

MIRACLE COREY

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IDEAS BY

PRITTY



**ICE STORM II
THE MIRACLE CURE?**

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From Ideas of Paul Pruitt

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Dedicated to Monica

ICE STORM II:
The Miracle Cure?

Prologue

The grey seemed to slide right out of her hair, and her gnarled hands and fingers returned to their usual smoothness.

The aging problem had been solved, but not in time for Big Mama. Jennifer's one-time friend, stricken by both a psychosis and by the virus, had too much organ damage from the disease. She had died while the three women were preparing the miracle cure.

Two problems remained—reproduction, the future of the race without men, and finding a way to kill the virus, not just stop the aging. Her cure may work for awhile, Jennifer knew. But there would eventually be more resistant strains of the virus if she didn't clean the world of it now.

And what was worse—she didn't know what these guards would do to her, now that Karen had died.

“DID YOU KILL BIG MAMA?”

Those were the final words Jennifer heard, before the butt of the rifle met with her temple, knocking her unconscious. . .

ICE STORM II

“DO SOMETHING FOR HER!”

The girls looked at each other hopelessly.

Big Mama’s body was rapidly decomposing. A disturbing sight for all who were in the room, it was grossly disfigured—discolored skin, slowly flaking off, fingers and joints twisting her into a mockery of

a human being. Jill and Anna had read about the effects of the aging virus, but they'd never witnessed it first hand.

Jill was the first to speak. She whispered to her sister while the guards stared at the lifeless body. "I'm scared, Anna. I'm kind of sorry for her and all, but what about us? What about Mom?"

"You saw Mom, just like I did. The serum worked for her. She'll be alright."

"ENOUGH WHISPERING! Do something!" The guards were coming closer.

"Stand back!" Anna said. "I think she's far beyond saving, and we don't know how contagious this is. Do you want to end up looking like her? Give us some room to examine her!"

The guards backed off.

That Anna, Jill thought. A chip off the old block—she’s just like Mom. Won’t take anything from anyone.

Anna looked up at her sister—“Jill, come closer, I want you to see this.” When Jill bent down near the body, Anna whispered, “We have to find a way to use this to our advantage.”

“Did you see this?” Jill said loudly, pointing to an ordinary boil on Big Mama’s neck.

“No, why?” Anna replied.

“It appears to be the beginnings of a malignant tumor. It could be why the disease attacked Big Mama so quickly. Say...do any of you have anything like this growing on you?”

The guards lost their cool. One felt a mole at the back of her head. “I’ve always had this,” she said, “but now that you mention it, I think it feels

bigger! Am I in trouble? Come here and take a look at me!”

“Yes, yes, hmmmmm...” Jill said, turning to Anna. “What do you think?”

“Well,” said Anna, “it’s a bit smaller for sure, but it’s the same type I think, and it appears to be a bit raised.”

“Is it that bad?” the guard yelled. “Am I dying? Help me!”

“Well, of course it’s still a bit too early to tell,” Jill replied. “Maybe we should wait and see.”

“WAIT AND SEE? ARE YOU CRAZY?
TREAT ME NOW!”

“Well, of course, we’d help you if we could,” said Anna, picking up on her sister’s lead.

“But between our mom and Big Mama, we’ve used nearly all the solution we made.”

“So make some more!”

“That would work, of course, but we’re not sure exactly how Mom tweaked the solution to make it work for her. She did something right before she collapsed, and, and—I never saw it. Did you, sis?”

“Nope. Missed that part. Mom was in such terrible shape that I got distracted. By the way, is she okay? Maybe she still remembers. I hope that bump on the head hasn’t done her too much damage...”

The guards exchange worried looks. The one with the mole on her neck reached up and rubbed it again, then looked at her fingers like they too had been infected. Fear spread across her face...

A Clever Escape

Jennifer awoke and rubbed the welt on the side of her head. It felt like daggers in her skull, and she almost lost consciousness, when she heard a familiar voice...

“Mom. Mom. You need to wake up. We need your help.”

The guards were standing right behind the two girls, watching their every move.

“Can you tell us the exact concentrations you used for your serum? We missed something

you did at the end, and whatever you did obviously worked.” Anna winked at her mom to show her she needed to play along.

“Well, I don’t remember exactly.” Jennifer rubbed the bump on her head long and hard for effect. You see, I’m still not thinking so clearly...what with my head pounding and all. And I’m hungry. I need something in my stomach, I can tell you, or I’m going to get a migraine. And let me tell you, if that happens, I’ll be out for the day—useless.”

“Get her some food!” the guard ordered her nearest comrade.

“Oh, and guard?” Jennifer asked, still rubbing her head.

“Yeah?”

“Bring something for my two assistants too, please. We may be awhile.”

After they'd all eaten, Jennifer made her first request. “Now that I seem to be completely healed, I need an infected sample to test our solutions on. Girls, we need to act quickly. There may still be some live virus inside Big Mama's body. Remember, viruses need living cells to inhabit, so we'll have to act quickly. Go get me some tissue samples from inside her body, but *contain them somehow*, okay? I'm not sure how powerful the pure virus is.”

The girls both nodded, and Anna worked hard to suppress a smile. She knew what Mom wanted them to do.

The girls were escorted to the door of Big Mama's bedroom, but the guards would go no further. Jill and Anna slipped into the room and approached Big Mama's bed. What they saw shocked them. Big Mama's skin was back to a fairly healthy flesh color, her hands weren't gnarled at all—she appeared to be almost peaceful, like she died in her sleep.

“Don't let the guards see this,” Anna whispered. “They have to think she's still infected.” Jill and Anna stepped up to Big Mama. “Now hold your breath and hold her mouth open,” Anna said, loud enough for the guards to hear, “while I swab inside her cheek.” The girls made a show of it, but the cotton swabs they dropped into the beaker were still completely clean.

“She’s so far gone,” Jill said. “I can’t stand the sight, I’m afraid.” She pulled the covers over the dead body, obscuring the view of the guards. “Now we just have to be extremely careful with this glass container. No telling what will happen if this virus were to escape.”

“It’d likely seek out a live host immediately,” Anna replied.

“What—what do you mean?” the guard asked.

“I mean it’d jump into the nearest live body it could find to survive, now that it’s outside of her warm, moist, cozy mouth.”

The guard backed off a bit more, and Jill and Anna made their way back to the lab.



Jill ran forward with the container, and Anna came up quickly behind, sticking her foot neatly between her sister's legs on purpose. Jill tripped and headed for the ground, sending the jar flying through the air as she did so.

“No-o-o-o!” Jennifer screamed, as the glass container hit the floor and exploded into a thousand pieces. “We’ll all die now!” She grabbed the neck of her shirt and pulled it up over her mouth and nose, like she was protecting herself.

The ruse worked. The guards scattered, running out the doorways in all directions, clutching clothing to their faces. The three women in the room grabbed a few supplies and headed for another room. They’d have to move fast, pack fast, and find transportation.

“But what about me?” the guard asked.

“What if I’m already infected?”

“Well, you go get them then,” the other replied. “I’m not going in there again, that’s for sure.”

“But what if I’m not infected and I get infected by going in there?”

While the guards were busy figuring out what to do, Jill, Anna, and Jennifer were assembling their packs, adding on some layers of clothing, and grabbing anything they thought would be of value to them.

“What’s the plan, Mom?”

Jennifer did her best to look confident in front of her girls. “Well, we grab a plane out of here, and head somewhere nearby where there’s a lab capable of producing the serum. On the way, I’ll

write out specific instructions—a recipe for anyone to follow. We'll spread the news as fast as possible. It's not like the ingredients are that hard to find, and there are no magic potions—anyone can brew a batch of this if they know how.”

The girls relaxed a touch. “But how do we get out of here?”

Jennifer's answer clearly surprised them both: “We walk out the front door.”

The guards had made up their minds. Quarantine the one guard who thought she'd been infected, and watch her closely. Surround the building and wait. If the scientists came out, they were healthy, and could be taken care of quickly. If they stayed inside for a long time—well, let's just say no one would go back inside. Safer that way.

They never expected to see the three women calmly strolling their way down the path. Each woman was clearly packed up and ready for escape. How could they be so confident?

As the women came nearer, the guards soon understood. They were each holding jars filled with cotton swabs, and they each had a hand on the lid of their container. Their faces were covered with tie-on masks, like the ones doctors wear when they're operating.

“We have a few demands, or we'll scatter this virus like a wildfire!” Jennifer screamed.

“We've determined that it will last at least 48 hours outside the body, so unless you want us to infect you and yours with it, you'll listen to our demands.”

“They're bluffing,” one guard whispered.

“Do you really want to chance it?” the other replied. “Ok, science freaks. You win. What do you want?”

“We want all the planes that you currently have on site brought out front here, and lined up neatly.”

“All of them? That must be twelve or thirteen planes we have here. You’ve only got three people. What are you going to do—torch the planes?”

“No, we won’t torch them, but we do want you to bring them to us.”

The guards didn’t see the harm. Even if the women chose three of the fastest planes, they’d still have plenty of speed left in the others to hunt them down with. They’d play along...for now.

When the planes were neatly lined up, the women went into each one, one by one, checking for supplies and equipment. By the time they loaded everything into the plane they wanted, they had quite a collection: GPS trackers, medical kits, maps of various areas and countries, emergency packs with dehydrated food pouches—they were set.

Just before Jill climbed into the plane, she shouted to the guards: “We’ve put several infected swabs in each plane that we went into. The virus stays live for 48 hours. If you feel like chancing it and following us, I hope you know that we haven’t had time to make up a new batch of serum. Death could come quickly. But ultimately, you decide. See you, ladies.”

Anna turned to her mom, who was starting takeoff procedure. “How long do you think it’ll take them to come after us?”

“Not sure, dear. They are fairly dumb. Maybe they’ll even wait 48 hours...that is, if they can count to 48. Then again, we might just see them pulling up beside us at any minute. One thing’s for certain—the faster we go, the more of a lead we’ll have.”

An Inspiration in a Difficult Flight

“So where are we going?” Anna asked, once
they were airborne.

“I have only a few ideas,” Jennifer answered. “The only active labs big enough to produce the serum with the materials we need are in Russia, I think.”

“Russia? That reminds me of something!” Anna pulled out her duotang of newspaper clippings from her backpack. “I’ve been reading about the meteorite crashes—the ones that brought on this weird weather. Let me find the article—ah, here it is--*Blast of ancient space explosion now hitting Earth*, by Tom Spears. Did you know him?”

“I knew *of* him and his work. What does the article say?”

“*Hundreds of millions of years ago, a star exploded so far from our galaxy that the energy of the blast only just reached Earth last month. Then another blew, and another—all far from each other,*

yet all visible on Earth within a few weeks. Each blast of this X-ray energy is just the second ripple of an explosion that could be visible to telescopes in the coming days or weeks... The first occurred in 1908...

“Burned out stars collapse inward on themselves, sometimes into a ball of neutrons and nothing else, becoming matter so dense that a huge star gets squashed down to only a mile wide, like an asteroid. The real danger to Earth is that the next set of explosions may be a little too close for comfort....”

“If he only knew then what we knew now—
meteor after meteor slamming into the earth,
creating our grey snow, our weird weather...”

Anna’s words trailed off as her thoughts drifted to

other matters. Finally, after a long pause, she said,
“I wish Dad were with us now.”

“I know, dear, I know. I miss him too.”

“Why do all the males have to die? I mean first our baby brother when he was only two, and now Dad.”

“Life’s just like that sometimes. Sometimes bad things have to happen for good things to happen later on. We don’t control everything, you know.” Jennifer fought back the tears. She needed to stay strong right now. She needed to think clearly.

“I know, I know. It’s just a bit much to take.”

Jill, who had been silent the whole time, piped up: “Do you think, you know, that whatever

is aging the women and killing the men came in on the meteors?"

"Actually," Jennifer replied, "I have no doubt about it. But why would the men die almost immediately, while the women just age and then die? It doesn't make sense."

"Unless they're two separate diseases," Anna added.

"Unless they're two separate diseases," Jennifer repeated. "It makes sense. Why was I so focused on them being the same? It makes sense that these meteors could be bringing all kinds of problems to Earth, or at least disturbing our own atmosphere enough to create a huge variety of problems. I think you're right, Anna. And I think I know where we're going now, too."

"Where's that?" Jill asked.

“We’re off to Russia—for sure.”

“Of course,” Anna said. “Are you talking about TK? 1908?”

“Yes,” Jennifer said. “Site of the Tunguska Meteorite. The first place where part of this explosion happened...way back in 1908. I think your article made mention of it.”

“1908? Are you kidding me? What could that have to do with anything?” Jill rolled her eyes, raising them to heaven.

“You always go back to the beginning, girls. You always go back to the beginning. Russian scientists have studied that meteorite crash for over 100 years now. They’ve documented so much about it that we may find a key there that will help us unlock this mystery. And as for labs? One of the best left is in Tomsk.”

“Tomsk?” Anna asked.

“Tomsk, Siberia. The oldest town in Siberia.

It’s been called the “Siberian Athens”—it has six universities there, and the researchers they’ve got working in that town are the best in the world. I should’ve thought of it earlier. Besides, there’s someone there I met at a conference a few times—Dr. Danuta Yevshenko. She’s an epidemiologist at their Centre for Disease Control. If anyone can give us a clue about this disaster, it’s her.”

“Yevshenko?” Anna asked. “That name sounds familiar. I know I’ve got another clipping somewhere....” And she was off, thumbing through her news articles again, searching for something, anything that could help them.

Jill just sat there, at a loss for what to do.

Mom was piloting the plane. Anna was doing her

research, as always. What was she supposed to do? How could she help? She tried to sort of look over Anna's shoulder without really making it look like she was. And then, a tiny clipping in the corner of one of the pages got her thinking. "I think I know why the men died so quickly," she blurted out

Their aircraft was just over the Gulf of Bothnia now, and they were in Finland air space. They'd have to plan their trip carefully from this point on if they were to reach Siberia unscathed. Jennifer's biggest worry was supplies between here and there. Where were the cities they could touch down in to get supplies? The picture she had in her head was a bleak one. Mother and daughters run out of supplies, failing to reach Siberia. They die, and

the world dies because of their stupidity. It was a picture she didn't want to paint.

Keep busy, Jennifer. Think. Don't let emotions get the better of you.

“Anna, can you put that book down, and pull out some maps? See if there's any kind of world map there that you can look at. Map out a route for us so we can replenish our supplies along the way. And Jill? What do you mean, you know why the men died so quickly?” Jennifer didn't mean to sound so rash with Jill. She just wished that Jill would be a bit more analytical sometimes and not jump to conclusions so quickly.

“Well,” Jill said, timidly, picking up Anna's book. “I know Anna's more into space science and whatnot, but my interest is more in health. And

there are a few things I've been thinking about.

Then I saw this headline—*Two killers: what men need to know.*”

“What’s the article about?” Jennifer asked.

“Well, it says here that the two major killers of men currently are lung cancer and prostate cancer. Now lung cancer has been a problem for both genders, but prostate cancer is a male thing. It made me consider the physiological differences between men and women. Whatever is killing the men has to be taking advantage of some physical difference they have.”

“I see where you’re going with this,”

Jennifer said, encouraging her to continue.

“Well, first of all, there’s a huge difference in ischemic heart disease mortality. Females are protected, mostly because of the effects of female

hormones. And men's tendency to accumulate fat in the upper abdomen doesn't help them either."

"Go on."

"Also, we know that there are structural differences between men and women in the mitral valve, which separates the left atrium of the heart from the left ventricle. And men's brain cells die faster than women's as they age. And men naturally have weaker immune systems than women. As for prostate cancer, it's most common in men over 40, but the chance of it increases greatly with each new decade of life after that. What if something was taking advantage of these differences, sort of speeding up the rate that these things happen? Exaggerating these differences between men and women even more? I don't think the two diseases are related at all. Whatever's attacking the men is

most likely attacking that mitral heart valve. I'll bet when we examine a body, that valve has been attacked somehow."

Jennifer looked over at Jill. Anna looked up from the map and stared at her sister. It was her mom who reacted first:

"You're absolutely right."

It wasn't much, but it was enough for Jill. She knew that somehow, in some way, she'd just earned a greater amount of respect than ever before. She'd reached a new stage. She knew she could contribute more than energy to this project.

Her moment of triumph was interrupted however, as the plane began to shake violently...

"Turbulence," Jennifer said. "Just a little turbulence. We'll be okay." But she saw what lay

ahead. She wasn't sure that they could make it. But if they touched down now, they might not get off the ground again, and who knows how long this would last? No supplies on the ground would be a slow, torturous death. At least if the oncoming storm took them out, it would be quick.

“A little turbulence? Are you kidding me? Mom, we both fly. We can see what's coming—how do we help?”

“Just hang on,” Jennifer said, as the plane dipped to one side.

The eyes of the girls were glued to the windows, but Jennifer's were on the instrument panel. The instruments never lie...the instruments never lie. Don't go by your own judgment, Jennifer. Trust the dials. Get through the storm. The storms

of life--a past sermon of her Dad's came rushing to her mind:

The storms of life will not conquer you if you remain focused on the word. Hebrews 13:5—
“He will never leave you or forsake you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will never leave you or forsake you....” Jennifer had never really understood, but now, at this moment, she knew who the instrument panel was that she had to place her faith in. She hoped it was enough.

The weather was getting rougher. Thunder, lightning, poor visibility. She knew roughly where they were, but finding a city in this soup would be tough. And there were a lot of wide open spaces out here—plenty of chances for something to go wrong.—and then it happened.

Something slammed into the side of the plane, shaking it with a force like none Jennifer had ever experienced. Problem with the electrical system—the gauges were malfunctioning. She'd have to find a way to land. Please God, take us through this storm, she prayed, for the first time in her life. Please help us find a way.

Something told her to go up. She pulled back on the controls and trusted.

“Mom, what are you doing? We should land. We can't fly through this! We should find a place to land. Are you crazy? We're going higher, right into the eye of the storm!”

And then just like that, they were above it. They broke through, and the skies were clear above.

Jennifer knew that the storm was still below them— she'd fly until she had to come down, when she knew it was time. For now, they were above the storm, and Anna was frantically paging through a map book, searching for a place.

“St. Petersburg, Mom. It's a major city. We should be able to land in St. Petersburg.” She tried to focus on mapping out their route, but she knew the storm hadn't gone away. Below them, it was still raging on. And the fuel gauge she'd checked just before the instrument panel had gone out showed they would have to land this plane fairly soon. St. Petersburg was just on the left edge of Russia. If they could make it there, they'd be okay.

Ten minutes later, Jennifer said, “It’s time.”

She pushed the controls slightly forward, and the plane began to dip down. As the turbulence returned, she pushed heavily on the controls, and the plane dove through, like an eagle chasing some prey.

To Jill, it felt like a death plunge. “Are you crazy, Mom? You’re going to kill us all!”

Jennifer stayed focused. She ignored the comments, the screams. She plunged the plane lower and lower, and then pulled it out of its dive just as the turbulence eased up. “It’s alright she said,” as much to comfort herself as the girls. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

Anna directed her to a spot she could land the plane safely.

“Oh no.”

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“It’s the landing gear. The hatch has been fused shut or something. The wheels won’t come down.”

“So we’re going to...”

“That’s right. Get ready—we’re landing without wheels. We’re about to do a huge belly flop.”

Jennifer eased the plane down to within a few feet of the ground and then pointed the nose slightly up as she touched down.

Smack! The plane scraped against the ground, and they bounced up again, but it definitely at a reduced speed. She tried again. Thunk! S-c-r-a-p-e. They were almost there, but they were running out of room. If she didn't stop the plane soon, they were about to slam into the hill ahead.

Just at that moment, the tail of the plane broke, and plane turned sharply to the left, skidding in circles, and doing a single flip over to come to a rest upside down. The women were all shaken and gear was everywhere, but with Anna as navigator and Jennifer as pilot, they had landed safely.

St. Petersburg or Bust

The women were exhausted, but they knew they had no time to waste. They had a fair amount of supplies on board, but now, they needed information, and transportation. The tail of the plane had been broken off completely. Jill went immediately into motion. She grabbed a chunk of the metal and pried open the hatch where the landing gear was. She got Anna to help her, and the two of them pulled up the wheels and used the kit inside the plane to disconnect and then reattach them to the tail part of the plane. Then they loaded the shell of the tail with their gear, packed the rest on their backs, and set off.

“How do we know which direction to go? We took quite a jolt there, and we never did see St. Petersburg...” Jill had an answer for that too. She pulled a handbook out of her pack—*Geocaching Around the World*.

“Geocaching?” Jennifer asked. “You want to go hunt for something hidden in a log while we—oh, I get it. That’s brilliant.”

“What?” asked Anna.

“Well, as you know, your sister’s favorite activity is to go trailing off with a group of people in the woods, in search of one object—usually a hollowed out log, something near a trail, where someone’s hidden a “little treasure”—a photo, a

medal, something geotrackers can take a picture with to prove they found the spot.”

“And how do they find it?”

“They key in the coordinates into a GPS system and go there the most direct route they can find.”

“Here it is! There is one near St. Petersburg. Someone’s put a laminated postcard of the Peter and Paul Fortress inside a ziplock bag about a ten-mile hike out from city limits.”

“The Peter and Paul Fortress?”

“It’s the oldest building in St. Petersburg. It says here that it was mainly used as a political prison until 1917, and that its most famous residents

included Dostoevsky, Gorky, Trotsky, and Lenin's older brother, Alexander. Best site--the cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul has—has a needle-thin spire and a weather vane on top in the form of an angel and a cross.”

Jennifer snapped to attention. *Saints Peter and Paul? A cathedral? An angel and a cross? It had to be a sign.* “We’re going to find that postcard,” she said, “and then we’re going to find that cathedral.”

The hike was long and cold, but the light of the GPS system grew brighter and brighter. The group could track their progress and see how close they were getting, and it spurred them on. Once they found this spot, they’d be able to get their bearings and head straight for St. Petersburg

It wasn't easy. The forest was thick, backcountry territory. It looked as though it hadn't even been walked on before.

“Are you sure you know what you're doing?” Anna asked Jill.

“Trust me,” Jill said. I've done this a hundred times. We should be approaching the site any minute now...

And there it was—a bird feeder hung from a thickly coiled rope that had been looped around one of the tree's branches. On the side of the birdhouse, was a framed postcard of the cathedral.

“But it said it was laminated, not framed,”

Anna persisted.

“I’m sure we’re here,” Jill replied.

“Someone probably just replaced the first one with something a little more permanent. It happens all the time. After all, how many cathedral postcards do you think there are out in the woods? And the GPS led us straight here. Now let’s warm up and eat before we make that final ten mile trek.”

Anna and Jennifer had never seen Jill like this before. She usually stepped back to let one of them take control, but on this task she seemed different. She seemed driven to succeed. And she was doing just that.

“Thank you, Jill,” Jennifer finally said.

Those three words meant the world to her. Jill quickly got a fire going, and pulled out some food for the group. This was her shot to lead, and she would make the most of it.

Those ten miles into St. Petersburg felt like fifty. The winds had picked up, and the biting cold and blowing snow was coming up off the ground, right into their faces. Visibility was getting worse and worse. Jill keyed in a location that should take them through the heart of the city, if her calculations were correct. She'd never done that before—just made up a spot and hoped it was in the right general direction, but she'd looked at the map carefully, and knew where they'd started. She'd

aimed for the heart of the city, so even if she was off a bit, they'd still find it.

“You know what you’re doing, right?” Anna asked. “We’re not out here wandering aimlessly in a near blizzard, circling to our deaths? It feels like we’ve been walking for forever.”

“Trust me,” Jill said. “Trust me.” But deep inside, she began to wonder about it too. Just as she was about to doubt herself, they hit paydirt—a road leading directly into the city. The walking would be much easier from here on in, and now they knew they were headed the right direction. They picked up the pace, and before nightfall, they made it into the city.

They found an abandoned warehouse, and set up camp for the night. It should be a safe enough spot to store their supplies and to gather more and bring them here, once they found a way out. From the looks of the skies above, it likely wouldn't be by air again. . .

That night, the warehouse shook with the sounds outside—the wind howled around, echoing in the empty space. No one got much sleep. The three of them huddled together, staying warm, and Anna pulled out a flashlight and her newspaper clippings. “I knew I had it,” she said. She read:

Experts fear huge pandemic. It's the flu to most people, a harmless flu bug, but epidemiologist

Dr. Danuta Yevshenko doesn't take it lightly. In an interview with her, reporter Carlos Boucher of the Sun has uncovered some startling developments...

"It's a master shape-shifter, really,"

Yevshenko states. "The flu virus has been evolving ways to slip past human immune systems every year to infect and kill people worldwide. It has the deadly ability to unleash a deadly pandemic and has done so with regularity for centuries. Then something happened in the early 1900's, 1908, to be exact, that I believe altered the virus and made it more potent. Just ten years later, in 1918, the Spanish influenza killed 40 to 50 million people worldwide.

CB: And what does that have to do with the present?

DY: Well, I think that slowly, over time, another virus has been growing in size and strength. But it's largely been overlooked, dismissed as a mutant version of the flu. Without sounding like some doomsdayer, I'm worried that the conditions are ripe for a microbial "perfect storm". We may have a pandemic on our hands the size of which we've never seen before."

CB: And just what was this 1908 event that started it all?

DY: Believe it or not, a meteorite crashing to Earth. The Tunguska meteorite crash in Siberia. It unleashed or altered something that set this new virus in motion.

CB: Sounds a little bit like a sci-fi movie gone wrong. Meteorite from outer space that ends up wiping out life on Earth—

DY: It's not like that. The world is in a delicate balance. Even one small change in a system can go on to influence another change in another system, and on and on until major effects are felt.

CB: I've heard of that. It's called the Butterfly Effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in South America, setting off changes that are ultimately found around the world.

DY: Something like that, yes. And by the way, these aren't the thoughts of one lone madwoman on the loose. The World Health

Organization (WHO) is certain that a global outbreak is almost certain. It should be an urgent public priority.

CB: We've been freaking out about the avian flu, and poultry outbreaks that have not been amounting to much. We've gotten stirred up about SARS, which seems to be under control. What makes this any different?

DY: In those cases, a few extremists tried to up the ante. A few business-like scientists with a buck to make. But WHO never supported those movements. For this situation, they have clearly explained that it is difficult to exaggerate the impact of a pandemic.

CB: So if 40 to 50 million died in 1918, what kind of numbers might we be talking about now?

DY: It's difficult to predict, you can imagine. A conservative estimate is 10 million within a few weeks of the virus reaching its height.

CB: And a worst case scenario?

DY: 100 million, within the same time frame.

CB: But if that continued, you're talking about, potentially, half the world being wiped out in a year! It's starting to sound like a fantasy again...

DY: Not quite. Our estimates are that it may only go on for six to eight weeks. But it will affect

all communities simultaneously. Keep in mind that we don't want to paralyze people with fear. But we do want them to have a realistic sense of what it is that we may be facing...

Jennifer was lost in her own thoughts again. The article was dated two years before the next wave of meteorites had hit. The second ripple. If the article was on target, and she felt that it was, they'd have to act fast. It had been much more than six or eight weeks since this outbreak began, so perhaps Yevshenko had been too cautious, fearful to respond with the real numbers. In any case, they had to act fast. The world was depending on them...

“So what do we do, Mom?” Jill asked.

“What's our next move?”

“Like I said before, we need to gather information and transportation. Once that’s solved, we travel as quickly as possible to Tomsk, and hook up with Dr. Yevshenko...if she’s still alive. But for tonight, hard as it may be, we’re going to have to get some sleep and gather our strength. Tough as it is to do that, we’re going to need it.”

Helping Hands

The next morning, Anna awoke and then shook Jill awake. Jennifer was already up and had a little breakfast prepared for them. Dry cereal and coffee. Some things never change.

Storing the greatest part of their goods in a corner of the warehouse, the three set out, with

much lighter packs on their backs. They were headed for the main university.

“The university? Why are we headed there? Shouldn’t we find a crew of people to help us first? What are we going to do at a university?”

“First of all,” Jennifer chimed in, “we are strangers in a strange land. Perhaps we’ll find someone in the university who knows of me or my work. At least they should be able to check me out. Second, we need to find someone who can speak English. They teach language courses, right? Someone will be able to connect us with the right person. When in doubt, go back to the origins—the roots of knowledge in the city, in this case.”

They made their way to the university and headed first to the science department. Only a few diehard scientists were still working away, in their impoverished conditions. They were trying to do what Jennifer herself was working on—a vaccine for the viruses.

Jennifer approached the first one she saw.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?”

The scientist briefly looked up from his desk, gave her a puzzled look and a frown, pointed to the door, and then went back to work. She tried another, and got the same reaction. Then, from behind, in broken English, she heard, “Dr. Kennedy, is that you?”

Paulina Peretzkova. Jennifer recognized her right away. “I’m so happy to see you,” she said. “We come with a gift.”

“What is it?” Paulina asked.

“The serum that saves women.”

“THE serum? You mean you’ve come up with it already?” Peretzkova rattled off some sayings in Russian to the workers in the room. They scrambled out and returned with, what Jennifer guessed, was the entire team that remained. Immediately, Jennifer gave them the recipe. Paulina translated it, and the crew went off to work, contacting others and gathering the supplies they’d need. Jennifer knew that now that others knew, the word—and the serum—would spread faster. It was

like having the cure for cancer, only better. The word would spread. The word. The WORD. She said a silent prayer. Job one would be taken care of.

Anna snapped into action. “Is any of the engineering department still around?” she asked Paulina.

“Sure. They more or less keep things running around here, and of course their skills are needed pretty much everywhere. What do you need?”

“Someone who’s an expert on the city. Maybe a person involved in city planning—urban and rural development—that type of thing. And a

mechanical engineer, too. We might need to locate some others as well—”

“What do you have in mind, Anna?” her sister asked.

“Tell you later, once I have a moment to breathe.”

IT didn’t take long to assemble the experts. In fact, nearly all of the think-tank that was left, whether they were in a related field or not, assembled in a lecture hall to plan the next moves.

It was Jennifer who was first to speak. “You know about one cure, the one that fights aging in women.” Paulina translated, word for word. “But we have another virus that we believe is responsible for the deaths of the men. And if we are ever to

have males on this planet again, we need to solve that problem incredibly quickly. Like within a few months or less. Some of the women who are currently pregnant will give birth to sons. As soon as they are born, they'll be infected quickly and will die. If they do, there'll be no other option in the future except artificial insemination—and we don't know how well preserved those stocks are now. It's an incredible gamble. In any case, my one daughter, Jill, has thoughts to share with you about that later. Maybe it'll spark an idea somewhere. Personally, I feel our best chances are to contact all the experts we can—and work from there.”

Jill stepped up to the mike next and explained her thoughts and theories. Heads nodded and mini-conversations erupted in the crowd.

Obviously she had struck a chord with them. They were probably wondering who this precocious young kid was, but even without speaking the language, she knew that they respected what she had to say.

Anna was next. I need the engineers and city planners to help us find a way out. Obviously, the storms are increasing, and air travel is impossible. I need a team of experts to help us find a way to Tomsk, Siberia. We will go ourselves, with a few volunteers, if possible, to seek out the advice of Dr. Danuta Yevshenko.

At the mention of Yevshenko's name, more murmurs worked their way through the crowd. They all knew of her work. Paulina then gave a

rapid series of orders, and they all scattered into groups, off to plot and plan the next moves.

“Now do you know why we came to the university first?” Jennifer asked her daughters.

“Yeah, two heads are better than one. But fifty are even better.” Anna was hopeful, but frustrated. It felt like this was out of their hands now, and she hated to have to trust others to get the job done...

Good news, bad news. The serum was being produced, and it was working. People were encouraged and more willing than ever to help others. Once the weather turned, and they were able to branch out, the serum would reach those who needed it.

Bad news. Roads were obscured by grey snow. Skies were becoming even more violent and flight was impossible. Roads were impassable, and railway tracks were covered. There was only one vehicle that could take them through, and that was an old snow-blower train. It wasn't working. It had been left on a side rail on the outskirts of the city. But if they could get it working, the line it was on would take them, eventually, to where they needed to go. If they could get it working.

Worse news. Also, if they needed extra cars, it would have to go forward, at least until it reached a switch, and then turn back and plow its way back into the train yards to pick them up. More delay.

The train worked well in up to ten feet of snow—but any more than that, and the snow would

have to be dug down, by hand. They didn't think it would be any deeper than that anywhere—only an avalanche somewhere could cause that. They put their faith in the team, gathered supplies, and put the word out in the community. They needed heroes—people who were willing to go on a train ride, and dig hard and fast, if need be.

What they saw when they reached the train yard was encouraging. Hundreds of volunteers, packed and ready, eager to save the world—or die trying.

Jill volunteered to stay at the train yards and organize the volunteers and supplies into train cars. Anna and Jennifer set out with the team on what was, at one time, a favorite method of transportation—snowmobile. They'd been through

a lot with them before, and weren't exactly keen on having any problems with them again, but once they were riding, they regained their comfort with the machines, and easily kept up with the rest of the pack.

When they reached the snow-blower, it was an intimidating sight. A massive red metal scoop the height of the train car, attached to the engine behind. What looked like a massive turbine from a generator was on front, and Anna shuddered to think the damage it could do when it was working. It must spew the snow out like a massive volcano spewed lava. It would be quite the sight to see—if they could get it working. If they could get it working.

The head mechanic was shaking her head and muttering. Anna found someone who could translate.

“She says it’s ancient technology. They don’t even make these machines like this anymore. And there’s just a single malfunctioning part—a part that if it were replaced, would have this up and running in no time. But they’ve stopped making them years ago, and chances of finding someone who could create one from scratch quickly was minimal. By and large, that was still a man’s field, and men were no longer around.”

Anna asked to see what the part was that they needed. When she saw the size and shape of it, she knew just what to do. “I don’t know where you can get one, but I know how you can make one,”

she said. "I'm assuming you can find a female welder."

The translator conveyed the message, and the mechanic nodded.

"All you need is a combustion chamber exit duct seal ring, made of waspaloy, and part of a titanium tailpipe."

The translator just looked at her and stared. "I don't know how to translate that," she said. "Where are you going to get those things from, and how do you know about them?"

"I know, because they're parts of an airplane. And I think with a little modification, they might just do the job."

Jennifer just stared. When she'd seen her daughters become obsessed with flight, she thought it was a bit unhealthy—how much time they'd spent learning about aircraft instead of other “more important” subjects. And here, now—that knowledge might just make the difference.

Anna went back to gather the parts, and she took a few workers with her. She arrived to see that Jill had already organized everybody and everything that was needed for the journey, more or less. Anna was impressed.

In no time, they had the parts off some planes, and they again rode out to the snow-blower. She'd gone overboard—brought out six times the

parts she probably needed, and she was glad she had. Trial and error reigned supreme, but by the fourth attempt, the part they'd created worked and held. They'd keep the other parts and the workers too, for the journey. Just in case. But it was time to head back now, and set off on the trip of a lifetime.

Jennifer just hoped Dr. Yevshenko would still be alive when they got there. All she needed now was another "Big Mama" episode.

When the snow-blower finally made its way back to the train station, Paulina was waiting for them. "Jennifer, in all the excitement, and with everything that's been going on, there's something I forgot to tell you. I'm not sure how much you know, or how important this is, but considering

what you told me about the Yevshenko article, I think you need to know...

The girls busied themselves with the final preparations. Anna took along some extra parts, pieces and materials, not really knowing how they might come in handy, but she wanted to have a variety of sizes, shapes, and metals with her, just in case. The breakdown of the train had been a blessing in disguise. Can you imagine a train breaking down in the Siberian countryside with no way to repair it? It'd be a certain death for everyone.

Jennifer found a quieter spot where she could talk to Paulina. She didn't want to alarm

anyone if the news was bad. “What’s this all about, Paulina? What’s the latest?”

“Well, I just thought you should know.

There have been some more meteorite crashes over here, other than the ones you’ve told us about.”

“And?” Jennifer said.

“And some of them are near Tomsk. You might be heading right into the eye of the storm. You might be going directly into an area with high concentrations of who knows what—new viruses? Other contagions? And what if you head out there, only to be taken out—God forbid—by another meteorite?”

“You know I don’t have any other choice, Paulina.” Jennifer glanced down at the necklace

Paulina was wearing—a bright gold cross hung at the end of it. “Pray for us,” she said. Then she hugged her friend and headed out.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Paulina asked.

“No. We need you here. We need you as command central. Be strong.”

“Same to you.”

With that, the two women said their goodbyes and set off in different directions. *Maybe we'll never meet again*, Jennifer thought. *Then again, maybe we will anyway.*

A Train Journey to Remember

The slow, long train journey was frustrating. They hadn't had to shovel anywhere yet, but they were moving slowly. The engine already had a

snow-blower to push, but usually, that was it. That's what it was meant for. Add the weight of some train cars packed to the brim, and it slowed down incredibly. Bit by bit, it snaked its way across a cold and desolate countryside. Biting winds and temperatures that dipped far below zero with wind-chill. Anna and Jill had never known cold like this—Jennifer had experienced it only once before. It was a shock to the system, but after what seemed forever, they found their way to Tomsk.

There'd be a big party tonight—of that they were certain. The people on board were never so happy to see a city in their life—but Jennifer had other ideas. She needed to find Yevshenko. She allowed the girls to stay back and party a bit, as long as they stayed with Maria Makarenko—a

woman with a clear head on her shoulders, a person Jennifer had befriended on the long train trip here. Besides, she could search faster on her own, with someone to translate. Once she found Yevshenko, she'd gather the girls and get to work.

Little did she know at that moment the impact that small decision would have...

Spirits were up, and the vodka and beer were flowing. The town of Tomsk was overjoyed with the news that they now knew how to solve the aging problem, and everyone who heard of it pitched in to throw a banquet for their special guests, the likes of which they'd never seen.

“Can you believe this, sis? It’s like we’re big heroes or something—people welcoming us like we’re some long lost brother or something.”

“Like the prodigal son?” Anna replied.

“The prodigal son? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. Just something I’ve been thinking more and more about lately. Have you ever read the Bible?”

“Oh come on. You’re not going to get religious on me like Dad would have, are you?”

“No, nothing like that. But still, there’s this one book in the Bible, Revelation—and it talks about destruction and end times and—”

“Snap out of it, sis! Don’t you go getting all scared on me now. You should enjoy yourself. Celebrate for once in your life. You’ve done a good job—you can enjoy a reward, you know.” Jill picked up a beer bottle and handed it to her sister. The label caught Anna’s eye.

“Can you believe it? Here we are in Russia and they’re drinking German beer! I wonder how they got this—”

Jill snatched the bottle back from her sister. She’d read about this one before, but never seen it. It was from the Neuzelle Kloster Brewery, a 400-year-old company in eastern Germany. But it was the back of the label, not the front, that had her attention. “We need to find Mom, NOW!” she said.

Jennifer lucked out. She found Yevshenko where she knew she would if the woman were alive—her laboratory at the Polytechnic.

“Jennifer Kennedy? But how? When?”

“Never mind, Danuta. I’m glad to see you too. There’s a long story behind why I’m here, but first, I have a formula to share with your staff. Then, if you’ll follow me back to pick up my girls, I can tell you all about it on the way....”

They never made it back to the girls. Jill and Anna found them first. “I think I know the secret, Mom. It might be what we’re looking for!” She

held up a beer, and Danuta and Jennifer looked strangely at each other, and then laughed.

It was the first real belly laugh Jennifer had had in a long time. “You think beer is going to save the world?”

“I do,” Jill replied, with a stern look on her face that made the others stop laughing.

“Take a look at the ingredients and tell me what you see,” she said.

Jennifer took a look at the bottle. Of course, it had all the traditional ingredients of beer—water, hops, yeast and barley—but there seemed to be much more than that added to this one. She translated the label for the girls: *Kloster Special: the Healthy Beer*. After the list of usual ingredients

there was a special mix of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. And then she saw it—undoubtedly what Jill had been talking about—SPIRULINA. Like the plantain before, maybe this ingredient held the answers to their problem...

“Spirulina, Mom. It’s an algae rich in protein, iron, and vitamins—especially A and D. D helps tissue, like the skin, and antioxidants can help reduce the risk of heart disease and some cancers. I think we’ve found our solution—Spirulina may be the key. It could help build up weak heart tissue, maybe and replace some of what men may be missing--but how do we test it?”

“We won’t have to wait long,” Jennifer replied. “Just get us to a maternity ward and we’ll see...”

Will Spirulina save the day? And what about the most recent meteorites that have crashed to the ground? Could they hold the key to other problems too, or will they create new ones? And as for the cold weather, grey snow, and advancing glaciers—what can be done? Is this the end of the world that Anna's been reading about in the Bible? Find out in Ice Storm III, the final book of this trilogy!

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Paul Pruitt is Monica Pruitt's uncle and has an overactive imagination.

