

PARASITE

I made my way slowly toward the window, wishing I had a weapon, or any idea how to use one. I would have felt better. There were probably lots of things that could be used as improvised weapons in the kitchen and living room, but I didn't know what would work, and so I didn't reach for anything. I wasn't a fighter. I did, however, have a pane of glass between me and whatever was in the side yard. I held that thought firmly at the front of my mind as I inched around the couch and peered out the window.

Three of my neighbors were standing in the side yard, their hands down at their sides, staring at the fence. I recognized them all, even if I only knew one—Mr. Carson from next door—by name. None of them were moving. One of them, a woman, was wearing a bathrobe a little newer than mine. Her socks were soaked and grass stained. The other woman was wearing one shoe, and her hair looked like it was halfway-combed. I bit my lip. They were just *standing* there.

Then Mr. Carson turned and looked at me.

I let out a little scream and stumbled backward, falling over the couch in my retreat. His eyes were like Chave's had been: totally empty of anything resembling humanity or life. Dead eyes. He looked at me like a man who had crawled out of his own grave.

BY MIRA GRANT

The Newsflesh Trilogy

Feed

Deadline

Blackout

Parasitology

Parasite

PARASITE

PARASITOLOGY VOLUME 1

MIRA GRANT



www.orbitbooks.net

O R B I T

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*For Melissa and Rachel.
You are very good sisters.*

INTERLUDE 0: GENESIS

My darling ones, be careful now, and don't go out alone.

—SIMONE KIMBERLEY,
DON'T GO OUT ALONE

Here there be monsters.

—DR. SHANTI CALE

August 17, 2015: Time stamp 15:06.

[The recording is crisp enough to look like a Hollywood film, too polished to be real. The lab is something out of a science fiction movie, all pristine white walls and gleaming glass and steel equipment. Only one thing in this scene is fully believable: the woman standing in front of the mass spectrometer, her wavy blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, a broad smile on her face. She is pretty, with a classic English bone structure and the sort of pale complexion that speaks less to genetics and more to being the type of person who virtually never goes outside. There is a petri dish in her blue-gloved hand.]

DR. CALE: Doctor Shanti Cale, *Diphyllobothrium symbogenesis* viability test thirty-seven. We have successfully matured eggs in a growth medium consisting of seventy percent human cells, thirty percent biological slurry. A full breakdown of the slurry can be found in the appendix to my latest progress report. The eggs appear to be viable, but we have not yet successfully induced hatching in any of the provided growth mediums. Upon consultation with Doctor Banks, I received permission to pursue other tissue sources.

[She walks to the back of the room, where a large, airlock-style door has been installed. The camera follows her through the airlock, and into what looks very much like an operating theater. Two men are waiting there, faces covered by surgical masks. Dr. Cale pauses long enough to put down her petri dish and put on a mask of her own.]

DR. CALE: The subject was donated to our lab by his wife, following the accident which left him legally brain-dead. For confirmation that the subject was obtained legally, please see the medical power of attorney attached to my latest progress report.

[The movement of her mask indicates a smile.]

DR. CALE: Well. Quasi-legally.

[Dr. Cale crosses to the body. Its midsection has been surrounded by a sterile curtain; the face is obscured by life support equipment, and by the angle of the shot. She pulls back the curtain to reveal the gleaming interior of the man's sliced-open abdomen. The skin has been peeled back, and the blood has been suctioned away, revealing a wide array of colors. Liver brown, intestinal green and glistening white, and the smooth pink sac of the stomach. Calmly, she reaches into the man's body, pushing organs aside until the surface of the small intestine is revealed.]

DR. CALE: Scalpel.

[One of the masked men passes her the requested tool. She takes it, pressing down against the man's intestine. He does not move. Her hand does not tremble.]

DR. CALE: I am not following strict sterile protocol, in part because infection is not a risk. The subject's immune system has been supplemented. *D. symbogenesis* eggs were

introduced to the subject's system six days ago, fed into his body along with the nutrient paste we have been using to preserve basic biological functions.

[The surface of the intestine splits, spilling a thin film of brownish liquid over the surrounding organs. Dr. Cale ignores it as she sets the scalpel aside and thrusts her hand into the man's body. He still does not move as she digs through his small intestine. When she finally retracts her hand, she is clutching something. She pulls down her mask with her free hand and directs a beatific smile toward the camera.]

DR. CALE: I am pleased to report that we have multiple fully-formed proglottids present in the subject's body, as well as some partial strobila.

[She holds out her hand. The camera zooms in on the white specks writhing against her gloved fingers.]

DR. CALE: *D. symbogenesis* is capable of maturing when cultured inside a living human host. Ladies and gentlemen... at long last, it's alive.

[The film ends there. There are no notes in Dr. Cale's progress reports relating to the eventual fate, or original identity, of the first human subject used to culture *D. symbogenesis*. The medical power of attorney referenced in the recording has never come to light.]

[End report.]

June 23, 2021: Time stamp, 13:17.

This is not the first thing I remember.

This is the first thing that I was told to remember; this is the memory that has been created for me by the hands and eyes and words of others. The first thing I remember has no need for hands, or eyes, or words. It has no need for others. It only needs the dark and the warm and the distant, constant sound of drums. The first thing I remember is paradise.

This is not the first thing I remember. But this is the first thing you will need to know.

Sally Mitchell was dying.

She was up against an army—an army that had begun with paramedics, moved on to doctors, and finally, to complicated life support machines that performed their function with passionless efficiency—but none of that seemed to make any difference. She had always been determined, and now, she was determined to die. Silently, and despite everyone's best efforts, she was slipping further and further away.

It was not a swift process. Every cell in her body, damaged

and undamaged alike, fought to retain cohesion. They struggled to pull in oxygen and force out the toxins that continued to build in her tissues and bloodstream. Her kidney function had been severely impaired in the accident, and waste chemicals had ceased to be automatically eliminated. She no longer responded in any meaningful way to external stimuli. Once she was removed from the machines that labored to keep her body functional, her life would come to an end in very short order.

Sally Mitchell existed in a state of living death, sustained by technology, but slipping away all the same.

Her hospital room was crowded—unusually so, for a woman standing in death’s doorway, but her doctor had hoped that by bringing her family to see her, he could better plead his case for taking her off life support. The damage from the accident had been too great. Tests had shown that Sally herself—the thinking, acting girl they remembered—was gone. “Clinical brain death” was the term he used, over and over again, trying to make them understand. Sally was gone. Sally was not coming back. And if they kept her on artificial life support for much longer, more of her organs would begin to shut down, until there was nothing left. If her family approved the procedures to harvest her organs now, her death could mean life for others. By pairing her organs with splices taken from her SymboGen implant, the risks of rejection could be reduced to virtually nothing. Dozens of lives could be saved, and all her family had to do was approve. All her family had to do was let her go.

All they had to do was admit that she was never waking up.

Sally Mitchell opened her eyes.

The ceiling was so white it burned, making her eyes begin to water in a parody of tears. She stared up at it for almost a minute, unable to process the message she was getting from her nerves. The message wanted her to close her eyes. Another part

of her brain awakened, explaining what the burning sensation in her retinas meant.

Sally closed her eyes.

The doctor was still pleading with her family, cajoling and comforting them in turn as he explained what would happen next if they agreed to have Sally declared legally dead. His voice was no more or less compelling than the buzz of the machines around her. None of his words meant anything to her, and so she dismissed them as unimportant stimuli in a world that was suddenly full of unimportant stimuli. She focused instead on getting her eyes to open again. She wanted to see the white ceiling. It was...interesting.

The second time Sally opened her eyes, it was easier. Blinking came after that, and then the realization that she could breathe—her body reminded her of breathing, of the movement that it required, the pulling in of air through the nose, the expelling of air through the mouth. The respirator that was supposed to be handling the breathing process began beeping shrilly, confused in its mechanical way by her sudden involvement. The stimulus from the man in the ceiling-colored coat became more important as it grew louder, hurting her ears.

Sally sat up.

More machines started to beep. Sally winced, and then blinked, surprised by her own automatic reaction. She winced again, this time on purpose. The man in the ceiling-colored coat stared at her and said something she didn't understand. She looked blankly back at him. Then the other people in the room started making noise, as shrill and confused as the machines around her, and one of them flung herself onto the bed, putting her arms around Sally and making a strange sound in her throat, like she was choking.

More people came into the room. The machines stopped making noise, but the people kept on doing it, making sounds

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she would learn were called “words,” asking questions she didn’t have answers for, and meanwhile, the body lived. The cells began to heal as the organs, one by one, resumed the jobs they had tried to abandon.

Sally Mitchell was going to live. Everything else was secondary.

STAGE 0: EXPOSURE

*Your health is too important to trust to just anyone.
Choose SymboGen. Choose freedom.*

—EARLY SYMBOGEN
ADVERTISING SLOGAN

Where am I?

—SALLY MITCHELL

When the hygiene hypothesis was proposed in the late 1980s, most people laughed it off as fringe science. It was based around the idea that more people were developing life-threatening allergies and autoimmune conditions because they weren't getting enough early-life exposure to infectious agents. Not just viruses—everyone gets exposed to viruses, unless they live inside a bubble—but allergens, bacteria, even parasites. We weren't living in literal bubbles, but we were sterilizing our environments more every year, and we were starting to see the effects. Children were getting sick because we refused to let them play in the dirt. It was a ludicrous idea. Pure scientific comedy.

Except that by the beginning of the 21st century, no one was laughing. More and more, the human race was being faced with a choice: find a way to keep our systems in the equilibrium they had evolved to maintain, or accept a future of chronic illness, increasing biological and neurological disorder, and potentially, eventually, extinction.

That's where we came in.

—FROM “KING OF THE WORMS,” AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR. STEVEN BANKS, CO-FOUNDER OF SYMBOGEN. ORIGINALLY
PUBLISHED IN *ROLLING STONE*, FEBRUARY 2027.

...traffic cameras captured images of the driver's hands beginning to shake uncontrollably in the middle of the intersection before she apparently experienced a massive seizure, losing control of her vehicle and causing a dramatic sheer to the right. Witnesses reported that Sally Mitchell, age 20, appeared unaware of her surroundings as she drove straight into the path of an oncoming crosstown bus.

In his deposition, the bus driver (David Alexander, 37) claimed he had been unable to either hit the brakes or swerve to avoid Mitchell's car. The two vehicles collided without slowing, sending Mitchell slamming into the wall of a nearby bank. One pedestrian was hit, Anthony Thomas, 28. Mr. Thomas was hospitalized for a broken leg and several minor contusions, and was released two days later. At the time of this writing, Sally Mitchell remains under hospital care, and has not yet regained consciousness...

—FROM *THE CONTRA COSTA TIMES*, JUNE 13, 2021.

Chapter 1

JULY 2027

Dark.

Always the dark, warm, hot warm, the hot warm dark, and the distant sound of drumming. Always the hot warm dark and the drums, the comforting drums, the drums that define the world. It is comfortable here. I am comfortable here. I do not want to leave again.

Dr. Morrison looked up from my journal and smiled. He always showed too many teeth when he was trying to be reassuring, stretching his lips so wide that he looked like he was getting ready to lean over and take a bite of my throat.

“I wish you wouldn’t smile at me like that,” I said. My skin was knotting itself into lumps of gooseflesh. I forced myself to sit still, refusing to give him the pleasure of seeing just how uncomfortable he made me.

For a professional therapist, Dr. Morrison seemed to take an unhealthy amount of joy in making me twitch. “Like what, Sally?”

“With the teeth,” I said, and shuddered. I don’t like teeth. I liked Dr. Morrison’s teeth less than most. If he smiled too much, I was going to wind up having another one of those nightmares, the ones where his smile spread all the way around his head and met at the back of his neck. Once that happened, his skull would spread open like a flower, and the mouth hidden behind his smile—his *real* mouth—would finally be revealed.

Crazy dreams, right? It was only appropriate, I guess. I was seeing him because I was a crazy, crazy girl. At least, that’s what the people who would know kept telling me, and it wasn’t like I could tell them any different. They were the ones who went to college and got degrees in are-you-crazy. I was just a girl who had to be reminded of her own name.

“We’ve discussed your odontophobia before, Sally. There’s no clinical reason for you to be afraid of teeth.”

“I’m not afraid of teeth,” I snapped. “I just don’t want to look at them.”

Dr. Morrison stopped smiling and shook his head, leaning over to jot something on his ever-present notepad. He didn’t bother hiding it from me anymore. He knew I couldn’t read it without taking a lot more time than I had. “You understand what this dream is telling us, don’t you?” His tone was as poisonously warm as his too-wide smile had been.

“I don’t know, Dr. Morrison,” I answered. “Why don’t you tell me, and we’ll see if we can come to a mutual conclusion?”

“Now, Sally, you know that dream interpretation doesn’t work that way,” he said, voice turning lightly chiding. I was being a smart-ass. Again. Dr. Morrison didn’t like that, which was fine by me, since I didn’t like Dr. Morrison. “Why don’t you tell me what the dream means to *you*?”

“It means I shouldn’t eat leftover spaghetti after midnight,” I

said. “It means I feel guilty about forgetting to save yesterday’s bread for the ducks. It means I still don’t understand what irony is, even though I keep asking people to explain it. It means—”

He cut me off. “You’re dreaming about the coma,” he said. “Your mind is trying to cope with the blank places that remain part of your inner landscape. To some degree, you may even be longing to go back to that blankness, to a time when Sally Mitchell could be anything.”

The implication that the person Sally Mitchell became—namely, me—wasn’t good enough for my subconscious mind stung, but I wasn’t going to let him see that. “Wow. You really think that’s what the dream’s about?”

“Don’t you?”

I didn’t answer.

This was my last visit before my six-month check-in with the staff at SymboGen. Dr. Morrison would be turning in his recommendations before that, and the last thing I wanted to do was give him an excuse to recommend we go back to meeting twice a week, or even three times a week, like we had when I first started seeing him. I didn’t want to be adjusted to fit some model of the “psychiatric norm” drawn up by doctors who’d never met me and didn’t know my situation. I was tired of putting up with Dr. Morrison’s clumsy attempts to force me into that mold. We both knew he was only doing it because he hoped to write a book once SymboGen’s media blackout on my life was finally lifted. *The Curing of Sally Mitchell*. He’d make a mint.

Even more, I was tired of the way he always looked at me out of the corner of his eye, like I was going to flip out and start stabbing people. Then again, maybe he was right about that, on some level. There was no time when I felt more like stabbing people than immediately after one of our sessions.

“The imagery is crude, even childish. Clearly, you’re regressing in your sleep, returning to a time before you had so many

things to worry about. I know it's been hard on you, relearning everything about yourself. So much has changed in the last six years." Dr. Morrison flipped to the next page in my journal, smiling again. It looked more artificial, and more dangerous, than ever. "How are your headaches, Sally? Are they getting any better?"

I bared my own teeth at him as I lied smoothly, saying, "I haven't had a headache in weeks." It helped if I reminded myself that I wasn't totally lying. I wasn't having the real banger migraines anymore, the ones that made me feel like it would have been a blessing if I'd died in the accident. All I got anymore were the little gnawing aches at my temples, the ones where it felt like my skull was shrinking. Those went away if I spent a few hours lying down in a dark room. They were nothing the doctor needed to be concerned about.

"You know, Sally, I can't help you if you won't let me."

He kept using my name because it was supposed to help us build rapport. It was having the opposite effect. "It's Sal now, Doctor," I said, keeping my voice as neutral as I could. "I've been going by Sal for more than three years."

"Ah, yes. Your continued efforts to distance yourself from your pre-coma identity." He flipped to another page in my journal, quickly enough that I could tell he'd been waiting for the opportunity to drop this little bomb into the conversation. I braced myself, and he read:

Had another fight with parents last night. Want to move out, have own space, maybe find out if ready to move in with Nathan. They said wasn't ready. Why not? Because Sally wasn't ready? I am not her. I am me.

I will never be her again.

He lowered the book, looking at me expectantly. I looked back, and for almost a minute the two of us were locked in a

battle of wills that had no possible winner, only a different order of losing. He wanted me to ask for his help. He wanted to heal me and turn me back into a woman I had no memory of being. I wanted him to let me be who I was, no matter how different I had become. Neither of us was getting what we wanted.

Finally, he broke. “This shows a worrisome trend toward disassociation, Sally. I’m concerned that—”

“Sal,” I said.

Dr. Morrison stopped, frowning at me. “What did you say?”

“I said, Sal, as in, ‘my name is.’ I’m not Sally anymore. It’s not disassociation if I say I’m not her, because I don’t remember her at all. I don’t even know who she is. No one will tell me the whole story. Everyone tries so hard not to say anything bad about her to me, even though I know better. It’s like they’re all afraid I’m pretending, like this is some big trick to catch them out.”

“Is it?” Dr. Morrison leaned forward. His smile was suddenly gone, replaced by an expression of predatory interest. “We’ve discussed your amnesia before, *Sally*. No one can deny that you sustained extensive trauma in the accident, but amnesia as extensive and prolonged as yours is extremely rare. I’m concerned there may be a mental block preventing your accessing your own memories. When this block inevitably degrades—if you’ve been feigning amnesia this whole time, it would be a great relief in some ways. It would indicate much better chances for your future mental stability.”

“Wouldn’t faking total memory loss for six years count as a sort of pathological lying, and prove I needed to stay in your care until I stopped doing it?” I asked.

Dr. Morrison frowned, leaning back again. “So you continue to insist that you have no memory prior to the accident.”

I shrugged. “We’ve been over this before. I have no memory of the accident itself. The first thing I remember is waking up in the hospital, surrounded by strangers.”

One of them had screamed and fainted when I sat up. I didn't learn until later that she was my mother, or that she had been there—along with my father, my younger sister, and my boyfriend—to talk to my doctors about unplugging the life support systems keeping my body alive. My sister, Joyce, had just stared at me and started to cry. I didn't understand what she was doing. I couldn't remember ever having seen someone cry before. I couldn't remember ever having seen a *person* before. I was a blank slate.

Then Joyce was throwing herself across me, and the feeling of pressure had been surprising enough that I hadn't pushed her away. My father helped my mother off the floor, and they both joined my sister on the bed, all of them crying and talking at once.

It would be months before I understood English well enough to know what they were saying, much less to answer them. By the time I managed my first sentence—"Who I?"—the boyfriend was long gone, having chosen to run rather than spend the rest of his life with a potentially brain-damaged girlfriend. The fact that I still hadn't recovered my memory six years later implied that he'd made the right decision. Even if he'd decided to stick around, there was no guarantee we'd have liked each other, much less loved each other. Leaving me was the best thing he could have done, for either one of us.

After all, I was a whole new person now.

"We were discussing your family. How are things going?"

"We've been working through some things," I said. Things like their overprotectiveness, and the way they refused to treat me like a normal human being. "I think we're doing pretty good. But thanks for asking."

My mother thought I was a gift from God, since she hadn't expected me to wake up. She also thought I would turn back into Sally any day, and was perpetually, politely confused when I didn't. My father didn't invoke God nearly as much, but he

did like to say, frequently, that everything happens for a reason. Apparently, he and Sally hadn't had a very good relationship. He and I were doing substantially better. It helped that we were both trying as hard as we could, because we both knew that things were tenuous.

Joyce was the only one who'd been willing to speak to me candidly, although she only did it when she was drunk. She didn't drink often; I didn't drink at all. "You were a real bitch, Sal," she'd said. "I like you a lot better now. If you start turning into a bitch again, I'll cut your brake lines."

It was totally honest. It was totally sincere. The night she said that to me was the night I realized that I might not remember my sister, but I definitely loved her. On the balance of things, maybe I'd gotten off lightly. Maybe losing my memory was a blessing.

Dr. Morrison's disappointment visibly deepened. Clearing his throat, he flipped to another point in my journal, and read:

Last night I dreamt I was swimming through the hot warm dark, just me and the sound of drums, and there was nothing in the world that could frighten me or hurt me or change the way things were.

Then there was a tearing, ripping sound, and the drums went quiet, and everything was pain, pain, PAIN. I never felt pain like that before, and I tried to scream, but I couldn't scream—something stopped me from screaming. I fled from the pain, and the pain followed me, and the hot warm dark was turning cold and crushing, until it wasn't comfort, it was death. I was going to die. I had to run as fast as I could, had to find a new way to run, and the sound of drums was fading out, fading into silence.

If I didn't get to safety before the drums stopped, I was never going to get to safety at all. I had to save the drums. The drums were everything.

He looked up. “That’s an odd amount of importance to place on a sound, don’t you think? What do the drums represent to you, Sally?”

“I don’t know. It was just a dream I had.” It was a dream I had almost every night. I only wrote it down because Nathan said that maybe Dr. Morrison would stop pushing quite so hard if he felt like he had something to interpret. Well, he had something to interpret, and it wasn’t making him back off. If anything, it was doing the opposite. I made a mental note to smack my boyfriend next time I saw him.

“Dreams mean things. They’re our subconscious trying to communicate with us.”

The smug look on his face was too much. “You’re about to tell me I’m dreaming about being in the womb, aren’t you? That’s what you always say when you want to sound impressive.”

His smug expression didn’t waver.

“Look, I can’t be dreaming about being in the womb, since that would require *remembering* anything before the accident, and I don’t.” I struggled to keep my tone level. “I’m having nightmares based on the things people have told me about my accident, that’s all. Everything is great, and then suddenly everything goes to hell? It doesn’t take a genius to guess that the drums are my heart beating. I know they lost me twice in the ambulance, and that the head trauma was so bad they thought I was actually brain-dead. If I hadn’t woken up when I did, they would have pulled the plug. I mean, maybe I don’t like the girl they say I was, but at least she didn’t have to go through physical therapy, or relearn the English language, or relearn *everything* about living a normal life. Do I feel isolated from her? You bet I do. Lucky bitch died that day, at least as long as her memories stay gone. I’m just the one who has to deal with all the paperwork.”

Dr. Morrison raised an eyebrow, looking nonplussed. Then he reached for his notepad. “Interesting,” he said.

Somehow I managed not to groan.

* * *

The rest of the session was as smooth as any of them ever were. Dr. Morrison asked questions geared to make me blow up again; I dodged them as best as I could, and bit the inside of my lip every time I felt like I might lose my cool. At the end of the hour, we were both disappointed. He was disappointed because I hadn't done more yelling, and I was disappointed because I'd yelled in the first place. I hate losing my temper. Even more, I hate losing it in front of people like Dr. Morrison. Being Sally Mitchell sucks sometimes. There's always another doctor who wants a question answered and thinks the best way to do it is to poke a stick through the bars of my metaphorical cage. I didn't volunteer to be the first person whose life was saved by a tapeworm. It just happened.

I have to remind myself of that whenever things get too ridiculous: I am alive because of a genetically engineered tapeworm. Not a miracle; God was not involved in my survival. They can call it an "implant" or an "Intestinal Bodyguard," with or without that damn trademark, but the fact remains that we're talking about a tapeworm. A big, ugly, blind, parasitic invertebrate that lives in my small intestine, where it naturally secretes a variety of useful chemicals, including—as it turns out—some that both stimulate brain activity and clean toxic byproducts out of blood.

The doctors were as surprised by that as I was. They're still investigating whether the tapeworm's miracle drugs are connected to my memory loss. Frankly, I neither care nor particularly want to know. I'm happy with who I've become since the accident.

Dr. Morrison's receptionist smiled blandly as I signed out. SymboGen required physically-witnessed time stamps for my sessions. I smiled just as blandly back. It was the safest thing to do. I'd tried being friendly during my first six months of sessions, until I learned that I was basically under review from the

time I stepped through the door. Anything I did while inside the office could be entered into my file. Since those first six months included more than a few crying jags in the lobby, they were enough to buy me even more therapy.

“Have a nice day, Miss Mitchell,” said the receptionist, taking back her clipboard. “See you next week.”

I smiled at her again, sincerely this time. “Only if my doctors agree with whatever assessment Dr. Morrison comes up with, instead of agreeing with me. If there is any justice in this world, you’ll never be seeing me again.”

Maybe the comment was ill-advised, but it still felt good to see her perfectly made-up eyes widen in shock. She was still gaping at me as I turned back to the door and made my way quickly out of the office, into the sweet freedom of the afternoon air.

One good thing about being the first—and thus far, only—person to be saved from certain death by the SymboGen Intestinal Bodyguard: I wasn’t paying for a penny of my medical care, and neither were my parents. Instead, the corporation paid for everything, and got running updates from my various doctors, all of whom had release forms on file making it legal for them to give my medical information to SymboGen. It sucked from a privacy standpoint, but it was better than dying.

SymboGen developed the Intestinal Bodyguard. My father works for the government, but even they don’t know enough about what the implants can do to manage my care. So everything went on SymboGen’s bill, and the corporation kept learning about what their tapeworms can do, while I kept getting the care I needed if I wanted to keep breathing. Breathing was nice. It was one of the first things I remembered discovering on my own, and I wanted to keep doing it for as long as possible.

Even with SymboGen looking out for me, we’d had our share of close calls. Since my accident I’d gone into full anaphylactic shock multiple times, for reasons I still didn’t fully understand.

The first time had corresponded with a course of antiparasitics provided by SymboGen. They were intended to help me pass my old implant—a pretty way of saying “they were supposed to kill my tapeworm and force it out of my body”—and they’d nearly killed me, too. The second and third attacks had come out of nowhere, and the attack after that had corresponded with another course of antiparasitics, different ones.

What mattered to me was that I’d nearly died each time. Without SymboGen, I *would* have died. I needed to remember that. No matter how much I hated the therapists and the tests and everything else, I owed my life to SymboGen.

I looked back at Dr. Morrison’s office before walking down the street to the empty bus stop. I sat down on the bench and settled in to wait. I’m patient. I’m rarely in a hurry. And I don’t drive.

Patience may be something I have in abundance, but punctuality is not. My shift at the Cause for Paws animal center was supposed to start at four o’clock. Thanks to my missing the bus—again—and having to wait for the next one—again—it was already almost five when I came charging through the door.

“I’m sorry!” I called. I shrugged off my brown leather messenger bag and hung it next to the door, where it looked dull and out of place next to Tasha’s rainbow crochet purse and Will’s electric red backpack. In an organization made up of eccentrics and chronic do-gooders, the girl with the unique medical history is the boring one.

The door slammed behind me. I flinched.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated more quietly to Tasha, who was standing next to the coffee machine with an amused expression on her face.

“You’re sorry?” she asked. “Really? You’re late, and you’re sorry about it? Truly this is unprecedented in the annals of our humble shelter. I’ll mark the calendars.”

I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Did the bad psychologist try to tell you that you were crazy again?” asked Tasha, seemingly unperturbed. Perturbing Tasha was practically impossible. She was the kind of girl who would probably greet Godzilla while he was attacking downtown by asking whether he’d ever considered adopting a kitten to help him with his obvious stress disorder. “You can tell your Auntie Tasha about it. I swear I’m not a SymboGen plant reporting all your actions back to the corporation.”

“You’re a jerk,” I said mildly, and grabbed my apron. “Come on. Scale of one to murder, how mad is Will over the whole ‘late’ thing?”

“Will isn’t mad at all, because you just volunteered to clean all the cat boxes,” said Will. I turned to see the shelter’s owner standing in the doorway of the kitten room, a seemingly boneless cat draped across his forearm. “Thanks, Sal!”

I rolled my eyes. “Lateness is not a legally binding promise to scoop shit.”

“No, but keeping your job sometimes means doing things you don’t want to do. Now go forth and scoop.” Will stepped out of the doorway. “Look at it this way. You spent the afternoon feeding metaphorical shit to your therapist, and now you can clean up some literal shit. It’ll be symbolically cleansing.”

“You just don’t want to do the boxes.”

“That, too,” Will agreed.

I rolled my eyes again and walked past him to the supply cabinet. Will was making a bigger deal of punishing me than was strictly necessary—I had a disability clearance excusing me for all my mandatory medical appointments, and since SymboGen made healthy donations to the shelter in exchange for keeping me on the staff, it wasn’t like he was going to argue with them needing a little of my time. I was also making a bigger deal of disliking my punishment than I had to. He was right. I needed a little normal after the day I’d had. I didn’t

like dwelling on the reality of my situation, or the fact that SymboGen essentially controlled my future, at least for now. They paid for everything. The medical care, the lab work, the classes... everything. Until I was perfectly healthy and finished relearning the world, they held the strings.

The cats chirped, meowed, and hissed their greetings as I came into the room and shut the door behind me. I smiled at them, ignoring the paws that reached for me between the bars of their cages. "Okay, guys," I said. "Let's get to work."

There's one more good thing about being the girl who lived because her genetically engineered tapeworm refused to let her die: I lived. That made everything else possible. Everything else in the world.

I was wondering when you'd get around to asking about the Mitchell case. She's a remarkable girl, young Sally. There are some people who think SymboGen saved her life. Well, I don't feel that I'm bragging when I say that they're probably right. We were nowhere near the accident, of course, we didn't find out about it until later, but the presence of her implant made it possible for her body to survive the amount of trauma she experienced. The machines can only do so much, they're on the outside. An implant, on the other hand... that can work from the inside, it can tailor its response faster than any doctor. It helps that the Mitchell family was able to get a really good, top-of-the-line model for Sally. Colonel Mitchell made sure his entire family was equipped with tailored Intestinal Bodyguards™. That must be what saved her.

SymboGen saves lives. Don't let anyone try to convince you differently. If you think I'm wrong, well. Why don't you try asking Sally Mitchell?

—FROM “KING OF THE WORMS,” AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR. STEVEN BANKS, CO-FOUNDER OF SYMBOGEN. ORIGINALLY
PUBLISHED IN *ROLLING STONE*, FEBRUARY 2027.

...the core genetic material for the SymboGen Intestinal Bodyguard™ was taken not from T. solium, as many would

naturally assume, but from a subspecies of Diphyllbothrium—specifically D. yonagoensis. Many other genetic sources were utilized in the development of the Intestinal Bodyguard™; however, D. yonagoensis provided fully 63% of the initial genome.

By using a species not known for parasitizing humans as a primary host, SymboGen was able to control the life cycle of the Intestinal Bodyguard™ to an unprecedented degree. Their guarantees of sterility and planned obsolescence have thus far been borne out by all independent and internal testing. Their tailored species of Diphyllbothrium, D. symbo-genesis, is stable, and genetically distinct enough not to be confused with any naturally occurring genotype, yet is incapable of reproducing itself outside the laboratory environment...

—FROM “THE DEVELOPMENT AND LIFE CYCLE OF
DIPHYLLOBOTHRUM SYMBOGENESIS,” ORIGINALLY
PUBLISHED IN *THE STANFORD SCIENCE REVIEW*, JUNE 2017.

Chapter 2

JULY 2027

It took half an hour to do the litter boxes, and another hour to feed and medicate the kittens in the isolation room. They would be kept away from the rest of the cats until their blood tests came back negative for any infections or parasites; then they would be integrated into the rest of the shelter's population, to await their "forever homes." The irony of an organization where every human was a proud parasite-carrier working diligently to cure animals of parasites was not lost on me. Nathan liked to say that SymboGen wouldn't rest until they'd perfected the Intestinal Bodyguard for use in every animal in America. Then he'd laugh like he was joking, even though we both knew he wasn't.

I didn't get the chance to check my phone until I was done with the last cage. There were two messages waiting for me. The first was from my sister, demanding—in her usual, strident

Joyce way—to know how therapy had gone, and whether she got to keep treating me like the crazy one. There was a note of genuine concern under her nagging. She knew how much I hated seeing Dr. Morrison.

Nathan had left the second message only a few minutes before. It was substantially shorter than Joyce's had been:

“Look outside.”

I lowered the phone as I crossed to the window. Nathan's car was parked across the street. He was sitting on the hood in an easy cross-legged position, elbows resting on his knees as he smiled at the shelter, like he was waiting for me to appear.

I swiped my thumb across his name on my contact list before raising my phone to my ear. He dug out his own phone a few seconds later. “Hello?” he said.

“This is stalker behavior, you know,” I said sweetly. “Only stalkers park outside women's places of employment and sit there waiting to see if they're going to come out.”

“I prefer to think of it as being a compassionate, concerned boyfriend who didn't want to make you take the bus,” said Nathan. “Stalker behavior would have me hiding in the supply closet.”

“What if I was looking forward to riding that bus?” I asked. “What if I'm playing a game of guess-that-smell with the driver, and I don't want to let him pull ahead of me as we approach the championship round?”

“I suppose I'd just have to slink sadly back to my empty apartment, no girlfriend in my car, no one to go out to dinner with me,” said Nathan, and sighed theatrically. “I'll just sit there in the dark, all alone...”

I laughed. “You're a ham. You're an absolute ham.”

“Probably true, and good use of the word ‘ham,’” Nathan replied, the faux mournfulness gone in an instant. “Come down, Sal. I'll give you a ride home, and you can tell me how your appointment with Dr. Morrison went.”

“Do I have to?”

“Come down? Sure, unless you want to live at the shelter—a valid lifestyle choice, I admit, but probably boring in the long run.” Nathan paused before adding, “We don’t have to talk about Dr. Morrison if you don’t want to. I just thought you might.”

As soon as he said it, I realized that he was right: I did want to talk about it. I didn’t want to go home and try to sleep with all that rattling around my brain. “I’ll be right down,” I said, and hung up.

Tasha was gone when I emerged from the back. Will was still there, sitting at the front desk. The cat from before was sitting next to the computer, nonchalantly washing a paw. It looked up when I entered the room, flicking its tail once. The tail landed across the keyboard, and Will looked up.

“Taking off?” he asked.

“Yeah. Nathan’s here to get me.” I retrieved my bag from the hook by the door. “The kittens in the isolation room are fed, and all the boxes are scooped in all five rooms. You going to be okay without me for the rest of tonight?”

“Yes, and for the rest of the week. See you Saturday.” Will smiled, making a waving gesture toward the door. “Go on, Sal. You need to spend some time with your boyfriend. Do normal things before your review. I worry when you let yourself get this stressed out.”

“You, Tasha, and everybody else,” I said. “Goodnight, Will.”

“Goodnight, Sal.”

It was a warm night, and the streetlights cast just enough light to make walking down the steps feel like something out of a movie: darkness that wasn’t really dark, more...cosmetic. Nathan slid off the hood of the car when he saw me coming.

He was in the driver’s seat by the time I reached the passenger side door—which was, naturally, locked. I tugged the handle and glared at him through the glass. He smiled without

showing his teeth. I made a downward gesture with my free hand, and he hit a button on the steering wheel, causing the window to drop.

“Yes, miss?”

“You’re a dork,” I informed him. “A giant dork.”

“That’s a new word.” He pressed another button. The door unlocked. “Where’d you learn that one?”

“Eric—the kid next door. He said it was less offensive than calling someone a dick, but that it came from the same family of words.” I slid into the seat, glancing toward Nathan and quirking an eyebrow. “Why? Did I use it wrong?”

“No, you seem to have grasped my essential dorky nature.” Nathan leaned over to kiss me slowly. “Missed you today.”

“I missed you, too.” I returned his kiss before sinking deeper into the seat, trying to let my shoulders relax. Nathan adjusted the environmental controls. My seat warmed up and began rubbing my back in slow, rhythmic motions. “Mmm. Thanks.”

“You’re more fun when you’re not so tense that I can see the whites all the way around your eyes,” he said, and started the car. I tensed again, and relaxed as Nathan pulled smoothly onto the mostly empty street. Cars make me nervous. But Nathan was a good, safe driver who let me read his insurance statements when I asked him to confirm that he’d never been in an accident. He also kept both hands on the wheel when he had me in the car with him. “How did it go with Morrison?”

“He thinks I’m crazy.”

“Yes, he does.”

Nathan’s honesty was usually one of the things I appreciated most about him. At the moment, I wasn’t feeling much like embracing my inner truth. I glared at him. “You could be a little slower to agree there, you know.”

“I didn’t say I thought you were crazy, I said that he thinks you’re crazy. Or at least he’s convinced himself to think that you’re crazy.”

I frowned. “Support your thesis.”

“Normal people don’t say ‘support your thesis’ in casual conversation, honey.”

“Right.” I sighed. English is not an easy language to learn, and it was no better the second time. Basic sentence structure was mostly okay, but I had trouble with colloquialisms—the slang, the shading of the words, the reason that some things were more appropriate than others. English is a language full of words and syntax and phrases. It was a good reason for not talking much around strangers. “Can you explain?”

“Look, to Morrison, you’re a unique case that needs to be studied, and he figures that he might as well be the one doing the studying. Most people don’t come back from what you experienced.”

“I know that,” I said peevishly. “Why does that give him the right to act like I’m insane?”

“It doesn’t. It just gives him the motivation he needs to convince himself that you need his help more than you need anything else in the world, and so he keeps looking for excuses.” Nathan glanced at me, then back at the road. “He thinks I’m doing the same thing, you know.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Morrison. He thinks I’m dating you because it’s the best way to keep track of what’s going on with your metabolism.”

“That’s... wow. If you were doing that, you’d be an idiot. I’m peeing in so many cups and giving so many blood samples every week that you wouldn’t need to buy me dinner to keep track of my condition.” Nathan was a doctor—a parasitologist, to be exact—at San Francisco City Hospital. We’d met when Joyce had to go to the hospital to have the health of her implant checked. He’d given her some basic nutritional supplements and asked me out to dinner. It was the first time someone had shown interest in *me* like that, and I’d been delighted. I still was.

Nathan laughed. I loved that sound. “I know. Add the fact that SymboGen handles everything having to do with your Intestinal Bodyguard internally, and there’s a media blackout that means I couldn’t get your medical records if you asked me to, and I’d be a specialist without a subject.”

“That’s why I adore you,” I said. “You’re willing to waste time on me even when I don’t advance your career.”

“Right now, I’m more interested in advancing dinner,” he said.

“Good plan,” I said. “How do you feel about Mexican?”

“Excellent,” he said, and we drove on into the night.

In less than twenty minutes, we were seated at a white Formica table with a basket of chips and salsa, watching the waitress weave her way through the crowd to put our orders in. Nathan had ordered iced tea; I had ordered watermelon agua fresca, which I was intending to doctor liberally with Tabasco sauce. We’d discussed the relative merits of one another’s drinks a dozen times before—he thought mine was disgusting, I thought the same of his—and so we were able to skip that exchange in favor of a brief, companionable silence.

Nathan looked toward the window, watching someone walk past. I watched him. It was an activity I’d learned to like a lot since we met. I’d been surprised when I first realized that I found him attractive; that hadn’t happened to me before. The fact that he turned out to be handsome to other people was irrelevant.

He wasn’t tall as men went, only an inch or so taller than me, and having a Korean father and an English mother meant that he was always tanner than me, no matter how much time I spent in the sun. Both my parents were Irish, and the Irish word for “suntan” is “burn.” Of the two of us, he was still better about remembering to put on sunscreen, since he was much more aware of the dangers of cancer than I was. He wore wire-framed glasses in front of his dark brown eyes, citing a dislike

of sticking things into his body as a reason to avoid either contacts or retinal implants.

That was another thing: Nathan was the best parasitologist I knew, and knew more about the SymboGen Intestinal Body-guard than almost anyone who hadn't helped to develop it, but he didn't have one of his own. In a world where most people managed their medication automatically via tapeworm, he still took pills, because he said that it was less disturbing than the alternative.

The pause, and the introspection, couldn't last. Nathan turned to look at me. I bit back a sigh. I knew that look. It was the "I'm about to ask you how therapy went" look, and it never ended well, for either of us.

"Did you tell him about the dreams?"

Yup: this was going to suck. "What about them?" I asked lightly. "The red part, the red part, or the red part?"

"Sal..."

"Yes, I told him about the dreams. He thinks I'm dreaming about being in the womb. I think he's wrong. He's probably going to tell SymboGen I'm repressing, or regressing, or something, and I'm going to wind up with another year of therapy." I stabbed a tortilla chip viciously into the salsa. "*He's* the one who needs therapy."

"Unfortunately, he's not the one getting it. You are."

"Nathan, I'm *fine*." Sure, I woke up screaming three or four times a week, but that was normal for me. It was what I had been doing for all six years of my remembered life.

Nathan frowned, starting to say something. He was interrupted by the return of the waitress with our drinks. Once she was gone, he said, "You didn't know who I was yesterday morning."

I stopped in the middle of reaching for my agua fresca. "Excuse me?" My mouth was dry. I grabbed my drink and took a gulp, trying to rinse the dryness away. It didn't work.

“Yesterday morning, you screamed and sat up in bed. I asked you what was wrong. You looked at me like you’d never seen me before. Then you looked at your hands and screamed again. I was honestly waiting for my neighbors to call the police and report that I was beating you, you screamed so much.”

My head was spinning. It felt like all the blood had drained out of it, heading for safer climes elsewhere in my body. “What happened after that?” I didn’t remember any of this, I didn’t remember *any* of it. Was Nathan lying to me? Worse, was Nathan telling me the truth?

“You stopped.”

The words were so simple that they didn’t quite make sense. I blinked at him. “What?”

“You stopped screaming. You didn’t wake up, you didn’t react when I touched you, you just collapsed back onto your pillow like you’d never moved at all. When you sat up again, about ten minutes later, you didn’t remember any of it.”

I *did* remember Nathan being oddly concerned about how I’d slept, and asking three times whether I was going to keep my appointment with Dr. Morrison. I bit my lip before asking, “Why didn’t you say anything? You know I don’t like it when people keep things from me.”

“You also don’t like it when I upset you right before you have to see Dr. Morrison, and I’m saying something now,” Nathan countered. “If it weren’t for your medical history, I’d think you were having night terrors—they’re rare in people in their twenties, but they’re not unheard of. But with your amnesia...”

“There goes my medical history, complicating everything again,” I said bitterly.

“I love you, medical history and all, but it scared me. It should scare you, too. That’s why I wanted you to tell Dr. Morrison about the dreams. I know you don’t like him, but you don’t have another psychiatrist you can discuss this stuff with, and it’s better if this is psychological.”

I caught his meaning immediately. If this was psychological, it meant I was still recovering from that first big knock to the head. If it was physical, it could mean almost anything—and very little that was good. “I know. I’ll tell you what: we’ll keep a record of how I’m sleeping for the next few weeks, okay? If it happens again, I’ll tell SymboGen.”

“You promise?”

I solemnly drew a cross across my left breast with my right index finger. “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

He actually laughed. “When did you learn *that*?”

“Yesterday, from a little girl who came into the shelter to pick out her new kitten.” I grinned. “I am full of surprises.”

“Yes, you certainly are,” he said, and leaned across the table to kiss me.

I returned the gesture, although my mind was only half on the moment. I might not understand the gruesome details of my medical history the way he did, but I knew enough to understand that my problems didn’t end with any of the nasty physical side effects that I was being tested and monitored for on a regular basis. My implant had kept me alive. We still didn’t know what that meant, but it did involve waiting, every day, for the other shoe to drop.

Talking to SymboGen about the night terrors—if that was what they were—meant resigning myself to even more therapy, and possibly another sleep study at SymboGen. I could deal with that. If Nathan was worried, I’d be a fool not to be.

When I pulled away, Nathan smiled. “Love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said. “And I’ll talk to SymboGen. I just won’t be happy about it.”

“If you were, *I’d* start worrying about your sanity.”

“I don’t trust Dr. Morrison.”

“You shouldn’t,” Nathan said, with a wry smile. “He works for SymboGen.”

I laughed, and then the food arrived, and we had better things to talk about.

Nathan didn't ask me anything else important until the waitress came back to pick up the check. Then he asked, "You sleeping over tonight?"

There was only one good answer to that question. So I smiled back, and said, "I was just waiting for you to ask."

Nathan's apartment was in a gated complex near the Ferry Building. He had almost a quarter of the ninth floor, complete with a balcony on the wall that faced the Bay. He had it decorated in what he assured me was an utterly forgettable mish-mash of Ikea and bachelor pad chic. It didn't look like either the sleekly sterile halls of the hospital or like Sally Mitchell's room, haunted by the ghost of a girl I didn't remember being, and so I loved it.

But I loved him more. We were barely inside before I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom, where the big black bed was waiting for us. Nathan went willingly. I'd been the one to first take our relationship sexual; he was always trying to go slowly, trying to let me be sure of what I wanted. *This* was what I wanted. This room, this place, this time, and a man who'd never met Sally Mitchell, but who loved me for me.

By the time we fell asleep, tangled in the sheets and in each other, it felt like things would be better. And I dreamt...

When I listened to books about dream imagery—which I did more than I was willing to admit, because I wanted to understand my dreams as much as Nathan did, if only because I was worried about Sally rising from below and fracturing my fragile psyche with her own, older memories—they always seemed to focus on things happening to bodies. Bodies flying. Bodies getting older, or losing teeth, or being seen in public without their clothes on. Bodies everywhere, doing *things*.

I never dreamt about bodies.

Instead, I dreamt about the dark—the hot warm dark, which was always those three distinct things. It was hot the way a summer night was hot, when the air trapped moisture like a sponge, even in San Francisco, all humidity and untaken breaths. It was warm the way Nathan's arms were warm, comfortable and close and safe, and the two states weren't antithetical at all. They were two parts of the same whole. When I dreamt, it was absolutely natural that hotness and warmth would be different things, capable of existing simultaneously. It was only when I was awake that it seemed like a contradiction. And the dark...

The dark wasn't like the dark in the apartment when the lights were off, or the dark in the street when the sun went down. It wasn't even like the dark inside my eyelids, although that came closer than anything else did. The dark *was*. It was entire and eternal, without question, and it didn't need to be anything else, because there was nothing else that the dark could possibly be. It was just the dark, the hot warm dark, and it was perfect. I didn't need anything but the hot warm dark, and the feeling of the world's arms closed around me.

That night was one of the good dreaming nights, where it was just me and the hot warm dark, and part of me was still dimly aware of the apartment where my body lay sleeping in its own cocoon of hot warm dark, the space created where my skin pressed against Nathan's. We encompassed a world between us. Anything outside that world wasn't worth worrying about.

Somewhere across the Bay, a boat horn blew a long, mournful note. Everything else was still, and I slipped deeper down into dreams and the safety of the hot warm darkness inside me.

The early success of the SymboGen Intestinal Bodyguard™ line of products can be partially ascribed to canny advertising. Their marketing department hired an actress best known for her work in a series of horror movies featuring a monster modeled off a species of parasitic wasp. Her first infomercial began with her in her original costume smiling her A-list smile and saying, “I know a bad parasite when I see one. Now it’s time for you to learn about a good parasite—one that wants to help you, not hurt you.”

While SymboGen would quickly move away from use of the word “parasite” in advertising material, the early groundwork had been laid, and people were beginning to trust the concept behind the Intestinal Bodyguard™. After that, all that remained was to sell the idea to the world.

—FROM *SELLING THE UNSELLABLE: AMERICAN ADVERTISING THROUGH THE YEARS*, BY MORGAN DEMPSEY, PUBLISHED 2026.

*Little boy with faith so thin,
Little girl so strong within,
I said I’d never leave you, and I’m sorry, but I lied.
If you’re set to pay the price,
Learn the ways of sacrifice,*

44 MIRA GRANT

*Leave this world to grieve you, take a breath, and step
outside.*

*The broken doors are waiting, down the path you've
always known.*

My darling ones, be careful now, and don't go out alone.

—FROM *DON'T GO OUT ALONE*, BY SIMONE KIMBERLEY, PUBLISHED
2006 BY LIGHTHOUSE PRESS. CURRENTLY OUT OF PRINT.

Chapter 3

AUGUST 2027

I glared at the sheet of paper in front of me. The words that were printed there swam in and out of focus, seeming to actively evade my attempts to understand them. Joyce placed a steady hand on my shoulder. “Deep breaths, Sal,” she said. “Let them come to you.”

“Yeah, because *that’s* going to happen,” I muttered, and kept glaring at the paper.

Learning to read again had been more difficult than learning to talk, and I still wasn’t comfortable with it. Apparently, I hadn’t been dyslexic before the accident. The old Sally Mitchell was a voracious reader. I preferred audiobooks, which didn’t change themselves around when I was tense or tired.

After several minutes of continued glaring, the recalcitrant letters began to obey me, assembling themselves into tidy sentences, which read:

THE PRESENCE OF PATIENT SALLY R. MITCHELL IS HEREBY REQUESTED AT SYMBOGEN INC. ON THE MORNING OF FRIDAY, AUGUST 20TH, TO DISCUSS ONGOING TREATMENT. PLEASE BRING ALL RECEIPTS RELATING TO HEALTHCARE EXPENSES INCURRED SINCE FEBRUARY 2027, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO HOSPITAL STAYS, TRANSPORTATION TO AND FROM APPOINTMENTS, APPROVED SPECIALISTS (SEE APPENDED LIST) . . .

The words started scrambling themselves again. I stopped trying to read them. There was only so much SymboGen doublespeak I could take at any one time, and “requests” from the corporation were never really requests. They were commandments wearing their best Sunday clothes, and that didn’t make me like them any better. “I think I have everything they’ve asked for,” I said, and thrust the paper at her. “Can you please check the list? I can’t read this anymore.”

“You tried, and that’s what matters,” said Joyce, taking the paper and glancing down it. “It looks like we have everything. Now come on, Sal, it’s going to be fine. This is just your six-month review. They’re not trying to pull a fast one. They’re making sure they have all their paperwork in order and that you haven’t started hiding symptoms from them. This is totally normal, and that means it’s *fine*.”

“You know, I don’t mind so much when our parents talk to me like I’m six, but you need to cut it out,” I said. “You’re not the one who has to go to SymboGen and get poked at by their scientists for an entire day.”

“I’m also not the one who decided to play chicken with a bus,” said Joyce. “See, this is how a single bad decision can shape your whole life. I’m the good daughter, and you’re a cautionary tale.”

Despite myself, I laughed. Unrepentant to the end, Joyce grinned.

Joyce and I looked alike enough for our relationship to be obvious: we had the same pale Irish skin, the same round faces, and the same lanky frames. We even both had brown hair and eyes. But my hair was a middling chestnut, while hers was a dark red-brown that looked like it belonged in a shampoo commercial. Her eyes were light enough to be almost hazel, while mine basically matched my hair. We both burned in any kind of strong light, but my skin freckled, while hers eventually tanned. It didn't take me long to realize that of the two of us, she was "the pretty one"—something I'm sure I resented when I was Sally and had to deal with growing up shadowed by a prettier, smarter, genuinely nicer younger sister. Now that I didn't have any of that baggage, I could appreciate Joyce for what she was. That was nice. If I was going to have a sister, I wanted her to be someone I could like.

She was also a biologist, working with our father in his lab. I'd been going to college for a general Liberal Arts degree—something everyone I met assured me was useless—when I had my accident. Now I seemed destined for a long, productive life as a lab rat. So I guess we were in the same general profession, at opposite ends of the food chain.

"Now come on." Joyce dropped the paper on the kitchen table and grabbed my hand. "You promised me an afternoon of mindless shopping at the mall, followed by a brainless summer blockbuster and all the popcorn I could consume. This is our sisterly bonding time, and I won't let you out of it again."

"But Joyce—"

"Nope, no buts. I was promised commerce and togetherness, and commerce and togetherness I shall have." She gave my hand a tug. "Come on, Sal. Live a little. Buy uncomfortable shoes and makeup that you'll never wear in a million years."

I sighed. “You really want me to go shopping with you.”

“You’d think that would have been obvious, from the way I’ve been saying ‘hey, let’s go shopping like you promised’ since you got out of bed, but yes, I want to go shopping. It’ll help you relax before your review.” Joyce dropped my hand. “Come on. We’ll go to the big mall in San Bruno. They have an Orange Julius!”

“Why didn’t you say so before?” I stood, stretching slowly just so I could watch the impatience blossoming in her expression. Joyce glowered at me. I smiled. “What? Am I not fast enough for you?”

“Stop messing around with me, or I’m making you drive.”

My smile died. “Not funny, Joyce.”

“Oh, shit, Sal, I’m sorry,” said Joyce, immediately seeing that she had gone too far. She leaned over to touch my shoulder, adding, “I just keep thinking it’s been long enough. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll tell you when it’s been long enough, okay? Just...for right now, please, no more jokes about making me drive.”

Joyce nodded, biting her lip.

I somehow forced myself to smile. “It’s not that bad. Don’t American social norms mean that younger siblings are normally fighting to be the ones behind the wheel?” Not that I was that comfortable having Joyce drive me anywhere. According to her driving history, she’d been in six minor accidents and received eleven speeding tickets since she got her license. It wasn’t the sort of thing that inspired confidence. But if I was going to be a good sister, I was going to let her drive me to the mall.

“Every time I think you’re halfway back to normal, you go and say something like that.” Joyce rolled her eyes, distress forgotten in favor of making sure I realized how weird I was. That had been the idea. “You get your coat. I’ll get the keys.”

“I’m on it,” I said, turning toward my room. Dwelling on my upcoming appointment wasn’t doing me any good, and maybe Joyce was right. Maybe commerce would do the trick.

* * *

After an hour at the mall, I was absolutely certain of one thing: Joyce was wrong. My feet hurt, my shoulders ached from carrying Joyce's bags—something I hadn't volunteered to do, but seemed to be doing all the same—and I was starting to think longingly of the isolation room back at the shelter. It was hot and snug and always smelled like cats, and it would have been paradise compared to the food court at the San Bruno Mall.

Worst of all, the outing wasn't doing anything to take my mind off my upcoming visit to SymboGen. If anything, it was making me dwell on it *more*, since the mall wasn't giving me anything better to think about. Except for maybe going home.

I'd been sitting by myself for almost fifteen minutes, ostensibly guarding Joyce's many purchases, when she came flouncing back through the crowd and placed an Orange Julius cup in front of me with a grand flourish. "Ta-da!"

I raised an eyebrow.

"What?" She frowned. "You're supposed to be overcome with gratitude. I hunted and killed that smoothie for you."

"My hero," I deadpanned.

"I think you mean 'heroine.' Heroes are male."

"Whatever." I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Joyce. I'm not trying to be a spoilsport."

"Yet somehow, you're still managing to do an excellent job." Joyce flopped into a plastic chair, propping her chin on her knuckles. "You wanna tell me why *this* SymboGen trip has you all fucked in the head, as opposed to all the other ones?"

I sighed, taking the lid off my smoothie and swirling my straw through the thick orange goo. "I had another fight with Mom."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Joyce wince. "The moving out thing?"

"The moving out thing," I confirmed. "Until SymboGen says I'm both healthy and mentally stable, she's not going to

let me move out.” For most adults, “let” wouldn’t matter. For me...there had been a period following my accident when I wasn’t expected ever to recover the ability to make my own decisions. My parents had been granted conservatorship over me until such time as my doctors judged me fully recovered. Until SymboGen signed the papers to certify that I was both healthy and sane, “let” was the only word that mattered. I couldn’t do anything my parents didn’t want to *let* me do.

“It could be worse,” Joyce said.

“Sure. They could decide not to *let* me go to work anymore. Or maybe they’ll decide not to *let* me see Nathan.” I shoved my smoothie aside. “I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for them. I know that. And I know that I have to let SymboGen keep studying me, because we need to understand why I didn’t die. But sometimes I’m just tired of feeling like this is my life, you know? Like this is all I get, and it’s all because of our parents, and *SymboGen*.”

I stopped, startled by the venom in my own voice. Even Joyce was staring at me, briefly shocked out of her normal too-cool-for-this attitude.

“I...” She stopped, reaching for the words, and tried again: “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged halfheartedly. “It feels like there’s no way out sometimes.”

“You’ve been so much better these last few years. It’s like you’re...it’s like you’re happy for the first time in your life. I thought that meant...I mean, you seemed happy, so I thought you had to *be* happy.”

“I *am* happy,” I said. “I’m happy that we’re friends. I know from what you’ve said, and from what everyone who knew me before the accident won’t say, that you and I didn’t always get along. I like my job. I like working with animals.”

“And Nathan?” asked Joyce, a trace of her normal insouciance creeping back.

“And Nathan,” I allowed. “I like him, too. I love him, even. So it’s not that I’m not happy. It’s just that I don’t like feeling trapped.”

“I get that,” said Joyce. “Sometimes—” She cut herself off, blinking at something behind me. “What the hell is going on over there?”

There was a new air of confusion to the general chatter in the mall. I’d been too busy focusing on Joyce to notice it before. I twisted in my seat, following her gaze to a little girl outside the boundaries of the food court. She was too young to be on her own—no more than six or seven—and she was half-walking, half-staggering toward the exit. From the way she was moving, she’d hurt her foot recently. If she’d been older, I would have suspected her of having had a stroke. And yet her gait managed not to be the strangest thing about her, possibly because the sight of a little girl towing a fully grown woman bodily along was weird enough to make everything else seem incidental.

“Helen, sweetie, come on, stop playing this bad game,” said the woman—her mother, judging by the resemblance between them. There were tears running down her cheeks. Her obvious dismay just called the utter slackness of the little girl’s expression into sharper relief. “Let’s go back to Daddy, okay? Okay, sweetie? Please?”

The little girl—Helen, her name was Helen, and that seemed suddenly very important, although I couldn’t have said exactly why—gave no indication that she’d heard a word her mother said. She just kept plodding forward, moving surprisingly fast considering that she was barely lifting her right foot off the floor. Her mother was dragged along in her wake, unable to stop the girl’s forward motion.

I heard Joyce gasp. “There’s another one,” she whispered loudly. Her hand stabbed past my face, pointing into the crowd. I turned to look where she was pointing, and saw a man shambling through the gathered bodies, moving with the same

unsteady speed as the little girl. Like the little girl, his expression was slack, eyes focusing on nothing in this world...and like her, he was heading straight for the exit.

“What the hell...?” I stood, taking a step back, so that I was standing next to Joyce. She scrambled to her feet, latching onto my arm with surprising strength. “What’s wrong with them?”

“I don’t know. Food poisoning maybe?” Joyce gave me a pleading look. “It’s not something contagious, is it? There’s not something in the air vents?”

“You’re the one who works in a lab,” I said, keeping most of my attention on the man and the little girl. “Shouldn’t you know what causes this sort of symptomology?” Helen’s mother wasn’t stopping her, but she was slowing her down, and the man was starting to catch up. I wanted to see what would happen if they saw each other. I wanted to see what they would do.

“Helen!” wailed the mother.

Helen plodded ceaselessly on. The man’s longer legs were rapidly shortening the distance between them. He was walking better than she was, although his balance didn’t seem to be as good; several times, I was sure he was going to topple over. But he didn’t.

And then they were next to each other, and with no more ceremony than a step, they stopped. The little girl turned to face the man, tilting her chin up as she stared into his eyes. Their expressions remained slack, neither showing any emotion as they considered each other. The entire mall seemed to have gone quiet; the only sounds were the music playing softly through the speakers overhead and the pleas of Helen’s mother.

Unsteadily, Helen extended her free hand toward the man. Just as unsteadily, he reached out and took it, mashing his fingers around hers with so much force that it had to hurt her. She didn’t react. Now hand-in-hand, the pair turned and resumed their trek toward the door, dragging Helen’s wailing mother in their wake.

They had almost reached the doors when the mall EMTs descended, summoned by someone who reacted better in a crisis than the rest of us. They had no trouble separating the man from the little girl—when they pulled on their joined hands, the pair just let go. They had more trouble getting Helen’s mother to let her go. I think they may have finally threatened to sedate her, because she dropped Helen’s hand and stepped away, pleas fading into sobs.

Joyce and I watched as both man and little girl were strapped to gurneys and wheeled away, vanishing through an EMPLOYEES ONLY door into the back corridors of the mall. A stunned silence hung over everyone who had witnessed the scene. Several people had their phones out and were snapping pictures of the crowd, like the disoriented faces of the witnesses would somehow provide the answers that none of us had on our own.

“I think we should go home now,” said Joyce, in a very small voice.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think you’re right.”

Joyce switched the radio from station to station as she drove, taking her eyes off the road so many times that I was afraid I was going to start hyperventilating. “Traffic, weather, stupid comedy show, traffic, traffic— God!” She slammed her fists against the wheel. “Doesn’t anybody talk about anything *important* around here?”

“Do we need to pull over so you can calm down?” I asked the question as calmly as I could, but my hands were pressed against the dashboard so hard the skin on my fingers was bleached bloodless white. My stomach felt like it was turning backflips. The only thing stopping me from giving in to the urge to throw up was the knowledge that it probably wouldn’t improve her driving.

“No! I’m fine.” She stabbed the search button with her index finger, sending the radio skipping to the next station.

“—doctors are baffled by a spate of what appears to be a new form of viral sleepwalking. Five victims of this ‘sleeping sickness’ have already been admitted to Bay Area hospitals. While the experts insist there is no evidence that this illness is contagious, it seems fairly obvious that something must be causing it, as none of the known victims have any history of narcolepsy or somnambulism—that’s falling asleep without warning, and walking around while you’re sleeping, for those of us without a medical degree. There is no word yet on whether the Centers for Disease Control—”

I leaned forward and turned the radio off. Joyce yelped.

“I was listening to that!”

“You were getting upset by that,” I corrected. “Let’s get home and talk to Dad. He’ll know if something is really going on, and you won’t wind up scaring yourself half to death before we fully understand the situation.”

Joyce glared. I looked impassively back, trying not to twitch at the fact that she wasn’t paying enough attention to the road. Finally, as I expected, she relented.

“I hate it when you’re reasonable,” she grumbled. “You should be freaking out.”

“You’re freaking out enough for both of us,” I said. “I just want to know what I’m going to be freaking out about before I waste energy freaking out about the wrong things. Conservation of panic is important.”

“Pretty sure we’re not having a panic shortage, Sal.”

“I don’t care. You’re still not turning that back on until we’re home. If you kill us both because you’re too busy being upset at the radio to keep your eyes on the road, I’m never going to speak to you again.”

Joyce glared again before turning and looking resolutely out at the road. I closed my eyes, pressing myself back in my seat, and tried not to think about the cars around us. We passed the rest of the drive that way. I relaxed when I felt the car take the

familiar turn into our driveway, and opened my eyes when Joyce turned the engine off.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“You should be,” I said, before I thought better of it.

“What?” Joyce turned to me, eyes wide. “What did you say?”

“You know I’m not okay with that sort of stuff.”

“I said I was sorry! Don’t freak out on me.”

Somehow, her sheer wounded indignation was the final straw. “Believe me, I’m not freaking out. If I start freaking out, you’ll have to sedate me to get me to stop,” I snapped, and opened the door, barely remembering to undo my seat belt before I stormed away. Joyce could carry her own damn bags. I was done being the helpful big sister for the day.

Mom and Dad were in the living room. They both looked up at the sound of the front door slamming, and for a moment, I saw that flicker of wary unhappiness that I thought of as the tracks of the old Sally—the one whose moods apparently made my panic attacks look like a fair trade in terms of “daughter we can live with.”

“Sal?” said Mom carefully, standing. “Honey, are you okay?”

Somehow, making her look at me like that just made the day worse. I shook my head and walked over to embrace her, pressing my face into her shoulder. Alarmed, she closed her arms around me.

“Honey, where’s Joyce? Was there an accident?”

I shook my head, not lifting it from her shoulder. I heard Dad stand and walk over to us. He didn’t say anything. That was probably for the best. At the moment, I wouldn’t have been able to answer him.

The door banged open again as Joyce came stomping in, dropping her bags with a series of rustles and thuds before she demanded, “Turn on the news!”

“Joyce, what’s going on?” asked Mom. “Why is your sister so upset?”

“There were these people at the mall, I think they were sick.” I lifted my head to see Joyce grabbing the remote off the coffee table. She clicked the TV on, flipping channels until she landed on CNN. They were airing a story about reality-star salaries. She snarled. “Why aren’t they saying anything? I’m going to my room. Maybe the Internet will have a clue.” She whirled and went stomping out of the room. Her bedroom door slammed a few seconds later.

I pulled away from Mom. “So what was that you were saying last week, about how I used to be the dramatic one? Can we have a re-vote on that title?”

“I think that might be a good idea.” Mom looked down the hall toward Joyce’s room. “What happened? Did you two have a fight?”

“If they’d had a fight bad enough that Joyce would be looking for it on CNN, I think we’d be down a daughter, Gail,” said my father reasonably. He was usually the reasonable one. Mom was a lot more like Joyce, only older and slightly less inclined to drag me to the mall when I didn’t want to go. “What happened, Sal?”

I sighed. “I wanted to talk to you about this anyway. See, there was this little girl...”

It didn’t take me long to explain what we’d seen at the mall. Mom and Dad listened without comment until I was done. I shrugged, spreading my hands. “That’s everything. It was weird, and sort of scary, but it really upset Joyce. The way she was driving scared the hell out of me, and it was like she didn’t even care. All she wanted to do was get home and find out what was going on. We were supposed to talk to you, but she didn’t even wait. I don’t get it.”

“She was probably worried about a biochemical attack on the mall,” said my father.

I blinked. Joyce had mentioned something in the air vents... “Dad? Is there something I should know?”

My father—Colonel Alfred Mitchell, United States Army, former director at USAMRIID and current director-slash-lab manager of their San Francisco research center, which is how my entire family wound up with the earliest specialized versions of the SymboGen implant—looked at me for a long moment without saying anything. Finally, he sighed, and said, “We didn’t want to worry you.”

“You know, that’s one of the most worrying things anyone ever says.”

“I know.” He paused before saying, “There have been a few isolated events recently. Unique pathogens showing up in inhabited areas. Nothing we can solidly say points to terrorist activity, but...”

“Enough that when we see people sleepwalking in broad daylight, you jump to bad conclusions,” I said. “How long have you known about this?” I paused, and added, “How long has *Joyce* known?”

“Sal—”

“Didn’t you think this might be something I’d want to know about, too?”

“It’s not public knowledge, and given your current condition, it seemed best not to upset you,” Dad said.

I stared at him. “It’s been six years since the accident. How long does this get to be my ‘current condition’ before it becomes just the way I *am*? I mean, really, I’d like to know, since I guess I’m going to have to wait until we hit that day before you’re going to start treating me like an adult, instead of like a child you have to protect.”

“Sal, that isn’t fair,” said Mom.

“I didn’t mean your memory loss, Sal,” said my father. I frowned. He shook his head. “I meant SymboGen.”

Understanding came suddenly. It did not come kindly. “You think SymboGen is involved in this?”

“Honey, I don’t know what I think. What I do know is that

it's a big, scary world out there, and I can't protect you from it." He looked toward Joyce's room. "I need to go check on your sister."

"Yeah," I said. "You do that."

Mom took my arm as Dad walked down the hall. "Let's go make some tea."

I thought about shaking off her hand, but experience told me that would be a bad idea. If I started acting like a child, she'd just work harder to treat me like one. "I'm not so delicate that you have to hide things from me," I said.

"I know. It's just your father's way. You were used to it before...before." She stumbled a little, sidestepping the issue of my memory loss with her usual awkwardness. Even after six years, it hadn't gotten any easier. "He needs to be sure of the facts before he really starts frightening people."

"He told Joyce."

"Joyce works in his lab. I'm not sure he could avoid telling her."

"She's just an intern."

"Even interns have to understand what they're doing." Mom let go of my arm, pushing me gently toward the kitchen table. I sat down. "I'm pretty sure we have some rosemary shortbread left over from last night. It's always better on the second day, don't you think?"

That was her way of saying that the conversation was over. I wasn't quite ready to let it go. "Mom, should I be scared right now?"

"I don't think it would do any good, and that means it's not worth wasting the energy." Mom got down the cookie jar and a tin of loose-leaf tea. "Now why don't you tell me how the trip to the mall went, up until those people showed up?"

I sighed. There was no way I was getting anything else out of her. "Well, first Joyce dragged me through every shoe store in the place..." I began.

Reciting the minutiae of our trip to the mall took very little of my attention. Mom fixed tea, and I kept talking. I couldn't stop thinking about the look on that little girl's face, the dead-eyed blankness that still projected a type of unwavering determination, like all that mattered in the world was getting to that door. The man had looked the same way, and they'd known each other through the fog.

Whatever was going on, it was bigger than Dad was admitting, maybe big enough to justify Joyce's panic. It was definitely a hell of a lot more important than shoe stores and shopping. Mom put the shortbread in front of me, and the summer afternoon ticked inexorably by, like so many others before it, like so many more that hadn't arrived yet.

I don't remember what we talked about. None of it mattered, and I couldn't stop thinking about the little girl.

It wasn't until I went to bed that night that I realized I'd been hearing the drums all day.

...in biotech news, a patent for a lab-created organism has been filed by genetic research leader SymboGen. The patented organism, dubbed “Diphyllobothrium symbogenesis,” is a form of modified tapeworm hybrid. The representatives from SymboGen, led by Dr. Steven Banks, have successfully demonstrated that this hybrid cannot arise in nature, and more, that the modifications to its genome have resulted in several medically and scientifically useful changes to the overall organism.

Rumors that SymboGen is already petitioning the FDA for permission to begin human testing of the D. symbogenesis organism have yet to be confirmed. This would represent a dramatic escalation of the normal timeline for research of this type. Sources inside the company say...

—FROM *THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PARASITOLOGY*,
PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2015.

San Bruno officials have as yet made no statement relating to the strange events at the downtown San Bruno Mall, although one mall employee has reported a strange smell in the area of the second-floor public restrooms. Sources indicate that a gas leak of some kind may have triggered the strange

behavior in the five individuals affected by what locals have begun calling “the Sleeping Sickness.”

All five of the victims of this strange outbreak have been hospitalized, and are being held in quarantine pending further updates on their condition...

—FROM *THE CONTRA COSTA TIMES*, AUGUST 19, 2027.

Chapter 4

AUGUST 2027

The morning dawned bright, early, and awkward. Joyce was sullen and refused to talk during breakfast; Mom was already gone by the time I got up. I had an e-mail from Nathan apologizing for not calling me the night before; there had been a sudden surge of patients at the ER, bad enough that it overwhelmed the normal doctors and caused them to call as many specialists as they could lure out of their labs. As a staff parasitologist, Nathan was accustomed to doing ER rounds—there were medical conditions that could be alleviated by making adjustments to the patient’s SymboGen implant, and others that could kill the implants, requiring them to be extracted immediately, before decomposition could set in. There were very few medical emergencies that could be improved by having two and a half pounds of dead tapeworm decaying in the patient’s gut.

I might have thought that the influx of patients was somehow

related to what Joyce and I saw at the mall, but he was using the code words that meant “accident.” I didn’t like to think about car crashes, and so he avoided discussing them with me in any specific terms. He invited me to come to the hospital for lunch. Since I didn’t have to be at the shelter that day, I wrote back saying I’d be there. Anything to get out of the house.

Dad and Joyce were leaving for work at ten: unusually late, but a concession they were sometimes able to make when I needed a ride. They dropped me off six blocks from the hospital, at a little florist’s shop I’d discovered during my outpatient physical therapy. The shop always had terrible roses. They made up for it by having some of the most beautiful orchids I’d ever seen—but that wasn’t their specialty: McNally’s Flowers specialized in carnivorous plants.

The bell over the door rang as I stepped into the warm, moist confines of the shop. There was no one in sight. “Hello?” I called. The store’s orange tabby came strolling out from a rack of vases, his tail held in a high, relaxed position. I knelt to offer him my hand. “Hey, Tumbleweeds. How are you today? Where are your people?”

Tumbleweeds deigned to walk over and sniff my fingers before butting his head against the back of my hand. Then he turned and walked away again, having accomplished his duty as store greeter.

“You’re lucky,” said a voice. I lifted my head. The owner, Marya, was standing near the cooler where she kept the substandard but seemingly obligatory roses. She was a tall, solid woman with long black hair and a narrow waist that she kept cinched in a wide leather belt at all times. I sometimes found myself wondering whether she would explode if the belt was removed.

She kept smiling as she strolled toward the front of the store, adding, “Tumbles has been standoffish lately. People come in, and he snubs them. He even hissed at a poor woman yesterday.

She'd come in to buy flowers for her husband, and here's my cat, hissing at her."

"Did you sell her flowers anyway?" I asked, straightening up.

"Four dozen of the long-stemmed red roses." Marya clucked her tongue. "I tried to steer her toward something worth giving to a person who doesn't feel his best—who wants my roses when they're already unwell?—but eh, can't steer a person who won't be steered, now, can we? She seemed happy enough."

I laughed. "You can't save everyone," I said.

"No, I suppose I can't," Marya mildly agreed. "What can I get for you today? Something sweet and covered in pretty blossoms?"

"I was hoping you had some new sundews, actually," I said. "Nathan had a hard night last night. I wanted to bring him something pretty."

"Ah! A discerning customer is the joy of a retailer's heart." Marya waved for me to follow her to the back of the store, where another glass door stood between the common flowers and the more exotic climate-controlled carnivorous plants. She held the door open for me, waiting until I was past her before closing it tight and flicking on the overhead lights. "Browse as you like, I've nothing better to do."

Marya's attitude wasn't as odd as it seemed, despite the fact that she was the only one currently working. The bell over the door would ring if anybody else came in, and her true joy was selling her carnivorous babies. Having someone who actually wanted to look at sundews was worth any number of missed opportunities to sell bad roses to tourists.

"I have some gorgeous King Sundews," she said, guiding me toward one of the trays of plants resting under their heat lamps, sticky petals spread toward the absent sun. The largest of the King Sundews was bigger than my palm, with beads of delicate pink "dew" clinging to the cilia of its long, green and orange

fronds. “They just came in day before yesterday; you’re the first one who’s come in to see them.”

From her proprietary tone, I could tell what she wanted to hear, and I was happy to give it to her: “Oh, Marya, they’re *gorgeous*,” I breathed, crouching down to study the sundews with a careful eye. They were no less impressive up close. “What are the care notes?”

“Dormancy isn’t required, but it’s a good idea if you want your King to flower; they can handle pretty good-sized prey, even up to moths and large beetles. You still want to be careful with feeding, don’t feed live if you can avoid it—just don’t worry too much if your King snatches a few snacks without your approval. They actually wrap their leaves around the things that they’re digesting. Hard to grow, intermediate to care for.” Marya smiled slyly. “Your boy would love one.”

“You’re probably right.” I straightened. “How much are they?”

“For you, my darling, thirty dollars even, and you bring me a picture next time you come in, let me see how the new beauty is rooting into the office.”

“You’ve got a deal.” I looked over the tray again before pointing to a sundew near the back. “I’ll take that one.”

“A wonderful selection. Come now, you sweet thing, time to move to a new home...” She cooed to the sundew as she plucked its pot from the tray, mixing endearments in English and Ukrainian. I smothered a smile, following her out of the room.

Marya was a botanist before she moved to the United States. She probably could have continued working in the field, but instead, she’d chosen to do what she loved best: spend all her time with plants, and occasionally foist them off on people who promised to keep them alive. The cut flowers and cheap stuffed toys with “Get Well Soon” slogans were a sideline, another way of meeting expectations.

“Everything is well with you and your boy?” Marya asked, as she rang up my new sundew. “No more headaches, no more bad dreams?”

“Lots of headaches, lots of bad dreams,” I admitted. “Symbo-Gen still has me under observation. I have to check in tomorrow for another review.”

“Such a shame. They should find something else to spend their time on.” Marya handed me the bag containing the sundew. “There’s a care sheet inside, and don’t hesitate to call if either of you has any questions. There are no bad questions in horticulture. There are only bad people who kill their babies through overwatering.”

“Thank you, Marya.” I took the bag, smiling.

“Now go on, see your boy,” she said, and made a shooing gesture with her hands. “He’ll be excited by what you have to give him.”

“If he’s not, he can’t have it.”

“Never ‘it,’ never ‘it,’” Marya chided. “None of God’s creatures is an ‘it,’ even if they’re not a boy or a girl or a mammal or a pretty bird. Call them ‘he’ or ‘she’ and be a little wrong, but never take away their individuality like that.”

“Sorry, Marya,” I said, and waved as I left the store. Tumbleweeds followed me to the door and sat there, staring at me through the glass with his tail wrapped around his legs, as I walked toward the hospital. Nathan would be waiting for me.

The nice thing about spending most of my remembered life in hospitals is that it’s become virtually impossible for them to make me uncomfortable. They’re more like home than home is. I’d been awake for almost a year before I realized that normal people aren’t supposed to find the smell of bleach and floor wax comforting. I walked through the main doors of the San Francisco City Hospital, made my way to the elevator, and pressed the button for Nathan’s floor. All business as usual.

A few orderlies nodded to me as I passed. I nodded back, and kept going. Nathan's lunch hour was never as long as we wanted it to be, and I'd already spent too much time at the florist's to spend more in being social. I looked down at the brown paper bag in my hand. It was worth it.

Nathan's research assistant wasn't at her desk when I reached the ninth floor. I kept walking until I came to Nathan's office. The door was open. I stopped, knocking on the doorframe. He raised his head and smiled.

"Hey there," he said. "Come on in, babe. I'll be done with this in just a second."

"Babe, darling...this is one of those days where I don't get to have an actual name, isn't it?" I crossed to the chair in front of his desk and sat, making sure to hold the bag where he could see it. "Doctor, I've got a pain."

Nathan ignored my joking attempt at a come-on, eyes going to the bag. "Someone called you 'darling'?" he asked, in a carefully casual tone. "Was that someone by any chance black-haired, wearing a leather belt, and originally from the Ukraine?"

"Funnily enough, that's a very good description of that someone," I said. "How did you guess?"

"Experience and greed," he said, and held up a finger as he turned back to his screen. "Just let me finish this before I get distracted by trying to convince you to let me look inside that bag."

"Paperwork?" I ventured.

"Oceans of it," he said. "Sometimes I think that's the downside of going green—you can't look in and see how buried I am by measuring the piles on my desk. Now I look exactly the same whether I'm busy or not, and so people feel like they're doing me a favor by giving me something to do. Some of them also—not you, you have a free pass at all times—feel like they're allowed to intrude without asking whether I have time to deal with them." He typed as he spoke, making quick notes on what had to be a seemingly endless succession of reports.

I quieted, settling in the chair and waiting for him to finish. He would answer if I talked to him—I knew that from previous attacks of unfiled paperwork—and so I didn't need to verify it by bothering him. I'd have his undivided attention faster if I let him take care of work.

About five minutes slipped by in the sound of typing and the reassuring chill of the air conditioning. Finally, Nathan turned in his chair to face me across the desk, extending both hands in a palms-up "gimme" gesture.

"I beg you, be merciful, for I have just filed fifty-seven patient reports," he said. "Let me see inside the bag of wonders."

"I don't know," I began. "I mean, you *did* say that people kept interrupting you..."

"You are never an interruption, a distraction, or anything else of the sort," he said, hands still outstretched. "Please. Be the most wonderful girlfriend in the world, and let me look inside the bag."

"You're lucky I'm soft-hearted," I said, and passed the bag over to him.

Nathan placed the bag on his desk with proper reverence before reaching inside and pulling out the King Sundew. The light from his desk lamp glinted off the tiny beads of sticky sap coating its fronds, making them look like jewels. Nathan's eyes lit up.

"You found a King Sundew," he breathed. "Sal, it's beautiful."

"I *bought* a King Sundew," I said. "Marya sold it to me."

"You found Marya's shop, something I hadn't managed in eight years of working here. Ergo, you found the King Sundew, and you should get the credit. Let me give you the credit. Please." Nathan stood, the sundew cradled lovingly in his hands. "This is an incredible plant. I mean, really remarkable."

I smiled. "You like it?"

"I love it." He paused. "And I'm being stupidly presumptuous again. Is this for me?"

My smile grew. I liked carnivorous plants as much as Nathan did—enough that I had a small terrarium filled with thriving flytraps and a few pitcher plants that were suitable for a gardener with more enthusiasm than actual skill. They were one of the things we'd bonded over. I'd come to meet him for lunch carrying a flytrap from Marya, and suddenly we had all these things to talk about. The walk we'd taken so I could show him Marya's store was one of our first dates. He was a lot further along in our mutual hobby than I was; there was no way I could keep a King Sundew alive. And yet the fact that he even felt the need to ask somehow made the gift all that much sweeter to give.

"All yours," I said. "I figured you needed a new friend to make up for the night you'd had. There's a care sheet in the bag, if you need it."

"Best girlfriend." He stepped around the desk, pausing to bend and kiss me quickly on the lips before he crossed the office to the terrarium where he kept the majority of his sundews—the ones pretty enough to pass muster for work. There were no pitcher plants, since the administration frowned on keeping dead bugs in your office, even if they *were* in the process of being digested. There were no flytraps, either. Thanks to hundreds of horror movies, everyone knew that flytraps ate meat. But the sundews, with their bright colors and glittering leaves, were just fine—never mind that they were, in some ways, the most vicious killers of them all. An insect that got stuck to a sundew could live for hours before it died, being slowly digested the whole time.

Carefully, so as not to jostle the plant in his hand, Nathan removed the lid from the terrarium and shifted the heating lamps to the side. Then he moved a few pots around, all one-handed, before lowering the King Sundew lovingly into the center of the display. Its fronds were still clumped together from their time in the bag. He picked up a long skewer—the kind people use for barbecues—and used it to gently tease the

sticky leaves apart. Then he replaced the lid on the terrarium and stepped back, looking proudly at his modified display.

“Beautiful,” he said, and turned to walk back to me, bending to pull me to my feet.

“Me or the sundew?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, and kissed me.

Being kissed by Nathan was one of my favorite hobbies, and I was more than happy to stand, put my arms loosely around his neck, and kiss him enthusiastically back. We passed several pleasant minutes that way. Finally, Nathan pulled away, cheeks flushed and eyes a little overly bright behind his glasses.

“You are amazing, and I am *starving*,” he said. “Lunch?”

“Lunch,” I agreed. “Indian?”

Nathan grinned. “It’s like you read my mind. Let me get my coat.”

He left me in the office while he took care of the last few details required before he could leave the hospital. I walked over to the terrarium, bending to study the King Sundew. It was already relaxing into its new environment, fronds fully extending as it mapped out the limits of its space. It would have insects stuck to those leaves by the next morning, using the nutrients in their bodies to feed its own.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured.

“Sal?” said Nathan, from the office doorway. “You ready?”

“I’m coming.” I straightened, smiling again. “Let’s eat.”

Nathan clicked the office lights off as he stepped out to the hall. The lights in the terrarium stayed on, casting a bloody red glow over everything. I grabbed my bag from the chair and followed him into the hall, leaving the silently growing plants behind.

The Indian restaurant we wound up in was half a mile from the hospital, tucked into one of those odd warrens of half-residential, half-commercial streets that seemed to spring up all

over San Francisco. Every neighborhood had its own character, a mixture of city natives, transplants, and people who thought of themselves as just passing through, even though they'd been living there for longer than I'd been alive. On such blends are cities built.

Nathan took a sip of his mango lassi as he looked thoughtfully at his goat curry. I leaned over and poked him in the arm with my fork. He looked up, startled.

"What?"

"We're supposed to be having lunch together, but I don't know where you are," I said. "What's on your mind?"

An odd look crossed his face. Putting down his lassi, he reached up and adjusted his glasses—a sure sign that he was uncomfortable. "Did you know that curry powder is a natural antiparasitic? That's probably part of why it was originally so popular in Indian cuisine. India has a warm, moist climate. That encourages high levels of parasitism, and the more parasites you have, the more ways you'll need to keep them out of your population. Assuming you want to have a healthy population, that is."

"And it's not until recently that we've been put into the position of needing to *add* parasites for the sake of our health, rather than getting rid of them," I said. "I know. You tell me things like that every time you don't want to talk about what's really on your mind. It's a good thing I was never enthusiastic about developing a taste for sushi. I think you'd get us kicked out of any sushi restaurant worth visiting."

"Just because people don't want to consider the risks inherent in their food choices—"

"Nathan, what's *wrong*? You don't usually try to change the subject twice in one meal."

He paused before sighing heavily. "If I say you really don't want to know, Sal, will you believe me?"

"Yes, but I won't stop asking." I poked him with my fork

again. This time the action earned me a brief smile. “I would be a terrible girlfriend if I didn’t make you tell me what was on your mind. You listen to me whine about dealing with Symbo-Gen enough. I can listen to you.”

“It’s about what happened last night.”

The words were simple, but still sent a thread of unease into my guts, where it curled and twisted like a parasite in its own right. Last night he’d been dealing with an accident. I hated hearing about accidents . . . but this was Nathan, and he deserved better than me shutting him out because I was uncomfortable. “I’m a big girl,” I said. “I can handle it.”

He sighed again. This time he took off his glasses, polishing them on the tail of his shirt as he said, “It was a nine-car pile-up on the Bay Bridge. The people who made it as far as the hospital said they had no warning at all. One minute, traffic was moving normally. The next, a big rig was jackknifing to block all four lanes of traffic, and cars were slamming into it before they had a chance to realize what was about to happen to them. Eleven people died before emergency services could even get to the scene.”

“That’s horrible,” I breathed, feeling the unease twist harder in my stomach. It was horrible, yes, and it involved a car crash, which was normally enough to make Nathan reluctant to discuss his work with me. But was it horrible enough for him to be *this* reluctant?

I didn’t think so.

Nathan heard my confusion. He looked up, putting his glasses back on, and said, “You said you were going to the mall with your sister yesterday. In San Bruno. Where those people started sleepwalking.”

“Yes. Joyce and I were both there. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“The driver of the big rig survived. So did the driver of the bus that capped off the accident. His passengers—the ones who

lived—said he hit the gas when he came around the curve on the bridge and saw the wreckage. Not the brakes. The gas.”

The similarity to my own accident made me go cold. “What are you—”

“Both drivers are showing the same symptoms as the people from the mall. They’re walking in their sleep. And apparently, causing multi-car pile-ups in their sleep, too. The trucker had no passengers, but the people on the bus said that their driver was perfectly normal when they first got on. He took their fares, said hello, asked about their families . . . some of them had been riding with that driver for years. They said he seemed perfectly normal, right up until he stopped responding to questions. The accident happened a little bit after that.”

I didn’t know what to say, and so I didn’t say anything at all. I just stared at him, trying to formulate the words that came next. I couldn’t find them.

Nathan nodded, seeming to understand my silence. “More than half the people who were in the accident didn’t make it out of the ER. Some of the others will never be the same. That doesn’t even go into the ones who won’t wake up.”

“There’s more than just the drivers?” The question came out in a whisper.

“Two from the bus, a few passengers from the cars—it’s hard to tell ‘sleepwalking, won’t wake up’ from ‘genuine coma’ right now. You were in a coma. You came out of it.” Nathan paused, wincing. “Oh, hell. Sal, I didn’t mean to . . .”

“It’s okay. I asked, remember? And I know my coma didn’t end the way the original Sally might have wanted. I wanted to be supportive.” My stomach was still rolling. I pressed my hand flat against the skin above my navel, grimacing. “Maybe I was a little *too* supportive. I’ll have to remember that for next time.”

“Thank you for trying.” He reached across the table to take my free hand. “Even a little supportive is good enough for me.”

“Don’t say that. I’m still learning social norms, remember?”

You tell me I don't have to support you to the best of my ability, next thing you know, I'm not showing up for dates anymore, and I keep asking you to do my laundry."

A small smile creased the corners of his mouth. "I think that's kids coming home from college."

"Or working as biotech interns. I have just described my sister, only substitute 'dinner' for 'dates.'"

"Good, because I don't want to date your sister, and I don't want to think about you dating your sister, either."

I burst out laughing, earning myself a startled glance from the people at the next table over. "Now that would *definitely* be going against social norms."

"Very true." Nathan released my hand and looked at the remains of our lunch. Neither of us had cleaned our plates. "Are you going to eat anything else?"

With how upset my stomach was, I wasn't sure I was going to keep down what I'd already eaten. "No," I said. "Can we go for a walk?"

"Sure," he said, and signaled for the check.

I leaned back in my chair and tried to smile, despite the fact that I really felt like I was going to throw up at any moment. The check came quickly, and Nathan paid. Pushing the feeling of roiling unease aside, I took Nathan's hand, and we walked together out into the early afternoon sun.

Every six months or so, some conspiracy nut starts in with “what they aren’t telling you” and “these are the things they don’t want you to know,” and you know what? Not one of them has produced verifiable scientific evidence that the Intestinal Bodyguard™ is harmful in humans. Not one! Don’t you think that if there were some kind of negative side effect, we’d have seen it by now? I don’t mean to sound like I’m claiming nothing can ever go wrong—we’re all human at SymboGen, we make mistakes—but even if you’re into conspiracy theories, you’ve got to admit that it’s pretty far-fetched to believe that we could somehow suppress every possible bad effect of the Intestinal Bodyguard™. Millions of people have our implants. Millions. That’s not a small number, and those people talk. We couldn’t keep them all quiet if we wanted to.

And why would we want to? Look at the blogs, look at the social media updates! No more allergies, no more missed medication—heck, some people even claim their Intestinal Bodyguards™ guard against hangovers. Now, that’s not a feature that we were necessarily aiming for, and it’s not in the brochure, but if your implant wants to help you have a little more fun, I say go right ahead. What’s the harm?

—FROM “KING OF THE WORMS,” AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR. STEVEN BANKS, CO-FOUNDER OF SYMBOGEN. ORIGINALLY
PUBLISHED IN *ROLLING STONE*, FEBRUARY 2027.

Steve's initial proposal was as fascinating as it was flawed. He wanted to take D. yonagoensis—a type of tapeworm that parasitizes fish in its natural environment, using small crustaceans as a secondary host—and use it to design a sort of “super tapeworm,” a specially crafted hybrid that would enhance the human immune system, protect against allergies and autoimmune conditions, and die every two years. That way, it would be the perfect pharmaceutical tool, but it wouldn't put the entire pharmaceutical industry out of business. I won't pretend that he wasn't thinking about the profits. We all were. Money makes the world go 'round.

It's a pity, really, that the design for his D. yonagoensis was never going to be viable. He used too many genetic strains, blending them without a cohesive core. The entire plan was flawed from the start. It couldn't have worked.

That's where I came in.

—FROM CAN OF WORMS: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
SHANTI CALE, PHD. AS YET UNPUBLISHED.

Chapter 5

AUGUST 2027

The Embarcadero encompasses a series of grassy lawns and jogging paths along the San Francisco Bay. It's one of the most scenic places in an already beautiful city, and even on a workday afternoon, it was decently crowded with a mix of tourists and natives. The sky was a flawless blue, the color of surgical gloves, which probably had something to do with the size of the crowd. There's something about a beautiful day that just encourages trips to the seaside, even when the seaside is only a few blocks from your office. Maybe especially when the seaside is something you can see from your window while you're pretending to care about work.

Nathan and I walked along a stretch of grass near the street, close enough to each other that we didn't feel like we were in danger of getting separated by random joggers, far enough apart that we could enjoy the day on our own terms. Nathan

liked to look at the ground as he walked, watching for interesting plants and examples of the increasingly rare local wildlife. I preferred looking at the sky. Somehow, the endless blueness of it all never stopped amazing me.

A man jogged by with a black Lab at the end of a nylon leash. The dog looked miserable, dragging her feet and carrying her tail tucked low between her legs. I stopped walking to watch them go by. “That’s weird...”

“What?” Nathan stopped in turn, turning to face me. “Sal?”

“Did you see that dog? The black Lab?” I pointed after the man and his dog. Well, presumably his dog. A dognapping could explain the animal’s distress, which was only growing as the pair moved on. Now she was visibly pulling against the leash, trying to get away. “You never see a Lab that unhappy. They’re the best-natured dogs in the world. That’s why they wind up being used as service animals so often.”

“You can’t save every animal you think might not be optimally happy, you know.” Nathan squeezed my shoulder. “I wish you could, but you’d run out of room at the shelter before you ran out of animals that needed help. I run into something similar with patients. I want to help them all. I can’t.”

“Time and insurance are cruel masters,” I said automatically. I still couldn’t take my eyes off the dog. The jogger had stopped and was scolding his pet now, although they were too far away for me to hear what he was saying. The dog pulled harder on her leash, and barked, once. *That* sound was loud enough to carry, and several other heads turned toward it. Dogs barking in the city wasn’t anything unusual. Dogs barking in that much evident distress was.

Maybe we weren’t the first ones to witness what happened next; maybe other people saw it happen before we did. But those people didn’t tell anyone what they’d seen—maybe didn’t understand what they’d seen—and we did. That made all the difference in the world.

First the jogger dropped the leash. It fell to the grass, and the dog ran several yards before turning back to face her master, barking again. She was a good dog. I could tell she was a good dog, even without knowing her name or why she was so unhappy. A bad dog would have run as soon as she had the chance. This dog looked back to her master, waiting for whatever was wrong to go away and leave things the way they were supposed to be. I abandoned all thoughts of a dognapping when I saw the look the dog was giving to that man, to *her* man, as she waited for things to fix themselves.

The man didn't move. For several seconds, he didn't move at all. Then all the tension went out of his shoulders and neck, leaving his head to loll limply forward. Several more seconds passed. Nathan's hand tightened on my shoulder.

"I don't like this, Sal," he said. "Whatever this is, I don't like it. We should get out of here."

"But the dog—"

"Will be fine."

"What if he's having a seizure or something? Shouldn't you see if you can help?"

Nathan shook his head. "This doesn't look like the start of a seizure. I don't know what it is, but it could be viral, and it's not something I'm equipped to deal with."

The man raised his head.

The dog immediately started barking again, her ears going flat against her head and her posture going rigid, something I recognized from the shelter as a sign that she was about to attack. Without thinking about it, I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled. Her head whipped around, ears going back up, and she broke into a sudden run, heading straight for us.

"Oh, crap, she's going to attack!" said Nathan, and pulled me backward, seeming set on physically removing me from the scene if that was what it took to keep me from getting savaged.

I pulled my shoulder out of his grasp. "No, she's not," I said,

and dropped into a crouch just as the dog reached us. She practically flung herself into my arms, whining frantically. She stank of urine, a hot, acrid smell. At some point during the confrontation with her master, she must have pissed herself.

“What did he *do* to you?” I muttered, and raised my head, intending to give the dog’s owner a piece of my mind. Then I froze, arms tightening around the still-whimpering dog. She plastered herself hard against me, like she thought she could somehow protect us both by cowering just a little more thoroughly.

The man—her master—was walking toward us with his arms held out for balance, a blank look on his utterly slack face. He looked like the people Joyce and I had seen at the mall; he looked like he was sleepwalking. All around us, people were shouting and pointing at him. Many of them were filming his shambling approach with their phones. The footage would be all over the Internet before the news crews even showed up.

This time, when Nathan pulled on my shoulder, I didn’t pull away. Instead, I scrambled to my feet, grabbing the dog’s leash at the same time. She whined, but she came willingly as the three of us turned and ran, as fast as we could, away from the Embarcadero.

We arrived back at the hospital winded and sweaty, having run the first two blocks and walked the rest. Only the dog seemed unaffected, probably because she belonged to a jogger—keeping up with me and Nathan had to seem like a walk in the park to her.

Just thinking the word “park” made that uneasy feeling in my gut reappear. I staggered to a stop just inside the lobby, catching myself against the wall with my free hand as I gasped for air. The dog sat down by my feet, assuming the patient waiting posture that has been the characteristic of the Labrador retriever since the breed was born.

Nathan stared at the closed door, and then turned to stare

at me. “Did you see that?” he asked needlessly. I looked at him without saying a word. He grimaced. “I’m sorry, I know you saw that, of *course* you saw that, but that was—he was perfectly normal, and then he was just...”

“Gone,” I whispered. I pushed away from the wall and knelt next to the dog. She had a full set of tags. I dug through them until I found the one with her name. “He was gone, and Beverly here was all alone. Weren’t you, Beverly?”

The dog—Beverly—looked up at me with warm, trusting brown eyes. I was a human. I had her leash, and I knew her name. Clearly, I was going to make everything okay. It must be nice to be a dog.

“I have to notify the ER. They need to send someone to pick him up...” Nathan raked a hand through his hair before whipping around to look at me. “Can you wait in my office for a few minutes? I promise, I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

“Right now, I’m not going anywhere that isn’t in this hospital, and neither is Beverly,” I said, and straightened.

Any protest Nathan might have been considering died when he saw the way I was holding the leash. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll be right there. I love you.” He kissed my cheek, and he was gone, speed walking toward the nearest set of doors.

The nearest security guard frowned in my direction as soon as Nathan was out of sight. I was disheveled, and I was with a dog who didn’t have a service jacket on. I offered the woman a wavering smile and turned to walk quickly toward the nearest bank of elevators, hoping that she’d let me go off and become someone else’s problem.

Luck, or maybe laziness, was with me; the guard kept glaring until I was safely in the elevator and bound for Nathan’s floor. Beverly walked easily on her leash, with none of the pulling or foot-dragging that I’d witnessed when she was being walked by her owner; she even heeled naturally, settling against my leg like she’d been born there.

“You’re a good dog, aren’t you, Beverly?” I asked her. “You’re a good, good dog. A good dog like you shouldn’t be treated like that. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. You have my word on that.”

Beverly turned her big brown eyes on me and believed every word I said. I could see it in her face, and belief is in the nature of dogs.

The elevator let us out on Nathan’s floor, where everyone was much more familiar with me, and hence more inclined to be forgiving. Nathan’s research assistant, Devi, still raised an eyebrow at the sight of my new black shadow. “Sal, I don’t mean to sound like I’m prying here, but . . . is that a dog?”

“She’s a dog,” I confirmed needlessly. “Beverly, I want you to meet Devi. Devi, this is Beverly. She joined us in the park.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Beverly,” said Devi to the dog, as politely as if she were addressing a human. Her eyes flicked back to me. “Still not trying to pry, but you look a little flushed. Can I get you a glass of water or something?”

The unspoken *Are you okay?* in her words was loud enough that she might as well have said it. I mustered a smile and said, “A glass of water would be good.” A fainting couch would be better, but if I asked for that, I was going to find myself getting more medical attention than I wanted—and there was no telling what would happen to Beverly, who really wasn’t supposed to be in the hospital.

“Uh-huh.” Devi rose, still watching me. “Are you going to tell me why you look so tired, or are you going to let me spin wild stories to amuse myself? You’re secretly an international spy who’s been faking amnesia while you waited for your contact to meet you with the goods.”

“‘The goods?’” I echoed.

“You know. Information that can be used to prevent the next World War.” Devi walked into the small nurse’s closet behind the desk as she spoke, and called back, “It’s probably on a

thumb drive hidden inside the dog. That's why you have her, right?"

I'd seen enough bad spy movies to know where Devi was going with this, and decided to play along. It would make us both feel better. "Yes, but I've decided to abandon my mission," I deadpanned. "I just can't bring myself to cut open a dog to get to the secret plans."

"That's what makes you a better person than your government masters." Devi emerged with a bottle of red Gatorade. I wasn't sure whether it was the red kind that supposedly tasted like fruit punch or the red kind that supposedly tasted like cherry. I also wasn't sure it mattered. I was thirsty enough that the first half of the bottle didn't taste like anything but sweetness. By the time the first traces of artificial fruit came creeping in, the dryness in my throat was mostly gone, and Devi was no longer watching me like she was afraid I'd keel over at any moment.

"Thank you," I half-said, half-gasped, and replaced the lid on the bottle. "I think I needed that pretty bad. We saw—"

The image of the man in the park—Beverly's real master, even if she had abandoned him for me—as the animation drained from his face rose behind my eyes. My stomach gave a lurch, objecting to the memory more than to the Gatorade. The result was the same. I clapped a hand over my mouth, thrusting Beverly's leash into Devi's hands. Devi looked unsurprised. She took the leash and stepped aside, clearing the way for me to race to the bathroom.

Red Gatorade looks a lot like blood when it's filling a toilet basin. I stayed on my knees in front of the bowl, bracing my hands against the floor while I waited for my head to stop spinning. My stomach gave another lurch. I managed to flush away the mess before I threw up again, but barely.

At least this time, there was less artificial red in the bowl. I leaned to the side and pressed my forehead against the tile

wall, waiting for the urge to vomit a third time to pass. It went slowly, but it went, and I stood on legs that felt like they were made of rubber. Once I was sure they'd hold me, I staggered to the sink and washed my face with icy water. I only wished there were a way for me to wash away the memory of what I'd seen. That poor man...

I shuddered. Then I straightened, dried my face with a paper towel, and walked back out of the bathroom to rescue Devi from Beverly.

Devi turned out not to need much rescuing. She was back behind her desk, and Beverly was sprawled at her feet, looking like she belonged exactly where she was. I laughed a little, despite the ongoing lightness in my head.

"Fickle dog," I said.

"She was worried about you," Devi countered. "She tried to pull me over to the bathroom when you started throwing up in there. I had to give her half my sandwich to convince her that I was a worthwhile substitute, and that you wouldn't enjoy puking more if you did it with a dog looking over your shoulder."

"Your sacrifice will not go overlooked," I said.

"No, it won't, and to repay me, you're going to drink the rest of that Gatorade." Devi smiled, but there was something unyielding in her expression, making it plain that all I'd get for fighting her was a worse headache than I already had. "I heard you flush twice. Now you're upset *and* dehydrated, and that isn't allowed on my watch. Drink it, or I'll suggest admitting you on suspicion of actual illness."

"Yes, Devi," I said meekly. She was right about the dehydration: I was once again thirsty enough that the Gatorade didn't taste of anything but sweetness. I finished the bottle without pausing.

"Good girl," she said, and offered me Beverly's leash. "Do you think you can tell me what happened now, or is it going to make you throw up again if you try?"

The elevator dinged before I could say anything. We turned to see Nathan walking into the lobby, looking almost as flustered as he had when we first arrived. “Sal, grab your things; I’m driving you home,” he said. “Devi, I need you to let everyone know that I’m unavailable for the rest of today. I’ve got to take Sally home, but then I’m going to check in at the ER. I think they’re going to need the help.”

“Yes, Dr. Kim,” said Devi. She turned to her computer, fingers already starting to fly as she pulled up his calendar and began shooting off e-mails to the people affected by the change in Nathan’s plans for the day.

I didn’t move. “Do you want some Gatorade?” I asked. “Devi made me drink some. Then I threw up twice. Then I drank some more. I feel better now. I think I’m done throwing up.”

Beverly smacked her tail once against the floor, as if to emphasize my statement. It made a dull slapping sound, and both of us looked toward the dog. She let her tongue loll, seemingly pleased by the attention.

“I need you to get your things,” Nathan said.

“I need to know that you’re safe to drive, or I’m not going *anywhere* with you,” I replied. It was an effort to keep my voice steady. “Your hands are shaking, you’re not meeting my eyes, and you’re talking about spending the rest of the afternoon working in the ER. That’s scary. I don’t get in cars with people who are being scary. It’s part of my ‘one life-threatening accident was enough’ campaign.”

Nathan stopped, his Adam’s apple visibly bobbing as he swallowed back whatever he wanted to answer me with. Then he nodded. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll have some Gatorade. Devi, is it in the fridge?”

“I can get it for you, just let me—”

“No, keep doing what you’re doing. That’s more important than waiting on me.” He walked past me and Beverly, pausing

to kiss my cheek and murmur, "I'm sorry. I should have realized that would frighten you," before continuing on to the fridge. He returned with a bottle of electric orange Gatorade in his hand.

"Fake orange or fake mango?" I asked. My voice didn't quaver. I was oddly proud of myself for that.

Nathan checked the label. "Fake tangerine," he said. "Who makes fake tangerine?"

"People who've never had a real tangerine," said Devi. She swiveled in her chair. "Your afternoon is clear. Should I go down and offer to help in the ER, or is this one of those situations where the research assistant stays far, far away?"

"This is one of those situations where the research assistant takes the rest of the afternoon off with pay, because otherwise, I'll feel bad about leaving her sitting up here all alone," said Nathan. "Go on home. I'll see you in the morning."

Devi's eyes widened. "What *happened* to you two?" she blurted. "I don't want to pry, but—"

"She always says that just before she pries," commented Nathan.

"Hush, I'm serious. Sal comes back white as a sheet and throwing up, you show up almost ten minutes later and tell me you're leaving, so I think I'm allowed to be a little bit concerned! And where did you get the dog?" Devi paused. "Did you steal somebody's dog? Is that why you're both so upset? I didn't think you had it in you."

"We didn't steal the dog," I protested. Then I hesitated, looking at Nathan. "Did we steal the dog?"

"No," he said. "The dog stole herself. We couldn't have stopped her." He turned his attention on Devi. "There's been another outbreak of sleeping sickness. We watched a man succumb while we were walking on the Embarcadero. Beverly is his dog. An ambulance has been dispatched, and once we've identified him, we'll contact his family about getting her back

to the right people. For the moment, Sal and I are the right people, because we're the people she has decided are worth trusting."

Speaking of trust... I looked down into Beverly's big brown eyes and decided, then and there, that no one *I* didn't trust was going to take her away from me, whether or not they were related to her actual owner. Dogs get to pick their people. Beverly had picked me. If her owner didn't recover, and she didn't pick somebody else to take my place, we were going to stay together.

Devi, meanwhile, had gone as pale as her complexion allowed. Staring at Nathan, she asked, "How bad is the outbreak?"

"I don't know yet. Apparently, they started getting reports almost as soon as Sal and I saw it happen, but I was the first person who'd actually come in with a report of the process, so they wanted to talk to me. Now they need me to help with the intake. We've got at least thirty people incoming." He slanted another glance my way. "I really need to get Sal home. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I can drive her," said Devi. We both blinked at her. Devi smiled a little. "I live in San Bruno, she lives in Colma. It's a carpool made in heaven. Besides, my car already smells like dog, so it's not like I need to worry about my upholstery."

"If you're sure—" Nathan turned to me. "It's your choice, Sal."

The idea of getting into a car with someone whose driving history I didn't know made my chest clench and my stomach turn over again. Sure, I did exactly that every time I took a bus, but there was something reassuringly solid about buses. Even after hearing about the bus driver with the sleeping sickness, buses felt safer to me than cars.

Still, Nathan was needed, and Devi was already heading home. Mustering every inch of calm I could find, I nodded.

“Sure,” I said. “That’ll be fine. Devi’s always been really nice to me, and won’t it be better for you to get down to the ER now, not after dealing with there-and-back traffic?” To punctuate my point I stepped forward, tugging on Beverly’s leash so she’d come with me, and kissed him lightly. He flushed, eyes darting toward Devi.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “I know what you two get up to when the office door is closed.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “Regardless. It’s unprofessional to subject you...”

I tapped his nose with one finger. He stopped. “I’m going to let Devi take me home. You’re going to go to the ER and do your job. You’re going to help people. I’m going to give Beverly the biggest soup bone I can find at the Safeway. And I’ll talk to you tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” said Nathan, looking relieved and guilty at the same time. I understood the combination. I was feeling something similar—relieved to be getting out of here, guilty to be leaving him alone—leavened with a healthy dose of fear.

Looking into his eyes, I suspected that I wasn’t the only one who was scared. All that did was frighten me more.

Devi’s car was a ’25 Prius, silver-beige, with no worrisome dents or signs that she’d been in a major accident. I relaxed a little. I relaxed more when she buckled her belt before putting her keys in her pocket and pressing the button to start the engine. She glanced my way, checking to be sure she wasn’t the only one who was buckled in. I offered a wan smile.

“I don’t do cars when I can help it,” I said. “I really do appreciate your giving me a ride home, though. I know Nathan’s needed here.”

“It’s no problem,” said Devi. She glanced at her rearview mirror. “You all right back there, Beverly?”

The dog didn't answer. I think both of us found that a little reassuring.

"Good," said Devi, looking satisfied. She was still paler than she should have been, with a worried look in her eyes, but at least she was comfortable in her car. "What's your address again?"

I recited the address for the benefit of her onboard GPS, which beeped politely before it announced, "Route calculated."

Devi pressed the button to turn off the voice instructions and activate the LED readout on the windshield. That made me relax a little more. Drivers who see their directions are less likely to take their eyes off the road, and reading without the voice component had been shown to reduce accidents by as much as eight percent.

"Let's get you home and me back to my own dog." She chuckled wryly. "My dog and my wife. But the dog is the one who'll greet me at the door, whereas Katherine is probably still at work. She just gets annoyed when I forget that I have a human, not just a bulldog, to come home to."

I'd met Katherine once, at a hospital cocktail party that Nathan dragged me to. She worked at the Lawrence Hall of Science and always looked a little distracted, like she was listening to conversation and running some complicated equation in her head at the same time. She stood almost a full foot taller than Devi, with a pale Scandinavian complexion and a broad Minnesota accent, and from everything I could tell, the two of them were blissfully happy together.

"What's your dog's name?" I asked.

"Minnie. It's short for 'Minneapolis.' She's an American bulldog." Devi beamed like a proud parent. "She's a good girl. She just gets a little destructive when she feels like she's being left alone for no good reason."

"If you both work, how do you handle that?"

“We vacuum up a lot of feathers and buy a lot of throw pillows.” Devi’s car rode smoothly enough that I barely even noticed when she turned onto the freeway—not until a less safe driver went rocketing by on our left, going easily twenty miles above the speed limit. Some of the other drivers leaned on their horns. I grabbed the handle above my door and squinted my eyes tightly closed, trying to tell myself that I was hanging off the passenger grip on the bus, and that I wasn’t on the freeway. I was anywhere but there.

Devi’s sigh was soft but audible in the near silence of the car. “You really don’t like cars, do you?”

“My family says I used to,” I said, without opening my eyes or letting go of the handle. “I got my license the day I turned sixteen. I got my first car six months later. Paid for it with my own money and everything—I’d been saving since I was eleven.”

“But you don’t remember any of that.”

“No. None of it.” I forced my eyes open, if only so I could be sure that Devi was watching the road, not watching me. Her face was turned reassuringly forward. I relaxed a little, but still didn’t let go of the handle. “I know I always say this, but I say it because it’s the truth: I don’t remember *anything* before waking up in the hospital.”

Just the dark, the hot warm dark, and the distant sound of drums that never stopped their pounding...

“I can’t even imagine,” said Devi. She paused before adding, thoughtfully, “Well, some selective amnesia would be welcome. Like my first college girlfriend, or my high school boyfriend. I could easily deal with forgetting either one of them.”

“You had a boyfriend?”

“I had a mother, and my mother had a lot of friends with kids my age, and my mother and her friends all wanted grandchildren very, very badly. Anand was nice, he was my age, and

he seemed like a good prospect for a respectable marriage.” Devi slanted a wicked look in my direction, there and gone before I could worry about her taking her eyes off the road. “The funny part is, I didn’t end it.”

“No?”

“No. He did, when he showed up at the Homecoming dance with a different date and an apology for making me waste money on my own corsage.” Her laugh was bright in the confined car. Beverly shifted in the backseat, making a curious buffing noise. “The replacement date’s name was Nikhil. In case you don’t know enough about Indian names to get the joke, it’s a boy’s name.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, I guess that made your coming out a little less awkward.”

“Not really. At least Nikhil was Indian. Still is, presumably—I haven’t spoken with Anand in years.” Her tone was light, intentionally more conversational than our previous relationship would justify. She was trying to keep me relaxed. Surprisingly enough, it was working. “Katherine is both incapable of giving my parents grandchildren unless we turn to medical science *and* she’s a white girl from the Midwest. I couldn’t even marry a nice Indian lesbian. Oh, the shame of it all.”

I laughed a little. “I guess when you look at it that way...”

“It helps.” Devi slanted another glance in my direction. Her hands were still steady on the wheel, and I found that I minded less when she took her eyes off the road, as long as she didn’t do it for long. “Like I was saying, though, I can’t imagine not remembering those pieces of myself. I wouldn’t be who I am today if it weren’t for the things that happened to me yesterday, no matter how much I did or didn’t like them. You’re handling things a lot better than I would.”

“I might not be this calm if the memory loss was partial, but I don’t remember *anything*. This is the only version of me that

I've ever known." I shrugged. "I forgot everything. I wouldn't even know I'd forgotten, if people didn't tell me. These last six years have sort of been my childhood? But they're my adulthood, too. It's weird. I am not a social model that exists outside my own skin."

Devi looked faintly embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"No, it's okay. Everyone gets around to asking eventually, and I figure driving me home gets you privileges." I leaned back in the seat, finally releasing the handle above the door. "Everyone who knew me before the accident—who knew Sally, I mean, since I don't even feel like I can legitimately claim to be her—says I'm much nicer now. I have a personality, which was a worry for a little while, since they thought there might be brain damage. It's just not the same one. I don't stress about the missing memories anymore. I stress about the thought that someday, if I'm not careful, they might come *back*. And that's when I don't know what I would do."

"You're good for Nathan," said Devi, and followed this seeming non sequitur by moving over a lane, heading for the exit that would take us to my street. "I was a little leery when he started dating you. It's not my place to dictate his personal life, but he's my friend as well as my colleague, and I was concerned."

"Everyone was concerned," I said. My parents had been at the head of *that* particular line of anxious people, convinced that Nathan was taking advantage of me by getting into a relationship with someone who had only recently been wearing a soy-paper gown, even if he hadn't known that when we met. We'd been able to bring them around, but it had taken time, and showing over and over that Nathan wasn't just good for me, he was great for me. I liked to think that I was the same for him.

"He has good taste in women," said Devi serenely. "I'm not making a pass or anything here—my wife would murder me—but

you should trust me, because I am an absolute expert on quality women.”

I smiled. “I’m glad to know that I’m acceptable.” Then I pointed toward a house about four down the street from our current position. “That’s me.”

“Well, it seems I’ve been able to get you home safely, then.” Devi pulled into my driveway and turned off the engine. “Door-to-door service. Now get your dog and get inside, so I can tell Nathan that I saw you in before I drove away.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “Thanks again.”

She waved it off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you soon.”

“Absolutely.” I slid out of the car before opening the back door and taking hold of Beverly’s leash. She jumped obligingly down to the driveway. I closed both doors, waved to Devi one last time, and turned to walk up the path to the house.

She was still there when I unlocked the front door and stepped inside, Beverly sticking close to my heels all the way. I turned to face the living room window and watched as Devi drove away.

In a matter of seconds, she was gone, and the street was still.

“Mom? Dad? Joyce?” No one answered. I was alone in the house. I had been expecting that; it wasn’t the middle of the day, exactly, more late afternoon at this point, but they all had jobs of their own to do. I was the only one who’d had the day off. It was actually a bit of a relief—I hadn’t been looking forward to explaining what I was doing home and where the dog had come from before I had the chance to calm down a little bit.

I couldn’t say exactly what had been so disturbing about seeing Beverly’s owner get sick, any more than I could say exactly what it was about the sleepwalkers that disturbed me so much. Something about them was deeply and fundamentally *wrong*, in a way that I couldn’t articulate. I just knew that it made me feel like I was going to start throwing up again.

Beverly sat at my feet, waiting to see what I was going to do next. I bent and unclipped her leash from her collar.

“Welcome home, Bevvie,” I said, and rubbed her silky ears. She let her tongue loll, looking pleased in that way that all dogs have. “Go ahead and explore. You’re going to live here for now.”

Beverly stood, stretching luxuriously, and went trotting off into the living room. I shrugged out of my coat, hanging both it and the leash on the rack next to the door, and followed her.

For the next ten minutes, Beverly explored the house and I followed her, watching as she sniffed at corners and shoved her head into places where I wouldn’t have expected it to fit. She was perfectly well behaved, not attempting to chew on anything or squat in any of the corners. Once she was done with the inside, I led her to the back door and opened it far enough for her to squeeze out and go to explore the backyard.

I didn’t know whether we’d ever had a dog, but we had a high fence that looked like it would be sufficient to keep her from wandering off into traffic. I watched for a few minutes as Beverly explored the outside, her nose low to the ground and her tail carried high, like a rudder. Then I whistled for her to come inside. She bounded back through the sliding glass door into the kitchen, her tail wagging madly as I closed it behind. I needed to go to Safeway and get dog food for her. I needed to do a lot of things. I was suddenly too tired to stay on my feet. I staggered down the hall toward my room.

I don’t remember getting into bed. I don’t remember falling asleep. All I remember is that one minute, the world was there, and the next minute, the world was gone. And, as always, I dreamt.

Here in the hot warm dark, something is changing, something is different than it was before. There are words now, words here in the dark, words for things like “red” and “drums” and “time.”

There is a “before” here now. There was never a before, and where there is a before, there can be an after.

What is an “after”? I do not know, and because I do not know, because there is something to be known and an “I” to fail to know it, I am afraid. There isn’t supposed to be an after. There isn’t supposed to be an I. There’s only supposed to be the hot warm dark, forever, and it’s never supposed to change.

The drums are getting louder. I wish I knew what that meant. I wish I understood why I was so very, very afraid...