in my heart when she used praise and creation together. The blasphemy, to not include God in creation. The other panel members were shaking their heads and avoiding eye contact with me.

Watkins began to titter through the silence that gathered in the warm air. The sound seemed to prompt Falbert to speak out. “Doctor Nation, was there any possibility of an emotional sidecar to your formula’s efficacy?”

“Sidecar?” I hated the concept -- that emotions could arrive unbidden in the wake of a mood conception drug.

“Come now, you know what I mean, Doctor. Something that comes along with drug’s intended ride, and can’t be separated.” Falbert’s own research focused on his pet theory. Trials were just a bag of nails for this hammer-only fool.

I tried to think where he was headed with his question. A rushing sound filled the room, I was sure. Time felt like it was roaring past while I sorted out possible answers. Then I realized the climate units had begun to work again.

Watkins sat down and grew silent, then dropped her face into her hands. Coyle, the VP of Current Trials, rose slowly and looked at the panelists who reported to him. “Doctor Nation,” he said in that coddling tone I hated, “doctor, we don’t mean to put you at a loss for an answer to this sidecar issue. It’s just so damned fortuitous, to be frank. This reaction is plain to see here in the drug’s current trial formula. The subjects in clinical trials gave us results that, well -- Watkins here just had to verify the behavior first-hand, I suppose.”

“Well, I know nothing about a sidecar. This formula is built to create a happier world, yes. But it’s not designed to drive this kind of, um, eros.” I used the Greek root, least offensive, most restrained. But Watkins had lost control of her passion. She should have been full of God’s love, not the craze I could read in that face.

Falbert spotted my uncertainty and replied like hitting a soft lob on a tennis court. “Well then, if that’s your answer, we’ll just keep you updated on the subsequent trial results.” He shook his head again and then rose to follow when Coyle moved to the door. Eventually Watkins got up, then drifted to the burnished aluminum doorframe in a trance, like she was remembering dance steps. She turned in a spin just at the doorway, stopped just short and sniffed at me. My lord, the release the drug provided. I stumbled onto the horror that they meant to put it to work along with those SimSuits.

My knees started to shake when I thought about what my creation could do in those garments of lust. I stood at the doorway alone, then lifted my hand to the lighting control and saw my fingers shake. This room, the place where I’d revealed my Laureate discoveries, never seemed so foreign, like a glove too small to fit my grasp of science or my grip on faith.

Chapter 7

Love's Hurts

Angie

Assateague, January 2021

I could not recall a time I slept so much. The island's morning was well-lit when I opened my eyes. That dog -- what a name, Sherlock -- he usually heard me stir in the deep down comforter, then he'd pad over from the doorway where he slept. He would put his snout on the edge of the four-poster bed and wag his tail. I was used to dogs that would bark at people in the morning. Sherlock was as quiet as Delta, who would bring me teas and massage what she called my meridians, then shuffle into the kitchen, or hum to herself at the workbench out on the porch, reclaiming whatever flotsam the surf brought onto her beach.

The sounds from the house felt different from Philly or the Hamptons, places where the music never stopped and somebody was always wheedling or snorting or uncapping a moan in another room. I was starting to think of those noises as the soundtrack of a former life. I drifted in and out of sleep when the sound of the waves boomed loudest, the hours when Delta said the water was at at high tide.

Delta was none of the things that Aurora or Tiffany or Alexandra had been on my sets: no swagger or panache, no buffed skin or enhanced parts or perfect smiles. No, Delta had the looks to drive away anyone but devoted nieces, parents or siblings. No one would start a family with a woman so coarse. But something made me drink in the sight of her, a study that got deeper as the healing and peace flowed from my caretaker.

I stared at the comforter wrapped around my knees, then sat up in the bed. The squares of brown, beige and canvas on the cover were common cloth, scrubbed cotton or maybe the Duralast sails I remembered from boats up in the Sag Harbor. I pulled my palm across the comforter, feeling the differences in textures. Outside my window I could see Delta washing sand off a sail, the cloth strung over a hawser of rope between two beech trees.

Even though I'd been there for weeks, I still had to scan the room to remember where I was when I woke up. I gathered the comforter over my shoulders and put my bare feet on the rough boards of the bedroom floor. A rag rug of faded pastels lay in front of the doorway. Candles lined the shelves of the room, along with some vases with gray sprigs of what looked like weeds, burnt at their tops. Then there were all those library books -- or what must've been the kind of books people borrowed and returned from a library, books that my grandmother read to me.

I made my way outside with Sherlock at my heel, the dog bolting through the screen door and down the steps, then coming back to escort me. The air lay heavy with water and spray, the smell of kelp off the beach, borne on the nip of a brisk wind. I sat on the next-to-bottom step and watched Delta work, unobserved until Sherlock barked and wagged his tail.

Delta turned to look at us both. "He thinks you've come out to play."

I stretched my legs out toward her. "Maybe I have."

She grabbed a corner of the sail she was washing and shook it. The spray covered the dog. He shook himself from head to tail. "So, you feel better then."

"I guess I do, a little. I just wanted to hear something more than the ocean."

"Too quiet for you?"

"Quieter than I've ever heard." I ran my hand through my hair to brush it off my forehead. "Or maybe not," I added after a moment. "There was nap time in kindergarten. This feels as good. Then the family had to move away. No kindergarten in the next school, not anymore."

As I sat on the rough-cut steps watching Delta work the sail, I felt warm. The day's weather was not, but inside my chest, I felt a soft pulse grow, like a blot of orange ink spreading in a clear bowl of water. In kindergarten Mrs. Elgin would stand beside me, holding a brush with a mouse-ear of bristles and coax, "Go ahead. Dip in, and make something new."

So I made a start at talking away the old. My baby, making it in high school with Phil without knowing it. Until my shame was swollen, then giving it away, the adoption when it was obvious we wouldn't make it as a couple. I stayed with Phil afterward until I forgot why.

Delta listened to the stories drain out like a bad wound, burning sage and hermabane, or using something she called reflexology on my feet and calves. She brewed grip-grass tea and infused things like hedgeburs to draw out my toxins. After the weeks of both listening and the internal healing, Delta made a start at teaching me the cures she was using, the work of what she called herself, a naturopath's art and crafts. "No one more able to carry on the craft than the cured," she said, and since I had no plans beyond this beach life, I learned.

One evening after our lesson in the healing with prana hand motions,

Delta balanced herself on the rope swing, fitting the round wooden seat under her broad bottom. I watched the effort, figuring the woman to be too big for the swing. I shook my head and felt a smirk in my cheekbones.

But she was strong. She had a sense of balance that didn't fit a woman over 200 pounds. I hadn't known many of those women after I left the Italian neighborhood in New Trenton. The skin trade didn't use women like Delta. She wasn't beautiful, or even comely or fair. Plain would have been a flattering way to describe her looks.

She didn't spot my smirk, moving on the swing with a verve that reminded me of the acrobatics of a three-way harness fuck. Delta pushed off with thick toes in the sand, spreading it apart until the dark underside of the sand surfaced. The shore breeze blew back her mussed hair while she stared at me,. She slowed down her swing when she became aware that her new student was watching.

I walked to the swing and stood behind her, then gave her a push when she swung back at me. She let out a squeal, a sound as sad as the gulls floating in the winds along the beach.

I pushed harder. Delta began to twist her legs together at the peak of each swing. On the downswing she spun toward me and I caught her. She pushed her hair from her face, and then I plucked away a few loose strands. I held her face in my hands.

She started to rise and walk past me. But I pulled at her arm. When I drew her close enough I put a kiss on her lips with a lingering peck.

"Why'd you do that?" I didn't hear any distaste in her question. She studied me like Lowell would eye a buoy in a channel.

"Well, I've been wanting to kiss you for a long time now. Ever since I got better."

"Got your wellness back, you mean," she said, stepping close. Her lips trembled. "I was expecting you to kiss me days ago. I just wanted to know what was special about now, this day."

"Maybe it's just a sign that I'm well. I don't have to hold in all that hurt, maybe. I'm thinking about love again. Part of that 'wellness from weary' you preach, you know?" I wrapped my arms around her and kissed my mentor with enough fervor to answer all other questions.

I shared my secrets with her in passionate kisses from the past. I shared dark and sad yesterdays, sordid with details of sweat-soaked sofa cushions of the gonzo sex films without story or dialogue, work that kept me in rent money with the meager pay, stories filled with a bony ache of daily humiliation. Later, the adult films at least, the ones pretending to be real movies with bad dialogue to accompany the sex. I never told the stories to anyone else before those

nights in Delta's beach refuge, not all of the details I remembered through a haze of grime. I cleansed myself in that fireplace light, night after night.

Delta took in many people with scars on their souls, but my tales of the trade broke water inside her heart. She healed as a calling, but no person she ever rescued spilled out such failed love.

"It hurts you to tell me these stories. I can see it. It even hurts me to listen."

I tossed out a chuckle. "They hurt even worse before they were stories. But I love my past exposed. I love giving up the whorey truth to you."

She folded her legs under those thick thighs. "So good, that word. You are right in choosing hoary." She was saying it differently than me.

"Well, for every producer who was my boyfriend, I was a whore. I made my money, sure. Even earned all my awards, Best New Starlet of 2019, then Best Femme Performer. But I earned it all on my back, or my knees, or doing really bad dialogue."

"Oh. Not hoary, then," she said.

"Like there's another way that it means?"

"Good question. Yes, a kind of rough, scabby experience."

"Oh, it was rough, plenty, especially in the gonzos. But here I can see how scabs can heal over. I know it since I met you. My past will always be out there, on the networks, another avatar girl for the boys to do, to see in action." I threw my calves over the wingback chair's arm and pointed my toes at her, stretching. "I believe in you, I mean, that healing you do. I want to learn it from you. I love how it feels."

When I washed into her life I was dying from being too pretty. Once I beat the virus and won back my health, I decided that perhaps beauty carried a sadness, somehow. But Delta looked happy. Here was a woman who crossed into her 40s plain and squat, built more like a linebacker than a mystic. Her body tone seemed to say she was an athlete in her past. She wore muscle where curves lived on the girls in the skin films. Her nose was too large to overlook its shape, and her knees had dimples below and above those fleshy joints. But underneath the mottled skin of her chest beat a heart so beautiful that my own stung just thinking of it.

She adopted a life of solitude that fit the practice of healing. I came to her from a world that she left behind, one that could only value those who weren't the ugly ducklings. She said her mother told her about the bird who grew into a swan. Delta shared her sacred skills in a world of swans, healing the wings of ducklings. I wanted to help her fly high in loving, eager to give her something in return, the glare of that red rocket.

On a sunny afternoon we walked the beach together and then fell into bed exhausted. The calico of the comforter felt like a waiting embrace as we

tangled together in its folds. I had already brushed the sand from her forehead, and pretended to find more to brush away, an easy way to let my hands run over her body while her eyes fluttered toward a nap. I brushed her shoulders, her back, then she cuddled closer, like a cat toward a caress, and I found my hands stroking softly, crossing a line to settle my debt to her, so I could lift myself to an equal place in the relationship. I wanted to graduate, to show Delta something I learned well in front of those cameras.

Femme fatale, that's what mamman called the tramps in the neighborhood. And so the love I gave Delta turned against us both, a strike against the healer's body that I just opened with my caresses and more.

Maybe I knew that I still carried the virus, not killing me anymore but strong enough to attack anyone. At least anyone who got close enough to quiver in gratitude, one body beneath another. I didn't know everything. What did anyone know for sure about how this virus behaved?

Chapter 8

Stuck on you

Dayton
New Jersey, September 11, 2021

I went to bed last night the same as every night since she died. I wanted to fall asleep and never wake up. A coma, maybe not die. While millions buried their families, friends, and lovers during the years of Ultra's pandemic, I buried my heart with Melissa. But even 10 months after her murder I could rejoin her in bed, touch her warm, brown skin in dreams of simulation. I replayed her in my SimSuit, running the Lost Lover program that captured loving touch and evaded True Sex. The kind that Healthland used to kill her.

But that morning in my Palisades apartment, I was paying for my replay.

My arms lay frozen in place. I tried to lift them, swathed in my tangled sheets, to rub my eyes crusted with sleep, but I couldn't move. I smelled the odor that hovered in my bedroom, that yeasty smell of the nano-bacterial computers that lined the inside of the suit.

Damn, I fell asleep in it again. I needed the suit, its fix of hearing and touching and tasting her. I rushed to my dreaming in the suit, the nights where her tresses sparkled as black as the West Texas sky where I grew up, the place I met her while reporting on the courthouse beat. But in that Jersey bed I was tied as fast as a calf in a Big Bend ranch rodeo. I could manage a glance at the clock. It was not my friend now of all mornings, a day I could ill-afford to be late.

They were awarding me a Pulitzer today. I had a date across the Hudson in New York, where I was supposed to be on stage when the ceremony began. Less than 90 minutes from now, but I was trapped in the Suit like a mummy in an exhibit. My news achievement would be on exhibit, the stories about Melissa's death in the epidemic's Camps and the scandal that had sent millions more to their deaths. Government testing, contracts to experiment with drugs built by PharmAlliance.

I squirmed my hips and flexed my forearms. Nothing. The suits provided

safety and I felt lucky to own one, except this morning. Damn little bacterial computers inside it tightened right down into stasis, the slick bastards. I could see the orange-lettered warning stamped on my forearm, my limb frozen in place, the one draped over the empty pillow on the bed. I read the lettering aloud.

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

I'd have to escape the suit with the pain that worked the last time I trapped myself. Dislocate a shoulder, the trick I gained after my accident on the gymnastics team at Fort Davis High, 20 years ago.

I wriggled my elbow to start escaping my Suit. At the pain that shot through my arm I forced myself to recall Melissa's elbows, a shade darker than the arms I'd cross over her chest, holding her while we slept spooned. Since her death, I usually woke wrapped around my Faux Pillow, her same body-length but more motionless than she had ever slept.

While I worked my arm, I took my mind off the pain by composing. “The pillows are as common as comforters on beds around the world. The Wall Street Journal and FoxNet use Faux sales as an index of death among couples. First the Flu, then Ultra to feast on an immune system crippled by the flu's alphavirus. Such pillows lay on many a bed as a sop to the sorrows of the survivors. They are sanitized against viruses, then scented with the favorite fragrance of the departed. They emit an aroma of abandonment.”

Ah, too drippy, I thought while I worked my shoulder away from the joint. I took deep breaths and smelled the jasmine on the pillow, her favorite essence. I'm wasn't alone. Millions sniffed the scent of lost lovers.

I squirmed to move an arm like Houdini escaping a straightjacket. I struggled for the silver control pad on the nightstand. A touch on the red reset button and I could be mobile again. The Suits didn't respond to voice commands. Too many shouts and cries to filter out. I realized I could be stuck all morning. People come in late for work because of shit like this.

I felt sticky as I struggled, because the suit's sensations delivered realism enough to come. I still vibrated from that replay, safer than the old Ultimate Sex, a name of disdain that came from the men who built the Suits, the same team that delivered Viagra and then “Vagilla, for her pleasure.”

If I could reach the console on my night table--just touch it like anybody couldn't touch anyone now without risk--I could wake the suit. I tried to find the correct angle to extend my arm away from the still-frozen suit and looked up the mirror overhead. The suit was covered with purple sateen.

I developed my SimSuit article and newscast for Viral Times without much reporting. My dirty secret was waking today from the thirty-second straight night I SimSuited myself to sleep. I heard a name for this kind of poor

bastard who couldn't unjack for even one night. They were calling us addicts Suit Hangars on the newsblogs.

I felt my artery thumping against the Suit's collar. The suit ran my lullaby, the stored Melissa program from our experimental night last year. I wrote my first story about a Suit as a fluff feature, using a borrowed pair in a night she humored me while we made love. But she didn't call it that. She called it "having sex -- it's just that different."

Sex or lovemaking, she felt alive when I wore the suit, kissing me everywhere, touching the tops of my ears, the small of my back. More nights than ever, I slept with her full-sensory simulation wrapped around the hole in my heart.

I switched on my video set with a voice command, automatically muted on startup. The chrome box sprawled across the bedroom wall of the 500 square meter Hyatt suite, where I'd been staying on my temporary assignment. The TV -- I smiled at the old 20th term for this far more connected system -- was a gift. From Wilcox, the Viral Times VP of Marketing, a goon who oozed in a habit like a rattlesnake's buzz.

The phone rang and I knew I could answer it without leaving the bed. Good thing, too. I didn't want to be discovered waking in my Suit like a drunk sobering up in jail. The phone continued to ring on my chrome countertop. The pricey communication unit, the remodel of the suite for my extended stay -- all off the back of the Times' largess. Bribe, really. They didn't want me to wander off to the FoxNet, not after my Camp series got short-listed. Not many video reports landed on the Pulitzer jury's list. Print still enjoyed prejudice with those prize juries.

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

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

"Answer, no video," I called out.

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

"Milo -- what do you want?" The last thing to start the day with was an admission. I couldn't explain my addiction to the simulation. It was like what? Loving mock turtle soup, instead of the real thing. I couldn't touch the real thing anymore, couldn't taste the warmth of her tongue on mine. And lots of people wouldn't touch anybody.

“Dayton, my man, you’ve simply got to see this.”

“See what?”

“Turn on Sat Seven. Oh, you’re already tuned in. It’s on Media Mash-up. I had to clear my throat. “Is that--”

“The awards, my man. Yours, for today, in the lead story.”

Cantering my head toward the TV, I shouted. “Un-mute, sound to 6.” The rumble of Anderson Cooper’s voice, rusty with advancing years but full of his trademark fury, filled the room.

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

“Hey!” Milo said. “Good on you, fellow. You’ve won. I never dug for a Pulitzer winner before. Afterward, get on down to the Rusty Pen, so we can celebrate.”

“Yeah, celebrate.” I 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 that coin that the network 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?”

I groaned as I tried to unfreeze the suit.

“You’re still a-bed, aren’t ya?”

“I’ll see you soon, Milo. Don’t wait on me to pour that champagne.”

I signed off and then arched my back. The pain bolted at me like a farm dog at a fence. Hell of a wake-up call. But my arm finally reached the console button.

Chapter 9

Rocky Port

Dayton
New York City, September 11

The ferry's engine growled across New York Bay. I perched at the rail even though the wind was unkind. I closed my eyes and rolled in the swells of the surf. I had been breaking waves, like breaking open the Camp scandal. A story about Healthland and broken rules. Health Camps that only delivered death along with drug trial results.

I didn't wail like I wanted while I thought about her death. I focused on the chill from the ferry rail. While I walked to the bow I noticed commuters at the cabin windows staring at me. I turned to stare back, scan the faces above the gold letters on the outside of the cabin: Port Authority of Weehawken. The air off the Hudson felt like it manhandled my ears. Out here, at my regular spot for my commute to the New York offices, I could face my loss over the last 10 months.

The City swung into view, gray and pin-lit with its windows shut tight but glittering. One of those buildings held my Pulitzer earned at the rim of death. The wind picked at my watch cap, as if it had an opinion about me wearing it today. On 9-11's Twentieth anniversary, America continued its tradition. No headwear. Especially in New York, where today's ceremony would be shared by the Pulitzer winners from two decades ago, as well as the follow-up attack during that Dodgers game on the Tenth anniversary. Parading those winners was another way to water down the jury's choice of me, the guy who yanked on the government's superhero cape.

The watch cap was Melissa's gift to me for a trip up to see Dad's folks in Ohio. I had to wear it today, even if it turned heads and had some people foaming at the mouth. She deserved my memorial on my prize day most of all. Without her Camp interviews I carried out on that recorder, I'd only have the story of her death and my own escape to report.

"Hey buddy, why are you wearing a hat?"

I turned to see a fireplug of a man, one arm mechanical from the elbow down, his pea coat sleeve dangling empty on the coat's other side. He held the end of a hawser with his mech hand and frowned at me.

Afghanistan vet. Yeah. He'd think today was still special after we found Bin Laden there.

"Mister, don't you know what today is?"

I turned to put my back to the wind gusting off the bow. "Everybody knows what today is. Monday."

"You sonofabitch. I gave up -- naw, lost an arm and a half for the likes of you." The ferry hand tossed down the hank of rope at my feet.

"Easy there, Sarge. I gotta wear this cap, especially today." I held my palms open, took a half step toward the man.

"How come? Everybody's supposed to be bareheaded today." Coulter's motto came quick to the veteran's lips. "We show our respect, to remain on guard."

I was sick of the old tart's catch-phrase. I tugged on my cap. The deckhand mumbled and stepped closer.

"Buddy," he said, "take it off."

"I'm not doing that." I touched the blue watch cap, two fingers extended. "She gave me this. It stays with me, out here, anyway."

The ferry pitched in the swells. "What does that matter?" the hand asked. "It's 9-11. Everybody goes hatless today. Even you should know that." He squinted and shaded his brow against the sun. "Hey, aren't you that guy?"

I was waiting for this revelation. Since my broadcast series, people knew me. "Yes, I am that guy."

"Dalton Winstead, that's you. I saw you on the news. During that Health Camp mess."

"Dayton. Dayton Winstead is the name, sarge."

"How'd you know I was a sergeant?"

"I bet you lost those forearms in Afghanistan." I tried to convey a look of understanding. Wait, better underline it for him. "I can understand why you're pissed at me."

"I didn't lose these for nothing."

"But I've lost something, too."

"Your wife died, didn't she? In that camp, I guess. I lost somebody in those Camps, too." His face softened in the crisp wind, reducing my grimace to a shade of sorrow. The silence grew tighter than a boat's line to a piling. I knew my loss was not a point of public honor like those from Afghanistan or 9-11. But my loss was trumpeted by the media just as much as the veteran's injuries. No matter if the comparison was unfair.

Thirty-five minutes and a flash colon probe later, I stood in the Columbia Journalism School's Anderson Cooper Theatre. Throne of the Vanderbilt fortunes, yeah. I looked to my left and sized up the Times' Herschel Sayne, the only living winner of the team that won the '01 prize for 9-11 reporting. Over on my right I eyed Majab Kay, the Google Tribune newsie who unearthed the cabal behind the Tenth Anniversary smallpox attack.

Both men covered attacks on government security. But I knew I stood in the other corner of the truth, exposing our government's threat. I felt the room expand, my view swelling like it always did when I panicked. My day for a prize, sure, for revealing crimes. But I had to share it with these Rushmore heads of reporting. Sayne was blinking constantly and grinding his teeth.

Endocrine replacement, it seemed. The old guy was striving for 97 with his new glands. Surviving was everyone's first career, the everyday work to outlast the viruses.

Time seemed to shift for me. The hall grew silent. Then I realized that the steel-glassed walls of the theatre drew still to deliver the one-minute tribute to the Fallen Ten Thousand, "Three in New York, seven in LA, all maintain our guard." The Dodgers-Giants series. What a place for an alphavirus, sprayed through the air conditioning of the SoCaliDome.

I felt a poke at my ribs. Sayne was grinning through clenched teeth. "Go on, kid," he whispered. This is your minute at the mike." I stepped forward to the applause that floated down from the balcony, saw my colleagues stand. Those at the back, even those up front, they became tiny bodies in my vision. The anti-viral scent stung my nose as the fumes wafted from the crowd. I managed to recall my opening line just as the hall quieted.

"Silence can soothe survivors, honor the dead. But stories make us remember forever." I fingered the cap in my hand, calling up the image of Melissa and her body limp in my arms. "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 eyewitness. I thank you all, my peers, and the Pulitzer jury..." Then the rest of my speech flew right out of my head. Think of them all naked. Okay, maybe not Helen Thomas in the front row, creeping beyond 100.

I could feel my throat thicken up, the wall of stings building behind my eyes. I didn't want to cry. I'd done enough of that during the stories on camera. I scrambled for something to break the sudden silence. "In a moment like this," I fudged, "words are too small. Not important." I looked down to see I was shuffling my feet. "C'mon, stick to your mark," I 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 their aid that--"

“Winstead. Dayton Winstead!”

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

The deck hand.

“Yes, that's me,” I said. “How'd you get up here?”

He turned away from my question. “Dayton Winstead, the US Court for the Southern District of New York summons you to appear in a lawsuit.” The deck hand didn't mutter, raising his voice to bark toward the mike. “This suit is levied against damages from your misconduct in this year's reports about PharmaAlliance.”

Before I could answer, the guy lifted up another folded paper. “The United States Congress also summons you to a hearing before its Healthland subcommittee.” A process server from Central Casting could not look any more zealous. He touched both papers to my chest.

A righteous, maximum attack, right upon my honor. I held the broadcast Pulitzer's silver spire in one hand and took the lawsuit and hearing summons in my other. The deck hand turned his back to the crowd and leaned in to me, flashing a grin that showed a flag stamped onto a false tooth.

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

The man stalked out while the catcalls from the crowd hounded him. I looked down at the summons, striped on its long edge with the official holographic seal. Then I stared at Cooper in the front row and Thomas. Her hair wasn't as white at the old anchor's, but both of their heads were bowed. Cooper glanced toward the crowd behind him, a move that showed the bald spot that the cameras had always avoided. I wanted all those cameras trained on him to have the same kind of blind spot for me.