

COST OF DOING BUSINESS

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress is the multiple-award-winning author of over two dozen novels and a hundred short stories. Her most recent work is the second book of the Yesterday's Kin series, *If Tomorrow Comes* (Tor, March 2018). "Cost of Doing Business" grew from the 2016 Year Without a Winter Conference in Arizona, but Nancy had been thinking about fossil fuels for a long time. When she was in grade school, more decades ago than she cares to admit, teachers were warning that oil reserves would someday run out. They didn't warn, back then, about climate change. They did say that drastic alterations in our society would be necessary—although not as drastic or as planned as in this story.

Some people are always too late to the party.

Kayla moved around the edge of the crowd of protestors, the camera in her sunhat recording continuously, her tiny handheld controlling the zoom. Looking for the best shot, the one that would go viral and that her prose could make iconic. There: the old man sweating so much that the toddler on his shoulders had slid sideways, still clutching his little homemade sign: LEAVE OUR CLOUDS ALONE!

Yes. A better image than the protestors who had—pointlessly—chained themselves to the airfield fence. Better than the signs that required more background to understand—SAVE THE SAHEL and NO SOGGY MIRRORS—or the ones tied to whacko conspiracy theories: CHEM TRAILS TO CLOUDS TO CAPTIVITY. Better than the water vendors, making profit from heat prostration under the murderous Midwestern sun, hot as dragons' breath.

A woman in short shorts and crop top jostled Kayla. "Oh, sorry."

"No problem. But . . ." She made her voice soft and hesitant, ". . . isn't this just a one-shot thing, to help Chicago?"

“No. Don’t you read anything? This is a fucking *test*. If it works, the government will go on to putting sulfates in the air for so-called ‘global cooling,’ there’ll be droughts in Africa and India, and the—” Her head swiveled to watch the planes take off from the heavily guarded airfield, their roar drowning out her words.

The planes, silver in the relentless sunlight, would seed the sky with aerosols that would cause the formation of water droplets, many more than would form naturally. The resulting cloud, a “soggy mirror,” would drift east until it shaded Chicago, where the city’s worst heat wave on record was shutting down businesses, melting asphalt, and killing—so far—269 people, most of them poor. The soggy mirror would reflect much more sunlight than normal clouds, relieving the worst of the heat caused by rising global temperatures, if only for a few days. Clouds did not last.

Neither would this cloud effort. Too expensive, too much public resistance. Did the protestors know that the decision to abort had just been officially announced? If so, they didn’t believe it.

The crop-topped protestor returned to educating Kayla. “Geoen지니어ing is just playing God with the planet, and not only that—hey! Why aren’t you sweating? You’re wearing a c-suit! Luke, over here—another infiltrator!” She grabbed Kayla’s arm, hard.

Kayla broke free and ran. Mistake, mistake, she shouldn’t have worn the cooling-suit under her clothes, but she’d been afraid that otherwise she might faint in the 105-degree heat before she got the story. Running cranked up the automatic cooling of the suit, but no amount of cooling could give her the speed and agility she’d had twenty years ago. Luke was gaining on her left, and now two more men angled toward her from the right.

Two weeks ago, a journalist had been badly beaten while covering a fracking protest in Montana. All media was assumed to have a corporate soul.

Kayla stumbled and fell. She curled into a ball, covered her head with her hands, and waited for the blows. They would come—she’d seen the expression on Luke’s face.

No blows. Instead, hands lifted her to her feet. “Ms. Serdenovna?”

Three men, one incongruously dressed in a dark suit; he must have an incredible c-suit on underneath. The other two had shorts, tees, and assault rifles.

Kayla broke free. “Who are you?”

“I work for someone who would like to talk to you. We can, of course, ensure your safety.” He gestured toward a long black car fifty yards away.

“I repeat, who are you? Who’s in the car?”

“James C. Sullivan.”

Kayla blinked. More protestors massed to her left. She saw the glint of sunlight on metal.

“Okay, let’s go. But if that’s not Sullivan . . .”

It was. Kayla recognized him; the whole world recognized him. Tall, austere, handsome, dressed more like a banker than a software geek, James Conway Sullivan had created a computer revolution, starting with his VR programs that turned an ordinary cell phone into a projector of room-filling, substantial-seeming holograms. Decorators and architects modeled room design; corporations created R&D presentations; history teachers filled classrooms with the Roman Forum; teenage boys holoed naked models in their dorm rooms. From there, more software doing more things no one had even realized needing doing, and then serious AI, until James Sullivan had become the richest man in the country, exceeding Bill Gates’s fortune by half. Famously frugal, he spent almost none of it, except on security.

Kayla, like most liberals, despised him. People like him controlled 95 percent of the world’s wealth, and this particular oligarch spent none of it helping the people that

needed it most.

"Hello, Ms. Serdenovna. Please get in. I have a professional offer for you."

* * *

He took her to a Marriott with, blessedly, AC. The unpretentious suite had a small, well-equipped bar. Kayla, who had interviewed ambassadors and princes, could recognize a bespoke suit. Sullivan's wasn't.

He said, "Would you like a drink?"

"No. What is this offer?" Not that she was going to accept it. But she was curious.

"I'd like you to write a book about an endeavor I'm going to undertake."

"I'm not a ghost writer. Nor a business writer."

"Don't you think I know that? You write books about failures."

Despite herself, Kayla blinked at his bluntness. What an odd duck he was: a software genius with little on-line presence, a native West Virginian with the precise diction of a fussy English professor, a fantastically rich mogul who stayed at a Marriott. And what he'd said was true. Her first book, *Standing Rock*, had been about the collapse of the protest movement against oil pipelines. *Red Planet Denied*, which had won the Pulitzer, had detailed the failure of NASA's plans to put a settlement on Mars when all the agency's funding had gone, too late, into the political fires kindled from climate change.

"You hardly qualify as a failure."

"No. And neither will my endeavor. But I've followed your work for years, and you're the journalist I want to cover this."

"What is 'this'?"

"Before I tell you, you will need to sign a nondisclosure agreement. It commits you to nothing."

"I'm not interested, Mr. Sullivan."

He went on as if she hadn't spoken, but his gaze stayed locked on her. "You would have total and unfettered access for a minimum of a year to all my meetings, memos, and deals. There will be no restrictions on what you can write, or where you can publish. The advance on the book is two million dollars, plus all expenses, of course."

Kayla felt her eyes widen; she'd never been a poker-faced negotiator. But she said nothing.

"The endeavor will be huge. Worth a year of your time, I promise."

Money was not going to lure her into being a flunky for James Sullivan. That gave her the luxury of being blunt in a way she never would have been with a source she actually wished to cultivate. "Tell me what the endeavor is. One sentence, before I sign any non-disclosure. You have my word that I will neither talk nor write about your one sentence."

Sullivan hesitated. Then he said, "All right. I'm going to tackle climate change by taking the United States off a fossil-fuel-based economy."

She said, stupidly, "What?"

"I'm going to take—"

"I heard you. I just . . . Sullivan, the entire economy? You must know that's not possible."

"It is. Plans exist."

"I know plans exist! I wrote *Standing Rock*, remember? Our political and economic structures don't permit going green on anything but a pathetically small scale."

"They will."

She shook her head. "You're wrong. Also crazy."

"Then you can write another Pulitzer-winning book about my megalomaniacal failure."

Kayla stared at him. He was serious. "Why?"

“Because I won’t fail. Sign the nondisclosure, Kayla. It commits you to nothing except another five minutes of blather.”

This was true. She read the paper carefully, signed, and said, “I’ll have that drink, after all. Two fingers of Scotch, neat. Okay. Talk.”

He brought her the drink. “Corporations are all built on gas and oil, right? To manufacture, transport goods and people, market to consumers, invest and speculate and—”

“Don’t talk down to me, Sullivan.”

“Sorry. It won’t happen again. So politicians back corporations to keep the economy going, and corporations back politicians. What is greater than that interlocking power structure?”

“Nothing,” said Kayla, bitterly. Of the Standing Rock protestors, three had ended up dead and sixteen in prison.

“You’re wrong. There is a force greater than corporations, at least in America. The vote.”

Kayla laughed. Now she was sure he was crazy as well as egotistical. “Mobilizing the people? C’mon, Sullivan! You couldn’t get voters to agree at gunpoint on a flavor of ice cream, let alone a plan to demolish the economy that provides them with jobs and cars and trips to Disneyland.”

“That’s the conventional wisdom, yes—that major paradigm shifts are impossible. And yet, once our economy ran on slavery, until it didn’t. Once only white men who owned property could vote, until everyone could. Once women like you had to stay home and raise kids, until you had other choices. Paradigms do shift, have shifted, before. And I’ll start small, with one model city.”

“Oh, right. Stop climate change with a model city. Every ‘model city’ in history has failed. Building another mini-utopia in some desert is just stupid.”

“Not a utopia, not in a desert, and not mini. This city will be different.”

“Uh huh.” She sipped her Scotch. “And what is this ‘model city’?”

“Flint, Michigan.”

She couldn’t help it; she erupted into guffaws, spraying Scotch all over the rug. “Flint! It’s in bankruptcy yet again, it has an 11 percent unemployment rate, its power company shows huge losses, they still haven’t replaced a third of those lead-contaminated pipes, and the FBI just named it the third most dangerous city in the country!”

“I know. Do you want to write the book?”

She still despised him; his ridiculous good intentions had not changed that. But this wasn’t any ordinary project, and she was a journalist. Already ideas were rising in her mind like heat waves, shimmering with promise, coalescing into mirages of the book she could write. Failure and narcissism on an Ozymandias scale. Rise and fall of an oligarch.

She was tired of writing *New Yorker* articles, but had no other book in mind. And Sullivan, to his credit, had not reacted with anger to her unprofessional insults. That boded well for a working relationship while she exposed his folly.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m in.”

* * *

She and Robert had dinner at their favorite bistro in Tribeca. Kayla had barely had time to catch a taxi from LaGuardia. Cars honked, drivers snarled at the usual Manhattan commuter traffic. She laid her head against the back of the seat and prepared to tell Robert that she would be traveling for the entire next year. It wasn’t going to be an easy conversation, but not because of the travel.

They had met three years ago, to instant attraction. Despite the long separations of two high-powered careers in journalism, the attraction stayed strong. Kayla had

never felt anything like it. When she won the Pulitzer, she had watched Robert carefully for signs of the professional jealousy that had wrecked her marriage ten years ago. The signs didn't come. Robert was genuinely pleased for her, unthreatened, able to spend the next year singing back-up to Kayla's literary hit. Their relationship was intellectually stimulating, physically exciting, emotionally satisfying. And yet, neither had ever brought up living together, let alone marriage. They remained a double-star system, just as strongly held to each other as they were separated by unseen centrifugal forces she didn't want to examine too closely.

"Kayla. I missed you. How did the veil protest go?"

"It fizzled. Geoengineering for climate control is a dead issue."

"You knew that already. Give me my kiss."

He was never self-conscious about public affection, something Kayla had had to get used to. They hugged, kissed, sat down, and ordered. After wine and dinner, when the mood was mellow, Kayla said, "I've got my next book project."

"Oh? What?"

"I'm going to follow James Sullivan—the James Sullivan—around for a year and detail this insane project he has, but right now I can only say—"

"James Sullivan? You can't be serious!"

"Just listen, Robert. It's not a how-I-became-rich book. He—"

"You're going to be a PR flack for Sullivan Enterprises? *You?*"

Kayla put down her spoon. Her crème brûlée no longer looked appealing. She said deliberately, "Of course not. This is something quite different. But I can't discuss it, because I've signed a nondisclosure."

Robert grimaced. Kayla's belly tightened. A long, ugly silence spun itself out. Finally Robert said, "Sullivan has never given significant money to philanthropy—not ever. And he has unknown and untraceable amounts of money stashed in Cayman Island banks. Peter wrote that piece on him for *Forbes* and couldn't crack his people, and Peter's good. You can't know what you're getting into."

"Everybody at that level has money stashed in the Caymans. You know that. And I'm insulted, Robert, that you're not trusting me more on this. I know what I'm doing."

"Don't be insulted. I didn't mean that." He tried to smile, but it was so forced that Kayla had to look away. Which didn't help.

She made herself say, "What's next for you now that the *Atlantic* piece is done?"

"Baton Rouge. *The Atlantic* again. There's apparently a health crisis there, with rich suburbs like Centurion getting all kinds of help but the poor in the city getting none for the same problem."

This was why she'd first fallen in love with him; his deep commitment to writing about the huge disparity in how the climate crisis affected rich and poor. She said, "Heat deaths again?"

"No. Something much different—miscarriages. Way too many."

"Something in the water? Or buried and leaking waste under the McMansions?"

"Don't know yet. I leave tomorrow. Are you done with your dessert?"

"Yes." She didn't want the crème brûlée. She wanted Robert back, but his face was stony and his gaze didn't meet hers. She said, "Robert, this assignment with Sullivan isn't a PR job."

"It will be. He'll make it be."

"I said it wasn't."

He said nothing, but condemnation showed in every line of his face. Angry at his judgment, Kayla said coldly, "Have a good trip. Call me from Louisiana."

"I will."

Neither of them suggested spending the night together.

* * *

The press conference was held in the Marriott, which passed for a luxury hotel in Flint. Kayla, waiting in a small anteroom with Sullivan, had been told what he would say, and her mind still reeled. The ballroom filled with local and state politicians and major press. Secret meetings had gone on for the previous month, night and day. The governor and the mayor both worked the room, fending off questions while reiterating the announcement that had brought everyone here, which boiled down to, “Something big is going to happen in Flint, and it involves James Sullivan.”

After weeks with Sullivan, Kayla still couldn't get a bead on him. He was completely open with her about his business transactions, but he never said anything about a personal life, and none of her interviewing tactics had coaxed him into even the simplest revelation. Nor had her private digging yielded more than everyone knew: born in Florida to a postal worker and a housewife, now both dead. No siblings. B.S. in computer science from Stanford, where he seemed to have made many contacts but no close friends. Never married. A few girlfriends, none serious, all of whom said he was kind and reasonably generous but very secretive. “It's like I never got into his mind, you know?” said one. “And he worked all the time.”

His employees in Silicon Valley said they seldom saw him; he left the day-to-day operations of Sullivan Enterprises to his COO, Marcus Calder. Probably wise—Sullivan's buttoned suits and stiff formality were a bad fit with a software company's style, which was given to T-shirts, arguments about zombie invasions, and friendly insults among programmers. Calder met with Kayla only because Sullivan told him to, but the meeting was frustratingly unproductive; Calder guarded whatever his boss's secrets might be like a dragon guarding treasure.

The Marriott had erected a makeshift dais in the ballroom. The governor, mayor, and other bigwigs climbed to their seats on the dais. Sullivan walked out and sat on the far left. Cameras were turned on, security stood by. The newspeople who had already ferreted out pieces of the story looked tense and, for newspeople, openly fascinated.

The governor made a welcoming speech. Kayla, who despised him for a self-serving idiot, rolled her eyes. Then the mayor took the podium.

“It's my great pleasure to make two major announcements about our city. First, as you already know, Flint has been in a public health state of emergency for too many years. Budgetary concerns have made it impossible to replace as fast as we would like the water mains delivering unsafe water.”

Unseen, Kayla snorted. *Too many years* was an understatement. A third of the pipes were still contaminated with lead, lawsuits drowned the city, three officials had gone to jail, and Flint was once more in receivership.

“However, all the remaining pipes will be replaced immediately, by which I mean starting tomorrow, both providing safe water to Flint and creating hundreds of good-paying jobs. This is possible through a five-hundred-million-dollar grant from James Sullivan, who has bought and equipped the old Johnson building to hire workers, train them, and begin pipe replacement.”

The room exploded. The mayor raised her hand for quiet—and were her eyes wet? No, just shining under the lights . . . weren't they? But there was no mistaking her grin.

“The second announcement is that the city will be switching its main energy company from Consumer Energy, which has served us well, to a new company with lower rates, Flint Energy Consortium. Everyone in Flint should see a drop in their energy bills next month, and going forward.”

“How?” Kayla had asked Sullivan when he'd first told her this.

“I negotiated a deal with CME, the parent company, to buy energy from them and sell it back at a reduced rate to the city. Flint wasn't very profitable for them—too much poverty, too many businesses closed.”

“And you're making up the difference from your own fortune.”

"It will pay off, eventually."

"No, it won't." Kayla said. He liked her to push back against his statements, as in their first meeting, and she usually learned more when she did. "You won't see any profit. And you're still using energy from fossil fuels."

"Not for long. Already the Consortium is buying fuel mainly from Michigan's wind farms and hydroelectric plants. I'll build more wind farms, install solar arrays with the newest capture-and-store features on public buildings."

"What will all this cost you?"

Sullivan thrust his hands deep in his pockets, looking for a moment almost boyish. Then Kayla realized the deliberateness of the gesture. She hadn't known he was capable of humor. He said, "It'll cost a lot. I'll give you figures later. To take back a city, you have to start with its energy sources, and energy companies only sell either when they can make a profit or when they're forced by law. I don't make laws."

"Is that where you're going? Buying a city so you can run a private dictatorship?"

"No. Really, Kayla, I know you better than that. You will have done your research. This mayor is nobody's tool."

True. In a corrupt state, Leah Goldman had proved incorruptible. Kayla said, "Flint will cost you billions."

"I have billions."

"And have never given as much as a dollar of it to charity. So—why?"

Sullivan shook his head. "I already told you. You don't believe me, which is fine. It's why I chose you."

Kayla said nothing. The look on Sullivan's face had baffled her. If she'd had to give a name to it, she would have called it sadness.

The press conference made headlines across the nation, professing equal parts wonder and skepticism. But Sullivan did exactly what he said. By the next day, people hungry for work stretched in a line around the block for jobs laying pipe. When the salary was announced, the lines doubled, then trebled.

* * *

She called Robert, whose light-created holo presence irritated her by saying, "When does the other shoe drop?"

"Are you sure it will?"

"Of course it will. Converting you to rule by the one percent, is he?" And then, when he saw that she was too angry to even reply, he said, "Sorry. I'm stressed out. You can't believe how hot it is down here."

Of course she could; she'd been in Louisiana in late August. But fear kept her silent. Was she losing him? Looking at his tired face, she knew she didn't want that to happen. But neither was she willing to lose herself.

"Robert, how is your research going?"

"Slowly. There's a clear pattern of early-pregnancy miscarriages, and it's a statistically significant percentage. The CDC is here and the EPA and all the rest of the alphabet, plus an army of biologists and virologists. So far nobody knows anything. No fetus has been farther along than four or five weeks, but the personal stories I'm collecting are heartbreaking, even for a curmudgeon like me that never wanted kids."

Kayla never wanted them either, but that was irrelevant. She said, "When are you returning to New York?"

"Not till I get answers. You?"

"Ditto."

Then there seemed very little to say. Heartbreak hung in the silences.

* * *

Six months later, the Flint water crisis, which had dragged on for years, was over. Heating and lighting bills dropped by 20 percent.

When the pipe replacement finished in Flint, workers were retrained to build a new utility wind turbine at a cost of two million dollars plus labor. More people were hired to build a five-billion-dollar light-rail system. Sullivan worked closely with the Mass Transportation Authority. Retail, restaurants, and repair companies expanded to serve the new workers. By November, when midterm elections were held, unemployment in Flint had dropped five full percentage points. The mayor was reelected in the largest landslide in Flint history. Sullivan was negotiating with GM for electric vehicles for city employees.

The mayor appointed Sullivan as Ombudsman, a city position charged with representing the interests of the public.

Kayla walked around town, interviewing people, taking photos of the new flowerbeds, playground, shops. She ate lunch at Angie's Diner, eavesdropping on construction workers. When she returned to the hotel, Sullivan had bought *The Flint Journal*.

The newspaper, which dated from 1876, had gone from a daily paper—Flint's only one—to publishing solely on weekends. Within a month, Sullivan restored daily circulation, hired more staff, ran a lot of articles on the climate crisis. He also bought an abandoned factory that had once made parts for the auto industry and had it retooled to produce solar panels, which he subsidized. Heating and lighting with solar became more affordable than drawing from the grid.

As they prepared to leave Flint, Kayla realized that she didn't know Sullivan any better, but she did like him more. He worked sixteen hours a day and then disappeared into his hotel room, but during meals and on the way to and from meetings, she'd discovered that he had a dry sense of humor and, incongruously, enjoyed the poetry of Robert W. Service. Kayla burst out laughing. "No, really? 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew'? I thought you'd have better taste!"

"No," he said, smiling, "you didn't."

That was the most intimate conversation they'd had. Worse, her conversations with Robert weren't much more intimate than those with Sullivan. Mostly they talked about the miscarriage crisis in Louisiana.

It was evident early on that the pregnant mothers showed liver changes that didn't affect them but disastrously affected fetuses under two months, leading to spontaneous abortion. A virus was suspected, but no one could find it.

"Viruses can be notoriously hard to isolate," Robert said during an early-morning holo-call. He looked tired, but also wary. He still thought less of her for working with Sullivan, she still resented his condescension, and the digital air between them felt thick and painful.

"What does the epidemiological map show?"

"Distinct clusters and lines of transmission, but nothing that can be pinned to a source, or to a maternal profile, or to anything at all."

"What about the fetuses?"

"They don't show any single pattern. Kayla, all this is in the news nearly every day, so why are you quizzing me?"

"Because we're supposed to be in love, remember?"

"Supposed to? Does that mean you're not?"

"I am. But I don't think you are, anymore."

Long silence. Then she knew. "You met someone else. In Louisiana."

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"A CDC pathologist. I was waiting to tell you until I knew that we—"

"Which 'we'—you and me or you and her? I suppose she has absolutely pure ideals, unlike corrupted me?"

Robert ran his hand through his hair. It was thinning. "Kayla, I . . . I'm sorry."

"Me too," she said, and cut the connection.

In her hotel bedroom, she sank onto the floor, back against the wall, and wrapped her arms around her body. The room felt cold. She rocked back and forth, trying to soothe herself, forbidding herself to cry. Kayla Serdenovna did not cry. But it was a long time before she could make herself get up off the floor, could breathe normally around the hard ball of pain in her throat, could get dressed and go down to the lobby to meet Sullivan for the day's work.

He noticed instantly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Let's go. Don't look at me like I'm dying, James—I'm not."

"Well, good," he said, and treated her no differently than before. But she caught him looking at her now and then, with concern.

* * *

A year after Sullivan's campaign began, the crime and unemployment rates in Flint had dropped precipitously. Roof gardens, the plants free to anyone who wanted them, had begun to send leafy trailers spiraling down old walls. The city council voted to divest itself of all stocks connected with oil and gas extraction and to reinvest the money in renewables. Press gathered regularly to examine and write about "the Midwest miracle." Not all the articles were complimentary. "Paternalism At Its Worst." "Sullivan Buys Himself a City-State." "The Prince of Flint."

Kayla said, "Flint cost you about twenty-five billion dollars."

James only smiled.

"That's maybe one-sixth of your fortune, and it's one city. Even if you spend the rest to transform five more smallish cities, so what? You're broke, the fossil-fuel companies are still merrily drilling and fracking and plumbing tar sands, and the Earth is warming more than ever. So what have you really accomplished?"

James sipped his Scotch. He was drinking more but he never seemed affected by the liquor. They sat in an airport bar, luggage already checked for New York, waiting for their flight to be called. Sullivan Enterprises owned a plane, but his executives used it more than he did. Flying commercial when you were the richest man in the country seemed affected to Kayla; whatever James was, he was not a man of the people.

Still, she had extended her contract with him for another year. This whole insane project now absorbed her. Digging had produced a few more tentative leads, which she was determined to follow.

Finally he answered her. "If you want people to say no to fossil fuels—enough people to matter, not just the liberals who are already going solar and protesting pipelines and planting trees in suburbia—you need to show them something to say yes to. Flint is artificially created by my money, yes, but it's still a model of how a city can look. And it's just the start."

"But the start of what, exactly?"

"Kayla, do you know how much it costs to be elected president? Less than a billion dollars. And no, I don't want to run for president. Nor senator or congressman."

"Yet you're putting together what looks a lot like a presidential-level, ground campaign network in every major city in the country. I'm supposed to have access to everything you do."

"You have it."

"To the 'what.' But not to the 'why.'"

"You already know the why. I'm going to take the United States off fossil fuels."

The wall again. She could only get so far before she hit it. "James—"

"No push-back right now, if you don't mind. They're calling our flight."

* * *

By June, CO₂ in the atmosphere had risen to 500 parts per million. Greenhouse

emissions in the United States had surged again, after several years of falling. The decreases, Kayla knew, had been due to moving factories overseas and emitting there. The global average temperature had risen another tenth of a degree, edging up to the three-degree increase that climatologists now called critical. Earth could become a planet without winter, or at least without snow. Certainly it was hot enough in Oklahoma. Sweat dripped into Kayla's eyes despite the c-suit under her loose dress, but at this protest no one noticed her.

Just outside the fence surrounding the big, ugly machinery, protestors chanted and screamed and waved signs. Fracking caused 30 percent more methane emissions than conventional extraction, but the chants and signs focused not on data but on emotion.

"No more earthquakes!"

SAVE MOTHER EARTH!

"No more earthquakes!"

FRACKING IS FATAL

"No more earthquakes!"

LEAVE THE OIL IN THE SOIL

The last had more passion than accuracy; this fracking site was after natural gas, not oil. Kayla moved closer, angling for a good shot. Overhead, surveillance drones added to the noise. Not, Kayla noted, many press drones, and those she did see were only from local media.

And then came another sound.

Oh, Christ, no.

Two military Strykers rolled up the road, followed by trucks carrying National Guard. Soldiers in riot gear, tear gas canisters at their belts, leapt down and moved into formation around the crowd. Someone with an AP system blared, "You have the right to peaceful protest, but do not attempt to enter private property beyond the fence. Repeat, do not attempt to enter private property beyond the fence."

The crowd suddenly buzzed like the world's largest wasp's nest.

It hadn't looked to Kayla like anyone had intended to climb the chain-link fence. But dared like that, the inevitable young man did. Early twenties, floppy hair falling over his forehead, he climbed the chain link and turned defiantly, a little wobbly, to face the soldiers. In the sudden silence he screamed, "Go away and take this fucking gas company with you!"

No, no, don't do it kid. . . .

She had seen such protestors, had written about them, before. In Greece, in Romania, in Canada, in Ecuador, in the United States. Sometimes the protestors won—all of France had banned fracking—but more often they did not. In China, environmental activists had been shot. In Nigeria, they had been hanged, burned out, mowed down with rifle fire. Milder militarized responses had resulted in people choking on tear gas, crying out with injuries, under arrest. But the fracking, drilling, tar-sand extraction, pipelines, and oil train wrecks all continued.

The young man swaying on the fence lifted one sneakered foot and set it down on the other side.

Soldiers raised their rifles.

Then three large men rushed forward and wrestled the young man off the fence. He screamed; they screamed; protestors milled around. The air still felt charged, but Kayla knew there would be no violence, not here today. Fellow protestors carried away the still-struggling young man, his sneakers vainly trying to kick whomever he could.

Kayla's cell beeped in the pattern that meant breaking news. It referenced a New York *Times* article; she opened and read it.

Robert's friend and rival had beaten Robert to his scoop.

* * *

VIRUS CAUSING MISCARRIAGES IDENTIFIED
 CDC WARNS OF "SHOCKING IMPLICATIONS"
 A Special Report by Peter Armbruster

Today the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta announced at a press conference that scientists have finally isolated the virus causing early-pregnancy miscarriages in four Southern states. The virus was identified through a joint effort by the CDC, the United States Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases, and the U.S. Public Health Service, said lead epidemiologist Dr. Jane Schilling. "This virus has shocking implications," Schilling said. "We never expected this."

She went on to explain that the miscarriages in Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi are caused by a virus temporarily named PV-45, which seems to be "a spontaneous mutation of a common virus." PV-45 interferes with the way the human liver processes the chemical toluene, also called methylbenzene. Toluene is a component of both gasoline and jet fuel.

In most PV-45-infected people, the liver simply figures out other ways to dispose of the temporary toluene overload. For pregnant women who are infected, however, the situation is different. Toluene readily crosses the placenta and causes miscarriage. At least 900 pregnancies so far have been ended by PV-45.

* * *

Oh, shit, Kayla thought. That first reaction was followed by two others: Robert will be disappointed that Peter, with his connections, got this first. And then: James just got a huge, unearned gift for his crusade.

Immediately she felt ashamed of herself. This was not about either Robert or James.

* * *

It has been known for decades that fetuses metabolize toluene differently from adults. In low concentrations, exposure to toluene does not affect pregnancies. High exposure, especially if it is chronic, can cause fetal gasoline syndrome, with results similar to fetal alcohol syndrome: low birth weight, facial abnormalities, and brain damage. However, PV-45 seems *not* to lead to fetal gasoline syndrome, common among chronic "glue sniffers" trying for a euphoric high, but rather to spontaneous early miscarriage.

Scientists have not yet identified how the virus is spread. "It doesn't seem to be airborne," Schilling said, "but we need much more research on both its transmission vector and its effects. Most of what we know about methylbenzene effects comes from animal studies, which may or may not be applicable to humans. We do know that the fetal, larval, and egg stages of all kinds of animals are more susceptible to toxins than the adults—oysters, sea turtles, dolphins. Still, PV-45 is uncharted territory. All sorts of new diseases have emerged, or mutated, in the last twenty years that we've never seen before."

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Who is at risk for PV-45? So far, the known miscarriages have clustered along heavily trafficked highways and among workers in factories that use toluene in manufacturing, such as printing, adhesives, and footwear. There has also been a significant increase in

miscarriages downwind from two Louisiana oil-drilling sites.

The CDC recommends that pregnant women, and those that think they might be pregnant, avoid gasoline, diesel fuel, and gasoline products, including paint, glue, and any household cleaners containing toluene. The OSHA safety threshold for toluene is 100 parts per million, and refueling your car can expose you to twice that amount. So, until more is known, let someone else pump gas for your car. Postpone painting in homes and workplaces. Avoid areas of heavy traffic. Don't—

* * *

Avoid areas of heavy traffic. Yeah, right. Tell that to all the pregnant women living in houses bordering interstates. Or standing at bus stops in crowded cities, breathing exhaust, to get to the jobs that kept their families fed. Peter had always been an elitist.

The fracking protest had lost energy. Some demonstrators left in fear of the military presence. A few had succumbed to the heat and were being helped away by friends or relatives. None of the remainder had yet seen the *Times* article about PV-45.

Toluene. Such a pretty word. It sounded like a flower, or a girl's name.

Kayla returned to the article. Her phone rang. James.

"My God, Kayla, did you see—"

"I saw it. All those poor women hoping to be mothers . . . but, James, this changes everything. And in your favor."

"No, damn it—don't you see? This makes it worse than ever for what I want to do."

She was bewildered—that didn't make sense. What was he seeing that she was not?

Then she saw it.

"Meet me in D.C.," he said. "We have a lot of work to do."

* * *

Powerful corporations are powerful. A tautology, of course, but so easily forgotten that Kayla wanted to have it tattooed on the inside of her eyelids.

It took the fossil-fuel PR machine less than twelve hours to come up with "proof" that PV-45 was somehow created, or spread, or at least being capitalized on (it varied by corporation) by environmentalists intent on baselessly attacking gas, oil, and the American way of life. Shell, BP, and Exxon pledged billions of dollars to fight the virus.

The stock market plunged, throwing the global economy into confusion and dread.

The media raced to interview scientists, pregnant women, corporate executives, politicians, and anyone else with an opinion, which was pretty much everyone. Tearful women who were pregnant, or hoped to be, fled north from the infected states, usually to friends or relatives, but some to a hastily opened "Pre-born Refuge" in Nevada, run by a religious group. The president gave a press conference each day, urging calm. Nobody listened. Kayla, outraged, hoped the crisis would stop with interviews and press conferences, but she knew better.

Protestors against the "dirty tricks" of environmentalists torched Sierra Club headquarters in Oakland.

Protestors against auto emissions blocked and closed down Interstate 65, backing up traffic and delaying delivery of goods.

Thousands refused to drive their cars, and tens of thousands who did so anyway were criticized and sometimes attacked.

Several countries put a temporary ban on travelers from the United States until more was known about the virus.

By the end of the week, PV-45 had spread to Florida and Georgia.

Polls showed that about a third of the country believed that the virus was indeed created by environmentalists to push “green fascism.” It was the same charge that had been made when Antarctic ice shelves had collapsed: “They blew it up to make us think global warming is real!” By now, nobody denied global warming was real, but anti-environmentalists still believed it was (pick one) a normal fluctuation, not as bad as the hysterical left said, or soon to be fixed by a technological miracle that was going to come along any day now.

Another third considered the virus an act of foreign terrorism that should lead to bombing someone, somewhere.

Slightly less than a third thought PV-45 had evolved naturally, but that the fossil-fuel companies should do something immediately; they did not agree on what.

The remainder attributed PV-45 to, variously, China, the End Times, a mad scientist somewhere, or an international cabal of illuminati, Jews, or zero-population fanatics.

James spent the week in D.C. meeting with lobbyists and members of Congress, with several side trips to various corporations. Kayla went on the first few of these, which were not very productive. He suggested that she cover the CDC instead.

“Stuck in a mob of reporters penned up somewhere in Atlanta until something breaks? James, this isn’t what you promised me. I go where you go.”

“I know, Kayla, but nobody foresaw this, did they? I have corporate crises of my own to attend to in Silicon Valley, and they’re proprietary to my company and not connected with your book. The stock of Sullivan Enterprises is taking the same dive as everybody else’s. You know that.”

She did.

He added, “I know Francis LaHaye, we were at Harvard together. I’ll get you a private interview. It’ll only be fifteen minutes, if that, but it’ll be an exclusive.”

Nobody, not even Peter, had gotten an exclusive with the beleaguered head of the CDC. Kayla went to Atlanta.

She was there when the CDC announced that it had found the transmission vector for PV-45. Like so many other diseases that had once been tropical, but had moved north with global warming, PV-45 was carried by a mosquito. *Aedes albopictus*, which unlike most mosquitos, fed not only at dawn and dusk but all twenty-four hours.

* * *

“Kayla,” said the voice on her phone, and she froze in the act of brushing her teeth after a long day of interviewing, writing frantically, and checking the news every fifteen minutes. The air in her hotel room suddenly felt as hot as the stifling city outside. Then the room went cold.

“Kayla?”

“Hello, Robert.” She mastered herself, but not her voice, which she cursed for its shakiness. They hadn’t spoken since the break-up. She had deliberately not followed his career or his life.

“Look, Kayla, I’m not going to pretend this call isn’t awkward as hell. Your phone says you’re in Atlanta, is that right?”

“Yes.” She fumbled with the tracking on her own phone; he was calling from Minneapolis. Why?

“Are you still working with Sullivan? If you’re not, then this call is pointless, and I won’t bother you. But if you are, there’s something I think you should know.”

“I am still researching James, yes.” There, that tone was better—neutral, professional.

“Okay. I have sources all over, you know that, and one involved with Sullivan’s ground campaign for—you knew he was building an extensive organization, right?”

“Of course I did. Don’t insult me.” James had been at his massive anti-fossil-fuel campaign for a year; it rolled out on Sunday. Kayla knew even more about it than James thought she did.

“Sorry,” Robert said. “But Sullivan’s campaign isn’t what I’m calling about. I can’t tell you who my source is for this, or anything about him or her, but the source has high-level contacts in the CDC and told me that it isn’t releasing everything it knows about PV-45. The source doesn’t know what’s being held back but says it’s big and wanted me to investigate. I can’t, but through Sullivan you probably have access to people that I don’t.”

Kayla still held her toothbrush. She rinsed it and put it down, letting the ordinary little action focus her. Robert sounded angry and aggrieved. At not having the access that, he rightly assumed, she had? Or at James, whom he’d always distrusted the way he distrusted all corporate brass?

“How reliable is your source?”

“Very.”

“What else did the source tell you?”

“Nothing. I know it’s not much.”

“No, it’s not. In fact, it’s nothing. Just a rumor.”

“No. This person is completely reliable.”

“Even if that’s so, why are you telling me? The CDC isn’t connected with James. Why not tell Peter?”

Now he sounded angry. “I thought you should have it because you’re a better journalist than Peter. Sorry if my tip offended you.”

“It doesn’t. But you sound offended. Robert, why are you in Minneapolis? You hate the Midwest.”

“Jenna has family here. It’s safer. She’s pregnant.”

Put out one hand, steady yourself on the wall. Walk to the chair. Sit down.

“Kayla? You still there?”

“Yes.”

“I know what you’re thinking. I did always say I didn’t want kids. But with Jenna . . . well, it’s different now.”

Different than it had been with her. And Kayla knew, because she knew Robert, that he would only have said that if he believed that she was as completely over him as he was over her. He did believe that. She needed him to believe that.

She needed to believe that.

From long journalistic experience, she found the right tone. “Congratulations. But now that we know PV-45 is spread by mosquitos, it will be easier to control it. We eradicated malaria-carrying mosquitoses from the U.S. We can do this, too.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Thanks for the call.”

“Sure. But will you call me if you find out anything more about the CDC?”

“Yes.” *Have to keep Jenna and her baby safe.* “I’ll talk to James as soon as he returns from Silicon Valley.”

A long silence. “Sullivan isn’t in Silicon Valley. He’s in Miami. It was just on the news.”

“Yes, of course. Silicon Valley was before Miami. Good night, Robert.”

* * *

“You lied to me.”

James sat in the living room of their shared hotel suite in New York, holding his volume of Robert W. Service poems. His gaze didn’t flinch from Kayla’s. He waited.

“You weren’t in Silicon Valley, you were in Miami. Why? And why lie about it?”

“Because my reason for going to Miami was completely personal. Someone I had to see there. A woman, all right? It didn’t concern you.”

He had never been rude to her before. Rudeness didn’t disconcert her, but pain did. He—James Sullivan!—looked near tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said awkwardly. “But you should have told me. I wouldn’t have

asked personal questions.”

He looked at her and laughed. An unhappy laugh, and mocking. And he was right. She would have asked personal questions.

James said, “I don’t want you to try to find her, or to talk to her. My personal life wasn’t part of our deal. Nor do I want to discuss this with you. I’m going to get some sleep—the campaign rolls out tomorrow.”

After he’d gone to his room, Kayla picked up his book. He’d marked a passage of Service’s wretched doggerel:

Go couch you childwise in the grass,
Believing it’s some jungle strange,
Where mighty monsters peer and pass,
Where beetles roam and spiders range.

’Mid gloom and gleam of leaf and blade,
What dragons rasp their painted wings!

* * *

“Huh,” Kayla said. She hadn’t promised not to find the woman in Florida. Nor had she told James that, in her opinion, the campaign would do no good at all.

* * *

It didn’t.

Not for lack of planning. James had spent billions. An army of canvassers handed out leaflets. TV and radio spots played as incessantly as if this were a presidential campaign. Online ads, blogs, tweets, videos, and pop-ups cluttered every screen in the country. Yard signs appeared. Everything, the simple and the complex, had one message: Eliminate gas and oil and you slow global warming. Nobody cared. The country was focused on eliminating mosquitos.

By 1951, *Anopheles*, the mosquito that carried malaria, had been eradicated from the United States. All the old weapons were hauled out: insecticides, repellants, netting, draining breeding grounds. Even an old cartoon character, Annie Awful, an *Anopheles* dripping blood with the original voice over: “Her business is robbery and coldblooded murder. They call her Annie Awful. She’s a thief and a killer. She stops at nothing.” Now Annie—and never mind that *Aedes* rather than *Anopheles* was the carrier this time around—was projected as a truly scary hologram running on all Sullivan Enterprises software. Hand-held mobile labs made spot diagnoses of everyone possibly infected while also tracking and updating epidemiological data.

The miscarriages increased.

Kayla, dashing from city to city to cover everything she could, talked to James by cell several times a day. “We’re changing the materials,” he said. “The new message is: no gas and oil, no miscarriages. The new spots and leaflets and all aren’t as polished as the old stuff—no time. But it’s all we have.”

It wasn’t all he had. While Kayla concentrated on information for her book, James had what seemed to be an army of journalists covering everything else he was orchestrating. Technically, they all held press credentials from *The Flint Journal*, which gave that small paper more coverage than NBC. James told her the major developments in time for her to get to them, but not even he foresaw the CDC’s next press conference.

“The PV-45 virology team,” announced an exhausted Francis LaHaye, “has evidence that although the generation of mosquitos carrying PV-45 has been largely eliminated from the six infected Southern states, the next generation of mosquitos is also carrying the virus. That’s why miscarriages have increased, not decreased. The best explanation for this is that PV-45 has an alternate host. In Africa, for in-

stance, malaria remains a scourge because infected mosquitos bite cattle, who then carry the malaria parasite in their blood, and when a new generation of mosquitos bites the cattle, they become infected and then bite people. That seems to be happening here.”

A reporter at the press conference called out, “What is the other host?”

“We don’t know yet.”

Three weeks later, the CDC announced the alternate host: the brown rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, the most common rat in the world and the most successful mammal on the planet, after humans. No place on Earth had succeeded in eliminating the brown rat.

Miscarriages continued to increase. But PV-45 and its twin carriers were, as James’s relentless campaign insisted through airwaves, print, and pixels, only half of the equation. PV-45 might be impossible to eradicate, but it caused miscarriages only because it acted on toluene breathed in by pregnant women.

No gas and oil, no miscarriages.

* * *

“Ain’t gonna happen,” Kayla said to James.

“Not completely, no. You need fossil fuels for some manufacturing, some products. But they don’t have to be completely eliminated. Just mostly. That would slow global warming enough to make a difference.”

“Even if it did—even if, which I doubt—the U.S. isn’t the only country emitting greenhouse gases. Or even the major one.”

“No.”

“The entire global economy runs on fossil fuels.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

“James—”

“I’m tired, Kayla. Leave me alone for just tonight, please.”

His usual upright posture had given way to slumping in his chair, whiskey in hand. The whiskey was his third, very unlike him, even after their long day of brutal meetings with K Street lobbyists in D.C. Kayla took the opposite chair, torn between compassion and journalism. A tipsy source often let down his guard to talk more freely.

She looked more closely. James had lost a lot of weight; his dark gray suit hung on him. He seemed not only exhausted, but also eaten away from within. Kayla had a sudden horrified thought. “James, are you ill? Seriously, I mean?”

He smiled, the whimsical grin that so surprisingly changed his entire face. “What you mean is: Do I look like this because I’m dying, and is imminent death the real reason for my sudden philanthropic crusade? No. I don’t have cancer or anything else fatal.”

She took a chance. “Then it wasn’t a doctor you went to see in the Cayman Islands last week, without stopping in Miami to visit a woman or anyone else?”

Long silence. The grin had disappeared.

“You’re good, Kayla. You must have people working with you that I don’t know about. And you probably think that I have illegal funds in the Caymans.”

She waited for him to confirm or deny it. He did neither.

“Good night, Kayla.”

“James, wait a—”

“Good night.”

She sat a while longer, thinking, but no matter how she shifted the pieces, they didn’t quite fit together. A campaign to stop climate change, waged single-handedly by a fundamentally decent, obscenely rich man who would not be at all rich at campaign’s end. A secretive nature that wanted Kayla to write a book about him. Illegal and untraceable offshore money. That deep, inexplicable sadness. The lie about a woman in Miami; Kayla’s digging, with help both hired and as favors, had 90 percent

convinced her that it was a lie. Journalistic leads that, time after time, ran smack up against stony silence.

That night, she dreamed of the grandmother who had raised her, dead for ten years now. Grandma Ann had not been a warm woman, or a particularly intelligent one, and Kayla had fought with her for decades, fights that had left both of them exhausted and unhappy. "Your generation don't know what it's like to sacrifice for the common good," Grandma Ann had often said. "In the war we all did without, ration and ration alike, and nobody died of not having chocolate or nylons or gas for the car. Spoiled, all you kids. And the next generation even more."

Shut up, Grandma Ann. Let me sleep.

Ain't gonna happen. At least, not tonight.

* * *

By September, things started to turn. Slowly, and at first in small ways.

The Rhode Island state legislature passed a law banning all natural gas extraction and stating that nature had an "inalienable right" to be protected. Such a law wasn't new—the city of Pittsburgh had one since 2010—and Rhode Island was hardly a major fracking site anyway.

New Mexico was. The legislature passed a law banning all gas and oil extraction. PV-45 was moving north and west.

An industry consortium immediately filed a lawsuit against the legislature, arguing unfair restraint of trade.

"All right," James said. "This is where it happens."

"Or doesn't," Kayla said. "This is your big gamble, isn't it? I want the latest cost figures."

He transmitted pages and pages of data, already prepared for her. She went over them sitting up in bed in yet another nondescript hotel room, and knew that she was looking at the biggest gamble any billionaire had ever made with any fortune. James was spending just about everything he had on multiple political campaigns, none of them his. Over a year ago he had said to her that only one force in the United States was greater than corporations: voters. Now, to an extent that she had not imagined even him capable of, he was doing what in Kayla's experience people seldom did. He was putting his money where his mouth was.

All his new candidates for national election in the November midterms were eco-green. No, not just green: bright, dazzling, Irish-countryside emerald. Those up for reelection were environmentalists who'd had to restrain their actions under the previous administration. They would not do so now. James had precision-targeted where to put his campaign money. If even two-thirds of these senators and congresspeople were elected, Congress could enact sweeping environmental reforms.

For the first time, Kayla thought: *My God, he might just do this.* It wouldn't have happened without PV-45, but PV-45 had happened. Did—

No. Insane thought. *Rein it in, Kayla.* She was a journalist, not a fantasist.

The candidates began, or ramped up, campaigning the next day. Intense, expensive campaigning. Journalists discovered who was financing the campaigns and stories exploded across airwaves, pixels, print. Kayla flew to Colorado, that perpetual political battleground, and interviewed random people.

"Hell, yes, I'm voting for Louis Tallerton. It's about time we stopped destroying the planet we all have to live on."

"Fuck, no—not Tallerton or any other green fascist. You know how much our jobs depend on gas and oil? No breadlines for my family!"

"He can't win—grow up, girlie."

"We need change. This is, like, a crisis!"

"I don't think . . . the issue is . . . who is Tallerton, again?"

“That TV ad said . . .”

“That other TV ad said . . .”

“I read online . . .”

“It was on Facebook that . . .”

A hundred street mini-interviews, and Kayla remembered only one vividly. The woman gazed at her for a long moment. Then she pulled from her purse a worn wallet, and from the wallet a picture of a young woman smiling shyly into the camera. The woman, maybe thirty, had medium brown skin, hair in dreads, and a smile like the sun.

“This is Mary, my daughter. She and her husband been trying eight years for a baby. Being a mother is all my Mary ever wanted. Then she got pregnant. Got a little ultrasound picture and sent it to me on the email. Then she lost the baby. Mary and Darryl, they live right by Highway 85 in Montgomery. Her heart’s broken, and mine, too. Yeah, I’m voting for Tallerton. I don’t usually bother with no elections except for president, but I registered yesterday.”

There were a lot like Mary’s mother.

A candidate for congress in Colorado was attacked at her own rally. She asked for sacrifices to be made by the voters, “just as the gas and oil companies are making sacrifices by paying for new technology to remove carbon from the air.” The crowd howled—actually howled—and mobbed the stage. Only a double line of cops got her away safely.

James said to Kayla, “Politicians who ask for sacrifice don’t get elected. Not unless the sacrifice is spread around fairly, like rationing in World War II. People look at Shell and Exxon and BP and don’t see fairness.”

“It’s working people who are losing jobs now in every industry involved with fossil fuels and that’s—”

“Don’t lecture me, Kayla. I know the statistics.” He looked ten years older than he had in January.

When had her disdain for him turned to admiration? She didn’t know.

The country plunged into a recession. Stocks fell. Unemployment rose. Miscarriages rose. Political campaigns turned dirtier than anyone living had ever seen, with attempts to block registration and highly illegal door-to-door intimidation of voters. Someone shot and killed a green candidate in Louisiana, where oil drilling was a major industry. The shooter then killed herself, gaining a sort of martyrdom.

Lawsuits and counter-suits clogged court dockets: restraint of trade, wrongful death, torts as varied as microbes. Rich people fled the PV-45-infected states, and the mosquitos fled north right along with them. Except in the states on the Canadian border, autumn weather did not kill *Aedes*. Global warming had made its extended range possible.

LEAVE THE OIL IN THE SOIL

SAVE THE CHILDREN!

KILL PV-45 TERRORISTS, NOT OUR JOBS

NO GREEN FASCISM

FUCK SHELL—IT FUCKED US

NO MORE GREEN LIES

Some days it seemed to Kayla that the only thing the country was producing was slogans.

Then a protest at a drilling site in Colorado turned violent, and the governor sent in the state militia. Seventeen protestors and three soldiers died. Kayla found James with his head in his hands. Stunned, she put her arms around him. He clung to her like a child, but said nothing. After a moment, he rose, went into another room, and closed the door.

* * *

Kayla and James got out of the car and walked across the tarmac to his corporate plane, which he had finally begun to use regularly. They were leaving Dallas's Love Field for a meeting in D.C. Very hush-hush, very important. The election was three days away.

Planes bellied up to jetways. One taxied by on the closest runway. Baggage carts drove through the heat, stifling even in November. Kayla smelled jet fuel in the air.

Toluene. Half of one percent of jet fuel, 15 percent of gasoline. Her head was a cache pond of percentages. Seventy-five percent of chemicals rated by the EPA had never been tested on fetuses or children; 11 percent of people live within 100 meters of a major highway; 25 percent of Germany's energy comes from renewables; investments in public transit create 31 percent more jobs than in new roads and bridges. . . . *Stop.* She hadn't slept in twenty-six hours. She had no idea when James had last slept.

The baggage handler leapt from his cart and sprinted toward James. Kayla saw him clearly. Young, scowling, goggled, and ear-plugged. He aimed a nine-millimeter at James and fired.

James went down. Another shot. Kayla hit the ground. The assassin was already dead, and James's bodyguards swept the area, looking for more shooters. There weren't any.

Kayla bent over James. "James?"

"It's . . . nothing. . . ."

It wasn't nothing. Sirens screamed. In the ambulance, James fainted. Kayla waited outside the OR, holding his briefcase. She studied the pattern on the floor tiles, squares and circles in a bilious shade of green.

Let him be all right.

Squares.

He's so close.

Circles.

And so am I.

She had a new lead, one she was not going to tell him about, not now. Maybe not ever, depending on what she found.

"Ms. Serdenovna? Are you a relative of Mr. Sullivan's?"

"Yes," she lied.

"He'll be fine. He's in Recovery now, and you can see him soon."

* * *

As soon as he was out of Recovery, James signed himself out of the hospital against medical advice. He refused to talk to the press. Kayla stopped reading or listening to the resulting avalanche of reporting, most of it wrong. The next day, bandaged and on painkillers, he took his meeting in D.C.

"James, after the election, I need a few days away."

"Now?"

"Yes. Now. It's personal."

He blinked, then nodded. "Certainly. Where do you want the plane to take you?"

"I'll make my own arrangements."

He looked impatient. "That's silly. Let me help. And you'll be back here faster. Things are happening."

"I *said* that I'll make my own arrangements."

He looked at her hard. "Have it your way."

* * *

At the polls, it went James's way.

Kayla felt a strange sense of unreality as she sat with him and his senior staff in a hotel room with a TV the size of a Tudor armoire. He had done it. At the cost of un-

told billions—although he would tell her, she knew, the exact number once he had it—James Conway Sullivan had bought himself a Congress that would wrench the entire economy in a new direction. Green Republicans—there were some—green Democrats, green Greens. A chartreuse coalition for a country in recessed turmoil, a coalition charged with pulling it out of tar pits and into windy, watery, sunny renewables, and with doing that fast enough to avoid sinking everything. Not, however, without bitter fights. Everyone knew that. But with disease-panicked support from below, James had changed the lawmakers so that they could change the laws.

Kayla congratulated James, went to her room, and slept for eleven hours. Two days later, she boarded an American Airlines flight for Minneapolis. The flight was less than one-third full, and waves of demonstrators on both sides of the green divide surged around and nearly into the airport. But the planes were flying.

* * *

She was almost too late, on an errand that had no real point except to mask her second plane trip, from a different airport in a different city, from James. Or maybe, like his famous software, she needed three-dimensional reality instead of just an image in her mind.

The baby still lay in the nursery only because Jenna had had to be delivered by C-section. Mother and baby, said a chatty nurse to Jenna's "cousin," were going home tomorrow. Kayla did not see Robert. She gazed through the wide glass window at the rows of bassinets holding newborns asleep, or crying, or gazing at that marvelous creation, the ceiling. BABY GIRL PATTERSON was a gazer. Wide blue eyes, wispy hair the color of Robert's, a pink blanket. She flailed one impossibly tiny fist.

Being a mother is all my Mary ever wanted. Her heart's broken, and mine, too.

So many Marys. So many kinds of heartbreak.

She left the hospital and caught her flight to Miami.

* * *

In January the new radical congress convened, facing a country in economic freefall. By the end of February, the Big Three auto companies had received bailouts, but with strings as heavy as cables. They were required to install the new carbon-sucking machines on their factories and to invest massively in electric cars and bio-fuels. The new mantra in D.C. was "the polluter pays."

With cars more expensive, mass transit was built faster than anyone thought possible, funded by a middling carbon tax of fifteen dollars per metric ton. Industry wanted no tax; the congressional majority wanted forty. The compromise was followed by screaming and yelling on both sides, but the public mood was definite: America was moderating its love affair with autos. Save the Children.

Fracking bans went nationwide; even before PV-45, studies proved that near major fracking sites, the miscarriage rate had been double the national average. Now the rate was over 90 percent.

Money to switch energy sources to renewables came from multiple sources: low-rate transaction taxes on the trading of stocks and derivatives. Higher royalty rates on oil, gas, and coal extraction. The wealthiest 5 percent of the country faced much steeper income taxes, and many loopholes were closed. Luxury taxes funneled money to cities and towns, earmarked exclusively for renewables. Those states whose budgets depended heavily on severance taxes from fossil-fuel extraction were compensated by a complicated formula that almost no one understood, but that seemed to work, although not at first. More crises in Colorado, North Dakota, Wyoming. Jobs were lost, but as work on new infrastructure began on a massive scale, people again found employment.

Key to making it all succeed, as James had insisted to Kayla from the beginning, was limiting fossil fuel's ability to elect and control politicians. "Politicians don't say

no to powerful corporations. At best, they say 'Maybe' or 'I'd like to' or 'We need a good study on that.'" Now political donations were tightly capped and full disclosure required, with heavy penalties for violations.

The lawsuits went international. The World Trade Organization filed several, alleging restraint of trade. It *was* restraint of trade; corporations could no longer move their factories overseas, creating pollution and cheap-labor sweatshops in other parts of the world, without facing ruinous penalties. The WTO also said that member countries could not privilege domestic trade over foreign trade, which meant no subsidies to companies producing renewable energy products. No local subsidies (the WTO had been suing over this for decades), no state subsidies, no national subsidies.

The United States did the unthinkable: They withdrew from the World Trade Organization.

"Protectionism never works," Kayla said to James.

"Not long term, no. We need it short term, for this transition in the United States. The others will follow. Congress is investing in third-world development through renewables. Give it time, Kayla."

"How much time?"

"Do I look like Chronos? I don't know. God, you're impatient. How long did it take to pull the world out of the Great Depression?"

"It took a war."

He was silent. It was what everyone feared: that America's pushing so hard would lead to war. Kayla, everything inside her roiling, turned toward the door.

James said, "Why are you spending so much time in Florida?"

"Are you having me watched?"

He didn't answer that. "How is your book coming?"

"I'm waiting for the ending." She turned her head, one hand on the doorknob, to give him a hard, level stare. But all he said was, "There is no ending. It's a process." "Right. Uh-huh. I'll wait anyway."

* * *

There was no war. By the presidential election, two years later, there was a vaccine for PV-45. The country elected a green president anyway, and returned most of the current Congress. Wind farms and solar panels, both with much higher efficiency resulting from heavy investment, produced half the country's electricity, with the percentage increasing steadily. People in sunny or windy areas sold power back to the grid, a wildly popular source of supplementary income. Unemployment was low. Taxes were high, but incomes were rising. Necessary traffic flowed easily on radically less-congested highways. Many of those vehicles, more every year, ran on either electricity or biofuels made without toluene. Mag-lev trains crisscrossed the country. In the cities, fast and reliable mass transit was still being built incredibly quickly by old standards.

There was a long way to go, especially in states whose economies had leaned heavily on fossil fuels. There were pockets of protest, of defiance, of legal battles. The president had won election by only a narrow margin.

Other countries, forced by the example and political pressure and outright economic bribes from the United States, were grudgingly and slowly following suit. Global warming slowed as emissions fell. China, particularly, accelerated its program to clean its barely breathable air and sludgy rivers. "It's always easier," James said dryly, "to get programs in place when you don't need to pay attention to anyone's civil rights."

Kayla's contract with James was finished, and by March her book was completed except for the last chapter. Before she could write it, she needed to talk to James.

Maybe, she hoped desperately, she was wrong.

She flew to Flint.

* * *

James had bought a modest, heavily guarded house in the countryside. To some, he was a hero; to others, Satan Incarnate. He gave no interviews, made no public appearances. Internet rumors said he was dead, or gone insane, or taken by aliens “back home.”

Kayla navigated a series of checkpoints and electronic surveillance to get into the house. James met her in the library, a small room lined with freestanding bookcases, four chairs in the middle around a low table. Kayla had seen the same chairs on sale at Macy’s.

“Hello, Kayla.”

She was shocked at his appearance. Always thin, now he looked skeletal, his sunken eyes shadowed. She blurted, “James, did you lie to me about being sick?”

“I never lied to you.”

Her anger flashed. “But there’s a lot you withheld from me!”

He ignored this. “Are you here to bring me the last part of the book?”

“No. To write it.”

If her answer surprised him, he didn’t show it. Kayla handed him a thin sheaf of papers; this wasn’t something she wanted in digital, and therefore pirateable, form. He read in silence.

“How did you get this?”

“It doesn’t matter how I got it. I’m a journalist, remember?”

“And I gave you a virtually unlimited expense account. Plus enough access to leads that you figured out where to look. Which is why you went to the Caymans more than once.” It wasn’t a question.

She found she was trembling and clenched her ass cheeks, an old trick. “You bought a struggling, off-shore biotech lab whose products never could have met with FDA approval. You bought it from some pretty shady sellers, in total contrast to your usual squeaky-clean business deals. When something doesn’t make financial sense, I’ve found, it usually makes some other kind of sense.

“James . . . you created PV-45. In that lab in the Caribbean. You had the virus genetically engineered to cause liver changes . . . to cause all those miscarriages. And when PV-45 was released in Louisiana, in that upscale suburb, you only pretended to think it was a setback to your plans.”

“Yes.”

“Just to—”

All at once he was across the room and clutching her arm with more fierce strength than she’d thought he could possess. She had never seen him angry before.

“Yes! ‘Just’ to remake the economy. ‘Just’ to abandon the fossil fuels that built this country before those same fuels had a chance to destroy it. ‘Just’ because our collective survival as a species depends on stopping the climate changes that might wipe us out. ‘Just’ because even if it doesn’t get that bad, millions if not billions will die from flooding, food shortages, and all the rest of it while a tiny fraction of humanity fiddles around with compost heaps and roof gardens and thinks it’s accomplishing something . . . ‘just’ that!”

Kayla wrenched herself free. “And what about the risk that we wouldn’t do your ‘remaking’ and wouldn’t find a vaccine, so that your disease destroyed the next generation?”

“Wasn’t going to happen. ‘Save the Children.’”

“All those lost jobs, all those families struggling to have kids and bitterly disappointed . . . what about compassion?”

“This is compassion. Anyway, you’re asking the wrong question.” He walked away from her and picked up a glass from the table, its rim sticky with whiskey.

“What’s the right question?”

"The right question is why I had to do it this way. Why I took it on myself to play God."

"All right—why did you?"

"Because nothing else would have worked."

Silence. He downed his drink in a single long swallow and swiped his hand across his mouth in a crude, uncharacteristic gesture. His next words were quieter.

"People want change, but they don't want to pay the real costs, and major change *always* costs. And I didn't have the luxury of time. In another fifteen years, maybe ten, it would have been too late. You've seen the warming curves. You know when the feedback loops kick in and climate change can't be stopped."

She did. She said, "I'm going to write about this," and for a sudden sickening moment she remembered the tarmac bodyguard with deadly aim. *Am I in danger?*

No. This was James. She knew him, even if not as completely as her vanity had assumed. *Dragons*, she thought—there were all kinds of dragons, including those of the mind: fierce, primitive, sometimes untamable thoughts and desires. Even if a story contained no physical dragons, dragons were there. They were always there.

James said, "So this is the last chapter of your book. I always knew that someone would discover the lab. I'm glad it was you."

"James—they'll crucify you."

"Interesting choice of words." He smiled, an expression so complex that Kayla would remember it for the rest of her life: pain, humor, resignation, regret.

She blurted, "You're a monster. And the bravest man I know."

He said with sudden ferocity, "It *was* the only thing that would work!" In a moment, the fierceness had vanished. He set down his glass. "Excuse me a minute—bathroom. Too much whiskey." In the doorway, he said over his shoulder, "The body, unfortunately, does have more limits than the mind."

He closed the bathroom door. Kayla heard it lock. A moment later, she heard the single shot.

Copyright © Nancy Kress, 2017. Originally published in *A Year Without a Winter*, from Columbia Books on Architecture and the City (distributed by Columbia University Press), 2018, edited by Dehlia Hannah, Brenda Cooper, Joey Eschrich, and Cynthia Selin.