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SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS: EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL

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SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

JENNIFER J. HOYT

ABSTRACT

The date is sometime in the future. The United States is divided into two areas: the technologically advanced Municipality and the more Eco-true Physis Expanse. Living in the Municipality, Caroline prides herself on being the ideal Citizen. Never a rule-breaker, she proceeds through life happily obeying the Central Government's edicts. Her husband Brady works for a branch of the government called the Progress Promotion Board. In a time when former lobby groups are given full status in the government, Brady is secretly forced to stay loyal to his Career at the possible expense of their unborn child. Caroline befriends Abby, a Natural from the Expanse, which puts her family at under the government's watchful eye. There is more to Abby's purpose than Caroline knows. Everyone is forced to keep secrets that affect each other. In a world where government control and technology are united, each person must make choices within the realm of their limited options. This thesis represents the beginnings of a future novel.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I. Overview of Personal Influences in the Dystopian Genre

As a high school senior, I read Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. It shocked me. It wasn't the writing style or the character development: it was the parallels between reality and this piece of fiction. I did not decide to be an author of dystopian fiction—I decided to write stories that made my readers think, that make me think. Because of my own political and technological awareness, however, I gravitate towards exploring the long-term ramifications in regards to everyday life. Fiction is the ideal vehicle for this exploration. For me, this journey started with reading.

Exaggerating and extrapolating, Huxley constructed a world based on the present, his present, my present, and it was a scary world. Although published in 1932, its warnings are relevant in 2010. The same is true for George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm. One of the most famous quotes from dystopian literature is Orwell's "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 133). Unlike Huxley who used traditional characters to issue his warning, Orwell told a

story about power, deception and ignorance in a metaphorical way (his characters are animals). These authors and others fast forward their political, social and economical present. They blur the line between fiction and reality, and, therefore, I believe, offer the greatest opportunity for influencing a society of people.

Their genre is called dystopian. Dystopian literature and social critics “derive considerable energies from a general modern skepticism about the possibility of an ideal society” (Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* 11). Studies of social critics like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche accompany in-depth criticism of dystopian authors. While social critics are self-proclaimed and exposed, fiction authors can shield their ideals behind fantasy. That is not to say that they are not advocating an opinion; however, the inherent distance between the text and the reader allows them to state their concerns through the back door of the reader’s conscience. Dystopian literature expert M. Keith Booker wrote: “the principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* 19). As proof, all we have to do is ask the man on the street if he’s read Nineteen Eighty-Four or The Communist Manifesto. More people will say they have, at least, heard of Orwell’s masterpiece. It’s required reading in school districts, because it’s accessible—and therein lies its power.

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the best known American dystopian authors. Vonnegut mastered wrapping a short story around one simple facet of life. In his “Welcome to the

Monkey House,” for example, he takes on overpopulation in two ways: one, people take “ethical birth-control pills” which numb their genitalia, and two, the government creates “Ethical Suicide Parlors.” The hero of the story is a renegade named Billy the Poet. He kidnaps a female, forces her to have sex and then watches her transform into his follower. The sociological implications warn us that overpopulation concerns may lead to drastic measures, which compromise a person’s right to their sexual organs as well as promote the taking of one’s own life. Both are represented as beneficial to the greater good, and both are regulated by the government. Vonnegut’s portrayal, like Huxley and Orwell feature typical dystopian themes: a government in control, scientific and technological advances, societal problems taking priority over individual liberties and, ultimately, a religious-like following of man-determined solutions. Readers may remember this fictional portrayal when faced with real-life solution for the overpopulation challenge.

Dystopian literature is anything but a thing of the past, as George Saunders has made a name for himself in the last twenty years. He uses humor and sarcasm to make his points. CivilWarLand in Bad Decline features short stories and a novella that capture the essence of a world gone wrong. In the title story, for example, he creates a Disneyworld-like theme park called “CivilWarLand” in which characters face internal power struggles akin to those faced in a corporate structure, only Saunders makes it a matter of life and death. The Disney reference is interesting given Keith Booker’s overview of the discourse surrounding the utopian aspect of the real-life park, which “has a multifaceted significance that illustrates the complexity of the utopian project as a whole” (Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* 1). In the novella “Bounty,” there are people called “Flaweds,” meaning they have some

characteristic that makes them imperfect. Through his protagonist's adventure, Saunders deals with slavery, sexual objectivity and the search for family. While Americans, in particular, may think these themes outdated, Saunders posits they are still to come.

Dystopian literature does not always deal directly with political themes. Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," for instance, questions personal pride and ego. The protagonist, a career-driven man named Gregor Samsa turns into a giant bug. While he thought his family relied upon his work and money, once he was not only unable to provide but also became a burden (as a bug), his death actually freed his family to prosper on their own. Kafka makes readers question their personal motivations and views of the world, showing them that the truth may be something other than what we believe. This and other stories couch his social critique in the existentialist terms of alienation, despair and absurdity to question what constitutes a worthwhile life.

As readers, we are given the opportunity to think about the future and to make decisions accordingly. The themes presented by each of these authors are universal to the human existence: power, control, desire and love. Many pit the individual liberty against the sanctity of society. What allows readers to stomach their assertions is the fictional aspect which allows readers to *pretend* as though these worlds could not exist.

Dystopian literature can encourage the individual to define a meaningful life on a personal basis. He/she then carries these ideals into deciding what is best for society. If the two perspectives do not match up, he/she has the opportunity to promote change. Almost always, therefore, the government structure has to be questioned, which is why nearly all dystopian stories feature a dominant government. In Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, for example, the government—"Big Brother"—is always watching: it produces the

books they read, the lifestyle they lead, and even rewrites history on a regular basis. War is constant, and it is necessary. Saunders, on the other hand, breaks his governments into localities, but they are, nonetheless, in charge of its people.

The ideas expressed and stories written by these international authors are relevant to the world today. Like the 1930s and 1940s of the interwar authors, the political climate of the United States in 2010 is restless. Economic recession, healthcare reform and the Occupation of Iraq influence the voting population. The prevention of terrorist threats, after 9/11, forces Americans to question personal freedoms and liberties in relation to governmental protection. The irony of a democracy is that the government is voted in and granted power by its people. Reaching individuals via literature is arguably the most compelling way to affect change within the hierarchy.

II. A Case for Self-Evident Truths

Self-Evident Truths is a story about choices: human beings will always base decisions upon basic criteria: safety, survival and love. We have to maneuver within our environment and decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Like my predecessors, I wanted to create a futuristic world portraying political and technological advances, showing human beings moving through it. The setting, plot and character development of Self-Evident Truths shows two women divided by two worlds, brought together by a common need.

The original project was to be a series of short stories connected by world and characters. A few things happened, however, that made me realize this story is better told in a novel. First, the plot would not stay simple. New complexities enriched the scenes. Similarly, the characters refused to be ornaments of their environment. Once Caroline, Brady and Abby were born onto paper, I tried my best to let them grow. The plot twists came out of recognizing and obeying the characters' thoughts and actions. As cliché as it may be, I became the channel through which the story travelled as opposed to the captain driving the ship. What started out as connected short stories, became excerpts from a novel, yet to be completed.

Deriving its title from the Declaration of Independence, Self-Evident Truths explores the basics of human existence: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Independence Hall Association). The Declaration goes on to say that if the government fails in protecting these rights, the people should

disband it and start again. My novel will not directly attack the government, as Orwell did, but rather invite the reader to examine its role, as Huxley did.

The setting in any story is important, but in a dystopian novel, the government can be seen as a character, because it influences everything. Its impact should feel unnatural to the reader. While traditional dystopian novels often present the world as broken, I wanted to keep the world accessible. I cannot, for example, relate to living in mud or scrounging for food. Negative portrayals of the future risk being dismissed by readers, because the distance it puts between them and the story is too great: they cannot see how their present actions may lead directly to the author's vision. My aim was to keep it real enough for self-evaluation but distant enough to maintain the right amount of defamiliarization.

The original stemmed from analyzing the differences between life in the country and life in the city. In general, the access to technology is greater in the city, yet there is a simultaneous push towards organic and natural. Politically speaking, government intervention is an issue of contention, although there a clear city/country divide does not seem to exist. What may benefit one hurts the other (e.g. government agricultural subsidies). Rather than try to use current definitions of city and country, I created my own. I wanted to portray a society so polarized that its inhabitants had to split from each other; thus, the Municipality and the Physis Expanse were born.

The Municipality believes in technological progress, human intervention on all levels, while the Physis Expanse prefers a more natural, less-regulated approach. People living in the Municipality are called Citizens, and those living in the Expanse are called Naturals. Because the central protagonist, Caroline, is from the Municipality, most of the

accompanying story flushes out that side of the country. In the full novel, however, the Expanse will be given greater description.

The Municipality's Central Government creates the regulations based on Citizen opinions and then enforces them via technological devices. For example, historically, Citizens grew tired of paying for the bad health choices of others. The CG, therefore, created nutritionally sound regiments and enforced them via a small chip implanted into the wrist of each Citizen. Citizens had hundreds of years to take responsibility for their own health and well being, and they failed, so the government intervened. This kind of intervention is happening in reality with increased health insurance premiums for smokers and the overweight. The technology, likewise, exists in Radio-frequency Identification (RFID).

Within the Central Government are several Boards and Committees. These are meant to represent lobby groups that were powerful enough to be awarded a permanent presence. For example, the Obligatory Morals Board is part of the education system and instills the proper etiquette required to keep the Municipality running smoothly. Mirroring some of Saunders' sarcasm, I exaggerated the real-life debate: who is responsible for teaching children lessons about, for example, sex and drugs? Is it the parents or the school system? The OMB solved that dilemma.

In any unfinished work, there are holes. There are several aspects of the piece that will need revisiting in completing the novel. For example, I made an initial attempt at breaking the story up into chapters but cannot be decisive until the entire work is done.

One of my greatest regrets of the thesis is not flushing out details of the Physis Expanse. This other side of life represents less government intervention. The word

“physis” has Greek origins and has come to mean “nature as the source of growth or change” (Random House). Henry David Thoreau used it in “Walden Pond: Spring” and understood it as “the arising of something from out of itself” (Dolis 70). The etymology of the word and its vast philosophical aspects give it a Joycean quality. Upon researching them, I knew I had found the name for that side of the country. On the Expanse, for instance, Naturals do not have implanted chips. These people represent the opposite viewpoint, because my intent is not to render judgment nor persuade readers but to explore the ramifications of both.

Typically, full character development in a dystopian work falls secondary to setting development; however, when I read Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead, I truly experienced robust character development. Her descriptions, while redundant on occasion, nonetheless, left no doubt as to whom these people were, what they felt and how they thought. I wanted to provide enough character information to the reader, simultaneously creating a sense of suspense. The novel, as opposed to short stories, has the space to meet this objective.

Ultimately the main protagonist is Caroline, and we are going to see her become more aware of her world. She will question the circumstances in which she finds herself, and, as this happens, her choices become increasingly complex. There is a trust that she places in her country and the safety of her environment: she thought that obeying the rules of the land would reward her righteousness. As she grows as a person, she will place a greater trust in her own solutions. In other words, her emotional and spiritual reliance upon the Central Government will give way to her intuition as a mother.

Interspersing chapters from Brady's point of view will help not only round out the story line but also increase the conflict emotionally. He is not a bad person; he does what he does, because he wants to provide for his family in a world of limited options. The reader needs to be aware of that without being distracted from Caroline.

Abby was originally meant to be a secondary character, but as her story developed, I may need to rethink that position. She, like Caroline, will question her circumstances but in the opposite way: her internal desires move into the background, bringing a greater allegiance to her external circumstances. As the plot unfolds, Abby will hold the key to saving Caroline's child. To do so, however, she risks the welfare of the entire Physis Expanse population.

As with "physis," I researched the meanings of and names to add depth to the story. "Caroline," for example, is Latin for beautiful woman. Abby's last name is "Arglos," which means "innocent" in German. Flowers represent diversity in nature and each has their own metaphysical significance. Abby knows the meanings of the flowers she grows, because that is valued on the Expanse. On the Municipality, flowers are not grown so much as manufactured. Real life is multi-dimensional and is rarely, if ever, black and white. The dystopian stories most influential are complicated, which helps make them eternal.

Pitting the liberties of the individual against the welfare of the state has been a conversation in philosophical, theological and sociological studies since ancient times. I doubt that my work is anywhere near the great dystopian writers, but I do believe Self-Evident Truths is a good start. The story, characters and setting are all there: my own purpose is to bring them to fruition. As a creative expression and sociological tool,

dystopian fiction can influence members of society to be aware of their choices. Life, after all, is simply a series of choices.

CHAPTER II
EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL: SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

CHAPTER 1

Caroline liked to think of herself as the ideal Citizen.

After receiving exemplary grades throughout her schooling, she worked as a Nutrition Steward in a local restaurant. Following the Weight Management Board's Nutrition Recommendations, it was always busy. Citizens enjoyed the orange and silver décor, the booths were lined with an Eco-Friendly Plastic covering that cushioned one's body while eating.

Caroline reveled in knowing she contributed to her fellow Citizens' healthy lifestyle. A healthy body means a healthy mind: that was their motto, reinforcing the government's slogan, and one that she always followed. She firmly believed that even if the WMB didn't enforce the Nutritional Recommendations, she would nonetheless follow them. Working at the restaurant, however, she learned there were some who went their own way. One in particular always stayed in her mind.

An overweight man came in on a weekday afternoon and sat in her section. When Caroline saw him, she gasped. She'd never before been that close to one, and it took a

few minutes for her consternation to give way to judgment. Patting down her waist-high white apron against her slender thighs, she approached him, reminding herself that

Overweight Citizens were under special watch by the WMB which meant their limited options should make her job fairly straightforward.

“Hello, my name is Caroline. May I scan your wrist please?” She looked down at his chubby wrist, the location of his implanted Health Code.

"Never mind the Health Code, I know what I want to eat," he replied as if she'd asked him the same questions fifty times.

"I'm sorry, Citizen, but we have to scan your Code to find out what you can eat."

"I don't care about the Health Code." He looked down at the table, and his voice lowered. "I don't have much longer to live, so it doesn't matter."

Because it was a restaurant rule, she would have to get a Manager's approval. Walking back to where he was standing, she tried to contain her annoyance.

“There’s a patron who refuses to let me scan his Health Code,” she said.

“Really? Does he seem abnormal? Behavior-wise?”

“I think refusing to let me scan him qualifies as abnormal.”

He scratched his chin. “Not necessarily. I’m not always happy to have mine scanned.” His disposition was always sunny, and he didn’t waver now.

“Why not?”

After a what seemed to her like an unnecessary pause he said “Well, Caroline, having certain ailments can be a little disconcerting.”

“But it’s the rule,” she said. Why wouldn’t someone follow the rules? Nothing good comes from disobeying. “Proper nutrition is important.” Under her breath she added “there shouldn’t be much to treat if one has followed directions.”

He looked at her in a way that made her feel like a child, as if she didn’t know something that was obvious to him. Surely he, young and intelligent, couldn’t have something that caused him shame. His body didn’t show any signs of unhealthiness: he was about six feet tall with a slender build. One time, she’d even noticed his flexing arm muscles.

Putting his hand gently on her arm, he said “Let’s go over to him and see what’s up, shall we?”

The two walked over, Caroline leading the way. The man was still staring down, and the digital menu embedded into the table was turned on, waiting for input.

"Good afternoon, sir, I am the Manager," he said. "I don’t mean to cause you any distress, but we’re required to scan your Health Code. Any ailments will, of course, register in our system allowing us to provide you with the correct nutrition for your situation."

The man sat and without looking up, raised his right hand. Chubby, sausage-like fingers protruded from his large hand, both ironically, immaculately clean. With ease, Caroline removed the small scanner from her apron pocket and positioned it on the outer portion of his wrist. When the yellowish light radiated from his wrist, she could see the outline of the implanted chip. One push of the button, and the scan was complete. Immediately, the man's health history and needs appeared on her screen, and the menu screen showed all available options. Caroline’s eyebrows furled as she saw he was given

free reign. The Manager reacted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He simply said "Thank you, sir. It will be a pleasure to serve you." He nodded at Caroline and walked away.

She looked at her scan and understood: he was no longer required to comply with the nutritional standards. This meant only one thing—no amount of nutrition could save him.

Composing herself as best she could, Caroline said "What would you like to eat?"

"I'll take the marbled steak with extra salt, crispy potatoes, extra oil and a side of the modified vitamin sprouts." When he said the word "extra," he looked at her for emphasis.

"You're not required to eat the sprouts—"

"I know. I like how they taste." Each word spoken in an even staccato rhythm.

After taking his order, she walked back into the kitchen and saw her manager reviewing the quality of food preparation. She looked away when he saw her.

"Are you ok, Caroline?" he asked. "These situations can be a little distressing, I know."

"I'm fine," she said with a smile. And she was. If someone wasn't willing to follow simple directions, then they had to accept the consequences. She could not comprehend why someone would choose to endure pain and suffering when the solution was handed to them at birth. Nearly all preventable diseases were eradicated by the Health and Wellness Committee of the Central Government Command Center. Diet and exercise, along with the Committee's vaccinations ensured a Citizen's productive existence. A productive existence ensured success.

While she sanitized her hands for handing the food, she could feel her manager looking at her. What more did he expect her to say on the subject?

“You know that man’s going to die prematurely, right? You read his scan,” he said.

“Yes, I do. I also know that he obviously didn’t take care of himself as directed. He allowed himself to get overweight and so developed heart disease. She shrugged her shoulders.

After a moment of silence, she took a deep breath and let it out, stopping all motion. She turned to face her manager and saw his expression. She didn’t mean to sound so harsh, she was angry, frustrated that someone would deliberately hurt themselves. And she wasn’t used to being involved.

“I’m not trying to be insensitive. I just have a difficult time feeling bad for people who prefer to live in the problem when the solution is right there.”

“I understand that perspective, Caroline,” he said. His jovial face started to return. “I just think some people—for whatever reason—are unable to adhere to the directives.”

He returned to his task and, before, she returned to hers, she added “We all have choices.”

She never saw that man again, and she never forgot him. Over the years, when she’d think back on the encounter, she’d struggle to turn her frustration into compassion. Mostly she succumbed to the idea that all she could do was take care of herself.

CHAPTER 2

One early evening, after working the afternoon shift, Caroline stood on the board platform, waiting for the next train of Pods to arrive. It was chilly outside, and, though not usually one to lament, she found herself wishing she had a Personal Vehicular Unit. She knew that only a certain number of Qualified Vehicle Privilege Passes were distributed each year throughout the city and that the criteria for receiving one were complex. It didn't matter anyway, because she couldn't afford a private vehicle. Still it would be nice not to wait outside.

The SkyPods did impress her, so she focused on marveling at the metal tracks from which they hung. To think that magnets were strong enough to hold each egg-shaped Pod, ten people full. The Transportation Progress Board certainly knows what they're doing, she thought as she shivered slightly.

Despite the attempt at distraction, she couldn't help but lament the weather change. Soon it would be winter. Keeping her gloved hands against her skirt to prevent it from flying up, Caroline turned around to the left and then to the right to see if there was an open bench. Thanks to shift changes, she didn't see one.

"You can sit here," a female voice said.

When she turned in its direction, she saw a vacant spot next to a young woman. Thankful, Caroline walked towards her, noticing her appearance with every step. She was about the same age as Caroline, because her head was covered with a light hat, she couldn't see her hair but judging by the escaped wisps blowing in the breeze, it was fairly long.

"Thank you," she said as she sat down. A man next to her shifted to make room.

"You're welcome," replied the stranger. Now that they were closer, Caroline saw her auburn hair, hazel eyes and pale complexion. She wore no makeup and readily smiled.

"The wind is strong today," Caroline said.

"Yes it is. Luckily I have a warm coat."

"It looks different than anything I've seen. What's it made of?" Caroline didn't know why she felt compelled to start a conversation. After all, she wasn't the type to chit chat with someone randomly.

"It's down," the stranger replied and patted it as though it was a precious possession.

"Down? Is that a type of ThermoFabric?"

"No, down means it's made out of feathers." The stranger smiled in a way that intimidated shyness. "From geese."

Caroline stared in disbelief.

"I'm a Natural" The stranger held out her hand. "My name is Abby."

Caroline shook her hand. A Natural. She'd never met one before, which wasn't surprising given they lived on the other side of the country. All she knew was that Naturals lived on the Physis Expanse, which was east of her own area, the Municipality. Remembering her only other encounter, she thought about her childhood. It had been twenty years ago.

She saw the fear in the tormented eyes of the Natural Children, as a few Citizen Children she knew hurled insults. They yelled "bacteria bitches" and "country bumpkins" which brought them uncontrollable laughter. What's a bumpkin? She wanted to ask but self-preservation kept her silent. Part of her wanted to make her friends stop, while the other part wanted to join in what must be fun. She did neither, and instead opted to silently watch the one-sided battle. When she wondered why the Natural Children didn't fight back, she presumed they didn't have the mental or physical ability to do so.

When she asked her parents about the incident, she was told to focus on her studies and refrain from unnecessary inquiries. She never saw one again, until she did.

"And your name?" Abby jarred her from her memory.

"Caroline. My name is Caroline." She looked past her companion and added "I wonder where the Pod is."

The two sat in silence until they boarded their respective Pods.

About a month passed before Caroline saw her again. Like before, she spotted Abby sitting on the bench waiting for the Pod. Caroline was uneasy: should she acknowledge her or pretend not to see her?

After their first meeting, Caroline had looked up information about the Physis Expanse. In doing so, it seemed odd that she remained so ignorant about the other half her country. The Public Information Database gave a concise description:

THE EASTERN PART OF THE FORMER UNITED STATES CONSTITUTES THE MUNICIPALITY, WHILE THE WESTERN PORTION MAKES UP THE PHYSIS EXPANSE. THE PACT OF 2100 GAVE EACH GROUP OF PEOPLE THEIR OWN HALF OF THE LAND WHILE MAINTAINING A SINGLE COUNTRY, SO AS NOT TO LOSE STANDING IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY. THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT COMMAND CENTER GOVERNS THE MUNICIPALITY WHILE THE EXPANSE HAS ITS OWN GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM.

As Caroline approached, she saw that the choice was hers: the seat next to her was open, but Abby was looking the other way. She felt compelled to know her. Was that ok?

“Hi Abby, may I sit here?” The cold air retarded her speech, and she wondered if she was slurring.

Abby turned and smiled “Of course, Caroline. Please, join me. I hear the Pod is running late, they just made an announcement.”

“Thank you.” Caroline fit easily into the opening and sensed Abby was happy to see her. “How late?”

“About 10 minutes.”

Caroline groaned, as ten minutes in this weather felt like an eternity. Abby nodded in agreement. Her hair was down, though still covered by a hat. There was

something about her that felt familiar, comforting. She wanted to spend more time with her.

“Where are you going?” Caroline hoped that didn’t sound as forced as it had in her head.

Abby smiled. “I go down to the Central City, just to walk around.” When she saw the look on Caroline’s face, she said “I love my way of life, but sometimes I like to know that there’s something else out there, ya know?”

“No, I don’t.” And she didn’t.

“That’s ok,” she said and put her hand on Caroline’s knee. “Everyone is different.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” Where that came from, she did not know.

“I would love it!”

The enthusiasm in Abby’s voice assured Caroline.

On the Pod, Caroline asked Abby questions about her part of the country. She had no idea that the Physis Expanse had systems for healthcare, criminal activity and such, it fascinated her. They arrived at Center City and entered the Climate Controlled Passageway, the clear, aboveground, caterpillar-like structure. Caroline could see the awe on Abby’s face at such a monstrous yet nonobstructive structure. They walked for about twenty minutes when Abby stopped to look at the Local Government Command Center.

“The only thing about the Municipality that I can’t get past is the lack of color,” Abby reflected.

“Lack of color?”

“Yes. In the Physis Expanse, we have flowers growing wild. They add warmth and energy.”

“We have flowers,” Caroline said.

Abby looked sad. “Yes, but they are placed purposefully. For instance, look there.” She pointed to the doorway. “The entrance to the most important building in the town is anything but inviting. No shrubbery or plants adorn its sides. Wouldn’t it be nice to see some color?” She paused. “Alliums would be perfect.”

Caroline tilted her head as she surveyed the entrance.

“Alliums signify strength. They’re a beautiful purple flower. Or perhaps amaryllis. Yes, they might be more appropriate as they stand for pride and beauty.”

She looked at her new friend who was obviously thinking deeply about this. “How do you know so much about flowers?”

Abby looked at Caroline. Her cheeks were rosy from the walking. “It’s what I do. I grow and sell them, my family’s been in the flower business for generations.”

“We have florists, although they’re very expensive. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever purchased flowers.”

“That’s a shame, I can’t imagine life without them.”

The women stood in contemplation until Caroline said “I think I’d like a cup of coffee. It’s about time for my Regulated Energy Boost.” She looked at the digital clock on the building which confirmed it. “Would you like to join me?”

She noticed a change in Abby’s demeanor, she seemed somber, while Caroline felt energized. Perhaps the air here is so different than what she’s used to, Caroline thought.

“No, thank you, though. I don’t drink the Municipality water.” Abby’s nose scrunched up. “I don’t mean any disrespect, but there are many ingredients, shall we call them, added to your water.”

“I know—they promote good health. Did you know that most diseases are preventable?”

“I’ve heard that before. Some of the ingredients harm plants, however, namely flowers.” She started to walk, and Caroline followed.

“How so?” Caroline didn’t understand why would they put something in the water that caused harm? Perhaps the flowers here are just different. They existed: she could order flowers with her groceries, so it couldn’t be that bad. She decided to keep this to herself, she didn’t want to risk starting an argument.

“It’s a complicated process, but to sum it up, the brightest and most fragrant flowers come from free water.”

“Free water?”

“Yes, water free from artificial ingredients. Luckily the Hydro Regulation Act of 2089, declared that water sent to the Physis Expanse must be filtered. It’s one of the few, yet most important, examples of large technologically based machinery on our side of the border.”

“I didn’t know that,” Caroline said. “I only knew we—the Municipality supplied the Expanse with most of your water.” She knew any further questions would sound confrontational and reveal her rejection of their systems.

“*Some* of our water, yes.”

Over Abby's shoulder, Caroline noticed a head crawling with chestnut brown curls. It was attached to a man who was looking directly at her. Quickly she looked away, feeling herself blush.

"Thank you, Caroline, for walking with me today. I've enjoyed it."

"Me, too."

"Speaking of water, I must be heading home." She leaned closer as if telling a secret. "I make dinner for my family."

Make dinner? Caroline did not understand why she would make dinner when the Weight Management Board provided meals...

"Enjoy your coffee," Abby said as she waved good-bye.

Although notions of fate weren't a part of her culture, Caroline intrinsically knew that her meeting Abby was meant to be. She continued her walk, stopping for coffee before heading home.

CHAPTER 3

Two days later, Caroline completed her morning shift and decided to stay and eat lunch. She sat at one of the window booths, facing the entranceway. While waiting for her food, she glanced up when something caught her eye: chestnut brown curls. The hostess stand blocked most of her view, so she leaned to the left trying to see better. It didn't really work, and she almost fell out of her booth. Composing herself, she looked around to make sure no one was watching her. Everyone seemed to be minding their own business. A few moments later, the curls moved past the stand and into the main floor and revealed the man to which they were attached.

It was definitely the same man she saw during her walk with Abby. This was the first time she was able to see all of him: his medium-build body was as healthy as she'd ever seen joined by a face that could disarm even the most stubborn of Citizens. The curls were a bit unruly by conventional standards, but she liked them that way. More than anything Caroline wanted to wrap a curl around her finger—

“More tea, Caroline?” Caroline jumped at the voice, she hadn't noticed her Nutrition Steward standing at her booth.

“What? Oh yes, thank you.” She moved her cup to the edge making it easier for her to pour the liquid.

She smiled. “He’s healthy looking, isn’t he?”

“Yes, yes he is.” Caroline didn’t bother to mask her appreciation.

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

“Maybe I will.”

Working in a restaurant taught her that looks can be deceiving: just because someone looked healthy didn’t mean they were. Caroline had dated a few men throughout the years but none of them proved worthy of lifelong partnership. Tired of looking back and wishing she’d paid more attention in the beginning of the relationship to red flags, she decided to wait and see what he ordered. Once she saw what he was served, she knew she had to approach him. Still in her uniform, she smoothed out her skirt and wrapped stray hairs behind her ears. She took a deep breath and walked as confidently as she knew how to do.

“Hello, may I sit with you?”

He looked up, fork in hand as he was in mid-bite and smiled. “Please. I’d be delighted.”

She slid into the seat opposite him and said “Thank you. I hope I’m not disturbing you—”

“If this is a disturbance, I’ll gladly play along.” His hand hadn’t moved, it just hung in front of him, stilled by her arrival.

His smile was captivating and his eyes welcoming. Caroline was used to men looking at her, expected it even. She was as healthy as she could be, thanks to following the government's structure. Nevertheless, she felt herself blush.

"It's just that I noticed you ordered the Antioxidant Medley. That's not something we see often here, since the Board doesn't include it in their recommendations."

"We?"

"I work here." She pointed to her uniform, he nodded and put his fork down.

"As I was saying, while the dish complies with guidelines, it's not required, of course, because cancer is cured easily so most people don't see its benefits. But you ordered it."

"I think most people don't like the taste. No offense, Caroline."

How did he know my name?

"Your name tag," he explained, and she chuckled, embarrassed at her initial surprise.

She glanced up and saw two of her coworkers whispering and looking in her direction. They stood about ten feet away, leaning against the utensils station. The large silver stand was essentially a metal box with three grapefruit-sized holes in it. A Steward could request a utensil set by pushing a button and retrieved it from an orange hole. In the middle of their gossiping, one must have pushed the button by accident, because a set flew out of the hole. Giggling, they picked up the set. In order to prevent her own laughter, Caroline tried to contain her smile and looked back at her companion, hoping not to appear childish.

“I mean no offense to the chef, and, in fact, I love it. But I’m not the average Citizen who prefers simply to maintain a healthy weight. There’s more to proper care than weight.” He took a sip of his water and barely swallowed before continuing. “Just because one adheres to the Regulations does not mean one is doing all he or she can.”

She was hooked.

“And furthermore, just because we can restore cancer cells to their normalcy via technology doesn’t mean we should not continue to prevent their occurrence in the first place.”

“I agree.”

“Well, so does the Progress Promotion Board. We’re working closely with the Health and Wellness Committee to produce a monitoring device that, when uploaded to the Health Code, will measure the likelihood that cancer cells are forming in one’s body. That information will then appear on your scanners, and more people will be ordering the Antioxidant Medley.” His expression was that of someone who just did her a favor.

“Good for business.”

“Wow. When is that happening...” She’d been wondering what his name was and thought this was her in to find out.

“Brady. Brady Corneille, Agent of the PPB.”

“Brady. When is this new advancement arriving?”

He looked at his watch. “Notices are going out as we speak. The uploads begin tonight at zero hour.”

“That’s incredible. I hadn’t heard anything about this until now,” she said.

“You didn’t need to know until now,” he said flirtatiously.

“I’ll be sure to tell the chef. He’ll be pleased.”

“See, Caroline. Everyone wins with technology.”

“And everyone is content with structure,” she added.

He was hooked. She could tell by the way he paid attention to her. He also hadn’t touched his food since her arrival.

She fell in love in that first conversation, and later, he had admitted, so had he. They had dinner that same evening and remained together from then on. They dated for about a year, and she said yes when he proposed marriage.

CHAPTER 4

Their first child was born a year into their marriage. Timing worked out well, as their son was commissioned by the Population Authority Board thanks to a recent drop in white-skinned children. Prior to marriage, Caroline didn't know the PAB's function, but she learned it ensures racial, ethnic and sexually oriented diversity by issuing permits to the appropriate child-seeking couples. It would be another nine years before they were granted another permit—and a baby girl.

“Tom! Come downstairs, honey.” Caroline hated yelling, but she couldn't feed one-year-old Hannah in the kitchen and get her ten-year-old to dress faster. “It's time to go to school.”

“Be down in a minute, mom,” he yelled back.

She loved her kitchen, she loved her Dwelling. Designed by the Efficient Dwelling Board, it retained the standard layout: three bedrooms and a full bath upstairs, office, kitchen opening into the living room downstairs. Brady gave Caroline free reign on the decorating, and she'd chosen pale spring-like colors, mostly shades of yellow and green. Her kitchen was her favorite. First, she loved the efficiency inherent in its design,

everything was close enough to save time yet spaced far enough away so she didn't feel cramped. The yellow she chose reminded her of the daffodils she saw in the stores in May. She most appreciated the soothing tone in the mornings when the family rushed around to start their day.

“One more bite, my sweet girl,” she said, turning her attention back to the blonde-curly-haired task in front of her. Hannah readily accepted her final bite only to spit it out on the already food-filled tray of her Child Feeding Chair. Caroline had to admit that Hannah's meal smelled less than appealing: it was puréed carrots with vitamins and spices but smelled like antibacterial agents. The Government required it, however, so she did her best to entice her little one. Once she made the mistake of eating it, hoping to show Hannah how good it was, but her own uncontrolled reaction did more harm than good. Caroline managed to swallow it but not without great effort. From that point on, she stuck to oohs and aaahs for persuasion.

“You're just like your brother, you know that? Oh how he hated to eat.” I would be, too, if I had to eat this food, she thought to herself.

“What about me?” Tom's voice boomed against the hard walls and white metal cabinetry of the kitchen.

“Speak of the devil. Are you all ready for school?”

“I think so,” he said as he gave his sister a kiss on the cheek.

“Did you get everything downloaded all right?” Caroline knew this question could start a confrontation, but it had to be asked.

“Yes,” Tom said without looking in her direction. Instead he pulled out his Regulated First Meal and inserted it into the Microwave Oven for cooking. A friendly

female voice came from the machine after five seconds, letting Tom know his food was done. He took it out and sat at the table across from Caroline, eating as if no one else was in the room.

“Let me see.”

“Mom—”

“Let me see. It’s not that I don’t trust you, I don’t trust the eReader.” This wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie. His eReader had been giving him trouble the last couple of days. Wishing he wouldn’t eat with his hands, she decided against correcting him. One confrontation was enough in the morning.

Yesterday, Caroline received an alert an hour after he went off to school. His eReader conveniently stopped downloading before his Spatial Mathematics homework could fully load. She wanted to avoid another alert.

“Everything looks good,” she said handing the pocket-sized device back to him.

“Told you,” he said with a bit of attitude.

“Told you what?” Brady entered the kitchen and kissed his wife and daughter before heading to the Coffee Dispensing Computer.

“That my eReader was up to date,” Tom said, as if wishing someone a good day.

As she looked at her son speaking to her husband, she couldn’t help but acknowledge the resemblance. He could be magnanimous and charming one minute yet obstinate and rebellious another. She trusted his learning of the Obligatory Morals Board’s guidelines for Citizens, however, not to mention her own parenting skills. He would turn out just fine, just like his father.

CHAPTER 5

It was late, and Brady still wasn't home. Caroline managed to get the kids to sleep and shut down the Dwelling for the evening. Most nights he was able to join them for dinner at least but for the past six months, thanks to a new project, she spent many nights alone. She sat in her living room, eReader on her lap. She'd just finished a novel that was less than thrilling. The computers were in Night Mode, and the only sound was the soft purring of the Salmonella Detector on the turtle cage. When Tom first told her he was required to have a pet, Caroline bristled at the thought of caring for it. With Brady gone, however, she came to appreciate its companionship.

It's not that she didn't appreciate his Career. On the contrary, his position as an Officer of the Progress Promotion Board supported their family well. Caroline loved being a part of the Intermediate Grade on the Central Government's Family Economic Ranking scale. They had enough income to support themselves but not enough to enter the Distinguished Grade, which required greater contributions to the Fiscal Assistance of Society.

She found herself thinking about his Career, as a way of reconciling the loneliness she felt. Income aside, she truly admired the nobility of the PPB and its mission to aid

Citizens in embracing new technologies. Caroline knew first hand that change was difficult to grasp. She often chided Brady that as soon as she was used to things one way, the PPB told her a new way was better. She had told him she learned this at an early age.

Until she was ten years old, her mother washed the family's clothing in their Personal Decontamination Unit. She was skilled at working within their water regulations which saved enough water in case Caroline needed something in particular washed in the middle of the week. One day, an agent from the Hygiene Board came and removed the Personal Unit from their home, instructing them to gather one load each to be taken away by the Hygiene Board's Clothing Decontamination Service. The very next week, and every Tuesday following, a large hovering vehicle waited outside their home as her mother brought out three Contaminated Clothing Receptacles, one each per person. She received, in exchange, three Approved Sterilized Clothing Receptacles. The Board counted each item to ensure the same size and weight of each week's load. Unfortunately for Caroline, her favorite shirt ended up in the initial load with the matching skirt going in the second one. She never again wore them together. At first, this new way frustrated them all. If they'd been given notice or time to adjust, it might have been easier. The PPB only said this way is better. In truth, aside from the occasional separated outfit, Caroline saw that the PPB was right: her mother had more time for other household chores, and it enforced limitations eventually relieving Caroline of the burden of clothing choice. Whatever items came back clean were the ones she wore that week. Life became simpler.

In the end, it always does. The less control they had as individuals, the more content they became.

One of the reasons she had fallen in love with Brady was her admiration for his dedication to his job: his job of making the lives of Citizens better. Still, she missed him. What good is technological progress if your husband, and the father of your children, isn't home?

Business was slow. Advances come in cycles, and they were in a down point. The good news was that this meant life in the Municipality was running efficiently. The bad news was that the Central Government pushed for more. This was Brady's explanation to Caroline as she complained about him spending late nights at work. Caroline ran through this morning's argument while she disinfected the silvery kitchen countertops. It had gone the same way it always had.

"I won't be home until late," he said while looking in the Reflective Object.

Caroline was in the middle of putting the cream and beige-colored comforter on the bed, she stopped and stared at her husband in frustration. She had just enough time to tidy the room before getting Hannah up. She could hear her stir in the Citizen Child Electronic Monitor and figured a cry was on its way.

"Brady, I was hoping we could eat dinner tonight as a family. We haven't done that in weeks, months, even."

“We’re discussing the plan to move in on the Physis Expanse tomorrow. I have to be prepared.” Caroline could see he didn’t care about dinner: he didn’t even stop to address her. She just stood there, until he had no choice but to stop.

“Caroline,” Brady said. “You know how important this project is—”

“Know? It’s all I hear about.” She mimicked him: “You’re going to bring technological advancement to the Physis Expanse.”

Each stood on one side of the bed, in what is usually the most serene room in the Dwelling. Caroline had the room painted Sapphire Blue, an optimistic color that welcomed the sunshine streaming in through its only window. This morning, however, despite the sunshine, nothing felt bright.

“I’m sorry, honey, I am. Once this is complete, I’ll—we’ll have more time. I promise.” He came to her side, kissed her on the cheek and went downstairs. The light on the Monitor turned red which meant Hannah was crying. Caroline looked at the bed, dropped the comforter, she was too angry to finish, and went to get her daughter.

The kitchen smelled like food, so she activated the Odor Cleansing System. With all their technology, she wondered why the system couldn’t stay on by itself. As she continued wiping down the steel-like surfaces, her mind would not let Brady’s work go. She admitted to herself that she felt uneasy about the PPB taking Municipal advances into the Expanse. When he first mentioned the project, Brady displayed such excitement that she didn’t pay much attention to the details. After a few years, though, it was old. She reassured herself that Brady was doing his best to support his family and make life better for all Citizens. She didn’t fully understand exactly what the PPB was doing, and

normally she wouldn't care beyond basic curiosity. Maybe it was the late nights that had her all mixed up about it. She didn't know. Rather than drive herself crazy, she finished the government required cleaning and went to the Kitchen Module to confirm that she'd thoroughly disinfected the kitchen. It was embedded into the wall near the room's entrance. She paused before it, inspecting the system, the system she'd never questioned. Was she questioning it now? No, she thought, she was taking care of her family.

Since getting married, Caroline stayed home with the children. Brady brought home the income, and Caroline enjoyed the opportunity to make sure all was properly taken care of at home. Today was grocery day, which gave her something to concentrate on. After she confirmed the cleaning regiment, she pushed the button which brought the Module out from the wall, its robotic arm moved smoothly so that it was waist-high. Pulling a chair over from the table, she sat in front of the screen and started working on her order.

She loved that groceries were delivered to the Dwelling as she couldn't imagine taking her one-year-old to a store nor could she imagine having to figure out what the family needed. With two children and a husband, it seemed impossible. Making sure Tom entered something into the Kitchen Module when he used it was challenging enough.

We need more antibacterial soap, she thought. Done. Now to enter the payment information. The computer flashed a warning, reminding her to update the account, which means she needed the Secret Code. Where is the new Secret Code? She sat still while her mind figured out its location. Brady's office: the Secret Code was sent to his Personal Records Device, and he always kept it in his office where it would remain safe.

Caroline stood up and stretched out her back. According to the clock on the wall,

she'd spent twenty minutes entering in the grocery order. It also meant she had about ten minutes before Hannah would wake up and need to be changed and fed.

Brady's office was in the front of the Dwelling, and she rarely went into it. She had no need for an office of her own and viewed the rest of the space hers. Even more so since he hasn't been home. She sighed. Somehow she needed to find a way to accept the situation and move on.

The door to Brady's office was closed, as always, and, because of his job, could only be opened by handprint analysis. She put her hand against the translucent black monitor and waited for recognition. It was cold. While waiting, she noticed a mark on the lower portion of the wall, from Tom no doubt. With Brady's promised extra income, they could get it fixed. There's a benefit, she guessed. The door slid into the wall, and she walked inside.

His office was like the Dwelling command center, not only in operation but also in appearance. Caroline squinted as she walked in, the Automatic Lighting Units bouncing their radiant lumina against the only pure white walls in the entire Dwelling. She had suggested a nice shade of green, sage, if she remembered correctly, to offset the lighting, but he refused. Considering he hadn't scoffed at any other decorating choices she made, she'd decided to simply follow his wishes. It's not like we go in here, anyway, except on occasions like this. Besides, there's only so much I can do when all Regulated Furnishings only came in three styles: silver, brass and translucent.

She knew he kept the Device in a locked drawer and found it with ease. She entered the alphanumeric code into the front keypad of the drawer. It opened. As she pulled out the device, her eyes wandered to the Digital Tablet lying on the translucent

desktop. It was the summary of Brady's proposal regarding the Physis Expanse. Across the top it read

PROGRESS PROMOTION BOARD

WATER STRIPPING DEVICE

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Water stripping device? She read further and discovered that the technology Brady developed removed various additives from water. Why would we need this?

"Are you finding everything ok?"

Caroline jumped.

"Sorry, dear. I didn't mean to scare you." Brady came closer and kissed her cheek. "What are you looking for?"

"The Secret Code." She felt like a child caught doing something wrong, even though, she knew her motives weren't sinister. "I found it." She held up the device as proof. "But then this caught my attention," she said pointing to the Tablet.

Without looking at it, he said "Yes, that's the documentation for the project I've been working on, the one keeping me away from you." His voice wavered at the end of the sentence, into an apologetic tone.

"Do they need this?"

"They will. Once the water change happens." He started towards the door.

"What's for dinner?"

Caroline followed, taking a step forward then back, nearly forgetting to take the Device with her. She had to rush to catch up with him. "What water change?"

They continued towards the kitchen, with Brady talking as they moved. “The Board’s ready to add a new agent into the water supply, an agent that will prevent something in cats. I’m not sure exactly what it does, but the Physis Hydro *Purification* system isn’t designed to catch it.” His pronunciation of the word purification mirrored the sarcasm most Citizens used when discussing the way of life in the Expanse.

Entering the kitchen, Caroline cherished the muted décor. No more harsh lighting or sterile walls, it’s amazing what a little color on the walls will do for silver appliances.

Brady continued, “We’ve designed a device to strip it out. The key is the personal use aspect: each individual must install the device onto water sources, faucets, and the like. The potential economic benefits are huge, for us I mean.”

“Why don’t they change their water system to catch it?”

“They won’t be able to. In order to catch something, you have to know what it is. We’re not about to give them that information.”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

He shrugged. “Right? Wrong? It’s all debatable.” Taking a handful of nuts from the container in the cupboard, he shoved them in his mouth, ignoring the fact that he had more to say. “Besides, this kind of stuff’s been happening since the two split. Don’t think it doesn’t go the other way either.”

“Honey, if you eat any more nuts, I’ll have to adjust your dinner.” She frowned at the thought, because of the lengthy explanations required in the system. “I always thought the two respected the aims of the other.” Caroline didn’t mean to sound naïve but didn’t know how to ask the question any other way.

“Respect is a public relations concept. We can’t encourage ordinary Citizens to be unfair, that would make them uncontrollable, chaotic even. But when we maintain some sense of order, via the Boards, the Municipality reaps the spoils.”

It was obvious to Caroline that Brady didn’t have a problem with what he just said, and while not one to question Municipality policy, even if doing so could affect change, she found this news disconcerting. Her stomach a little queasy, as if she was about to get onto a roller coaster.

Tom walked in, refocusing Caroline’s attention on her evening routine begun. She was already slightly behind schedule and had to endure Tom’s whining about hunger. Shelving her concern about Brady’s project, she proceeded to heat the appropriate meal packs.

CHAPTER 6

Later that evening, Caroline sat alone—again—in the living room, and thought about Abby. She hadn't thought of the Natural for years. She remembered Abby's comments on the flowers and free water. She wondered how Brady's project would affect them. In order to ask Brady, she'd have to reveal her encounter. While she didn't necessarily condone their way of life, she never felt the aggression that her husband did towards it. It didn't seem worth another confrontation. Should she warn Abby? Why would she do that? How would she do that? She told herself she was being silly: it was one encounter, one conversation. Feeling sympathy for her was ok but anything beyond that wasn't appropriate. Then why won't this gut reaction to protect go away...

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Caroline wasn't feeling well, her stomach was nauseous. After throwing up for about half an hour, she sat with her head and arms cradling the cold Citizen Waste Disposal Unit. Her head ached like she'd spent the morning banging it against the wall. She could feel her stomach muscles ache from the heaving which overtook her hunger only slightly. She'd woken up and gone into the bathroom immediately.

"Mom? Are you ok? Tom woke up to the sound of her puking.

"Get your father," was all she could muster, not sure if he even heard her.

"He left already. Can I come in?"

"No, I'll be downstairs in a minute." She tried to pull herself up but a weight kept her down. Through her physical pain, she registered that there was no one to help her. Somehow, she had to get up and get Tom ready for school. Slowly she looked at the door. It seemed light years away. She could tell that her son was waiting on the other side, because she didn't hear his footsteps leaving, she always heard Tom coming thanks to his heavy stride.

"Mom?"

“Yes, Tom.” She was halfway there, crawling on the smooth hard floor.

“Hannah’s crying.”

Great, she thought. Keep going, Caroline, you can do this. You’ve been through this before. She stopped mid-crawl: she had been through this before, twice before. Both times, she was pregnant. “Impossible,” she said out loud.

“What?” Tom was still there.

She managed to stand up. Scared to look in the Reflective Object, she just opened the door. The look on Tom’s face mirrored how she felt.

“I’m just not feeling well, honey. But I’ll be ok.” She smiled, knowing he could tell it was forced.

Somehow she managed to get Tom off to school. After feeding Hannah, which was no small task, she put sat her down in the living room in front of the Electronic Entertainment System. She giggled watching the dancing colors on the screen. As Caroline watched her, she wondered how this beautiful child could be the same terror who, just a few minutes before, fought each fork full of food. Now that the escapade was over, Caroline felt a twinge of guilt for elevating her voice to Hannah more than once trying to feed her.

Her body ached, and her head calmed down but still rattled. At least I don’t feel like puking, she thought. Her throat still burned from the influx of acid.

She knew her next steps to verify her suspicion. Trudging to the bathroom, she peed into the Medical Analysis Machine hooked to the side of the Disposal Unit. The machine was convenient but unpleasant. She peed in the cup at the tip of a tube and watched as the dark yellow liquid flowed into the wall. Dark yellow wasn’t a good sign.

Returning to the Bedroom, she contacted the Medical Oversight Board via the Bedroom Module to let them know that she'd sent the sample.

Caroline sat on the unmade bed. Still in her Night Clothes, she scratched under her arm. Lifting it was like lifting a cement block. Her whole body was out of whack, unprepared for the sudden upheaval of her insides. Soon the Module would warn her about her missed meal, asking for an explanation. "As soon as I know, you'll know," she said out loud as if it could hear her. And just like that, her answer appeared on the screen.

UNAUTHORIZED PREGNANCY CONFIRMED

Unauthorized pregnancy. She stared at the screen, hoping she saw it wrong and knowing that she didn't. Never before had she imagined this happening, nothing like this ever happened before, she'd never...

An unauthorized pregnancy meant two things: one, that her birth control had failed and two, that she and Brady had a big decision to make. Cancellation immediately sprung to mind, and she cringed at the thought.

This was impossible. She was not allowed to just get pregnant. *All citizens had to apply for and be approved to receive a permit from the Population Authority Board, which ran under the Central Government Command Center. She could hear the training video now. The population of the Municipality was closely watched, as it should be. Past experiences showed how detrimental overpopulation can be to the welfare of the state: economic deficits, sociological regression and environmental damages can be prevented by simply balancing births and deaths. Fewer births made it possible to continually increase life spans without upsetting the structure.*

How could this happen? Caroline could feel her body getting warmer as the anger welled. She never wavered from her monthly birth control injection. She couldn't waver—the system made sure of it. They'd never even talked of a third child; they were fortunate to have been awarded two Procreation Permits, allowing them to request one boy and one girl.

In the middle of her internal rant, she remembered another option: they could apply for an emergency permit from the Population Authority Board. The problem was it was costly, not to mention a permanent embarrassment on their Health Codes.

Tears streamed down her face, the only outlet for her anger and embarrassment. So much for perfected birth control. What will Brady say?

What did Brady have to say? She was the one who took care of the family. The list of daily responsibilities started running through her mind, each one coming on the heels of the one before it. She shook her head so hard it rejuvenated her headache, physical pain being preferred over psychological torment.

The best option was to cancel the pregnancy, she decided. It was still early enough, and the Cell Cancellation Center would send the cells to the Genetics Liberation Board where they'd be put to good use. What exactly that use was, Caroline didn't know, but she was sure it would be good. Besides, she hardly had the energy or the time to take care of her two children, and Hannah would be walking soon. There, it was settled. Surely Brady would see it her way, that is, if he ever came home.

CHAPTER 8

This morning came too soon, Brady thought, as he rode the SkyPod to work. Normally he appreciated riding in the 10-person Pod alone, but today it amplified his loneliness. This is what it would be like inside of an egg, minus the goop. Resting his head backwards against the smooth shell, he settled in for his twenty minute ride. It was unusual for his mind to replay events, but then the events had been anything but usual.

He and his wife, Caroline, were standing in the kitchen, when she said two little words.

“I’m pregnant.”

It wasn’t supposed to happen, and, in all reality, it couldn’t continue. They hadn’t applied for a Procreation Permit.

“I don’t know how it happened,” she said. “I received my monthly injection.”

Brady was bewildered. The Population Authority Board perfected birth control decades ago, and there were strict penalties for conceiving a child without a permit.

“I don’t see any other option but,” he hesitated before saying “but to cancel it.”

Caroline fell into a chair, limp, head hanging.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“You’re right, honey. We have to cancel it.”

He moved close to her, reached down, lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. Never before had he seen such sad resignation.

The Pod slowed as it came into a Station. He looked at his iPhone for the time. Caroline would leave soon for her journey to the Cell Cancellation Center. He would have gone with her but needed to be at work, there was a meeting regarding his Hydro Project. The project he’d worked on for most of his Career, the project that determined his family’s Economic Stability, the project that required his full concentration.

He tried to focus his thoughts on the meeting: it was expected to be a fairly straight-forward presentation given to Public Information Agents, the group that would help educate Citizens. First, he would tell them things they probably already knew, but for the sake of thoroughness, background information couldn’t hurt. Of course they knew about the Division Pact, separating the United States into The Municipality and The Physis Expanse, and about The Mutual Commerce Relations Board who, among other things, oversaw the Hydro Exchange Program.

This part Brady would have to explain clearly, because not everyone understood the intricacies. Focus, focus, focus, he told himself. Sitting up, he reached into his bag and pulled out his Portable Multipurpose Tablet, typing his thoughts always helped him sort things out. He began to make some notes:

THE TWO DIVISIONS COLLABORATED TO BUILD THE PHYSIS HYDRO PURIFICATION SYSTEM. AS CITIZENS OF THE MUNICIPALITY KNEW, AGENTS IN THE WATER PREVENTED

COUNTLESS DISEASES AND HARMFUL AFFLICTIONS. THE NATURALS, ON THE OTHER HAND, PREFERRED CLEAN WATER (THEIR TERM). THE SYSTEM, THEREFORE, REGULATED WATER TRANSFERRING FROM ONE SIDE TO THE OTHER APPROPRIATELY: ADDING AGENTS TO THE MUNICIPALITY WATER AND REMOVING THEM FROM THE WATER GOING TO THE EXPANSE.

This was the part that excited Brady.

A NEW AGENT WAS TO BE DEPLOYED INTO THE MUNICIPALITY'S WATER SUPPLY. IT HAD BEEN DECADES SINCE A NEW AGENT WAS DEVELOPED, AND THE SYSTEM WASN'T SET UP TO REMOVE IT. AS THE AGENT WAS DEVELOPED, A REMOVAL MECHANISM WAS CREATED. THIS MECHANISM, HOWEVER, WOULD REQUIRE EACH INDIVIDUAL OUTLET FITTED. THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR THE MUNICIPALITY WAS IMMENSE, BUILT IN MARKET, NO CHOICE AND ONE SUPPLIER, THE PROGRESS PROMOTION BOARD. DOUBTLESS, NATURALS WILL BE UPSET, BUT THAT'S WHERE YOU GUYS COME IN.

That last part would no doubt wake up the PI Agents. Brady, however, wasn't feeling it. He looked at his iPhone just as the SkyPod pulled into his Station.

As he sat in his office, he found himself looking back on his life and the path he took. Two thoughts ran through Brady's head: one, my life changed the day I met Caroline, and two, nothing is more important than my family. The funny thing was, Brady had never thought of himself as a family man. He pulled his chair up to his desk, went to turn his Official Business Tablet on and get the day's work started, only he couldn't. He watched his screensaver scroll from left to right side of paper-thin computer screen. It was the Board's motto

PROGRESS IS GOOD FOR ALL, MINUS THE FEW.

He sat, staring, at the same desk he's sat at for nearly fifteen years. For the first time in all those years, he became aware that he was surrounded on all sides by gray, stiff foam cubicle walls. It's not that he didn't know this before, but it was as if his conscious just woke up. He looked up and saw the only opening, the doorway, which was nothing more than a moveable piece of gray foam. Even the ceiling was gray foam. Soundproof, Lightproof, Smellproof. Those were the marketing key words, and Brady had always appreciated their accurateness. Now, though, those attributes seemed more claustrophobic than protective. For as long as he can remember, Brady looked to the future, but this morning, he sat still and looked at the past.

Technology as the means of advancing society was stressed in his home. His father used to say "Men are only as good as their technical development allows them to be." He worked for the PPB when it was called the Administration for the Technological Advancement of Society. From an early age, Brady was encouraged to embrace electronics and computers. An only child, he received the best his family could manage. Of all his toys, his favorite was a virtual fish tank. Swimming back and forth, one iridescent cichlid captivated Brady for hours, its blue and purple scales sparkling through the digitized water, from one end of the tank to the other. He realized that most kids played video games or toyed with newly developed teleportation toys, but Brady remained entranced with his fish. He felt that if humans could recreate animals, there was no limit to the potential.

While he entered the Progress Promotion Board right after completing school, he had already received his first assignment before he graduated. He was twenty years old and in his last year of his Advanced Education Training. Like all Final Year Students, his

studies focused on Career Placement activities. Unlike most students, he had known for years what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be involved in creating new technologies, like his father before him. The PPB recruited aggressively and, thanks to his father's success at the agency, he was watched earlier than most.

His first assignment was, he later realized, more of a loyalty test than anything else. While its primary purpose was to advance society, not everyone was eager to accept the updates. According to the File Brady was given, the school's Principal Headmaster was apparently one such person. Brady followed his instructions and made an appointment to speak to the Headmaster first thing one Monday morning.

Brady stood in the doorway of the largest office he'd ever seen. He'd never before been in the Headmaster's office, there hadn't been a reason. No one entered the office unless something very bad happened, and, even then, the Principal Underling handled such matters. Brady only saw the Headmaster once but never forgot his face. His deep black skin sagged over a distinct bone structure, he was in his late 60s, maybe 70s, tall, maybe 5' 10", and a healthy slender build. No one knew his age, just that he was old.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Corneille," he said. The Headmaster sat behind a large glass desk, facing the door, at the far end of the office.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster. Thank you for seeing me." Brady was nervous but not scared.

"Of course. Please come in. The door will close behind you."

Brady couldn't help but enter the room as if impeded. The beige walls watched him enter, and the deep brown carpet felt his presence. The décor was minimal except for

one large flat screen on each wall that scrolled silently through pictures of campus, students and award ceremonies.

“Sit down, young man,” he said, never looking away from his computer monitor.

Brady obeyed and cleared his throat for no reason other than for something to do.

The Headmaster turned to face him. “What can I do for you?”

“You know—” Brady stopped, realizing his voice was an octave higher than normal. “You know my dad’s been working on the new Tablet Integration Project, yes?”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” he lied. The File told Brady he was in fact aware of his dad’s position.

“He is, sir. And because of his involvement, I’m interested, of course.”

The Headmaster smiled. “Of course.”

“I haven’t seen any in the classrooms, though. When can we expect them?” The File also told Brady at least half of the classrooms should be using them.

“Well, Mr. Corneille, I’m not sure you will.”

“Excuse me?”

“Not before you graduate, that is.”

“Why not?” Brady realized he’d shifted out of any kind of professional manner, but since this was his first professional experience, didn’t know how to regain it.

The Headmaster unfolded his hands and laid them palm-side down on the glass.

“Does your father know you’re here?”

“No. No, sir. I came on my own.” This was true. The File told him explicitly that no one should know about his assignment.

The Headmaster smiled, as much as his face would let him. Brady wondered if he was capable of a belly laugh.

“Mr. Corneille, I’m not quite sure how to tell you this.” He refolded his hands. “But the Tablet Project has been terminated. They were found to be faulty.”

Faulty? Brady felt his temperature rise in conjunction with his dismay and anger. His father had been working on this project for years, it was his baby, his pride and joy, the pinnacle of his life’s work.

The Headmaster saw Brady’s concern. “Now, I know how important this project is to your father—and, therefore, to you—but it’s vitally important that you keep this information to yourself.”

“Does my dad know?” Brady looked down at his lap.

“No, he does not. Not yet. By the time he finds out, he’ll be out of a Career.”

He looked up. “Out of a Career?”

“Surely you don’t expect the PPB has use for someone who spends years on a bad project,” he said. His manner was matter-of-fact.

Brady stammered, trying to find something to say, some way to control the situation, but all that came out was silent breaths of indignation. Must retain composure, you were taught better than this, your own Career is at stake here, he thought. After a deep breath, he went on.

“Thank you for the information, Mr. Headmaster. I assure you it will stay with me.” He stood up. “I apologize for wasting your time.”

“Not at all, Mr. Corneille. I’m always happy to assist a bright, young talent. Perhaps you’ll learn from your father’s folly.” He went back to his computer screen, signaling an end to the meeting.

Brady stood a longer than he should have, in reaction to the last comment about his “father’s folly.”

The Headmaster never addressed him again.

Brady left the office and walked through the school’s halls numbly. Yes, the highest ranking official in his Educational System gave him startling news about his father, the man Brady had idolized since birth. Yes, his father was going to lose his Career, his life’s work. Yes, his family would face tragic economic repercussions. No, he would not betray the trust of the PPB. Brady knew that for certain. He also knew he should feel guilty that he didn’t feel guilty about this allegiance, but he didn’t.

Later that evening, Brady was at his bedroom desk, entering his report into the online PPB system when there was a knock at his door.

“Hi, son,” his father said, opening the door. He entered, head first, leaning against the door jam. A good looking man in his youth, thanks to 30 plus years of 60 hour work weeks and the stress of providing for his family, Jacob Corneille had lost most of his blonde hair and the lines across his forehead never went away. Despite adhering to the Weight Management Board’s Nutritional Guidelines, a tummy had started to protrude.

“Hi, dad,” Brady said, without looking up from the screen.

“How’d the assignment go today?”

Brady stopped, paused and turned to face his father. “Fine, dad, it went fine.” He smiled.

His father returned the smile and said “Anything out of the ordinary happen?”

“No. Pretty standard.”

“Good.” He stood in the doorway, rubbing his chin. “You know, Brady. You can talk to me about anything.”

“I know, Dad.” Brady shrugged. “Like I said, it was pretty standard.”

“Well, good night then. It’s been a long day. The Tablet Project is in full swing!”

The exhaustion in his eyes was second only to the pride in his voice.

“That’s good to hear,” he said it as authentically as he could.

It was a week before Brady heard from the PPB. When he did, he received an email that said

ASSIGNMENT SUCCESSFUL.

He was home, sitting on the couch in the living room, when he got it on his iPhone. He smiled and was satisfied. About ten minutes later, his dad came home, hours earlier than usual. Brady was checking his other messages when he heard his father’s footsteps come down the hall and into the living room. He stood to Brady’s right, a step into the room. Without salutation he said “Brady, can we talk for a minute?”

Brady looked over at him and answered “Sure.”

“Let’s go to your room, where we can talk in private.”

“Is everything ok?” His dad had a look that Brady couldn’t read.

“We’ll talk when we get to your room,” he said, already walking in that direction.

Once in his room, Brady sat on his bed, and his dad shut the door, remained standing.

“Assignment Successful?”

Brady figured it was ok to acknowledge the message and so nodded his head.

“You discovered my project, the project that I’ve worked on for years, the project that would make or break the family’s—your family’s—economic future, was a failure. And you didn’t tell me.”

He wasn’t asking, he was stating the facts.

Brady nodded.

“Was that difficult for you?”

He couldn’t tell if this question was a simple inquiry or an accusation and so decided to stick to the truth. Even so, he couldn’t look into his father’s eyes, preferring to stare into the air, when he said “No.”

“Why not?”

“My loyalties were to the PPB.”

“What about me?”

Brady looked him in the eyes. “I knew you’d be able to deal with whatever happened.”

His father smiled, a little at first then growing into the widest grin he’d ever seen his father make. He walked over to Brady and put out his hand. Brady shook it and found he couldn’t release it. As they held hands, his father choked back emotion.

“Congratulations, son. You’ve proven yourself worthy of the Progress Promotions Board.”

Brady smiled but couldn’t help be confused. “What are you going to do about the Tablet Project?”

“Continue on as normal.” He released Brady’s hand and sat down next to him on the bed. “The Headmaster was in on the assignment, well test, really. The Project’s more successful than we’d anticipated. Then they’d anticipated. I always knew the potential, but until implementation, the Board doesn’t exactly get excited.”

“A test?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “The PPB needs to know that you’re capable of keeping a secret, even when loved ones are concerned.”

“So you’re not losing your Career?”

“Far from it, son, far from it.”

As Brady recalled that first assignment, the pride he usually felt gave way to sadness. He wasn’t sure why, because everything worked out all right. He got his Career, and his father was a success. This time was different, though, and he knew it. Before his thoughts could go any further, they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Brady said.

“Good morning, are you ready for our meeting?” It was Carlos, his colleague.

“Yes, let’s go into the Conference Cubicle.”

Brady grabbed his tablet and followed Carlos to the large room at the end of the hallway, which was more like a tunnel, a tunnel of foam walls. One would never know that behind the walls were little rooms of offices, offices with people in them. Brady walked down this tunnel numerous times a day, this was the first time he wished he could see behind the walls yet the thought of doing so was too intense. The entire morning had been too intense and nothing had happened yet.

Focusing on the back of Carlos's head, Brady felt a thin coat of moisture burning through the skin on his back.

The men stopped, and Carlos turned to face Brady.

"You ok, buddy? You look like you don't feel well."

"I'm fine. Let's just get this over with." Brady started to move past him and into the room when he felt Carlos's hand prevent him from going any further.

"Brady, is there something going on with this project?" Carlos said. The look on his usually jovial face was deadly serious.

Brady had to pull himself together. He smiled to disarm his colleague.

"Everything's fine, Carlos, really. I think perhaps I am coming down with something. I'll check it out this evening."

It worked.

"Phew, you had me worried there for a second." He laughed and opened the door for Brady.

The Conference Cubicle was a large room that fit up to ten people around the circular table at its center. He'd expected all the seats to be full, but to his surprise, only two people were present, one woman, whom Brady knew and one man, whom he did not.

Extending his hand to the woman, he said "Denisha, It's nice to see you."

"Likewise, Brady." She turned to the man. "I'd like you to meet Liam. Liam, this is Brady Corneille."

The two men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Liam was a tall white man with bright red hair. When Brady looked up to find Carlos, he saw only that the door was shut. He must have left.

“Brady, please have a seat,” she said.

He did, on the other side of the table, facing his two guests. He leaned forward, putting his folded hands on the table.

“I know this wasn’t the meeting you expected to have,” she said. “We need to talk to you before the The Hydro Project can progress.” Denisha was a petite middle-aged woman of Indian descent: her family had been in the Municipality for generations so there was no trace of an accent. She sat erect with her legs crossed, commanding yet at ease, never wavering in her eye contact.

“I don’t understand, is there a problem?”

She didn’t so much pause as she just stopped. It was as if she were a toy whose battery just died.

Liam took over. “Your wife is pregnant, yes?”

It did not surprise Brady that someone knew, all medical information is online, and government officials have access to all records of its employees, but it did surprise him to hear it brought up.

“Yes. Well—”

“She’s on her way to cancel it.”

“Yes, yes she is.”

“We’d like to grant you a Procreation Permit, backdated so as not to incur any questions later.”

“That’s excellent,” Brady stammered, unsure of the implications.

Liam's facial expression never changed, his fingers never ran through his bright red hair, never scratched his chin or changed positions in the chair. "The child is not yours."

"Excuse me?" Brady's eyes shot open, and his stomach dropped.

"Biologically it's your DNA, but it does not belong to you or your wife."

This was too much. "At the risk of being rude, will someone please tell me what the hell's going on?"

Batteries kicked in, and Denisha rejoined the conversation. "Brady, there's another aspect of the Project that you don't know about. It concerns an Agent." She uncrossed and crossed her legs in the opposite direction. "We think we've developed an Agent that will cure Infantile Allergen Syndrome, but we need to conduct further testing."

"What is Infantile Aller..."

"Infantile Allergen Syndrome. It's a complex disease that inflicts babies in utero."

"I've never heard of it," Brady said. He was getting frustrated. What did this have to do with supplying water?

"Very few people have, thanks to the P.I. Office, but they can only contain this knowledge for so long. It's relatively new."

"What does it do?"

"It attacks the internal organs, quite rapidly actually, ultimately killing its host."

"How does a child get it?" He figured he didn't have a choice but to play along.

Denisha looked at Liam for the first time, he returned the glance.

What did this have to do with water—

“It’s something in the water supply, isn’t it? The woman drinks the water which contains the allergen, affecting the child during development.”

Denisha nodded.

“Does our baby have this?”

Without flinching, Liam answered. “Not yet.”

“Your child was conceived for one purpose, Brady: to help us test our cure,”

Denisha said.

Their words became the ball in a tennis match. The air seemed to stop flowing, and Brady’s body stiffened in concentration. “Caroline didn’t take Birth Control, did she? You made sure of that.”

“It was a placebo, yes.”

“And you’re going to give my child this allergen and then give it the cure.”

“Correct.”

“And what if the cure doesn’t work?”

“We’re fairly certain it will.”

“Fairly certain? You’re fairly certain my child will be ok?” His question brewed with sarcasm.

“It’s not a child, it’s a host,” Liam said.

Brady forgot all Psychological Training and jumped up from his seat. “IT’S A CHILD. MY child.”

Liam didn’t flinch. He simply took a breath and said “No, Mr. Corneille. It’s our host. We allowed it to be created, for our purposes.”

“I won’t agree to this.” He remained standing, trying to salvage some authority.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“The hell I don—”

“Brady,” Denisha interjected. “It’s already been given the allergen. Everything’s going to be just fine.” Brady felt like, if she could have, she would have reached across the table and patted him the head and handed him a child’s treat.

He slowly regained enough composure to sit down, sinking into the back of the chair. The air in the room seemed to have thickened, making it harder for him to breath.

“Why me? Why Caroline?”

“Because you’ve proven your loyalty time and time again to the PPB.” Denisha paused before saying “And, because, your Career rests on the Hydro Project.”

He was amazed at how effortlessly she could threaten him and his family’s Economic Stability. She might as well have been reciting tomorrow’s weather forecast. Baby with a slight chance of death, only to clear up in a year, no escape.

“What do I do now?”

“Keep your mouth shut,” Liam said.

“When will the cure be administered?”

“In a Routine Immunization Package,” he said. “In the meantime, proceed on The Hydro Project as planned. Nothing need be interrupted.”

Easy for him to say, scary how easy. “I need to call Caroline about the Procreation Permit.”

“We’ll leave you to do that. Good day.” Liam and Denisha left Brady alone in the room.

Another empty room, surrounded by foam, wanting to crack the shell. He sighed and dialed Caroline.

“Hello?”

“Hi, honey.” It just occurred to him that his new might be too late. “Where are you? Did you do it?”

“I’m in a Snack Shop, no, I haven’t gone up there yet.”

He didn’t know if this was good or bad. Part of him was disappointed that they had to go through this. “I have good news—we have the Procreation Permit.”

“That’s great, honey,” she said although not nearly as excited as one would expect. “I’m going to finish up here and come home then.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m just tired, you know? It’s been a rough morning.”

“I understand completely. For me, too. I love you, Caroline.”

“I love you, too.”

Brady put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. How could he possibly go through the entire pregnancy, knowing the child might not survive? How could he not tell Caroline? What if the pregnancy goes wrong, and Caroline’s in danger? The what-if-thoughts were scratching at one another, each one clawing its way to consciousness...

“Don’t do that to yourself.”

He looked up to see Carlos facing him.

“Don’t go over the scenarios in your head, man. It’ll drive you crazy. Trust me, I know.”

“You know? You know what they just told me—”

Carlos put his hand up to silence him. “No, no I don’t know what they just told you. What I do know is whatever it was, it was for the good of The Municipality.”

Brady just stared at the bullshit he was being told.

“Is this your idea of condolences?”

Carlos smiled, leaned over and staked his arms on the table, supporting his upper body. “It’s the only way to progress, Brady. Whatever it was that they’ve—we’ve done, supports the motto you and I’ve worked towards our whole life: *Progress is good for all, minus the few*. What? Did you think you’d never be one of the few?” Carlos laughed as if he had twenty years of experience over Brady. The truth was Carlos had five fewer years at the Board.

Get a hold of yourself, look at this like you look at everything else, what’s done is done, focus on the project, on your family, for all you know, the cure will work and everything will be fine, it’s out of your hands. Brady just needed a minute longer to regain composure. Then he had it. He stood up slowly.

“Carlos, do not tell me how to feel, think or act, is that understood? Do not mock me. I am still your superior.”

Carlos stopped laughing. Clearing his throat, he said “Of course. I meant no harm, Brady.”

“Fine. It’s done. We have a lot of work to do today. Let’s get going.”

Returning to his desk, Brady looked at his Tablet just as the word PROGRESS vanished into the right side and FEW appeared on the left.

CHAPTER 9

Caroline rode three SkyPods and one Underwater Craft to reach the Cell Cancellation building in the Population Board's Regional Hydro Complex. Most of the complex was underwater, built in a water quarry about ten years prior. She'd never had a reason to go there prior, but she knew about it. Everyone knew about it. It was one of The Municipality's most talked about projects, at the time. News Outlets reported the details of how the quarry provided energy to the building's operations, and the enclosed location allowed for expansion without necessitating increased land use. Everything needed to keep the complex going was all around it. It was heralded as the way of the future. But as she recollected its beginnings, she realized it remained the only one of its kind.

Once in the main entrance, Caroline stood and surveyed the surroundings. The oversized atrium made her feel like a fish swimming in an oversized bowl with its curving walls. There were other fish in the bowl, but they all seemed to be moving faster. Suffocating her, the open space was overwhelming. This sensation was new to her, and she attributed it to the nausea and lack of energy. She probably should have taken an extra vitamin before coming or perhaps added a snack: because the pregnancy test results were already in the system, her nutrition was updated, but she felt it unnecessary given her decision to cancel it. Lesson learned.

She saw a directory on the wall and walked towards it. People were everywhere, walking in all different directions, forcing her to dodge them. An obviously very pregnant woman stood to her right. She was pretty, Caroline thought, but she looked worried. Another woman, not pregnant, joined her and pointed behind them. The other woman looked similar only much older, so Caroline presumed it was her mother.

Caroline wasn't used to being a new place, her routine fairly cemented there wasn't a need to venture out of her neighborhood. That was until now. Her eyes took in the sites, looking left and right all while her feet maintained their course. She felt cold which surprised her. Then again, keeping such a large area with a dome ceiling one temperature would be difficult, even for the Municipality's abilities. The number of people doing unconnected things fascinated and overwhelmed her. To her left, she saw two younger men with Digital Tablets in their hands talking. Their gestures were animated.

“Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry.”

A man crashed into her from the right side, pushing her to the ground. The impact startled Caroline out of her people watching.

“Are you ok?” he said and helped her up.

“I think so.” After smoothing out her pants and button-down shirt, both blue, she looked up to find a handsome man. As she stood up, she saw his lips. They were firm. He was smiling in a concerned manner. She found it an effort to look up and into his eyes.

He spoke effortlessly. “I wasn't paying attention to what was in front of me. Again, I'm sorry.”

“It's ok. I'm ok.”

“My name is Craig.”

She shook his outstretched hand. His grasp was firm but not hard. “Caroline.”

Craig was a healthy looking man with brown hair and matching eyes. Normally she wouldn't have noticed these things in a person she just met, but his look was captivating. If she were single, he'd have caught her attention as a suitable prospect.

“At least let me buy you a tea as an apology.” He pointed to her left. “There's a little spot over there we can go.” Before she could respond, she was walking towards the Snack Stop, his hand on the small of her back.

This Snack Stop looked like all the others, and Caroline had to admit she was thankful for the familiar sage green exterior. Her Health Code, which would display the pregnancy, flashed into her mind. Panic caught her breath until she remembered tea was a Free Liquid, no need to check Health Codes.

She didn't want to delay her appointment, and she really didn't want to drink tea with a stranger. Her stomach flipped at the thought of the taste. It had been doing that a lot lately. She stopped and tried to step away from him. “Really, this isn't necessary—”

“No, I insist.” His grasp wouldn't let her move. “It's the least I can do,” he said and smiled. She saw in his eyes that he wasn't going to let her go easily.

“It's just that I have an appointment to keep,” Caroline said, pronouncing each word deliberately. “At the Cell Cancellation Center.”

His tone grew serious, almost accusing. “I wasn't aware that you made appointments there.” He was right: it was first come, first served.

All Caroline could blurt out was “I'm married.”

Craig laughed, but it was more condescending than jovial. "I know. Let's go." She succumbed to his direction, aware that something wasn't right.

At the counter, they bypassed the line and went right to the front. He turned to her and asked what kind of tea she wanted. The Barista didn't flinch at their cutting in front of other Citizens, in fact no one flinched. Who is this man?

She managed to answer "White. Please. How do you know I'm married?"

He ordered the teas and turned back to her with a serious look on his face. "I know a great deal, Caroline. In fact, I know just about everything."

The white walls felt confining. She looked at the pale yellow tables around her set with Citizens engaged in conversations. Her headache was returning, louder, screaming for attention. It was like a monster inside of her head, banging against her skull. Before her journey, she'd managed to quiet it with some yoga exercises. No amount of yoga could relieve the fear that she now felt.

He showed her to a table with teas in hand. Normally the warm scent of tea that filled the Shops soothed her senses, but today, it just reminded her of her captivity. She wished Brady were here.

Another man, a much older man than Craig, was sitting there. He stood up and extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Caroline. I'm Joseph. Please, have a seat." Joseph was not as friendly as Craig. In fact, he addressed her as though she'd just interrupted an important meeting.

She sat. How did he know her name?

"Thank you for joining us."

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Ah, Caroline, we always have a choice.” He leaned in closer. His head was nearly bald, but his nose was not. “You could have walked away.”

Returning to his original position, he took a sip of his own tea. Caroline held her breath until he was far enough away, she could smell his last meal thanks to her heightened pregnancy senses.

She looked past him, to the next table where a couple was getting up. When they moved, she saw it: an Emergency Help Button was on the wall. The bright red sphere signified hope. If she pressed it, the Safety and Protection Officers would save her. In fact, they often wore plain clothes and so could be there with them. Her eyes scanned the room slowly trying to pick them out of the crowds. Maybe the two women in the corner, they weren’t talking to each other but looking around, keeping watch, she hoped. If she could somehow get them a message...

Craig put his hand on her thigh, prompting her to look at him. He spoke in a calm and reassuring manner. “There’s no need to be concerned, the Button won’t help.”

Was there anything these guys didn’t know? Hope quickly faded away. She had no choice but to see this, whatever it is, through. Her throat ached for moisture, so she took a sip of her tea. Wincing, her lips and roof of her mouth burned. Neither seemed to notice or care.

“We’re with the Central Government,” Craig said. He must have seen the shock on her face, because he added “You’re not in trouble, Caroline. We just want to talk to you.”

Joseph grunted just loud enough for her to hear. She thought he was scoffing at Craig but wasn't sure if she interpreted it correctly. She wasn't sure of anything except that her eyes ached. The pressure against them wouldn't stop and she felt lightheaded. Realizing her breathing was shallow, she made a conscious effort to slow it down. His hand was still on her thigh, but he removed it when she looked down at it.

“We're actually interested in an acquaintance you made with an Abby Arglos.”

“Excuse me? I don't know an Abby,” she said and rubbed her eyes.

“The Natural you met on the SkyPod,” Craig added.

“Oh, yes, years ago. We walked around for a bit, and I haven't seen her since.”

Joseph sat back in his chair with his arms resting on his belly, unlike Craig who sat closer to the table, his hands in a less intimidating place around his tea. Joseph spoke without changing position. “What did you talk about?”

“I don't really remember. Why?” Caroline took another sip of tea, it had cooled enough to drink. She found herself mesmerized by the yellow paper-like cup. What's the material called? Her memory failed her, overwhelmed physically and mentally by the day's journey. She longed for the safety and comfort of her Dwelling. It was so far away.

“Your husband works for the Progress Promotion Board, and he's working on a high priority project concerning the Physis Expanse. Did you know that Abby's father is a member of the Mutual Commerce Relations Board?” Joseph must have been a Legal Debate Professional, because she felt like a criminal as he barked his words.

“No, I didn't.” She had a hard time focusing on what did come up.

“Did you mention your husband's line of work?”

“No.” Her forehead scrunched as she tried to remember that day. Then something clicked. “Wait—”

The two men looked at her, anxiously awaiting a breakthrough.

She looked at Joseph and said in the most confident voice she could muster. “I didn’t know Brady when I met Abby.” She continued to hold his gaze, feeling victorious over this patronizing, fat, old man.

He looked away first, and then Caroline went back to her yellow cup. That little burst of energy continued to well inside of her.

Craig put his hand on her wrist “We think it’s best not to mention this conversation to anyone, including Brady. Understand?”

Another rush of adrenaline burst through her body, and she couldn’t control the force of her words. “Why? I don’t understand. What do I have to do with anything other than a chance encounter?”

“What makes you so sure it was by chance?”

He said it so matter-of-factly that she felt stupid. Caroline had nothing left to say. It never crossed her mind that there was anything suspicious about meeting Abby. Besides, Caroline wasn’t aware of the project before a couple of days ago. “But that was, what, eleven years ago?”

Craig looked at Joseph answered like a newscaster. “The Hydro Project has been in the works for about thirteen years. It was kept quiet, of course, while still in the beginning phases. Brady was sworn to secrecy, given his involvement. The fact that he told you about it recently earned him a reprimand.”

“Reprimand? He didn’t mention—”

“Good. That means he understands the delicacy of his position.”

“I don’t like secrets, Joseph.” She couldn’t help but rub her temples, as the adrenaline subsided, the headache returned.

He finally leaned forward, folding his hands in front of him on the table. “Don’t look at it as a secret, look at it as an investment. A required investment. In your family’s wellbeing.”

Craig sighed and tried to lighten up the mood. “Speaking of, there’s no need for the Cell Cancellation Center. We’ve issued a Procreation Permit, even back-dated it so that the mistake will not be on your permanent Health Code.” He smiled as if she’d just won a great prize. If she’d met Craig in a different capacity, she would have liked him, he had that charisma and charm that invited you to sit by him.

“Am I allowed to tell Brady?” It came out with more attitude than she’d intended. Later she’d find herself grateful for his gift, if that’s what it was, but right now, she was focused on the situation in front of her.

“He already knows, he found out at the same time you did.” His arms waved like he’d just invited them to dig into a lavish meal. Then they rested on the table, and he added “Of course, you’ll be surprised—and grateful—when he tells you.”

Her iPhone started to vibrate.

“Perhaps that’s him now,” Joseph said dryly. He knew it was.

She looked at the device and said “it is.”

She took the call in front of the two men and did exactly what they requested.

CHAPTER 10

At the SkyPod station, Caroline enjoyed the Regulated Clean Air found in the indoor stations. She was glad to see it wasn't that crowded. On her way to an empty three-person bench, she saw the sign for Expecting Citizens Priority Seating. Chuckling to herself, Caroline was reminded that, legally, she didn't have to stand if she didn't want to.

She rubbed her stomach and half-smiled.

She had to figure this out.

Abby's father was on the Mutual Commerce Relations Board, which, as far as Caroline knew, was the Board on the Physis side that worked with the Board on the Municipality side to regulate the relationship between the two. Her husband was working on a project that will make income for us but possibly hurt them.

A slightly overweight man sat on the bench two spaces over and smiled at her. She couldn't bring herself to smile back, annoyed that the space was no longer hers alone. Regulate your food, she thought, as she always did when an overweight person was in her presence.

The headache hadn't gone away, and trying to concentrate didn't help. She put her head down on her lap and held it with her hands.

She jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Caroline. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Caroline looked up.

"Abby. What are you doing here?" She looked left and then right to see if anyone was watching them.

"Yes, they're watching. I won't stay long," Abby said. Her hair was streaming down her head, and her eyes had dark circles. She looked tired, like she hadn't slept in days, yet her beauty remained. Caroline thought she probably looked the same to her.

Caroline tried to stand up but nearly fell over. Abby helped steady her.

"Don't get up, I just wanted to let you know that I don't blame you." She emphasized "you."

She must have meant Brady.

"I must go now," Abby said. "Be well, Caroline." Abby smiled, and Caroline knew she was sincere.

As she watched Abby walk out of the Pod Station, tears welled up in her eyes. Who they were for, she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything anymore.

CHAPTER 11

She was home and nearly fell to kiss the ground in her entranceway.

“I’m never leaving again,” she told it.

Looking around at the empty Dwelling, she thought about what to do next.

She walked into the kitchen and saw flowers in a vase on the table. As she approached, she saw there was a card. It read “A gift for my beautiful wife who is carrying another beautiful child. Love always, Brady.” Putting it down, Caroline took a deep breath.

She wasn’t allowed to tell Brady about Joseph and Craig, but she needed to find out the truth. She’d never questioned Brady’s integrity, but now she was involved.

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, placing a kiss on her neck.

“Do you like them?” She felt his lips grace her ear.

“I do,” she whispered. “Thank you.” She turned around to face him, and he kissed her. She succumbed to their soft yet firm movements that were so familiar to her. These long moist kisses never ceased to make her body tremble with devotion, and this time was no different. Her hand reached around his head, choosing a curl to wrap around a finger. He was pushing himself closer to her body, and she could feel the edge of the

table pressing into her. One arm steadied their bodies, while the other lifted her slightly onto the table, and her legs instinctively wrapped themselves around his waist. If he hadn't moved his face from hers, she would have stayed in passionate denial, but once their lips separated, and she opened her eyes, the desire left. He kissed her neck, usually her favorite move, and she looked out straight ahead. On the shelf was a family portrait, taken right after Hannah's birth.

“Honey, I'm sorry...”

He moaned.

“Honey, Brady, I...” She tried to push herself up. His grasp held. She tried to unhinge her legs, but draping them caused her back great pain. In this position, she was unbalanced.

“Brady, stop, please.”

“Caroline,” he whispered and unbuttoned her shirt. “Come on, baby,” His tongue was outlining her right breast. “You taste so good.”

He pressed her into the table so she lay completely on her back. Her arms attempted to push him away, but they lacked the ability. Despite her daily exercise routines, he was too strong for her. Even with all her efforts, he managed to hold her down while unzipping her pants. She thought about screaming, she thought about biting. All she could do was cry.

He stopped all motion.

“Caroline? Are you crying?”

She nodded.

“Honey? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” His concern was sincere, and he backed away from her. His clothes were still intact.

“I’m just not feeling well,” was all she could say.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me to stop?”

There was no point in telling him that she did. But she said it anyway.

“I did.”

“What? I thought you were playing. I didn’t hear the safeword, did you say the safe word?”

The safe word. She’d forgotten all about it.

“No, I, I forgot.”

“Oh God, Caroline. God.” He paced with his hand touching his head. “I didn’t know you wanted me to really stop, I thought, I just thought…”

The tears stopped. She should have remembered the safe word. “It’s ok, honey, it’s my fault. I forgot all about, all about…everything.”

The two remained in their individual yet collective shock and embarrassment. Brady stopped pacing and looked at her. He took a deep breath, moved closer and put his hands on her cheeks. She loved those hands.

“I am so sorry. I never want to hurt you. You know that, right?”

She paused, and he noticed.

“Caroline? You know that, right?”

Her eyes met his. “Yes, yes, of course I do. I just got caught up in the moment.” She moved her left hand on top of his, and half-forced her smile to show tenderness. “It’s ok, honey. Really.”

He kissed her lightly and walked away, not in his usual confident manner but more like a child who was recovering from the dizziness brought on after twirling in circles.

She was alone in the kitchen.

This level of excitement was new to Caroline. There were no guidelines, no requirements, no direction on how to proceed. It reminded her of when she first saw Abby, at the SkyPod Station. What had she done? She had forged into the unknown, and it was the reason for her current troubles. If she hadn't talked to Abby, the government wouldn't care about her. Joseph and Craig wouldn't know who she was and wouldn't have brought suspicion into her marriage. None of this would have happened. Then again, the child she carried wouldn't exist. She would have gone to the Cell Cancellation Center and had it terminated. Before this moment, it hadn't been a child, just a cluster of cells. She found herself missing the contentment of ignorance. Putting her hand on her stomach, she felt the pangs of guilt.

The DoorVoice announced a visitor.

"Child Care Services," it said. It was Hannah. She'd been taken to the CCS for the day so Caroline could take care of things.

She opened the door and thanked the worker as Hannah was deposited into her arms. She kissed Hannah's cheek, and the baby's smell brought Caroline's first authentic smile of the day.

"I heard the DoorVoice." Brady was standing at the stairs, looking down at his wife and child. Caroline nodded and held out her hand, which he took, and the three embraced.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Brady. I think I’m just overwhelmed by the day’s events.”

“I understand. I’m sorry, too. I know we weren’t expecting another baby, to cancel the pregnancy and then be allowed to keep it.” He shook his head to rattle out the details. “I’m tired and not quite myself either.”

“Let’s just put this whole thing behind us, ok?” Hannah cooed.

“Sounds good to me.” He looked up at the Digital Clock above the doorway.

“Tommy should be home any minute, yes?”

She nodded, switching Hannah from one arm to the other.

“We still have some Food Order Rations, let’s get dinner delivered and just relax.

What do you say?”

“Perfect.”

“Great.”

Brady kissed Hannah’s forehead and went into his office. Alone with Hannah, Caroline wished she didn’t know what she did. At some point, she’d have to figure out when to talk to him, and how. Until then, she just wanted to play with her daughter.

In the living room, she sat her down on the blanket left in the middle of the room. Brady’s mother had given it to them when Tom was born. She caressed it, imagining another baby on it. Hannah grabbed a nearby toy, and Caroline turned it on. An innocent, playful tune filled the room. Brady was still in the office, and she couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing.

A clang from the kitchen interrupted her thoughts. Tom had walked in and thrown his bag on the hard surface.

“Hi, mom.”

“Hi, honey.”

“Where’s dinner?” He was looking around in disbelief, and she laughed watching his confusion.

“It should be here soon. We decided to have it delivered.”

Satisfied, he came into the kitchen and sat on the blanket. He rubbed Hannah’s back who loved having her brother home.

Caroline felt the urge to tell them about the baby but had enough excitement for one day. The news could wait.

DoorVoice announced dinner. Caroline heard Brady answering, and he brought it into the living room.

“Let’s get crazy and eat on the floor,” he said.

Sitting on the floor, next to the blanket, they ate and discussed Tom’s day at school. He loved the attention. Even Hannah seemed to enjoy the informal atmosphere, giggling and drooling happily. When all that remained of dinner were empty dishes and silverware spread out on the floor, Brady looked at Caroline.

“I suppose I should get some work done,” he said. “Although I can’t say I want to leave. It’s been a wonderful evening.”

“Yes, it has, it really has,” Caroline said.

Hannah whimpered.

“Looks like it’s time to put her down,” Brady said. Then putting his arm around his son, added “You, too, buddy.”

“Ok, dad.” Off he went.

Caroline started stacking the plates while remaining seated.

“Are you still working on the Physis Expanse project?”

“I am. Just wrapping up my part of the plan.”

“Do you remember that Natural girl I met a few years back? Abby, I think was her name.”

Brady paused as if trying to remember. “I think so. At the SkyPod Station, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about her?”

“I saw her today.”

Brady had joined in the cleaning effort, but when he heard that statement, he stopped.

“Where?”

“At the Pod Station, as a matter of fact.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Not really. She came up to me and said hello.”

“That’s it?”

Caroline didn’t like his tone. “Pretty much.”

“Pretty much?” His voice was tensing.

Caroline stopped and looked at her husband.

“Caroline, what else did she say?”

“She said she knew it wasn’t me.” She resumed her movements.

“Listen, honey.” He placed his hand softly on her elbow. “Please stay away from the Naturals. This project I’m working on is top priority.”

She looked at him trying to read his expression. He brushed crumbs off his pants and stood up.

“I probably shouldn’t even tell you what I do, but, well, I love sharing my work with you.”

“It was just a random sighting of Abby.”

He nodded and walked into the kitchen, muttering something.

“What’s that?” She called.

“Nevermind.” He turned towards his office.

She was once again alone left to wonder which way to proceed.

CHAPTER 12

The next morning Caroline got Tom off to school and sat at the Kitchen Module, making a list of the day's chores. Now that her pregnancy was allowed, she needed to figure out a way to work in the necessary groceries, update the workout module and review scheduled blood tests. She knew that if she simply did the next right thing, everything would turn out all right, or so she hoped.

The Module wouldn't let her continue until she completed the Dwelling Disposal Sequence. She sighed. Well, I wanted normal. The weather was mild enough for her to wear her Regulated Indoor Shoes outside. Besides, it was a short walk, she rationalized, and they were her most comfortable pair.

Outside she took in the fresh air and looked around the neighborhood. Even though she knew it was no different than any other Regulated Dwelling Neighborhood, it felt suitable. Its circular set up positioned all doorways towards the center where the government had placed the Central Disposal Dissolver. The large black canister shaped device held everyone's waste, which always amazed her. Twice a week, all she had to do was walk out and enter her code into their number pad. It automatically confirmed it in

the Module. Where the waste went, she didn't know or really care. It was easy and efficient—and connected. She stopped in front of the keypad. Everything was connected.

Back inside, she went to work on the Module. She felt watched: maybe it was the Household Tablet, a connected device. But all devices were always connected for efficiency. Her conscious awareness of these connections was like suddenly becoming aware that she breathed air. How did they know? That was the main question on her mind. It's not like she met Abby on a device. They met in a public place. The stations were surveyed, but for security purposes, or at least that was the official word. Maybe she shouldn't be asking how, but why?

The doorbell announced a visitor. "Unknown." Unknown?

Caroline walked over and looked out the viewfinder. Abby was standing at her front door, in plain view of the entire neighborhood. Caroline stepped away from the door. Answering it wasn't an option. The bell announced it again. After what seemed like an eternity, Caroline let out a deep breath, one that she didn't realize she'd been holding. Then she heard Abby's voice, pleading.

"Caroline? If you're in there, I need to talk to you. Please. It's a matter of life and death."

Caroline stood still.

"Caroline? They already know I'm here so if that's what worries you..."

They also knew I haven't opened the door, she thought.

"Please open the door." She was crying, almost pleading.

Caroline looked down at her hands to find them wet with perspiration. The air around her seemed to get staler the more she inhaled. Were the lights flickering? There, there they go again. The room was hot, much hotter than it should have been.

CHAPTER 13

She woke up to Brady kneeling next to her. She was still in the entranceway behind the front door, only she lay on the floor. Her back was sore from the hard surface.

“Brady?” It was all she could manage.

“Hi, honey. I’m here. It’s all going to be ok.”

“What happened?”

“You fainted, lucky for you, I came home early and saw that Abby girl was at the door.”

Caroline struggled to sit up but managed with his help.

“What happened to her?”

“I had her arrested. Once the Safety and Protection Officers removed her, I came in and found you here, lying on the floor.”

Arrested? That woke her up.

“Why arrested?”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” he said flatly.

“What did she do wrong?” Caroline was mad.

“Why do you care? She was going to hurt you.” His accusing tone reminded her of Joseph.

She sat up and looked into his eyes. “How?”

Brady looked flustered. She’d never seen him unsure of himself. He couldn’t answer her just started and stopped.

“Brady, what the hell is going on?”

“She won’t be back. I’ve made sure of that.” He helped her up, and the two stood looking at each other, she felt like for the first time.

“Everything’s ok now. Everything’s going to be ok.” Was he trying to convince her or himself, she wondered.

He looked past her for a second and then back down into her eyes. “It’s nothing for you to worry about anymore. Let’s get you up and into a nice bath.”

Suddenly, she remembered her daughter. “Hannah—”

“She’s fine.”

“Let me understand this,” she said, putting her hand to her head. “You came home, saw Abby, called the Officers and made sure Hannah was ok, all while I lay on the floor?” Now she was the accuser.

He didn’t offer a defense.

“I’ve never asked about your job, Brady, not in any great detail. Truth be told, I didn’t care all that much. I supported you in what you needed to do to support our family.”

“Caroline—”

“Wait,” she said and held up her hand in a cinematic display of power. “I still trust whatever you do, or did, is for the good of our family. And don’t patronize me, Brady. And I know there are things neither one of us can, are allowed to say.”

He didn’t move.

“Who is Abby? I want the truth, Brady.”

She saw the moisture on his face, the front of his button-down started to show his perspiration. He undid the top button and tried to crack his neck. He moved, but he said nothing.

He started to speak and then stopped. Then he said “There’s nothing to fix, Caroline. Everything’s fine.”

She was in control and wasn’t going to let go. “Who is Abby, Brady. Why would you have her *arrested*? It’s not a crime to visit someone.”

“It is when you’re the wife of the man responsible for completely changing life in the Physis Expanse.”

“What does that have to do with Abby?” She thought for a second and then went on. “I know about her father—”

“Caroline, stop. Don’t say another word. You—we can’t do this.” He was looking around the Dwelling, at the ceiling, in the other rooms.

Caroline’s eyes tried to follow his movements and then whispered. “Are, are they listening?”

He took a deep breath, which answered her question. Then he said “Caroline. Everything’s fine. Drop it.”

If they were listening, they must not have been watching, because Brady's eyes widened, telling her to play along.

“Ok, honey. You do what you have to do, ok?”

He smiled. “Of course. Everything's fine, Caroline. I promise.” His voice cracked on the word “promise.”

She turned and walked into the kitchen where Hannah was in her chair, playing with her snack, happily oblivious. Brady had gone into his office.

All she wanted was her life back, no government officials, no Naturals, no talk of the Physis Expanse, just her life, where she was a mother and wife. She had done nothing to deserve this disruption. That was the past, she thought. And if her Dwelling wasn't private, and Brady wasn't able to talk, then there was only one person who could and one place where it was safe.

She decided then that she would go to the Physis Expanse and look for Abby.

CHAPTER 14

Soaking in a hot bath wasn't so much a luxury for Abby as it was a necessity. She looked down at her naked body and marveled at the droplets of water as they ran off her thigh, slowly at first, then faster as they reached the rounded side. The steam felt good against her cheeks and neck, the muscles relaxing, the only sound an occasional drip from the faucet. Her entire body was tense. Being arrested will do that to a person. Being arrested in The Municipality, brought back to her home on the Physis Expanse, and being threatened with violence if she ever returned was something beyond tense. Just thinking about it made her stomach clench. To help, she did some deep breathing exercises. She was on her third inhale when there was a knock at the door. It opened to reveal to her Journey Mate.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“You can come in. I was just thinking about all we've been through.”

He knelt beside the tub and put the tips of his fingers in the water. She always felt safe around him, his blue eyes had a healing quality.

“Well, today was pretty rough, although not unexpected, I suppose.”

“It's not just today, John, it's everything, all of it.”

He smiled and flicked water at her face to make her smile. “We just have to keep going.” With that, he kissed her moist forehead, looked into her eyes long enough for her to know he loved her, and left.

“Keep going,” she whispered. “Keep going.”

It was hard to remember why it began. In truth, it had begun before she was born. All she knew of the story was what her mother had told her, when she was 16 years old.

“Honey,” she said. “We need to talk about something, something very important.” Her usually serene face had an unusual look on it. At 16, Abby couldn’t describe it any other way than to say she thought she was in trouble. As an adult, she realized her mother was simply thinking carefully about her approach.

“Sit here, on the couch, beside me,” she said and helped Abby onto the oversized Certified Organic Cotton couch. Abby loved that couch, a deep red, soft, smelled like home.

“Am I in trouble?” Abby asked as she put her hands on her lap, the good girl position.

“No, Abby, you’re not in any kind of trouble.” Her mom smiled and put her hand on top of Abby’s. “I promise.”

Even though she wasn’t in trouble, she didn’t feel at ease. Something was wrong, regardless.

“Abby. There’s something I need to tell you, to explain to you, that you might not fully understand right now. But I—”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“What, mom? What is it?”

“But I can’t guarantee I’ll get another chance, so I have to tell you now.”

“Tell me what? Mom, what’s wrong?” Abby could feel her own eyes grow misty with fear. She didn’t even notice the cat rubbing against the back of her head until much later.

Composing herself with a deep breath, her mom continued. She asked her what she knew about The Municipality. Abby didn’t know much, no one living on The Physis Expanse knew much about the other side of the country. It wasn’t necessary.

“Is it a bad place?” Abby wanted to know.

Her mom smiled and shook her head. “How could the place that gave me you be bad?” She moved in closer, put her hand on her cheek and said the words Abby would remember for the rest of her life. “You’re not my daughter, not in the biological, or blood way. You were born to a woman in The Municipality. You were brought here to save your family from getting into trouble for having too many children.”

Behind her mom, Abby stared at a replica of an antique Time Telling Mechanism. It had this shiny gold circle that went from one side of the faux wooden box to the other, producing a clicking noise each time. She looked past her mom, her eyes following the gold circle, back and forth. Her mom’s voice sounded as if it were underground, muffled and distorted. Maybe it was Abby who was underground, buried under the truth.

“Abby? Abby?”

She slowly climbed out. With each second, the voice grew louder.

“Abby?” Tears streamed down her mom’s cheeks as she shook Abby just enough to bring her back into reality.

“Abby, do you understand what I said?” Even when breaking life-altering news to her 16-year-old daughter, she remained a pragmatic teacher. Years later, Abby would first resent and then accept her communication style.

Recovered from the initial shock, she went on to learn that she’d been born to a family in The Municipality who hadn’t received the necessary Procreation Permit to have more than one child. Something went wrong in the In Utero Regulation Process, and twins were born. Luckily, the father knew Abby’s dad, and the arrangements were set. One twin would stay and one would go, and so Abby went to live with the Arglos and be raised in the Physis, as a Natural.

Her skin was starting to prune, so she got out of the tub, taking her time with each movement. The Order & Correction Officers weren’t nice to Citizens let alone Naturals. Her crime wasn’t a crime, at least not in her mind, but the Officers treated her rather harshly. As the water dripped from her body, she stood in front of the Reflection Surface, the shiny material dulled by a steamy film, leaving only small holes through which she saw her image. She noticed a bruise on her upper arm from where the male officer grabbed her, the purplish blue was already penetrating through her peach-colored skin, now red thanks to the heat. Her gaze travelled to meet itself. I could see myself in her eyes, she thought, more now than ever before. There’s a power to standing alone, naked, in room designed for privacy, with a mirror, a power that forces you to look at yourself as you are. Abby felt trapped, knowing what she did, knowing the fact that she had a sister on the other side propelled her to find, enlighten and join, knowing that their respective worlds would do anything to prevent that from happening. Never one prone to panic, she

felt her heart beat faster and loudly, her breathing shallow despite her best efforts on inhaling deeply. Get out of this room, just open the door, you can do it.

In an instant, she turned, opened the door and walked out, able to breathe again.

“How was your bath?” The sight of her Journey Mate, sitting at their dining room table further calmed her senses. Walking over to join him, she leaned over to give him a kiss on the forehead, before sitting next to him.

“It was nice.”

“I don’t believe you,” he rubbed her naked thigh lovingly.

“It was nicer than the Municipality’s Order & Correction Center.”

He playfully chuckled and said “that I believe,” and after a pause, added “Are you ready to tell me about it?”

Abby knew the healthy thing to do was to talk it out, and the safest person in her world was her Journey Mate and the love of her life, Ray, but it was going to be a struggle. Talking meant reliving. At least she was in an innocuous place: their two-bedroom Living Dwelling offered a quiet refuge from the worlds outside. Bathed in earth tones, the walls welcomed her as she looked around. The Dwelling wasn’t big by any means, about 1,000 square feet, but it was cozy and warm. The Regulation Organic Carpeting made her feet feel like they were walking on cotton balls. Life on the Physis Expanse had its challenges, but the Dwelling was a place of refuge and serenity. She needed all the peace she could get.

She sat facing him, closer than normal, both naked. Taking a deep breath, she began.

“I don’t quite know where to start.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you went to her dwelling,” he said. She hadn’t told him of her plans before doing them.

“They don’t call it a dwelling, dear, I went to her Official Residence.” She smiled while correcting him, but he wasn’t amused. His unchanging countenance brought her back to the task at hand. “I went there to talk to her, to try and talk to her.” Her head and torso moved with her words, as if searching for an answer. “Maybe if she knew that we were—”

“Related? Abby, you were born from the same sperm and egg, but you are not family.” He emphasized family to convey what she already knew. “You were raised, for all intensive purposes, on two different planets.”

“I know that, Ray, don’t you think I know that?”

“I think you forget that, dear. I think you forget the significance, the differences between the Municipality and here.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything. I just refuse to believe that she doesn’t feel a connection, the same connection I feel.”

He sat back in protective frustration. Ray had heard all this before from Abby, and she knew she was repeating herself, but she just wanted him to understand. She knew he couldn’t, though, no one could, no one, except maybe Caroline. She went on with the details, not wanting to rehash the same conversation they’d had multiple times before.

“Anyway, I went to her Residence and knocked on her door. I could tell she was home—”

“Let me guess, you felt it?”

“Don’t make fun of me, Ray. You can’t understand.”

“Ok, ok, I’m sorry. Continue.”

Her skin was nearly dry now, all the water vaporizing into the clean air.

Thankfully, it was mildly warm outside, allowing them to keep the screen door open. The soft breeze caressed her bruised skin.

“I knocked on the door repeatedly, called her name, she never came. The next thing I knew their Protection Officers, or whatever they’re called, came up behind me, grabbed my arm—“she placed her left hand on the opposite arm, remembering the pain—“and pulled me down to the ground.”

“Oh, Abby, that sounds terrible.” He moved his chair closer, touching hers, and placed his hand on her knee, leaning forward. She couldn’t bear to look at the horror on his face, but she heard it in his voice.

“It was actually. More than just physically, I felt torn from her all over again, I mean I know that’s rather melodramatic, but to be so close and yet not anywhere near her...”

“Abby—”

“I need a break,” she said rather abruptly. “I’m going to lie down.” As she walked into their bedroom, she heard him say something about letting him know if she needed anything. What I need is to get my head together, she thought. Snap out of this, Abby, this isn’t like you, all this morose, dramatic talk. Think. What’s your next move?

In her room she tried to pull herself together by picking the clothes up off of the floor, making the bed, straightening the books...book in hand, she stopped, caressed its cover, turned it over and lightly grazed the back. Caroline has probably never seen a book, she whispered. Abby, unlike most, was educated about the differences between the

Municipality and the Physis Expanse. She thought about Caroline's world with its Electronic Readers and Personal Vehicular Units. Modules and Tablets everywhere: everything in the Municipality was entered into a computer, and all the computers talked to each other so that the ruling Central Government Command Center knew everything. Didn't they see the danger in that power? Didn't they know—no, they couldn't possibly know, because it's just the way things were. How does a bird know if it's better to be a flower?

Putting the book back on the shelf, Abby walked over to her Clothing Container and pulled open the top drawer. Beneath her Certified Organic Delicates was a small box, which she brought over to the bed and sat down. From it, Abby pulled out the letter and photograph she was given by her mother after the conversation about her origins. Her mother had given her explicit instructions to never share its contents with anyone, no one could be trusted. Abby obeyed until right before she married Ray. If he was going to pledge his life to her, she had to know he knew everything about her. She carefully unfolded the letter: it was written with an ink mechanism on unprotected processed wood paper, an archaic form of communication. Her mom always did have a soft spot for the past. The irony wasn't lost on Abby: in many ways she was trying to connect to her own past although she often told Ray that it was her future she wanted to cultivate.

The letter opened tentatively and the familiar words once again saw light.

DEAREST,

IT PAINS US TO DO THIS BUT IT IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, AS YOU KNOW,
GIVEN THE POPULATION AUTHORITY BOARD'S CHILD LAWS. WE ARE JUST
NOT IN THE POSITION TO PUT OUR FAMILY IN DANGER. PLEASE LOVE AND

CHERISH HER AS WE WOULD HAVE. EVERY TIME WE LOOK INTO HER SISTER'S
EYES, WE WILL SEE HER.

GRATEFULLY YOURS.

No signature, too risky. Abby looked up. On the wall opposite where she sat hung one of her favorite paintings. She didn't know the artist and didn't want to. Knowing a mere human created the swirling blues and greens that mesmerized her throughout the years would detract from its mystique.

There has to be a way to see her. They had a nice time the one afternoon they spent together. That had been the best way to do it, Abby thought, show up some place a couple of times and let her come to me. She smiled, remembering how excited she was when Caroline sat next to her on the bench at the SkyPod Station. Caroline was drawn to her, she knew it. It took a couple of times, but when she asked Abby to walk around the Town Center with her, Abby felt a door opening. Now, she sat feeling a door had been closed, literally and figuratively.

In the middle of that thought, a revelation hit her. Why would Caroline call the Officers? Abby hadn't ever been a threat to her, just an innocent companion one afternoon. Could it be that Caroline didn't call them? Energized by this line of thinking, she folded the letter and put the box and its contents back into the drawer. She paced around the small room. Who else could have called? A neighbor? But why would a neighbor call, she hadn't created a disturbance, she simply knocked on the door. She had to tell Ray.

“Ray—”

Standing in the middle of the living room, Ray faced her but stared at the floor, his expression shell shocked. Abby approached in small, slow steps.

“Ray? What is it?”

He raised his head when she reached him.

“We had visitors, Abby, didn’t you hear?”

Shaking her head, her eyes questioned him. She hadn’t heard a thing.

“Two Citizens from the Central Government.” He stood motionless as he spoke. Everything in the room was still, even the air.

He continued, “from the Municipality’s Central Government. They came here to warn us.”

“I don’t understand. Why would the Central Government warn—”

“Because of you,” he said. She couldn’t tell if the tone of his voice was denouncing or advising her. She’d never seen him less animated.

“Because of the arrest?” Abby racked her brain to comprehend. “But that shouldn’t be of concern to the Central Government, it was a minor matter, a mere misunderstanding, really.”

“There’s more to it, Abby. Sit down.” Motioning to her right, he guided her to the dining room table they sat at earlier. She sat, eagerly awaiting the explanation. The look on his face was one of deep concentration, like he was trying to make sense of what he was told while he relayed it to Abby.

“Did Caroline ever tell you what kind of Career her husband held?”

Abby thought back to their conversation and replied “no, we never talked about him.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think I would have remembered, Ray. You know how many times I’ve replayed that conversation just to relive it.” The still air began to move again despite the suspense it held.

“That’s what I thought. Well, it turns out that he works for the Progress Promotion Board.”

“The board that forces citizens to use new technologies,” Abby added. That board was considered most dangerous by the Naturals. They knew the Central Government unleashed new technologies into the Municipality under the guise of progress when, in reality, each dispersion contained hidden mechanisms designed to give the government new ways to exploit Citizens. All completely without their knowledge. Abby physically shuddered at the thought.

She could see Ray shaking off the vision as well. Needing the feeling of something concrete, she ran her right arm across the Recycled Clear Material table. When activated, it was a touch screen computer. In the Municipality, as far as she knew, computers were never off. Her moment of gratitude, however, was short lived as Ray went on.

“They didn’t say what he was working on, but I got the sense that it involves us.”

“Us?”

“The Physis Expanse.”

Danger. “What does this have to do with me? I don’t know anything about this.”

He leaned back in the Recycled Metal chair. The cushioned bottom made them comfortable for a while but not for lounging, and his back was obviously feeling it,

because he twisted slightly, working his muscles. They'd talked about getting more suitable ones but decided their Currency was better spent elsewhere. Normally they sat on the couch, but the conversation was so intense, she didn't dare interrupt its flow.

“All they said was, no, all they demanded was that you stay away from not only Caroline but the Municipality in general.”

“What? They can't demand that? It's not legal.”

“I don't think they care about legal, Abby. These men weren't here officially.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said they were from the Central Government.”

“They were. But they made it clear that this conversation never happened.”

Abby stood up, her own chair starting to hurt her body. She walked to the middle of the room and turned back. “This doesn't make sense. What does the government care if I visit a Citizen?”

“Not just any Citizen—Caroline.” He twisted to face her, his arm resting on the chair's back.

“You know...before I came out here, I was wondering who called the Officers on me, because Caroline didn't have a reason to fear me.” Pacing as she spoke, Abby tried to put all the pieces together.

“Was anyone else home?”

“I don't think so, but even if her husband was home, he wouldn't have reason to fear me.”

“I don't know, Abby, but I think it's time to put this all behind you, behind us.”

She looked at her Mate, unable to process what he'd just said. He saw her astonishment and stood up to put his arm on her.

Her body instinctively backed away. “Ray, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying, this is serious, Abby. We’ve got CENTRAL GOVERNMENT officials coming to our DWELLING, for goodness sake.”

Ray was not prone to hysterics, ever, no matter the situation. Every ounce of Abby’s being conveyed shock and dismay, and she knew it. Part of her was surprised at his reaction and part at what he was saying.

“Ray. I have nothing to do with the government.”

“I know that, Abby. But there’s some connection there, I don’t know what it is, but these guys were deadly serious.”

“I can’t stop now, Ray,” Abby choked back tears as her voice pleaded with him for support. In her mind she pictured kneeling at his feet, begging him, but she didn’t move, she couldn’t move. They just stood there, facing each other, naked in both the physical and emotional sense. He was scared, she knew, and so was she.

His face grew soft. “Abby. This is about choice. You were put in a situation due to the choices of the Municipality and the Expanse, the choices of two families. Now it’s your choice.”

Her legs felt weak, she fell onto the couch. As soon as she did, she wanted to stand but couldn’t so her hands repeatedly joined and disjoined, her fingers grasping for some way to bind their anxiety. She couldn’t speak.

Ray walked over and sat beside her, but she didn’t turn to face him.

“I know connecting with Caroline is important to you, but all I’m asking you to do is consider that maybe, just maybe it’s not meant to happen. There’s more to this story

than we know, and now our lives, our being is in jeopardy.” He put his hands on top of hers to stop the movement. As soon as her hands were silenced, her leg started to bounce.

“Abby, isn’t enough just to know she’s alive and well? You have to let it go, at least for now. You have to take care of you...of us.”

At this last statement, her body went still. He was right, her desire was putting her family at risk, she didn’t know why or how, but the last 24 hours had been more than she expected. She still wasn’t sure why she was arrested or why Central Government officials came to her Dwelling, but she did know that Ray was scared. Hell, she was scared. Something bigger was at work, something too big for Abby to contend with. She turned to the man she loved so completely.

“You’re right.” Nodding, she surrendered.

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CHAPTER II
EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL: SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

CHAPTER 1

Caroline liked to think of herself as the ideal Citizen.

After receiving exemplary grades throughout her schooling, she worked as a Nutrition Steward in a local restaurant. Following the Weight Management Board's Nutrition Recommendations, it was always busy. Citizens enjoyed the orange and silver décor, the booths were lined with an Eco-Friendly Plastic covering that cushioned one's body while eating.

Caroline reveled in knowing she contributed to her fellow Citizens' healthy lifestyle. A healthy body means a healthy mind: that was their motto, reinforcing the government's slogan, and one that she always followed. She firmly believed that even if the WMB didn't enforce the Nutritional Recommendations, she would nonetheless follow them. Working at the restaurant, however, she learned there were some who went their own way. One in particular always stayed in her mind.

An overweight man came in on a weekday afternoon and sat in her section. When Caroline saw him, she gasped. She'd never before been that close to one, and it took a

few minutes for her consternation to give way to judgment. Patting down her waist-high white apron against her slender thighs, she approached him, reminding herself that

Overweight Citizens were under special watch by the WMB which meant their limited options should make her job fairly straightforward.

“Hello, my name is Caroline. May I scan your wrist please?” She looked down at his chubby wrist, the location of his implanted Health Code.

"Never mind the Health Code, I know what I want to eat," he replied as if she'd asked him the same questions fifty times.

"I'm sorry, Citizen, but we have to scan your Code to find out what you can eat."

"I don't care about the Health Code." He looked down at the table, and his voice lowered. "I don't have much longer to live, so it doesn't matter."

Because it was a restaurant rule, she would have to get a Manager's approval. Walking back to where he was standing, she tried to contain her annoyance.

“There’s a patron who refuses to let me scan his Health Code,” she said.

“Really? Does he seem abnormal? Behavior-wise?”

“I think refusing to let me scan him qualifies as abnormal.”

He scratched his chin. “Not necessarily. I’m not always happy to have mine scanned.” His disposition was always sunny, and he didn’t waver now.

“Why not?”

After a what seemed to her like an unnecessary pause he said “Well, Caroline, having certain ailments can be a little disconcerting.”

“But it’s the rule,” she said. Why wouldn’t someone follow the rules? Nothing good comes from disobeying. “Proper nutrition is important.” Under her breath she added “there shouldn’t be much to treat if one has followed directions.”

He looked at her in a way that made her feel like a child, as if she didn’t know something that was obvious to him. Surely he, young and intelligent, couldn’t have something that caused him shame. His body didn’t show any signs of unhealthiness: he was about six feet tall with a slender build. One time, she’d even noticed his flexing arm muscles.

Putting his hand gently on her arm, he said “Let’s go over to him and see what’s up, shall we?”

The two walked over, Caroline leading the way. The man was still staring down, and the digital menu embedded into the table was turned on, waiting for input.

"Good afternoon, sir, I am the Manager," he said. "I don’t mean to cause you any distress, but we’re required to scan your Health Code. Any ailments will, of course, register in our system allowing us to provide you with the correct nutrition for your situation."

The man sat and without looking up, raised his right hand. Chubby, sausage-like fingers protruded from his large hand, both ironically, immaculately clean. With ease, Caroline removed the small scanner from her apron pocket and positioned it on the outer portion of his wrist. When the yellowish light radiated from his wrist, she could see the outline of the implanted chip. One push of the button, and the scan was complete. Immediately, the man's health history and needs appeared on her screen, and the menu screen showed all available options. Caroline’s eyebrows furled as she saw he was given

free reign. The Manager reacted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He simply said "Thank you, sir. It will be a pleasure to serve you." He nodded at Caroline and walked away.

She looked at her scan and understood: he was no longer required to comply with the nutritional standards. This meant only one thing—no amount of nutrition could save him.

Composing herself as best she could, Caroline said "What would you like to eat?"

"I'll take the marbled steak with extra salt, crispy potatoes, extra oil and a side of the modified vitamin sprouts." When he said the word "extra," he looked at her for emphasis.

"You're not required to eat the sprouts—"

"I know. I like how they taste." Each word spoken in an even staccato rhythm.

After taking his order, she walked back into the kitchen and saw her manager reviewing the quality of food preparation. She looked away when he saw her.

"Are you ok, Caroline?" he asked. "These situations can be a little distressing, I know."

"I'm fine," she said with a smile. And she was. If someone wasn't willing to follow simple directions, then they had to accept the consequences. She could not comprehend why someone would choose to endure pain and suffering when the solution was handed to them at birth. Nearly all preventable diseases were eradicated by the Health and Wellness Committee of the Central Government Command Center. Diet and exercise, along with the Committee's vaccinations ensured a Citizen's productive existence. A productive existence ensured success.

While she sanitized her hands for handing the food, she could feel her manager looking at her. What more did he expect her to say on the subject?

“You know that man’s going to die prematurely, right? You read his scan,” he said.

“Yes, I do. I also know that he obviously didn’t take care of himself as directed. He allowed himself to get overweight and so developed heart disease. She shrugged her shoulders.

After a moment of silence, she took a deep breath and let it out, stopping all motion. She turned to face her manager and saw his expression. She didn’t mean to sound so harsh, she was angry, frustrated that someone would deliberately hurt themselves. And she wasn’t used to being involved.

“I’m not trying to be insensitive. I just have a difficult time feeling bad for people who prefer to live in the problem when the solution is right there.”

“I understand that perspective, Caroline,” he said. His jovial face started to return. “I just think some people—for whatever reason—are unable to adhere to the directives.”

He returned to his task and, before, she returned to hers, she added “We all have choices.”

She never saw that man again, and she never forgot him. Over the years, when she’d think back on the encounter, she’d struggle to turn her frustration into compassion. Mostly she succumbed to the idea that all she could do was take care of herself.

CHAPTER 2

One early evening, after working the afternoon shift, Caroline stood on the board platform, waiting for the next train of Pods to arrive. It was chilly outside, and, though not usually one to lament, she found herself wishing she had a Personal Vehicular Unit. She knew that only a certain number of Qualified Vehicle Privilege Passes were distributed each year throughout the city and that the criteria for receiving one were complex. It didn't matter anyway, because she couldn't afford a private vehicle. Still it would be nice not to wait outside.

The SkyPods did impress her, so she focused on marveling at the metal tracks from which they hung. To think that magnets were strong enough to hold each egg-shaped Pod, ten people full. The Transportation Progress Board certainly knows what they're doing, she thought as she shivered slightly.

Despite the attempt at distraction, she couldn't help but lament the weather change. Soon it would be winter. Keeping her gloved hands against her skirt to prevent it from flying up, Caroline turned around to the left and then to the right to see if there was an open bench. Thanks to shift changes, she didn't see one.

"You can sit here," a female voice said.

When she turned in its direction, she saw a vacant spot next to a young woman. Thankful, Caroline walked towards her, noticing her appearance with every step. She was about the same age as Caroline, because her head was covered with a light hat, she couldn't see her hair but judging by the escaped wisps blowing in the breeze, it was fairly long.

“Thank you,” she said as she sat down. A man next to her shifted to make room.

“You're welcome,” replied the stranger. Now that they were closer, Caroline saw her auburn hair, hazel eyes and pale complexion. She wore no makeup and readily smiled.

“The wind is strong today,” Caroline said.

“Yes it is. Luckily I have a warm coat.”

“It looks different than anything I've seen. What's it made of?” Caroline didn't know why she felt compelled to start a conversation. After all, she wasn't the type to chit chat with someone randomly.

“It's down,” the stranger replied and patted it as though it was a precious possession.

“Down? Is that a type of ThermoFabric?”

“No, down means it's made out of feathers.” The stranger smiled in a way that intimidated shyness. “From geese.”

Caroline stared in disbelief.

“I'm a Natural” The stranger held out her hand. “My name is Abby.”

Caroline shook her hand. A Natural. She'd never met one before, which wasn't surprising given they lived on the other side of the country. All she knew was that Naturals lived on the Physis Expanse, which was east of her own area, the Municipality. Remembering her only other encounter, she thought about her childhood. It had been twenty years ago.

She saw the fear in the tormented eyes of the Natural Children, as a few Citizen Children she knew hurled insults. They yelled "bacteria bitches" and "country bumpkins" which brought them uncontrollable laughter. What's a bumpkin? She wanted to ask but self-preservation kept her silent. Part of her wanted to make her friends stop, while the other part wanted to join in what must be fun. She did neither, and instead opted to silently watch the one-sided battle. When she wondered why the Natural Children didn't fight back, she presumed they didn't have the mental or physical ability to do so.

When she asked her parents about the incident, she was told to focus on her studies and refrain from unnecessary inquiries. She never saw one again, until she did.

"And your name?" Abby jarred her from her memory.

"Caroline. My name is Caroline." She looked past her companion and added "I wonder where the Pod is."

The two sat in silence until they boarded their respective Pods.

About a month passed before Caroline saw her again. Like before, she spotted Abby sitting on the bench waiting for the Pod. Caroline was uneasy: should she acknowledge her or pretend not to see her?

After their first meeting, Caroline had looked up information about the Physis Expanse. In doing so, it seemed odd that she remained so ignorant about the other half her country. The Public Information Database gave a concise description:

THE EASTERN PART OF THE FORMER UNITED STATES CONSTITUTES THE MUNICIPALITY, WHILE THE WESTERN PORTION MAKES UP THE PHYSIS EXPANSE. THE PACT OF 2100 GAVE EACH GROUP OF PEOPLE THEIR OWN HALF OF THE LAND WHILE MAINTAINING A SINGLE COUNTRY, SO AS NOT TO LOSE STANDING IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY. THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT COMMAND CENTER GOVERNS THE MUNICIPALITY WHILE THE EXPANSE HAS ITS OWN GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM.

As Caroline approached, she saw that the choice was hers: the seat next to her was open, but Abby was looking the other way. She felt compelled to know her. Was that ok?

“Hi Abby, may I sit here?” The cold air retarded her speech, and she wondered if she was slurring.

Abby turned and smiled “Of course, Caroline. Please, join me. I hear the Pod is running late, they just made an announcement.”

“Thank you.” Caroline fit easily into the opening and sensed Abby was happy to see her. “How late?”

“About 10 minutes.”

Caroline groaned, as ten minutes in this weather felt like an eternity. Abby nodded in agreement. Her hair was down, though still covered by a hat. There was

something about her that felt familiar, comforting. She wanted to spend more time with her.

“Where are you going?” Caroline hoped that didn’t sound as forced as it had in her head.

Abby smiled. “I go down to the Central City, just to walk around.” When she saw the look on Caroline’s face, she said “I love my way of life, but sometimes I like to know that there’s something else out there, ya know?”

“No, I don’t.” And she didn’t.

“That’s ok,” she said and put her hand on Caroline’s knee. “Everyone is different.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” Where that came from, she did not know.

“I would love it!”

The enthusiasm in Abby’s voice assured Caroline.

On the Pod, Caroline asked Abby questions about her part of the country. She had no idea that the Physis Expanse had systems for healthcare, criminal activity and such, it fascinated her. They arrived at Center City and entered the Climate Controlled Passageway, the clear, aboveground, caterpillar-like structure. Caroline could see the awe on Abby’s face at such a monstrous yet nonobstructive structure. They walked for about twenty minutes when Abby stopped to look at the Local Government Command Center.

“The only thing about the Municipality that I can’t get past is the lack of color,” Abby reflected.

“Lack of color?”

“Yes. In the Physis Expanse, we have flowers growing wild. They add warmth and energy.”

“We have flowers,” Caroline said.

Abby looked sad. “Yes, but they are placed purposefully. For instance, look there.” She pointed to the doorway. “The entrance to the most important building in the town is anything but inviting. No shrubbery or plants adorn its sides. Wouldn’t it be nice to see some color?” She paused. “Alliums would be perfect.”

Caroline tilted her head as she surveyed the entrance.

“Alliums signify strength. They’re a beautiful purple flower. Or perhaps amaryllis. Yes, they might be more appropriate as they stand for pride and beauty.”

She looked at her new friend who was obviously thinking deeply about this. “How do you know so much about flowers?”

Abby looked at Caroline. Her cheeks were rosy from the walking. “It’s what I do. I grow and sell them, my family’s been in the flower business for generations.”

“We have florists, although they’re very expensive. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever purchased flowers.”

“That’s a shame, I can’t imagine life without them.”

The women stood in contemplation until Caroline said “I think I’d like a cup of coffee. It’s about time for my Regulated Energy Boost.” She looked at the digital clock on the building which confirmed it. “Would you like to join me?”

She noticed a change in Abby’s demeanor, she seemed somber, while Caroline felt energized. Perhaps the air here is so different than what she’s used to, Caroline thought.

“No, thank you, though. I don’t drink the Municipality water.” Abby’s nose scrunched up. “I don’t mean any disrespect, but there are many ingredients, shall we call them, added to your water.”

“I know—they promote good health. Did you know that most diseases are preventable?”

“I’ve heard that before. Some of the ingredients harm plants, however, namely flowers.” She started to walk, and Caroline followed.

“How so?” Caroline didn’t understand why would they put something in the water that caused harm? Perhaps the flowers here are just different. They existed: she could order flowers with her groceries, so it couldn’t be that bad. She decided to keep this to herself, she didn’t want to risk starting an argument.

“It’s a complicated process, but to sum it up, the brightest and most fragrant flowers come from free water.”

“Free water?”

“Yes, water free from artificial ingredients. Luckily the Hydro Regulation Act of 2089, declared that water sent to the Physis Expanse must be filtered. It’s one of the few, yet most important, examples of large technologically based machinery on our side of the border.”

“I didn’t know that,” Caroline said. “I only knew we—the Municipality supplied the Expanse with most of your water.” She knew any further questions would sound confrontational and reveal her rejection of their systems.

“*Some* of our water, yes.”

Over Abby's shoulder, Caroline noticed a head crawling with chestnut brown curls. It was attached to a man who was looking directly at her. Quickly she looked away, feeling herself blush.

"Thank you, Caroline, for walking with me today. I've enjoyed it."

"Me, too."

"Speaking of water, I must be heading home." She leaned closer as if telling a secret. "I make dinner for my family."

Make dinner? Caroline did not understand why she would make dinner when the Weight Management Board provided meals...

"Enjoy your coffee," Abby said as she waved good-bye.

Although notions of fate weren't a part of her culture, Caroline intrinsically knew that her meeting Abby was meant to be. She continued her walk, stopping for coffee before heading home.

CHAPTER 3

Two days later, Caroline completed her morning shift and decided to stay and eat lunch. She sat at one of the window booths, facing the entranceway. While waiting for her food, she glanced up when something caught her eye: chestnut brown curls. The hostess stand blocked most of her view, so she leaned to the left trying to see better. It didn't really work, and she almost fell out of her booth. Composing herself, she looked around to make sure no one was watching her. Everyone seemed to be minding their own business. A few moments later, the curls moved past the stand and into the main floor and revealed the man to which they were attached.

It was definitely the same man she saw during her walk with Abby. This was the first time she was able to see all of him: his medium-build body was as healthy as she'd ever seen joined by a face that could disarm even the most stubborn of Citizens. The curls were a bit unruly by conventional standards, but she liked them that way. More than anything Caroline wanted to wrap a curl around her finger—

“More tea, Caroline?” Caroline jumped at the voice, she hadn't noticed her Nutrition Steward standing at her booth.

“What? Oh yes, thank you.” She moved her cup to the edge making it easier for her to pour the liquid.

She smiled. “He’s healthy looking, isn’t he?”

“Yes, yes he is.” Caroline didn’t bother to mask her appreciation.

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

“Maybe I will.”

Working in a restaurant taught her that looks can be deceiving: just because someone looked healthy didn’t mean they were. Caroline had dated a few men throughout the years but none of them proved worthy of lifelong partnership. Tired of looking back and wishing she’d paid more attention in the beginning of the relationship to red flags, she decided to wait and see what he ordered. Once she saw what he was served, she knew she had to approach him. Still in her uniform, she smoothed out her skirt and wrapped stray hairs behind her ears. She took a deep breath and walked as confidently as she knew how to do.

“Hello, may I sit with you?”

He looked up, fork in hand as he was in mid-bite and smiled. “Please. I’d be delighted.”

She slid into the seat opposite him and said “Thank you. I hope I’m not disturbing you—”

“If this is a disturbance, I’ll gladly play along.” His hand hadn’t moved, it just hung in front of him, stilled by her arrival.

His smile was captivating and his eyes welcoming. Caroline was used to men looking at her, expected it even. She was as healthy as she could be, thanks to following the government's structure. Nevertheless, she felt herself blush.

"It's just that I noticed you ordered the Antioxidant Medley. That's not something we see often here, since the Board doesn't include it in their recommendations."

"We?"

"I work here." She pointed to her uniform, he nodded and put his fork down.

"As I was saying, while the dish complies with guidelines, it's not required, of course, because cancer is cured easily so most people don't see its benefits. But you ordered it."

"I think most people don't like the taste. No offense, Caroline."

How did he know my name?

"Your name tag," he explained, and she chuckled, embarrassed at her initial surprise.

She glanced up and saw two of her coworkers whispering and looking in her direction. They stood about ten feet away, leaning against the utensils station. The large silver stand was essentially a metal box with three grapefruit-sized holes in it. A Steward could request a utensil set by pushing a button and retrieved it from an orange hole. In the middle of their gossiping, one must have pushed the button by accident, because a set flew out of the hole. Giggling, they picked up the set. In order to prevent her own laughter, Caroline tried to contain her smile and looked back at her companion, hoping not to appear childish.

“I mean no offense to the chef, and, in fact, I love it. But I’m not the average Citizen who prefers simply to maintain a healthy weight. There’s more to proper care than weight.” He took a sip of his water and barely swallowed before continuing. “Just because one adheres to the Regulations does not mean one is doing all he or she can.”

She was hooked.

“And furthermore, just because we can restore cancer cells to their normalcy via technology doesn’t mean we should not continue to prevent their occurrence in the first place.”

“I agree.”

“Well, so does the Progress Promotion Board. We’re working closely with the Health and Wellness Committee to produce a monitoring device that, when uploaded to the Health Code, will measure the likelihood that cancer cells are forming in one’s body. That information will then appear on your scanners, and more people will be ordering the Antioxidant Medley.” His expression was that of someone who just did her a favor.

“Good for business.”

“Wow. When is that happening...” She’d been wondering what his name was and thought this was her in to find out.

“Brady. Brady Corneille, Agent of the PPB.”

“Brady. When is this new advancement arriving?”

He looked at his watch. “Notices are going out as we speak. The uploads begin tonight at zero hour.”

“That’s incredible. I hadn’t heard anything about this until now,” she said.

“You didn’t need to know until now,” he said flirtatiously.

“I’ll be sure to tell the chef. He’ll be pleased.”

“See, Caroline. Everyone wins with technology.”

“And everyone is content with structure,” she added.

He was hooked. She could tell by the way he paid attention to her. He also hadn’t touched his food since her arrival.

She fell in love in that first conversation, and later, he had admitted, so had he. They had dinner that same evening and remained together from then on. They dated for about a year, and she said yes when he proposed marriage.

CHAPTER 4

Their first child was born a year into their marriage. Timing worked out well, as their son was commissioned by the Population Authority Board thanks to a recent drop in white-skinned children. Prior to marriage, Caroline didn't know the PAB's function, but she learned it ensures racial, ethnic and sexually oriented diversity by issuing permits to the appropriate child-seeking couples. It would be another nine years before they were granted another permit—and a baby girl.

“Tom! Come downstairs, honey.” Caroline hated yelling, but she couldn't feed one-year-old Hannah in the kitchen and get her ten-year-old to dress faster. “It's time to go to school.”

“Be down in a minute, mom,” he yelled back.

She loved her kitchen, she loved her Dwelling. Designed by the Efficient Dwelling Board, it retained the standard layout: three bedrooms and a full bath upstairs, office, kitchen opening into the living room downstairs. Brady gave Caroline free reign on the decorating, and she'd chosen pale spring-like colors, mostly shades of yellow and green. Her kitchen was her favorite. First, she loved the efficiency inherent in its design,

everything was close enough to save time yet spaced far enough away so she didn't feel cramped. The yellow she chose reminded her of the daffodils she saw in the stores in May. She most appreciated the soothing tone in the mornings when the family rushed around to start their day.

“One more bite, my sweet girl,” she said, turning her attention back to the blonde-curly-haired task in front of her. Hannah readily accepted her final bite only to spit it out on the already food-filled tray of her Child Feeding Chair. Caroline had to admit that Hannah's meal smelled less than appealing: it was puréed carrots with vitamins and spices but smelled like antibacterial agents. The Government required it, however, so she did her best to entice her little one. Once she made the mistake of eating it, hoping to show Hannah how good it was, but her own uncontrolled reaction did more harm than good. Caroline managed to swallow it but not without great effort. From that point on, she stuck to oohs and aaahs for persuasion.

“You're just like your brother, you know that? Oh how he hated to eat.” I would be, too, if I had to eat this food, she thought to herself.

“What about me?” Tom's voice boomed against the hard walls and white metal cabinetry of the kitchen.

“Speak of the devil. Are you all ready for school?”

“I think so,” he said as he gave his sister a kiss on the cheek.

“Did you get everything downloaded all right?” Caroline knew this question could start a confrontation, but it had to be asked.

“Yes,” Tom said without looking in her direction. Instead he pulled out his Regulated First Meal and inserted it into the Microwave Oven for cooking. A friendly

female voice came from the machine after five seconds, letting Tom know his food was done. He took it out and sat at the table across from Caroline, eating as if no one else was in the room.

“Let me see.”

“Mom—”

“Let me see. It’s not that I don’t trust you, I don’t trust the eReader.” This wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie. His eReader had been giving him trouble the last couple of days. Wishing he wouldn’t eat with his hands, she decided against correcting him. One confrontation was enough in the morning.

Yesterday, Caroline received an alert an hour after he went off to school. His eReader conveniently stopped downloading before his Spatial Mathematics homework could fully load. She wanted to avoid another alert.

“Everything looks good,” she said handing the pocket-sized device back to him.

“Told you,” he said with a bit of attitude.

“Told you what?” Brady entered the kitchen and kissed his wife and daughter before heading to the Coffee Dispensing Computer.

“That my eReader was up to date,” Tom said, as if wishing someone a good day.

As she looked at her son speaking to her husband, she couldn’t help but acknowledge the resemblance. He could be magnanimous and charming one minute yet obstinate and rebellious another. She trusted his learning of the Obligatory Morals Board’s guidelines for Citizens, however, not to mention her own parenting skills. He would turn out just fine, just like his father.

CHAPTER 5

It was late, and Brady still wasn't home. Caroline managed to get the kids to sleep and shut down the Dwelling for the evening. Most nights he was able to join them for dinner at least but for the past six months, thanks to a new project, she spent many nights alone. She sat in her living room, eReader on her lap. She'd just finished a novel that was less than thrilling. The computers were in Night Mode, and the only sound was the soft purring of the Salmonella Detector on the turtle cage. When Tom first told her he was required to have a pet, Caroline bristled at the thought of caring for it. With Brady gone, however, she came to appreciate its companionship.

It's not that she didn't appreciate his Career. On the contrary, his position as an Officer of the Progress Promotion Board supported their family well. Caroline loved being a part of the Intermediate Grade on the Central Government's Family Economic Ranking scale. They had enough income to support themselves but not enough to enter the Distinguished Grade, which required greater contributions to the Fiscal Assistance of Society.

She found herself thinking about his Career, as a way of reconciling the loneliness she felt. Income aside, she truly admired the nobility of the PPB and its mission to aid

Citizens in embracing new technologies. Caroline knew first hand that change was difficult to grasp. She often chided Brady that as soon as she was used to things one way, the PPB told her a new way was better. She had told him she learned this at an early age.

Until she was ten years old, her mother washed the family's clothing in their Personal Decontamination Unit. She was skilled at working within their water regulations which saved enough water in case Caroline needed something in particular washed in the middle of the week. One day, an agent from the Hygiene Board came and removed the Personal Unit from their home, instructing them to gather one load each to be taken away by the Hygiene Board's Clothing Decontamination Service. The very next week, and every Tuesday following, a large hovering vehicle waited outside their home as her mother brought out three Contaminated Clothing Receptacles, one each per person. She received, in exchange, three Approved Sterilized Clothing Receptacles. The Board counted each item to ensure the same size and weight of each week's load. Unfortunately for Caroline, her favorite shirt ended up in the initial load with the matching skirt going in the second one. She never again wore them together. At first, this new way frustrated them all. If they'd been given notice or time to adjust, it might have been easier. The PPB only said this way is better. In truth, aside from the occasional separated outfit, Caroline saw that the PPB was right: her mother had more time for other household chores, and it enforced limitations eventually relieving Caroline of the burden of clothing choice. Whatever items came back clean were the ones she wore that week. Life became simpler.

In the end, it always does. The less control they had as individuals, the more content they became.

One of the reasons she had fallen in love with Brady was her admiration for his dedication to his job: his job of making the lives of Citizens better. Still, she missed him. What good is technological progress if your husband, and the father of your children, isn't home?

Business was slow. Advances come in cycles, and they were in a down point. The good news was that this meant life in the Municipality was running efficiently. The bad news was that the Central Government pushed for more. This was Brady's explanation to Caroline as she complained about him spending late nights at work. Caroline ran through this morning's argument while she disinfected the silvery kitchen countertops. It had gone the same way it always had.

"I won't be home until late," he said while looking in the Reflective Object.

Caroline was in the middle of putting the cream and beige-colored comforter on the bed, she stopped and stared at her husband in frustration. She had just enough time to tidy the room before getting Hannah up. She could hear her stir in the Citizen Child Electronic Monitor and figured a cry was on its way.

"Brady, I was hoping we could eat dinner tonight as a family. We haven't done that in weeks, months, even."

“We’re discussing the plan to move in on the Physis Expanse tomorrow. I have to be prepared.” Caroline could see he didn’t care about dinner: he didn’t even stop to address her. She just stood there, until he had no choice but to stop.

“Caroline,” Brady said. “You know how important this project is—”

“Know? It’s all I hear about.” She mimicked him: “You’re going to bring technological advancement to the Physis Expanse.”

Each stood on one side of the bed, in what is usually the most serene room in the Dwelling. Caroline had the room painted Sapphire Blue, an optimistic color that welcomed the sunshine streaming in through its only window. This morning, however, despite the sunshine, nothing felt bright.

“I’m sorry, honey, I am. Once this is complete, I’ll—we’ll have more time. I promise.” He came to her side, kissed her on the cheek and went downstairs. The light on the Monitor turned red which meant Hannah was crying. Caroline looked at the bed, dropped the comforter, she was too angry to finish, and went to get her daughter.

The kitchen smelled like food, so she activated the Odor Cleansing System. With all their technology, she wondered why the system couldn’t stay on by itself. As she continued wiping down the steel-like surfaces, her mind would not let Brady’s work go. She admitted to herself that she felt uneasy about the PPB taking Municipal advances into the Expanse. When he first mentioned the project, Brady displayed such excitement that she didn’t pay much attention to the details. After a few years, though, it was old. She reassured herself that Brady was doing his best to support his family and make life better for all Citizens. She didn’t fully understand exactly what the PPB was doing, and

normally she wouldn't care beyond basic curiosity. Maybe it was the late nights that had her all mixed up about it. She didn't know. Rather than drive herself crazy, she finished the government required cleaning and went to the Kitchen Module to confirm that she'd thoroughly disinfected the kitchen. It was embedded into the wall near the room's entrance. She paused before it, inspecting the system, the system she'd never questioned. Was she questioning it now? No, she thought, she was taking care of her family.

Since getting married, Caroline stayed home with the children. Brady brought home the income, and Caroline enjoyed the opportunity to make sure all was properly taken care of at home. Today was grocery day, which gave her something to concentrate on. After she confirmed the cleaning regiment, she pushed the button which brought the Module out from the wall, its robotic arm moved smoothly so that it was waist-high. Pulling a chair over from the table, she sat in front of the screen and started working on her order.

She loved that groceries were delivered to the Dwelling as she couldn't imagine taking her one-year-old to a store nor could she imagine having to figure out what the family needed. With two children and a husband, it seemed impossible. Making sure Tom entered something into the Kitchen Module when he used it was challenging enough.

We need more antibacterial soap, she thought. Done. Now to enter the payment information. The computer flashed a warning, reminding her to update the account, which means she needed the Secret Code. Where is the new Secret Code? She sat still while her mind figured out its location. Brady's office: the Secret Code was sent to his Personal Records Device, and he always kept it in his office where it would remain safe.

Caroline stood up and stretched out her back. According to the clock on the wall,

she'd spent twenty minutes entering in the grocery order. It also meant she had about ten minutes before Hannah would wake up and need to be changed and fed.

Brady's office was in the front of the Dwelling, and she rarely went into it. She had no need for an office of her own and viewed the rest of the space hers. Even more so since he hasn't been home. She sighed. Somehow she needed to find a way to accept the situation and move on.

The door to Brady's office was closed, as always, and, because of his job, could only be opened by handprint analysis. She put her hand against the translucent black monitor and waited for recognition. It was cold. While waiting, she noticed a mark on the lower portion of the wall, from Tom no doubt. With Brady's promised extra income, they could get it fixed. There's a benefit, she guessed. The door slid into the wall, and she walked inside.

His office was like the Dwelling command center, not only in operation but also in appearance. Caroline squinted as she walked in, the Automatic Lighting Units bouncing their radiant lumina against the only pure white walls in the entire Dwelling. She had suggested a nice shade of green, sage, if she remembered correctly, to offset the lighting, but he refused. Considering he hadn't scoffed at any other decorating choices she made, she'd decided to simply follow his wishes. It's not like we go in here, anyway, except on occasions like this. Besides, there's only so much I can do when all Regulated Furnishings only came in three styles: silver, brass and translucent.

She knew he kept the Device in a locked drawer and found it with ease. She entered the alphanumeric code into the front keypad of the drawer. It opened. As she pulled out the device, her eyes wandered to the Digital Tablet lying on the translucent

desktop. It was the summary of Brady's proposal regarding the Physis Expanse. Across the top it read

PROGRESS PROMOTION BOARD

WATER STRIPPING DEVICE

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Water stripping device? She read further and discovered that the technology Brady developed removed various additives from water. Why would we need this?

"Are you finding everything ok?"

Caroline jumped.

"Sorry, dear. I didn't mean to scare you." Brady came closer and kissed her cheek. "What are you looking for?"

"The Secret Code." She felt like a child caught doing something wrong, even though, she knew her motives weren't sinister. "I found it." She held up the device as proof. "But then this caught my attention," she said pointing to the Tablet.

Without looking at it, he said "Yes, that's the documentation for the project I've been working on, the one keeping me away from you." His voice wavered at the end of the sentence, into an apologetic tone.

"Do they need this?"

"They will. Once the water change happens." He started towards the door.

"What's for dinner?"

Caroline followed, taking a step forward then back, nearly forgetting to take the Device with her. She had to rush to catch up with him. "What water change?"

They continued towards the kitchen, with Brady talking as they moved. “The Board’s ready to add a new agent into the water supply, an agent that will prevent something in cats. I’m not sure exactly what it does, but the Physis Hydro *Purification* system isn’t designed to catch it.” His pronunciation of the word purification mirrored the sarcasm most Citizens used when discussing the way of life in the Expanse.

Entering the kitchen, Caroline cherished the muted décor. No more harsh lighting or sterile walls, it’s amazing what a little color on the walls will do for silver appliances.

Brady continued, “We’ve designed a device to strip it out. The key is the personal use aspect: each individual must install the device onto water sources, faucets, and the like. The potential economic benefits are huge, for us I mean.”

“Why don’t they change their water system to catch it?”

“They won’t be able to. In order to catch something, you have to know what it is. We’re not about to give them that information.”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

He shrugged. “Right? Wrong? It’s all debatable.” Taking a handful of nuts from the container in the cupboard, he shoved them in his mouth, ignoring the fact that he had more to say. “Besides, this kind of stuff’s been happening since the two split. Don’t think it doesn’t go the other way either.”

“Honey, if you eat any more nuts, I’ll have to adjust your dinner.” She frowned at the thought, because of the lengthy explanations required in the system. “I always thought the two respected the aims of the other.” Caroline didn’t mean to sound naïve but didn’t know how to ask the question any other way.

“Respect is a public relations concept. We can’t encourage ordinary Citizens to be unfair, that would make them uncontrollable, chaotic even. But when we maintain some sense of order, via the Boards, the Municipality reaps the spoils.”

It was obvious to Caroline that Brady didn’t have a problem with what he just said, and while not one to question Municipality policy, even if doing so could affect change, she found this news disconcerting. Her stomach a little queasy, as if she was about to get onto a roller coaster.

Tom walked in, refocusing Caroline’s attention on her evening routine begun. She was already slightly behind schedule and had to endure Tom’s whining about hunger. Shelving her concern about Brady’s project, she proceeded to heat the appropriate meal packs.

CHAPTER 6

Later that evening, Caroline sat alone—again—in the living room, and thought about Abby. She hadn't thought of the Natural for years. She remembered Abby's comments on the flowers and free water. She wondered how Brady's project would affect them. In order to ask Brady, she'd have to reveal her encounter. While she didn't necessarily condone their way of life, she never felt the aggression that her husband did towards it. It didn't seem worth another confrontation. Should she warn Abby? Why would she do that? How would she do that? She told herself she was being silly: it was one encounter, one conversation. Feeling sympathy for her was ok but anything beyond that wasn't appropriate. Then why won't this gut reaction to protect go away...

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Caroline wasn't feeling well, her stomach was nauseous. After throwing up for about half an hour, she sat with her head and arms cradling the cold Citizen Waste Disposal Unit. Her head ached like she'd spent the morning banging it against the wall. She could feel her stomach muscles ache from the heaving which overtook her hunger only slightly. She'd woken up and gone into the bathroom immediately.

"Mom? Are you ok? Tom woke up to the sound of her puking.

"Get your father," was all she could muster, not sure if he even heard her.

"He left already. Can I come in?"

"No, I'll be downstairs in a minute." She tried to pull herself up but a weight kept her down. Through her physical pain, she registered that there was no one to help her. Somehow, she had to get up and get Tom ready for school. Slowly she looked at the door. It seemed light years away. She could tell that her son was waiting on the other side, because she didn't hear his footsteps leaving, she always heard Tom coming thanks to his heavy stride.

"Mom?"

“Yes, Tom.” She was halfway there, crawling on the smooth hard floor.

“Hannah’s crying.”

Great, she thought. Keep going, Caroline, you can do this. You’ve been through this before. She stopped mid-crawl: she had been through this before, twice before. Both times, she was pregnant. “Impossible,” she said out loud.

“What?” Tom was still there.

She managed to stand up. Scared to look in the Reflective Object, she just opened the door. The look on Tom’s face mirrored how she felt.

“I’m just not feeling well, honey. But I’ll be ok.” She smiled, knowing he could tell it was forced.

Somehow she managed to get Tom off to school. After feeding Hannah, which was no small task, she put sat her down in the living room in front of the Electronic Entertainment System. She giggled watching the dancing colors on the screen. As Caroline watched her, she wondered how this beautiful child could be the same terror who, just a few minutes before, fought each fork full of food. Now that the escapade was over, Caroline felt a twinge of guilt for elevating her voice to Hannah more than once trying to feed her.

Her body ached, and her head calmed down but still rattled. At least I don’t feel like puking, she thought. Her throat still burned from the influx of acid.

She knew her next steps to verify her suspicion. Trudging to the bathroom, she peed into the Medical Analysis Machine hooked to the side of the Disposal Unit. The machine was convenient but unpleasant. She peed in the cup at the tip of a tube and watched as the dark yellow liquid flowed into the wall. Dark yellow wasn’t a good sign.

Returning to the Bedroom, she contacted the Medical Oversight Board via the Bedroom Module to let them know that she'd sent the sample.

Caroline sat on the unmade bed. Still in her Night Clothes, she scratched under her arm. Lifting it was like lifting a cement block. Her whole body was out of whack, unprepared for the sudden upheaval of her insides. Soon the Module would warn her about her missed meal, asking for an explanation. "As soon as I know, you'll know," she said out loud as if it could hear her. And just like that, her answer appeared on the screen.

UNAUTHORIZED PREGNANCY CONFIRMED

Unauthorized pregnancy. She stared at the screen, hoping she saw it wrong and knowing that she didn't. Never before had she imagined this happening, nothing like this ever happened before, she'd never...

An unauthorized pregnancy meant two things: one, that her birth control had failed and two, that she and Brady had a big decision to make. Cancellation immediately sprung to mind, and she cringed at the thought.

This was impossible. She was not allowed to just get pregnant. *All citizens had to apply for and be approved to receive a permit from the Population Authority Board, which ran under the Central Government Command Center. She could hear the training video now. The population of the Municipality was closely watched, as it should be. Past experiences showed how detrimental overpopulation can be to the welfare of the state: economic deficits, sociological regression and environmental damages can be prevented by simply balancing births and deaths. Fewer births made it possible to continually increase life spans without upsetting the structure.*

How could this happen? Caroline could feel her body getting warmer as the anger welled. She never wavered from her monthly birth control injection. She couldn't waver—the system made sure of it. They'd never even talked of a third child; they were fortunate to have been awarded two Procreation Permits, allowing them to request one boy and one girl.

In the middle of her internal rant, she remembered another option: they could apply for an emergency permit from the Population Authority Board. The problem was it was costly, not to mention a permanent embarrassment on their Health Codes.

Tears streamed down her face, the only outlet for her anger and embarrassment. So much for perfected birth control. What will Brady say?

What did Brady have to say? She was the one who took care of the family. The list of daily responsibilities started running through her mind, each one coming on the heels of the one before it. She shook her head so hard it rejuvenated her headache, physical pain being preferred over psychological torment.

The best option was to cancel the pregnancy, she decided. It was still early enough, and the Cell Cancellation Center would send the cells to the Genetics Liberation Board where they'd be put to good use. What exactly that use was, Caroline didn't know, but she was sure it would be good. Besides, she hardly had the energy or the time to take care of her two children, and Hannah would be walking soon. There, it was settled. Surely Brady would see it her way, that is, if he ever came home.

CHAPTER 8

This morning came too soon, Brady thought, as he rode the SkyPod to work. Normally he appreciated riding in the 10-person Pod alone, but today it amplified his loneliness. This is what it would be like inside of an egg, minus the goop. Resting his head backwards against the smooth shell, he settled in for his twenty minute ride. It was unusual for his mind to replay events, but then the events had been anything but usual.

He and his wife, Caroline, were standing in the kitchen, when she said two little words.

“I’m pregnant.”

It wasn’t supposed to happen, and, in all reality, it couldn’t continue. They hadn’t applied for a Procreation Permit.

“I don’t know how it happened,” she said. “I received my monthly injection.”

Brady was bewildered. The Population Authority Board perfected birth control decades ago, and there were strict penalties for conceiving a child without a permit.

“I don’t see any other option but,” he hesitated before saying “but to cancel it.”

Caroline fell into a chair, limp, head hanging.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“You’re right, honey. We have to cancel it.”

He moved close to her, reached down, lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. Never before had he seen such sad resignation.

The Pod slowed as it came into a Station. He looked at his iPhone for the time. Caroline would leave soon for her journey to the Cell Cancellation Center. He would have gone with her but needed to be at work, there was a meeting regarding his Hydro Project. The project he’d worked on for most of his Career, the project that determined his family’s Economic Stability, the project that required his full concentration.

He tried to focus his thoughts on the meeting: it was expected to be a fairly straight-forward presentation given to Public Information Agents, the group that would help educate Citizens. First, he would tell them things they probably already knew, but for the sake of thoroughness, background information couldn’t hurt. Of course they knew about the Division Pact, separating the United States into The Municipality and The Physis Expanse, and about The Mutual Commerce Relations Board who, among other things, oversaw the Hydro Exchange Program.

This part Brady would have to explain clearly, because not everyone understood the intricacies. Focus, focus, focus, he told himself. Sitting up, he reached into his bag and pulled out his Portable Multipurpose Tablet, typing his thoughts always helped him sort things out. He began to make some notes:

THE TWO DIVISIONS COLLABORATED TO BUILD THE PHYSIS HYDRO PURIFICATION SYSTEM. AS CITIZENS OF THE MUNICIPALITY KNEW, AGENTS IN THE WATER PREVENTED

COUNTLESS DISEASES AND HARMFUL AFFLICTIONS. THE NATURALS, ON THE OTHER HAND, PREFERRED CLEAN WATER (THEIR TERM). THE SYSTEM, THEREFORE, REGULATED WATER TRANSFERRING FROM ONE SIDE TO THE OTHER APPROPRIATELY: ADDING AGENTS TO THE MUNICIPALITY WATER AND REMOVING THEM FROM THE WATER GOING TO THE EXPANSE.

This was the part that excited Brady.

A NEW AGENT WAS TO BE DEPLOYED INTO THE MUNICIPALITY'S WATER SUPPLY. IT HAD BEEN DECADES SINCE A NEW AGENT WAS DEVELOPED, AND THE SYSTEM WASN'T SET UP TO REMOVE IT. AS THE AGENT WAS DEVELOPED, A REMOVAL MECHANISM WAS CREATED. THIS MECHANISM, HOWEVER, WOULD REQUIRE EACH INDIVIDUAL OUTLET FITTED. THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR THE MUNICIPALITY WAS IMMENSE, BUILT IN MARKET, NO CHOICE AND ONE SUPPLIER, THE PROGRESS PROMOTION BOARD. DOUBTLESS, NATURALS WILL BE UPSET, BUT THAT'S WHERE YOU GUYS COME IN.

That last part would no doubt wake up the PI Agents. Brady, however, wasn't feeling it. He looked at his iPhone just as the SkyPod pulled into his Station.

As he sat in his office, he found himself looking back on his life and the path he took. Two thoughts ran through Brady's head: one, my life changed the day I met Caroline, and two, nothing is more important than my family. The funny thing was, Brady had never thought of himself as a family man. He pulled his chair up to his desk, went to turn his Official Business Tablet on and get the day's work started, only he couldn't. He watched his screensaver scroll from left to right side of paper-thin computer screen. It was the Board's motto

PROGRESS IS GOOD FOR ALL, MINUS THE FEW.

He sat, staring, at the same desk he's sat at for nearly fifteen years. For the first time in all those years, he became aware that he was surrounded on all sides by gray, stiff foam cubicle walls. It's not that he didn't know this before, but it was as if his conscious just woke up. He looked up and saw the only opening, the doorway, which was nothing more than a moveable piece of gray foam. Even the ceiling was gray foam. Soundproof, Lightproof, Smellproof. Those were the marketing key words, and Brady had always appreciated their accurateness. Now, though, those attributes seemed more claustrophobic than protective. For as long as he can remember, Brady looked to the future, but this morning, he sat still and looked at the past.

Technology as the means of advancing society was stressed in his home. His father used to say "Men are only as good as their technical development allows them to be." He worked for the PPB when it was called the Administration for the Technological Advancement of Society. From an early age, Brady was encouraged to embrace electronics and computers. An only child, he received the best his family could manage. Of all his toys, his favorite was a virtual fish tank. Swimming back and forth, one iridescent cichlid captivated Brady for hours, its blue and purple scales sparkling through the digitized water, from one end of the tank to the other. He realized that most kids played video games or toyed with newly developed teleportation toys, but Brady remained entranced with his fish. He felt that if humans could recreate animals, there was no limit to the potential.

While he entered the Progress Promotion Board right after completing school, he had already received his first assignment before he graduated. He was twenty years old and in his last year of his Advanced Education Training. Like all Final Year Students, his

studies focused on Career Placement activities. Unlike most students, he had known for years what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be involved in creating new technologies, like his father before him. The PPB recruited aggressively and, thanks to his father's success at the agency, he was watched earlier than most.

His first assignment was, he later realized, more of a loyalty test than anything else. While its primary purpose was to advance society, not everyone was eager to accept the updates. According to the File Brady was given, the school's Principal Headmaster was apparently one such person. Brady followed his instructions and made an appointment to speak to the Headmaster first thing one Monday morning.

Brady stood in the doorway of the largest office he'd ever seen. He'd never before been in the Headmaster's office, there hadn't been a reason. No one entered the office unless something very bad happened, and, even then, the Principal Underling handled such matters. Brady only saw the Headmaster once but never forgot his face. His deep black skin sagged over a distinct bone structure, he was in his late 60s, maybe 70s, tall, maybe 5' 10", and a healthy slender build. No one knew his age, just that he was old.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Corneille," he said. The Headmaster sat behind a large glass desk, facing the door, at the far end of the office.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster. Thank you for seeing me." Brady was nervous but not scared.

"Of course. Please come in. The door will close behind you."

Brady couldn't help but enter the room as if impeded. The beige walls watched him enter, and the deep brown carpet felt his presence. The décor was minimal except for

one large flat screen on each wall that scrolled silently through pictures of campus, students and award ceremonies.

“Sit down, young man,” he said, never looking away from his computer monitor.

Brady obeyed and cleared his throat for no reason other than for something to do.

The Headmaster turned to face him. “What can I do for you?”

“You know—” Brady stopped, realizing his voice was an octave higher than normal. “You know my dad’s been working on the new Tablet Integration Project, yes?”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” he lied. The File told Brady he was in fact aware of his dad’s position.

“He is, sir. And because of his involvement, I’m interested, of course.”

The Headmaster smiled. “Of course.”

“I haven’t seen any in the classrooms, though. When can we expect them?” The File also told Brady at least half of the classrooms should be using them.

“Well, Mr. Corneille, I’m not sure you will.”

“Excuse me?”

“Not before you graduate, that is.”

“Why not?” Brady realized he’d shifted out of any kind of professional manner, but since this was his first professional experience, didn’t know how to regain it.

The Headmaster unfolded his hands and laid them palm-side down on the glass.

“Does your father know you’re here?”

“No. No, sir. I came on my own.” This was true. The File told him explicitly that no one should know about his assignment.

The Headmaster smiled, as much as his face would let him. Brady wondered if he was capable of a belly laugh.

“Mr. Corneille, I’m not quite sure how to tell you this.” He refolded his hands. “But the Tablet Project has been terminated. They were found to be faulty.”

Faulty? Brady felt his temperature rise in conjunction with his dismay and anger. His father had been working on this project for years, it was his baby, his pride and joy, the pinnacle of his life’s work.

The Headmaster saw Brady’s concern. “Now, I know how important this project is to your father—and, therefore, to you—but it’s vitally important that you keep this information to yourself.”

“Does my dad know?” Brady looked down at his lap.

“No, he does not. Not yet. By the time he finds out, he’ll be out of a Career.”

He looked up. “Out of a Career?”

“Surely you don’t expect the PPB has use for someone who spends years on a bad project,” he said. His manner was matter-of-fact.

Brady stammered, trying to find something to say, some way to control the situation, but all that came out was silent breaths of indignation. Must retain composure, you were taught better than this, your own Career is at stake here, he thought. After a deep breath, he went on.

“Thank you for the information, Mr. Headmaster. I assure you it will stay with me.” He stood up. “I apologize for wasting your time.”

“Not at all, Mr. Corneille. I’m always happy to assist a bright, young talent. Perhaps you’ll learn from your father’s folly.” He went back to his computer screen, signaling an end to the meeting.

Brady stood a longer than he should have, in reaction to the last comment about his “father’s folly.”

The Headmaster never addressed him again.

Brady left the office and walked through the school’s halls numbly. Yes, the highest ranking official in his Educational System gave him startling news about his father, the man Brady had idolized since birth. Yes, his father was going to lose his Career, his life’s work. Yes, his family would face tragic economic repercussions. No, he would not betray the trust of the PPB. Brady knew that for certain. He also knew he should feel guilty that he didn’t feel guilty about this allegiance, but he didn’t.

Later that evening, Brady was at his bedroom desk, entering his report into the online PPB system when there was a knock at his door.

“Hi, son,” his father said, opening the door. He entered, head first, leaning against the door jam. A good looking man in his youth, thanks to 30 plus years of 60 hour work weeks and the stress of providing for his family, Jacob Corneille had lost most of his blonde hair and the lines across his forehead never went away. Despite adhering to the Weight Management Board’s Nutritional Guidelines, a tummy had started to protrude.

“Hi, dad,” Brady said, without looking up from the screen.

“How’d the assignment go today?”

Brady stopped, paused and turned to face his father. “Fine, dad, it went fine.” He smiled.

His father returned the smile and said “Anything out of the ordinary happen?”

“No. Pretty standard.”

“Good.” He stood in the doorway, rubbing his chin. “You know, Brady. You can talk to me about anything.”

“I know, Dad.” Brady shrugged. “Like I said, it was pretty standard.”

“Well, good night then. It’s been a long day. The Tablet Project is in full swing!”

The exhaustion in his eyes was second only to the pride in his voice.

“That’s good to hear,” he said it as authentically as he could.

It was a week before Brady heard from the PPB. When he did, he received an email that said

ASSIGNMENT SUCCESSFUL.

He was home, sitting on the couch in the living room, when he got it on his iPhone. He smiled and was satisfied. About ten minutes later, his dad came home, hours earlier than usual. Brady was checking his other messages when he heard his father’s footsteps come down the hall and into the living room. He stood to Brady’s right, a step into the room. Without salutation he said “Brady, can we talk for a minute?”

Brady looked over at him and answered “Sure.”

“Let’s go to your room, where we can talk in private.”

“Is everything ok?” His dad had a look that Brady couldn’t read.

“We’ll talk when we get to your room,” he said, already walking in that direction.

Once in his room, Brady sat on his bed, and his dad shut the door, remained standing.

“Assignment Successful?”

Brady figured it was ok to acknowledge the message and so nodded his head.

“You discovered my project, the project that I’ve worked on for years, the project that would make or break the family’s—your family’s—economic future, was a failure. And you didn’t tell me.”

He wasn’t asking, he was stating the facts.

Brady nodded.

“Was that difficult for you?”

He couldn’t tell if this question was a simple inquiry or an accusation and so decided to stick to the truth. Even so, he couldn’t look into his father’s eyes, preferring to stare into the air, when he said “No.”

“Why not?”

“My loyalties were to the PPB.”

“What about me?”

Brady looked him in the eyes. “I knew you’d be able to deal with whatever happened.”

His father smiled, a little at first then growing into the widest grin he’d ever seen his father make. He walked over to Brady and put out his hand. Brady shook it and found he couldn’t release it. As they held hands, his father choked back emotion.

“Congratulations, son. You’ve proven yourself worthy of the Progress Promotions Board.”

Brady smiled but couldn’t help be confused. “What are you going to do about the Tablet Project?”

“Continue on as normal.” He released Brady’s hand and sat down next to him on the bed. “The Headmaster was in on the assignment, well test, really. The Project’s more successful than we’d anticipated. Then they’d anticipated. I always knew the potential, but until implementation, the Board doesn’t exactly get excited.”

“A test?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “The PPB needs to know that you’re capable of keeping a secret, even when loved ones are concerned.”

“So you’re not losing your Career?”

“Far from it, son, far from it.”

As Brady recalled that first assignment, the pride he usually felt gave way to sadness. He wasn’t sure why, because everything worked out all right. He got his Career, and his father was a success. This time was different, though, and he knew it. Before his thoughts could go any further, they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Brady said.

“Good morning, are you ready for our meeting?” It was Carlos, his colleague.

“Yes, let’s go into the Conference Cubicle.”

Brady grabbed his tablet and followed Carlos to the large room at the end of the hallway, which was more like a tunnel, a tunnel of foam walls. One would never know that behind the walls were little rooms of offices, offices with people in them. Brady walked down this tunnel numerous times a day, this was the first time he wished he could see behind the walls yet the thought of doing so was too intense. The entire morning had been too intense and nothing had happened yet.

Focusing on the back of Carlos's head, Brady felt a thin coat of moisture burning through the skin on his back.

The men stopped, and Carlos turned to face Brady.

"You ok, buddy? You look like you don't feel well."

"I'm fine. Let's just get this over with." Brady started to move past him and into the room when he felt Carlos's hand prevent him from going any further.

"Brady, is there something going on with this project?" Carlos said. The look on his usually jovial face was deadly serious.

Brady had to pull himself together. He smiled to disarm his colleague.

"Everything's fine, Carlos, really. I think perhaps I am coming down with something. I'll check it out this evening."

It worked.

"Phew, you had me worried there for a second." He laughed and opened the door for Brady.

The Conference Cubicle was a large room that fit up to ten people around the circular table at its center. He'd expected all the seats to be full, but to his surprise, only two people were present, one woman, whom Brady knew and one man, whom he did not.

Extending his hand to the woman, he said "Denisha, It's nice to see you."

"Likewise, Brady." She turned to the man. "I'd like you to meet Liam. Liam, this is Brady Corneille."

The two men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Liam was a tall white man with bright red hair. When Brady looked up to find Carlos, he saw only that the door was shut. He must have left.

“Brady, please have a seat,” she said.

He did, on the other side of the table, facing his two guests. He leaned forward, putting his folded hands on the table.

“I know this wasn’t the meeting you expected to have,” she said. “We need to talk to you before the The Hydro Project can progress.” Denisha was a petite middle-aged woman of Indian descent: her family had been in the Municipality for generations so there was no trace of an accent. She sat erect with her legs crossed, commanding yet at ease, never wavering in her eye contact.

“I don’t understand, is there a problem?”

She didn’t so much pause as she just stopped. It was as if she were a toy whose battery just died.

Liam took over. “Your wife is pregnant, yes?”

It did not surprise Brady that someone knew, all medical information is online, and government officials have access to all records of its employees, but it did surprise him to hear it brought up.

“Yes. Well—”

“She’s on her way to cancel it.”

“Yes, yes she is.”

“We’d like to grant you a Procreation Permit, backdated so as not to incur any questions later.”

“That’s excellent,” Brady stammered, unsure of the implications.

Liam's facial expression never changed, his fingers never ran through his bright red hair, never scratched his chin or changed positions in the chair. "The child is not yours."

"Excuse me?" Brady's eyes shot open, and his stomach dropped.

"Biologically it's your DNA, but it does not belong to you or your wife."

This was too much. "At the risk of being rude, will someone please tell me what the hell's going on?"

Batteries kicked in, and Denisha rejoined the conversation. "Brady, there's another aspect of the Project that you don't know about. It concerns an Agent." She uncrossed and crossed her legs in the opposite direction. "We think we've developed an Agent that will cure Infantile Allergen Syndrome, but we need to conduct further testing."

"What is Infantile Aller..."

"Infantile Allergen Syndrome. It's a complex disease that inflicts babies in utero."

"I've never heard of it," Brady said. He was getting frustrated. What did this have to do with supplying water?

"Very few people have, thanks to the P.I. Office, but they can only contain this knowledge for so long. It's relatively new."

"What does it do?"

"It attacks the internal organs, quite rapidly actually, ultimately killing its host."

"How does a child get it?" He figured he didn't have a choice but to play along.

Denisha looked at Liam for the first time, he returned the glance.

What did this have to do with water—

“It’s something in the water supply, isn’t it? The woman drinks the water which contains the allergen, affecting the child during development.”

Denisha nodded.

“Does our baby have this?”

Without flinching, Liam answered. “Not yet.”

“Your child was conceived for one purpose, Brady: to help us test our cure,”

Denisha said.

Their words became the ball in a tennis match. The air seemed to stop flowing, and Brady’s body stiffened in concentration. “Caroline didn’t take Birth Control, did she? You made sure of that.”

“It was a placebo, yes.”

“And you’re going to give my child this allergen and then give it the cure.”

“Correct.”

“And what if the cure doesn’t work?”

“We’re fairly certain it will.”

“Fairly certain? You’re fairly certain my child will be ok?” His question brewed with sarcasm.

“It’s not a child, it’s a host,” Liam said.

Brady forgot all Psychological Training and jumped up from his seat. “IT’S A CHILD. MY child.”

Liam didn’t flinch. He simply took a breath and said “No, Mr. Corneille. It’s our host. We allowed it to be created, for our purposes.”

“I won’t agree to this.” He remained standing, trying to salvage some authority.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“The hell I don—”

“Brady,” Denisha interjected. “It’s already been given the allergen. Everything’s going to be just fine.” Brady felt like, if she could have, she would have reached across the table and patted him the head and handed him a child’s treat.

He slowly regained enough composure to sit down, sinking into the back of the chair. The air in the room seemed to have thickened, making it harder for him to breath.

“Why me? Why Caroline?”

“Because you’ve proven your loyalty time and time again to the PPB.” Denisha paused before saying “And, because, your Career rests on the Hydro Project.”

He was amazed at how effortlessly she could threaten him and his family’s Economic Stability. She might as well have been reciting tomorrow’s weather forecast. Baby with a slight chance of death, only to clear up in a year, no escape.

“What do I do now?”

“Keep your mouth shut,” Liam said.

“When will the cure be administered?”

“In a Routine Immunization Package,” he said. “In the meantime, proceed on The Hydro Project as planned. Nothing need be interrupted.”

Easy for him to say, scary how easy. “I need to call Caroline about the Procreation Permit.”

“We’ll leave you to do that. Good day.” Liam and Denisha left Brady alone in the room.

Another empty room, surrounded by foam, wanting to crack the shell. He sighed and dialed Caroline.

“Hello?”

“Hi, honey.” It just occurred to him that his new might be too late. “Where are you? Did you do it?”

“I’m in a Snack Shop, no, I haven’t gone up there yet.”

He didn’t know if this was good or bad. Part of him was disappointed that they had to go through this. “I have good news—we have the Procreation Permit.”

“That’s great, honey,” she said although not nearly as excited as one would expect. “I’m going to finish up here and come home then.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m just tired, you know? It’s been a rough morning.”

“I understand completely. For me, too. I love you, Caroline.”

“I love you, too.”

Brady put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. How could he possibly go through the entire pregnancy, knowing the child might not survive? How could he not tell Caroline? What if the pregnancy goes wrong, and Caroline’s in danger? The what-if-thoughts were scratching at one another, each one clawing its way to consciousness...

“Don’t do that to yourself.”

He looked up to see Carlos facing him.

“Don’t go over the scenarios in your head, man. It’ll drive you crazy. Trust me, I know.”

“You know? You know what they just told me—”

Carlos put his hand up to silence him. “No, no I don’t know what they just told you. What I do know is whatever it was, it was for the good of The Municipality.”

Brady just stared at the bullshit he was being told.

“Is this your idea of condolences?”

Carlos smiled, leaned over and staked his arms on the table, supporting his upper body. “It’s the only way to progress, Brady. Whatever it was that they’ve—we’ve done, supports the motto you and I’ve worked towards our whole life: *Progress is good for all, minus the few*. What? Did you think you’d never be one of the few?” Carlos laughed as if he had twenty years of experience over Brady. The truth was Carlos had five fewer years at the Board.

Get a hold of yourself, look at this like you look at everything else, what’s done is done, focus on the project, on your family, for all you know, the cure will work and everything will be fine, it’s out of your hands. Brady just needed a minute longer to regain composure. Then he had it. He stood up slowly.

“Carlos, do not tell me how to feel, think or act, is that understood? Do not mock me. I am still your superior.”

Carlos stopped laughing. Clearing his throat, he said “Of course. I meant no harm, Brady.”

“Fine. It’s done. We have a lot of work to do today. Let’s get going.”

Returning to his desk, Brady looked at his Tablet just as the word PROGRESS vanished into the right side and FEW appeared on the left.

CHAPTER 9

Caroline rode three SkyPods and one Underwater Craft to reach the Cell Cancellation building in the Population Board's Regional Hydro Complex. Most of the complex was underwater, built in a water quarry about ten years prior. She'd never had a reason to go there prior, but she knew about it. Everyone knew about it. It was one of The Municipality's most talked about projects, at the time. News Outlets reported the details of how the quarry provided energy to the building's operations, and the enclosed location allowed for expansion without necessitating increased land use. Everything needed to keep the complex going was all around it. It was heralded as the way of the future. But as she recollected its beginnings, she realized it remained the only one of its kind.

Once in the main entrance, Caroline stood and surveyed the surroundings. The oversized atrium made her feel like a fish swimming in an oversized bowl with its curving walls. There were other fish in the bowl, but they all seemed to be moving faster. Suffocating her, the open space was overwhelming. This sensation was new to her, and she attributed it to the nausea and lack of energy. She probably should have taken an extra vitamin before coming or perhaps added a snack: because the pregnancy test results were already in the system, her nutrition was updated, but she felt it unnecessary given her decision to cancel it. Lesson learned.

She saw a directory on the wall and walked towards it. People were everywhere, walking in all different directions, forcing her to dodge them. An obviously very pregnant woman stood to her right. She was pretty, Caroline thought, but she looked worried. Another woman, not pregnant, joined her and pointed behind them. The other woman looked similar only much older, so Caroline presumed it was her mother.

Caroline wasn't used to being a new place, her routine fairly cemented there wasn't a need to venture out of her neighborhood. That was until now. Her eyes took in the sites, looking left and right all while her feet maintained their course. She felt cold which surprised her. Then again, keeping such a large area with a dome ceiling one temperature would be difficult, even for the Municipality's abilities. The number of people doing unconnected things fascinated and overwhelmed her. To her left, she saw two younger men with Digital Tablets in their hands talking. Their gestures were animated.

“Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry.”

A man crashed into her from the right side, pushing her to the ground. The impact startled Caroline out of her people watching.

“Are you ok?” he said and helped her up.

“I think so.” After smoothing out her pants and button-down shirt, both blue, she looked up to find a handsome man. As she stood up, she saw his lips. They were firm. He was smiling in a concerned manner. She found it an effort to look up and into his eyes.

He spoke effortlessly. “I wasn't paying attention to what was in front of me. Again, I'm sorry.”

“It's ok. I'm ok.”

“My name is Craig.”

She shook his outstretched hand. His grasp was firm but not hard. “Caroline.”

Craig was a healthy looking man with brown hair and matching eyes. Normally she wouldn't have noticed these things in a person she just met, but his look was captivating. If she were single, he'd have caught her attention as a suitable prospect.

“At least let me buy you a tea as an apology.” He pointed to her left. “There's a little spot over there we can go.” Before she could respond, she was walking towards the Snack Stop, his hand on the small of her back.

This Snack Stop looked like all the others, and Caroline had to admit she was thankful for the familiar sage green exterior. Her Health Code, which would display the pregnancy, flashed into her mind. Panic caught her breath until she remembered tea was a Free Liquid, no need to check Health Codes.

She didn't want to delay her appointment, and she really didn't want to drink tea with a stranger. Her stomach flipped at the thought of the taste. It had been doing that a lot lately. She stopped and tried to step away from him. “Really, this isn't necessary—”

“No, I insist.” His grasp wouldn't let her move. “It's the least I can do,” he said and smiled. She saw in his eyes that he wasn't going to let her go easily.

“It's just that I have an appointment to keep,” Caroline said, pronouncing each word deliberately. “At the Cell Cancellation Center.”

His tone grew serious, almost accusing. “I wasn't aware that you made appointments there.” He was right: it was first come, first served.

All Caroline could blurt out was “I'm married.”

Craig laughed, but it was more condescending than jovial. "I know. Let's go." She succumbed to his direction, aware that something wasn't right.

At the counter, they bypassed the line and went right to the front. He turned to her and asked what kind of tea she wanted. The Barista didn't flinch at their cutting in front of other Citizens, in fact no one flinched. Who is this man?

She managed to answer "White. Please. How do you know I'm married?"

He ordered the teas and turned back to her with a serious look on his face. "I know a great deal, Caroline. In fact, I know just about everything."

The white walls felt confining. She looked at the pale yellow tables around her set with Citizens engaged in conversations. Her headache was returning, louder, screaming for attention. It was like a monster inside of her head, banging against her skull. Before her journey, she'd managed to quiet it with some yoga exercises. No amount of yoga could relieve the fear that she now felt.

He showed her to a table with teas in hand. Normally the warm scent of tea that filled the Shops soothed her senses, but today, it just reminded her of her captivity. She wished Brady were here.

Another man, a much older man than Craig, was sitting there. He stood up and extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Caroline. I'm Joseph. Please, have a seat." Joseph was not as friendly as Craig. In fact, he addressed her as though she'd just interrupted an important meeting.

She sat. How did he know her name?

"Thank you for joining us."

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Ah, Caroline, we always have a choice.” He leaned in closer. His head was nearly bald, but his nose was not. “You could have walked away.”

Returning to his original position, he took a sip of his own tea. Caroline held her breath until he was far enough away, she could smell his last meal thanks to her heightened pregnancy senses.

She looked past him, to the next table where a couple was getting up. When they moved, she saw it: an Emergency Help Button was on the wall. The bright red sphere signified hope. If she pressed it, the Safety and Protection Officers would save her. In fact, they often wore plain clothes and so could be there with them. Her eyes scanned the room slowly trying to pick them out of the crowds. Maybe the two women in the corner, they weren’t talking to each other but looking around, keeping watch, she hoped. If she could somehow get them a message...

Craig put his hand on her thigh, prompting her to look at him. He spoke in a calm and reassuring manner. “There’s no need to be concerned, the Button won’t help.”

Was there anything these guys didn’t know? Hope quickly faded away. She had no choice but to see this, whatever it is, through. Her throat ached for moisture, so she took a sip of her tea. Wincing, her lips and roof of her mouth burned. Neither seemed to notice or care.

“We’re with the Central Government,” Craig said. He must have seen the shock on her face, because he added “You’re not in trouble, Caroline. We just want to talk to you.”

Joseph grunted just loud enough for her to hear. She thought he was scoffing at Craig but wasn't sure if she interpreted it correctly. She wasn't sure of anything except that her eyes ached. The pressure against them wouldn't stop and she felt lightheaded. Realizing her breathing was shallow, she made a conscious effort to slow it down. His hand was still on her thigh, but he removed it when she looked down at it.

“We're actually interested in an acquaintance you made with an Abby Arglos.”

“Excuse me? I don't know an Abby,” she said and rubbed her eyes.

“The Natural you met on the SkyPod,” Craig added.

“Oh, yes, years ago. We walked around for a bit, and I haven't seen her since.”

Joseph sat back in his chair with his arms resting on his belly, unlike Craig who sat closer to the table, his hands in a less intimidating place around his tea. Joseph spoke without changing position. “What did you talk about?”

“I don't really remember. Why?” Caroline took another sip of tea, it had cooled enough to drink. She found herself mesmerized by the yellow paper-like cup. What's the material called? Her memory failed her, overwhelmed physically and mentally by the day's journey. She longed for the safety and comfort of her Dwelling. It was so far away.

“Your husband works for the Progress Promotion Board, and he's working on a high priority project concerning the Physis Expanse. Did you know that Abby's father is a member of the Mutual Commerce Relations Board?” Joseph must have been a Legal Debate Professional, because she felt like a criminal as he barked his words.

“No, I didn't.” She had a hard time focusing on what did come up.

“Did you mention your husband's line of work?”

“No.” Her forehead scrunched as she tried to remember that day. Then something clicked. “Wait—”

The two men looked at her, anxiously awaiting a breakthrough.

She looked at Joseph and said in the most confident voice she could muster. “I didn’t know Brady when I met Abby.” She continued to hold his gaze, feeling victorious over this patronizing, fat, old man.

He looked away first, and then Caroline went back to her yellow cup. That little burst of energy continued to well inside of her.

Craig put his hand on her wrist “We think it’s best not to mention this conversation to anyone, including Brady. Understand?”

Another rush of adrenaline burst through her body, and she couldn’t control the force of her words. “Why? I don’t understand. What do I have to do with anything other than a chance encounter?”

“What makes you so sure it was by chance?”

He said it so matter-of-factly that she felt stupid. Caroline had nothing left to say. It never crossed her mind that there was anything suspicious about meeting Abby. Besides, Caroline wasn’t aware of the project before a couple of days ago. “But that was, what, eleven years ago?”

Craig looked at Joseph answered like a newscaster. “The Hydro Project has been in the works for about thirteen years. It was kept quiet, of course, while still in the beginning phases. Brady was sworn to secrecy, given his involvement. The fact that he told you about it recently earned him a reprimand.”

“Reprimand? He didn’t mention—”

“Good. That means he understands the delicacy of his position.”

“I don’t like secrets, Joseph.” She couldn’t help but rub her temples, as the adrenaline subsided, the headache returned.

He finally leaned forward, folding his hands in front of him on the table. “Don’t look at it as a secret, look at it as an investment. A required investment. In your family’s wellbeing.”

Craig sighed and tried to lighten up the mood. “Speaking of, there’s no need for the Cell Cancellation Center. We’ve issued a Procreation Permit, even back-dated it so that the mistake will not be on your permanent Health Code.” He smiled as if she’d just won a great prize. If she’d met Craig in a different capacity, she would have liked him, he had that charisma and charm that invited you to sit by him.

“Am I allowed to tell Brady?” It came out with more attitude than she’d intended. Later she’d find herself grateful for his gift, if that’s what it was, but right now, she was focused on the situation in front of her.

“He already knows, he found out at the same time you did.” His arms waved like he’d just invited them to dig into a lavish meal. Then they rested on the table, and he added “Of course, you’ll be surprised—and grateful—when he tells you.”

Her iPhone started to vibrate.

“Perhaps that’s him now,” Joseph said dryly. He knew it was.

She looked at the device and said “it is.”

She took the call in front of the two men and did exactly what they requested.

CHAPTER 10

At the SkyPod station, Caroline enjoyed the Regulated Clean Air found in the indoor stations. She was glad to see it wasn't that crowded. On her way to an empty three-person bench, she saw the sign for Expecting Citizens Priority Seating. Chuckling to herself, Caroline was reminded that, legally, she didn't have to stand if she didn't want to.

She rubbed her stomach and half-smiled.

She had to figure this out.

Abby's father was on the Mutual Commerce Relations Board, which, as far as Caroline knew, was the Board on the Physis side that worked with the Board on the Municipality side to regulate the relationship between the two. Her husband was working on a project that will make income for us but possibly hurt them.

A slightly overweight man sat on the bench two spaces over and smiled at her. She couldn't bring herself to smile back, annoyed that the space was no longer hers alone. Regulate your food, she thought, as she always did when an overweight person was in her presence.

The headache hadn't gone away, and trying to concentrate didn't help. She put her head down on her lap and held it with her hands.

She jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Caroline. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Caroline looked up.

"Abby. What are you doing here?" She looked left and then right to see if anyone was watching them.

"Yes, they're watching. I won't stay long," Abby said. Her hair was streaming down her head, and her eyes had dark circles. She looked tired, like she hadn't slept in days, yet her beauty remained. Caroline thought she probably looked the same to her.

Caroline tried to stand up but nearly fell over. Abby helped steady her.

"Don't get up, I just wanted to let you know that I don't blame you." She emphasized "you."

She must have meant Brady.

"I must go now," Abby said. "Be well, Caroline." Abby smiled, and Caroline knew she was sincere.

As she watched Abby walk out of the Pod Station, tears welled up in her eyes. Who they were for, she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything anymore.

CHAPTER 11

She was home and nearly fell to kiss the ground in her entranceway.

“I’m never leaving again,” she told it.

Looking around at the empty Dwelling, she thought about what to do next.

She walked into the kitchen and saw flowers in a vase on the table. As she approached, she saw there was a card. It read “A gift for my beautiful wife who is carrying another beautiful child. Love always, Brady.” Putting it down, Caroline took a deep breath.

She wasn’t allowed to tell Brady about Joseph and Craig, but she needed to find out the truth. She’d never questioned Brady’s integrity, but now she was involved.

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, placing a kiss on her neck.

“Do you like them?” She felt his lips grace her ear.

“I do,” she whispered. “Thank you.” She turned around to face him, and he kissed her. She succumbed to their soft yet firm movements that were so familiar to her. These long moist kisses never ceased to make her body tremble with devotion, and this time was no different. Her hand reached around his head, choosing a curl to wrap around a finger. He was pushing himself closer to her body, and she could feel the edge of the

table pressing into her. One arm steadied their bodies, while the other lifted her slightly onto the table, and her legs instinctively wrapped themselves around his waist. If he hadn't moved his face from hers, she would have stayed in passionate denial, but once their lips separated, and she opened her eyes, the desire left. He kissed her neck, usually her favorite move, and she looked out straight ahead. On the shelf was a family portrait, taken right after Hannah's birth.

“Honey, I'm sorry...”

He moaned.

“Honey, Brady, I...” She tried to push herself up. His grasp held. She tried to unhinge her legs, but draping them caused her back great pain. In this position, she was unbalanced.

“Brady, stop, please.”

“Caroline,” he whispered and unbuttoned her shirt. “Come on, baby,” His tongue was outlining her right breast. “You taste so good.”

He pressed her into the table so she lay completely on her back. Her arms attempted to push him away, but they lacked the ability. Despite her daily exercise routines, he was too strong for her. Even with all her efforts, he managed to hold her down while unzipping her pants. She thought about screaming, she thought about biting. All she could do was cry.

He stopped all motion.

“Caroline? Are you crying?”

She nodded.

“Honey? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” His concern was sincere, and he backed away from her. His clothes were still intact.

“I’m just not feeling well,” was all she could say.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me to stop?”

There was no point in telling him that she did. But she said it anyway.

“I did.”

“What? I thought you were playing. I didn’t hear the safeword, did you say the safe word?”

The safe word. She’d forgotten all about it.

“No, I, I forgot.”

“Oh God, Caroline. God.” He paced with his hand touching his head. “I didn’t know you wanted me to really stop, I thought, I just thought…”

The tears stopped. She should have remembered the safe word. “It’s ok, honey, it’s my fault. I forgot all about, all about…everything.”

The two remained in their individual yet collective shock and embarrassment. Brady stopped pacing and looked at her. He took a deep breath, moved closer and put his hands on her cheeks. She loved those hands.

“I am so sorry. I never want to hurt you. You know that, right?”

She paused, and he noticed.

“Caroline? You know that, right?”

Her eyes met his. “Yes, yes, of course I do. I just got caught up in the moment.” She moved her left hand on top of his, and half-forced her smile to show tenderness. “It’s ok, honey. Really.”

He kissed her lightly and walked away, not in his usual confident manner but more like a child who was recovering from the dizziness brought on after twirling in circles.

She was alone in the kitchen.

This level of excitement was new to Caroline. There were no guidelines, no requirements, no direction on how to proceed. It reminded her of when she first saw Abby, at the SkyPod Station. What had she done? She had forged into the unknown, and it was the reason for her current troubles. If she hadn't talked to Abby, the government wouldn't care about her. Joseph and Craig wouldn't know who she was and wouldn't have brought suspicion into her marriage. None of this would have happened. Then again, the child she carried wouldn't exist. She would have gone to the Cell Cancellation Center and had it terminated. Before this moment, it hadn't been a child, just a cluster of cells. She found herself missing the contentment of ignorance. Putting her hand on her stomach, she felt the pangs of guilt.

The DoorVoice announced a visitor.

"Child Care Services," it said. It was Hannah. She'd been taken to the CCS for the day so Caroline could take care of things.

She opened the door and thanked the worker as Hannah was deposited into her arms. She kissed Hannah's cheek, and the baby's smell brought Caroline's first authentic smile of the day.

"I heard the DoorVoice." Brady was standing at the stairs, looking down at his wife and child. Caroline nodded and held out her hand, which he took, and the three embraced.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Brady. I think I’m just overwhelmed by the day’s events.”

“I understand. I’m sorry, too. I know we weren’t expecting another baby, to cancel the pregnancy and then be allowed to keep it.” He shook his head to rattle out the details. “I’m tired and not quite myself either.”

“Let’s just put this whole thing behind us, ok?” Hannah cooed.

“Sounds good to me.” He looked up at the Digital Clock above the doorway.

“Tommy should be home any minute, yes?”

She nodded, switching Hannah from one arm to the other.

“We still have some Food Order Rations, let’s get dinner delivered and just relax.

What do you say?”

“Perfect.”

“Great.”

Brady kissed Hannah’s forehead and went into his office. Alone with Hannah, Caroline wished she didn’t know what she did. At some point, she’d have to figure out when to talk to him, and how. Until then, she just wanted to play with her daughter.

In the living room, she sat her down on the blanket left in the middle of the room. Brady’s mother had given it to them when Tom was born. She caressed it, imagining another baby on it. Hannah grabbed a nearby toy, and Caroline turned it on. An innocent, playful tune filled the room. Brady was still in the office, and she couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing.

A clang from the kitchen interrupted her thoughts. Tom had walked in and thrown his bag on the hard surface.

“Hi, mom.”

“Hi, honey.”

“Where’s dinner?” He was looking around in disbelief, and she laughed watching his confusion.

“It should be here soon. We decided to have it delivered.”

Satisfied, he came into the kitchen and sat on the blanket. He rubbed Hannah’s back who loved having her brother home.

Caroline felt the urge to tell them about the baby but had enough excitement for one day. The news could wait.

DoorVoice announced dinner. Caroline heard Brady answering, and he brought it into the living room.

“Let’s get crazy and eat on the floor,” he said.

Sitting on the floor, next to the blanket, they ate and discussed Tom’s day at school. He loved the attention. Even Hannah seemed to enjoy the informal atmosphere, giggling and drooling happily. When all that remained of dinner were empty dishes and silverware spread out on the floor, Brady looked at Caroline.

“I suppose I should get some work done,” he said. “Although I can’t say I want to leave. It’s been a wonderful evening.”

“Yes, it has, it really has,” Caroline said.

Hannah whimpered.

“Looks like it’s time to put her down,” Brady said. Then putting his arm around his son, added “You, too, buddy.”

“Ok, dad.” Off he went.

Caroline started stacking the plates while remaining seated.

“Are you still working on the Physis Expanse project?”

“I am. Just wrapping up my part of the plan.”

“Do you remember that Natural girl I met a few years back? Abby, I think was her name.”

Brady paused as if trying to remember. “I think so. At the SkyPod Station, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about her?”

“I saw her today.”

Brady had joined in the cleaning effort, but when he heard that statement, he stopped.

“Where?”

“At the Pod Station, as a matter of fact.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Not really. She came up to me and said hello.”

“That’s it?”

Caroline didn’t like his tone. “Pretty much.”

“Pretty much?” His voice was tensing.

Caroline stopped and looked at her husband.

“Caroline, what else did she say?”

“She said she knew it wasn’t me.” She resumed her movements.

“Listen, honey.” He placed his hand softly on her elbow. “Please stay away from the Naturals. This project I’m working on is top priority.”

She looked at him trying to read his expression. He brushed crumbs off his pants and stood up.

“I probably shouldn’t even tell you what I do, but, well, I love sharing my work with you.”

“It was just a random sighting of Abby.”

He nodded and walked into the kitchen, muttering something.

“What’s that?” She called.

“Nevermind.” He turned towards his office.

She was once again alone left to wonder which way to proceed.

CHAPTER 12

The next morning Caroline got Tom off to school and sat at the Kitchen Module, making a list of the day's chores. Now that her pregnancy was allowed, she needed to figure out a way to work in the necessary groceries, update the workout module and review scheduled blood tests. She knew that if she simply did the next right thing, everything would turn out all right, or so she hoped.

The Module wouldn't let her continue until she completed the Dwelling Disposal Sequence. She sighed. Well, I wanted normal. The weather was mild enough for her to wear her Regulated Indoor Shoes outside. Besides, it was a short walk, she rationalized, and they were her most comfortable pair.

Outside she took in the fresh air and looked around the neighborhood. Even though she knew it was no different than any other Regulated Dwelling Neighborhood, it felt suitable. Its circular set up positioned all doorways towards the center where the government had placed the Central Disposal Dissolver. The large black canister shaped device held everyone's waste, which always amazed her. Twice a week, all she had to do was walk out and enter her code into their number pad. It automatically confirmed it in

the Module. Where the waste went, she didn't know or really care. It was easy and efficient—and connected. She stopped in front of the keypad. Everything was connected.

Back inside, she went to work on the Module. She felt watched: maybe it was the Household Tablet, a connected device. But all devices were always connected for efficiency. Her conscious awareness of these connections was like suddenly becoming aware that she breathed air. How did they know? That was the main question on her mind. It's not like she met Abby on a device. They met in a public place. The stations were surveyed, but for security purposes, or at least that was the official word. Maybe she shouldn't be asking how, but why?

The doorbell announced a visitor. "Unknown." Unknown?

Caroline walked over and looked out the viewfinder. Abby was standing at her front door, in plain view of the entire neighborhood. Caroline stepped away from the door. Answering it wasn't an option. The bell announced it again. After what seemed like an eternity, Caroline let out a deep breath, one that she didn't realize she'd been holding. Then she heard Abby's voice, pleading.

"Caroline? If you're in there, I need to talk to you. Please. It's a matter of life and death."

Caroline stood still.

"Caroline? They already know I'm here so if that's what worries you..."

They also knew I haven't opened the door, she thought.

"Please open the door." She was crying, almost pleading.

Caroline looked down at her hands to find them wet with perspiration. The air around her seemed to get staler the more she inhaled. Were the lights flickering? There, there they go again. The room was hot, much hotter than it should have been.

CHAPTER 13

She woke up to Brady kneeling next to her. She was still in the entranceway behind the front door, only she lay on the floor. Her back was sore from the hard surface.

“Brady?” It was all she could manage.

“Hi, honey. I’m here. It’s all going to be ok.”

“What happened?”

“You fainted, lucky for you, I came home early and saw that Abby girl was at the door.”

Caroline struggled to sit up but managed with his help.

“What happened to her?”

“I had her arrested. Once the Safety and Protection Officers removed her, I came in and found you here, lying on the floor.”

Arrested? That woke her up.

“Why arrested?”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” he said flatly.

“What did she do wrong?” Caroline was mad.

“Why do you care? She was going to hurt you.” His accusing tone reminded her of Joseph.

She sat up and looked into his eyes. “How?”

Brady looked flustered. She’d never seen him unsure of himself. He couldn’t answer her just started and stopped.

“Brady, what the hell is going on?”

“She won’t be back. I’ve made sure of that.” He helped her up, and the two stood looking at each other, she felt like for the first time.

“Everything’s ok now. Everything’s going to be ok.” Was he trying to convince her or himself, she wondered.

He looked past her for a second and then back down into her eyes. “It’s nothing for you to worry about anymore. Let’s get you up and into a nice bath.”

Suddenly, she remembered her daughter. “Hannah—”

“She’s fine.”

“Let me understand this,” she said, putting her hand to her head. “You came home, saw Abby, called the Officers and made sure Hannah was ok, all while I lay on the floor?” Now she was the accuser.

He didn’t offer a defense.

“I’ve never asked about your job, Brady, not in any great detail. Truth be told, I didn’t care all that much. I supported you in what you needed to do to support our family.”

“Caroline—”

“Wait,” she said and held up her hand in a cinematic display of power. “I still trust whatever you do, or did, is for the good of our family. And don’t patronize me, Brady. And I know there are things neither one of us can, are allowed to say.”

He didn’t move.

“Who is Abby? I want the truth, Brady.”

She saw the moisture on his face, the front of his button-down started to show his perspiration. He undid the top button and tried to crack his neck. He moved, but he said nothing.

He started to speak and then stopped. Then he said “There’s nothing to fix, Caroline. Everything’s fine.”

She was in control and wasn’t going to let go. “Who is Abby, Brady. Why would you have her *arrested*? It’s not a crime to visit someone.”

“It is when you’re the wife of the man responsible for completely changing life in the Physis Expanse.”

“What does that have to do with Abby?” She thought for a second and then went on. “I know about her father—”

“Caroline, stop. Don’t say another word. You—we can’t do this.” He was looking around the Dwelling, at the ceiling, in the other rooms.

Caroline’s eyes tried to follow his movements and then whispered. “Are, are they listening?”

He took a deep breath, which answered her question. Then he said “Caroline. Everything’s fine. Drop it.”

If they were listening, they must not have been watching, because Brady's eyes widened, telling her to play along.

“Ok, honey. You do what you have to do, ok?”

He smiled. “Of course. Everything's fine, Caroline. I promise.” His voice cracked on the word “promise.”

She turned and walked into the kitchen where Hannah was in her chair, playing with her snack, happily oblivious. Brady had gone into his office.

All she wanted was her life back, no government officials, no Naturals, no talk of the Physis Expanse, just her life, where she was a mother and wife. She had done nothing to deserve this disruption. That was the past, she thought. And if her Dwelling wasn't private, and Brady wasn't able to talk, then there was only one person who could and one place where it was safe.

She decided then that she would go to the Physis Expanse and look for Abby.

CHAPTER 14

Soaking in a hot bath wasn't so much a luxury for Abby as it was a necessity. She looked down at her naked body and marveled at the droplets of water as they ran off her thigh, slowly at first, then faster as they reached the rounded side. The steam felt good against her cheeks and neck, the muscles relaxing, the only sound an occasional drip from the faucet. Her entire body was tense. Being arrested will do that to a person. Being arrested in The Municipality, brought back to her home on the Physis Expanse, and being threatened with violence if she ever returned was something beyond tense. Just thinking about it made her stomach clench. To help, she did some deep breathing exercises. She was on her third inhale when there was a knock at the door. It opened to reveal to her Journey Mate.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“You can come in. I was just thinking about all we've been through.”

He knelt beside the tub and put the tips of his fingers in the water. She always felt safe around him, his blue eyes had a healing quality.

“Well, today was pretty rough, although not unexpected, I suppose.”

“It's not just today, John, it's everything, all of it.”

He smiled and flicked water at her face to make her smile. “We just have to keep going.” With that, he kissed her moist forehead, looked into her eyes long enough for her to know he loved her, and left.

“Keep going,” she whispered. “Keep going.”

It was hard to remember why it began. In truth, it had begun before she was born. All she knew of the story was what her mother had told her, when she was 16 years old.

“Honey,” she said. “We need to talk about something, something very important.” Her usually serene face had an unusual look on it. At 16, Abby couldn’t describe it any other way than to say she thought she was in trouble. As an adult, she realized her mother was simply thinking carefully about her approach.

“Sit here, on the couch, beside me,” she said and helped Abby onto the oversized Certified Organic Cotton couch. Abby loved that couch, a deep red, soft, smelled like home.

“Am I in trouble?” Abby asked as she put her hands on her lap, the good girl position.

“No, Abby, you’re not in any kind of trouble.” Her mom smiled and put her hand on top of Abby’s. “I promise.”

Even though she wasn’t in trouble, she didn’t feel at ease. Something was wrong, regardless.

“Abby. There’s something I need to tell you, to explain to you, that you might not fully understand right now. But I—”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“What, mom? What is it?”

“But I can’t guarantee I’ll get another chance, so I have to tell you now.”

“Tell me what? Mom, what’s wrong?” Abby could feel her own eyes grow misty with fear. She didn’t even notice the cat rubbing against the back of her head until much later.

Composing herself with a deep breath, her mom continued. She asked her what she knew about The Municipality. Abby didn’t know much, no one living on The Physis Expanse knew much about the other side of the country. It wasn’t necessary.

“Is it a bad place?” Abby wanted to know.

Her mom smiled and shook her head. “How could the place that gave me you be bad?” She moved in closer, put her hand on her cheek and said the words Abby would remember for the rest of her life. “You’re not my daughter, not in the biological, or blood way. You were born to a woman in The Municipality. You were brought here to save your family from getting into trouble for having too many children.”

Behind her mom, Abby stared at a replica of an antique Time Telling Mechanism. It had this shiny gold circle that went from one side of the faux wooden box to the other, producing a clicking noise each time. She looked past her mom, her eyes following the gold circle, back and forth. Her mom’s voice sounded as if it were underground, muffled and distorted. Maybe it was Abby who was underground, buried under the truth.

“Abby? Abby?”

She slowly climbed out. With each second, the voice grew louder.

“Abby?” Tears streamed down her mom’s cheeks as she shook Abby just enough to bring her back into reality.

“Abby, do you understand what I said?” Even when breaking life-altering news to her 16-year-old daughter, she remained a pragmatic teacher. Years later, Abby would first resent and then accept her communication style.

Recovered from the initial shock, she went on to learn that she’d been born to a family in The Municipality who hadn’t received the necessary Procreation Permit to have more than one child. Something went wrong in the In Utero Regulation Process, and twins were born. Luckily, the father knew Abby’s dad, and the arrangements were set. One twin would stay and one would go, and so Abby went to live with the Arglos and be raised in the Physis, as a Natural.

Her skin was starting to prune, so she got out of the tub, taking her time with each movement. The Order & Correction Officers weren’t nice to Citizens let alone Naturals. Her crime wasn’t a crime, at least not in her mind, but the Officers treated her rather harshly. As the water dripped from her body, she stood in front of the Reflection Surface, the shiny material dulled by a steamy film, leaving only small holes through which she saw her image. She noticed a bruise on her upper arm from where the male officer grabbed her, the purplish blue was already penetrating through her peach-colored skin, now red thanks to the heat. Her gaze travelled to meet itself. I could see myself in her eyes, she thought, more now than ever before. There’s a power to standing alone, naked, in room designed for privacy, with a mirror, a power that forces you to look at yourself as you are. Abby felt trapped, knowing what she did, knowing the fact that she had a sister on the other side propelled her to find, enlighten and join, knowing that their respective worlds would do anything to prevent that from happening. Never one prone to panic, she

felt her heart beat faster and loudly, her breathing shallow despite her best efforts on inhaling deeply. Get out of this room, just open the door, you can do it.

In an instant, she turned, opened the door and walked out, able to breathe again.

“How was your bath?” The sight of her Journey Mate, sitting at their dining room table further calmed her senses. Walking over to join him, she leaned over to give him a kiss on the forehead, before sitting next to him.

“It was nice.”

“I don’t believe you,” he rubbed her naked thigh lovingly.

“It was nicer than the Municipality’s Order & Correction Center.”

He playfully chuckled and said “that I believe,” and after a pause, added “Are you ready to tell me about it?”

Abby knew the healthy thing to do was to talk it out, and the safest person in her world was her Journey Mate and the love of her life, Ray, but it was going to be a struggle. Talking meant reliving. At least she was in an innocuous place: their two-bedroom Living Dwelling offered a quiet refuge from the worlds outside. Bathed in earth tones, the walls welcomed her as she looked around. The Dwelling wasn’t big by any means, about 1,000 square feet, but it was cozy and warm. The Regulation Organic Carpeting made her feet feel like they were walking on cotton balls. Life on the Physis Expanse had its challenges, but the Dwelling was a place of refuge and serenity. She needed all the peace she could get.

She sat facing him, closer than normal, both naked. Taking a deep breath, she began.

“I don’t quite know where to start.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you went to her dwelling,” he said. She hadn’t told him of her plans before doing them.

“They don’t call it a dwelling, dear, I went to her Official Residence.” She smiled while correcting him, but he wasn’t amused. His unchanging countenance brought her back to the task at hand. “I went there to talk to her, to try and talk to her.” Her head and torso moved with her words, as if searching for an answer. “Maybe if she knew that we were—”

“Related? Abby, you were born from the same sperm and egg, but you are not family.” He emphasized family to convey what she already knew. “You were raised, for all intensive purposes, on two different planets.”

“I know that, Ray, don’t you think I know that?”

“I think you forget that, dear. I think you forget the significance, the differences between the Municipality and here.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything. I just refuse to believe that she doesn’t feel a connection, the same connection I feel.”

He sat back in protective frustration. Ray had heard all this before from Abby, and she knew she was repeating herself, but she just wanted him to understand. She knew he couldn’t, though, no one could, no one, except maybe Caroline. She went on with the details, not wanting to rehash the same conversation they’d had multiple times before.

“Anyway, I went to her Residence and knocked on her door. I could tell she was home—”

“Let me guess, you felt it?”

“Don’t make fun of me, Ray. You can’t understand.”

“Ok, ok, I’m sorry. Continue.”

Her skin was nearly dry now, all the water vaporizing into the clean air.

Thankfully, it was mildly warm outside, allowing them to keep the screen door open. The soft breeze caressed her bruised skin.

“I knocked on the door repeatedly, called her name, she never came. The next thing I knew their Protection Officers, or whatever they’re called, came up behind me, grabbed my arm—“she placed her left hand on the opposite arm, remembering the pain—“and pulled me down to the ground.”

“Oh, Abby, that sounds terrible.” He moved his chair closer, touching hers, and placed his hand on her knee, leaning forward. She couldn’t bear to look at the horror on his face, but she heard it in his voice.

“It was actually. More than just physically, I felt torn from her all over again, I mean I know that’s rather melodramatic, but to be so close and yet not anywhere near her...”

“Abby—”

“I need a break,” she said rather abruptly. “I’m going to lie down.” As she walked into their bedroom, she heard him say something about letting him know if she needed anything. What I need is to get my head together, she thought. Snap out of this, Abby, this isn’t like you, all this morose, dramatic talk. Think. What’s your next move?

In her room she tried to pull herself together by picking the clothes up off of the floor, making the bed, straightening the books...book in hand, she stopped, caressed its cover, turned it over and lightly grazed the back. Caroline has probably never seen a book, she whispered. Abby, unlike most, was educated about the differences between the

Municipality and the Physis Expanse. She thought about Caroline's world with its Electronic Readers and Personal Vehicular Units. Modules and Tablets everywhere: everything in the Municipality was entered into a computer, and all the computers talked to each other so that the ruling Central Government Command Center knew everything. Didn't they see the danger in that power? Didn't they know—no, they couldn't possibly know, because it's just the way things were. How does a bird know if it's better to be a flower?

Putting the book back on the shelf, Abby walked over to her Clothing Container and pulled open the top drawer. Beneath her Certified Organic Delicates was a small box, which she brought over to the bed and sat down. From it, Abby pulled out the letter and photograph she was given by her mother after the conversation about her origins. Her mother had given her explicit instructions to never share its contents with anyone, no one could be trusted. Abby obeyed until right before she married Ray. If he was going to pledge his life to her, she had to know he knew everything about her. She carefully unfolded the letter: it was written with an ink mechanism on unprotected processed wood paper, an archaic form of communication. Her mom always did have a soft spot for the past. The irony wasn't lost on Abby: in many ways she was trying to connect to her own past although she often told Ray that it was her future she wanted to cultivate.

The letter opened tentatively and the familiar words once again saw light.

DEAREST,

IT PAINS US TO DO THIS BUT IT IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, AS YOU KNOW,
GIVEN THE POPULATION AUTHORITY BOARD'S CHILD LAWS. WE ARE JUST
NOT IN THE POSITION TO PUT OUR FAMILY IN DANGER. PLEASE LOVE AND

CHERISH HER AS WE WOULD HAVE. EVERY TIME WE LOOK INTO HER SISTER'S
EYES, WE WILL SEE HER.

GRATEFULLY YOURS.

No signature, too risky. Abby looked up. On the wall opposite where she sat hung one of her favorite paintings. She didn't know the artist and didn't want to. Knowing a mere human created the swirling blues and greens that mesmerized her throughout the years would detract from its mystique.

There has to be a way to see her. They had a nice time the one afternoon they spent together. That had been the best way to do it, Abby thought, show up some place a couple of times and let her come to me. She smiled, remembering how excited she was when Caroline sat next to her on the bench at the SkyPod Station. Caroline was drawn to her, she knew it. It took a couple of times, but when she asked Abby to walk around the Town Center with her, Abby felt a door opening. Now, she sat feeling a door had been closed, literally and figuratively.

In the middle of that thought, a revelation hit her. Why would Caroline call the Officers? Abby hadn't ever been a threat to her, just an innocent companion one afternoon. Could it be that Caroline didn't call them? Energized by this line of thinking, she folded the letter and put the box and its contents back into the drawer. She paced around the small room. Who else could have called? A neighbor? But why would a neighbor call, she hadn't created a disturbance, she simply knocked on the door. She had to tell Ray.

“Ray—”

Standing in the middle of the living room, Ray faced her but stared at the floor, his expression shell shocked. Abby approached in small, slow steps.

“Ray? What is it?”

He raised his head when she reached him.

“We had visitors, Abby, didn’t you hear?”

Shaking her head, her eyes questioned him. She hadn’t heard a thing.

“Two Citizens from the Central Government.” He stood motionless as he spoke. Everything in the room was still, even the air.

He continued, “from the Municipality’s Central Government. They came here to warn us.”

“I don’t understand. Why would the Central Government warn—”

“Because of you,” he said. She couldn’t tell if the tone of his voice was denouncing or advising her. She’d never seen him less animated.

“Because of the arrest?” Abby racked her brain to comprehend. “But that shouldn’t be of concern to the Central Government, it was a minor matter, a mere misunderstanding, really.”

“There’s more to it, Abby. Sit down.” Motioning to her right, he guided her to the dining room table they sat at earlier. She sat, eagerly awaiting the explanation. The look on his face was one of deep concentration, like he was trying to make sense of what he was told while he relayed it to Abby.

“Did Caroline ever tell you what kind of Career her husband held?”

Abby thought back to their conversation and replied “no, we never talked about him.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think I would have remembered, Ray. You know how many times I’ve replayed that conversation just to relive it.” The still air began to move again despite the suspense it held.

“That’s what I thought. Well, it turns out that he works for the Progress Promotion Board.”

“The board that forces citizens to use new technologies,” Abby added. That board was considered most dangerous by the Naturals. They knew the Central Government unleashed new technologies into the Municipality under the guise of progress when, in reality, each dispersion contained hidden mechanisms designed to give the government new ways to exploit Citizens. All completely without their knowledge. Abby physically shuddered at the thought.

She could see Ray shaking off the vision as well. Needing the feeling of something concrete, she ran her right arm across the Recycled Clear Material table. When activated, it was a touch screen computer. In the Municipality, as far as she knew, computers were never off. Her moment of gratitude, however, was short lived as Ray went on.

“They didn’t say what he was working on, but I got the sense that it involves us.”

“Us?”

“The Physis Expanse.”

Danger. “What does this have to do with me? I don’t know anything about this.”

He leaned back in the Recycled Metal chair. The cushioned bottom made them comfortable for a while but not for lounging, and his back was obviously feeling it,

because he twisted slightly, working his muscles. They'd talked about getting more suitable ones but decided their Currency was better spent elsewhere. Normally they sat on the couch, but the conversation was so intense, she didn't dare interrupt its flow.

“All they said was, no, all they demanded was that you stay away from not only Caroline but the Municipality in general.”

“What? They can't demand that? It's not legal.”

“I don't think they care about legal, Abby. These men weren't here officially.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said they were from the Central Government.”

“They were. But they made it clear that this conversation never happened.”

Abby stood up, her own chair starting to hurt her body. She walked to the middle of the room and turned back. “This doesn't make sense. What does the government care if I visit a Citizen?”

“Not just any Citizen—Caroline.” He twisted to face her, his arm resting on the chair's back.

“You know...before I came out here, I was wondering who called the Officers on me, because Caroline didn't have a reason to fear me.” Pacing as she spoke, Abby tried to put all the pieces together.

“Was anyone else home?”

“I don't think so, but even if her husband was home, he wouldn't have reason to fear me.”

“I don't know, Abby, but I think it's time to put this all behind you, behind us.”

She looked at her Mate, unable to process what he'd just said. He saw her astonishment and stood up to put his arm on her.

Her body instinctively backed away. “Ray, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying, this is serious, Abby. We’ve got CENTRAL GOVERNMENT officials coming to our DWELLING, for goodness sake.”

Ray was not prone to hysterics, ever, no matter the situation. Every ounce of Abby’s being conveyed shock and dismay, and she knew it. Part of her was surprised at his reaction and part at what he was saying.

“Ray. I have nothing to do with the government.”

“I know that, Abby. But there’s some connection there, I don’t know what it is, but these guys were deadly serious.”

“I can’t stop now, Ray,” Abby choked back tears as her voice pleaded with him for support. In her mind she pictured kneeling at his feet, begging him, but she didn’t move, she couldn’t move. They just stood there, facing each other, naked in both the physical and emotional sense. He was scared, she knew, and so was she.

His face grew soft. “Abby. This is about choice. You were put in a situation due to the choices of the Municipality and the Expanse, the choices of two families. Now it’s your choice.”

Her legs felt weak, she fell onto the couch. As soon as she did, she wanted to stand but couldn’t so her hands repeatedly joined and disjoined, her fingers grasping for some way to bind their anxiety. She couldn’t speak.

Ray walked over and sat beside her, but she didn’t turn to face him.

“I know connecting with Caroline is important to you, but all I’m asking you to do is consider that maybe, just maybe it’s not meant to happen. There’s more to this story

than we know, and now our lives, our being is in jeopardy.” He put his hands on top of hers to stop the movement. As soon as her hands were silenced, her leg started to bounce.

“Abby, isn’t enough just to know she’s alive and well? You have to let it go, at least for now. You have to take care of you...of us.”

At this last statement, her body went still. He was right, her desire was putting her family at risk, she didn’t know why or how, but the last 24 hours had been more than she expected. She still wasn’t sure why she was arrested or why Central Government officials came to her Dwelling, but she did know that Ray was scared. Hell, she was scared. Something bigger was at work, something too big for Abby to contend with. She turned to the man she loved so completely.

“You’re right.” Nodding, she surrendered.

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