

FATAL FEAST

Chapter 1 – Deathwatch

Driving through a designated kill zone on the twisting mountain road to Dad's cabin fueled my concern. I hadn't talked to him in weeks and there was no cell coverage in the remote area. A Montana State Fish, Wildlife and Parks command post officer stopped my vehicle on Highway 93 south of Medicine Falls to warn me of the hazard. He glanced at my Ohio plates and explained a whitetail doe infected with Chronic Wasting Disease had died within a mile of our location. To eradicate infected animals and stop the spread, a group of local hunters had orders to shoot all deer, elk and moose within a ten-mile radius. the officer suggested I turn back.

I explained the circumstances. He reluctantly acquiesced and let me pass.

Decades of CWD research at the Rocky Mountain high-risk lab made my father a local and international expert. He would know if this orchestrated kill was adequate to stop the epidemic spread in wildlife. It sounded doubtful.

He'd voiced concerns about the rapid spread of this variant of mad cow disease into vast herds of wildlife after prion-infected deer were killed in the fall hunt in eastern Montana. That was months ago, hundreds of miles away, and across the Rockies. Then, there had been no outcry, no headline story, no significant public education about the mis-folded proteins that behaved like untreatable super-bugs. It appeared Montana authorities had suppressed information just like British leaders during the mad cow epidemic in the 1990s.

An outbreak of this fatal disease in big game would be catastrophic in vast ranching country, where pickups driven by hunters cruised with rifles hanging in their back windows year-round.

Growing up with a prion researcher father had stimulated my interest in his work. He had dressed me in oversized protective gowns to make rounds on sick animals with him at a large animal veterinary research center in Colorado.

I'd felt very grown up, especially one memorable day after second grade when I skipped down a long hall beside him in my scuffed cowgirl boots with a large gown covering my pretty sundress. We went out a side door along a cement corridor to an animal pen. As we approached, a skinny black cow spun around and collapsed against the fence near Dad's feet.

Frightened, I jumped back.

He knelt and calmly spoke to the struggling animal. "I failed you. So sorry."

I had squatted beside him looking from her frightened brown eyes to his sad face. "She looks really weak, Dad. Can we help her get up?"

He stood and took my hand, pulling me away from the cow. "She's too sick to eat and her jerky muscles made her fall. My medicine didn't work. She's dying of mad cow disease."

I moved away from him and the cow. "Don't be afraid, Callie. She's not mad at you. It's a contagious disease that damaged her brain."

Tears welled in my eyes. "Quick, give her something else. Fix her."

"Nothing will help, honey." He hesitated as if trying to find words to tell a seven-year-old about the disease epidemic. "This bad disease is even killing pet cats in England."

The day he left for a Great Britain sabbatical to help solve the mad cow crisis, I put my arm around him. "Promise you won't eat any hamburgers."

"Cross my heart." Dad smiled. "And, I'll write to you and keep journals on my work so you can read them someday if you're interested."

That was the day I knew he would save the world, and the cats.

Now, decades later, after my medical school, infectious disease training and finally finding some success in prion research, we were both still trying to save the world. Our dream had been to work together. Following an animal rights break-in at my lab, the CDC made the dream come true by transferring me to the more secure Rocky Mountain Ridge Lab where he had worked for years. This was my first day in town, road-weary after a three-day drive from the Human Prion Center in Cleveland.

Eight miles after the turnoff, I parked in front of the one-room cabin and tromped up three plank steps into view of a German shepherd barking ferociously at the window. My knock brought louder barking when I cracked open the door to peek inside. “Dad, are you here?”

The growling dog backed away, positioning itself across the room near a silhouette on the bed.

A hand patted her head. “It’s okay, girl. Callie won’t hurt us. Come on in, honey. This is Blaze, my rescue dog.”

Their images clarified in the dim interior as my eyes adjusted. I approached but stopped cold, not because of the dog. In the four months since my last visit, Dad had metamorphosed from a fast-talking white haired professor with a goatee, to a haggard mountain man with long hair and a bushy beard. He pointed a walking stick. “Lock the damn door before those guys come in again. They’ve been sneaking around for days.”

I moved closer. “I didn’t see anyone. Who’s been up here?”

An uncoordinated arm shot forward. “Stay back.” His voice broke in a sob. “It’s my brain. Hallucinations, I guess.” A cascade of spasms jerked his shoulder, a hand, a leg. “I couldn’t bear to tell you. I infected myself in a lab accident.”

Years of suppressing my emotions as an infectious disease physician caring for challenging prion-infected patients in the Cleveland hospice wing failed when I saw him debilitated and dying. I wailed in grief. “Oh no, Dad. If you’d told me, we could have tried my animal drugs.”

He struggled to his feet. “I have little time left. I’m so sorry we won’t be able to work together.” Dad hung his head. “I injected monoclonals from my deer study, but the damn wasting disease progressed too fast.” He lurched toward the door. “Please walk up to the lookout with me one last time.”

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Dad stopped frequently to catch his breath and gain footing on the rocky path to the ridge. We sat on a boulder at the top to rest looking at an endless view of distant mountain peaks jutting against the eastern sky. It was here we had shared stories, achievements, and the profound sadness after Mom’s death of pancreatic cancer. This was one of those times. He wanted to say good-bye to our favorite place.

When there were no more tears, we discussed the tragedy of losing our dream of working together. There was so much to talk about but his brain deterioration from prion clumps ravaged his memory and ability to communicate. I listened to a stranger with skeletal features, his shirt hung on a scarecrow frame. Sunken eyes looked my way. “I plan to take my life before I get worse and kill somebody.”

My experiences working at the Human Prion Center had forever embedded images of despair in my mind. I stifled a gasp and scanned the area, fearing he might try to lunge from the steep cliff to his death.

He shook his head. “I won’t jump. I have other plans.” Then, with tears streaking his cheeks, he laughed and laughed, a familiar croaking laughter that had haunted my dreams for years.

No one laughed in the hospice wing of the human prion hospital *except the patients*. During their downward spirals through combative behavior and confusion, strange spasms of laughter echoed in the halls before silence and coma ensued. The same neurological symptoms of *laughing death* were first seen in primitive New Guinea tribal members with *kuru* who developed the infectious disease from ritual cannibalism. My unfortunate patients had suffered with inherited forms of the disease or rare infection sources but like *kuru* victims, in the end they drifted into peaceful unconsciousness, leaving behind infected corpses requiring cremation to destroy the prions.

I understood why my father wanted to leave me before his condition worsened, but it did nothing to soothe my grief. On the descent to the cabin, he steadied himself with the walking stick and was emphatic about me not touching him to help. Exhaustion stopped him from climbing the cabin steps where he sat to rest.

Dad took a ragged breath. "We made the summit. Let's have a glass of brandy for a toast."

In the past, we'd sipped the calming liquid, sitting by a roaring fire while relaxing in the cabin after a day of hiking, but today I brought two paper cups and the bottle out to the porch. Anguish choked each breath as I poured and handed him one. Dad's words faltered and jerky movements sloshed his drink. "Cheers. Cure this damn disease ... before it wipes out the world." His eyes drifted to the dog's beautiful face. "Blaze, take care of Callie."

The dog wagged her tail.

I stroked her head. "We'll take care of each other." My voice broke. "I'll find that cure, promise."

Sipping brandy, he coughed repeatedly while trying to talk. "I stripped the apartment. Burn everything you can after I'm gone ... paint the inside of the cabin and house." He crumpled the cup. "I can make it up the steps now."

Dad lay on the bed, his jerky speech making it difficult to understand. Sometimes, I just nodded when I didn't comprehend, anything to give him peace. After drifting into a restless sleep, he awakened just after sunset. In kerosene lamplight, I followed him to the small kitchen area where he had organized the death meds, the same drugs he'd used to euthanize animals.

My ambivalence watching him prepare to take his life, wanting to help him, and wanting to stop him, ping-ponged in my heart. His uncoordinated movements made it difficult for him. I turned away. Dark images reflected in the nearby window. Dad's jerky hands stirring suicide meds into a small bowl of applesauce. My face of stone, holding back tears. I understood the rational decision formulated in a once-brilliant mind. He had the right to make this final choice.

Before swallowing the drugs, he donned gloves to feed Blaze from a large bag of vegetarian dog food. She waited patiently until he added a little water and then placed the bowl on the floor in front of her. Dad went back and sat on his bed. Thin legs hung limp between involuntary movements as he struggled to swallow each spoonful of death slurry.

I controlled my emotions to help ease his sorrow. Wanting to pull him back to the time before prions had entered his body. Back when we'd consulted, working on parallel projects, separated by so many miles but close in spirit.

A smile crossed his lips when I turned on his battery-powered stereo playing the orchestral CD of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." One of *our* songs he had played for me on the piano.

Tonight, mythical winged valkyries from Norse folklore accompanied him on his journey, like they carried warriors who died in battle to the hall of Valhalla. An appropriate tribute to a man who'd fought a valiant struggle against ravaging disease.

The music played on. Dad looked out to the mountains with Blaze beside him.

His eyes closed.

Drugs slowed his breathing, stopped the leg spasms, and let him rest for the first time in months. Thundering music filled the cabin as his breathing slowed. Rhythmic movement of washboard ribs tenting the fabric of his red wool shirt faded. My tears fell on him as I waited for another breath. My gloved hand on his chest stopped moving. I'd never considered this end.

A profound darkness enclosed me, stopping my breath.

I dropped my gloves into the burn barrel near the door and lay on the couch thinking of the time as a seven-year-old when I was excited to see my first mad cow prion slide. When I begged him to quit his job so he wouldn't die. Sobs racked my body as I contemplated a future without him.

Blaze pawed my knee. I hugged her and cried harder, resigned to stay in the cold cabin until daylight when I could safely navigate the mountain road back to town into cell phone range. The contagious disease death had to be reported and I hoped the medical examiner would comply with his wish not to report his cause of death to the Rocky Mountain Ridge Lab.

Blaze walked around Dad's bed whimpering, then returned and curled up by me. My hand on her back brought me comfort. Later, I awakened shivering in dim lantern light, when seeing his body, a fresh horror swept over me, realizing my world would never be the same.

I stepped outside for more firewood. A faraway wolf howled. Forest noises compressed to an eerie chorus of rustling branches and whistling treetops. Near the wood pile, I startled at the whisper of an owl's wings sweeping past. Filtered moonlight illuminated the large gray bird as it perched on a nearby bare pine limb wrapped with fingers of fog. I recalled the Indian saying: *If the owl cries, an Indian dies.*

Owls symbolized death. I stood still, barely breathing. The owl gave a cry and disappeared on silent wings.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Fatal Feast - Chapter 1 Author Betty Kuffel

Amazon Author page and link to other books

<https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B07XFQPLFX>

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