The Hour of Lead

Kathleen De Grave

with

Earl Lee

A novel of Kansas and other alternate realities

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Earl Lee

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For more information contact

See Sharp Press
P.O. Box 1731
Tucson, AZ 85702-1731

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The Hour of Lead

This is the hour of lead
Remembered if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the snow—
First chill, then stupor, then the letting go.

Emily Dickinson

Slipstream I

Tuesday Morning, September 20

Chapter One: Weylan

Weylan Collins stared out the sixth-floor window of the hospital straight into the white morning sky. He wanted to stay there forever and pretend he hadn't done what he'd done. The empty sky let him imagine that there were no consequences, that no boy lay in his hospital bed wrecked because Weylan had tried to save him. In the white sky, no mini-jets zoomed past, no prying drones, not even a bird came into view. If he looked down, he'd see people wearing broad Panama hats to keep off the sun. He'd see the slow-motion conveyor walk taking people from here to there, endlessly. Where they were going, he didn't know; maybe they didn't either. If he looked down, he'd see electric cars and bike messengers on the street, with tuk-tuks moving in and out among them. But if he looked straight ahead, he felt alone in the universe.

From the corner of his eye he saw that to the northwest clouds were slowly moving toward him—they boiled in the distance, black and threatening. As the clouds neared, his chest tightened. What Nietzsche said of the old Greek daemon might be right: the best thing for everyone would be never to have been born, or, failing that, to die soon. Because every breath was horror.

Weylan didn't want to think about the boy, and he didn't want to think about what the clouds might mean. No tornadoes yet, but by the afternoon anything could happen. He turned his gaze down to avoid the clouds, and

saw instead the rounded tops of wind-resistant homes: giant concrete igloos, painted a startling pink or blueberry or checkerboard yellow-and-black. They sprouted like strange fungi among the trees. Some of the igloos had skylights of transparent aluminum, tinted blue, with titanium shutters in bright red. No one would get sucked out of those windows; none of these houses, round as tomatoes, would be pulverized by two-hundred-mile-an-hour winds when the next tornado hit. Wherever a house with a peaked roof and square walls had been taken out, an earth-berm home was built into the side of a hill or another igloo took its place, even though they were too expensive for most people. Within his field of view, no peaked roofs appeared, not one.

If he kept his breathing steady and concentrated on the scene outside the window, he could stay in control. But how was he supposed to breathe deeply when his diaphragm felt like it was in an iron clamp? Still, he tried, because to think about the boy was too horrible. He had to think about something else, anything else. He wished he could find some numbness-inducing mantra.

But mantras were rare these days. Nothing fit anymore. The trees that grew near the houses were the wrong colors. When he was a kid, trees had been green—elm, oak, catalpa. He'd learned the names in grade school and could recognize their leaves. The trees he saw now, scattered among the fruit-colored igloos, had a blue tinge or an orange glow. He had heard peculiar names for them like ylang-ylang, jacaranda, neem, weeping fig, octopus. They came from China, India, Australia, Brazil. The native Kansas trees took too long to grow back after a storm. The new trees flattened in the wind and, if they survived, unbent like flowers when the storm was over—at least that's what CorGo (CorporateGovernment) said. CorGo was wrong. The trees grew in bizarre shapes, trunks and branches twisted by the winds.

On his way to the hospital that morning, as he'd pedaled his bicycle down the crowded glide, Weylan had breathed the trees' odors until he choked. The flowers of the catalpa trees used to last ten April days, their smell overpowering; but then the flowers fell and their scent was gone. These gene-altered flowers bloomed too long—it was September and still they spewed perfume. And their colors—magenta, cerulean, salmon—made his skin prickle.

The hospital corridor where he stood was eerily quiet. Now and then a droid came through the double doors at the end of the hall, and each time, when Weylan turned at the sound, the robot nurse surveyed him

with its placid gaze, before turning away. Even though the droids had human skin and human hair, Weylan never mistook a robot for a person. Droid faces were too clean and symmetrical, their movements too fluid. The robo-nurses wore the same clothes the other nurses did—orange or banana jumpsuits—and had been programmed to use facial expressions. But something would be off—a smile that was too flat, a crinkling around the eyes that looked like scrunched paper. Robots were cheaper than people, though: they didn't get sick and never disobeyed. CorGo couldn't function without them. If the business model was to be the savior of all things, as CorGo promised, then robots trumped people every time.

Droids were quiet, but this ward was too quiet, **unnaturally so.** It was for abandoned children. No one visited, no one cared. That's why the children were so valuable.

At the thought, Weylan began panicking again. Mikey, the boy with his mind in pieces, was here because of him. He had sworn he would never hurt a child. Never. He would help children, cure them painlessly. That was the point. A week ago Weylan had believed in what he was doing, he'd thought the hospital did good for all the lost children, left with no one because of the winds, the floods, the fires. The hospital did its best to cure the fungi that grew in the children's spines or the tumors that riddled their bones, the odd diseases that came with drinking water from broken water lines and from breathing the spores that grew in piles of rotting wood.

Psychological wounds were harder to salve, but the hospital lavished daring and costly drugs and psychotherapies on the abandoned children. A week ago Weylan had believed that the hospital was the children's best hope. He'd told himself that his technology, too, was important—he was going to save people's souls.

But he hadn't saved Mikey. And now Weylan was out here in the hallway, afraid to go into the room behind him and see again the boy he'd harmed, his own personal experiment gone wrong.

His mentor, Dr. Mason, told him to stop beating himself up about it. Of the hundreds of displaced children the hospital and CorGo helped, only a few ended up in this ward. "Who else is going to save them?" his mentor had asked just the day before. "If the treatments don't work," he said, "they're dead anyway."

Weylan's stomach turned over. *Dead anyway*.

Pandora had warned Weylan about Mason as soon as she heard that he was pushing Weylan to try his technology on people, not just in simula-

tions. They had fights about it. He tried to tell her that in the last decade nanites had boosted the immune system and had cured many blood diseases, that nanite spiders could move through the children's veins, seeking out cancer cells. The hospital was giving these children a chance other people didn't get. The kids' families couldn't have paid for that kind of treatment.

Children? Pandora said. *You would use nanobots on children? Have your machines infest their brains?*

"You make it sound like some horror story, when you say it like that. All the trauma they've gone through? My nanites can fix that. The children need me."

The fights never lasted long, but tell Pandora exactly what he was doing? No. She'd been there when he found out that his procedures had been okayed by the review board, but he hadn't mentioned that he'd start working with people the next day.

He certainly didn't tell her about Mikey. His plan had been to save the boy without her knowing anything about it, and then triumphantly present his success. Up to the moment when Mikey had started shrieking, Weylan had thought he was doing the right thing. The memory of that sound still made Weylan sweat.

Hr steadied himself by putting his hand on the safety bar that ran along the window, and he lifted his eyes to gaze again on the sky. He had to be calm and in control before he went into the room where Mikey lay in bed, almost catatonic. Cancer wasn't killing Mikey; his memories were. Weylan's nanobots should have changed that—gave Mikey a way to understand what had happened to him. Instead, look at where the kid was now. When he'd told Pandora about Mikey, the night she left him, she'd said, *You did what?* And in that moment, he'd realized the terrible mistake he'd made.

Weylan could feel the door to Mikey's room looming behind him. Each day it was harder to go through it. He didn't have to be here; the experiment was over. It was his choice to come here. Maybe today would be his last day; maybe he wouldn't go through that door at all; maybe he would leave and never come back.

* * *

Standing at the sixth-floor hospital window, avoiding the sight of his failure, it seemed like he was at the end of his career. But two weeks before, it had seemed like the beginning.

Weylan had hung a poster in his new office, showing the 239 varieties of nanites. "One day soon," his mentor said at the party he'd thrown for Weylan, "there will be 240." Weylan's exciting new nanite with its extendable arm would round the number out, he said. Weylan didn't think so. Still, he'd straightened the poster he'd placed in the center of the empty wall across from his desk, glad for the greens and yellows that added some color to the office's drabness. It was the one and only poster in the room. On it, the nanites looked like friendly bugs, even those with arms snaking off their surfaces. Of course these were artists' renditions, since actual nanites were only a couple of microns across, small as a blood cell and invisible to the naked eye.

Weylan's psychobiotic nanobot had passed CorGo's review board. He could use it on humans beginning now. But he knew it wasn't perfect. He'd worked on the design for three years and had always run up against the same problem: the nanites could too easily cause a memory cascade. The truth was, Weylan was stuck. And he wasn't miraculously going to get unstuck, either. It didn't matter what Dr. Mason or the review board said. His nanite was no magic "Number 240."

To ensure that no one had control of his design but himself, at least not before he'd fixed it, he'd left out a bit of code from the version he'd given the review board—and therefore the version CorGo had. No one had noticed that anything was missing because he'd taken the code out of a subroutine that most people would presume was complete. Without that subroutine, the design would fail if anyone tried to use it behind his back. He felt safer that way. He could always add the code again when he had the problems solved.

Still, maybe his design could work even with its flaws if he mixed the technology with the right drugs. First, there was the tiny amount of drug the nanites delivered, along with an electrical pulse. And then there was the tranquilizer the nanites floated in. But the electrical stimulation and the memory-enhancing drug were too powerful by themselves. The nanites stimulated the memory centers so strongly a human mind couldn't handle the instant, overwhelming images and feelings. Still, with the right tranquilizer, the effects could be dulled. That's what he'd thought two weeks ago. But he should have been more careful, especially with a child.

Years ago he had understood that technology needed limits. He'd been fourteen when he learned that his great-great-grandfather had been half Cherokee, with some Olmec or Aztec genes mixed in. It had been a shock, and a sudden possibility. He'd chosen right then to think of himself as Na-

tive American, even though he hadn't been raised that way and most of his genes were Irish. He read books on Cherokee culture, on Coronado's visit to Kansas in the 1600s—noting that some of the Indian guides had come with Coronado from Mexico, wondering if one of those men or women might have been his ancestor. But then he'd gone to the Technoversity and studied science and psychology, and that intensely logical vision of the world didn't leave room for anything else. And now, since the day he'd seen Mikey's mind break, Weylan had been thinking of the things he'd learned when he was fourteen—humanity's connection to the earth, the need to allow chaos and mystery—but he didn't know where to go from there. He wasn't fourteen, he was thirty-one. And he was a scientist, not a rebellious boy.

In his office, the only decorations besides the new poster and his Sponge Bob Square Pants cup, which he kept hidden in a file cabinet when anyone was around, were a nanite hand puppet Pandora had sewn for him (sitting like a frog in the back of his drawer) and an antique lamp that she'd given him for his birthday. The lamp was from the 1940s, a hundred years old, with a blood red glass globe that had only a couple of almost invisible cracks in it. The globe had a menagerie of animals etched around its face, and hung from a brass pin at the top of the lamp; the flick of a finger would send it spinning. When he'd turned the lamp on the first time in a dark room, and the red light shimmered on the walls, he'd felt a moment of happiness as the white seals and tigers and horses danced by. The lamp wasn't scientific, but he kept it anyway.

On the day of the party, Dr. Mason sprang for exotic foods: Polynesian taro root for finger dipping, Samoan fa'ausi with coconut and brown sugar, breadfruit, Kava to drink, and hot balls from Papua New Guinea. Then—or Weylan, who didn't like new things—pizza with goat cheese. Everyone was there: the three other post docs, including bald-headed Lynn, who had gotten her appointment only a month before, to improve beam confinement so **that** the radio waves would activate the nanites more efficiently; a couple of Dr. Mason's favorite undergraduate interns; and John 1 and John 2 (Jianyu and Jong-Pil, from China and Korea) who ran the CNC machine that built the nanobots from Weylan's design. The two Johns had been disagreeing on the best way to construct the nanite's arm, but earlier that week John 1 had finally found a solution they could live with. So, everyone Weylan would expect was there. Then, to his disbelief, he saw Pandora sitting with the others, as if she were part of the gang. That was two weeks before

she left him. She'd been saying for weeks that she didn't like his nanobot idea, thought mucking about with someone's memory was wrong and loosing tiny machines in their brain even worse. And they'd had a fight about it just a few days before the party. Yet, there she was, sitting on a lab stool, smiling her half-smile as Dr. Mason gave a speech about the future of psychobiotic nanotechnology and about how Weylan's achievement being a great leap forward.

Dr. Mason had his hand on Weylan's shoulder. Weylan hated how grateful he felt, the same way he used to feel when his grandfather would rest his hand on his back and tell him he was doing a good job shoveling manure out of the horse barn. The feeling was half rage, half desire to weep in thanks that the old man had appreciated him. His mentor's hand was heavy, and Weylan stood absolutely still under it. Everyone was focused on Dr. Mason, who had shifted his weight to one hip, easy in his flowered shirt and safari pants. He wore his gray hair pulled back in a ponytail that said he was just one of them, one of the guys. Dr. Mason's voice was deep and mellow, but his body gave off an acrid musk. Weylan wondered if what he smelled was a new kind of marijuana. He didn't listen to Mason, and instead stared at his and Mason's feet. Sturdy black shoes at the end of his own legs—the leather needed a good buffing; on Mason's feet the newest brand of slider sandals with embedded computer chips that reformed the sole as he walked. Today he was barefoot in his sandals, instead of wearing his more usual brown argyle socks. Weylan stared at the dirt around his mentor's big toenails. He must have been outside and forgotten to get a sonic scrub on his way back in.

"With our new patients ready to go tomorrow," Dr. Mason was saying, "we'll all have plenty to do." He gave Weylan's shoulder a squeeze and Weylan pulled away as if he'd been bitten. He looked quickly toward Pandora, who stared back at him. She had her hair in pigtails, which meant she had come directly from work. The other women in the room had on form-fitting jumpsuits in colors like fuchsia and puce, but she wore a brown T-shirt and denim shorts. Weylan gave her an awkward grimace. She squinted her eyes at him, but then took a breath and gave a tightlipped grin back. There would be no fighting during the party.

The day of that party was the last time Weylan could say he was happy. Pandora had given in and shared pizza with him, brushing cheese out of his mustache, agreeing with the post docs and students who came over to congratulate him that indeed his nanobots were wonderful. He'd held her hand and believed for a moment that everything could be good.

* * *

But now, two weeks later, standing in the hospital corridor steeling himself to go into Mikey's room, nothing was good. The hospital seemed unreal. This children's ward should be noisy and messy and full of life, but it wasn't; it had no smell except cleaning fluid, no sound. The entire ward seemed asleep. The drugs used here didn't heal them; they just helped the children die without pain. Behind him neon puppies silently scampered from one end of the corridor walls to the other, and then started over again, never arriving at their unseen destination. Frantic, endless play. They made no sound either except a hiss when the neon surge hit a section where there was seam.

Weylan closed his eyes. He wanted to do something, at least undo what he'd done. But more than anything, he didn't want to go into the hospital room behind him. He didn't want to even think about it. Yet he stood at the window, his eyes open, and stared at the toadstool-like igloos, the strange trees, and, amid them, billboards silently gliding up into the air and down, finding their audience. The boards faced the hospital, mostly, although some faced the glides, some the houses. *You need an answer? We have it. Choose your color, your taste. Happiness and ease are right here*, and then CorGo's symbol a black tulip with dark green stripes.

A drone startled him, appearing outside the window as if from nowhere. It gleamed in the sunlight, a happy golden ball, trying to read him—his needs and desires. It scanned him then zipped away as one of the billboards slowly rose above the trees, turning as it climbed six stories into the air, the stem growing upward and the board turning, grotesque and graceful, to face him and tell him that *Dranzapine* could now make him *happier than ever*. In 3-D, a doctor wearing rainbow scrubs handed a lollipop to a sick girl. *Make Her Love You*, the sign said, and the doctor's head swiveled toward him. Again Weylan's stomach churned.

"Forget it!" Weylan said. He turned his back on the window and strode to room 621. It was time to go in.

Tuesday Morning, September 20

Chapter Two: Weylan

The morning Weylan saw Mikey for the first time, a week ago, with his child's fingers lost in the smooth, perfect hand of the nurse droid, he was struck by how much the boy looked like him at that age. Mikey had the same skinny legs and big feet, the same pointed chin. Mikey's hair was blond—that was a major difference—but Weylan recognized himself in the boy's apathy as Mikey was led around by a machine that was twice his size. It was the refusal to care, the orphan's knowledge that no one really wanted him. What else would a kid think when his father stuck him in a rain vat and left him there in 100 degree heat?

The nurse droid was five feet two inches of metal and plastic and ball bearings covered by human skin that had been grown in a stainless steel vat, like cancer cells in a gigantic Petri dish. It was skin that never sweated, never calloused. The droid couldn't want anything. AI scientists had been trying to make the robots more human, not just efficient, but kind. It hadn't happened yet. The theory had been that by 2050 computers would be better than humans—smarter, faster, more rational. The theory had stalled in the last half of the 2020s. Weylan could have told them that there wasn't any algorithm for kindness. So he always looked at the nurse droids with a wary eye. Any being that could suddenly ratchet its arm across the room fifteen feet and then snake it back needed to be given plenty of distance. It didn't matter how realistic the arm was, or how pretty the hand with its sparkling green fingernails.

"Thank you," Weylan said to the nurse. No, he didn't trust the thing, but that didn't mean he shouldn't be polite. When he took Mikey's other hand to lead him into his office, the droid interpreted the action and words correctly and let Mikey go. Mikey's hand was hot and dry. It felt terribly small.

"You did pretty good with that nurse machine. You're a tough kid."

Mikey didn't answer, but he slipped his hand free and pushed himself up into the chair in front of Weylan's desk. Weylan was often surprised by how comfortable kids seemed to feel around him, because he wasn't comfortable with them.

"Well, Mikey, do you know why you're here?"

Probably not. How do you tell a kid he's going to have an army of tiny robots shot into his brain? How do you tell him he's going to be forced to remember the awful thing his father did to him, the very thing he'd been refusing to think about for a week and a half? Mikey's counselor had tried to get Mikey to talk, but as soon as she came anywhere near the topic of his father or his sister, Mikey would start banging his head on the floor. Maybe if Mikey's treatment could go slower, his counselor could get him to feel safe enough to talk about how he felt. But health insurance for the children of factory workers had a low credit cap. In another week his insurance and any charity credits would run out. That's why he was there with Weylan—the experimental treatment was a last resort.

Mikey had pulled Weylan's pen-and-pencil holder across the desk and had proceeded to dump out the writing utensils in front of him—pink erasers, green fountain pens, black and red ballpoints that had run dry, yellow pencils whittled down to stubs—a collection of antiques. Children were still taught how to draw and write, even though they would use virtual text-writers in their adult lives. But they didn't use pens as they learned; they used a stylus on a computer slate. To see so many old pens and writing materials together in one place must have been wonderful. Mikey bent over the desk to concentrate on moving the pens about, his fingers touching each of them gently. Seeing his pens messed up like that didn't feel wonderful to Weylan. He began fidgeting and almost immediately began putting the pens back in the old Prince Albert tobacco can he used as a holder. He was careful to return them to the exact order they'd been in—brown pen next to blue next to two black pencils. Mikey watched him do it and, with solemn intensity, even offered a couple of antique Bic pens to help. When the utensils were all back in their rightful spots, Weylan put the container, with its faded portrait of the prince, back where it belonged.

Then he and Mikey stared at each other. The boy's face seemed drawn down, as if his feelings weighed more than he did. Weylan felt it too. What came to mind was his own mother's face. She was shouting something, but he couldn't hear her.

Weylan stood up quickly, bumping his knees against the bottom of his desk. His heart ticked fast. Mikey broke his gaze when Weylan jumped up,

and he found something new to play with. It was a staple remover, also something no one needed anymore.

"What have you got there?" Weylan asked. The rusty teeth of the remover clacked together in Mikey's hand. "Be careful now."

Mikey made the jaws open and close, open and close, and then jammed the teeth against his arm, savagely mashing the jaws together so they dug deep into his flesh

Mikey let the jaws open, and four puncture wounds spurted blood. Weylan lunged across the desk as the boy attacked his arm again.

"Did it," Mikey said. Or that's what Weylan thought he said. "I did it."

Weylan grabbed the staple remover and Mikey threw himself back in the chair, banging his head, again, and then again.

"Stop it!" Weylan yelled. The sight of Mikey's blood on his arm and then the sound of Mikey's head banging made Weylan frantic. He knew he was over-reacting, but he couldn't help it.

"Stop it!"

But it didn't matter how loud he yelled. Mikey wasn't listening. Weylan came around the desk. He grabbed the hand with the staple remover and forced it out of Mikey's grasp.

He knelt next to the chair, put his arms around the frenzied child and held him tightly, trying to stop him from harming himself further.

Weyland forced himself to breathe deeply as Mikey squirmed. He would help Mikey the best way he knew, by using the nanobot therapy—carefully, using just a few 'bots. If the nanites worked, Mikey would be healed and Pandora would see that Weylan was not some mad scientist, that he was only trying to help.

Meanwhile, Mikey thrashed and Weylan held on as best he could. Finally, Mikey calmed enough that he was able to call Mikey's counselor to come take the boy away.

* * *

That was their first meeting. The boy Weylan saw when he went through the door of room 621 wasn't Mikey; he was Mikey's wraith, an apparition. *Dead already*. Against the white sheets, the boy was almost lost: his pale hair, his skin so transparent the veins showed blue. As Weylan walked into the room, a sudden roaring migraine made him lightheaded. Mikey was his fault. But that thought was so awful he pushed it down, using another old trick of his. He imagined loosing a thousand nanites on the idea, a hun-

dred thousand, letting them chip at it with their claws, dissolve it bit by bit with the tiny spurts of chemicals they released. The nanites swarmed over the thought until they reduced it to a puddle, a clump, a nothing.

That helped. His headache backed off. He wouldn't "cry like a little girl," as his grandfather said—when Weylan fell out of the tree and broke his wrist, or a couple of years later when a car hit his dog and his grandfather had to shoot it. An image of his grandfather came to him, his grandfather standing there with the rifle, his skinny legs solidly set in their tough denim jeans. He was wearing his black shirt and his black cowboy hat, because this was a Sunday and they'd just come from church. Weylan remembered how steady his grandfather's arms had been as he shot the dog. "Think like a man," his grandfather always said. Well, Weylan thought, now would be the time to do that.

At first Weylan had believed that Mikey would come out of the odd, half-catatonic state he was in. Mikey's psychiatric counselor, Dr. Van Hoy, had tried day after day to talk him out of the terrible place where he seemed to be stuck, the place Weylan's brilliant new nanobots had put him. When she gave up, Mikey was placed on a new dose of calming drugs and had been transferred here.

Mikey's eyes opened when Weylan came through the door, but nothing was going on behind them. That would be the effect of the drugs. Without them, Mikey's eyes had looked terrified and he'd rarely blinked. This was better, and Weylan winced at that idea.

"Mikey?" The boy didn't smile. It was as if Weylan hadn't spoken.

When he learned that Mikey was going to be relocated from the regular children's section of the hospital to the Abandoned Children's Ward, Weylan had used all his bank credits to pay for this private room. The room could never make up for the harm he'd done, but Weylan was determined to do anything he could to help Mikey now. On one side was the telewall that Mikey never watched. It stretched from ceiling to floor along an entire wall. Elephants and giraffes and polar bears in fluorescent blues and yellows galloped around the LED frame, moving so fast the frame seemed iridescent. Across the screen, every couple of minutes, a splash of pink and purple and the happy faces of children from around the world invited whoever saw it into their projected world. The first day he'd come, Weylan had tried turning on the telewall, selecting a kid's show with circus music. It didn't make any difference. Mikey could just as well have been staring at a blank screen. Books about gigantic green dinosaurs and silver androids sat on the chest of drawers under the windows, unopened. A flashy red

hover car still in the box sat on the little table in front of a child's chair. The car had a horn that beeped and a toy laser gun that showed a flaming dot on whatever it was pointed at.

Weylan forced himself to look at the boy lost in the huge bed. Mikey's eyes were glazed, and he lay there without moving. Was he breathing? In a few steps, Weylan was at the bed; he stroked the boy's forehead and bent close to hear his breath. He was so frail! In that moment it was as if he understood what Mikey had gone through. The sides of the vat would have been hot to the touch, the fiery air burning Mikey's lungs. And that stink of plastic, baking in the sun—how could he breathe?

Mikey's father had put Mikey in the older vat, the one that had holes in the side. His sister got the good vat, the one that was perfectly strong and never leaked. Mikey would have known that she had to get out, before it got too hot. He was a smart kid. If he was sweating from head to foot and choking on the fumes, it would be worse for her. She was only three years old. He was smart enough to drink the water his father had given him, but Tracy might not think of it. And she couldn't possibly have been able to undo the lid. Poor Tracy! Weylan understood why Mikey had scratched at the holes in his vat so frantically that his fingers bled.

Mikey's father had put books, toys, and water bottles in the vats, and water bottles, and made sure the air vents were open at the top. "I did everything I could think of," he said. He thought it was being good to his children to do this!

"When I used to tie them to the bed," the father said, "Mikey just undid the knots. Smart like his mother was. I thought the vats were big enough to be like little playrooms. I didn't expect Tracy to—." He'd broken down on that word.

Weylan smoothed Mikey's hair from his face, and backed up to sit in the chair next to the bed. It instantly shaped itself to him. Comfortable, soft. What Weylan preferred was a hard chair, one that would force him to sit straight. He had to face it: he'd killed Mikey's spirit as much as Mikey's father had. It was his technology, his arrogance that was at fault. How had he expected to talk a kid through this? If Mikey remembered what happened he'd be better? No. Mikey had it right. Never remember, never! How was the kid supposed to make sense of tearing for hours at those holes in the baking heat, and finally getting through that old plastic—so old it had started to crack in the sun—only to find his father yanking the cover off Tracy's "safe place" and lifting her limp body out? He couldn't ever make sense of that. No real doctor would have asked him to.

The iron band around his diaphragm came back. Weylan could take only short breaths, even though he tried to calm down. One half of his mind told him that he should have known technology wasn't the answer for a disorder of the soul—nanobots in the brain! What had he been thinking? The other half argued that the technique should have worked, that Mikey had at least been given a chance to recover from what his father had done. Weylan's mental battle was going nowhere, and he stood up from the chair in

gratitude when Asoese, the very human day nurse, bumped open the door with her hip. She announced that it was "Breakfast time for good little boys."

When Weylan had met her on the first day Mikey was on this ward, he'd been worried. Her hair stood straight up in four-inch spikes with rainbow colors, and her eyelids were heavily coated, one surrounded by glitter, the other fluorescent blue. Under the makeup, she had the olive tones and rounded face of someone from the tropics. She was from Samoa, he thought she'd said, or some other island that had flooded in that version of The Events. He imagined her bailing water out of a rowboat floating in the Pacific. Now, as soon as she saw Weylan, she glared at him.

"You!"

Then she strode into the room as if she were going to a fight. The tray, striped with green and coral, could have been her weapon. It held a child's cup and bowl, one a dazzling orange, the other purple.

"I—I was just leaving," Weylan said.

Asoese slitted her eyes, but set the tray on the table by the bed instead of throwing it at him. Her jumpsuit was a radiant yellow. Over it she wore a smock that currently displayed sailboats and electric bikes, because she was in a boy's room. It would change to pink kites with flowers when she worked with girls. And as long as she was happy, the colors would be happy, too. The colors were flickering now, from crimson to saffron to white, as if her suit didn't know what the right mood was.

"Well, that's fine then. You go and this little bugger is left to . . ." and she mouthed the word "die."

Weylan's suit coat dragged on his shoulders, and the sleeves lapped over the base of his palms.

"Has he been eating?" he asked. "Yesterday the nurse said he wouldn't eat."

Asoese frowned at Weylan, then sat on the side of the bed, and her smock went back to happy sailboats. "He didn't know how to coax him, did

he little darling? Come on baby, you're a big boy, aren't you," she said as she put her arm under Mikey's back and urged the boy to sit up.

Irrational—was he a baby or a big boy? Mikey let her sit him up—he seemed so terribly light. When she raised the bed behind him and lowered the foot, the bed became a chaise lounge, and the sheets turned blue.

"You'll eat some ice cream, won't you Love?" Asoese held the spoon to Mikey's mouth. His bangs flopped into his eyes, and she combed the fine hair back with her fingers. Against his pale skin, his freckles had a sickly look.

"Ice cream for breakfast?" Weylan asked.

Mikey opened his mouth, and Asoese fed him quickly and surely. Not a speck on his thin lips.

"Eating is eating, innit?" She scooped up some more. "I added protein powder, if you have to know."

Weylan was glad he had paid extra for a human nurse even if she hated him. No machine would have gotten Mikey to do anything. And if he hadn't paid, who would? Mikey's father was in jail, and his mother had been dead for a year already (thus the tying to the bed and then the rain vat "daycare"). There didn't seem to be anyone else left.

As the nurse brought the spoon to his mouth, Mikey opened his lips. He ate bubblegum ice cream as if he were a robot, opening his mouth when Asoese asked him to, but there was no happiness in his eyes.

He should have let Mikey be. The poor kid had too many people wanting to do him good. "I wanted to be a father, they could trust," Mikey's dad had said, sobbing. This was at the interview when Weylan and Dr. Van Hoy were trying to piece together what had happened. "I didn't want them getting into no trouble." Mikey's father looked a lot like Mikey—skinny, overalls hanging on him, his boots too big, a vast sadness behind everything. "I was only gone a couple hours—to work. I have to work, don't I? And she had enough air," their father said. "I made sure that both of them had enough air." But he hadn't thought about the sun. Ninety degrees at ten in the morning, and it had heated up fast. "I don't have no car, so I ran home. I tried to call someone, anyone to go get them, but I couldn't get through." Mikey's father hadn't been a monster. He'd been poor and too proud to ask for help, and his imagination couldn't go past using the vats. He hadn't been able to imagine being inside one.

Maybe that's what a monster was—someone who couldn't imagine what someone else felt. Maybe Weylan was the monster. He hadn't even thought about what would happen if he urged Mikey to remember the vat, and then

gave him nanites and a memory enhancer on top of it! The details of the memory, all the feelings and thoughts, the smells and textures, had overwhelmed the kid. His mind couldn't handle it, and now Mikey was stuck.

But his nanites should have worked. They should have! The tranquilizer that went with them was supposed to keep Mikey calm. He should have been okay. But he wasn't okay. He was supposed to see that he couldn't have saved his sister, no matter what he'd done. And that should have freed him. Weylan had mixed the dose according to Dr. Mason's prescription: six drams tranquilizer, two thousand nanites, a smidgeon of enhancer. It should have worked. Now, if only he could go back a week and smash those machines before they had a chance to get into Mikey's brain. He imagined crushing the microscopic tentacles, that famous arm he'd worked on so carefully. It was his fault that the nanobots worked at all. His design let the machines cross the barrier between the blood and the brain. It was his design that let the nanobots touch the exact spots in the brain that held Mikey's memories and, as Pandora would say, "muck about." Each bot sent a miniscule jolt of energy through the arm and deposited less than a drop, less than a millionth of a drop of a memory drug directly into whatever cell it had gone to. What if the bots had worked too well? What if Mikey had gone into his memory the way he was supposed to, but now was caught there, with no way to get out?

"It's your fault, innit?" Asoese had cleaned the tray and set it aside. She took Weylan by the arm and pulled him away from the bed. "You aren't even a real doctor. I heard about you!"

Her leggings and smock had turned ecru. The computer chip knew joy from sadness, but it locked up when emotions got hot: it couldn't tell anger from lust, so it automatically switched into default—no color at all.

Weylan glanced down at his own suit—navy blue, gray tie. Those sturdy shoes. Pretty much the same uniform doctors had worn since the twentieth century—that's why the drone had tagged him as one. But the drone had it wrong. He hadn't worn the suit because he was a doctor; he'd chosen the suit and wore it every day because it connected him with his great-great-grandfather. Weylan's grandpa wore jeans and boots, but great-great-grandpa Adohi Conor Collins, to judge by the one photograph he'd found when he was fourteen, always wore a formal suit coat that reached to his knees. It was dark and had big buttons. Weylan remembered the first time he'd seen the photo, the day he'd snuck into his grandfather's study at the back of the house. The study had a musty smell from the old tack—saddles, reins, and bits—that his grandfather kept there. In one corner was a pile

of horse blankets, but his grandfather's oak desk took up most of the rest of the room. What his grandfather did at the desk was a mystery to him—Weylan never saw his grandfather with a book.

Being in the room was dangerous. It was disobedience. If his grandfather found him there, his back would feel it. Weylan sat in his grandfather's chair and put his hands on the surface of the desk. His grandfather's power seemed to radiate from the wood, a threat even when he was nowhere near. Daring to defy his grandfather by sitting unbidden at the desk made Weylan feel strong.

He found the photo hidden in the bottom desk drawer. Weylan had heard about his great-great-grandfather, the half Cherokee, but he didn't know much: the Indian blood in his grandfather's line had been a family secret. On the back of the photo were two names: James Brian Collins and Adohi Conor Collins, and a date, 1907. Brothers. The photo itself was a black and white still shot, showing two teenage boys holding themselves rigid to let the photo take. One boy was fair-haired and wore a jacket. He knelt next to a mutt and had one hand on the dog's neck. In his other hand was a rifle, standing upright. The other boy had a dog, too, but the dog lay with his head on his paws at the boy's feet. This boy, tall, wearing a long dark coat, his pants cuffs stuffed into old brogans, must be Weylan's great-great-grandfather. He had long black hair pushed behind his hears. He held a gun like the other boy did, upright, his hand on the barrel, but unlike his brother, he didn't look at the camera. His head was turned, as if he mused on something far outside his brother's understanding. Weylan could see the Cherokee in him, or some mix of Cherokee and an old, old Mexican tribe. The brother was half Cherokee, too, but he looked all Irish.

Weylan was one thirty-second Cherokee, yet he felt as if he understood what his great-great-grandfather had been staring at. A hundred and fifty years before, his ancestor had worn his formal coat and now Weylan wore his blue suit as a way to give the world some limits, to have some control—not just over the chaos out there, but over the anger and guilt and fear that he, and he believed his great-great-grandfather, held inside and didn't dare to let show.

Asoese shook him, and Weyland came back to the present.

"Well, mister fake doctor?"

Annoyed at her, Weylan snapped back, "If you checked up on me you know that I *am* a doctor, just not the kind you were thinking of. I work with technology, experimental treatments."

"Well, your experiment failed. What are you going to do about it?"

Do? He couldn't do anything. He'd already done too much.

"At least I tried to help," he said. "Dr. Van Hoy —you know her don't you?—said that no matter how much she counseled him, no matter what drugs she prescribed, he wouldn't make it six months at the displaced kids' home, The Children's Playground."

The billboards said all children were happy at The Playground. But all the playthings in the world, all the drugs in the world, wouldn't have been able to make Mikey happy. In Mikey's mind he'd killed his own sister. How could warehousing Mikey make that go away?

His technology really had been the only solution. It still was. He just had to figure out the next step.

Asoese had him by the arm and was staring at him.

"The Playground is where he's going five days from now, if he doesn't get better," she said. "And my contract runs out then, too. It's your money they say, so what's your plan?"

"You see my plan—" he pointed at Mikey. "You see how well that worked out. I don't have some magic potion to make it all go away."

"Why don't you? You're the genius, aren't you?"

"I'm no genius, I just . . ."

"You were smart enough to put that boy in this condition. Now use your head and get him back out."

She threw his arm down and marched to the bed to get the tray. Weylan couldn't do anything but watch her. As she pulled the door open, she turned her gaze on him one last time and pursed her lips. She was challenging him. Asoese seemed to believe that he knew the answer to Mikey's problem, if he could just remember it.

Weylan's vision blurred as his migraine came back; the room and the bed floated in a gray haze. He had no magic answers. There was nothing he could do.

And now it was time to see Dr. Mason, at their regular Tuesday meeting. He was supposed to tell him how things were coming with his other patient, Tabitha—she was not a child, thank God. Weylan would have to lie. His mentor thought the failure with Mikey gave them a good benchmark for knowing how many nanobots were too many. Benchmark! Since Mikey, Weylan had cut back on Tabitha's dose, and certainly hadn't upped the dose as Mason wanted.

Pretty soon, Mikey would probably die, his career would be over, and Pandora would never forgive him. But there had to be an answer. If he did

nothing, Mikey *would* die. The tranquilizers were killing the kid, wiping out his life, but without them he'd be trapped in terror. Still, he should be able to figure out what had happened.

The migraine hit him again. Weylan thought he might throw up as he searched through pain-slitted eyes for the wastebasket. The only other times he'd felt this bad was after he'd gotten drunk—before they came up with a cure for hangovers—and when he'd tried drugs. Cocaine gave him the migraine but not the nausea, and downers were okay as long as they lasted, but he felt like death warmed over the next day. His grandfather's mountain mushrooms weren't quite as bad, but in their case he really could have died..

The mushrooms must have come to mind because he'd been thinking about his great-great-grandfather. Weylan didn't know much about him, but he did know that his great-great-grandfather had handed down his knowledge of mushrooms to his son and then that son to Weylan's grandfather. Weylan had heard the lore went all the way back to Coronado and his Indian guides—Olmec? Toltec? Aztec? Weylan's grandfather was supposed to pass on his knowledge to his son, Weylan's father. But Weylan's father had died, a soldier, so there was nothing to do but for his grandfather to teach Weylan as the next in line. In college, Weylan had seen where the mushrooms could take him, but they'd scared him so much he'd put them away and hadn't thought about them for years. Weylan still had some, dried and stuck in the back of his refrigerator, but they were probably shriveled to nothing by now.

There was nothing to do, at least not here. Weylan turned his eyes away from Mikey, and went into the hallway, shutting the door gently behind him. Weird how he'd been thinking about mushrooms all day—fungi, the billboards growing suddenly the way mushrooms do, the igloos looking like mushroom caps. Everything had reminded him of them. Why? His grandfather had treated the mushrooms like a family secret, shared only by the men. His grandma certainly knew nothing about them.

The year his grandfather had passed his knowledge on, Weylan had been fourteen. His father had died that summer, and that fall Weylan and his grandfather had driven the horse trailer all the way from the Kansas/Missouri border, where they lived, over 600 miles to the Colorado mountains. They'd driven up a rocky one-lane road, and then they'd backed the horses out of the trailer, hooves stamping, the horses snorting in the thin air. Weylan had stroked his horse, Doodle, soothing him, whispering to him that he had trouble breathing too, that he would take care not to push too hard.

They'd mounted their horses at a spring, where the horses could drink and where Weylan and his grandfather had filled their canteens. The stream that ran from the spring had kept some tiny white flowers alive, rock jasmine his grandfather told him, and here and there dark green leaves hid the last chokecherries, but they were too tough to eat. The night before, Weylan and his grandfather had stayed at a motel where the heater made such a racket they had to turn it off, even though the blankets were too worn to keep them warm. Now, early in the morning, he could feel the November cold in his bones. The mountain was mostly bare rock, but blue spruce, with fine blue powder on its needles, grew along the streams. Under the cliffs, the shadows were dark, and the breeze carried the odor of ponderosa pine.

He rode Doodle behind his grandfather over the rocks and up into the woods. His grandfather had on a sheepskin jacket Weylan wore layered long johns and a flannel shirt under his windbreaker. His grandfather didn't talk, and Weylan didn't either. They rode upwards for over an hour, slowly, carefully, then turned abruptly and followed a rivulet down a rocky slope, until his grandfather put up his hand for Weylan to stop. They were at a gulley in a stand of aspen and spruce.

"You go over there. And don't look this way." His grandfather pointed to the gulley's far end. He waited until Weylan did as he said. Why would his grandfather have him come along if he wasn't going to show him what he was doing? Weylan thought about this a lot in the months after they got back. Maybe his grandfather was doing something dangerous and needed to protect him. Maybe his grandfather was doing something illegal.

Or maybe it was a test.

The second time Weylan and his grandfather made the long trip, across Kansas, into Colorado and up the mountain to the pine trees, they arrived at the same gulley. His grandfather said, "I have to show you something," and I want you to remember it. I'm only going to show you once."

His granddad got off his horse and crouched at the foot of the small spruces that grew near the stream. Mushrooms with bright red caps and white stems, some as much as five inches tall, grew under the trees. Their pungent, wet smell was overpowering. Weylan got down from Doodle and wrapped his reins lightly over a chokecherry bush. His grandfather had taken off his gloves, even though the air bit, and he laid out a spade and a piece of red cloth, then said, "Here, kneel next to me. Watch everything I do."

Weylan knelt in the dirt and concentrated on his grandfather's hands.

The mushrooms were grotesque—red-orange with tiny white dots, some with wide caps, others conical. They looked deadly. His grandfather didn't just pick the mushrooms. He moved his hands in a certain way and said words that Weylan didn't understand. His grandfather was like a priest, and he performed the ritual carefully as he dug out one mushroom at a time. The mushrooms looked dangerous, but Weylan was even more afraid of his grandfather. He'd never seen such a rapt look on his face. At that moment he loved his grandfather, maybe for the first time, and vowed to do whatever he asked. Weylan held his breath and concentrated.

After what must have been a quarter of an hour, his grandfather sat back on his heels and looked at Weylan.

"The words have to be right," he said, "and you have to dig in a certain way."

"Or—?"

"Or the mushrooms will kill you if you eat them. Or they won't have any power at all."

Then his grandfather taught him how to hold the spade, which direction to dig toward first, what to say each time the spade entered the earth. He taught Weylan how to say the words: *iknuih, cuacualti, itacatl, axan, nian.*

They were Náhuatl words, from the old days, meaning "brother, beautiful, food." His grandfather taught Weylan in the same way his father had taught him, and that was the same way Adohi Conor Collins had taught his son. Probably, over the generations, the words had become confused and the ritual corrupted, but Weylan wanted to believe. He repeated the words aloud and said them over and over in his mind until he had made the strange sounds familiar. For the length of these short phrases, the language became his.

After that trip, Weylan began his secret study of Cherokee culture and then began studying the people who had spoken Náhuatl in Coronado's time. He'd already, first thing, learned about the mushrooms. They were Amanita Muscaria, called the "Mushrooms of the Gods" because they let people experience the spirit world.. Or at least experience some other reality. Some people said the visions came from heaven, while others said they came from hell. But if you had no heaven or hell, then they simply came from another plane, where physics and biology didn't apply. Either way, the mushrooms explained those long nights at home when his grandfather rode off, leaving Weylan with his grandma. He remembered how rough his grandfather always looked the next morning, when he'd come back to the ranch and would stop only to tell Weylan to take care of the horse. His

clothes would be dirty with mud and sticks, his eyes wide and full of pain, as if he'd seen something no one should. This happened all the while Weylan's father had been away as a soldier, but more often and more intensely after his father died. Those times, Weylan saw something in his grandfather that was usually hidden. He saw the same loneliness and fear he'd seen in the photo of his ancestor. When his grandfather's rages made Weylan want to strike back, he remembered the trip to Colorado, and the memory helped him calm himself, helped him bear whatever his grandfather did, in silence.

Weylan didn't try eating the mushrooms himself until he was in graduate school after he'd studied the mushrooms and learned how to handle their poison. He'd read that if you pulverized the mushrooms and extracted their oils to mix in tea or kava or mead and then drank the mixture, you would understand your place in the universe. He had seen colors, swirls, then was hit with nausea and a terrible grief. He'd woken up curled on the floor of his dorm room, vomiting and sobbing. No more of that for him.

The hallway had been quiet when Weylan came out of Mikey's room, but now there was a flurry of nurse droids headed into a room near the double doors. No bells, because the robots were programmed to react to an alert individually. Some poor kid, he guessed—Weylan didn't want to think about it. Pretty soon he'd be seeing a cot pushed out of the room and through the doors, and that would be the end for that child. He'd be a statistic written up in some doctor's report.

It wasn't fair. Just because no one loved you didn't mean you should die like a dog.

He turned again to the window and stood at an angle so that he could see the clouds in the northwest more clearly. They were huge, now, definitely coming. His great-great-grandfather might have told him to have respect for thunder and wind, but all he felt was terror. Even though it had been a quarter of a century since his life had been torn apart, his body seemed to think it was yesterday. He already had a migraine and was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

Weylan recognized the yearning—an ache and a panicked desire—to watch the weather, so he put a stop to it right there. To help bring himself back to the present, he glanced at his watch, another relic from the old days. He didn't like the idea of implanting a communication device in his eye like most people did, with its constant blinking reminder of the time. Luckily there was no law to make him do that, yet.

But it was time—past time—for him to get down to Dr. Mason's office. And the Memory Division was in the sub-sub-basement of the hospital, at subway level. He would have to take the electropole down to it. He didn't like it, didn't trust it, but it would be worse to be absent when Dr. Mason's telepresence switched on.

* * *

His heart beat rapidly as he hurried down the corridor. He hadn't felt this much hope for a long time, and he was afraid to give in to it. He didn't have an actual plan for saving Mikey, but for some irrational reason he believed he was on the edge of finding a solution. Still, his migraine erupted again when he slammed through the double doors at the end of the hall, in his rush to get downstairs on time. On the other side of the doors, there was chaos. People hurrying from one side of the lobby to the other in their jumpsuits and capes—enough tangerine, shocking pink, and opalescent teal to make him squint. Nurses, visitors, doctors—everyone was walking fast, most of them talking through their communication implants or texting by wiggling their fingers in the air to punch numbers on virtual pads. He got bumped a couple of times, by people trying out the new technology that let them manipulate their communications devices by thought. A few people, though, stood out, wearing regular clothes like Weylan, talking to the people standing next to them instead of into the air. They noticed him as soon as he came through the door, and he felt like acknowledging them. But he kept his eyes on the electropole, which shone like a splinter of lightning in the middle of the sixth floor lobby. This was the top floor of the hospital, so he didn't have to squeeze himself between others already riding on the device. He waited until no one else was getting on, then reached out with an arm and a leg for the glowing pole that ran down the full eight stories to the lowest basement. A platform instantly appeared under his feet; he gritted his teeth and let himself go.

The engineers who built the pole said the electromagnetic binding system wasn't dangerous, but it jangled every one of his nerves. He had to wait as others got on and off, making the slide down slower than it might have been. He didn't know which was worse: this, with the energy coursing through his body for a full thirty seconds, or a ten-second express trip down that made his stomach rise to his throat. Either way, he didn't have control. The pole made him feel in thirty seconds what his life had been making him feel for years. The last weeks, especially, had seemed to have

an unnamable energy propelling him downward, no matter how much he wanted to stop.

The difference was that, with the pole, after he pushed the release button he could step off when he got to the bottom floor and the ride was over. Still, he stood wobbling for a long time after he stepped off. There were fewer people here, thank God. One woman asked if he was okay, and he nodded woozily. His migraine was gone, though. All that energy must have short-circuited it. The time saved going down, however, became time lost. It took a few seconds before he felt steady enough to walk to Dr. Mason's office.

Too late. Dr. Mason's telepresence was already at the desk, hunched over papers. The desk was in this room; Dr. Mason and the papers were not. Yet as Weylan sat down on the wooden chair facing the desk, he felt Dr. Mason's personality more forcibly than he did the hard seat against his bottom. If the projection hadn't flickered now and then, and if he'd been able to smell his mentor's skin and clothes the way he smelled his own, musty with a tang of fear, he might have believed that the two of them sat in the same office. But Dr. Mason was half a continent away in Harvard.

Not until the last paper passed under his eyes and disappeared as he put it out of tele range, did Dr. Mason look up to study Weylan. His eyes were sad, compassionate. They made Weylan squirm.

"Looking in on the boy again, I see. No change?"

Weylan shook his head.

"You're going to have to let him go."

Something about his mentor's ponytail, the gray at the temples, the worry lines on his forehead; something about the way he sat—carelessly, centered—made it hard for Weylan to speak. Dr. Mason waited for him, as if he were being kindly. That made it even harder. It confused him, the same way he used to be confused when he sat at his grandfather's breakfast table with sausage and eggs on a plate, the breakfast his grandfather wanted him to choose, rather than Cocoa Puffs with whole milk in a bowl, his actual desire

"I can't let him go," he said. "I mean, go where?" He was glad smell didn't carry over tele waves. The salty tang of his sweat had become rank. "I don't want him in some children's home. He needs attention, someone to spend time with him, to coax him out of his shell. If I let him go to a home, he'll be dead before Christmas."

His mentor, even from fifteen hundred miles away, looked him in the eye. "He's already dead, Weylan." Dr. Mason's voice was soft and reason-

able. An image of his grandfather's saddle came to Weylan's mind. Odd connection, that. "We did our best to save him, but now we have other patients to think about."

"No. I, I mean let me try a couple of things. I have ideas," Weylan said, even though his idea was vague and shocking. It wouldn't do to talk about mushrooms with Dr. Mason. He was all about new medications, high technology. Weylan didn't want him to say no.

"I want to try to fix this," Weylan said. His heart beat as fast as it had when he'd reached out for the pole.

Dr. Mason looked impatient, but didn't say anything. Weylan took that as an okay, and he stood up.

Then, Dr. Mason said, "You can try to 'fix it' if you want to, but don't let that get in the way of what we're working on. You've got your other patient to deal with." He looked at a paper. "Tabitha Phillips. I hear she's been mauled pretty badly by her boyfriend. I've increased the dose of nanobots for her, so we'll see how that goes." And with that, the man behind the desk blinked out.

Weylan went to his own office down the hall, a closet with a three-foot desk and two folding chairs. The light came on automatically, but he said, "Shut off." Had to say it three times for the light to cooperate. He sat in the semi-dark on his cold chair and leaned his head back. His head hurt, his eyes hurt, his whole body hurt. Ever since Pandora left him, he hadn't been sleeping well. The bed needed her weight to balance his. That horror on her face when he told her about Mikey was what he remembered. And her voice: "*You did what!?*"

If there was a pill that obliterated memories, he'd take it. Wipe out the whole thing. Of course, then Mikey would go to The Children's Playground and that would be that.

Weylan sat up, said "On" for the lights, and searched in his desk drawer, trying to find the Dranzapine. Soon he'd be happier than ever.

Tuesday Morning, September 20

Chapter Three: Pandora

Space is a vast silence. The absence of sound, the absence of light. Even with the rush of planets and the whirling of the galaxy—still only infinite emptiness, the stasis of a billion years. Compared to that, what was this house, this one person leaving?

Pandora felt her insignificance as she stood near the trunk of her rental car, holding a crate in her hands. She stared across the street at nothing. The pink car was crammed full of the boxes and bags that held everything she owned—her books and papers, her vinyl boots and tin helmet, her hand puppets. They were what kept her sane. If she didn't have work and didn't have her disguises, all she had left was herself. The crate held her Warrior Princess outfit. She'd wrapped the cape around the one dish her mother had let her take from home ten years before—a fake Wedgewood plate with a blue windmill. The plate had a chipped spot along the edge that cut her every time she forgot about it. She should just throw the plate away.

"Trunk, open," she said, and the rear hatch glided upward. She'd rearranged the tiers of boxes, bags, and boots until there wasn't an inch left for anything else. With frustration, Pandora tugged a bag out of one corner so she could stick the crate in, instead. The bag would have to sit under her feet up front. When she said "Close," the door came down slowly, making a gravelly crunch as it crushed anything that got in its way, sounding like her mother's old coffee grinder smashing the beans to pulp. The door finally snapped shut, and the car shimmied.

"Just like a big old dog, aren't you? Come on, girl, settle down."

While she'd been loading the last things into her car, neighborhood kids, the ones who didn't get to go to school, had been riding up on their bikes or running across the street to see. They wanted to know what the car would do next. These were the leftover children, the ones from the families that were packed, two and three sometimes, into a house no bigger than hers. Her neighborhood was like a refugee camp for people from islands in the

Pacific or from Central America, where whole villages had been flooded, crushed by mudslides or reduced to rubble in an earthquake. The kids were mostly brown and a lot of them were barefoot—they mainly stayed off the pavement in the heat.

In the distance, thunderclouds were gathering, but here the sun burned Pandora's bare arms. She used her palm as a shade over her eyes to look at the growing crowd of children.

"Go away. Scat!" she said.

None of the kids seemed to listen.

"Allez! Ousté! . . . . Andale!"

That was the full range of her foreign languages. These kids might speak Samoan or Maori for all she knew.

The tallest girl, wearing shorts that flashed yellow and orange and with a top the size of a hair band, said, "Wacked ride." Or at least that's what Pandora thought she said.

"It is wacked, and I can't guarantee what it's going to do next. So the best thing you can do is not touch it. Okay?"

The kids didn't touch, but they didn't leave, either.

Pandora guessed it was a sign for her to take off. But there was the house, standing forlorn and empty. Even the mimosa tree next to the porch looked ragged. Pandora could imagine the house as if it were alive, whispering, "Come back, Pandora, come back." She wanted to. It was home.

But home was what she always left. Her mother's when she was sixteen, now this marriage house. The wooden walls shook when it thundered; the shingled roof would blow apart in a strong wind. That's why it had been cheap—the thin walls and the wrecked street, all potholes and bumps. For a year she and Weylan had come back here every night after work. They ate together at the rickety kitchen table, slept and made love in the mildewed bed, listened to the wind moan.

Now everything was wrecked.

Still the house looked at her sadly, and, behind her, surrounded by children, the car sat at the curb like a wad of cotton candy.

Unlike the house, the car took that moment to speak, its girlie voice as sugary as its paint job looked: "Two hours and twenty minutes remain, Pandora," it said. The children shrieked and laughed to hear a car talking, and they were really impressed that it knew Pandora's name. "After two hours and twenty minutes, the rates will shift to a full day."

"Let it," she said loudly, and one of the children pointed out at the top of his voice, "She's talking to a car!"

She turned away from the car and kids and walked back to the house. Opening the screen door this time felt different. Every scratch in the wood stood out, every nick in the coat of blue paint that she had put on last summer, every too-big hole in the door screen. Maybe she ought to fix the screen before she left, to keep the straw mites out. No, it didn't matter how tiny the holes were, the mites would get in anyway. They'd infest the place.

She stepped in, closed the inside door, and leaned against it. Standing inside this house for maybe the last time, Pandora tried to memorize it. The front door led right into the living room. There sat the flowered couch; there was Weylan's desk with books, pens, computer slate, and a set of scales for weighing gun powder, all lined up precisely; the far side held the telewall that was more like a telepatch, it was so small. She recognized everything, yet it seemed to be a stranger's house. Pandora had stripped it of her things—that's why it looked different, almost empty. Yes, it really was time to get out of here. Mamie would be calling in a second. Her friend would be sure to remind her again that *she* had left *him*, but the pain ground her down either way.

Pandora walked to the couch and sat down, to catch her breath, avoiding the side where she and Weylan usually sat leaning on each other, late at night, watching monster movies on the telewall. The screams and mayhem had seemed satisfying somehow, as they sat cozily together. She wasn't used to the cushion on this side. It was lumpy. They should have bought the kind of furniture that fit itself to anybody's bottom. No history that way.

The whole house seemed history-less. Normally there'd be scraps of gold lamé and bits of fur and satin strewn on the floor, for whatever costume or puppet she was working on. The Wicked Queen costume had needed yards and yards of black shiny stuff and a long piece of crimson for the brocade in the front and more red for the underskirt. She still wasn't done with that one, mainly because she'd been sidetracked by making a Captain T'Aarg puppet, complete with tentacles and spike heels. The Wicked Queen should be tall, her legs making her ominous, a woman of power. Pandora, not a Wicked Queen—or any other kind of queen, at that—was short and squat. "Like a toad," her mom used to say.

She'd explained this to Weylan one night while she worked on the Wicked Queen dress. "The costumes make me feel taller. I feel happy when I wear them." Weylan had been watching her drape the black material of the Queen's skirt around her waist. It pooled at her feet.

"You're not squat, you're petite and healthy. You're all muscle," he'd said, and he squeezed her bicep to prove it.

She remembered how gentle his hand had been on her arm.

If he'd been screwing someone behind her back, or smacking her, or gambling their credits away, moving out would feel right. But no, she had to leave because of his ethics, his *ethics* for God's sake. Why was she doing this to herself?

Every day for the last five days, every hour of every day, she asked herself that question. And the answer was always the same. How could she sleep in the same bed with a man who had broken a child's mind?

The night Weylan told her what he'd done, she'd been making fudge. The old way, with a pan and a spoon. It was going to be a good night: she'd recharged the light globes and she'd put clean sheets on the bed. Weylan had been fidgety the last couple of days, not able to sit still long enough to help her weave the queen's arm bands, or even to concentrate on making his bullets. She thought the fudge would help. Maybe he would tell her what was wrong. Well, he did.

"Help me to understand this, Weylan. You used the nanobots on a patient and something went wrong? Why did you do that? I thought you were going to tell Mason no."

"I had to do something. The kid was hurting himself and blaming himself for what happened to him. I thought that if I could get him to see the truth . . ."

"What kid? Why were you talking to a kid?"

"He can't remember what happened to him. I had to help him remember. Make him see that nothing was his fault. So I began to talk to him about what his father had done to him and told him he needed to remember that he didn't have any power, he couldn't have stopped anything. And so then I used the nanobot therapy . . ."

"You did *what*? How could anything his father did be worse than putting those machines into his brain? I can't believe you did that!"

Weylan's face had darkened, and Pandora took a step back. Then he kicked the kitchen chair. Weylan kicked a chair? It was as if she didn't know the man she was married to.

"Weylan?"

"I did something terrible, Pandora."

As he said this, he put his hand over his mouth, and his body shook. Pandora knew she should hold him, make him feel better. But she couldn't. It would be a lie. Because what she felt right then wasn't compassion or worry for Weylan. It was revulsion. After all the fights, all the arguments where she'd warned him never, never to use his technology on a living per-

son, he'd gone ahead and done it anyway. On a child.

"It was Mason, wasn't it? He made you do this. You couldn't stand up to him."

Pandora heard the disgust in her own voice. The look on Weylan's face was as if he'd been punched. She was sorry for that now, but then she'd been cold, her anger so intense she felt nothing else. Her tone had been rational, absolutely restrained. Every word she said must have made Weylan cringe, but she didn't have any emotion left over for pity.

"No! I thought I was."

"Weylan, what happened? And what are you going to do about it?" she said.

"Do about it? I can't do anything about it! I already did enough! I'm the one who put him in that awful memory loop where he's being tortured and no matter what he does, he can't get out of it—he's going to be there forever."

The look on Weylan's face had shocked her. He seemed to want her to feel bad for him. But the boy—

"You did what!?" She could feel her face mirroring her mother's look of disgust back in her high school days when Pandora once had tried to dress up for a dance in a low-cut gown. Weylan looked the way she'd felt—as if he'd been punched.

Waylon wouldn't look at her, just looked down

Pandora turned off the stove, letting the fudge take care of itself, threw some clothes and blankets into a duffle bag, and used her night pass to take the subway to the Techno. That's where she'd been sleeping for the last few nights, anyway. Sitting on the couch now, she asked herself if she'd been too harsh. Weylan had looked so forlorn—maybe she should have tried to be supportive.

But in all those nights away from him, from the man she'd believed she would be with until the day she died, never had she thought that she could live in the same house with him again. He had an essential flaw, a wound so deep it had warped his character. It wasn't a matter of forgiveness. You don't forgive a panther for having teeth. But you don't take it into your bed, either.

No. She loved Weylan—there was no one else for her. But she could never come back home. Under her breath she said, "I'm sorry Weylan. But that's the way it is."

Pandora stood up to give the living room one last check. Where her stuff normally sat, now there was only emptiness: no physics books, no pamphlets on how to sew—nothing remained on her shelves in the bookcase; no space pen floated on the coffee table; no paper scraps had been tossed and left on the couch and the arm chair and the floor—her midnight calculations. Everything of hers was gone. She'd collected her sewing machine, her patterns, her thigh-high princess boots. It was as if she had never lived here. She stared at the tele and it stared back, the screen reflecting the couch flowers in an eerily beautiful way. The frame around the tele, built right into the plaster, had a gothic flair, the carved vines twisting grotesquely. At the top of the tele was a round hole that was the camera. Pandora wondered for the thousandth time what was on the other side of the camera. Undoubtedly a software agent programmed to report emergencies. But what else did it report? What triggered human inspection?

Luckily, Weylan liked paper as much as she did. He kept a notebook on his desk, all neat and tidy—not like the pieces of paper she would ball up or let float to the floor. She created the mess on purpose because it helped her think. All day, at the Technoversity, she worked neatly on her slate; at night, she liked to let herself go. It had been a nightly argument—Weylan's tidiness, her need to sprawl. Well, Pandora thought as she ripped a blank sheet of paper from his notebook, she'd ended that fight, hadn't she.

It had been Weylan's idea to keep paper taped over the camera at all times. "You think the camera only reports emergencies?" he'd asked.

Probably his paranoia. Still, Pandora dragged a stool over so she could slip the paper under the tape that was hanging there. She should have noticed that the paper was gone as soon as she started moving things out. She imagined six skinny guys hunched over screens watching her lug boxes. It was supposedly their job to keep an eye out for some kid ripping off a little old lady, to notice the cut that bled too much, or to send help for the old man who couldn't get up from the floor. She should be thankful to CorGo for caring, but somehow, she wasn't.

Moving her stuff out had raised dust, and now Pandora was overwhelmingly thirsty. She shouldn't take too long—Weylan might come back for lunch. And she couldn't handle that! Besides, it had gotten awfully black outside. One minute the sun burning, the next minute no sun at all. It was still hot, and with the sudden humidity it was wet, too. The air conditioner couldn't keep up. Pandora's body was covered in sweat, even inside the house. So she had sweat on her skin but her throat was desert dry.

There, that was thunder. And lightning—it lit up the window. Pandora counted: five, maybe six miles off. Just enough time to go through the house, run downstairs to the half-basement, and get out before the storm hit. She knelt with one knee on the couch that sat under the living room window and pulled back the curtain to see better. Lightning bounced around in the clouds. And the thunder never took a breath; one peal grew out of the one before it. No rain though, and to the north the sky was yellow.

When she hurried into the kitchen, the clock read only 10:15—that surprised her. Cleaning out the house had seemed to take hours, and she hadn't drunk anything the whole time. Pandora's throat was so dry she felt like choking. A quick look in the refrigerator showed that Weylan had let the water jug run down to the bottom—as usual. After she passed her wrist over the credit reader on the sink, she had to wait almost half a minute for the water to run clear. People had been complaining about having to pay for that bit of crap water every time they turned on the faucet—it probably came to a fraction of a credit, but it still made everyone mad. The water did finally come through cleanly, though. Pandora filled the jug to the top—her parting gift for Weylan—and then poured herself a full glass. The water was so good, even if it was warm. While the thunder roared, Pandora took a huge gulp, and then another, as if this would be the last relief she would get for a long time.

* * *

Pandora opened and closed the kitchen cabinets one after the other and saw that Weylan hadn't stocked up since she left. She glanced into the broom closet: nothing that she needed to take. She went halfway down the basement steps. Nothing and more nothing. The room was big enough for the sonic washer and for the two of them to hide when the tornado warning blasted; that was about it.

Pandora closed the basement door and stood in the hallway. She could go look in the bathroom, but the bedroom was right there. Then again, she didn't have to go in—why do that to herself? A sprinkling of drops on the roof told her the rain had begun. She could skip the bedroom, really should. If she left right now, she might get to Mamie's before the storm hit. But her feet didn't move, and the door to the bedroom sat half open. She was such a coward.

With that thought, Pandora walked through the bedroom doorway. Hauling her costumes out of the room—her hats, boots, and hand puppets;

her bullwhip and her one crystal ball—hadn't bothered her. But now that all her stuff, every ounce of her personality was gone, the cold room made her feel ill. At the foot of the bed Weylan's shoes and slippers sat lined up in perfect order, and the bed itself was tucked in as tightly as a new soldier's army cot. He was back to his old ways. She hadn't realized how little of this room had been his. The chest of drawers had Weylan's key box on top, a green cartridge case from the Viet Nam war, something his grandfather had given him. It was metal and had a top that didn't quite fit. That was all except for dust and the clean spaces where her holo-dogs and jewelry racks had been. The walls were empty, too, now that her 3-D posters were gone. She'd had one of the solar system, another of Carolyn Herschel discovering her first comet, and then, her favorite, the poster with a series of Dr. Evil's wise sayings that appeared and disappeared, depending on where you stood in the room. Gone too were her animated holo-Eschers—people walking up and down stairs into infinity. The curtains drooped, no yellow scarves to brighten the dark blue. Funny how all her stuff seemed like junk when it was packed in the car, but in this room it had created their world. Coming into the bedroom without her things in it was like visiting a tomb.

At least she had left Weylan the quilt. But where was it? They'd bought it together when they went to Eureka Springs for their honeymoon. It had been hand-knotted in a wedding-ring pattern—their pledge to fight for things that stayed constant. The quilt was heavy and had coffee stains on it and one corner was ripped; otherwise it would have cost too much. And that was their pledge, too: not to care about looks or money, but to care about what mattered. Even if it looked messy.

Maybe Weylan was glad to have her gone—no more Pandora to clutter things up. But then she thought of those nights when he let things get very messy and warm. Him letting her touch his back, letting her stroke the scars his grandfather had made; him kissing the mark at the back of her knee and loving her until the candles burned out.

Pandora closed her eyes, and it was then that she heard the storm. She was right, coming in here meant she'd be trapped by the rain. It poured down—rain sliced at the window and battered the roof. Now she'd have to stay until the rain let up.

If only time could fold back on itself and it would be a week and a half ago, and that little boy had never been hurt so badly by his father, whatever it was the father had done. If only Weylan hadn't unleashed his machines on him.

But time couldn't do that, and Weylan had.

She was in the room, so she would finish the job. Pandora peered under the bed and saw one clumsy stack of Weylan's holograph photo sets, covered in dust. His neatness didn't extend that far. Standing against the wall near the bed was the gun case that held Weylan's guns, a 30.06 hunting rifle and a shotgun. The case was locked. Nothing of hers would be in there anyway. Pandora went to the dresser and checked her two drawers—nothing there. On the floor under the straight-backed chair she found one set of her black cat's claws, the points filed off so they were smooth. She liked dressing like a cat. Not to scratch anyone, not to be sexy, but cat playful, cat restful, cat purring. Weylan would pet her, and she would glide her smooth claws over his skin.

She felt revulsion at herself now—she wasn't a cat, she was a lump, a blob, just like her sister always said. A good shake of her head got rid of that voice. With a determined pull on the knob, Pandora opened the closet door once more. And this time she saw it—the quilt, folded tidily in the back corner of the upper shelf.

Her lungs got tight. Their quilt. She'd thought she was leaving him something important, but there it was, folded as if it didn't mean anything. All right, he could have the thing—she didn't want to touch it. Nor touch his two blue suits and white shirts. That was everything, except for some empty hangers. Pandora had tried to get Weylan to wear something other than those suits to work. She'd argued that John 1 and John 2 wore T-shirts and khaki pants. Why did he have to dress every day as if he were going to church and about to meet the Pope? He'd mumbled something about an ancestor who knew what proper attire was, and she'd given up. He did have shirts and jeans, of course, but not in the closet. His work-around-the-house clothing was folded primly in his chest of drawers.

Thinking about Weylan's flaws helped. Pandora could breathe normally again. Look at that army case, for instance. Weylan had kept it hidden for as long as she knew him, stuffing the box in the back corner of the closet where it could be forgotten. Now it sat in the middle of the closet floor, because Pandora had needed to move it to get at some of her things. The case contained mementos of Weylan's childhood. He'd made it clear that she should leave it alone.

"Pandy," he'd said when they first moved in together, "there are certain things I'd like to keep for myself. This case is one of them, okay?"

Weylan was the only one who called her Pandy. Mamie had once, but Pandora had told her not to. She liked the name when Weylan used it; when Mamie did, it seemed false. No one was ever going to call her Pandy

again. And that was Weylan's fault. She'd believed in him. She'd trusted him. But if he was so weak—!

Pandora gave a vicious pull on the metal case and dragged it into the room. Olive drab, standard Army issue, secured by three hasps. No locks, though. It was two feet long by one foot wide, and at least eight inches deep. Pandora knelt on the floor beside it. This was Weylan's private stuff. She didn't have to remind herself of all the stories about girls named Pandora letting evil into the world or stories about wives who opened Bluebeard's secret room. What if Weylan came home and caught her? She almost pushed the container back into the closet, back into its corner. Somehow, though, when her hand touched the warm metal, she flipped open the first hasp instead. Betrayers deserved betrayal, didn't they? Her thumb rested lightly under the second hinge. Time ticked away.

The pounding rain soothed her, made her see how unimportant all this was. That's why she studied astronomy—it made her life bigger and smaller at the same time. She, Pandora Vandergest, could tell you what that dim, farthest twinkling star was made of, when it was born, how many centuries it would take for a spaceship to get to it. There was a calmness to that. So much had changed around her since she was born, yet the skies didn't change, except in their regular way. There she could always find steadiness and absolutes. The rain was like that. It came down no matter how she felt, who left her (wait, no, remember who left whom!), whether she was sick, hungry or, as now, needed to pee.

As to the case, she might open it or she might not—she would decide about that later.

* * *

The harder the rain came down, the better Pandora felt. But it did make her need to go. While she was in the bathroom, she could check to see if she'd left anything. That nasty urinal—black, rusted, shaped like a gravy boat—looked awful even though Weylan had obviously cleaned it. It was up high for men's use, the installers never thinking about the antics a woman would have to go through to sit on it—too little anyway. She herself had used a big plastic funnel with a small end that closed when she was on the toilet and opened after she carried the funnel to the urinal. For security's sake, CorGo said, and for the people's sake, too. Every morning before anyone was allowed to start work, the boss would get a report on the employee's urination. Marijuana, heroin, crack, meth? No work that day.

Dranzapine was fine, of course, and all the other happy drugs CorGo produced. Once a week, each citizen got a report showing cholesterol levels, triglycerides, STDs. If the numbers were amiss, the boss gave the worker a stern lecture on nutrition and sexual safety—sometimes sending a robotic nurse to the person's home to make sure diets were duly followed, medications were taken according to schedule, and "personal sexual safety items" were in proper supply. People were reminded in special announcements on the telewall, on billboards, and in texts to their mini-phones and slates that all of this was evidence of CorGo's good will.

Well, Pandora hadn't been peeing in anybody's cup (not even the new ones for females) for five days now, because she'd been sleeping in her office at the Techno and then at Mamie's. And no one had hollered at her. Maybe she was off the grid. Who knew how much surveillance there actually was? Just worrying that you might be watched or checked on would keep most people straight. One way or the other, though, she had to use the toilet. Afterwards, whether this would alert someone or not, she passed her wrist over the credit checker to flush and then again to wash her hands. She wouldn't go so low as to make Weylan have to pay for the tank of water, even though toilet water was cheaper than the pure stuff. He'd better be thankful for that.

Not wanting to think about the army case, Pandora returned to the kitchen. The thunder was so loud it shook the windows. A good strong storm gave her a feeling of comfort; she liked being safe inside while the wind blew. She poured herself one more glass of water from the jug and drank the water with a sense of finality. But her calm resignation disappeared in an instant when she bent to put the jug back in the refrigerator and saw a glass container stuck on the bottom shelf, as far back as it could go. Weylan's mushrooms. She'd argued with him about that, for all the good it did her. Who wanted those mushrooms—poisonous he said—in the refrigerator? What if someone ate one by mistake? Pandora dragged the container out and opened it. Sheez, those were ripe! She had to turn her head away until the smell dissipated. The mushrooms were funny looking, too: some were shriveled caps, the color of sandstone with nearly invisible white dots; others had the stem attached—they looked like witch's fingers with dull red nail polish and white flecks. Why did Weylan insist on keeping them? It was irrational for her to feel so mad; this wasn't her house anymore. But all the anger she'd been holding down flared up over the stupid mushrooms.

A burst of lightning startled her. Then, a moment later, the air conditioner hesitated, and the thunder rolled in an echoing roar. Still holding the

mushroom jar in her hand, Pandora glanced out the window at the sheets of rain and jerked when she glimpsed movement on the porch under the window. It was Weylan! Drenched, his hair streaming, he was bending over his bike. His suit seemed to melt in the rain, yet he was stooped over the bicycle, chaining it up. No instant lock and tarp for him.

Pandora spun to the refrigerator and crammed the mushrooms back where she'd found them. Then she raced to the bedroom to push the army case into the closet where it should have been all along. But the front door opened and she heard Weylan come squishing down the hall to find her inside the closet, shoving the case with her foot.

"Pandora?"

She turned to see Weylan standing in a growing puddle. Every inch of him was wet. Even his mustache dripped.

"I was supposed to be gone before you got here," Pandora said. "I was just leaving. I-I took my stuff." But Weylan looked so bedraggled, and the thunder would not stop hammering—she couldn't just go. "You rode your bike through that? Why would you even think of it? And it's not noon—I don't understand!"

It was true: she couldn't understand, not at all. Storms terrified him. Probably because of how his mother died. Weylan had told Pandora about it one night when they lay next to each other under the new quilt, their flanks touching. She had been talking about her mother's fantasy that her maternal line was descended from German royalty—Pandora wouldn't be included in that because she took after her father, her mother would say. "Just take one look at you and you'd know which side you came from." Pandora had been laughing about it—Pandora as servant to her mother was an old joke. And he'd said, "My mother is dead." She should have realized this. They hadn't invited anyone from either family to their wedding, which had Mamie as witness, photographer, and only guest, but she'd presumed that he didn't want his parents to be there, any more than she did hers.

"Dead? Why didn't you tell me? That's awful, Weylan."

"I was four. It was in the first year of the tornadoes. A long time ago."

Pandora raised herself on her elbow so she could see his face. He was trying to look stoic.

"So Dad went off to Afghanistan and then Korea and then the China wars. He died there. I was raised by my grandparents."

He'd never told her that storms scared him, but she'd seen him tense often enough when the wind started blowing, and he obsessed about weather reports during tornado season, which these days was pretty much all year.

That was all the data she had. She didn't talk about her past; he didn't talk about his. What they had was new—it was of the future. The past would only drag them down. Still, for him to come riding home on his bicycle in this weather! Something was wrong.

Weylan wiped his cheeks and his chin with his hands, then started wringing out the hem of his suit coat. "Pandora, don't go—wait just a minute, I—."

"Here," she said. "Let me get you something to wipe this up—wipe you up!" Pandora went past him and into the bathroom. The only towels left were his; they were scratchy and thin. She took three and brought them to the bedroom. "Take off your coat. I can't believe you did this. I thought you were afraid of storms."

She took his coat and put it on a hanger, then brought it to the bathroom to drip into the tub. He followed her into the bathroom holding his shoes, which he set on the back of the sink. First he handed her his shirt, then his tie. He took off his wet belt and then his pants. His shoes had enough water in them that he could pour the water into the sink, into which he also wrung his socks. Then he stood there, naked except for his new-fangled briefs, the one thing he'd decided was an improvement, over the old boxers. They had an instant-dry feature for hikers who got caught in the rain. The fabric was made out of a new kind of polymer that could wick moisture away immediately, but it went through a rapid change of color as it did so. His pants were changing colors now.

Pandora got a fourth towel from the linen closet and handed it to him. Again she asked herself if she really, really had to leave. They were so close to each other—no shame, no embarrassment. When would she ever find that again?

Pandora watched as Weylan stepped around the puddle with the three towels soaking wet in the middle. She was not going to clean that up! He rubbed his hair dry with the fourth towel and then draped it over the chair that sat by the chest of drawers.

"I'm not afraid of rainstorms," he said, as he went to the closet to get a dry shirt. He stopped when he saw the army case, then he took the shirt off the hanger and turned to face her as he buttoned the shirt. He was extremely calm. She thought he must be using every ounce of control to keep his hands steady, although he couldn't stop the shivers, even with the dry underwear. The look of him with his skinny legs and those yellow and blue striped briefs sapped any desire Pandora had to be angry. She had trouble remembering why she had been.

"It's tornadoes I don't like. This is just a thunderstorm. Not the same. And it wasn't raining when I started out."

By now he had put on his dress pants and a dry belt. He stood rifle straight and looked directly at her.

"You moved my case," he said. "Did you open it?"

Now she remembered why she was mad.

"Are you getting on your high horse with me? If we're talking about breaking a code of ethics, then you've got a lot more to account for. Look what you did to us." She made a grand sweep with her arm. "This is what you did to our marriage. And you don't even seem to understand what the problem is. I'm not going to talk to you. Good-bye."

Pandora took a huge step over the puddle and headed toward the front door.

"It's raining," he said. "You don't want to trust a rental car in the rain."

Pandora opened the door. There, her dramatic exit stalled as rain pellets jabbed at her through the screen door. She shut the inner door again and turned to face him.

"So tell me why *you're* here. Really, I didn't want to fight. We said everything five days ago. I was supposed to be gone before you got back."

With a slow gaze, Weylan surveyed the living room. His eyes stopped on every surface she'd stripped, then on his own desk where everything was just as he'd left it. Pandora felt the emptiness again.

She sensed how hard Weylan was trying to keep himself in control. He looked perfect in his navy blue suit pants, white shirt, and red tie—except for his bare feet, and for the fact that his clothes bagged on him. He'd slicked his wet hair back. The water made his hair seem darker than normal. His mustache, too. She could see how tight his jaw was, and his eyes had the look of someone who was about to be sentenced to death.

"I came for something," he said. "I need them now."

"Them? What could be so important?"

He didn't answer. She followed him into the kitchen, saw that he noticed the full water jug as he reached into the refrigerator to get the mushrooms from where she'd set them. She found herself hoping he hadn't seen that they'd been moved.

"What are you going to do with those? They're deadly, aren't they?"

Without answering, Weylan went to the hall closet and took out a waterproof backpack into which he carefully slid the jar.

"I've been trying to figure out what happened to that boy," he said. "I think the nanites damaged his brain. Like a cascade of memories that some

mechanism in his brain should have been able to stop, but didn't because of the nanites or their electrical charge."

"Listen to yourself, Weylan. You're talking calmly about sending electricity into a little boy's brain." As she said it, her voice rose. The immense anger that had been hanging back returned full force. Her vision clouded and Weylan's voice seemed distant.

". . . the mushrooms," he was saying. He didn't seem to notice her rage. The tone of voice that had made her so angry, she realized now was him talking to himself, trying to sort things out.

"Maybe I can do something with the mushrooms to bring him out of it."

Weylan seemed to be looking at the cupboard, but Pandora understood that he was focused on something internal. Her anger subsided. Weylan in his pitiful suit and his bare feet was doing what he could. If she had hurt a child this way, she would have been useless.

Weylan looked at her then, and she was scared by the expression on his face. "The mushrooms are weird," he said. "They have effects on the mind that no one has been able to pin down."

"Okay. Maybe if you had years to study them you could make some kind of drug. But you can't give the mushrooms to the boy, they might kill him—you can't risk that!"

Weylan looked at her intently. "I won't," he said. Then he went to the bedroom to get a dry pair of shoes and socks and put them in the pack, too.

"You're not riding back in this rain, are you?"

A roll of thunder made them both stand still and listen. It was moving off, but the rain still pounded the roof. Weylan set the backpack on the kitchen table then searched the hall closet a second time. He came out with a rain slicker that he unfolded. It had a hood.

"I don't understand you, Weylan. It's like you're a different person."

"Sometimes" he said as he slipped the backpack and then the slicker, which made him look like a hunchbacked beetle— "you have to be different in order to be yourself."

With his hood up and in his feet bare, he was ready to go into the rain. He turned to face her after he opened the door. The rain pelted his coat. "I just want you to know that I'm not experimenting on anyone else anymore. That's a promise." With that, he pulled the inner door shut after him and let the screen door slam. Pandora watched out the kitchen window as he unlocked his bike and bumped off the porch edge. She hoped the rain was tapering off, but it was still strong enough that when he had gone a few yards she couldn't see her husband anymore.

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With Weylan gone, the heaviness of the house closed around her. Rationally she understood that the pressure she felt wasn't from his absence but from the rain: atmosphere, not abandonment. The house didn't change just because he went out the door. Still, Pandora couldn't stop looking out the window. The storm had picked up again so that the thunder was all around, one thunder roll after another; and again the rain pounded.

It wasn't that the house and the rain seduced her; they just made it easier for her to return to the bedroom and pull the army case out of the closet and kneel in front of it. The grayness, the constant raindrops pounding against the house, the rumbles all around seemed to give her permission to unlatch the hasps, one after the other. With the case open, she sat on her heels and looked where she knew she shouldn't.

On top were snapshots, most on photographic paper that had dulled with time. The first one showed Weylan and an older man in front of a long and low house, with a porch running the length of it. They were squinting into the camera. Weylan looked a lot younger, with no mustache. He had blue jeans on and cowboy boots that had been well used. He wore a checked shirt. The man must be his grandfather. He had his hand on Weylan's arm, as if to hold him back. The grandfather had short white hair and a tan face. Although his grandfather's face looked kindly, Weylan didn't seem happy—his eyes were shifted to the side and down. She wondered if the beatings had begun by then.

The photo under that showed the ranch house again, but this time a woman stood on the porch with her hand shading her eyes. The woman's chest seemed hollow, sunken in, as if she were trying to disappear. Weylan was on a horse, and he had the same happy grin Pandora remembered from their wedding day. The horse showed up a couple of times in the rest of the prints, always with Weylan appearing at ease. He seemed to know how to sit in the saddle. He was like that on his bike, too, the way he put his left foot on the pedal and so easily swung his right leg over the seat. She had to bend a bike toward her and lift her leg over the bar, then do a beetle walk to get the bike rolling. Weylan handled a bike as if it were a part of himself. She loved watching him ride.

To keep everything in order, Pandora set the photos on the carpet next to the case, the pile arranged as she'd found it. Next came a row of medals, each in a plastic sheath. Pandora studied each medal in turn—a Korea Campaign Medal, other campaign medals for Afghanistan and China, a

medal and ribbon for Distinguished Service, a Purple Heart. These were his father's, certainly. The death certificate under the medals had been torn into pieces then carefully taped together. Second Korean War. KIA. Pandora memorized which medal went next to which then placed all of them on the carpet on the other side of the case.

Two papers were tucked along one side of the case—Weylan's master's degree in psychology and his PhD in psychobiotic technology. None of this seemed to need hiding, nor did Weylan's spurs, one missing the round sharp part. But when Pandora got to the next level and saw her lopsided Warrior Princess hand puppet, she flushed. This was the place where Weylan kept things he loved. And here was the puppet. She took it out and slipped it over her hand. It was one she had thrown out because she'd sewn it crookedly. She had forced Weylan to watch one of her puppet shows, and she'd thought he scorned them. Seeing this puppet here—tiny helmet and sword attached—made her eyes sting.

Weylan loved her. And she loved him, despite what he'd done. It wasn't a crime she was committing by looking at his private things; it was an act of love. Pandora's blood beat fast as she laid the puppet aside. She became aware again of the storm: its coolness, its sweet rain, the thunder answering itself. Not much wind, though, only enough to ring the chimes on the porch. The universe seemed to be on her side, giving her permission to look at Weylan's life. When the rain ended, she'd have to put everything away and it would be time to go, so she sorted through the contents more quickly: another stack of photos clipped together, this time with a young woman in them—one where she looked down at her newborn, another where she sat at the dinner table with the older people Pandora presumed were Weylan's grandparents. A young man sat at the table, too—the couple must be Weylan's parents.

Besides the photos and medals, there were tickets to a play, a belt buckle, a bottle of rocks, none of which she knew anything about. But then Pandora discovered something that surprised her. Folded in a paper towel was a pottery shard, gray and black. Weylan had told her about his Cherokee background, but this was the first time she'd seen anything related to it. Under the shard, which she rewrapped and set aside, was a dog-eared novel called *House Made of Dawn.* The book opened to a page in the preface where someone—Weylan?—had underlined a paragraph about inventing yourself, creating an identity if you didn't like the one you were given. The author was talking about claiming his Kiowa heritage even though he hadn't been raised in that culture, but Pandora understood the urge. She'd

had to invent herself as an astronomer. Maybe this searching had been what attracted her to Weylan from the beginning.

A faded pamphlet was in the case, too. It described a mushroom called "amanita." Pandora leafed through the pamphlet, uneasy because the picture on the front reminded her of the mushrooms in the refrigerator. In the glass jar they looked creepily like dried fingers, but in the pamphlet the mushrooms looked full and fresh. Weylan must have been thinking about these mushrooms for a good portion of his life. She hoped he knew enough about them to be safe. Again she decided not to worry about him. She would let him go his own way, just as she, right now, was going her own.

On the bottom of the case—Pandora was surprised that she'd gotten there so soon—under everything, was a man's handkerchief swaddling something. Pandora stopped. Maybe looking at this would be going too far. Her legs had cramped, and she needed to stretch. As she pushed herself up, she realized that the rain wasn't even a drizzle anymore. What she heard could be water dripping from the eaves. No thunder at all, just the air conditioner. And the room had enough sunlight now that she said "Off" to the ceiling lights. Her knees and ankles hurt. In the clear daylight, seeing all Weylan's private wares spread on the floor made her ashamed. She would put them back, quickly and accurately. Pandora cringed when she imagined Weylan opening the case and realizing that she'd pried where he'd asked her not to.

This wasn't right. It was time for her to go. When she knelt down again to put everything back, one knee sent a shooting pain down her calf. "All right," she thought. "I get it."

Still, the handkerchief lay in front of her, all by itself on the bottom of the box. She had to undo it, didn't she? Digging all this way only to leave the final treasure hidden—it wasn't reasonable. She was shocked at herself; she told herself she was a bad person; but she unwrapped the handkerchief anyway. She could feel what was inside before she saw it. It was the size and consistency of a thumb. Pandora unfolded the handkerchief carelessly now, wanting to see, afraid to see, determined to understand this most secret thing.

When the handkerchief lay open in her hand, she stared, uncomprehending. Three inches long, yellow on one side and white on the other, squashed and bedraggled but still clearly something from a stuffed toy, this most carefully wrapped and hidden thing looked like nothing so much as a badly mauled rabbit's ear. It wasn't horrible. It wasn't beautiful. Pandora let out her breath.

As she carefully refolded the handkerchief, wanting to wipe out what she'd done, Pandora shifted her weight and bumped the now-empty case. Something moved inside it, although the case itself didn't budge. She should have realized that what she'd laid out couldn't have had enough weight to make her have to drag the case to move it. The bottom wasn't the bottom. Without asking herself if she should, Pandora laid the newly wrapped handkerchief aside, searched for and found the button that released the false floor, and stared at what she might have expected all along if she'd thought about it: boxes of shells and boxes of slugs; they made sense for a guy who made his own ammo. But next to them was something she would not have suspected: an evil looking handgun—heavy, cold, deadly. His rifle and shotgun she knew about; this handgun, no. Maybe it was his father's. She picked it up gingerly—she didn't like it. But there was something else, too, something in a bag with a string. She put the pistol into the case again and picked up the bag. It was light and whatever was inside was smooth. As soon as she opened the bag, she realized that what she was looking at was a cold-fusion-powered laser gun, like the ones she'd seen on the news, meant for burning holes in people at 500 feet. She dropped the thing on the floor and immediately panicked that she'd done something so stupid—maybe now it would blow up or shoot something on its own. My God! A laser gun!

Pandora sat again on her heels. Who was this man she had married? Did she know him at all? Her crime was nothing compared to this. Laser guns were dangerous! They weren't meant for the public—it wasn't a pretend Captain T'Aarg gun—and even that had a stun setting. Laser guns killed and maimed. That was their purpose. Even the military didn't use them—there was terrible danger from reflections. But gangsters had them, of course. And so did Weylan.

Pandora had seen more than she wanted to; she was done. First, she replaced the laser gun as it had been next to the pistol and clicked the false bottom into place. Then she arranged everything else the way it had been. She wasn't ashamed any more. The gun released her of all need to atone. With a sense of finality, she snapped the three hasps shut and dragged the case to the closet, where she stowed it as it had been when the day started. It was indeed time for her to go. She left the bedroom, locked the front door of the house behind her, and stepped into the sunshine—into a world washed as clean as she felt.