

Chapter 1

New York City—2026

Texie Raynott raised her eyebrows as she stared into the microscope. *Green stuff in cancer cells? That can't be right.*

Emerald discs, like tiny stacks of pancakes, drifted through the cytoplasm of a human tumor cell. She shook her head. *I'd better record this.* Texie zoomed in with a digital camera, and her eyes widened. *Those green things are multiplying.*

Texie picked up a glass pipette. *Maybe I should get some fresh cells.*

As Texie took a breath, an invisible cloud of pollen from the lilac bushes outside the window drifted through her open mouth into her lungs. Inside Texie's air sacs, spiky, golf-ball-shaped pollen grains bounced against each other, as if jostling for position.

It happened so quickly, she never had a chance. Texie coughed, and her foot slipped on a shiny patch of the floor. She twisted in the air, desperately trying to avoid falling backward.

As her chest hit the floor, the glass tip of the pipette pierced her skin and slid through flesh and spongy lung tissue toward Texie's aorta. Her head bounced once on the concrete, making a thud, like a ripe watermelon falling on the floor.

Texie managed to snap a few pictures before she fell.

Dust bunnies clung to her cheek as her visual field narrowed to a pinpoint. Everything went black.

A custodian found Texie facedown on the laboratory floor, in a pool of blood. Her right hand still gripped the pipette that impaled her chest. Minutes later, two strangers in dark suits whisked her away on a stretcher.

"I can't understand it," Dock Hatman said. "Texie has perfect balance." *I should have told her how I feel—damn. What if her injuries are serious?*

Arnie Dipose, the department head, shook his bald dome. "Dock, this is bad news. I can see the headline now: 'Talented, Young Scientist Critically Injured while Working at the Nation's Most Advanced Cancer Institute.'"

The doctor treating Texie entered the room. "How is she?" Dock said.

She shook her head. "I don't know if she'll make it," the doctor said.

“Tell me what you’ve found so far,” Dock said. *Please, let her be all right.*

“Dr. Raynott was examining human tumor cells in a ninety-six-well plate. She added samples of different plant compounds, and she was screening them for possible use as cancer drugs,” the doctor said. “By the way, the sample is missing.”

“What?” Dock said. “That is impossible.”

The doctor shook her head. “We found a clean polypropylene well on the stage of the microscope.”

“What about images?” Dock said. “I’m certain she would document her progress with the sample.”

“We checked. Dr. Raynott did not take any images while she had the sample,” the doctor said. She raised her eyebrows and continued. “She slipped on the floor. It was a horrible accident. I’ve never heard of this happening. The glass tip of the pipette punctured a lung and nicked her aorta. And she suffered a severe concussion.”

Dock stared at the doctor. “How could this have happened? Is she going to make it?” *If she comes through this, I’m going to tell her that I love her.*

The doctor nodded. “I don’t know. I am keeping her in a medically induced coma until we find out more.”

Chapter 2

Dock pounded on the desk. “A woman almost died,” he said.

Arnie Dipose pushed the papers in front of him to one side. “Dr. Hatman, I do not like the tone of your voice,” he said. “Of course everyone is concerned about your colleague.”

Arnie pressed his lips together so that they looked like two cocktail franks. He glared at Dock. *I wish you knew my pet name for you: “Dock the Dork.” You are such a pain. I hope they fire your ass. Everyone sees you following Texie like a lovesick puppy. The bitch doesn’t even like you.*

“Why aren’t you filing a report on the incident?” Dock said. He looked at Arnie’s melon face and became more furious.

“You need to calm down or I will end this conversation,” Arnie said. “Unfortunately, you do not have the security clearance required to obtain further information on this matter.”

“Arnie, what does security have to do with someone slipping on those damn, overpolished floors? I’ve always said they were deadly, but no one listened,” Dock said in a loud voice.

“Dr. Hatman, if you value your position and wish to remain employed by this organization, you will drop this,” Arnie said. “Dr. Raynott is recovering, and everyone is happy. Let the matter rest.”

Dock didn’t want him to hear the tremors in his voice, so he took a deep breath and waited. “All right, Arnie,” Dock said. “You win.” *For now. As soon as I find out what you are playing at, I will go straight over your fat head.*

After Dock left, Arnie pursed his lips and considered Dr. Dock Hatman. *I worked hard for this position. I am the boss. Who does he think he is shouting at me like that? It was a freak accident. It will never happen again—although I wonder why it’s so hush-hush. In any case, it will blow over in no time. Then I will get that seven-thousand-dollar raise, and I can finally buy a boat. I’ll take it down to the bay in the summer. I’ll sit on my ass and fish all day.*

Dock returned to his office. He looked at the mess on his desk. A mountain of papers and journal articles teetered on top of stacks of books and journals. He sat and pulled his laptop closer. He turned to the computer and read a summary of the news.

An item caught his attention. *What a strange title: “Long Island Man Chokes to Death on Pollen.” The guy probably had an allergy.* Dock read on. *That’s odd: the cause of death wasn’t an allergic reaction or asthma. The man’s lungs were filled with maple-tree pollen. He suffocated from lack of oxygen.*

Dock leaned back in his chair and thought for a minute. *I've studied plants all my career, and that's the first time I ever heard of someone choking to death on pollen grains. I don't think it's possible. How could so much pollen gather in one place, and how could it get into someone's lungs? The guy would have to inhale the stuff through a tube. He shook his head. It has to be a mistake.*

Dock found the contact information for the author of the article, and he fired off an e-mail asking to speak with the reporter. Five minutes later, he heard the ping of an incoming message. Dock opened it and read.

Do not tell anyone you contacted me. Meet me at Grand Central Station in the Oyster Bar tomorrow at 4:30 p.m. I will wear green cufflinks.

Dock replied and said that he would be there. *What's with the secrecy? The poor guy probably died from a severe allergic reaction. I'm sure the reporter got it wrong. I wonder if I should tell Arnie that I'm going.* Dock shook his head. *No way—he is such a micromanager he'll want to talk to the reporter before he lets me go. I'll call in sick. He'll never know.*

The next day Dock took a seat at the oyster bar. The smell of clam chowder drifted through the air. He watched as a cook used a battered saucepan to prepare a seafood stew. "I'll have a beer, please," Dock said.

The cook placed a cold beer on the counter, and Dock reached for the glass. "Dr. Hatman." The voice came from beside him. "Don't be startled; keep drinking," the voice said.

Dock glanced to his right, and he saw the flash of emerald on white cuffs. "Excuse me, could I have the hot sauce?" the man said.

"Sure," Dock handed him an orange bottle. Dock felt something drop into his pocket.

"Eat. Do not talk to me," the man said as he slurped oysters.

Dock heard the crackle of plastic when the man opened his bag of crackers. After the crunching stopped, Dock sensed the man get up and leave.

The cook, a thin man with sallow skin, took Dock's order—a platter with an assortment of seafood.

Minutes later, Dock sipped his second beer while he chowed down on shrimp cocktail, crab legs, and a dozen oysters.

The cook's right eye twitched as he removed Dock's plate and silverware. He slapped

down the bill and turned away.

As soon as Dock paid the check, he walked out into an open area of Grand Central Station. The cook pulled out a cell phone and spoke into it in a low voice.

Dock stared like a tourist at the constellations on the ceiling. The object rested in his jacket pocket. He placed his hand over it to protect it from a pickpocket.

Once he reached his car, he locked the doors and started the engine. He couldn't contain his curiosity any longer, so he pulled the metal object out of his pocket. He used a fingernail to open it. A plastic card covered with tiny columns of numbers fell out. Underneath he saw a microSD card, the kind used to store video and images in a cell phone. *I guess I'll have to wait until I get back to see what is on it.*

Dock hit every red light on the way home. He breathed a sigh of relief when he turned onto his street, only to find himself stuck behind a white-haired driver who kept his vehicle exactly at the speed limit. Fidgeting and cursing, Dock pulled into a parking spot in front of his building.

Once in his apartment, sweat dripped down his forehead as he fiddled with the card. He plugged it into his laptop, and a window popped up. A dialog box prompted him to enter an encryption key. *Aha, that's what the plastic card is for.* Dock read off the digits, entered them, and the folder's contents appeared. Hundreds of files with cryptic names appeared in a grid. Dock picked one at random. He clicked on it and waited.

A web browser launched, and a video played. *These look like home videos. I wonder why no one is narrating—unless they did not want people to know they were recording.*

A crowd was standing on a beach. Screams, yells, and a siren could be heard in the distance. A man with his back to the camera was bent over someone on the ground. The camera was directly above the prone person. The man giving first aid leaned to the side and cursed. The man was pulling ropes of seaweed from the mouth of the person prone on the beach.

Dock shook his head and paused the video. *It can't be, but it is.* Dock recognized the type of seaweed as Pacific Giant Kelp, the longest seaweed in the world. It is also the fastest-growing green plant, increasing in length by over one and a half feet per day. The man in the video continued to pull an impossible amount of green filaments out of the nostrils and mouth of the victim. "It's no use," the man said. "The seaweed completely filled his lungs." The video stopped abruptly.

Dock paused and looked at the other files in the folder. Dock clicked another file icon, and a different scene unfolded.

It looked like a forest, maybe in Eastern Europe. A family was hunting for mushrooms. They walked in single file, and shouts erupted whenever anyone found a mushroom on

the forest floor.

Dock heard the intake of breath when they found the body. It looked like the corpse had exploded. Bits of flesh hung on leaves and tree branches. Dock paused the video and stared at the screen in shock. The inside of the body cavity was filled with mounds of spores. Dock clicked play. He heard someone warn the family to move back and to cover their mouths and noses.

Dock stopped the video. *What am I going to find on the rest of these videos? More horrible deaths? What the hell is going on? I have to report this to someone.*

Dock didn't sleep that night. He watched every video and every gruesome death.