

**PROLOGUE: ISAIAH SQUARE, 2049**

Dr. Aviva Wiseman and Isaac Mejia de Chanchavac, long-time colleagues and sometime lovers, are on the annual, all-expenses paid Renaissance Pharmaceuticals company retreat. It's a special year. The CEO, Dr. Ralph "Zuck" Zuckerman, and the chairman of their Board of Directors, Bradley Chu, have invited the entire Renaissance team to the Grand Opening Weekend at Isaiah Square, humanity's first orbiting space colony.

Aviva and Isaac sit on the carpet on either side of a rustic wood coffee table in the Honeymoon Suite. Their socks are off, their bare feet touching under the table legs.

At the center of the table, on a small white teacup saucer, sits a lifetime dose of Melodicin – all-time record-breaking pharmaceutical blockbuster, and the only product Renaissance has ever manufactured.

Melodicin is the master medicine, the mender of souls and bodies, the liberator of prisoners and the guardian of civility. To an untrained eye, this seven-compartment miracle might look like a regular pill -- oblong, off-white, preternaturally smooth. But Aviva Wiseman immediately spots the trademark sticker. It's the size and color of a fresh pinprick --a red R inside a six-pointed star. Retail pharmacies receive boxes of the stuff with the label already scrubbed off.

"I see you came prepared, Lamb," Aviva says.

Isaac gazes at her, wide-eyed and expectant. "I did, girl -- did you? Show me our diamond ring. Or forget the ring, but put something on the table."

"Fine."

Aviva pulls out a pocket photograph of their 19-year old son, Jacob, and his lover Ahmed Al-Tikri. She snapped it last week at the beginning of Jacob's high school prom. They wore matched tuxedos, in spinning kaleidoscope patterns of blue and purple.

Aviva decides to be blunt. "Look, I won't dance around this, Lamb. We want you. We really want you. Jake and I study every fold in your cheeks. We memorize your words. We spend a day shopping for your birthday gifts. I know you've never lived

in our house, but you've cared for him in every other way you could. Since the day he was born."

Through the window, Aviva can see the Earth, sparkling and spherical and bluish-green, gliding by in the darkness of space. Two vases of hibiscus flowers, bathed in the gentle light of fusion-powered sunlamps, adorn each end of the windowsill. Then she notices the moisture in Isaac's eyes. She shakes her shoulders around, to relieve the tightness in her tense muscles.

"So I want you to marry me," she says, "and move up here to Isaiah Square."

"You sure, now?" Isaac says hoarsely.

"I mean it, babe. I've thought this through. The homes are already on the market, and I've got a down payment. The boys can stay with us until they're ready to buy their own place down along the Hull. Jacob can do college online. Nobody up here cares about the credential anyway, as long as he can do the hauling and planting and fix broken robots. Will you do it?"

"Aviva Wiseman, I been waiting for thirty years for you to ask that question."

"I know. So say yes."

Isaac shakes his head slowly. "Not so fast. Get melted first."

He pushes the pill in her direction, but Aviva freezes. She wants her Lamb, but maybe not that much. "Come on, Isaac. You know me -- I tough things out..."

"No side effects, babe."

"Please don't. It could be a deal-breaker."

Isaac is undeterred. "I'm gonna ask you a question, Doctor Wiseman. You spent your life working for the company that manufactures this drug. You know every tiny miracle it does to a brain. To sick neurons, weak immune cells. You've seen me -- monster before, man after. Every one you know is melted -- well, almost."

Aviva's parents, like her, remain proudly un-melted.

"And you've seen for yourself, Viv. We've blossomed and grown."

Aviva nods. "I know."

"So why you biting the horse?"

"You mean the hand. The hand that feeds you."

His gaze is unrelenting, his fists half-clenched. Aviva's eyes wander away and down. She is 47, two years younger than he, and her upper arms have developed the tell-tale splotches of age. Aside from the whiteness of tensed muscle, Isaac's skin is smooth, packed with collagens still.

"Back at you, Lamb," she says. "What makes you such an - advocate?" She wants to say "fanatic" but stops herself. "What has Melodicin done for you that makes it so important for me?"

"You got a day to listen to my life story?"

"I do, Lamb, I do. Dinner at the Spaceship Dock is in seven hours and forty-two minutes."

"And you? You gonna tell me what your problem is with Melodicin?"

"Sure. I'll 'fess up too." After thirty years of stop-go loving, Aviva thinks, it is about time for her and the Lamb to get to know each other. "I'll even go first."

As Aviva is getting her thoughts together, they hear knocks at the door, three short, sharp machine-gun raps, and on the door's other side, the booming voice of a man who needs answers quickly. "It's Bradley Chu. Can I come in please?"

No one keeps Bradley Chu waiting. He is the man with the money, the Master of the Universe investor who has bankrolled Renaissance Pharmaceuticals since its inception in a downtown Los Angeles garage. "Come in," Aviva and Isaac say together.

Brad strides into the Suite, grim, determined and ready for a fight. He carries a small holographic disc in his right hand. Six feet tall and wire-thin, he wears his wavy black hair cut just below the ears and sculpted with gel. In honor of the company retreat, he wears a glittering crimson suit and two silver earrings. Without a word of greeting, Brad crosses the room and sticks the disc into a slot next to the light switch on the empty white wall, across from the Earth-view window. As he flips it on, the wall screen lights up. Aviva and Isaac's reaction is automatic; they shift their chairs to watch the show that's about to begin.

CAPTAIN TRUTH: Broadcast I

The show begins with sounds of whistling wind and ringing bells. A deep male voiceover says "BEFORE THE RECORD: CATCH THE NEWS BEFORE IT BREAKS!" A white point on a black background expands into a radiant blob of white light, then a life-size avatar, a masked figure in a top hat and a bright red body suit with an open eye in the center. The only visible body parts are two hands holding a silver pen and notepad. The avatar speaks in an androgynous tenor voice with the throaty, hushed tone of ghost stories on Halloween.

"Welcome to Before the Record, Captain Truth reporting."

The darkness around Captain Truth morphs into a panoramic view of Isaiah Square from the window of an approaching spaceship.

"Fellow truth seekers," the avatar announces, "if you have never believed in conspiracies, now is the time to change your mind!"

There is a close up of the space ship docking station on Isaiah Square, surrounded by two-storey buildings.

"In the last few years, while you've been busy making ends meet, the governments of China and the United States have spent hundreds of billions of your tax dollars to build this luxury resort in space. Welcome to Isaiah Square, folks... a construction project in near Earth orbit, unprecedented in its scale and complexity. Looks great,

right? Two square miles of comfortable homes, stores, and offices with a view of Earth and the stars through every window, powered by sunlight and nuclear fusion. It's completely self-sufficient, has enough air, water, plants and animals on board for five thousand people to live comfortably forever, without returning to ground. Isaiah Square, open for business. And guess what, folks-- you are NOT invited! Not unless you've been personally selected by the leadership team. Here they are, and here's what their new space gig is worth in year-end bonuses..." Three life-size photographs of Renaissance executives appear on the screen, each with eight-digit dollar figures above their heads.

"Look, Brad -- you're smiling!" says Aviva, pointing to his image on the wall screen.

Brad switches the broadcast off. "God damn it, Aviva," he shouts, "it's not funny!"

"Cool it," Aviva says.

The investor collects himself, breathing deeply for a few seconds. "This is an inside job; we found the disc on board. It could blow up in our faces."

"So what did you come in here for?" Aviva asks.

Bradley pockets the disc. "Like I said, it's an inside job. A leak."

Aviva and Isaac are silent.

"Your contracts are crystal clear," Bradley says quietly, looking directly at Aviva. "Renaissance employees protect trade secrets at all times. If I find out that either of you has leaked confidential information to the press, or facilitated the leaking of information, I'm kicking you off Isaiah Square for good and I will do everything in my power to get you fired." He turns around and walks out, shutting the door behind him.

Aviva and Isaac look at each other.

"You're confessing first, right?" Isaac asks.

"Not quite yet." Aviva turns the wall screen back on. "Bradley would be a terrible spy. He forgot to stop save, and the Captain Truth disc automatically backed up."

Isaac brushes phantom strands of hair out of his eyes and shakes his head. "It don't concern us, babe."

"How can you be sure unless we look at it?"

Aviva knocks quickly on the screen, which responds to voice and touch commands, and fast-forwards Captain Truth through the Isaiah Square sequence. No secrets there; it's all stock images and panorama shots. Then she calls out "Play!"

#### CAPTAIN TRUTH: BROADCAST 2

Captain Truth reappears on the wall screen, suspended in mid-air among images of Ancient Roman ruins, cobblestone alleyways and fountains. He begins flying through the sky, above a weaving line of automobiles on a busy two-lane highway, and passes a street sign in Italian -- "Via Cassia." The road meanders past brick and stucco apartment buildings. After a few seconds, he reaches the entrance to a complex of stately old buildings, including a 19th century villa and a stone amphitheater. Then the view from the wall screen pans closer in, and focuses on the hallway of a school, lined with lockers and populated by teenagers walking, running, and chatting with one another. It's a period piece. The background music is 1980s disco. Students are entirely bare-headed, and wear static-color clothes.

"Folks, this is an old story. It begins 65 years ago, in the hallways of a small bilingual high school in the suburbs of Rome, Italy, where the privileged children of the local aristocracy once came to learn English and prepare for American colleges. Although the school is gone now, two of its graduates have become household names. In the fall of 1984, a quirky young television writer named Robert Zuckerman arrived from Los Angeles. He took the campus by storm with his love of literature and his delight in cultivating student talent. His plan was to teach English for a few years and write a screenplay that would make him a player in Hollywood. Well, he did both of those things, and much more. By 1987 he had written the screenplay, sold it, and returned to Los Angeles to launch a successful entertainment career. Two of his star students followed him. Giulia Valentino Borghese became his wife and the mother of his son. Giuseppe Romero, a childhood friend of Ms. Valentino Borghese, became a Franciscan friar and spiritual mentor to thousands of LA gang members. When Robert Zuckerman died of a heart attack in 2009, he left Ms. Valentino Borghese \$10 million and a nondescript plot of land in downtown Los Angeles. The inheritance was sizable, but its legacy has been vast -- a rolling storm of social changes greater, and perhaps more destructive, than even the wisest forecasters of the time could have imagined...."

"I know this shit already," Isaac says. He waves his hand at the screen to shut it off, but turns the volume higher instead. "It's you I want to learn about, girl. You're the divine mystery."

Aviva picks up the remote control from the counter, and flips off the show with a fierce jerk of the wrist. Captain Truth disappears. "Divine mystery? Damn it, Lamb -- don't you dare. Don't you DARE make me into a character in a morality play."

"OK, OK," the Lamb responds, grinning. "Just tell your story."

## PART I: THE LAST DAYS OF MADNESS

### 1. Desire

Wiseman Condominium, San Fernando Valley, October 2009

Aviva Wiseman was six, and that was little compared to grownups, but she was already a big girl who could take care of herself. She could write her name -AVIVA- with confidence across the top of every school assignment, in small or large print. It was true that she liked to whine and grumble about brushing her teeth, and sometimes she would say to her Daddy that she'd gotten the top of her mouth and the back and had counted to one hundred, even when she really hadn't. But she did go to the potty on her own now, even when Mommy didn't remind her.

Viv also knew that every one, old and young, would notice how she dressed, so she never left the house without a glittery hairband. She was so proud of her short, thin blond hair that she usually waited patiently as her Mommy combed it in the mornings. And even when Mommy or Daddy chose her clothes, they would make sure to give her matching black and pink outfits to wear just about every day. Since she was a big girl, and she knew how to act nice, the girls in her class were all her friends. They wanted to come over for play dates. When she got excited about circle time, and the Activity Groups, and ballet, they got excited too and copied what she said and did. She liked to include every girl in her games. She would run everywhere and she'd always tell herself stories.

The Genesis game started one Sunday morning in mid-October when Aviva was six years old. She trotted with her Daddy through the front door, and they dashed up together to her room. She immediately got busy drawing rainbow-colored flowers and dashing squirrels and a blazing pink-orange sun onto some construction paper, which she placed carefully in the middle of the floor. Rabbi Frank had taught the Hebrew school class that day to the first graders, and the subject was Bereshit, the Beginning in Hebrew.

They used “little people” dolls for Adam and Eve, a smiling pink plastic lizard for the Serpent, and two lego trees. A fence of building blocks decorated with letters, words and illustrations served as the fence around the Garden. About five minutes before Mommy was expected home, they were done --no doll for God of course – and Aviva chose this time to drop her bombshell. In the deep voice of God she said

“Adam and Eve, if you eat from the tree of knowledge, you will die.”

And then Aviva’s baby-girl Eve voice responded, “But God, I want to know everything!”

Daddy interrupted her.. “Viv, that’s not how the story goes!” Without so much as looking up, the Queen of Earth and Heaven responded—calm, even, offhanded ...

“I know Daddy. I like this better. Rabbi Frank said we can change the stories if we like sometimes.”

Viv moved her Eve doll up the tree of knowledge to eat an imaginary fruit, juicy and sweet. She had Eve smack her lips, say “yum,” and then ask, “Now God, are you sure I have to die now?” Then Viv put on her Deep God voice, while her Daddy looked on, speechless.

“Now come on Eve, you know what we agreed. You have to die because you broke the rules.”

Now Viv used her sweet Eve voice again. “Can’t I just live forever like you? I promise I won’t do anything bad.”

Viv’s God voice: “Eve, you’re being very rude and disrespectful.”

Viv had heard her Daddy say those words to her sometimes. They sounded suitably angry.

“Please, God? Please, please, please?” the Eve doll pleaded. Meanwhile, the Adam doll wasn’t saying a word. Aviva didn’t like giving boys any parts in her plays. There was a moment of silence in the Garden of Eden.

“Well,” God responded, still deep and disembodied, “you have to do it on your own honey. In the meantime, you and Adam will have to leave the Garden because you’ve got some growing up to do.”

Daddy had said that to Aviva too.

“You will have to endure the pain of childbirth, and Adam is going to become dust again, and you’ll have to make yourself clothes too, so get to work.”

Having spoken, the voice of God dissolved into nothingness, and Aviva marched the Adam and Eve dolls out of the Garden of Eden. Next, she started to build Adam and Eve’s lego house.

Just then, Aviva and her Daddy heard the key in the door. Mommy was home from her yoga class, and it was almost time to make brunch. But Aviva wasn’t ready to stop playing.

“I’m going to say hi to Mommy,” said Daddy. He got up and walked out.

“Close the door,” Aviva said. Daddy obediently closed the door.

While Daddy was downstairs to see Mommy, Aviva could go on building. The first part of the house was the wall, and she wanted it to be blue, red and green. Mommy and Daddy were talking downstairs, and their voices were soft so she couldn’t hear at first, but then they got louder.

“Ralph needs us over there right now,” Daddy was saying. “Emergency brainstorm session.”

“Is she dressed and ready to go?” said Mommy.

Aviva was not dressed. She was not ready to go. Aviva didn’t want to go anywhere. She wanted to stay home and help Adam and Eve build their lego house.

“Look,” Daddy said. He was using his grumpy voice. “Can’t you take the Toyota and meet us there in an hour?”

Mommy didn't like that. "Come on Dimi, you know what will happen. Tantrum time. Aviva wants us together on Sundays."

"Fine, then let's face her together," Daddy said.

Aviva kept playing and waited. She knew that her parents would be at her door soon. Sure enough, in a minute they were knocking.

"Aviva," said Mommy. "Hi sweetie. May we come in?"

"I'm busy," Aviva said. They didn't open the door yet.

Now Daddy tried. "Honey, we're going to visit the Zuckermans. You can bring your toys if you want."

"No, I don't want to go."

Mommy's turn. "We have to go, sweetie. You can play later."

Aviva kept moving dolls around. Sometimes it was easier to pretend she didn't hear.

"Aviva Wiseman, you need to open the door," Daddy said. "Otherwise I'm counting to three and then I'm coming in."

Aviva did not like this. She didn't want to stop. She didn't want to go to the Zuckermans' house. It was boring there. She wanted to stay home and play with Daddy and Mommy. Aviva shouted "No. No. Don't come into my room! Don't you DARE come in!"

"One, two, three," Mommy said, and Aviva tried to push the door closed, but Mommy was stronger and wouldn't stop pushing the other way. Aviva screamed and cried and lay down on the ground and started kicking.

"I don't want to go there! There's no kids to play with! It's boring!"

"Aviva, this is not OK," said Mommy. "You aren't acting like a big girl."

Aviva screamed louder. "I don't want to be a Big Girl."

She watched carefully as Mommy and Daddy looked at each other. Daddy reached down and picked Aviva up and hugged her, really tight, against his chest and shoulders. "Calm down, honey," he said. "Please calm down. Mommy and Daddy need to help the Zuckermans. Bob Zuckerman is sick, and Mommy has to help him get better. I think Uncle Ralph will be there. He wants to draw pictures with you."

"Do you want to wear your black shirt with the stars or your blue shirt?" said Mommy.

Aviva mumbled, "Pink dress."

After Aviva had wrestled her way into the pink ruffly princess dress that she loved to wear, because it made her colorful and it was comfy to run around in, she saw that Mommy and Daddy were still talking so she closed her bedroom door and started to build her house with the big lego pieces. Adam and Eve needed a nice strong house because they were living in the desert now and it could get very hot and windy there.

"This is ridiculous," Daddy was saying behind the door. "Every time we leave the house it's a power struggle. I think she has ADD. She acts impulsively. She doesn't listen."

"Don't label her. She's six years old."

"You're the doctor. You know better than I do. Whatever."

Mommy and Daddy were talking about Aviva, but she didn't understand what they were saying. She wanted to go outside and ask them what "label" meant, but that would make them act even sillier. It was more fun to go on playing and listening.

## 2. Dread

So Aviva kept listening.

“There’s practically steam coming out of your ears,” Mommy was saying, low and whispery. “Is it the layoffs?”

Daddy talked loud. He didn’t know how to whisper, even the conversation was supposed to be private. “Bob wants a steamy-hot pilot by December 15. I can’t believe the pressure he’s putting us under. Explorer is moving toward reality TV because scripted doesn’t sell ads like it used to. I’m on the brink, honey. Half my colleagues are sending out writing samples to every one they know, and the other half are taking night classes or planning to move back to Ohio or Idaho or whatever.”

“You’re stressed.”

“Well, duh. Wouldn’t you be?”

“Honey, it’s just – don’t shit on us. OK? Besides, Bob...”

“Bob is an asshole with a heart problem. If you want me to relax, then tell him not to shit on his writers.”

“He’s sick, honey. It’s confidential....”

“Oh, you mean he’s too fat? He’s smoking and drinking and eating too much? That’s a big surprise.”

“His numbers – cholesterol, blood pressure. They’re in the red zone.”

Uncle Ralph’s Daddy was sick, Aviva thought. He needed Mommy to take care of him because she was a doctor. That’s why Mommy and Daddy were so grumpy.

Because Bob Zuckerman was sick. That made sense. Aviva felt less upset now. She was ready now to go over to Uncle Ralph's house.

Mommy didn't need to take the Toyota, because Aviva got ready to go by herself. Well, almost. She put on her glittery purple headband, and asked Daddy to help her brush her teeth and comb her hair, and Daddy told her that he was proud of her and she was such a wonderful girl. They ate brunch - Mommy made pancakes and Daddy made eggs. He didn't burn them the way he had last Sunday, because he was paying attention. Sometimes Daddy didn't pay attention.

Then they climbed into the special electric Honda, shiny and crimson and comfy with four automatic-window doors and the computer map next to the steering wheel, and Mommy drove them over to Beverly Hills, over the Santa Monica Mountain where big king-and-queen houses with tall columns hid behind big rocks and steep driveways, and the road was curvy and crazy. In the car they were like a snake slithering around the deep green and brown canyons. Mommy turned on the relaxing Ecuadorian music with the pipes and sweet fuzzy drums.

Aviva was pretty sure that everybody needed to relax. But Mommy and Daddy kept talking instead of paying attention to the music, so Aviva listened. She always listened with both ears because Mommy and Daddy would say things to each other that they didn't say to her.

"Maybe we need to start a Facebook campaign," said Daddy. "Bob needs to get ten messages a day from every one he knows."

"Saying what?"

"Put out that cigarette and live five more minutes.' 'Hold the drinks, choose your liver.' 'Killing yourself slowly?' Stuff like that."

"That's not a bad idea, honey. But Giulia has to watch what she buys too. There's too much cheese in that refrigerator, ice cream, corned beef. The Bacardi. The Irish Coffee mix. She doesn't help."

"She's tried! You know Bob. He just sends his assistant out to buy whatever he doesn't have. He's got a fridge and freezer at the office."

"Well, then raid it. Tell your friends to stop feeding drugs to the addict."

“You don’t understand, Zo. His office fridge is off limits. Steal a sausage, face his wrath.”

“You don’t want a dead boss, do you? Believe me. The more people he hears it from, the better.”

“Facebook’s the way then.”

“How about this afternoon you all swear off the chocolate croissants and macaroons while you’re working? Set an example, you’re Senior Writer!”

“Not my job, babe. I don’t cater. Actually, I have a better idea. I’ll propose a pilot about an impresario who stages music festivals in third world countries. The show will really be about Bob and Giulia, but Bob won’t even know it. Each week the hero puts on a show in a different place, with different types of folk-world music, and you see his pleasure-loving, live-and-let-live oversize persona emerge.”

“Dimi, I’m serious. Bob’s really sick.”

“ And he can have this really aristocratic, uptight nagging wife with a sexy European accent who loves him but thinks he should change. Bob will love the story, but he won’t understand why, and watch --he’ll come alive, snap out of this black Nazi mood he’s been in...”

“Sure. Insult Bob and Giulia in a TV script. That’ll save the day.”

“It isn’t our problem.”

“Dimi – for crying out loud. You have the spine of a jellyfish.” Aviva didn’t like the sound of her Mommy’s voice; it made her feel cold and hungry. Dad took a deep breath, like he was trying not to drown. But nobody said anything else after that, so she could just listen to the flutes and the drums playing and watch the hills swoop up and down, and it was better that way.

The drive felt endless. Aviva had almost fallen asleep in her car seat when they pulled up the Zuckermans’ cypress-lined driveway in Beverly Hills. Aviva had never seen any other driveways this big. There was room for maybe four, maybe six, maybe one hundred cars to drive next to each other. The cypresses were huge too,

as tall as Aviva's whole condominium, both floors probably. When they visited here she liked to pretend she was visiting a princess 's castle.

Uncle Ralph opened the door. He had curly dark hair everywhere on his head, and he was thin, thinner than Daddy for sure, and he didn't like to shave his mustache or his beard that much, so whenever he fluffed her hair or kissed her cheek it always was itchy, but Aviva didn't mind. She giggled and jumped onto him and he picked her up and turned her upside down. "Hey little Springtime Girl! How are you doing!"

Aviva's name meant Spring in Hebrew. Uncle Ralph knew that, because he was Jewish like her.

"Hi Uncle Ralph! Hi! Why aren't you in college?"

"Home for the weekend, girlfriend. Helping my Mom and Dad."

"Let's draw a picture together."

"Sure thing. " Uncle Ralph carried Aviva upside down all the way to the living room and sat her down at the table. Then he got the thick colorful markers that she liked, all the colors in the rainbow, and he brought two whole pads of white paper and blue and purple paper. "You want to draw a brain today?"

"Yes yes yes. Let's draw a brain!"

Dad came over to the table and said. "Hey Zuckmaster. Thanks for being such a trooper."

"Hey, no prob. You've got a bright little daughter here. She should come to medical school with me! She can help me with homework."

"That's funny. " Daddy said. "OK, Vivvy." He had turned on his soft gentle voice. "Be good. Have fun. I'll be in the backyard with Bob and the other guys if you need me. Mommy is in the study with Giulia."

"Ralph?" asked Aviva. "How come you are my uncle but your Mom and Dad aren't my aunt and uncle?"

"I'm your friend uncle, not your blood uncle, big girl. I like to play with you."

"Oh. So Bob and Giulia. They aren't my aunt and uncle?"

"Sure, they can be your aunt and uncle too if you want."

"And you can be just my friend?"

"I'll be your friend. Here, look at this. See this is the Corpus Callosum, this roundy-ovally thing here."

Aviva was happy. She liked drawing. She was glad that Ralph would be her friend. Bob and Giulia, they were more like her aunt and uncle, the aunt and uncle with the big Princess Castle in Beverly Hills. She really hoped that Bob was OK, and that Daddy was OK and he wouldn't have to get another job, because then maybe she wouldn't be able to come to the castle any more. Then she would want to cry. But she didn't have to cry yet, because she was with Ralph and Ralph wanted to play with her. Everything was OK for now.