

ONLY FOREVER

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Chapter 1

This particular strain of flu, Nick DeAngelo decided, had been brought to Earth by hostile aliens determined to wipe out the entire planet—starting, evidently, with an ex-jock who owned one of the best Italian restaurants in Seattle.

Sprawled on the couch in the living room of his apartment, he plucked a handful of tissues from the box on the floor beside him and crammed them against his face just in time to absorb an explosive sneeze. He was covered in mentholated rub from his nose to his belly button, and while his forehead was hot to the touch, the rest of him was racked with chills.

He wondered when Mike Wallace would burst through the door, wanting the story. It was time to alert the masses to impending doom.

Did you actually see these aliens, Mr. DeAngelo?

Call me Nick. Of course I didn't see them. They must have gotten me when I was sleeping.

The imaginary interview was interrupted by the jangling of the telephone, which, like the box of tissues, was within reach. Hoping for sympathy, he dug the receiver out from between the cushions and rasped out a hoarse hello.

“Still under the weather, huh?” The voice belonged to his younger sister, Gina, and it showed a marked lack of commiseration. “Listen, if I wasn’t afraid of catching whatever it is you’ve got and missing my exams next week, I’d definitely come over and take care of you.”

Nick sagged against the back of the sofa, one hand to his fevered forehead. “Your concern is touching, Gina,” he coughed out.

“I could call Aunt Carlotta,” Gina was quick to suggest. She was a bright kid, a psychology major at the University of Washington, and she knew which buttons to push. “I’m sure she’d love to move into your apartment and spend the next two weeks dragging you back from the threshold of death.”

Nick thought of his aunt with affectionate dread. It was in her honor that he’d slathered himself with mentholated goo. “This is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill flu, you know,” he said.

Gina laughed. “I’ll alert the science department at school—I’m sure they’ll want to send a research team directly to your place.”

Privately Nick considered that to be a viable idea, but he refrained from saying so, knowing it would only invite more callous mockery. “You have no heart,” he accused.

There was a brief pause, followed by, “Is there anything I can get you, like groceries or books or something? I could leave the stuff in the hallway outside your door—”

“Or you could just drop it from a hovering helicopter,” Nick ventured, insulted.

Gina gave a long-suffering sigh. “Why don’t you call one of your girlfriends? You could have a whole harem over there, fluffing your pillows and giving you aspirin and heating up canned chicken soup.”

“My ‘girlfriends,’ as you put it, are all either working or letting their answering machines do the talking. And chicken soup is only therapeutic if it’s homemade.” Nick paused to emit another volcanic sneeze. When he’d recovered, he said magnanimously, “Don’t worry about me, Gina, just because I’m putting you through college and paying for your car, your clothes, your apartment and every bite of food that goes into your mouth. I’ll be fine without... any help at all.”

“Oh, God,” wailed Gina. “The guilt!”

Nick laughed. “Gotcha,” he said, groping for the remote control that would turn on the TV. Maybe there was an old Stallone movie on—something bloody and macho.

Gina said a few soothing words and then hung up. It occurred to Nick that she was really going to stay away, really going to leave her own brother to face The Great Galactic Plague alone and unassisted.

There was, Nick decided, no human kindness left in the world. He flipped through the various movie channels, seeing nothing that caught his fancy, and was just about to shut the set off and try to focus his eyes on a book when he saw her for the first time.

She was a redhead with golden eyes, and the sight of her practically stopped his heartbeat. She was holding an urn that was suitable enough to be someone’s final resting place, and there was a toll-free number superimposed over her chest.

With quick, prodding motions of his thumb, Nick used the control button on the remote to turn up the volume. “My

name is Vanessa Lawrence,” the vision told her viewing audience in a voice more soothing than all the chicken soup and mentholated rub in the world, “and you’re watching the Midas Network.” She went on to extol the virtues of the hideous vase she was peddling, but Nick didn’t hear a word.

He was too busy dredging up everything he knew about the Midas Network, a nationwide shopping channel based in Seattle. One of his friends—an executive with the company—had urged him to invest when the economy had gone south, claiming that the new home-shopping network would be a hit with newly spendthrift consumers.

Nick shoved one hand through his hair, causing it to stand on end in ridges that reeked of eucalyptus. Undoubtedly, he thought, he was experiencing some kind of dementia related to the virus that had been visited upon him.

Without taking his eyes away from the screen, he groped for the telephone and punched out the office number. His executive assistant, a middle-aged woman named Harriet, answered with a crisp, “DeAngelo’s. May I help you?”

“I hope so,” wheezed Nick, who had just finished another bout of coughing.

“You don’t need me, you need the paramedics,” remarked the assistant.

“At last,” Nick said. “Someone who understands and sympathizes. Harriet, find Paul Harmon’s number for me, will you please? I’m in no condition to hunt through the contacts on my phone.”

It was easy to picture Harriet, plump and efficient, searching expertly for the number. “His office number is 555-9876,” she said.

Nick found a pencil in the paraphernalia that had collected on the end table beside the couch and wrote the digits

on the corner of the tissue box, along with the home number Harriet gave him next.

The woman on the screen was now offering a set of bird figurines.

“Oh, lady,” Nick said aloud as he waited for Paul Harmon to come on the line, “I want your body, I want your soul, I want you to have my baby.”

The goddess smiled. “All this can be yours for only nineteen-ninety-five,” she said.

“Sold,” replied Nick.

Vanessa Lawrence inserted her cash card into the automatic teller machine in Quickee Food Mart and tapped one foot while she waited for the money to appear. A glance at her watch told her she was due at her lawyer’s office in just ten minutes, and the drive downtown would take fifteen.

Her foot moved faster.

The machine made an alarming grinding noise, but no currency came out of the little slot, and Vanessa’s card was still somewhere in the bowels of the gizmo. From the sound of things, it was being systematically digested.

Somewhat wildly, she began pushing buttons. The words *Your transaction is now completed*, were frozen on the small screen. She glanced back over one shoulder, hoping for help from the clerk, but everyone in the neighborhood seemed to be in the convenience store that afternoon, buying bread and milk.

“Damn!” she breathed, slamming her fist against the face of the machine.

A woman wearing pink foam rollers in her hair appeared at Vanessa’s side. “You’re on TV, aren’t you?” she asked. “On that new shopping channel, the something-or-other station.”

Vanessa smiled, even though it was the last thing she felt like doing. “The Midas Network,” she said, before giving the machine another despairing look. “Just give me back my card,” she told the apparatus, “and I won’t make any trouble, I promise.”

“I watch you every day,” the woman announced proudly. “I bought that three-slice toaster you had on yesterday—there’s just Bernie and Ray and me, now that Clyde’s gone away to the army—and my sister-in-law has four of the ceiling fans.”

In her head, Vanessa heard the production manager, Paul Harmon, giving his standard public-relations lecture. *As the viewing audience expands, you’ll be recognized. No matter what, I want you all to be polite at all times.*

“Good,” she said with a faltering smile.

She took another look at her watch, then lost her cool and rammed the cash machine with the palms of her hands. Miraculously two twenty-dollar bills popped out of the appropriate slot, but Vanessa’s cash card was disgorged in three pieces.

She dropped both the card and the money into the pocket of her blazer and dashed for the car, hoping the traffic wouldn’t be bad.

It was.

Worse, when Vanessa reached her attorney’s modest office, Parker was there with his lawyer and his current girlfriend.

Vanessa prayed she didn’t look as frazzled as she felt and resisted an urge to smooth her chin-length auburn hair.

Parker smiled his dazzling smile and tried to kiss her cheek, but Vanessa stepped back, her golden eyes clearly telling him to keep his distance.

Her ex-husband, now the most sought-after pitcher in

the American League, looked hurt. “Hello, Van,” he said in a low and intimate voice.

Vanessa didn’t speak. Although they had been divorced for a full year, Parker’s presence still made her soul ache. It wasn’t that she wanted him back; no, she grieved for the time and love she’d wasted on him. Vanessa’s attorney, Walter, was no ball of fire, but he was astute enough to know how vulnerable she felt. He drew back a chair for her near his desk, and gratefully she sank into the seat.

Parker’s lawyer immediately took up the conversational ball. “I think we can settle this reasonably,” he said. Vanessa felt her spine stiffen.

The bottom line was that Parker had been offered a phenomenal amount of money to write a book about his career in professional baseball and, with the help of a ghostwriter, he’d produced a manuscript—one that included every intimate detail of his marriage to Vanessa.

She was prepared to sue if the book went to press. “Wait,” Parker interceded suavely, holding his famous hands up in the air, “I think it would be better if Van and I worked this thing out ourselves...in private.”

His girlfriend shifted uncomfortably on the leather sofa beside him, but said nothing.

“There is nothing to work out,” Vanessa said in a shaky voice she hated. Why couldn’t she sound detached and professional, like she did when she was selling ceiling fans on the Midas Network? “If you don’t take me out of that book, Parker, I’m going to drive a dump truck into your bank account and come out with a load of your money.”

Parker went pale beneath his golden tan. He ran a hand through his sun-streaked hair, and his azure blue eyes skittered away from Vanessa’s gaze. But after a moment, he

regained his legendary poise. “Van, you’re being unreasonable.”

“Am I? That book makes me sound like some kind of sex-crazed neurotic. I’m not going to let you ruin me, Parker, just so you can have a few more annuities and condominiums!”

Parker flinched as though she’d struck him. He rose from his chair and came to crouch before hers, speaking softly and holding both her hands in his. “You feel threatened,” he crooned.

It was all Vanessa could do not to kick him. She jerked her hands free, shot to her feet and stormed out of the office.

Parker caught up to her at the elevator, which, as luck would have it, was just arriving. “Baby, wait,” he pleaded.

Vanessa was shamed by the tears that were flowing down her face, but she couldn’t stop them. She dodged into the elevator, trying to escape him.

Parker squeezed into the cubicle with her, oblivious, apparently, of the fact that there were two men in suits, a cleaning woman and a maintenance worker looking on. He tried again, “Sweetheart, what do you want? A mink? A Corvette? Tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you. But you’ve got to be reasonable!”

Vanessa drew her hand back and slapped the Living Legend. “How dare you assume you can buy me, you pompous jackass!” she cried. “And stop calling me sweetheart and baby!”

The elevator reached the ground floor, and Vanessa hurried out, hoping Parker wouldn’t give chase. As it happened, however, he was right on her heels.

He looked exasperated now as he lengthened his strides to keep pace with her on the busy downtown sidewalk. He straightened the lapels of his tailored suit jacket and rasped

out, “Damn it, Vanessa, do you know how much money is at stake here?”

“No, and I don’t care,” Vanessa answered. She was almost to the parking lot where she’d left her car; in a few minutes she could get behind the steering wheel and drive away.

With sudden harshness, Parker stopped her again, grasping her shoulders with his hands and pressing her backward against a department store display window. “You’re not going to ruin this deal for me, Vanessa!” he shouted.

Vanessa stared at him, appalled and breathless. God knew Parker had hurt her often enough, but he’d never been physically rough.

Parker’s effort to control his temper was visible. “I’m sorry,” he ground out, and because he seldom apologized for anything, Vanessa believed him. “I didn’t mean to manhandle you like that. Vanessa, please. Sit down with me somewhere private and listen to what I have to say. That’s all I’m asking.”

“There’s no point, Parker,” Vanessa replied. “I know what you want to tell me, and my answer won’t be any different. The way you portrayed me in that book is libelous—I wouldn’t be able to hold my head up in public.”

“And I thought you’d be proud when I sent you a copy of that manuscript.” He paused to shake his head, as if still amazed at her negative reaction. “Van, people will know I made most of that stuff up,” Parker went on presently with a weak smile. “They’re not going to take it seriously.”

Vanessa arched one eyebrow. “Oh, really? Well, I’d rather not take the chance, if you don’t mind. I have dreams of my own, you know.”

Passersby were beginning to make whispers that indicated they recognized Parker. He took Vanessa’s arm and