

2148



Gary Pisarski

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Nightengale Press
370 S. Lowe Avenue, Suite A-122
Cookeville, Tennessee

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pisarski, Gary,

2148 / Gary Pisarski
ISBN 13: 978-1-935993-31-5
Fiction

Copyright Registered: 2012
First Published by Nightengale Press in the USA

September 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the USA and the UK



For my sons, Chris, Steve, and Jake



Chapter 1

The 22nd Century Man

My eyes were pleased with the reflection of the 22nd Century man smiling back at me from the mirrored wall as I walked to the hospital cafeteria. He was a man I was proud of—one who believed in his purpose and performed his responsibilities with integrity. I set my tray down on the table for what could have been the thousandth time. One of the same gray trays on one of the same white table tops, pulling up one of the same composite cushioned chairs I had sat upon as many times. I had barely chewed my first fork full of food before Dr. Laney sat down across from me, the white mask snug across his mouth.

“It’s 2148, Doctor,” I said to him. “There hasn’t been a radiation warning in two years.”

I thought of him as one of the most annoying people in the hospital, though my opinion was one shared by anyone who had ever spoken of him. But the same people who found his personality irritating, also conceded he was an intelligent, brilliant surgeon. I would often see him enter the cafeteria, his thumbs tapping the top edges of his tray as he searched the sea of heads, seemingly looking for a sanctuary where he would find tolerance. And yet, despite my probing

words and dry sarcasm, he often migrated towards me if I was not in the company of Dr. Carlson, a man for whom Laney clearly had no patience. I was a safe choice for some reason, perhaps because I was not a doctor or a nurse and didn't talk the language from which he sought a break.

He tugged his mask, pulling it below his chin.

"I'm well aware of that, Adams. I am more concerned about a new strain of virus that seems to be making the rounds of late. You do know which one I am speaking of, don't you?"

He often expressed his theory that the Department of Population Control developed and released new viruses when the population of the United States exceeded the two hundred million maximum established per the Beijing Agreement in the last century. And because I was one of the DPC agents assigned to the hospital, he just as often prodded me for a sign of validation to his absurd idea.

"No...I don't, Doctor," I answered.

"Of course you don't," he said smugly, raising his brows and shaking his head as he added, "I gather you would never admit to it anyway."

"Well...I've never known the DPC to do anything I would consider underhanded or immoral. And if I did find that something...like what you state in your theory...was true...well then, I would find something else to do with my life."

"You're very convincing, Adams," he said as he opened a napkin and placed it below the edge of the table. "If I was less educated, I might believe you."

"If I thought there was a virus out there, don't you think I'd be wearing one of those masks as well?"

“Please Adams, I’m sure the DPC inoculates their own.”

His head turned to the left and I turned as well to see what had caught his attention. It was Kay Riley, a nurse in her late twenties, whose movement and slender figure had routinely turned many heads her way.

“I hear Riley is dating Doctor Death,” he said.

“That’s uncalled for, Doctor,” I said in defense of the man to whom he was referencing. Dr. Carlson and I weren’t friends, at least not in the sense that we socialized away from the hospital—he was more of a kindred spirit, the two of us having been associated with one another by fate.

“He is just that, Adams,” he said turning back to force his opinion at me with a fearless glare.

“He is a doctor of Euthanasia, and the work he does here is just as vital as that you perform,” I told him in a calm tone intended to stay within the confines of our table.

“I save people,” said Laney defensively.

“And Doctor Carlson has the courage to do what he has been trained to do.”

“Like I said, I save people’s lives, Adams. He takes them. But of course, he only does the work that you and your cohorts approve of him doing, doesn’t he?”

“We follow the law, doctor,” I said as my fork tapped the surface of my plate. “And as you know, I never sign off on any termination unless one of you has made it clear that all protocols have been followed.”

He glanced at me and shook his head, muttering the word that obviously displeased him, “Protocols.”

He was a man who spoke what was on his mind,

alienating people with opinions delivered with a one way passion. He presented his perspectives like gospels, overpowering and dismissing any opposing views.

“I don’t understand something, doctor,” I said. “You never hide your dislike for Dr. Carlson and yet, to my face at least, you don’t seem to show the same disdain for me.”

He raised his eyebrows, “*You*, Adams? You are just an instrument of the government, but one that nevertheless provides an absolution of guilt from physicians like me, who oppose the so-called protocols and laws that you are here to uphold. You are...a fail safe.”

Dr. Laney finished the first half of his sandwich, looked down at his watch and excused himself with a familiar “I have to see a patient...one whom I intend to keep alive.”

He pushed back his chair as he stood, his words leaving a sting to my morning.

“And now, I must stop by the leftover Gestapo,” he said in reference to the woman who weighed the food that wasn’t consumed and charged fines accordingly. It was by law that the cafeteria charged for the food you bought and penalized you again for any food not eaten.

As Dr. Laney disappeared from sight around a corner wall, I recalled Dr. Carlson’s words about the man the day before.

“I can’t stand him. He’s like a vulture, waiting around for me to do *my* work just so he can harvest organs to save his *privileged* patients.”

“Vultures are extinct, Doc.”

“Yes...and too bad Laney isn’t on that long list.”

They were two men with equal intellect and a mutual disdain for one another.

The apparatus in my shirt pocket interrupted my thoughts as it vibrated against my chest. I pulled it out quickly, pressed the stop button and read the message flashing on the small screen.

“So much for a quiet day,” I said to myself.

I listened to the echoed rhythm of my footsteps as I hurried down the long, taupe hallway to the ER wing. The double doors opened before me as the laser eye sensed my approach. Like most people, I took for granted the technology and styles of my time, and wondered if I too, would someday speak to my child the words spoken to me by my parents and grand-parents; “I never had *that* when I was growing up.” Thinking back, that phrase was the favorite of my mother’s father, the first of my grand-parents to relocate.

Dr. Thomas met me as I shuffled my feet quietly between the line of emergency cubicles where light gray curtains covered glass walls running from ceiling to floor.

“We have two for you, Adams,” she said. She always called me by my last name, and never gave me the benefit of her attractive smile, never. I had long accepted her reaction towards me, her rejection of me as a fellow human being. And yet, I still looked directly into her eyes while holding onto a faint hope that she would someday change.

“Two?”

She led me towards one of the small rooms, talking over her shoulder as she walked ahead of me.

“The first is a 55-year old male...heart attack at home...we finally got the heart beating again...but

with the loss of oxygen, there's little we can do for his brain...for a non-essential."

She led me into a room where a grayed hair man was unconscious, flat upon the narrow bed, a mask over his face, wires running from his head and chest to a series of machines on the wall behind him.

"He's a positive donor match for a patient upstairs who is waiting for a liver...and also for another patient over at Mercy General."

She lifted him by the shoulder and tilted his body just enough for me to slide my scanner over the nape of his neck.

"Thank you," I said as the green light indicated the transmission of the data contained in the chip embedded below his skin since his 1st year of life. In a few seconds, lines of information began scrolling upon the small display on the left side of the black machine that I carried with me while on duty. The equally sized screen on the right was reserved for data scanned from the identification cards that all Americans were issued every other year.

"Walter Slezak," I said aloud. "Is that the information you have, Doctor?"

"Yes," she answered as she let him down gently.

"And he will not survive without machine support?"

"Not at his age or status."

"Does he have family here?" I asked.

"His wife is waiting in conference room one."

"I'll sign off," I said with a nod. "Who is the doctor on shift from Euthanasia?"

She glanced at her watch. "Carlson."

I nodded before I stepped away from her and walked slowly to the conference room where the

patient's wife was waiting. It was one of several small rooms that the hospital and DPC staff used for consultations. I opened the door slowly. The woman sitting there stood up quickly, her reddened eyes yearning for me to be the bearer of good news.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked in a meek voice.

I shook my head. "My name is Sean Adams...I am the DPC agent assigned to the hospital on this shift."

"How is my husband?"

"What have the doctors told you?"

"That he suffered brain damage," she said. "But he can be saved, can't he? I know the doctors can do wonderful things these days."

"Please sit down, Mrs. Slezak," I said softly, guiding her back with a gentle nudge of my hand on her shoulder. I moved a nearby chair, sliding it in front of her. I sat down without taking my eyes off her weary face, and spoke softly.

"Your husband is a non-essential employee in our database...that means we cannot by law put him on life support."

"That *has* to be a mistake," she said in a pleading tone. "His supervisor told Walter that he was very important."

"I'm so sorry...but whatever Walter was told doesn't mean the same thing. Your husband may have been doing a wonderful job...but that isn't the same as being classified as essential."

"Your information must be wrong...he has been essential for the past twenty years."

I scrolled through the blue screen, reading the white letters and numbers that appeared in the font I had found the most pleasing to me.

I shook my head again. "He was reclassified two years ago. Every company has a limit to the number of employees they can classify as essential and as you know, they have the legal right to change those classifications every three years...I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Slezak."

"Please..." she said through her tears, stopping at the one word as if knowing any more would be wasted in vain.

"Do you have a child?"

"She lives in San Francisco," she said with a nod, wiping the tears that had slid over her paled skin and down her rosy cheeks.

"What about friends?" I said, asking the next logical question.

"There's someone I can call," she said.

"Mrs. Slezak...I know in this time, no words can ease your pain, but your husband is a positive donor match....so his organs will help someone else live."

Her face cringed with anger. "I don't want Walter cut up so some person considered more worthy than him can be kept alive while he is taken away from me. How can *that* be fair?"

"I understand how you must feel..."

"No you can't!" she said bitterly, the loudness of her voice jolting me backward.

"I'm sorry, but I do, Mrs. Slezak. But I also know that the law obligates the hospital to harvest your husband's organs before he is cremated."

"It just isn't right."

"It *is* the law, Mrs. Slezak. Wouldn't your husband want to save a life if that was possible?"

She again wiped her tears before dabbing her nose as well.

"Will they hurt him?" she asked softly, her eyes

looking downward at her hands, now folded upon her lap. "When they end his life?"

"No...the doctor will be very gentle with your husband...Walter will feel no pain, absolutely none at all, and will pass very peacefully."

"Can I see Walter once more?"

"Of course you can," I assured her, placing my hand upon hers. "I will send one of the nurses to come in and take you to him. And again...I am so very sorry for your loss."

I had had the same conversation hundreds of times with hundreds of wives or husbands or sons or daughters, and still hung upon the word "very" to soothe and emphasize and deflect any animosity that so often was directed my way. These conversations were much more difficult at first, but over time they became less personal. I learned to distance my emotions from the routine of confirming the termination of a life deemed not worth the financial burden of the government or the patient's employer. I did not make those decisions and accepted the classification that came back on a small screen measuring two inches in height by three inches in width. I would then go to the nearest computer, slip the fingertips of my right hand into the four black sockets that read my prints, gaining me access to issue the order authorizing Dr. Carlson or one of the other physicians from the Department of Euthanasia to end a human life. It was not just a job...it was a responsibility that I accepted with the highest level of seriousness.

Two uniformed police officers stood outside the doors of a consult room and an examination room at the end of the hall. A nod from Dr. Thomas was all I required to confirm that was where I was needed

next. The officer outside the patient's room stepped aside as I flashed my ID. The well dressed man sitting on a chair inside stood up as soon as he saw me, identifying himself as a detective.

The closed eyes and pale skin and still chest of the man lying on the table informed me of his condition.

"He looks dead. Why did you need *me*?" I asked.

The detective called me over to the side of the bed, turned the body slightly, exposing a scar on the nape of the man's neck.

"Dissident?"

"No," he said as he let the body down. "Like most of the criminals today, he had his fingerprints faded, but he couldn't modify his DNA. He's a known member of the AFM."

The American Freedom Movement was a radical group that had been a thorn in the government's side for twenty years. They had been a rather docile group for most of their existence, turning violent three years prior when they took credit and were blamed for a massive explosion that brought down the Washington Monument. Many of the group's members were arrested, but their leaders were in hiding while the violence continued on a sporadic and much smaller scale.

"Then call IS," I said. "This has nothing to do with my department."

"I know," he said. "An Internal Security team is on their way. I'm body sitting until they get here. This guy was hit by another car when he was getting into his cab."

"That doesn't make it my concern."

"I'm getting to that," he said with frustration in his words. "There was a passenger in the back seat of his cab. I have an officer guarding her in the room across the hall."

"So?"

"So...she appears to be blind. I thought you people were supposed to weed out the disabled."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"She could be essential...she might be waiting for an operation...it could be any number of reasons...I don't know the history of everyone out there," I said.

He handed me her identification card.

"Then why isn't her status on her card?"

"I don't know...did you scan her?"

He shook his head.

"She got hysterical when we tried," he said. "Frankly, my men and I have better things to do than baby sit some blind woman and some stiff. As far as I'm concerned, *you* can sort out this woman's ID discrepancy."

"My responsibilities concern patients in the hospital," I said as I tried in vain to hand the woman's ID card back to the unwilling detective.

"She was hysterical, so one of your nurses gave her a couple of pills to calm her down. In my book, that makes her a patient."

I looked down at her ID once again. Her eyes appeared to be looking directly into the camera and in turn, at me. I slipped the card through the slot on the side of small black box in my hand and waited again for the little pale-green light.

"The IS team is here," said the voice of the uniformed officer who had been standing just outside

the glass door.

“Your patient is across the hall,” the detective said in a rather harsh tone that would have been better aligned with the words “Get out!”

As I stepped towards the consult room, I looked down the hall at the team of three men and one woman who were approaching us, the shoulders of their long coats dark from the rain falling outside.

The woman inside the consult room looked towards me from behind a dark pair of glasses, the black frames contrasting against her blonde hair.

“Who are you?” she asked in a rather scornful tone. “Another policeman?”

“No...my name is Sean Adams. I am from the Department of Population Control.”

“A people cop.”

“No, I’m not a cop, lady. I don’t arrest people and I don’t carry a weapon.”

“I know what you do,” she said in a voice dripping with a hint of hatred. “Isn’t that little black box you carry a weapon?”

My scanner beeped as the display on the right confirmed the woman’s name as Judith Kozell, listing her age as 42, and the same out of town address that was listed on her ID card. The picture on my screen however, was unusually dark, showing dark hair and obscuring her facial features. I rotated the metal ID card, but the three dimensional hologram of the woman’s face seemed flawed to me. I gazed back down at the picture looking up at me from the small screen, but couldn’t tell for sure if it matched the image on her ID.

“Well?” she said.

I gazed at her face, the large glasses blocking her eyes.

“You were born in 2106?”

“You can read, can’t you?” she said.

“You look much younger.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment...it was a statement,” I said. “And your hair was black.”

“I dyed it. Is that a crime now as well?”

“No, but resisting a scan *is* a violation of federal law.”

“I didn’t want my privacy invaded,” she said as she looked up at me through the dark lenses covering her eyes. I had seen only a few blind people before, but was still somewhat startled at her adeptness in following the sound of my voice.

“The chip in your neck is the property of the United States Government,” I said. “As is the information it contains. Privacy is not a valid excuse to resist a scan.”

“You have my ID card,” she said with an attitude I had witnessed many times before from people who acted as though anyone from the DPC was their enemy.

“Your card doesn’t indicate that you are blind. And frankly, I’ve seen enough of these to suspect that this one may be illegal.”

“Just because it doesn’t indicate that I’m blind?”

“No, but that’s one of the red flags popping up at me.”

“Well, forgive me if I can’t see the same little flags you see,” she said. “Your people issued the card. It’s not my responsibility if the DPC can’t do their job the

right way.”

“So tell me,” I said, “Why doesn’t your ID indicate that you are blind?”

She paused before saying, “Are you a doctor now?”

“No. I’m just trying to do my job,” I said, as I felt the built up irritation rising in the bottom of my throat. “If you’re disabled, your ID should indicate as much. That’s why the Chicago PD made you my responsibility. So just tell me why your card doesn’t show your status. Were you blinded recently? Are you waiting a procedure? I’m just looking for a simple answer, lady.”

“And what are you going to do if don’t let you scan?”

“I *am* going to do it,” I told her. “Even if I have to have someone hold you face down on the damn floor.”

“If you dare touch me with that thing, I swear I’ll scream that you were fondling me. It wouldn’t be the first time one of you DPC creeps was caught victimizing a defenseless citizen.”

I retreated back to the door, realizing I needed to get out of the room to calm my stressing nerves.

“Stay here,” I told her. “If you don’t want to cooperate with me, I’ll have the IS people take over. They have a lower tolerance for crap like this.”

I was equally jolted by the appearance of two IS agents standing there in front of my face as I closed the door behind me.

“We need to talk with her,” one of them said. “Alone.”

“Enjoy yourselves,” I said as I moved aside. One

of the agents went in. The other stood guard by the door, motioning to me with a flip of his hand to move away.

“Adams,” a voice called out from behind me. I turned to see the regional Director of the DPC. I had seen her several times at both live and video conferences, but I had never before spoken to her on a one-on-one basis. “What’s going on here? I was alerted by Internal Security that we have a situation.”

“There was an accident,” I said. “There is a dead man who is supposedly a member of the AFM and a rather feisty blind woman in this consult room who was a passenger in the cab he was driving. That’s the extent of what I know.”

“I was told this blind woman’s ID doesn’t show her as disabled.”

I showed her the card still in my possession. She looked at it, gave out a low toned groan of disgust and said, “This is an embarrassment.”

“There’s most likely a logical explanation.”

“Not with Internal Security involved in this,” she said. “You can’t possibly understand the politics at stake here. The IS wants to bring DPC under their control...and this is the type of issue that can blow up in our faces and play right into their dirty hands.”

She was making it sound more serious than it was, but I didn’t know her well enough to say as much. She was right to an extent—I didn’t understand, or care to understand, the politics of the pushing and pulling between the two government departments. And although I was a bit aggravated, sensing that the tone of her voice was condescending, I was a little taken aback that she recognized the fractured

reputation of Internal Security. Up until that point, I had only gossiped about the shady innuendos of IS with other low level agents as myself.

I looked around. The Chicago police were no longer there, most likely excused from the scene while I was with the cab's passenger.

The IS agent exited the room, leaving the woman alone. He was the shorter of the two who were near the consult room. The other two agents stood guard by the room where the dead man lay.

The shorter man's bald head reflected the dim overhead light. He stroked his pen-thin mustache as he whispered to the other agent, looked over at the Director and me and stepped towards us.

"The woman in there says that you did your job and scanned her," he said to me.

"Of course he did his job," the Director said, perhaps more in her defense than mine.

"What do you know?" the IS agent asked me.

I could have told the truth. I should have told the truth. But as two pairs of eyes glared at me, I lied.

"Nothing more than is on her ID card," I said.

The bald IS agent turned toward the Director.

"Can I speak to you alone?" he said as he placed his hand lightly on the Director's upper arm and led her down the hall. The two spoke quietly for a few minutes, and then, the solemn faced Director shuffled back to where I stood. In the moment, she reminded me of a high school principal with whom I had been on a first-name basis, if only because I had been in her office on many occasions being reprimanded or punished, or both.

“Listen to me, Adams,” she said in a tone as firm as the strict teachers who often scolded me in my youth. “You will take this woman out of here and take her wherever she wants to go, as long as it is as far from Chicago as possible. I don’t care what her card says. I don’t care that she’s blind. I just want her out of my jurisdiction.”

“Why me?”

“Because Internal Security is giving us ten minutes to wash our hands of this mess...you don’t need to know any more than that.”

“But...”

“Just do what you are ordered to do, Adams... or I’ll have you monitoring the border with Mexico for the rest of your career. Or perhaps you’d prefer doing just that?”

“No,” I said, surrendering to the power of her position. “But my replacement’s shift won’t start for another six hours...”

“I don’t care, Adams,” she said with an authoritative stare. “You will do as you are told.”

I gave out an overstated sigh and began to turn away when she added, “And Adams...you will stay with this woman until you are relieved by an IS agent. Is that understood?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I said without turning back.

The woman in the room wasn’t surprised to hear my voice again and insisted on carrying her own duffle bag of belongings. I quickly guided her through the maze of hallways of the hospital, stopping at my office to pick up a few items of my own before leading her to my car, helping her into the back seat.

“What’s wrong with the front seat?”

“Nothing,” I answered coldly just before I closed the door. It was just that I didn’t want her sitting next to me.

The batteries under the hood awakened at the turn of my key and I was soon steering us through traffic, the twin wipers pushing aside the rain that continued to fall.

“Have you ever heard of the town of Waterman?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think it’s an hour or two west of here.”

“Can we go there?”

“No, we’re heading north.”

I heard a click and felt the end of a gun barrel touching the back of my head.

“I say we’re heading west,” she said from the backseat.