

Dr. Corinne Magnolia embarks on a new assignment that appears to be a dream-come-true on the surface. In time, she realizes she is but a pawn in the nefarious plot of a group of criminal masterminds, leading directly back to Washington, DC.

Arms to the Poor

By Melanie Isabelle Henner-Stanchina

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Arms
TO THE
Poor
A NOVEL

Melanie Isabelle-Henner Stanchina

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Prologue

October 12, 2015: The day I died, figuratively speaking. When I went into hiding awaiting capture by the FBI, who had been directed by the government of the state of Minnesota to proceed with my capture. I awaited a thorough patting-down, frisking, and locking up, perhaps for good. What was a girl to do? I had not read a multitude of books on pleading one's innocence to a federal or state entity or on how to free oneself from the clutches of one's destiny, whether innocent or guilty. Too many a prisoner had lay festering in jail for no justifiable reason or on faulty charges—perhaps due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Too many lives lost at the hands of the “justice” system, too much young blood spilled for governing entities to continue to turn a blind eye, yet they did. To law enforcement, I would be nothing more than a number. To my family, I had become engulfed in an escapade they wanted no part of but claimed to love me unconditionally all the same. At the epitome of my career, I lost everything. I had turned from oblivious bystander to hardened criminal, seemingly in the blink of an eye.

It's 4 a.m.; I can't sleep, so I've decided to write my story from the perspective of an isolated room in a battered women's shelter. In the end, my history will be all that's left of me. For years, I dreamed of lab rats. And yes, I patted myself on the back for my world-renowned article on the primary activation agent for the Onco gene I discovered. As far back as I can remember, I've been determined to cure cancer. Me, Corinne Magnolia, discovering a cure at the ripe, old age of twenty-eight. I had just graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University with a PhD in biochemistry with an emphasis on pharmacology added to my repertoire. I still recall my delivery of my doctoral dissertation before a panel of five judges, how they inspected me with casual smiles as they ripped me apart. But they passed me, and that was enough. Now, with the celebrated, coveted

title of *doctor*, I was ready to blow the world away with my discovery.

How naive in my thinking I was back then. How foolish to believe that I would be successful in all the experimental trials and then be recognized just like that. My life had transformed so rapidly that the chain of events leading to now still seemed surreal. I currently awaited my upcoming murder trial in the midst of a nationwide manhunt and certainly facing death row if convicted. *How would they do it?* I wondered. Old-fashioned execution, no doubt. Confronted by a group of twelve who would decide my fate. Being interrogated by the FBI, the local law offices of Minnesota, and the US government at large, only to sit waiting to walk the line to my demise. All for pursuing my dream of saving lives, one person at a time.

The ordeal began two years ago. That was when my journey started, though when I look back at everything, I'm bereft of anger or bitterness toward others. I have only myself to blame. My eyes shut as I pray to an entity I have forgotten how to believe in, in the hopes that I will survive the night. What I have seen, heard, and experienced seem beyond unfathomable though regrettably not foreign to the human condition. Great things are meant to be discovered and implemented for a higher good, yet too much knowledge can be dangerous...even lethal. I implore you to listen. Lend your ear since everything I'm about to reveal is true. It is firsthand.

My passion has always been medicine, from the time I could put thoughts into words. Cancer research especially. I rarely shared my plight with others, convinced that openness equated to weakness. But I had, in fact, developed brain cancer at age eight. After surviving multiple bouts of chemo and radiation, which finally sent my cancer into remission, the doctors told me my immune system would never be the same. I was saddled with a lifelong, reduced ability to fight future infections and could succumb to opportune illness much easier than most. There were other effects that the doctors described in

good faith. After I won my battle, my mother told me that my brain function was dramatically different than the norm. Missing a crucial piece of my brain resulted in the remaining parts being forced into overdrive. I could solve advanced calculus problems at age ten and develop scientific experiments, drafting subjects from my neighborhood pool, by twelve. When I graduated from Harvard Undergrad at age eighteen, my final thesis outlined the onset and traced the course of environmentally induced genetic mutations. My findings, later published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, were only the start.

Cancer is not just a disease for me; it envelops me and every aspect of my life. Burying the memories of my grim diagnosis, however, and disregarding the probability of its return has kept me remaining optimistic. Because I know there is an answer beyond modern medicine. Many around me have been stricken with a similar death sentence, and on the advice of their doctors, underwent the treacherous pathway of chemotherapy, accompanied by radiation, clinging to that three-to-five-year success rate with a heavy heart. One by one, I watched their remissions—along with their hope—give way to the deadly disease. And one by one, they deteriorated and then were gone. I wanted to put it all to an end, to reignite the torch of hope and eradicate every damaged cell without destroying the person who housed them.

There was only one problem. Regardless of our station in life, we cannot escape the demons of our past. Survival, though a miracle, has its drawbacks. Owing almost entirely to my brush with death twenty years earlier, I was inclined to the awkward habit of sleeping in a seated position with the lights on. The most frightening moments for me were the unpredictable blackouts. Silent seizures, my doctors called them, for lack of a more precise diagnosis. But they would last considerably longer than average. I never went so far as frothing at the mouth or sustaining a head injury from falling during a blackout, but they were persistent and were with me still. Another unwelcome effect of my brain surgery. Usually, they stayed latent due to medication, but now and again they would rear their ugly heads when

they were disposed to do so. I had no control over when a so-called seizure would hit and would often awake in a state of terror in strange places with no recollection of how I ended up there. I could not be long away or too distant from a neurologist to monitor my brainwaves and ensure no new pathology had surfaced. So, I carried the burdens with me, the seizures, the uneven brain compensation, the buried knowledge that my remission could disappear at any given day. My life would never be worry-free, and I was the type to carry my troubles alone—mostly. One other, my mother, bore the most brunt as my confidant. She kept close the belief that her nurturing would reduce the incidences of the blackouts.

My carefully locked-away burdens took their toll, of course. I would abruptly end relationships once I felt my secret was nearly out. I never slept over at a man's home. I also refused to sleep without a blanket. The simple sensation of the cloth against my skin convinced me that I was indeed still alive and had not been forcibly seized from the world during my sleep. I had also taken to what others referred to as sleepwalking. I would rise from my recliner and reach for various objects, palpating them between my fingertips and grazing them against the nape of my neck. I was semi-conscious enough when in this state to desire quelling my nightmares and deciphering fact from the fiction, reality from my brutal dreams. I wrote copious notes to share with others, mainly for reassurance that I was not hallucinating—another side effect of my near-lethal brain tumor.

On what had been considered my deathbed at the time, even as a young child of eight, I recalled looking out the window and toward the skies, invoking a higher power. I asked for life in exchange for helping others live. Now, I know I have failed miserably.

For me, there won't be a second chance.

Chapter 1

It was right after graduation. I was so eager to embark on my career in medical research that I interned with a diverse group of biologists, dissecting every microscopic particle of the cancer cell for evidence of “foul play.” As motivated as they were, their method rarely unleashed anything new...or of the faintest interest.

I stepped outside on an uncharacteristically sweltering day in April, wiping my brow, thinking back over the weeks that had melted into months, all the time that had passed since I left the Harvard campus forever. Frustration gnawed at me. I had done my due diligence, contacting various cancer research labs across the country and presenting my previous work, including publications. Somehow, the fame I had expected did not come as easily as I thought it would.

My phone rang in my purse. I looked at the caller ID, not recognizing the number, and offered a very mundane “Hello” into the speaker, unaware that this would turn into the call of a lifetime. My heart jumped into the pit of my throat when I listened to the voice on the other end of the line. I tossed away the shock of light brown, wavy hair that obscured my hazel eyes, though I would scant need my vision to be fully attentive to the conversation. With a thrust of my entire body weight, I lifted my somewhat athletic figure off my seat, then paced back and forth for a moment before sitting back down again. I would never describe myself as curvy or full-figured but definitely naturally toned, not owing to any team sport or gym participation. As usual, I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, leery of showing too much skin despite being entirely alone. I’d had little time to be observant of the beauty trends or fashion sense of my generation.

“Good afternoon. May I speak with Corinne Magnolia?”

My brow furrowed a bit. “Speaking.”

“This is Dr. Aron Perez, senior research developer of the Duluth Medical Research Institute at UMINN Medical School. Your resume was referred to me by a colleague who thought you might be willing to participate in our new project. We’re recruiting participants for a clinical research study involving an innovative cancer drug, Persiqua. We would love to invite you to fly over for an in-person interview during which we can further explain our process. It is like no other drug you have ever encountered, I assure you. Plus, it’s fairly new to our domestic market. When will you be available?”

I raised my eyebrows as the information he had relayed sunk in. I detected a strong accent beneath his deep, commanding voice that I could not place as my collection of experiences did not reveal its origin. I boasted a multicultural upbringing in NYC, what I like to call “The melting pot of the East.” I had nicknamed my small, compact group of that era “the United Nations,” comprised of folk who represented the four corners of the globe. Dr. Perez sounded as if he were a man in his late 50s to early 60s as his expertise preceded him. It was difficult to not want to bow down and commit myself to his mercy completely. There was something soothing about him from the beginning, setting aside his high level of confidence. “Well, I should have some free time beginning next Wednesday after I submit my clinical reports to my counterpart biologists for review.”

“Perfect. Let’s set the interview for 9 a.m. sharp Thursday morning. My company, Independent Medical Researchers of Greater Duluth, will gladly cover all airfare and hotel accommodations. Please do bring a winter coat. It can be chilly on those April evenings in the city,” advised the doctor.

“Will do. I will see you then. And thank you kindly for the invitation.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine.” Dr. Perez declared.

I could sense Dr. Perez grinning ear to ear at the other end of the line. I felt my heart speed up, elated to be selected for this once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a concrete difference. Looking back, I didn't ask any of the obvious questions. Many of the variables just seemed of no consequence to me at that moment. I did not even consider the fact that the offer would be in Minnesota and that if accepted, I would have to move there, at least temporarily. Nor did it occur to me that I had virtually no knowledge of either the area or the experimental drug Persiqua. In any other circumstance, I would have been inclined to laboriously research the medication to ascertain the risks as well as benefits before agreeing to any projects involved. And the move... I had lived between New York and Boston my entire life, big, bustling cities rife with constant activity. But Duluth, Minnesota? I knew as much about it as a snake had knowledge of locomotion on all fours. Admittedly, my knowledge was largely based on viewing the occasional documentary. Oh, wait...no! That would be St. Paul. I dreaded breaking the news of my upcoming interview to Mom, who was busy pruning the plants in the backyard and watering the vegetables while dressed to kill. I opened the back door and slowly made my way toward her. If not for the galoshes, one would have thought she was dressed for a '70s theme party. She looked up at me with her usual loving expression.

“Yes, dear, is there something I can help you with? You look like you have a lot on your mind”. She got up and gently tossed down her shears and watering can.

My mother froze in disbelief at the mention of Duluth. My mother's perky, spiked-up-to-perfection salt-and-pepper hair cradled her face, which was notably more docile than her wild, hippie personality. Her mane was noticeably shaved at the nape of her neck, rendering it full on top and tapering into a peak at the bottom. Her angular, high-cheek-boned jaw was offset by her gigantic, piercing blue eyes that could captivate and mollify just about anyone. Her full, rosy lips pursed into a heart shape when she smiled. She was of average height and weight, leaning more toward the slim side, and was covered head to toe in a bronze complexion, no stranger to

tanning in broad daylight while scantily clothed in front of the house in full view of any nosy onlookers. She had not quite fully emerged from the 1970s, with its ostentatiously bright colors and patterns that could make anyone dizzy if they gazed at them for too long. She wore a plain white dress covered with an open jacket that was adorned in orange psychedelic pinwheels, leading one into a trance from which you could barely extricate yourself. She prided herself on having been able to maintain vegetarianism for the past forty years, growing all her own vegetables ever since the day she had taken a walk downtown in NYC and passed a butcher shop displaying in the window the traditional piglet hanging upside down with his eyes open, watching her. She never ate meat again and raised us vegan as well. I never confessed to her that I was given to moments of weakness when I would down a sausage or cheeseburger while nobody was watching.

“Duluth? You may as well have chosen Australia! At least there, you will find intelligent forms of life!” she uttered with disappointment, evidenced by the shrill crack in her voice from swallowing her tears at the thought of my leaving her. She sighed, configuring her hands into a prayer-like pose as if imploring me not to go. “Are you sure you’re going to be able to manage on your own out there? You don’t even have a treating physician. How will you get your medication?” My mother paced the room, wringing her hands. Her posture transitioned from that of a pleading parent to an outright concerned one. Her anxiety was taking a toll on her. She took a deep breath again before she continued. “We made a pact to take care of each other. I have to watch over you. It’s my duty as a mother. What if something happens? You will be too far away for your family to help you in a dire situation. Who will rescue you in the middle of a blackout in...in an isolated boarding room or wherever it might happen over there?” She had become overly melodramatic. Of course, the very first thing that would enter her mind would be an image of me passing out in the middle of a secluded boarding room!

“Mother, this is where the research institute is located. I’m fully certain there are intelligent life forms there. Just because they are in a micro-city doesn’t make them any less intellectual. I mean, visiting is always an option. It’s not as if I’ll be at the other end of the planet. This is serious. I may be at the forefront of something incredible. Perhaps I’ll find the one thing that every other researcher has overlooked. And I’m pretty sure there’ll be medical doctors and pharmacies near the lab. That will be the least of my concerns, trust me.” I turned my head to discretely roll my eyes at Mom. She meant well, I knew, but really had a way of skirting to the extreme at times.

“Okay, Corinne. Go save the world from the headquarters in Duluth, Minnesota. Incidentally, it’s not about trusting you. We’ve had this conversation before. You are in a permanently fragile predicament. Your safety is of utmost concern. You have nobody out there. What if you lose consciousness in the lab? You may very well be slumped over a chair or sprawled across a cold tile floor for days before someone finds you. Do you not understand the gravity of the situation?”

“I know how you feel, Mom. But I’m not a porcelain doll that can be kept in a cardboard box to avoid shattering. It’s time to spread my wings and leave the nest. This is life-changing. If this medication is effective, it could revolutionize medicine altogether. I have to take chances. If offered the position, I will keep in touch regularly just like we always do. I have not forgotten our special code when either of us is in trouble. Besides, the role is very competitive. I may not even get it. I was placed on this earth to save lives and will do so regardless of this or any other position. I know so little about it, in any event.”

“I’m confident you’ll get the offer, honey. If a twenty-eight-year-old expert in the field of cancer and genetic mutations is not offered the position, the judge involved must be overthrown.”

I could tell Mom didn't believe I could successfully do this, but if I hadn't felt in my gut that this was right, I would never have made the trip. At least *I* trusted my own judgment.

Chapter 2

The week came and went in a whirlwind. I was enthusiastic, to put it mildly, and considering the prospect of a free flight, with room and board, I had absolutely nothing to lose. I practically held my breath the whole flight. Once we touched ground on the landing pad, sheer excitement penetrated my core. It was only then that all this really started becoming a reality. I exclaimed, "This is it!" in a frantic yet matter-of-fact tone. Getting up too quickly, I was not prepared for the extent to which my legs began to wobble. I had no choice but to hold onto my seat to regain my balance enough to move again. By the time I gathered myself to exit the plane, I was half-expecting to find Dr. Perez waiting for me at the sidelines. I had gathered up everything I had learned about style, in passing, as little as it was, and had forced myself to put on a gray, form-fitting suit that day, which was visibly crinkled by the time I got up. I wore plain black pumps and had my hair styled in as tight of a bun as could be expected with my cropped haircut. Yet still, a lock of hair escaped and flew directly into my face. I ripped through a crowd of hundreds bumping into each other with little regard to their neighbors on either side and with little respect for the common decency to excuse themselves in doing so. They shuffled past me with briefcases on wheels, duffel backs tossed across their shoulders on one side and cranky curly-haired babies on the other. The sound of the shuffle of busy feet by far drowned out the overhead announcements. Possibly due to the announcements being inaudible to most, I detected racing passengers in my periphery, perplexed, late, and lost, about to miss their flights. I was exhausted for them but glad to be in a different predicament. Way ahead of me, the old and disabled passengers were being accompanied by flight attendants to the baggage claim downstairs, and subsequently, to meet their eager family members, who were perhaps alternating shifts with each other to care for them.

Much to my dismay, Dr. Perez had sent an associate in his stead, whom I could recognize only by the bold sign he held high above his head: *Welcome Dr. Corinne Magnolia*. He was a short, bizarre-looking man with a wiry mustache, bald head, pointy nose, elfin features, spectacles reminiscent of eyewear popular in the 1920s, and a grin that could shatter all the glass panels that adorned the semicircular configuration of the airport. His wide and artificial smile highlighted his two missing front teeth on the top, with the remainder of them bearing either a yellowish hue or the grayish-black that was reminiscent of advanced decay. He wore a top hat and black suit and, I noticed as I reached in for a hesitant handshake, apparently used a lot of Old Spice. I could never stand that smell. It reminded me of walking into a closet littered with mothballs. My hypersensitivity to smell left me on the verge of passing out as I breathed in the aroma produced by his aftershave-drenched body. The worst of it was his persistence in looking me up and down like I was an object for sale. I guess he had not expected me to be attractive in the least. His preconceived notions of a female physician undoubtedly centered on long-held stereotypes of a shrewd but unsightly, portly, elderly woman unable to attract members of the opposite sex. To think he actually believed he had a chance with me turned my stomach. I held my breath to ease my growing nausea and listened as Mr. Marone carefully removed a sheet of paper from his coat pocket. He cleared his throat, unfolded the paper, adjusted his glasses, and squinted with obvious uncertainty, making it clear that his grasp of the English language was doubtful even before he struggled to pronounce the second word.

I frowned, trying to understand what he was saying. *Why would such a brilliant physician choose a man of this caliber to be his personal assistant?* I wondered. It made little sense.

“Good afternoon, madam. I am Mr. Marone. You must be exhausted and fam-ished. I see you ’ave...thank-fully sur-vided the trip. I am Dr. Perez’s personal assistant. He has given me strict instructions to treat you with the ut-most respect and esteeeem. Please, do allow me to take your bag. I’m sure you have been fore-

warned about our extreme chill temper-a-tures and pri-stine landscapes.”

I nodded. “He has mentioned it. However, my knowledge of Duluth, Minnesota is limited to what I have read on the research institute. I very much look forward to the opportunity to speak with Dr. Perez in person. It seems he is on the brink of a major scientific breakthrough.”

“Yes, you will find him to be quite interesting, with a wild imagination and a knack for invention. Please, after you.”

The transportation arrangements had not been properly disclosed. I almost felt uneasy as we stepped out of the bustling terminal, and I caught sight of the stretch Bentley limousine glistening in the sun just beyond the curb. *Is this what the life of a research assistant is like?* I wondered as the chauffeur, a tall, thin man with a bland face, levered himself out of the front seat to open the back for me and my oddly dressed companion. I slid onto the dark, high-end fabric, a full bar and all the protection in the world at my disposal. Mr. Marone was courteous and respectful throughout the ride, saying little besides what had been spelled out for him on his cue cards.

He perused his cards, then read out: “Help yourself to anything you desire. It will be a one-hour drive to the hotel. Make yourself at home.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you very much for your hospitality.” I poured myself another glass of Merlot—I was now on my third—though I was careful to stop there so as not to lose consciousness. I was already tipsy and worried about making a bad impression on my new boss. In addition, I feared an adverse reaction when accompanied by my seizure medications. Imbibing alcoholic beverages had plummeted to the bottom of my pastime list after the initial thrill of turning twenty-one wore off and I suffered my first alcohol-induced blackout. I did not know this man and was not about to put myself in a vulnerable position, despite his apparent harmlessness.

Before I knew it, directly facing me was a palatial building overlooking the entire city. As I entered the revolving door, I was smitten immediately with the majesty of it all. The entryway was designed much like any Ritz Carlton or high-end hotel. The vaulted glass ceilings held my attention for at least a good fifteen minutes. Draped from the ceilings were equally exquisite chandeliers of the finest crystal descending at a slope-like angle ever so slightly as they reached the neighboring baby grand piano room. By the piano was a fully stocked, cream-colored, marble wrap-around bar area surrounded by matching marble tabletops and ivory-colored chairs. Attentive waiters approached the tables, satisfying their customers' every desire while bellboys and concierges greeted anyone waiting on the side benches for more than five minutes, offering a hand offloading luggage onto gilded carts. The glass windows extended all around the perimeter of the first floor, letting in the glorious rays of sunlight. The check-in area was equally breathtaking. Off to the right side was a steakhouse excluded to anyone without a reservation. I gasped in amazement. Something told me I hadn't even seen the half of it. Mr. Marone did his best to bring my attention back to reality, but this vivid dream wouldn't leave me that easily. According to Mr. Marone, the hotel was located just minutes from the research institute. He instructed me to present a card or pass at the front desk, which he handed me without delay. He told me they would be expecting me and left his contact information. I did as I was told and was immediately led by the concierge to the twenty-seventh floor. I froze in disbelief, blinking and pinching myself repeatedly, convinced this could not be real. The concierge, seemingly unfazed by the opulent surroundings, spoke to me as we boarded the elevator. Within seconds, we arrived at our destination.

“After you, please. I insist!” he said in a polished manner. “Madam, your host has given you exclusive privileges to the dinner menu. Please do order up until 11 p.m. I advise you to schedule your dinner as soon as possible as the prime selections run out quickly. Plus, you will need your beauty rest for the interview tomorrow. We have reserved our Diplomat Suite for 9 a.m. sharp. See you then.

Good luck,” uttered the twenty-something immaculately coiffed and dressed concierge in a rehearsed and cordial tone. He waited until my key card had made contact with the door lock and I was safely inside my room before departing back toward the elevator. I took a moment to peruse the room, which, as expected, was also luxurious. The bedroom housed a turn-of-the-century canopy bed, next to which was a chestnut wooden secretary writing desk with a Tiffany lamp and a large window overlooking a massive balcony, staring twenty-seven stories down. There was a lounge area with a full wine refrigerator containing every variety imaginable, facing an antique chestnut wooden recliner and footstool with crushed red velvet upholstery. The bathroom contained none other than an ivory-marble tiled shower alongside a Jacuzzi, facing a curtained window and twin sinks with bronze swan-neck faucets. I had almost forgotten about the laminated menu that sat patiently on the desk outside.

I browsed the menu, which included chef’s choice leg of lamb, fresh-caught sea bass, steak au poivre, and lobster soufflé. Decisions, decisions. I selected the lamb, made the phone call to request my order, and poured myself a nice glass of pinot noir off the top shelf above the perfectly chilled fridge, of which I vowed to take only a couple sips to get the edge off and alleviate the throbbing of my aching back. I got settled and inspected my suit, which was in an irreversible state of disarray, its white pinstripes scarcely visible. I lifted my hands to my hair, discovering it now completely tousled, eagerly escaping from the bun I had so carefully crafted. I sat down on the recliner, running my fingers across its velvety constitution and arching my head backward to crack my already sore back. I decided to call my mother as promised. I inspected the room briefly to ensure that I had not accidentally removed or displaced any of the precious accouterments. Satisfied with my surroundings, I picked up the phone to dial home.

After a brief explanation of the luxurious accommodations, I got nothing but dead silence on the line.

“Mother, are you still there?”

“Yes, just dumbfounded. It seems they sure are trying to seduce you with nice things so you will not be able to turn down the offer regardless of how ludicrous it might seem to an outsider. I can’t help but be a bit skeptical of all this. No better than a man trying to lure you into the bedroom with expensive gifts. Your father, however, would have just told me to let you be, let you create your own path, and stop passing judgment. So, are you happy so far?”

“Well, I was happy, having been so nicely serenaded and seduced, but you just rained on my parade. I just feel ever so hopeful of my future.”

“You know what, honey? I’m positive you’ll shine no matter what! You’re right. I’m going to stop standing in your way and just let you be. I’m sure you will make the right decision.”

“Thank you.”

“Truthfully, though...despite your father’s eternal words ringing in my ear, I do feel a duty to protect you still, even as a blossoming, grown woman. You are the baby of the family, that is a curse. But your brain... Well, we all know you’re a first-class genius! Your brother is one thing, but you...”

“I what?”

“You were the apple of his eye. Good luck tomorrow. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. Just remember: I’m only a PhD-level biochemist. It’s not exactly the same as an MD. I’m only supervised by MDs. Technically, I’m a philosopher, studying the mind-body balance as it relates to cancer. MDs are in charge of the real science. However, great to know I can always count on your undying support.”

This was an ongoing joke between me and Mom. She often referred to me as “Doctor” when speaking to outsiders, which would

lead them to question whether I was a true doctor or just some quack who studied brain-body balance. Never mind that the brain and the body feed off and interact in a continuum with each other.

No sooner had I hung up the phone than there was a brisk knock on the door. I stopped in my tracks, somehow fearing the strange little man who had escorted me to the hotel had returned for one last glance before morning. I could not put my finger on it, but there was something about him that seemed off. I got so enveloped in my brief memory of the man that I forgot about the dinner I had ordered. I opened the door. Sure enough, the concierge stood just beyond my room's threshold.

"Madam, dinner is served," he reported in a clipped, professional tone before adorning an affected smile. "Be careful—it is piping hot. Bon Appetit!"

"Thank you very much. Have a lovely evening." I tucked a \$10-tip into his pocket on his way out. He flashed another smile, tipped his head briefly in appreciation, and moved off to address his next customer.

I decided to take advantage of the scenic view from the balcony, the serenity of the sunset. Fortunately, the building was facing west. I sat at the simple yet lovely patio with my three-course meal, feeling the wind pull at my hair as fresh air filled my nostrils. My dinner was amazing, far superior to anything else I had had in a long time. I plunged into my own personal paradise for a while. The bay was just below, with trickling waves hitting the shore as if simply to say hello. People came and went, disappearing as tiny specks into the distance. I wondered what to expect next, given the opulence I had been met with so far. My suite was fit for a dozen people. I could only fathom attaining the level of success Dr. Perez enjoyed, being world-renown in his research. He had been studying medicine before I was born. And that led me to wonder: *What could he possibly want with an amateur just out of med school?*

I watched the sun gradually disappear into the horizon, fading from consciousness while the last morsel of my leg of lamb melted in my mouth. I fell into a state of reverie. When I awoke, it was already morning. I had not realized I had fallen asleep in the recliner not soon after the discussion with my mother had ended. I had forgotten to doff my famous gray suit before checking out. It was all the better. The thought of a standard bed often terrified me. I suppose that I always, in the back of my mind, held onto the prospect of being trapped in a supine position while being attacked. I knew the fear was irrational but could never shake it. I had thankfully made it through another night, my fleece blanket, which I had removed from my suitcase the night before, faithfully by my side. I took my time preparing myself and conducting mock interviews in front of my bathroom mirror, which more resembled the elaborate dressing parlor or powder room vanity of a royal palace rather than that of a simple hotel room. This time, I had decided on a navy-blue suit with slightly ruffled sleeves and flat moccasins, considering my comfort rather than anything else. I left my hair alone, frustrated with its lack of adherence to my directions to stay put, and decorated my face with some light powder, lip gloss, and mascara, which were more feminine than I was accustomed to. Soon enough, I had left my room and found myself drifting down the corridor, half-forgetting that I needed to search for the words “Diplomat Suite” on a door somewhere. Finally, I swung open the door and saw, seated at the tail-end of the conference table, none other than Dr. Perez. He motioned to me with an air of sincerity and joviality, then rose as I entered and summoned me toward him, though he decided, in the end, to meet me halfway. Seated immediately to Perez’s right was a familiar face—Marone, clad in a fresh, navy-blue suit, his bald head twinkling beneath the harsh, conference room lights. He offered a toothy grin as I approached them both. I was drawn more to the decency and command of Dr. Perez’s presence, which negated the onerousness of the little man next to him. I did remark to myself that Mr. Marone had another vital companion with him: a locked box, from which he removed a box of gloves, a rotten tomato with a pungent odor, and several labeled vials, which he placed in front of

him in a vertical storage apparatus. He also had, in tow, all he would need for the video projector.

“Please do not be shy. Pull up a chair and make yourself comfortable. Pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard so many good things about you.” Just as his voice on the line had initially conveyed, Dr. Perez was of reasonably tall stature, with broad shoulders and a warm smile. His deep brown eyes held much of his past but did not dwell on it. He was focused on the contours of my face as I approached him. His silky black hair did not have the misfortune of receding with age. His mustache was tame but thick and prominent nonetheless. He wore a long-sleeve, white, button-down shirt with a pleated collar neatly tucked into his dress pants. The room was typical of a conference room, devoid of any of the appeal of the rest of the hotel. The walls were plastered with neutral wallpaper, arbitrarily housing various works of abstract, modern art. The table was a sleek, black pressed board with matching chairs. It could most likely have seated close to fifty-five if the need arose. Fake potted plants sat at the corners, screaming *business as usual* to its guests—who surely would want to culminate their session quickly to return to the inspiration of the remainder of the hotel.

From whom? I wondered regarding his “heard so much about you” comment. *Who are his links to me? Has he read my publications?*

I smiled and chuckled lightly as I approached him, hand outstretched. “Don’t be ridiculous. I am honored to be here today. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.”

He grasped my hand and gave it a strong shake, eyes firm upon mine. “Oh, nonsense. I hope you have found your environment acceptable thus far.”

“Thank you, indeed. Your personal assistant was most helpful.” I sank into the chair immediately to the left of his.

“Good. Now, let’s not waste any time. We have much to discuss, and as you know, time is of the essence. I’m about to unleash a series of demonstrations that will have you falling out of your chair. Mr. Marone, please, exhibit one!” Dr. Perez methodically placed the pair of gloves on his hands.

I watched as Mr. Marone passed over a tiny tube with a lid, which he referred to as “Dr. Perez’s masterpiece.” He insisted that it blew all other treatments out of the water, then stood and moved to the wide-screen LED panel TV at the other end of the room. He wiggled a laptop out of the thin briefcase he carried with him and set it on the table. A bit of fiddling later, and he had connected the laptop to the TV, which lit up with video footage. He pressed buttons on the TV remote, and a pleasant male voice put content to the clinical lab scenes that unfolded, focusing on the origins of the materials and how they were refined to remove impurities or toxins. The video also touched on the machines used to detect the shrinking of the bacteria invading and activating the cancer gene. Marone paused the video at different intervals to offer the occasional comment. He must have sensed that I was trying to make out his thick accent, despite my multicultural European upbringing. Unbeknownst to me at the time, Marone was, among other things, a mind reader, an interpreter of the inner workings of man, so to speak. A true delight for someone well-versed in studying the human brain! Dr. Perez, as if demonstrating his own prowess in ESP, took that moment to quench my curiosity regarding his personal history.

“I was raised in Israel by Colombian parents. They wanted me to have the true experience of Judaism, surrounded by other Jews. As I got older, I broke free of this mentality, primarily because I was raised in a culture of violence, intolerance, and territory battles. In the heat of warfare between Palestinians and Jews, I fled to the US to attend medical school. I became fascinated with the various existing methods of cancer treatment, along with their side effects—which, in and of themselves, can be poisonous. I noticed one commonality between them all, which was that not one targeted the cancer cell itself without killing off the surrounding healthy cells—including but

not limited to the lymphatic system. Please, do take a look at this.” He emphatically raised his hands in an excited but controlled manner and nodded at me distinctly while passing me the test tube so I could inspect its contents.

I brought the tube to my eyes, rolling it gently between my fingers. At first, it looked like any other pharmacological substance I had seen. The substance’s brownish tint with gold flecks adorning the bottom of the tube was unremarkable. No doubt to him, it was pure gold. Surely, I would come to see it the same way eventually. It would just take time.

Perez went on:

“The majority will also weaken the immune system and damage healthy cells, making them susceptible to opportunistic infections. Let me show you something.”

He very meticulously, with one gloved hand, took a small piece of rotten tomato and placed it into the tiny vial. While the inner center was damaged, the outer edges remained intact. Once placed into the vial, the rotten portion disappeared, leaving a crevice in its place, while the outer section was undisturbed. There were no traces of the rotten portion at all within the vial, just the standard suspension I’d seen originally.

“Have no fear. Eventually, the section that appears as a crevice now will regenerate fleshy tissue, much like the limb of a starfish. Just envision this: If this small bit of a solution can perform so effectively on a tomato, imagine what it can do to a human cell that is a tiny fraction of the size of this piece of fruit. Enter Persiqua, the first of its kind, developed from strictly biological materials and marketed as an injectable. A series of ten treatments will be needed over the course of six months. After those treatments, *voila!* No more traces of cancer. Better still, the individual will feel as healthy and vibrant as before the cancer—if not more so! While the standard of present-day medical science is a recidivism rate above 20 percent, in

clinical trials, this percentage typically falls terribly short of this standard: 3 percent on average. Yet people faced with terrible diagnoses often grow so desperate that they are willing to cling to even the most minute increment of hope. Many do not seek treatment due to the expense or other factors until stage three or four. By this point, the cancer is metastasizing. The diagnosis becomes even more grim, with no localized site to serve as the focal point. Patients, understandably reluctant to face their own mortality, are still willing to succumb to the demands of modern medicine. Persiqua is prepared to tackle the cancer no matter the stage and can be marketed at a cost affordable to the average consumer.”

Out of breath, Dr. Perez reached for a glass of water on the table in front of him. Fiercely, he gulped the water down, then turned to me for affirmation—or confirmation that I had absorbed everything in his mile-a-minute monologue.

“I am intrigued, Dr. Perez. Please don’t let me stop you.” I smiled and offered an encouraging gesture.

“There’s just one problem: The drug has not been approved by the FDA since clinical trials, as a standard, are required to run for at least two years to validate its efficacy over a long-term period. The US government is even less forthcoming with approving drugs in general compared to international sources.”

I shook my head, not entirely trusting what I was hearing. “Wow, this is unbelievable! So, how exactly does this drug really work?”

“Good question. As I’m sure you’ve noted in your past research, the maturing of a cancer cell requires a trigger—a switch, so to speak. The trigger is most likely a microbe that disrupts the cell membrane by ‘fooling’ it into believing it is an antigen. Because antigens—otherwise known as ligands—fit together into a vibrating lock and key configuration, some microbes will distort the shape of the surface antigens, eventually knocking them out of their orbital positions on the cell and replacing them with themselves. This, in

effect, prevents healthy proteins from binding with them and disrupts the cell's overall homeostasis. The microbes will release endemic agents into the cell membrane, completely changing the characteristic of the cell. In this way, they are unlike typical antagonists as they will impact the overall functioning of the cell. Other microbes, which have a fluid shape, will rewire themselves to bind with the distorted surface antigens. Once together, the new locks and keys release a poison into the cell membrane to which the nucleus is permeable. The poison reteaches the cell to misbehave, and these cells replicate rapidly. There is only one way to prevent the transmission of this poison: release a powerful antibiotic into the bloodstream that is time-sensitive so that the red blood cells may transport it directly to the source."

"Yes, I see."

"A healthy cell will not be able to accept the said microbe any longer because the antibiotic counters the binding properties and subsequent release of poison. More healthy cells will be produced rather than destroyed since the cell can now perform its usual homeostatic operations. The Persiqua, among other ingredients, contains a high dose of antibiotics, probiotics, and prebiotics mixed with master proteins that restore the overall wellness of the cell. It has a very specific configuration of amino acids that make up the proteins, ones which have not yet been identified in the US. As we know, more and more amino acid compounds are discovered every year. I have defined the chemical structure for this cancer-cell-specific molecular compound over the course of decades of medical research. Since it is strictly composed of organic compounds found in differing quantities in the human body itself, the body does not reject it. It is also only sensitive to cancer-activated cells," Dr. Perez exclaimed excitedly, out of breath once again.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. "Wow...I'm speechless. According to my calculations, well, no offense, but this is theoretically impossible. The antibiotics and formula you just mentioned may attack the cancer cells or bounce the microbes

causing the cancer off their corresponding receptors, but they cannot restore a damaged immune system in the throes of a stage-three or -four cancer. How do you propose to radically correct the immune system and then anticipate that it will perform independently once the drug is discontinued? As you say, the treatment duration will be for six months only. In addition, do you plan on administering the treatment to subjects at all stages of cancer, say, even stage four, a stage at which chemotherapy is no longer even recommended? And if so, how will you, from an ethical standpoint, promise these end-stage subjects treatment that could, in their minds, potentially prolong their lives without this guarantee in actuality?"

Perez smiled and nodded like a teacher proud of a student. "Excellent questions. You are astute and not inclined to trust blindly in the credentials of a refined physician. Very good. You have passed the first stage of your interview. I regret to inform you that even the most talented magician does not give away his secret formula entirely." He leaned back in his chair, his intense eyes studying me. "At least know that there must be a price involved. You will need to sign a non-disclosure agreement and contract as have all the subjects selected. During the trials, nobody is to be made privy to any element of the formula or function performed or analysis of the result data until they have been concluded at the end of the two-year period. You are right. There is no guarantee. But I hold onto a sense of hope, even if it is minute, that if the occurrences of deaths from cancer were even decreased by 2 percent, it would have been worth it. We've both watched the human body in action, beheld mysterious happenings that are left unexplained even by science. Nothing is guaranteed. Does that mean there should be no passion? Martyrs didn't walk the earth at one time thinking about the outcome of their good deeds. They simply performed the deeds." He spread his hands. "I, for one, know that I have embarked on something great. Whoever shall follow me shall do so of their own volition."

"Magician?" I responded quizzically, remembering his earlier reference to wizardry and the secrets involved with the craft.

Now Perez's eyes glowed with a brilliant light. "You've never viewed yourself as a magician, Corinne? A doctor of philosophy such as yourself, right up there with the great thinkers of modern times, postulating theories of the mind and how they connect to medical science?" His brows lowered knowingly. "Your proposals have always been a long shot, theories in need of something to be declared valid. I'm sure you have encountered many a skeptic and turned him into a believer. Is that not magic?"

I cocked my head thoughtfully. "Your method of thinking is fascinating."

He grinned. "You have barely grazed the surface of it, my dear!"

He then proceeded to wave his arm in the air in a rhythmic motion, his lips pursing to make various sound effects. "Poof! Magic!"

He watched me closely to ascertain my reaction. I could only smile nervously. It was the first time I had heard of a doctor of philosophy being likened to a purveyor of magic. But I supposed, in a sense, that could be accurate. Getting others to believe a theory based on a carefully contrived experiment and the resulting data was quite a magic spell indeed.

I observed the man, wondering if he found me anywhere near as fascinating as I did him. What struck me most about him was his sincerity and the fact that he shared my philosophy of life. Why not take a risk? Otherwise, what was the point of it all? That left only one more question as far as I was concerned. "So, what are the side effects?"

"The afflicted individual may experience tingling headaches or some bizarre behaviors initially, but this is just a sign that his or her body is adapting to a foreign substance." Perez waved a hand as if dismissing an annoying fly. "It mimics the effects of a kidney transplant except that the subject will only reject the first two to three treatments but will very quickly recover. No antiretroviral treatments

will be necessary. You will have much work to do in convincing your subjects to remain in the study once they begin to experience some of these effects.”

I blinked in surprise. “I will? And where will you be during this process?”

Dr. Perez gazed at me with a reassuring smile. “I will be within arm’s reach. It will be my responsibility to recruit the subjects and yours to administer the medication and conduct the laboratory analysis under my indirect supervision, of course. I imagine your hands are quite capable, given your history. I will review all the reports and direct you to change any methods if necessary. I will check in with you at least once per week; that is, if you are selected. I must alert you that there is an expansive pool of candidates who, of course, cannot all be selected. The study is taking place in several states, so some willing candidates will be assigned to, for example, a lab in North Dakota. Your application will be reviewed by a screening committee over the next couple of weeks. If you are chosen, you will receive a congratulatory phone call at that time.”

“In all my prior experiences, I worked directly with the physician in the laboratory. A seasoned physician will be needed for the analysis.”

“As I plan to be. I will need to check in with the lab managers in other states periodically, just as I will do with you. Therefore, I cannot be present at all times. I have full confidence in you, but ultimately, the decision is yours. Just so you know, the labs have been managed in Columbia and Israel very well. In those countries, it is far easier to patent an invention. The bylaws in the US are a thousand pages in total. Navigating them and operating within that system presents a challenge. But I am not worried in this case.”

With that, he dropped a silver key onto the table and then handed Mr. Marone the vial he had taken out at the outset of the interview, asking him to place it back in its original location for safekeeping. I

shuddered to think that somehow, someone had given out my credentials. I didn't recall having applied to this specific position, though maybe I had just been inundated with a pile of resume copies for so long, I had lost track of where they had all been sent. But, I was usually organized. I didn't know whether to be concerned about that or elated. The moment was fleeting, however, and overpowered by his self-assurance of his new drug; he was so charismatic and convincing, it seemed virtually impossible to refuse his offer. At what point in my life had it been so effortless to ace a job interview?

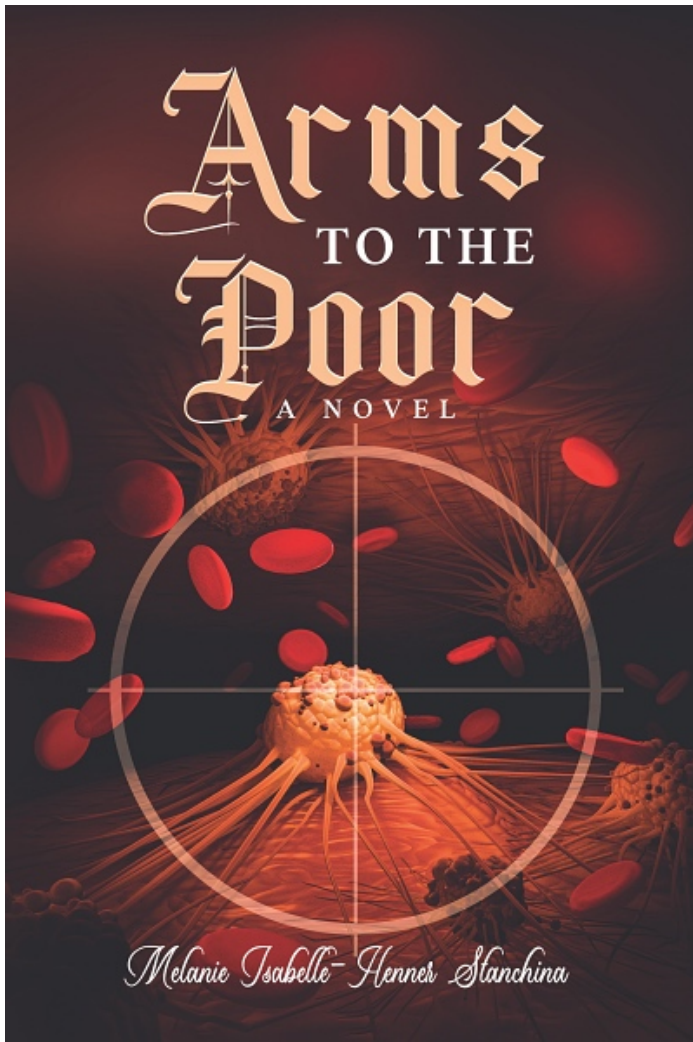
“Let me be firm. I mentioned to you earlier in our conversation that there is a non-disclosure agreement included with the contract. Being as the entire procedure will be self-contained within the lab, no hospitals should be involved or outside physicians since they will surely interfere by performing unnecessary tests and administering medications that may counteract the effects of the Persiqua. No outside sources, news agencies, or other media should be contacted to disclose the procedures or outcomes of the study. It is strictly confidential. We can never reveal details on a medication that has not been approved by the FDA. Just think—the recognition you so crave could be at your fingertips. Everyone will remember you as the young lady who cured cancer. Just imagine the magnitude of that discovery, Corinne. If you are selected, trials will begin the following week. The research center at the university has issued a grant for this project, which includes a stipend for your housing as well as a generous base salary. After two years, your obligations will have been met, and you will be free to leave the compound. The subjects are all set to enter phase one. The only thing missing is you. *Ciao* for now. I will be hearing from you soon. Don't think too hard.” He gave me a playful wink, then offered a soothing grin that suggested that everything would be just fine.

I walked out in a state of utter shock. He had ended the conversation with a bizarre question—whether I believed there to be any reason I might not be competent to complete the course of the study. I conveniently concealed the ordeals I had suffered in having my life saved. It was an honest answer, at least in my mind. I'd never

viewed my brain as being compromised or my seizures as limitations or shortcomings. They may have been mild flaws, sure, but not unlike the flaws endured by others. Notions of human normalcy were, after all, tenuous at best.

Back in my room, I mulled over the interview. Reading Dr. Perez's motives behind his slick, debonair manner was like analyzing the "L" and "D" presentations of dihydro-chlorohexane. *What am I getting myself into?* I wondered. But his siren song had resonated with me. Imagine, me, the young woman who cured cancer. Still, I knew there had to be a host of opportunities of the same magnitude elsewhere and much closer to home. A million thoughts raced through my mind, but in the end, nothing could steer me away from pursuing my lifelong dream. Finally, I understood the meaning behind the brain cancer I had been stricken with at such a young age. I had asked why so many times. Why it had happened to me. Now, finally, it all made sense.

My decision would not be without its share of complications. What would I tell my mother? My brother had already left home to join a large business accounting firm in Seattle, and now, I, her youngest, was headed to Minnesota in the hopes of implementing a cure for cancer. Mom, with nothing to think about except her empty nest, wouldn't know what to do besides get into trouble.



Dr. Corinne Magnolia embarks on a new assignment that appears to be a dream-come-true on the surface. In time, she realizes she is but a pawn in the nefarious plot of a group of criminal masterminds, leading directly back to Washington, DC.

Arms to the Poor

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