

CH
1
1
1
1
M

A Tangeled Web

REJECTING TECHNOLOGY'S ASSAULT
ON MOTHER NATURE

A Novel

M. P. Zarrella



Copyright © 2013 M. P. Zarrella.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Abbott Press books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

*Abbott Press
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.abbottpress.com
Phone: 1-866-697-5310*

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only.

Certain stock imagery © Thinkstock.

*ISBN: 978-1-4582-0891-0 (sc)
ISBN: 978-1-4582-0890-3 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4582-0889-7 (e)*

Printed in the United States of America.

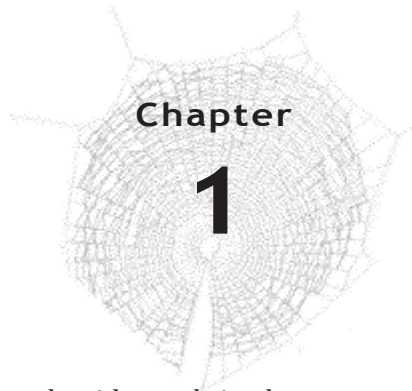
Abbott Press rev. date: 04/08/2013

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the loves of my life. Kate, I could not have done this without your constant support and your wonderful, educated, experienced eye. You are a big part of this story. Rob and Rick, your encouragement and support mean so much to me; you also had a creative hand in the crafting of this story. I am very proud of you all. You have inspired me every day of your lives.

The Rancho Bernardo Writers group: you taught me so very much. I could not have done any of this without the guidance and support of so many inspiring and wonderful professionals. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you to Mike, who was an important part of our lives during the crafting of the last chapters of this book; I very much appreciate the encouragement, insight, and support you gave me.



The dew-covered spider web in the tree outside the bedroom window sparkled like a diamond necklace under a jeweler's bright light. It caught Annelise's eye, as it did most mornings.

Years ago, while washing windows, Annelise found the perfect web in a big oak tree outside her bedroom. The nature lover abandoned her window washing that day to watch the tiny spider build a work of art. *He seems to float as he creates his food-catching masterpiece*, she thought in awe. *It is more beautiful than anything I could paint*. Annelise had studied art in college. Her creative eye noticed the beauty in nature that busy people missed. She knew the web and its builder would soon disappear, like so many other objects of nature; the modern world would take its toll on this intricate and beautiful handiwork.

Weeks later, knowing the job had to get done, Annelise began the window-washing project again. When she saw the web, Annelise realized the tiny spider had not been around for several days. She knew his work of art would also vanish if something wasn't done to preserve it. The thoughtful mother decided to save the spider's creation. That afternoon, when James got home from school, his mother greeted him at the door. "Jimmy, come out to the big tree with me. I want to show you something." She took her son by the hand and walked him around to the side of the house where the big oak tree stood, shielding their home from the elements with its long, strong limbs. "See that spider web? Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah, Mom, it sure is big! Hey, where did the spider go?" The youngster had obviously been watching the tiny creature as well. "I saw him wrapping his silk around a leaf the other day. What do they do with the things they trap?"

"I don't think it was a leaf, Jimmy, it was probably a tiny bug. He wraps it in silk until he needs food. Then when he's hungry, he eats the bugs he's got stored in those silk pouches." She moved a bit of scraggly hair from Jimmy's face. "Do you want to help me save this web? I haven't seen the spider for several days. This web is so beautiful, and if we never see another spider, I want to be able to save at least one piece of their handiwork."

"Sure, Mom, I can help you. Are we going to mount it like you do your pictures?"

"Oh no, Jimmy. I want to preserve it right here in the tree. Let's go to my studio and find a backing board and some spray lacquer. You'll enjoy this project."

The two nature lovers worked together. First they found a ladder so James could climb safely while protecting the full eighteen-inch diameter of the web with the cardboard backing. James held it steadily behind the spider web. The cardboard was supported by the ladder's supply shelf and leaned against the ladder's top. Annelise painstakingly sprayed the web with several light coats of clear lacquer, making sure not to spray too much and overwhelm the silk creation.

Their work paid off. Five years later, Annelise and James still enjoyed its splendor. She often caught James, now almost thirteen, standing at her bedroom window and admiring their beloved spider web.

Thinking of the day she and James toiled over that web brought a warm smile to Annelise's face as she stretched quietly on this Saturday morning in 2040. Her husband, Dan, lying next to her took the sleepy woman's attention away from the window. He turned to face her and stretched out his arms, choosing to cover his face from the sunlight rather than take it in like his wife. Annelise touched his arm. She wanted so much to wrap it

around her and snuggle, but he had been very distant since his return from Japan three weeks prior. "Let's lie here in bed and ignore the world," she suggested as he pulled away.

"Why not?" was his reply. "The house is quiet." He rolled onto his side to distance himself from her and tried to go back to sleep. He adjusted the T-shirt that had become his nightly attire since his most recent work trip to Japan; he'd had a bad fall while hiking, he told her. Dan said he was sore and badly scraped, and he did not want his wife to worry about it. Seeing him in that T-shirt made Annelise feel emptiness. In all their years of marriage, he had never worn clothes to bed, and this injury was the first time she'd been asked to stay away. They had always cuddled at night, and she would nestle in his arms to catch up on events of the day. As a wife and mother, she was used to taking care of her men; it did not happen often, but when James or Dan got hurt, they came to her. Watching him turn away from her hurt and made her wonder how much longer it would take him to heal from that bad fall and come back to her physically and emotionally.

I miss you, Dan.

Annelise sighed and adjusted the pillow to get a better view of the glistening web. While Dan slept, she enjoyed the simple solitude of the morning, trying not to disturb their sleeping son, who, at almost thirteen, now preferred to be called James.

* * *

The murmur of electronics in the house did not mask the melody of her life-giving breath. The sound of appliances was the only daybreak music heard in 2040. Annelise missed the morning chorus that greeted her as a child. No longer did chirping birds or barking dogs make up the morning's song. This day, like so many others, the hum of the alarm clock and the click of the ceiling fan were the only music she heard. Life in the modern world was certainly different from the days of her youth.

Suddenly, earth-shattering screams of terror broke the morning repose. "Mom, come quick! Dad's hurt!" *What?* Thought Annelise, *Dad is right here with me.*

At that moment, Dan grabbed her wrist and glared with a menacing look of hate. "Not a word from you. Hear me?" The other hand reached behind his ear and pulled hard.

Annelise froze, not knowing what to do. Paralyzing fear ran through her. *Who is this stranger in bed?* Watching the veins pulse in his neck, she could not breathe for the pounding in her chest. Her heart was working overtime, and her lungs were unable to do their job as she gasped for breath. *What is happening?* She was frozen as her mind raced over the details that resulted in this moment.

For several weeks, Dan had been cold, distant, and acting strangely. Annelise had tried hard to figure it out; maybe it was the stress of work, constant travel, and his new boss. He had always been the neat person in their household, but overnight he had become very messy. That was not the only change in her husband of seventeen years. The couple used to enjoy simple things, like the color of the sunset or the sound of rainfall. Now those things simply annoyed him, which disappointed the earthy, nature-loving woman. So much had changed, especially since his latest trip to Japan, to bring Annelise Gilroy to the confusion of this morning. Petrified, she could not stop thinking, *What is happening?*

As he pulled, a flesh-tone mask ripped off his face, revealing that he was not her husband.

"Mom, come quick!" James shrieked again, shaking Annelise back into the moment.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" One tear trickled down her left cheek as she demanded answers from the stranger in bed with her.

He sat up, freeing her hand as he did. "Do you think we would let you keep tending that herd of disgusting creatures? You think we don't know what you and your ridiculous associates are up

to?" His tone was low as his eyes focused on the scared woman, staring at her with a penetrating glare full of malice and deep loathing.

As he reached for her arm, Annelise moved as far away as she could while still on the bed. She then turned to face him. "Where is my husband?" She was incensed by the audacity of this intruder, and without realizing the gravity of the situation, the words flew from her mouth.

"Didn't you hear your boy, you foolish whore? He must have gotten away from the guards and found his way back here. You have done a good job of keeping him in the dark, haven't you?" He tried to slap Annelise but missed when she ducked to the left. Her body was strong and agile from the lifestyle she so loved.

"What is shared with my husband is none of your business. What do you want from us?" Annelise stepped quickly off of the bed. As she looked toward the door, she screamed, "Honey, I'll be right down. Is Dad breathing?"

"I want—no not I—we want," the stranger continued, his forehead now shiny with sweat as he reached out. Trying to grab her wrist, he leaned forward and onto his knees.

"Yeah, Mom, he's breathing and opening his eyes. *Where are you?* Come quick!" Fear punctuated each word.

At that moment, Annelise's flight reflex kicked in, giving her the agility to spin around and face the door without falling over. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, and her mind raced, looking for something with which to defend herself. She spotted the heavy lamp that sat on the nightstand: it was made of an old chunk of wood with metal accents. She grabbed it, spun toward the bed, and hit the stranger in the face as he groped in her direction. Annelise was on autopilot, making no conscious decisions and using instinct and adrenaline to get down the stairs and out the front door, which thankfully James had left wide open. Annelise felt her heart pumping like it never had before. She prayed the lamp had hurt the stranger enough to

immobilize him until she reached her child and figured out what to do next.

She found James hovering over a body collapsed beside the bushes in front of the living room window. "Honey, don't ask questions. Just go bring the car."

"Mom?" James was obviously scared and confused by the request, knowing the security cameras on the streets of town would see everything. "You said I can't drive till I get my license." The only child was used to doing what his parents expected of him; they were fair and kind, so he had no reason not to. "I'm scared, Mom."

"James, listen to me. *Don't ask questions.* Just go!" The frightened youngster ran around to the side of the house where a carport housed the family vehicles. Annelise returned her attention to the man beside the bushes, who appeared to be Dan, though he was so dirty and covered in what looked like blood she could not be sure.

"I am sorry, Annie," the voice did sound like Dan; it was quiet and weak.

"What do you mean?" Her right hand stroked his hair, feeling the skin behind his ear. After witnessing the transformation of the stranger in her bed, she had to know there was no mask. Her left hand groped for somewhere to support him without causing pain.

The sound of the car getting close grew louder. From their position in front of the bushes, she looked up through the window and saw the stranger entering the upstairs hallway from the bedroom. He was awake!

"Tell me later. Quick, can you stand?" Annelise knew they had to get out of there immediately.

"Not sure; I think they shot me." Dan gasped for air as he tried to stand.

"Come on, let me help you. We've got to get to the car."

Thankfully, the active lifestyle Annelise loved meant lots of heavy lifting of hay, feed bags, and the like, so helping Dan stand

and move was not that difficult. James reached over and opened the back door as his parents hobbled to the car. Annelise helped Dan into the back seat, and he scooted across the car. The car slowly rolled forward; with James focused on the activity in the back seat, his foot slipped off of the brake onto the floorboard. The youngster realized immediately what happened and smashed down on the brake, bringing the car to a sudden stop. His mother managed to stay partially inside the slow rolling vehicle. When it stopped, Annelise pulled herself in the rest of the way and slammed the door shut.

She nervously asked her son, "Do you feel comfortable driving to the depot where I leave my car? Don't worry about the cameras." James had done a wonderful job getting the car out of the garage. *Thank goodness we let him practice on the driveway.*

"Sure, Mom, I think I can." At almost thirteen, James was not yet a legal driver, but right now that did not matter.

"Well, go as fast as you can. *Drive.*" With that, Annelise returned her attention to Dan, who seemed to finally be coming out of the fog.

"I don't know what is going on," he said. He could barely speak. "When I was in Japan, they kept asking me about *you*. I was supposed to be there to talk about James's idea for that digital dog game." He stopped to take a breath as her fingers fumbled behind the driver's seat to find a tissue and water bottle, to clean him. She found a bottle of hand lotion, which was good enough. With paper towels kept in the seat compartment, the milky white liquid did a good job of cleaning off some of the blood, allowing Annelise to see how badly injured he was. "They just wouldn't let up. They asked what you do all day."

"Sweetheart, relax, take a breath" she said.

Dan gasped as he tried to sit up and let her reach the back of his neck to continue the makeshift sponge bath. "They kept harping on you. Why are you so different from other American women they've met? Your tanned skin is different, your manner

is different.” Dan clenched his fist and then pulled her hand off of his arm and held it tightly. His hand was so cold. “They studied you, Annie—a lot. It made me furious hearing them talk about you; they know way too much about your life.” He coughed and cleared phlegm from his throat. “I told them you’ve always been independent, and you like to be outdoors a lot, so you are tanned and fit. So what?” Dan suddenly pushed his wife’s hand away and glared at her. “Why are they so interested in you anyway? What the *hell* is going on here, Annie?” Annelise thought her husband, having caught his breath, finally looked like himself. He was no longer void of color. His skin tone was back to normal and was no longer ashen. Blood flow brought a pale pink color into his lips. He was gaunt. His cheekbones cut a silhouette under the skin of his face, and his body was thin, weak, and worn. She wanted nothing more than to hold him and let him feel safe.

“Who are ‘they’?” said Annelise. Her brain was trying to make sense of so many things. She was still focused on the man who had looked and sounded so much like her husband.

“My new bosses, the ones we had dinner with before I went to Japan last month. You remember? The two men working on James’s Digidog idea.”

“You mean Cyberdog, Dad,” muttered James, annoyed by his father’s comment while fumbling for control of the speeding vehicle. He was obviously taking in every word that was being said in the seat behind him. “It’s Cyberdog!” the teenager grumbled again as he swerved to avoid hitting the curb.

“Sorry son. Yes, it’s Cyberdog” Dan acknowledged his only child, which was so normal for him even in this stressful situation. *This is my Dan, no doubt about it*, thought Annelise. Then she asked him, “Are you talking about the men who came for dinner before your last trip to Japan? I never saw them before that night and have not seen them since. I got the creeps from them. Remember that one guy who insisted on using the bathroom upstairs? I was happy when they left—I did not like them!” She worked to calm herself.

“I think you scare them, Annie. They aren’t used to women like you who have a mind of your own. These Japanese men seem to think you still have pets. The entire flight back here, they sounded paranoid, telling me you’ve stashed animals away somewhere, and they were going to find them. They’re crazy. We don’t have any animals—we can’t have animals here because it’s the law. I told them you see your horse once in a blue moon; he’s on the God damn reserve, like the rest of them. All we have are these digital things, for Christ’s sake!” Dan coughed, almost choking on his own saliva. Annelise leaned forward, unsure about what to do to help him. He pushed her back into the seat and cleared his throat. “I was fed up with the interrogation and tried to get back to the digital dog game. We were still on the airplane. That is all I remember. Then I woke tied up in a storage room with this big goon watching over me. He didn’t speak English like the others. I haven’t seen the others in almost three weeks.” Dan rubbed his face as he spoke, as if to bring forth the memories from deep within his psyche.

“I scratched one line on the wooden headboard every morning. That is the only reason I know how long it was. They had a watchdog on me twenty-four seven, either the big goon or a little skinny guy. I finally managed to kick the skinny guy down the stairs on our way to the bathroom. Then I ran and hid, making my way home without being seen. Thank God I recognized the area where they were holding me. I was on the other side of town in the warehouse district.” His left hand rubbed across his forehead, scratching his scalp as if unlocking more memories as he glared at the seat back in front of him. “I had no idea if you guys would be there.” He turned and looked at Annelise. “You can’t imagine how worried I was, not knowing whether or not you two were all right.”

Thankfully, Dan was only scraped and bruised, the bloody towels a testament to his struggle. *He looks exhausted from hiding, ducking in and out of cars and anything that would shield him from the downtown surveillance cameras. My Dan can still*

move like the rugby star he once was. He ran through the night to get home and check on us. Annelise just wanted to hold her beloved husband, but there was no time for that.

James turned into the park and headed to the back parking lot near the bus stop. Annelise directed him. "Pull back there between all those trees. See the road back there?" Then her attention returned to her husband. "Dan, I'm sorry. I need to know if it is really you. What was our first date?"

"Oh God damn it, Annie, I can't believe you are doing this to me!" His glare cut through her and then past her. As he looked out the window behind his wife, he sighed and said, "I gave you a ride home from the damn barn at school, you and your bike. That was our first date."

"It is you! Oh thank God!" She reached over to hug him, but the awkwardness of the back seat made hugging impossible. "I can't tell you too much. I don't really know what is going on anyway, but you've got to trust me—it's very serious, and somehow you are involved." She stared into his eyes trying to find a connection, but there was nothing there. "We weren't supposed to do any of this for at least another two weeks. Sid wanted to come over for dinner and fill us both in. He's been worried about you, about us." She did not know what else to say. *I hope someone is at the dock. That is where Sid told me to go if I ever got scared—and I'm scared now.* Annelise had no idea what to expect.

Just then Rick, one of the people working with her friend and mentor, Sid, waved madly to catch their attention. "Come quick—we are in trouble," Rick said as he rushed to help the Gilroy family out of their car to a waiting truck. He was sweaty and seemed hurried. With everyone safely in the vehicle, Rick drove through the opening in the stand of trees and headed for the dock. "They found the barn. We have all the horses loaded on a big ship, some sort of burned-out cruise ship. The other animals and whatever supplies we could gather quickly are four hours ahead of us. This happened really fast. I was supposed

to wait for you and get the hell out as soon as possible. We are heading for the island right now. We have to go immediately. Sid knew they had you under surveillance.”

Rick explained to the frightened family what little he knew about the political movement that was behind all of the changes in animal rights in America. Sid planned to fill them in on the ship; all Rick knew was that it had been important to keep the secret barn from Dan. Annelise’s husband worked way too close to the people who were in control of this invasion of digital pets. They had animal-loving Americans hooked on their products, and it was a billion-dollar industry with lots at stake. The company didn’t want the secret Animal Sanctuary group to succeed.

“You have been seeing Harley secretly for how long, Annelise? I thought you’d sent him to the animal reserve—eighteen or twenty months ago!” Dan was astounded by the revelation.

“I don’t know, Dan. I really wanted to tell you, but Sid told me your safety was at stake.” She was close to tears. “Rick, how long has it been?” The driver ignored her question. “Ten or eleven months, maybe? Sweetheart, this has been hard on me too—you have no idea.”

Young James seemed dumbfounded at the adult conversation around him.

Rick pulled the truck to the end of the third dock in an industrial shipping port about a mile north of the park. That park was where Annelise had met Amy for their nine-mile drive southwest to the secret barn, where the horses were kept. Most of the ships along the dock were commercial freighters or car haulers in for repair. The cruise ship was anchored at dock number three, ready and waiting for the Gilroy family and Rick to come aboard.

“You three find somewhere to be comfortable. Sid or Marcus will find you,” Rick said before he disappeared into the belly of the ship. The family found space along the railing. Dan took James by the shoulders and walked him past his mother. They settled where both could watch the shoreline as the ship pulled

away. Annelise felt her heart beating; her hands were sweaty. Given their body language, it was evident to her that Dan and James did not want her to join them. Annelise closed her eyes and tried to relax by controlling her breathing. As she did, her mind wandered to the days of her childhood.



Chapter

2

Annelise Wentz lived with her parents in the city when she was a young girl. On her thirteenth birthday, she earned the privilege of horseback riding lessons. Every Saturday, she would board a bus at seven in the morning at the corner stop and arrive at the barn by nine. She had convinced her parents that she was old enough to ride the bus to the barn like her friend Amy, who was fifteen. Amy worked cleaning stalls in exchange for riding lessons; Annelise knew that she could do the same thing. The youngster would be with a friend on the long bus ride, so her parents agreed.

Annelise's parents drove her to the first horseback riding lesson, met Sid the trainer, and watched the activities of the day. Annelise happily followed Amy and did as she was told. The girls found a wheelbarrow, rake, and shovel. They helped each other clean two stalls while Sid brushed the horses. When the eager young equestrians were finished cleaning the stalls, Amy showed Annelise where the saddles and bridles were kept. The teens carried the heavy equipment to Sid, who saddled and bridled the horses. The riding portion of the day was as wonderful as the stall cleaning.

Every Saturday throughout her teenage years, Annelise repeated the events of this day. Being so young, yet mature enough to work for riding lessons, had always made her very proud—though Annelise's parents never showed a reaction to her grueling weekend schedule.

Her mother and father, Margaret and Fredrick Wentz, were both college professors, which explained her formal name, Annelise, with no nickname. Her parents felt that educated people did not use nicknames. The family lived two blocks from campus, where her mom and dad spent all of their time working and socializing. The school was their world, and so the three hardly saw each other except on Sundays. Even in the evening when everyone was at home, Margaret and Fredrick would pass the time reading or grading papers, and Annelise spent the time up in her room. She was a good student. Her parents had nothing but unspoken trust and confidence in their only child. On Saturdays she was able to catch the bus and spend all day helping at the barn and riding as many horses as possible. Those were the days when life made sense: everything was simple, honest, and as it should be.

The Wentzes were not used to having a youngster. They were forty when their only child was born. Because of their profession and age, they never treated her as a child. Rather than using baby talk and engaging in simple activities, they always spoke in adult language and challenged her like one of their college students, holding Annelise to standards to which no one her age could relate. That afforded her a great deal of freedom and independence at an early age, so from the third or fourth grade (when her mother returned to teaching) until college, life was her own, each day filled with the things that mattered to her. Some days could be very lonely, spending so much time by herself.

Animals were a big part of the day for Annelise: dogs, cats, and eventually her own horse. She could not imagine life without a pet; they were so full of unconditional love.

However, as Annelise approached mid-thirties, everything changed. The world was getting too crowded, there was not enough water, and food was scarce. For all those reasons, animals were no longer welcome residents.

* * *

As the ship pulled out of the channel and into open water, Annelise opened her eyes and surveyed the expanse of foamy blue-green sea. She felt the warmth of her childhood memories disappear. Annelise looked at James and Dan leaning against the railing and lamented the world of 2040. It had become manufactured and cold. Even things as ordinary as grass were being slowly replaced by synthetic turf. Advancements in biogenetics changed everything about the outdoors and nature. These modern miracles were very important to Annelise's family history; her father, Fredrick, was a biology researcher. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, his lab looked at ways to create "super plants." As he aged, Annelise' father finally learned to enjoy the simple pleasures of the world, having realized through his life's work that not all change was good. No doubt Fredrick turned in his grave every time scientist researchers created new variations, forever altering Mother Nature's original works of art.

Fredrick and his peers were part of the technology boom, and for many years mankind had explored the new frontiers of outer space. In this modern world, nothing seemed impossible. Finding ways to improve life here on earth was also important research in that time period. Fredrick's generation of scientists hoped to develop new bioengineered strains of grasses and other grains that could pack more calories and beneficial nutrients into the vegetation relied on for sustenance; that way less land and water would be required to produce food. They never achieved that goal to the extent that they hoped to, so his lab had to find another project on which to focus. He never expected his legacy to be taking the life *from* living things.

* * *

While gazing at the endless miles of cerulean ocean, Annelise thought about water in the modern world. Potable water was a rare and precious resource in 2040, and therefore irrigation of

landscaping was no longer allowed. Western culture had learned how to desalinate and use ocean water, but mankind's reliance on the oceans had put a strain on that ecosystem, too. In the end, water usage limitations were prevalent in all developed countries.

Americans' obsession with green lawns and pretty landscaping begged the question of how to meld water restriction with beautiful outdoor spaces. The next generation of Fredrick's lab perfected the chemical reaction in plants that suspended the cell processes of the greenery, effectively halting any change in the vegetation.

"Listen, I loaded the plant with super food; see how healthy it looks? Now is the perfect time to try to freeze the process," Annie's father said, wearing a white lab coat and fiddling with a blade of grass.

"You really think you can do that, Fredrick?" said his enthusiastic assistant.

"Trust me. I've put my life into this. Attach those wires through these straws down to the main roots. Let me know when you have it, and I will turn on the power. If the plant doesn't shrivel from the heat, we should have suspended animation." The assistant gave the signal, and Fredrick pulled the switch.

"Fredrick, it is green, the stem is round, the flower is still upright and full of color!" The assistant could not contain an embrace for his mentor, something not common in the lab. The test plant remained perfect. Fredrick and his associates knew they had invented a way to keep perfectly adorned lawns in a semi-real state without the use of precious water. The cell structure of the treated item ceased all natural processes. This was the beginning of the end for nature as the world knew it.

The question of whether suspended animation of plants and trees would create problems in the atmosphere loomed constantly over Fredrick's lab. He and his fellow scientists had more problems to solve, and they did so. The other item to consider for a plant-free environment was the atmosphere and

conversion of carbon dioxide into oxygen. Ozone air purification machines had been around for a while. The next generation of fake atmosphere technology was the photosynthesis machine, which took off when scientist were able to produce P680 chlorophyll in a lab environment. These two scientific developments rendered real, “high-maintenance” plant material unnecessary. Outdoor spaces in the city were now 100 percent artificial, yet they were beautiful. Real plants, trees, grasses, and shrubs turned to lifeless yet realistic ornaments.

Technology had forever changed the very basis of our existence on the planet. That reality had been a concern to Annelise for quite some time. She turned to look at her two men standing three feet away from her on the railing. James smiled and acknowledged his mother. Dan took his son by the hand and said, “We’re going down to the stern. You stay here, will you?”

Dan worked for a technology company. Was all of this high tech changing him, too? Dan had become very cold and distant, almost robotic, in his ways.

Annelise would talk to her childhood friend Amy, the only person she trusted enough to share such intimate details. “All this travel to Japan is changing Dan, Amy. He constantly surprises me—and not in a good way. I might be losing him.”

Lately life was different; “normal” seemed to be changing for the Gilroy family because every aspect of their existence had become confused. Was it Annelise who was different, not everything around her, that made it all feel unfamiliar and austere? Those thoughts were ever present in her mind. Annelise held tightly to the rail and leaned backward, stretching her spine and hoping to release some of the tension that was stuck there. Her mind continued to analyze the strange situation in which she found herself. Special moments with her husband that previously made life warm and cozy became increasingly difficult. The couple’s favorite sunset walk, finding that one remaining wildflower on the hill, or reminiscing about the old days when they had a real dog—all those things were simply

annoyances as far as Dan was concerned. Was it his job and all the travel to Japan?

To Annelise, the world had become terribly stark and technological; everything was managed or matrixed. Nothing felt real—not photos, movies, or even people. In this new millennium, it was hard to discern if something was digitally, medically, or otherwise enhanced. Even her beloved pets were no longer warm, fuzzy, living creatures that purred or curled up on her lap of their own accord. The latest trend in “furry friends” included ideas like Cyberdog and Digicat.



Chapter

3

High-tech companies had finally invented the perfect pet: no shed, and no pee or poop to worry about. These pets could be programmed to lie around, simply wagging their tail and looking cute. One could also make them fetch, do tricks, or sleep. As long as the computer chip inside of them worked, programming these “pets” to do whatever their master wanted was not tremendously difficult. Many of the Gilroys’ friends loved these perfect no-fuss, no-mess pets—but not Annelise. Breathing furry beings, especially horses, were still very special to her. Animals had been lifelong friends and held a special place in her heart; not having them around made everything that much more sterile.

In the late 1990s environmentalists came up with the concept of the environmental footprint. Every living creature required natural resources to sustain life: air, water, food, and room to exercise. The quantity of those resources used in an average day defined one’s environmental footprint. In the new millennium, animals, especially large animals, were felt by some to be too environmentally needy and in conflict with two of the nation’s other main goals.

One of those goals was to eliminate dependence on the Middle East and fossil fuels. There were so many excuses that the fear mongers used. The methane gas created by livestock exacerbated global warming. First cattle was the enemy, and soon so were horses that ate grain that was needed to produce

biofuel. Eventually, virtually every four-legged creature on the planet was considered undesirable. Vegetarians wanted to save animals because eating living creatures was barbaric. Outlawing furry creatures of any kind so that carnivorous humans would not illegally butcher and eat them made sense to the animal activists and vegetarians. If animals were required to live on reserves, they would be protected. At the same time, the biofuel fanatics formed alliances with the global warming extremists, who warned that livestock would eat the vegetation needed to produce fuel. Biofuels, made from grain—the same feed consumed by horses and other livestock—were all the rage. Biofuels seemed more earth friendly than other types of fuel, particularly fossil fuels.

The first attempt to free the country from dependence on foreign oil was via the hybrid gas and electric vehicles of the early 2000s, and then more all-electric vehicles were introduced. Providing electric charging stations as part of the normal infrastructure proved to be very expensive, so owners had to plan trips very carefully in order not to run out of power or fuel. The batteries in those vehicles were even more toxic to the environment than the pollution from exhaust. After a few years of use, these batteries began to fail, and the effect on landfills was devastating. Finding places to safely dispose of these highly toxic and now plentiful boxes of contaminant was trying at best. Auto manufacturers continued to investigate “earth friendly” vehicles.

“Going green” was very important in the early 2000s. Maybe society felt that going green would somehow compensate for the stark coldness of technology. Or was mankind trying to make amends for mistreating Mother Earth and ravaging her resources for so many years?

Horses, cattle, pigs, dogs, cats, and really all living animals ate too much, pooped too much, and required too much air and water. To the fanatics, they had become a nuisance. For many years, Fredrick and his colleagues had been researching ways to reduce the environmental impact of livestock and other animals.

Maybe that is where my love of animals came from, thought Annelise whenever she felt sad for the state of pets in America and the modern world.

Now, Fredrick's work was not even visible—animals were nowhere to be seen. In 2040 animals are legislated out of normal life almost completely.

Annelise's mother, Margaret, had similar influence on her only child. Margaret was an English teacher, an idealist, and a modern-day transcendentalist who was not happy with the state of affairs in the world. Margaret was very passionate, always putting energy toward something of importance in the world. Annelise felt she was very different from Margaret, who spent her time reading, traveling to lectures, and sitting inside while meeting with students. It seemed to Annelise that Margaret was never outside; she was too stuck in her thoughts and projects to enjoy the beauty of nature.

Annelise loved the outdoors, animals, and art. As a teenager, her days were spent lying in the grass drawing her cat, or up in the trees studying the bugs that made their home in the leaves. She wanted to do them justice in her artwork. The young artist also loved to paint the flowers in the garden. Annelise captured everything in her sketch book except the horses in her life. As far as her equine friends were concerned, there was no time to sit and draw; time with them was far too precious to waste. Her day at the barn flew by, brushing, feeding, bathing, and most important, riding.

Now, years later, it saddened Annelise not to have a sketch some of her equine companions. Horses, like most other animals, rapidly disappeared during the early part of the twenty-first century, long ago cast out as an expensive nuisance and as a danger to the survival of humanity. Horses, no longer viewed as the sport of kings and a helper to man, were in danger of becoming a food source. Those seeking the perfect planet had eradicated the wondrous creatures that once lived freely and had such a symbiotic relationship of service with humanity.

One law after another was enacted. First there were no animals within city limits, and then no animals within three hundred miles of any population center. Zoos were outlawed because they created too much pollution and used too much water. The only way to see a real animal, exotic or domesticated, was to drive to four central locations, mostly in the plains of the Midwest and the deserts of the far West. Animals were now kept in a handful of sanctuaries. *Where had all of these crazy laws come from? Annelise wondered. Have our leaders lost their minds? And is it simply coincidence that real animals are disappearing as these digital pets are taking over every store shelf in every department store of the nation?* Annelise and her friend Amy often discussed the coincidence.

Young James Gilroy had said it felt like animals were the Native Americans of the twenty-first century: corralled on reservations and forced to live their lives there, whether or not it was their natural habitat. Life had become very confused.

Annelise decided it was too hard to stand alone on the railing, though she did want to be by herself for a while longer. She found some shade and a bench on a lower deck, and she sat, taking in her surroundings with all of her senses. The rhythmic hum of the ship's engine and the calciferous scent of the air were hypnotic. She found herself thinking about her twenties, before James was born . . . and when she and Dan were still deeply compatible and so much in love.