

PROLOGUE: AUGUST 20, 1977

"What the hell is the 'Edwards Option?'" The Director leaned forward over the desk, his color high and a tiny vein pulsing at his temple.

Cal Edwards suppressed a smile. It was no moment for smiles he knew, but the Director, under stress, became an exaggerated imitation of himself, and for some reason Edwards found that both amusing and comforting. "I gather you've spoken to Donegal."

"I just got off the hookup. No video, but I could hear his voice. He said you would explain—"

"Chris, you've got one astronaut dead, Taggart, and one not dead, Donegal. Our J. Donegal, still alive in spite of the disaster."

"Still alive for the moment. For the moment!"

"Yes."

"Up there in a hopelessly damaged orbiter, spinning away from us, on its way to god knows where."

"A long elliptical, headed well outside the orbit of Saturn," Edwards filled him in.

"He told me it would be a public relations disaster for the Program if the whole world had to watch his long slow demise in fascinated horror. Think of it, a man drifting away to his certain death, coming to grips with that death over the course of nine days." They had calculated how long before the cooling would begin and make further life impossible. Nine days. "He said he didn't want that, that the public should be told he had gone out with Taggart, that they were both suiting up in the inner lock when the explosion tore off the side of the capsule, both expelled and . . ." The Director shuddered.

"Yes. Expelled and ugly stuff happened."

"Sorry. No need to dwell on the details. When he said that, I naturally assumed that he meant to take his QAPD."

"His Quick and Painless Death pill, designed by NASA for something pretty much like this."

"But he said—"

"That he had another option, a better one."

"He called it the Edwards Option."

Edwards nodded. "As you can imagine, Chris, when we're together, the Twenty, or any subset of us, we think about these things, almost obsessively. Often late at night and lubricated with alcohol. We think, Gee what do I do if I am up there in a damaged orbiter headed into the far reaches of outer space, already too far away for rescue? Is it QAPD time for me? Or is there an alternative?"

"I can't imagine—"

"When the orbiter eventually swings back close to the earth, years or centuries later, maybe I could be brought down then, and if only I could somehow preserve myself for eventual resuscitation . . . Did you know, Chris, that there are three tanks of liquid nitrogen on board the orbiter, part of the reserve air supply?"

"Donegal is going to freeze himself? That's the Edwards Option?"

"Turn off all the cabin heaters, break the regulators off the tops of the tanks. Liquid nitrogen is stored at minus -321 degrees Fahrenheit. The entire cabin would be cold enough to freeze a man solid within half an hour."

The Director looked stricken. "But what a half hour, what a horrible half hour!"

"Sleeping pills. Donegal had six and there were six in Ray Taggart's kit. Ray wouldn't be needing his. Donegal would be technically dead before pain could set in. But not so dead that he couldn't be brought back when sufficient medical advances had made that possible. Sometime in the future . . ."

The Director chewed on that. "How long?"

"The loop is a little more than forty-one years. Think of J.J. as a comet, revisiting us every forty-one years. He will be close enough then for us to retrieve him. I told him I'd be there to welcome him back to earth, if I'm still alive."

"In forty-one years I'm not likely to still be Director."

"So we have to put the mechanisms in place . . ."

"And suppose the state of the art of medicine still isn't up to the task in forty-one years?"

"Then eighty-two years, or one hundred twenty-three . . ."

The Director sagged back in his chair, absorbing. After a long moment: "Jill? Does she know?"

"Not yet. She disappears when J.J. is on a mission. Heads into the hills and camps out till he's due back. Nikki and I will be there for her when she returns. We'll be the

ones to tell her. When you and the Chaplain make your formal visit, she'll already know. That's the way J.J. wanted it."

A sigh. "I don't envy you."

"No," Edwards said.

"Because of the way they were. I mean, we all have our relationships, but J.J. and Jill were . . ."

"I know."

"J.J. and Jill were somehow more than just a married couple, more than just lovers."

"I know," Edwards nodded. "They'd been together since they were kids . . ." His voice trailed off.

The Director shook his head appreciatively. After a pause: "You know, Cal, you said that you and the others in your bull sessions would go over and over some of the worst things that could happen, to grapple with what your response would be. I had no one to have a bull session with, but I often thought, How would I handle saying goodbye to one of my flyers if it ever happened as with J.J. I thought I had a pretty good idea, but when it came down to it . . ."

"Don't beat yourself up, Chris. Nobody would have been up to that."

"I tried to offer something of a summing up, but he cut me off. He told me the strangest thing: He told me that an angel had appeared to him in the orbiter. Just after the explosion. An angel."

"?"

"I know he's not a believer . . ."

"But he knows that you are."

"He said that the angel had a message for me. For me? I said. I was shocked. But I took the bait, and asked what the message was. He said the angel wanted me to know that there are no angels."

Edwards smiled. "That's J.J."

"I guess. Then he clicked off. That was the end." Then, almost as an afterthought: "Cal, I know you had talked to him just a few minutes before I did. Could I ask, How did you ring off with him?"

"I told him what his first question ought to be when they wake him up."

"Which was?"

"His first question ought to be 'What is the date?' So he will know how far into the future he had come."

1 AWAKENING

"What is the date?" Donegal asked.

Blurred vision. Hovering over him was the face of a young woman. Her dark hair fell gracefully about her face as she reached behind his head to arrange the pillows.

His voice had sounded so weak, even to himself, that he knew he would have to summon more strength to be heard. As he prepared himself to repeat the question, she leaned down over him, bringing her ear almost to his lips to hear the words. He caught a faint whiff of her scent, light and flowery. "What is the date?"

"It's April. The end of a lovely April." She touched his cheek with the back of her hand. "You're alive," she said. The woman's face was swimming above him. She was in white, a nurse perhaps, and breathtakingly pretty. When her image swam out of focus, she was still there, he knew, because the hand was still by his cheek and the scent hovering about him.

He considered whether his question, Edwards' question, really, had been answered. He readied himself to speak again. The face that leaned close this time to catch his words was pretty and female and young, but a different face. And behind the face was darkness, not sunlight as there had been only a moment before. There was a different scent too, as nice as the other, but different. Perhaps time had passed. He forgot his question. The eyes above him were light blue with long lashes and a hint of eyeliner. They showed concern.

"Itchy," he croaked.

"Yes, poor dear. I should think so. I'll give you something to relieve that. You've come through a lot."

He felt something cool and metallic pressed against the upper part of his shoulder. There was a slight buzzing sensation from whatever it was, and the itching drifted slowly out of his consciousness. He seemed to sleep.

When he was aware again, there was sunlight, yellow and bright, flooding into the room. And the woman of the first scent was there again.

"What is the date?" he asked. His voice sounded a little better.

"May," she said. Her expression, just above him, was amused. "One might think you had urgent plans, with so much interest in the date."

"May."

"Yes. Don't worry John Donegal. You'll be up and around before this spring is over. You won't miss it all."

"But May of what year?"

She laughed. The sound of her laughter was delicate, like a wind chime stirred in the breeze. He stared up at her, struck by her loveliness. When she'd finished laughing she considered his question, smiling still. "May of... the Year that Brought Too Much Rain, I should say."

There were, altogether, four presences that moved around him. All were women, though of different ages. Most often they were in white. He was in a hospital, he knew. There was nothing of the smell or paraphernalia of hospitals he had been in before — the only bit of medical technology he had noted was the smooth metal sometimes pressed against his bicep to buzz away his discomfort, some kind of injection mechanism, he supposed. The clue that it was a hospital was the smooth, confident manners of the women who moved about him. They had the authority of medical professionals. He was in their care.

There was something wrong with his skin, it seemed to be flaking and monstrously itchy as if recovering from burns. He itched all over. That might have been the effect of the cold, the blistering, brutal cold of the freezing gas. He wondered idly if he would be scarred. "Will I be scarred?" he asked the young woman with yellow hair.

"No, I don't think so. You look a bit scruffy now, but you'll soon be pretty as ever."

The itch and awareness of his skin gave him a dream. Or maybe what gave him the dream was the women, competent and assured and comely. The dream was a recollection of something from his long-ago past: the summer of his odd skin infection, what they called the IM-PE-TYE-GO.

He had been only fourteen at the time. The infection was evidently from swimming in the Androscoggin where it ran through the town. Other children, he had

heard, had the same thing. Doctor Moulton prescribed a course of ultra-violet treatments at the clinic. You lie down under a bright blue light, he explained, and return perhaps a dozen times for sessions of half an hour. It didn't sound too bad.

The surprise though was that you had to lie there quite naked. A fourteen-year-old boy could be desperately shy, at least the fourteen-year-old Jack Donegal was. He had to undress down to his shorts inside the treatment cabin and then wait for a nurse to come in. All this he lived again in the dream. He was hoping she would be old and motherly. Instead it was the attractive young nurse, the one the doctor had called Laura. She was the kind of woman he would have been shy in front of even in his clothes. "You're Jack Donegal, I guess." "Yes, Ma'am." He was blushing. Let it not be her, he had been thinking, right up to the moment she'd stepped into the cabin. Laura checked one more time what was written on the chart and then patted the padded table under the light. She motioned for him to lie down on his back. He wanted to ask her if he couldn't keep his shorts on, but the words wouldn't come. He would learn soon enough anyway.

"Thirty minutes," she said brightly, "fifteen on each side." She smiled down at him. "Don't worry, Jack, it won't be bad. And no one else will see; it's just me."

He nodded, trying to make his color normal again, and probably only succeeding in making it more flushed.

"You have to keep your eyes closed and covered by a cloth." She was folding a starched white napkin into a narrow band to be placed over his eyes. "I want you to keep it in place the whole time, even though your eyes are closed. Because the light is not good for your eyes. The light is strong enough to go right through the lids. So you will keep it on, won't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"We'll need to slip these off." She took his undershorts away. He lay back on the table biting his lip. She folded them carefully and put them together with his other clothes on the bench next to the padded table. When she turned back, she had another white cloth in her hands, which she was folding into quarters. She looked down at his body. "We can cover up this part at least, as you aren't too affected there." She placed the folded cloth over his embarrassing erection. "That will help preserve your modesty a bit."

"Thank you," he said, feeling more foolish than ever. She put the other folded white cloth over his eyes.

In the dream — but the dream was just a replay of reality from years before, unchanged as much as he could remember — in the dream, she returned after fifteen minutes and turned him over. "Now we'll do the other side and you'll be finished for the day." In this position, of course, she could see his behind. She made no move to cover that part of him. "Back in fifteen minutes," she said. "Be good."

At the end she'd come back to turn off the light and write in his chart. "You can get dressed now, Jack." Her back was turned to him to afford some privacy. When he was ready, she led him back to the lobby of the clinic. If there was anyone there, he would blush again, sure that they would know for certain he had just been bare naked in front of a young woman.

Eleven times the routine was repeated, each time with Laura. He had no secrets from Laura. He could remember from each session the sensation of her eyes on his body. It was as if the focus of her glance was a light tickle, distinctly felt, not just noticed.

On the very last day of the twelve, there was a girl in the waiting room when Jack arrived. He knew vaguely who she was, the state senator's daughter, perhaps two years older than himself. She was supposed to be a snob. Though he only glanced at her, he caught her at that moment fidgeting slightly, and realized with horror that she had the infection too, the impetigo. And she was here for the same reason he was. So she might be in the treatment area, in the corridor right outside his cabin when the door was opened.

The doctor's secretary called his name and directed him to one of the numbered cabins. He undressed uneasily. When Laura tapped and stepped in, he was pressed into the corner beside the door. She looked at him curiously. "There's a girl outside. I was worried..." She frowned. "I told you I would protect your privacy. You can count on me, you know." "I know. Of course." He smiled up at her.

After the treatment, she waited for him to dress, turned away from him in the little room. He had his eyes on her back. This was the last treatment. "Ready," he said at last.

"Come along then."

In the corridor, she paused outside an adjacent door. "I won't be a sec. Stay right here, please, and behave yourself." She tapped on the door and let herself in. She placed herself in front of the patient's head and shoulders, but left the door open slightly. Jack took in his breath. Stretched out in front of his eyes were the long uncovered legs and bare bottom of the girl. Laura said something, waited for the muffled reply, then stepped outside again, closing the door. His eyes were still stuck on the space where the vision had been. Laura reached her hand toward him, put one finger under his chin and lifted it. "Well, come along then. All cured. We just need to sign off your file and send you on your way again, as healthy as ever."

He followed her down the hall, not saying a word. A few moments later he was back out on the street.

When the dream was over, it rewound and began again. There was no variation, just the same dream: Waiting in the little cabin in his shorts, a quick tap on the door and then Laura. You're Jack Donegal, I guess Yes, Ma'am. Blushing. We'll just need to slip these off. The towel, the touch, back in fifteen minutes, be good, the girl's bare bottom; and finally, on your way again, as healthy as ever...

It played over and over again, identically, each time passing through the twelve visits. There must have been something happening in his life between the visits, but of that the dream told nothing. After the nth re-play he was feeling progressively more and more withdrawn, watching his adult self on a hospital bed going back endlessly over an incident from childhood. Repeated dreams were a sign of fever, he remembered. Did he have a fever? He felt bad enough for fever. His mind wandered off from the dream, though the dream played on still.

As Laura turned him over under the light, he was wondering where the four presences were from the here and now. Had they given up on him? Was he slipping away, failing after all to respond to the treatment that was to have him up and about before the spring was done? Is that what the repeated dream implied? Laura tapping at the door and letting herself in. I said I'd guard your privacy. You can count on me you know. Yes I know. Back in fifteen minutes, the nude girl, then off again, healthy as ever. You can count on me, you know. We'll need to slip these off. It won't be so bad, it's just me. The dream accelerated, Laura was racing through her part. Donegal was suddenly frightened of the dream, frightened of its urgent repetition and what that

could mean. He ought to withdraw even more, to distance himself from it. But he was just as frightened of withdrawing. What would it be to withdraw entirely from the dream, the dream that had been his own life?

Someone was leaning over him, but not Laura. It was the flowered scent of the first awakening, dark hair, the laughter like chimes. Only she wasn't laughing.

"We should have eased him off. It was too quick."

"What did we know? How could we have known? If we'd been more perfect in prescribing, he would have come out more easily, but he *is* coming out. He'll be OK. This is the first day I've really felt that."

All four of his presences were back again, surrounding his bed. They were smiling, not so much at him as at each other. The young woman with the short dark hair reached across to the fairer one and took her arm. "Gwen, you've pulled off a miracle, a remarkable piece of work."

The fair complexion, coloring a bit. "Thank you, Cindy. Thank you all. You live all your life to win one like this. I couldn't have asked for three people I'd rather share the victory with, or three people I could count on more to help make it happen."

All the hands reaching out to join in the space above his head.

"Victory," Donegal said groggily.

"He's coming up."

The four faces, focused now on his own. They were the same four who had watched over him through it all. The sounds and scents were mingled. He looked from face to face. They were all so lovely. Perhaps there were angels after all.