

PUBLIC OFFERINGS BOOK ONE: BIRTHRIGHT

By Bob LiVolsi

EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

*Cameron Pass: Rawah Wilderness of northern Colorado, Aldrich Mountain Lab
November 22, 11:10 p.m. Mountain Standard Time (MST)*

In the thin air of Cameron Pass, where the peaks of the Colorado Rockies first scrape Wyoming sky, Sheila Stratemeier struggled late into the night with information she did not fully understand. Information about death. A lot of death. Avoidable death.

Her lab coat thrown over her cubicle wall, Sheila propelled her thin fingers in a manic jig across the keyboard. The phosphorescent blue light of the PC's display revealed squinting eyes and lips squeezed together over grinding teeth. The ethereal glimmer stood a beacon amidst a sea of cubicles in Dilbertville, a ghost town awaiting the arrival of the morning shift in just a few hours. The gloomy expanse echoed with the creaking and popping of metal vents, the vague howl of the mountain wind in counterpoint – each new variation causing Sheila to flash her eyes for a nervous glance along the battlements of her cubicle fortress.

She had nearly escaped. At 6:30, she started to leave the building for the lab's dorms, but the chill of autumn wind rushing across the compound gave her pause at the exit. The wrestling match in her conscience drove her back inside.

As senior research scientist for drug discovery at the Aldrich Institute, she had come to know many AIDS victims in the course of her research. She knew through first-hand observation the horrible, devastating, wasting death that often resulted. Any hope mattered.

But not this.

The project – this apocalypse – had to be stopped. Sheila did not know where to turn.

She held a sheet of paper up in the reflected light of the LED monitor. A long sigh. She dropped back in her chair, hands flung to her lap. After a moment, she raised her hands, held them poised over the keyboard.

A thud. She looked up. Waited. Quiet.

Her fingers dropped to the keyboard, pouring a flow of words across the screen. She would e-mail this document to the board of the Aldrich Institute before sunrise. She pondered sending a copy to Dave Clement, but decided, for the sake of his fifteen year old daughter, not to add to his burden. Not yet anyway.

If the Aldrich board failed to respond, she would feel justified in going to the press. That would also be the appropriate time to bring Dave fully into the loop. She already had gone so far as to load the phone numbers of the Denver Post and the mile-high city's Fox TV affiliate as favorites on her cell phone – which had no signal at the lab. Security.

She did not really want to involve the press. She did not want the headlines for herself or the lab. Bad press would undermine the great good the lab could do. Plus she would end up blackballed for life and probably cause Claire McQuaid and the Aldrich Institute to fight her all the harder. So she preferred to work through internal channels. No outsiders. No headlines.

The dance of her fingers accelerated on the keys, the flow of words streaming across the screen. The plastic bridge of her glasses slipped down her nose. A finger popped off the keyboard to push them back up.

Another thud. Nearby. She paused, scanned the top of her cubicle walls. Quiet.

Fingers poised again. Face back in the blue light.

A knock. She half rose from her seat, hovering, listening. A loud clatter. She stood, grabbed the top of the

cubicle and peered over.

Her shoulders relaxed. She tapped on the top of the cube. Waved. Several cubicles away, a man wearing a gray institutional shirt waved back. He dumped a plastic trash can into a larger container. Sheila blew out, sat, fingers back on the keyboard.

The incessant rhythm of the clicking keys slowed only slightly when she sensed the movement behind her. She felt no pain when the wire sliced through her windpipe. When her body jerked from its chair, the garrote caught in the parts of her neck. Her hand reached out to hit the send key, barely missing. Airborne, she vaguely registered her loafers dangling off the toes of her naked feet. Her toes curled, trying to save the shoes. New shoes. An instant later, her air-starved nerves imploded, one final burst of confused data firing across screaming synapses.

In the end, Sheila made headlines after all.