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GATEKEEPER

A novel by

TERRY L. CRAIG

CHAPTER ONE

HE HOPED HE WOULDN'T GET SICK. HE WAS ABOUT TO BE led into a hospital operating suite and didn't know how he'd react when he saw the real thing. News cameras were rolling, and bursts of light from still cameras flashed like assault weapons all around him.

Don Cole wanted to appear intelligent, poised, and focused. He had gotten only five hours of sleep on a bus and had a minor headache going.

How do people with families do this? he thought. He was glad to be single. He had seen too many "campaign wives." They were either hard as nails or overwhelmed and shot down in the first couple of months. Without a wife or children he was free to devote every waking moment to the race. And as a candidate for president of the United States, Donald Larson Cole hoped to take advantage of every "photo op" he could get.

His trusted friend and campaign manager, Bob Post, had arranged this visit to a hospital just outside Cleveland, where some of the latest medical breakthroughs were

being put to use. Don thought it was a great idea to have his name mentioned in the same sentence as "cure for cancer," "breakthrough in diabetes," or some other medical miracle. The quality and cost of medicine still ranked as hot topics, and he wanted to jump right into the fray, a leader fighting for premium care at less cost. Caring for America.

Now he was about to witness a new type of surgery that represented years of research and the latest developments in technology—a revolution in medicine. He had seen it on film, but now he would soon see it in person, with the press watching. He could feel a trickle of sweat run down his back. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

I am calm; I am focused, he thought as the volleys of light bombarded his eyes. To his relief, all the cameras and microphones suddenly turned in the opposite direction as Dr. Damian Walsh, who was to perform the operation, entered the room.

"Dr. Walsh, is this your most famous spectator?" asked one of the reporters, referring to presidential candidate Cole.

"Well, yes, but to tell you the truth, the Surgeon General would probably make us more nervous," he replied with a smile. A brief flutter of laughter floated through the assembled press.

"Mr. Cole is about to witness a surgery that challenges what have been the confines of medicine for more than a century," the doctor said. "In addition to the technological components, known collectively as 'the capsule,' we use a process that has taken years to perfect. These are joined with special training techniques for surgical teams and give the patient the benefit of all that modern science has to offer.

"The capsule can be used anywhere electricity can be generated. And once the patient is in the capsule, sterilization of medical personnel attending the patient will no

longer be required. In some cases, where there is modem link-up, the doctor could be in New York and the patient could be in a capsule in Miami!

"Mr. Cole and the preselected members of the press will observe the removal of a cancerous tumor. At the end of the operation, written handouts will be made available to the press, and a brief time of questions and answers will be permitted.

"And now, Mr. Cole, shall we proceed?" Dr. Walsh said, motioning toward the doors.

Don took a deep breath as all of the cameras and microphones swung with a single motion back to him. He nodded with the look of someone who was ready for business and headed for the doors.

He proceeded across the room and followed Dr. Walsh through the doors with the selected reporters quickly closing in behind them. All of them were still wearing their street clothes.

Don's eyes were drawn to a large, transparent cylinder on a wheeled support structure that dominated the center of the room. It was bigger and rounder than a coffin, but that was what came to mind as Don looked at it for the first time.

The patient inside the cylinder, a middle-aged man, remained completely visible. Cole noted the wide band of opaque plastic material that was stretched around the man from his shoulders to the end of his rib cage, and the other wide bands circling his hips, legs, and forehead. The bands both covered him and held him down to the narrow shelf that ran through the center of the capsule.

Just like a mummy, Don thought.

What looked like a diving mask covered the man's eyes and nose, and a breathing tube was taped in his mouth.

A group of small, but powerful, lights and a small camera lens were suspended above the patient from a rod that ran the full length of the capsule. The lights could be moved along the rod to illuminate any area below.

Two sets of gloves, which fit the hands to well above the elbow, sat on either side of the capsule. They could move lengthwise along the capsule in a slot that maintained an airtight seal.

"The patient in the capsule," Dr. Walsh began, "is 'Mr. X,' and I will ask the media, once again, not to photograph his face. Mr. X, a Caucasian, is forty-seven years old and has worked in construction for twenty-nine years. During recent tests a tumor was discovered in his colon, and today we are going to remove it."

The doctor nodded to three people waiting near the capsule, and they moved to their posts around the patient and inserted their hands in the gloves.

"Everything inside the capsule has been sterilized, and all the instruments we should need are on a shelf beneath the patient, in front of the nurses."

Some of the spectators moved to the other side to gain a better view.

"If an unanticipated need arises, sterile instruments can be loaded into the air lock at the end of the capsule, the end sealed, and then opened on the inside by a nurse and placed on the shelf or handed to me.

"Much of the surgery will be done with lasers, so loss of blood will be minimal. Any flow of blood will be suctioned out of the capsule with this hose and deposited here, where, in some cases, it can be cleaned and recycled back into the patient," he said as he pointed under the capsule to a container.

"As you can see, there is virtually no chance for the spread of germs to the patient or from the patient. I can stand here in my street clothes along with all of you and maintain a cleaner environment around Mr. X than if we had all scrubbed up.

"With the latest in robotics and communications, even complicated operations can be performed by doctors who are not even with the patient. They can receive a live feed from the camera above and manipulate robotic arms that

will mimic every move their hands make when fitted with computer-monitored gloves.

"The applications—on the battlefield, in remote locations, and small towns—are endless!"

Dr. Walsh had missed his calling as far as Don was concerned. He kept everyone so entertained, he should have been an actor. He filled the room with impressive medical chatter while removing a tumor! This guy was good.

Once outside the operating room, Don felt back in his own element. He would let Dr. Walsh have a few moments in the sun (hospitals and doctors always appreciated the right kind of free publicity), then he would give an interview. Don had studied health reform and had well-crafted statements on AIDS, the patient's right to die, abortion, and a dozen health-related issues that could be the kiss of death to his campaign if he were not careful.

He came to the podium with a memorized statement. When he finished giving it, he would accept a limited number of questions from the assembled media.

Bob, his campaign manager, held his breath and prepared to watch the sparring begin.

"As we have seen today," presidential candidate Cole began, "the world of medicine stands poised at a gate leading to a new echelon of excellence. A whole new realm where not only the length of life is increased, but the quality of life as well.

"But passage through this gateway and others beyond it is not guaranteed. It's an exploration, an uncertain pilgrimage, and it will not be without cost. If we are to venture into this new realm, there will be a price to pay in dollars and lives. Today we have seen dedicated men and women who have devoted themselves to this new era of medicine. How far can they go? Not much further without money.

"The current administration has seen fit to cut the funds for medical advances time and again while continuing to

finance such things as 'police actions' on foreign soil and refurbishing the Oval Office.

"If elected, I pledge to search for every creative way possible to give the scientific and medical communities what they need to make our lives, the lives of our parents, and the lives of our children better." Don Cole looked around at the sea of hands as reporters vied for the privilege of shooting loaded questions at him. *Let the war games begin.*, he thought, and pointed to a man in the front row. "Yes, you."

The man stood and said, "Mr. Cole, in recent months the public has been made aware of projects that are exploring brain cell manipulation and hormonal, gene, and chemical therapies in order to 'rejuvenate' the elderly and make their latter years more productive. If they succeed, would you be in favor of raising the age at which one can receive retirement and medical benefits?"

Whoa! Let's just start with the hand grenades, why don't we, Don thought. "Well, thank you for asking that. Actually," he cleared his throat, "I am aware of some of the advances being pursued in geriatric medicine. If you look, I think you'll see I have an excellent track record of supporting programs to benefit those over sixty-five.

"As some of you know, my father died of Alzheimer's disease three years ago, and my mother suffers with painful arthritis every day. If anything could be done to restore someone else's father in the future or make my mom's life better, you bet I'd be all for it. As for retirement and medical benefits, what intelligent person would address that before the situation was actually on the horizon?"

Bob Post smiled. If Cole didn't want to argue, no one could get him to do so. He fielded questions with an intelligence and grace that were certain to make him the next president of the United States.

Always wanting to leave them hungry and noting that the press conference had gone on for about ten minutes,

Bob gave Don the cue to wrap it up. Cole gave him a slight nod of acknowledgment, but he decided to take one last question from an attractive female reporter in the third row. She stood, and as she spoke, the room grew quiet.

"Mr. Cole, I have just finished a lengthy investigation of this medical facility and am prepared to prove that in another building scientists and doctors from this hospital are conducting human cloning and genetic experimentation. They are engaging in *interspecies* engineering—specifically chimpanzee/human. Should they be allowed to do this? Where do *you* stand on this issue?"

Don Cole blinked. For a moment, he thought he could hear his own heart beating.

Bob grabbed his assistant and whispered, "Who is that woman? Find out immediately . . . is she a crackpot or something? And get hold of our legal . . ."

After a moment of silence, Cole looked right at the woman and started to laugh. It was contagious, and soon others were laughing, too, as if the whole thing had been some sort of joke for a network comedy show. He regained his composure and said, "Well, I guess that's about all for today." He held both hands up to say goodbye to all, stepped away from the podium, and moved off into a side room.

Bob leaned over to his assistant again. "Never mind."

Within minutes all of the reporters had packed up and left. All but one. She waited until Cole and his entourage appeared and approached him. He breezed right by her and kept moving.

"Why did you do that to me?" she yelled after him.

He stopped and turned.

Bob Post stepped in front of Cole quickly. "Steady, boy; she could be taping this whole thing, just waiting for you to trip up."

Don looked at her again. She was lovely, but obviously a loose cannon. "Listen, ma'am, this was my show, not yours."

"My name is Linda Posner. I asked you a question, and you laughed at me."

"You didn't really ask me a question. You spewed out some possibly libelous dribble and then waited for attention. You're lucky I laughed. Maybe you'll be able to keep your job. If I'd answered you by any other means, you'd be in big trouble right now. This way no one took you seriously, and you're off the hook."

Her eyes narrowed. "Every word I said was true, and I was willing to prove it."

"Sure," he chuckled. "And you planned on holding your own press conference after mine?"

"It's the truth!" she exclaimed, fighting back tears.

Cole walked up, stood almost toe to toe with her, and looked down at her. *She's so young*, he thought. *Was I ever this young?*

"Listen," he said softly, "it's not about the truth; it's about power. You haven't got any. Go out and grab little fish first, then the bigger ones. Grow up, or the sharks will eat you without a second thought."

He turned and left the building.

When they were outside, Bob asked, "Do you think she was telling the truth?"

Don looked at the surrounding buildings, "Who knows? She very well could be. Just consider the possible motives. Eventually, corporations might have to stop using Third World children and prisoners to do their slave labor for them. What better replacement than someone who has the strength—and possibly some of the skills—of a human, but no 'human' rights? Scary thought, isn't it?"