

A Span of Moments

Robert Beech

First Edition

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Robert P. Beech. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-578-95936-8

Chapter 1

Even the pelicans weren't flying, content instead to float motionless at the edge of Passage Channel, long bills tucked against chest feathers, eyelids closed to the glaring light. Here and there, patches of brown seaweed dotted the calm surface, creating quilted patterns of tiny islands. Beyond the channel, the Gulf of Mexico was a wide mirror of water and sky. At the horizon, shimmering light waves spawned fleets of ships that didn't exist. Normal sounds were absent. It was noon and dead-high tide. A painted moment when the senses starved for activity.

Simon sat at the edge of a wooden platform, leaning back against the roughness of his bridgetender's shack. A tattered straw hat cast a dark shadow over the wrinkled features below. Only the white stubble of beard was apparent under the drooping brim. The July sun beat down hard. Sweat dripped from his chin.

He stared out at the stillness and tried to calm his mind. Fifty years had passed since 1944, but that didn't matter. The uplifted faces were as vivid as ever—the final moment upon them, the chaos of realization. He continued staring

across the water. The stillness only amplified what time would not erase.

Eventually he threw the ribboned medal as far as he could, watching it flutter through the air, the sunlight reflecting off its shiny sides. It landed with a small splash. He watched the tiny ripples as they disappeared into the stillness, hoping the offering would quiet the karmic beast. It was growling loudly in the shadows of his soul.

* * * *

Many miles to the northeast, Jake Crawford stood by the wide window of a large conference room. Downtown Boston lay beyond, but the image he saw had nothing to do with that reality. Eyes closed, he was imagining a boy on a bridge, fishing rod in hand, the warmth of the Florida sun on his face, a soft breeze rippling across the water. The tranquil vision provided refuge from the chorus of nearby voices. They were imploring him to reconsider, talking over each other, becoming more strident.

"You can't stop the clinical trial."

"If you do this, we'll have to release a public disclosure."

"Our stock price will be demolished."

"Jake, be reasonable. This isn't only about science."

"You've already damaged our valuation with your damn donation, and now this!"

The tranquil vision was disrupted by the last comment. Jake turned around, focused on the offending board member. "What's my donation got to do with this?"

"You know what I mean."

"What, that I support cancer research?"

"Dammit, you gave away all your company stock."

"So?"

"We're talking four hundred million dollars!"

"And what's that got to do with drug toxicity?"

Another board member intervened. "Look, Jake, we understand you have high standards."

"You do?" Jake's skepticism was evident.

"Yes, we do. But you can't stand on a rock about this."

"Even after what I presented? This drug will cause some patients to die. The data is pointing right at it."

"But no patient has died yet."

"Thank God, but it's only a matter of time."

The general counsel raised her hand, silencing the group. "This discussion is hitting the guardrails. Dr. Crawford, you must stop making comments to our board about the likelihood of patient deaths."

Jake turned to the attorney with exasperation. "So, what else should I discuss? Shareholder return on equity? I'm the chief science officer."

She glared at him. "You are indeed an officer of the company. And protection of shareholders is a fiduciary duty."

Jake glared back. "My foremost duty is to protect patients, not shareholders." Jake's voice rose in anger, well outside his normally calm demeanor. "You of all people should know the legal guidance: What did I know? When did I know it? And what did I do about it?"

Jake shifted his glare toward the others. *They know the guidance as well. Yet there they sit, shaking their heads at me, squirming with worry about our damn stock price.* Years of growing disillusionment finally erupted. "Doing what's best for patients is only lip service in here. They're only a means to an end. A tool for making you obscenely wealthy. It's disgusting."

The CEO jumped up. "You need to shut the hell up,

Jake. This is our board of directors!”

“I don’t give a shit who it is. I’m tired of the game you all are playing with patient lives. Nothing about our stock price should be part of this discussion.”

The CEO came around the table and confronted him. “You’ve already gone way too far. You need to leave the room—*now*.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m leaving, but not just this room. All of it ... the company and entire industry. It’s all been perverted—by greed.” Jake headed for the door.

The chairman stood and got in front him, pressing a hand on Jake’s chest, a look of fear in his eyes. “Hold up. You need to calm down.”

Jake looked down, studying the chairman’s hand, noting the manicured fingernails and large diamond in the pinky ring. He batted the hand away and walked out.

* * * *

The first pelican took to the air, signaling that the tide had started out. Other pelicans took flight as well, joining with the first into a tight squadron that would soon be dive-bombing small fish along the shallow edges of the gulf. Simon got up from the platform edge, watching as the squadron gained altitude.

Formations of the big birds often reminded him of the cadet training flights out of Arcadia, like the ones that had first taken him over the southwest Florida coast. Marcosta Island had always appeared so lovely from the air, positioned below Naples and just north of the Ten Thousand Islands. The wooden bridge at the north end of the island had become one of their favorite targets, taking turns practicing fake strafing and bombing runs. Many times, he had

flown right over this bridgetender's shack, wondering what it would be like to live and work in such a beautiful spot. He had sworn to find out if he made it through the war alive.

Forty-eight years had passed since he entered rotation as one of two bridgetenders, starting in 1946, working for the City of Marcosta Island: one week on, one week off. His counterpart had quit after a few years. Simon remained as the sole bridgetender, requesting to stay on the bridge without relief, offering to do it for the same pay; explaining how he had arranged for someone to bring his groceries and run small errands. Locals told him it would be a virtual prison sentence, that it wouldn't last—but he had surprised them. The seclusion of bridgetending had become an effective antidote, tempering the poisonous memories he brought back from the war.

Simon went into his shack and fixed a tumbler of whiskey and ice. He sat down at the small kitchen table and lit a cigarette. A customary bout of coughing was triggered by the first inhale. He leaned back and looked out at the gulf, struggling to control his pace of breathing. A Bahama fan whirled above, spreading the smoky air while augmenting the cooling effect of the drink.

A crumpled ball of newsprint sat on the floor by the table, an unwanted intruder in his private sanctuary. It held an immense power that belied its flimsy material and small diameter. He continued to smoke and drink, glancing warily at the ball. *I knew this would arrive one day, so why such turmoil?* He finished the whiskey and cigarette, then repeated the process. The refreshed tumbler was soon joined by another lit companion. A nearby trashcan became the recipient of the paper ball.

Simon sat again, studying the woodgrain of the kitchen

table. *Why the sudden loneliness? After all the years of being alone?* He turned and stared across the room. A pair of khaki shorts lay drying over the back of the other kitchen chair. *No one has ever sat in that chair and talked with me.*

Faded memories of Pat came to mind. The times together as young pilots, chasing back and forth across the blue skies, dodging in and out of the billowing clouds, followed by hours of earthbound laughter at bars or tables, talking excitedly about going to war and what they would do afterward. He needed Pat at this table now, seated in that other chair, sharing a whiskey and smoke. They could talk through those poisonous memories and perhaps avert the outcome that loomed in his mind. But Pat had been the first among many who never returned.

Simon lifted his head. Tired eyes stared out at the wide expanse of gulf. He thought of the ribboned medal laying on the bottom of the channel, soon to be covered by shifting sands. The final decision was now close at hand. *Can I do it?*

* * * *

The lobby of the Boston building was more crowded than usual. Occupants in suits and lab coats moved up and down on escalators. Chattering voices and beeping pagers permeated the cavernous space, echoing off its granite angles and curves. Revolving doors unleashed a steady stream of people to and from the street. Taxis came and went, honking incessantly. A siren wailed and passed. A baby was crying in the swirl of activity.

Jake moved across the lobby, winding in and out of the hurrying crowd, navigating toward a side elevator that led to the parking garage below. A few faces tried to catch his look but to no avail. The board meeting was still the focus of

his thoughts. Striking the chairman's arm was regrettable. The fact it happened underscored the need to quit.

The baby's crying was louder, nearby this time, pausing his thoughts. He glanced over at the mother, her eyes reflecting the frustration of being in a place for work, not family. She met his glance, and her look intensified, as if his lab coat signaled an immediate threat. She turned away, struggling to comfort her tiny child.

The garage elevator was directly ahead. On the wall to its left was a bronze plaque honoring the inauguration of the building. Embossed in large type was the year 1953. He paused and stared. *The year DNA discovered itself.* He had seen the plaque many times but never considered the irony. It was also the year he was born, forty-one years ago, back when new combinations of DNA were left to natural mixing and random mutations. He entered the elevator and looked back at the mother and crying baby. *My mother no doubt held me like that, trying to comfort me during troubling moments of immature cognition.* No one back then could have realized what the year 1953 would signify. Perhaps it would become the zero restart of a future religious calendar.

The elevator doors started to close. The lobby scene was now a caricature of what had consumed his life for over two decades. In the final analysis, he had learned too much. The naive optimism of early years had been displaced by the turmoil of accumulated knowledge, leaving only disillusionment and a philosophical dilemma.

The time had come to retreat, to salvage what remained of his original love of nature and its timeless rhythms. It was time to head home—back to Marcosta Island and its old Florida way of life.