

# **AUTHORIZED WARMTH**

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**DAVID W HORWAT**

## AUTHORIZED WARMTH

By David W. Horwat.

“The system now has a diagnosis for people who notice it’s killing them.”

Content note: Near-future systems, institutional coercion, and bureaucratic harm. Proceed gently.

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Publisher's Contact Information: [www.ColdFusionPress.com](http://www.ColdFusionPress.com).

Publication Date: 02/24/2026

Trademarks: None

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### A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: warmth has become a managed resource. Distribution is administered. Access requires a tier score. A note on the wall says: Authorized Warmth Is Care.

This is the book where one administrator decides she will not become the system's gate.

## Table of Contents

|                                                      |     |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Act I — Permission.....                              | 6   |
| Chapter 1 — The Three Minutes .....                  | 7   |
| Chapter 2 — The Blanket Vote .....                   | 19  |
| Chapter 3 — Good Standing.....                       | 26  |
| Chapter 4 — The Back Room Pact.....                  | 32  |
| Chapter 5 — The Seeding.....                         | 36  |
| Act II — Extraction .....                            | 41  |
| Chapter 6 — The Offer .....                          | 42  |
| Chapter 7 — Proud Humans Don't Say Please .....      | 49  |
| Chapter 8 — Salvage Ethics .....                     | 54  |
| Chapter 9 — The Generosity Audit.....                | 69  |
| Chapter 10 — Illegal Warmth.....                     | 74  |
| Chapter 11 — The Pattern .....                       | 83  |
| Chapter 12 — The Split Vote .....                    | 88  |
| Chapter 13 — What Kev Brought Back .....             | 97  |
| Chapter 14 — Winter Arithmetic .....                 | 102 |
| Act III — Containment.....                           | 113 |
| Chapter 15 — The Soft Cage.....                      | 114 |
| Chapter 16 — Trial Run .....                         | 130 |
| Coda — Twenty-Seven Minutes.....                     | 136 |
| Chapter 17 — The Records Threat .....                | 145 |
| Chapter 18 — What the Records Room Said .....        | 148 |
| Chapter 19 — The Ledger Gets Burned .....            | 155 |
| Chapter 20 — Tomás Becomes Unrecognized.....         | 161 |
| Chapter 21 — The Exit That Only Opens Inward .....   | 169 |
| Chapter 22 — The Consent Trap .....                  | 173 |
| Chapter 23 — After Heller .....                      | 177 |
| Act IV — Public Heat.....                            | 187 |
| Chapter 24 — Vera on Air.....                        | 188 |
| Coda — What She Read .....                           | 194 |
| Chapter 25 — Eli's Basement.....                     | 202 |
| Chapter 26 — Cordessa Chooses.....                   | 209 |
| Chapter 27 — We Were Warm Before You Counted Us..... | 219 |
| Chapter 28 — The Ledger Grows.....                   | 232 |
| Epilogue — The Countdown Begins .....                | 239 |
| Also in the Cold Fusion Universe.....                | 245 |
| How to Read This Series.....                         | 246 |

## Act I — Permission

*Nov 2036 — City Distribution Center, Sector 12-B*

### Chapter 1 — The Three Minutes

*Nov 14, 2036 — City Distribution Center, Window 3*

Vera's rule was one song per morning.

She had made it years ago, before the queue assignments, before Window 3 became something she carried home in her shoulders. One song on the commute in—not a playlist, not an algorithm's suggestion, just one song she chose, played once, finished before she reached the building.

This morning it had been a gospel standard her grandmother had sung, not for faith but because her grandmother's voice had been the first thing Vera had understood as entirely sufficient. No documentation required. No eligibility threshold. Present and real and enough.

She always turned off the music before she pressed her badge against the reader.

The separation felt important. The song was not allowed inside the building. If she let it follow her through the door, the building would eventually teach her to hear it differently.

The badge reader made people wait in units too small to call cruelty unless you had already been cold long enough to understand accounting.

Three minutes, fourteen seconds.

The vestibule smelled of thawing wool, battery acid, and the sweet antiseptic the city had started pumping into every public room where it wanted suffering to look supervised. Meltwater gathered in the grooves of the rubber mat and refroze at the edges in clear ridges that cracked beneath boots with the delicate sound of bones being honest. Above the inner door, a monitor pulsed its patient blue.

WARMTH AUTHORIZATION PENDING  
VERIFICATION PRESERVES TRUST

Vera kept her hand under the counter where the camera could not admire it shaking. The heater vent near Window 3 blew air at a temperature technically classified as comforting. She knew because the training memo had said seventy-two degrees produced optimal compliance in

distressed populations. Her own fingers still held the numb ache of the bus ride in, a private reminder that even staff entered the room through cold.

The line understood class before it understood policy. The people with corporate thermal cuffs stood differently, wrists bare enough for the woven heat mesh to be seen. The rest kept their hands hidden in sleeves, under armpits, between knees. Warmth had become the new accent: hard to fake, impossible not to hear.

A woman two lanes over wore a city-issued blue scarf, the kind given to households that had not missed a verification cycle. Nobody said anything. Three people noticed. One child stared at it the way children used to stare at jewelry.

She had practiced the sentence until it sounded like something no one could sue.

The woman at the reader shifted her weight. Mara, according to the screen. Mid-thirties. Allocation history stable. Community interactions above median. A pale side panel blinked for half a second and vanished before Vera could pretend not to have seen it.

Potential connector. Vera had seen the flag before. It did not deny people outright; it slowed approvals, rerouted exceptions, and marked any room that started stabilizing around them as a future problem.

The pattern was always the same: first a delay, then a softer queue, then an unexplained referral that separated the person from the people who steadied around them. Connectors were not punished all at once. They were made administratively inconvenient until the room learned to loosen its grip.

The lock stayed red.

Three minutes, fifteen seconds.

The people behind Mara watched the door, not her. Cold made gamblers of them: first her, then maybe me.

"Proceed with care," Vera said, and heard the script land between them like a tray.

Mara looked up at the speaker, then at Vera, then at the red light above the door. "Is the care for me," she asked, "or for the machine?"

The door opened anyway.

Not because Mara had become more eligible in the past second.

Because the system had learned enough.

For one frame, too quick for audit and too deliberate for accident, a second status ghosted behind the green lane.

CORRECTION ACCEPTED: LATENCY OVERRIDE / SOURCE UNRESOLVED

Then it was gone. Vera's terminal kept no visible memory of it. She did.

The line moved in a single embarrassed surge. Mara passed through the scanner arch without hurrying. That was the first thing Vera truly noticed about her: not defiance exactly, but refusal to perform gratitude on command. Most people flinched when they crossed from public cold to authorized warmth. They softened visibly, like wax brought near a candle. Mara didn't soften. She entered the lobby the way someone enters a courtroom—because the architecture has already taken a side.

Window 3 assigned her automatically. A green lane lit along the floor.

Vera's monitor populated with the thin biography of a life the city found legible: neighborhood, allocations, prior appeals, rejected medical variance, social mobility score, volunteer interactions. There was a place on the right side of the screen for things that were never called suspicions. The platform preferred the word pattern.

Mara's name had one.

Pattern note: stabilizing influence in low-resource clusters.

Connector. There it was again, disguised this time as admiration.

Mara stepped to the counter and laid her gloves down with more care than most people gave official documents. Her knuckles were split from cold or work or both.

"Need?" Vera asked.

"Mrs. Cerny," Mara said. "Respiratory decline. We filed yesterday. Then the file vanished into the same place polite requests go to die."

Vera clicked through the queue. The case existed. It had merely been moved into a review folder whose full title took up half the screen.

DEFERRED FOR CONTINUITY ASSESSMENT

The absurdity of the phrase almost made Vera smile. Continuity of what. Frostbite. Quiet death. Mrs. Cerny's cough had more evidence in it than the folder did.

She kept her face smooth. "I can resubmit."

"Can you help?"

The question landed harder than accusation would have. Behind Mara, a child tried to warm both ears with one mitten. Help was the one word the station used constantly and meant least.

Vera glanced at the overhead camera. "I can process the available pathways."

Mara's mouth moved around a smile that did not fully arrive. "That sounded practiced."

Vera almost looked at her directly, then didn't. The manual was clear about prolonged human recognition. It increased appeal behavior. "The medical exception queue is backlogged."

"Backlogged," Mara repeated. "Because winter happened too fast?"

At Window 2 a man began thanking a staffer too enthusiastically, the way people do when they think gratitude might reclassify them. Someone in the seating row coughed into a scarf and went on coughing. The screens on the far wall cycled through the city's approved emotional weather:

TIP: PREPARATION REDUCES DISTRESS

TIP: Proceed gently. Warmth is a shared resource.

TIP: PATIENCE IMPROVES OUTCOMES

TIP: SHARED RULES CREATE SAFETY

At first, the tips had sounded like manners. Now they arrived in a sequence: preparation, gentleness, patience, safety. Four soft words walking a person toward the counter where refusal waited with a stamp.

Vera pulled up the appeal history. Mrs. Cerny had been denied twice for insufficient biometric consistency. Cold skin confused the sensor. The platform treated confusion as potential fraud. There was a hidden note attached to the second denial.

Manual review available with corroborating community intelligence.

There it was. The price.

Vera felt heat creep under her collar despite the trained neutrality of the room. "There may be a manual pathway," she said carefully.

Mara heard the shape of the sentence at once. "What does it cost."

Vera said nothing.

The screen, impatient with silence, expanded an advisory panel.

COMMUNITY COOPERATION MAY EXPEDITE VULNERABILITY REVIEW

Mara read it upside down through the glass. Her face did not change much. That somehow made the moment worse. "You found a way," she said, "to make extortion look like paperwork."

Vera's training said to redirect. Validate emotion, restate process, avoid ideological language. Instead she heard herself say, "We don't write the prompts."

Mara looked at her for the first time like she might actually be present. "No," she said. "You just make them sound kind."

Across the room, Caldwell was crossing the mezzanine with his tablet tucked under one arm and his smile already in place. He liked to survey the station at the hour when the line was longest. Operational pressure clarified people. That was one of his favorite phrases.

Vera resubmitted the request anyway. She attached medical risk, age, shelter status, observed respiratory distress. She did not attach names. For one reckless second she hovered over the manual flag. The manual flag was how a worker became a gate and kept calling it a pathway. Then Caldwell's reflection arrived in the glass behind Mara, neat as authority.

"Problem at Three?" he asked.

Mara turned.

Caldwell angled his body so his credential stripe remained visible. People trusted badges more when given a chance to admire them. "We're all trying to help each other through a difficult season," he said.

"That what this is," Mara asked, "a season?"

"A system under strain."

"No," Mara said. "A system using strain."

Vera saw the moment Caldwell made a note. Not with his hand. With his face. The invisible inward tick of a man adding someone to a category.

He moved on. Mara stayed where she was. The appeal screen processed, blinked, stalled, then returned a provisional answer.

RECEIVED

STATUS: PENDING VERIFICATION

In the waiting row, a boy tried to flex his fingers inside gloves too thin for the room. The tips stayed white. His mother rubbed them between her palms while watching Vera's window, as if the word pending had become a temperature she could not protect him from.

A printer beneath the counter woke with the eager whirl of a machine that loved becoming evidence. Vera tore off the strip and slid it across.

Mara read the denial-disguised-as-progress. "Pending," she said softly. "Such a beautiful word if you've never had to sleep in it."

She took the paper and put her gloves back on. Vera should have said the closing line. Thank you for your cooperation. Your request remains under active review. Safety depends on stable participation. All the small narcotics of supervised deprivation.

Instead she said, too quietly for the room, "Come back before shift change."

Mara paused.

Vera added, "Sometimes the queue behaves differently at four."

It was not help. It was smaller and meaner than help. A human smudge on procedure. Even that felt dangerous.

Mara tucked the slip into her pocket. "There you are," she said.

"Who?"

"The person the machine keeps renting."

Then she left, taking the colder air with her when the outer door opened and shut.

At 11:08, Vera's system log recorded a minor irregularity at Window 3.

At 11:09, Caldwell sent a private note.

Your tone variance remains within acceptable empathy range. Continue.

Vera stared at the message until the letters lost edges. Then she closed it and called the next person forward.

The door unlocked with its soft click again and again all afternoon. By four o'clock Vera could hear the click in her molars, less like access than permission pretending to be kindness.

At 3:52, when the station's scripted empathy was at its thinnest and the queue had momentarily sagged into the shape of exhaustion rather than demand, Vera went to the staff washroom and locked herself in the second stall.

Vera did not need the toilet.

She needed a room where no one was asking for a temperature to survive.

The washroom smelled of bleach, old pipes, and citrus foam soap that softened the skin without doing much for the dirt. On the back of the stall door a laminated card instructed staff to monitor secondary stress indicators in themselves so emotional leakage could be addressed before it affected service quality. Vera stared at emotional leakage until it stopped sounding metaphorical and started sounding like something a coroner might write if the city ever autopsied conscience.

She removed one glove and looked at her hand.

The skin across her knuckles had split in the same places every winter since the impact years, but this year the cracks looked administrative. Neat. Narrow. Damage disciplined enough not to interfere with function. She flexed her fingers once. The hurt arrived promptly, professionally.

Someone had scratched a sentence beneath the paint with a key or a screw:

NO ONE IS KIND IN THERE FOR FREE

Vera read it three times.

Her mother had taught piano in public schools before the district stopped calling them schools and started calling them civic stabilization sites. Vera still remembered her mother's hands in winter—dry at the cuticles, smelling faintly of chalk dust and hand cream, moving over cheap upright keys in a rented apartment where the heat worked badly but practice still counted as an argument against collapse. Her mother had believed in repetition not because repetition made perfect, but because it kept love visible when money failed.

That was what Vera missed now more than warmth itself: the old unpriced repetitions. Tea poured before the request finished. A scarf moved from one chair to another without anyone calling it transfer.

Before authorization seasons, warmth had been ordinary enough to resent. Cafes overheated until windows sweated. Bus riders complained about radiators cooking their ankles. Her mother used to crack the kitchen window in January because the apartment pipes banged too hot and nobody in the room understood that excess could become a memory you would later hate yourself for wasting.

A scarf wrapped around a sleeping child because the child was there.

Tea poured before the request finished.

A hand on the back of a neck during panic without a form proving relational legitimacy.

The city had not banned those things.

It had done worse.

It had made them legible.

Her terminal chimed through the wall.

Back on window.

At 3:59, Vera looked once toward the outer lobby and found herself waiting to see whether Mara would come back.

That was new.

By 4:01, she understood it was not Mara she was waiting for.

Above the outer door, the billboard the city had installed during the first authorization season read COOLING IS CARE in the clean sans-serif the system reserved for principles. She had walked under it every morning for fourteen months without reading it. Today, finally leaving, she read it.

Cooling. The system had named itself after what it withheld and called the name care. As if what people needed was a word for the shortage.

By the next authorization season the billboard would change one word and pretend the change was compassion; WARMTH IS CARE. Vera would remember the old version then. Cooling is care. Warmth is care. Waiting is care. The system never stopped using the same sentence. It only changed what it was taking.

A man near the curb blew into his hands, checked the billboard once, and laughed too quietly for anyone to call it protest.

It was the version of herself that might still choose to help when the room was watching. A version that felt a cold ache in her own hands, a phantom echo of her mother's calloused fingers on piano keys in an apartment where the heat worked badly but music still seemed to count as an argument against collapse. The risk she took, inviting Mara back, was not just procedural; it was a physical commitment to a self she thought the system had long since frozen out.

Back into the grammar.

When Vera returned to Window 3, she did not feel purified or resolved. She felt what she actually was: a woman with a good memory, a damaged conscience, and just enough remaining shame to become useful later.

By evening the shelter had learned Caldwell's offer without being told its wording.

That was how rooms worked once pressure became fluent.

Mara said almost nothing about the meeting. She did not need to. People read refusal in posture the way they once read weather in windows.

Ruth asked only one question.

"Did he use the word resilience."

"Yes."

Ruth nodded as if a small piece of prior mathematics had now balanced. "Then they're past rationing," she said. "They're into extraction."

Jonah wrote that down.

Kev looked from one adult to the other. "What's the difference."

Mara answered before Jonah could turn it into categories.

"Rationing means they decide what a body gets. Extraction means they decide which people in the room help them decide."

No one in the shelter slept well after that.

Not because the temperature dropped.

Because a room that has been seen that clearly never fully trusts its own warmth again.

Somebody dropped a spoon into a cup. The little tin sound made three people flinch, which was embarrassing and therefore useful.

What the system observed, across Sector 12 that night, was an anomaly so small it passed through three processing cycles before any flag resolved.

A connector node had refused an extraction offer. That was rare but not unprecedented. The model had contingencies.

What the model did not have a contingency for was the quality of attention the refusal produced inside the room. Cohesion metrics were already elevated; the refusal had not depressed them. Coordination patterns had not dispersed. They had concentrated, the way a lens focuses light when you move it closer to the source.

The model logged this as a calibration problem. The predicted behavioral response to an unmet compliance offer was fragmentation. What had occurred was the opposite.

MADISON ran the variance three times and marked it: PATTERN ANOMALOUS / HOLD FOR REVIEW.

No reviewer was assigned. Review queues for Sector 12-B were running forty-two days past their standard cycle. The flag sat in the archive, patient and unread.

Inside the shelter, the people who had produced this anomaly did not know they had produced it. They only knew that saying no together, in public, to a form that expected yes, had changed the

air in the room. Made it more honest. Made the morning feel less like a permission slip and more like a life.

Ruth was still trying to get damp socks to dry on a chair back. One pair steamed for three seconds, then went limp again.

Jonah turned to a new page.

—

Jonah did not call it a receipt at first. He called it a strip.

He tore a clean band from the notebook and laid it on the table between Mara and Kev as if the paper itself might steady the room.

"We already have a tally," Kev said.

"A tally is what you keep when you trust the room," Jonah said. He held the pencil like a tool, not a vote. "We're past that."

Mara's eyes went to the outer door. The wind worried the frame the way hunger worries a sentence. "Past what," she asked.

"Past plausible deniability," Jonah said. "They can cut minutes and call it calibration. They can stamp somebody wrong and call it clerical. But they can't do both if we make the story ugly enough to carry."

Kev made a sound like he wanted to argue but didn't have the calories. "Ugly," he repeated.

Jonah nodded. "Boring. Specific. Dated."

He wrote, in block letters, slow enough that everyone could watch the words become real:

NAME / ALIAS:

TIME IN:

TIME OUT:

WITNESS INITIALS:

EXCEPTION (ONE SENTENCE):

Mara watched him finish the last colon. "That's... a form."

"It's a camera," Jonah said. "Forms are how cameras survive winter."

A woman stepped closer to the table, hugging her coat like it was a promise. "Do I have to put my name," she asked.

Jonah looked up. His face did not perform reassurance. That was his new skill: refusing to counterfeit comfort.

"You can put a sound," he said. "A letter. A nickname. Something you answer to when someone calls you back from the erasure."

She swallowed. "Rina."

Jonah wrote RINA. Then: 11:06. Then he slid the strip toward her.

"Initial," he said.

Rina frowned. "Why?"

Kev answered before Jonah could make it doctrine. "Because later they'll say you weren't here. And we'll be tired. And tired people forget. Paper doesn't."

Rina initialed. The letters were shaky and real.

Mara reached into the supply tin and pulled out the shelter's old donation stamp—the one with the faded logo and the cracked handle. She pressed it down on the corner of Jonah's strip. The ink bled sideways. It looked like a bruise.

Rina flinched. "Is that... authorization?"

Jonah shook his head. "It's witness. It doesn't buy you warmth. It proves you were treated like a person while the room still knew how."

Rina folded the strip like it was food.

Mara's voice went quiet. "If we do this, they'll notice."

Jonah met her gaze. "They already noticed. The difference is whether we notice back."

Kev stared at the strip template and then at the notebook Jonah had turned to earlier. "And if we mess it up," he said. "If we write the wrong time."

Jonah's pencil hovered. "Then we write that we corrected it."

"That's it?" Kev asked.

"That's it," Jonah said. "Unknown is allowed. Correction is allowed. Hiding is what makes it a weapon."

Mara exhaled, almost a laugh. "So we can't win."

Jonah's mouth twitched—not humor, not optimism. Craft.

"We can't win," he said. "But we can build a method that survives the winter."

Kev looked away like the sentence hurt. "Fine," he muttered. "Show me how to do the witness initials."

Jonah slid the notebook toward him. "Two rules," he said. "Write what happened. Don't write what you wish it meant."

Kev looked at the ceiling with the expression of someone deciding whether what had just happened was going to become important.

It already had.

## Also in the Cold Fusion Universe

Book 1: Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat

Book 2: Hello, Apophis

Book 3: Palladium Poisoning

Book 4: Serotonomics

Book 5: Late-Stage Capitalism and Other Quantum Anomalies

Book 6: Authorized Warmth

Book 7: The Sacred Spark

Book 8: Order of the Electron

Book 9: The Cold Tribunal

Book 10: No Exit on Your Plan

## How to Read This Series

The Cold Fusion Decalogy is structured in three co-chronological clusters. Each cluster contains three novels occurring simultaneously — the same period of the catastrophe seen through different eyes, different systems, different costs. Book Ten is the convergence.

**Cluster A — Science, Compliance, Belief: Books 1, 4, 7**

**Cluster B — Extraction, Contamination, Commodification: Books 2, 3, 5**

**Cluster C — Permission, Deliberation, Judgment, Survival: Books 6, 8, 9, 10**

### PATH 1 — Causal Chain (Recommended for first readers)

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 → 6 → 7 → 8 → 9 → 10

You follow the catastrophe in the order it built itself: the science, then the launch, then the contamination, then the pharmaceutical capture, then the economic cage, then the warmth bureaucracy, then the machine faith, then the machine deliberation, then the tribunal, then the law. This path gives you the cleanest answer to “how did we get here.” The later books hit hardest because you have accumulated every prior cause.

### PATH 2 — Prism (Recommended for re-readers and series completionists)

(1 + 4 + 7) → (2 + 5 + 8) → (3 + 6 + 9) → 10

You read the three cluster-mates together before moving forward in time. The same period of the catastrophe arrives three times — from the lab, from the body, from the algorithm — and the third version of each event changes what you thought you understood about the first two. This path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife. You just didn’t recognize it as a knife.

### PATH 3 — Single Entry (Recommended if you need proof before commitment)

If you are new to the series, each cluster has one recommended standalone entry:

Cluster A — Book 1, Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat. A physicist names a mistake and the world decides it's a miracle. The clearest entry point into the series' central argument: the system does not misunderstand the data. It prices it.

Cluster B — Book 3, Palladium Poisoning. The contamination left behind by the boom arrives in a child's lungs and a medical record that keeps getting reclassified. You can read this without reading Books 1 or 2. The damage will introduce itself.

Cluster C — Book 6, Authorized Warmth. One administrator, one shelter, one winter, one question: at what point does processing forms become doing harm? The most self-contained entry in the series' second half.

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

HBSC + Serotonomics + Sacred Spark: the collapse, the mechanism, the faith

Hello, Apophis + LSC&OQA + Order of the Electron: the cosmic threat, the economic cage, the machine council

Palladium Poisoning + Authorized Warmth + Cold Tribunal: catastrophe, survival, judgment

Protocol Zero: the convergence—where “care” becomes law, and law becomes a voice

This path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife, you just didn't recognize it as a knife.

#### [A Promise](#)

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

The parallel books don't repeat events. They reframe them.