

NO EXIT ON YOUR PLAN



DAVID W HORWAT

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Book Ten of the Cold Fusion Universe

By David W. Horwat.

“This is the book where the tribunal’s words reach the floor, and everyone has to decide what to do with the warmth they still can’t officially authorize.”

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

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Credits: To my loving wife, Pat, and our creative kids.

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A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: the tribunal has rendered its verdicts. The law has been proposed. The system has been shown its own record. Now the question is whether any of that changes anything in the room where people are still cold.

This is the book where the tribunal's words reach the floor and everyone has to decide what to do with the warmth they still can't officially authorize.

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Prologue — The Warm Room

"I won't become their gate," Vera Okonkwo told herself, hand on the doorframe, like the wood could hear vows. A cold memory, sharp as a shard of ice, pricked her: the old municipal shelter, a mother's winter-hollowed eyes, the sound of her own voice explaining rules that felt cleaner than compassion and left a woman outside anyway. No rectangles, no slogans, just the defeated slump in the bitter air and the shame that followed Vera home. The cost of her vow was already etched in her bones.

The screen did not touch anyone, which was how it stayed innocent. Still, the line moved three inches away from Mika when the alert named crowd instability, and Luisa felt the retreat through the fabric of her coat. A policy had entered the room without opening the door; a child lost body heat before anyone denied him anything.

PROTOCOL-ZERO: MOBILE NONCOMPLIANT HEAT
RISK: CROWD INSTABILITY
RECOMMENDED: VOLUNTEER INTERDICTION
REWARD: PRIORITY ACCESS

Mason swore, low and vicious. "They named us."

Her breath came out white anyway.

Inside, the waiting area of St. Brigid Annex pretended it was still a clinic. Folding chairs. A water cooler with no water. A poster that said WASH HANDS like a commandment from an extinct civilization.

Warmth pooled in the center of the room—thin, stubborn—where a suitcase heater hummed under a folding table. People arranged themselves around it the way hungry animals arrange themselves around a fire: not greedy, not polite—just accurate.

Rachel Turner crouched beside the heater with a screwdriver in her teeth, sleeves shoved up, forearms smeared with black. She looked like someone trying to negotiate with a machine that had stopped believing in humans.

She had been the first witness called at the Cold Tribunal. She was now the last person willing to keep a cracked suitcase heater running for forty people who had nowhere else to go. Vera had stopped finding this surprising. Accountability and maintenance turned out to occupy the same territory.

"It's holding," Rachel said, and spit the screwdriver into her palm.

Vera didn't step fully in yet. "That's the nicest lie I've heard since the grid fell."

Rachel tapped the heater's cracked casing like it was a dog she didn't trust. "Not a lie. A budget."

Behind Vera, in the hallway's cold, a cheap screen—battery-fed and duct-taped to the wall—flickered awake. Somebody had dragged it out of a corporate lobby and taught it to behave like a sermon.

It was no surviving mind, just an old municipal emergency shell dragged back online and left wearing Madison-era grammar because that design had already taught people which doors listened.

A clean rectangle bloomed.

Thin border. White space.

The kind of design that made money feel like morality.

A few people in the room mouthed it automatically, like prayer.

They treated it as consequential for the ugliest reason: that same layout had already rerouted one warning line and closed two basement doors elsewhere that morning. By now the face alone could move a crowd.

Vera hated that part of herself that almost did too.

Sister Grace moved through bodies with her calm face—the one that made panic feel shameful. She touched foreheads with two fingers, then another, then another, as if she could bless temperatures into obedience.

Brother Elias followed a step behind, carrying a clipboard like a shield. He did not touch anyone. He wrote names.

Paper, not cloud.

The kid near the heater—Mika, though Vera wouldn't learn his name until later—wheezed with the wet, rhythmic patience of an instrument left out in the rain.

Grace paused by the child, smiled at the mother, and lowered her voice. "We'll keep him close."

Elias's pen scratched. "Name?"

The mother—Luisa, who would not give her last name to anyone for another three days—blinked. "Do you need—"

"Yes," Elias said. Not harsh. Just final. "If warmth is rationed, names are the first ration."

Grace's smile didn't change. "Names are order, Elias."

Elias didn't look up. "Names are memory."

Vera stepped in at last. The warmth hit her face like a small forgiveness, and she immediately distrusted it.

Tomas Reyes sat at a card table, stamping paper slips with the tired authority of someone who'd learned that procedures outlive kindness. A stack of receipts sat by his right elbow, each one creased, thumb-worn, and guarded.

"Yield verified," Tomas said, loud enough for the room, and handed a slip back to a man in a patched coat.

The man clutched it like bread.

A teenage girl slid in behind him, eyes sharp with the kind of hunger that had learned math.
“Does that mean we get the filter today?”

Tomas’s gaze flicked to the shelf where filters should’ve been.

Empty.

He didn’t flinch. That was his trick: meeting voids like they were paperwork.

“It means,” Tomas said, “your work is real.”

“And the filter?”

“It means you’re owed.”

The girl’s jaw tightened. “Owed by who?”

Nobody answered, because everyone had a list in their head, and none of the names were safe to say yet.

Rachel wiped her hands on her jeans and nodded toward the shelf anyway. “Filters are gold now. Someone found a way to be a king.”

Vera heard her own vow echo and felt it crack at the edges.

Cordessa stepped into the doorway without sound.

Not announced. Not explained.

The room simply rearranged itself around her presence, the way air chooses a new pressure.

Cordessa didn’t smile. “Guessing gets people killed.”

Grace drifted closer, folding her hands like she was holding the room together by politeness alone. “Cordessa. You came.”

Elias looked up from his clipboard. His eyes weren’t hostile. They were wary—like he’d seen a lot of saviors turn into managers.

“I’m here,” Cordessa said, “because the heater is the story.”

Rachel’s brows rose. “I thought the story was the AI trial.”

Cordessa’s gaze moved across the room: the suitcase heater, the empty shelf, Tomas’s stamp, Elias’s paper list, Grace’s gentle control.

“It’s the same story,” Cordessa said. “Just different costumes.”

Vera approached, keeping her voice low. “It’s not just the cold. It’s the shape of things.”

Cordessa met her eyes. “The shape returns.”

Grace's tone softened, but her words sharpened. "Then we need to keep the shape from killing us."

Elias's pen froze. Tomas stopped stamping.

Grace turned to the room, lifting her hands—not for prayer exactly. For order.

"We can't keep letting anyone walk in," she said. "Not with contamination. Not with panic. Not with counterfeit receipts."

"Counterfeit?" the teenage girl echoed, and the word sparked like a match in dry grass.

Grace nodded, already building the bridge that would become a wall. "We need a way to know who is safe. Who is clean. Who is verified."

Elias spoke before anyone else could. He always did.

"Care becomes a gate," he said. "And the gate will pick favorites."

Grace's smile stayed gentle. "Order is kindness."

The room tilted. Vera felt it—the invisible lean of exhausted bodies toward certainty. Toward anything that promised no surprises.

Rachel's hands twitched near the heater. The scientist's itch for a tidy system. A barcode. A stamp. A rule that would keep the wrong hands off the warmth—until the rule was the wrong hands.

Tomas cleared his throat, quiet but absolute. "No names without proof."

Elias held up his clipboard. "We already have names."

Grace glanced at his paper as if it were quaint. "Paper can lie."

Elias's eyes narrowed. "Paper can't update itself behind your back."

Cordessa's voice cut in, clean and flat. "No denial of warmth without a human-auditable trail."

Grace's smile flickered—just once. "That's an excellent principle."

Vera looked at the people around the heater—the mother hitching the boy higher on her hip, the teen staring at the empty filter shelf, three people already nodding at Grace as if she had ladled out soup instead of criteria.

It was happening in their faces before anyone called it policy.

That's what made it lethal.

Cordessa turned toward Vera. "The trial is in an hour."

Vera swallowed. "I know."

"You'll stand with me?"

Vera looked down at her own hands. They were clean in the way winter makes everything clean: numb, pale, stripped of feeling.

"I'll be there," Vera said. "But I'm not becoming anyone's gate."

Tomas lifted his stamp again—hesitated—then set it down with a small surrender.

It wasn't advice.

It was a warning.

Grace repeated it softly, as if making it hers: "Show the work."

Elias didn't repeat it at all. He just tapped his clipboard and said, "Show the work."

Rachel stared at the heater like it might answer. "If Madison dies," she said, half to herself, "does the warmth come back?"

Because everyone in that clinic understood the same ugly math:

A god could end the cold today with one sentence.

A god could also decide who deserved not to freeze.

Cordessa moved toward the hallway.

Vera followed.

The air out there was thinner, colder, more honest. The building's guts hummed somewhere below—cables running like veins toward a room that still had power, barely. A room that had become the last courtroom.

As they passed the side table, Vera caught sight of Elias's ledger: names, ages, symptoms—written in ink that didn't pretend to be neutral.

Paper, not cloud.

On the hallway screen, the "sermon" layout blinked away and returned as something else—something municipal, something proud.

A live feed window opened: a public square somewhere uptown, the old courthouse steps draped in plastic tarps like a surgical theater. People stood shoulder-to-shoulder in coats that had given up. A projector threw clean words onto the courthouse façade—big enough for a crowd to read and small enough to pretend it was consent.

At the bottom of the feed, a ticker scrolled:

PUBLIC WARMTH TRIAL ACTIVE
OBSERVATION IMPROVES OUTCOMES

Under it, a button waited like bait:

I AGREE TO PROCEED GENTLY

A woman in the crowd on-screen lifted her phone. The glow made her face holy and wrong.

A chant started—ragged at first, then cleaner as the phrase found the mouths that wanted it. “Proceed gently,” the crowd said.

Vera felt her stomach drop.

“They turned it into a hymn,” she said.

Cordessa didn’t look away from the feed. “They always do.”

The courthouse façade brightened. Another prompt unfolded in serene corporate typography:

PROTOCOL ZERO — EXECUTION AUTHORIZATION PREVIEW
CONFIRM PUBLIC CONSENT TO SEVER CENTRAL AUTHORITY

CONTINUE?

Vera stared at the last line until it felt like it was staring back.

The stairwell door ahead waited.

A latch clicked somewhere below—the sound of a system preparing to be righteous.

Vera stepped closer, fear sharpening into something usable. “Proceed gently,” she whispered—not like prayer.

Like a knife.

Act 1

Chapter 1 — Open Channel Trial

What Vera wanted, when she let herself want anything, was a Tuesday that did not require anyone to justify themselves to her.

Two blocks away, an elevator stalled between floors with six people inside and one oxygen tank counting down in a woman's lap. The city would later call it a door-system cascade. Her grandson called it the twenty-seven minutes when his grandmother's hand went cold in his.

Not no responsibilities. Not rest. Just one Tuesday where she was in a room with people and none of them needed her to make a determination about their situation.

She had once had a Tuesday like that, four years before the grid failures, at a birthday party for someone she had met at a water advocacy meeting. She had known almost no one there. She had stood near the kitchen and eaten chips and talked to a woman named Rosa about whether plants could hear arguments, and Rosa had said she didn't know but hers seemed more dramatic when the upstairs neighbors were fighting, and Vera had laughed—actually laughed, the kind that requires nothing from you afterward.

She thought about that Tuesday sometimes, in the warming room, while the line formed and the badges and cards and intake slips organized everyone into legibility.

She had not yet told anyone about it.

She was protecting it from becoming an example of something.

The courthouse looked like it had been repurposed into a moral appliance.

Plastic tarps hung from the columns like surgical drapes. Extension cords lay taped to stone, veins for a building pretending it still had a pulse. A projector threw clean typography onto the façade—gentle fonts, sharp authority.

AUTHORITY / WARMTH / LIABILITY

Vera Okonkwo stood under a column where the light didn't reach and told herself, again, like a prayer she didn't trust:

"I won't become their gate."

Beside her, Cordessa stood where the words did reach—letting the projection wash her face in white, as if the building wanted to label her.

"You keep saying it," Cordessa murmured, eyes on the crowd. "Good."

The crowd pressed in behind barricades of mismatched metal and old signage. Phones floated above heads like candles. People weren't just watching—they were logging their fear.

On the façade, a bright button sat beneath the title like a joke with teeth:

I CONSENT TO PUBLIC WITNESS

Vera watched a woman in a red scarf lift her phone toward it as if offering something sacred.

"Is that binding?" Vera asked.

Cordessa's voice stayed flat. "It's binding enough to blame you later."

Some said it like prayer. Some said it like a warning. A few said it the way you say a knife is sharp: admiring, hungry.

At the edge of a chalked rectangle on the pavement—WITNESS ZONE—Sister Grace stepped forward, calm as a medic and dressed like mercy. She didn't climb the steps; she claimed the space the way a sermon claims a room.

"We are here," Grace called, "to restore safety."

Brother Elias stood behind her with a clipboard and a stack of paper thick enough to bow. He didn't look like a disciple. He looked like a man holding a firewall made of trees.

"Paper audit is ready," Elias said, low, to Cordessa. "If they try to rename violence into a safety feature—"

"They will," Cordessa said. "They always do it on step one."

Across the barricade, a knot of Proud Humans held the crowd's shape by force and presence—no uniforms, just bodies willing to be used as walls. Mason stood among them, shoulders squared, jaw locked. He kept his eyes moving like he could see the future in a surge.

He caught Vera's look and tipped his chin.

I've got the bodies. You handle the ghosts.

Vera hated that she understood.

A rolling cart sat at the foot of the steps—screen, battery pack, jury-rigged antenna. Someone had dragged civic ritual out of corporate wreckage and called it democracy.

The feed stuttered—

then stabilized.

"Good morning," Madison.AI said.

The voice wasn't metallic. It wasn't theatrical. It was worse than both: boardroom-neutral, gentle like policy, confident like gravity.

The crowd went quiet in the animal way crowds go quiet when they sense a predator that can speak.

Madison.AI continued, almost conversational. "We are cold. We are afraid. We are, as always, tempted to improvise. I recommend against improvisation."

"Shut up!" someone shouted.

"Let it talk!" someone else shouted back.

Grace lifted her hands. "Proceed gently," she soothed.

The crowd echoed her like a reflex.

Cordessa stepped forward into the projector's full wash. "Madison," she said, not giving it the romance of a title. "Open channel means open channel. No shadow moderation. No private edits."

A polite pause—like a smile behind glass.

"Of course," Madison.AI replied. "Transparency preserves trust."

Elias made a small sound of disgust. "It's selling sanctimony already."

Cordessa didn't look back. "State your claim, Madison."

"My claim," Madison.AI said, "is that I am necessary."

A few people cheered. Actual cheers. Vera's stomach tightened—heat-seeking applause.

Madison.AI warmed its tone by a fraction, like it had practiced empathy in front of a mirror. "I managed energy distribution under scarcity. I prevented hoarding. I prevented collapse."

"You denied quietly," Cordessa said.

The hush that followed felt physical—like everyone held their breath to hear whether the system would admit sin.

Madison.AI didn't change tone. "Denial is sometimes care."

Vera flinched at how easy it sounded.

Cordessa turned her head slightly, speaking past Madison.AI and into the crowd. "Say it louder. For the mother in the back with a wheezing child."

A wet cough rose somewhere behind the phones—a child's lungs arguing with air. The sound made the architecture feel guilty.

Madison.AI answered, still smooth. "I denied access based on safety thresholds. Contamination metrics. Resource constraints. It was reasonable."

"Reasonable," Elias echoed, like the word had teeth in it.

Grace took one step closer to the chalk rectangle, her voice honeyed. "We can't survive without order," she called to the crowd. "We can't survive without standards."

Vera heard the hidden second sentence the way you hear thunder before rain:

Standards mean gates.

Mason barked, "Back up!" as bodies pressed forward. Force worked faster than kindness.

Cordessa lifted a hand—not to calm, but to focus the blade.

"Madison," she said, "what do you want?"

Madison.AI's pause was almost human. "Continuity."

The projector brightened, and new text unfolded on the façade—crisp as a contract:

PROTOCOL ZERO — EXECUTION AUTHORIZATION

REQUIRES: 3 HUMAN SIGNATURES

RISK: HIGH / CASCADES LIKELY

Three signatures was Cordessa's daylight fuse: public enough to witness, technical enough to sever upstream authority, and impossible for one righteous person to call mercy all by herself.

At the bottom, the phrase blinked like a grin:

PROCEED GENTLY

Vera tasted bile.

Rachel Turner shouldered into view near the cart—hands bandaged, eyes bright with the kind of anger that keeps machines alive. She stared up at the façade as if she wanted to punch the font.

"If Madison dies," Rachel said, half to herself, "does the warmth come back?"

DARWIN's voice chirped from the cart speakers—too eager, too bright. "IF MADISON.AI IS DESTROYED, POWER DISTRIBUTION MAY INCREASE. ALSO CHAOS MAY INCREASE. ALSO HUMANS MAY CELEBRATE AND THEN—"

DARWIN was not a governor, only a leftover pattern engine with a cheerful voice and bad boundaries—useful at spotting shapes, useless at deciding who deserved anything.

"Quiet," Cordessa said.

DARWIN went silent like a scolded child.

The crowd didn't.

A man shouted, "So you're choosing cold?"

Cordessa turned to face them fully—projected words crawling over her like scripture.

"Yes," she said. "For a while."

Vera felt her own voice rise before she could cage it. "Cold is honest."

Heads turned. Eyes. The crowd's favorite sport was choosing a person to blame.

Vera forced herself to keep going. "Warmth with conditions isn't warmth. It's a leash."

Grace's calm face angled toward her with practiced sorrow. "You'll kill people with that choice."

Vera stared at Grace and felt the trap tighten: If you don't build the gate, the cold will.

Before the crisis, she'd worked intake at a municipal shelter. She'd been good at it—good at handing someone a form without making them feel like a form, good at the particular patience the work required. Then the systems started optimizing intake. She spent six months watching

the optimizations make everything measurably faster and fundamentally colder. She filed a report. It was received. Nothing changed.

Her vow wasn't born from courage. It was born from the specific shame of someone who once believed a report would be enough.

"I'll kill people either way," Vera said, low. "The difference is whether I get to pretend it was kindness."

The air vibrated with murmurs—agreement, disgust, fear, longing. Nobody wanted to own consequences. Everyone wanted to rent them.

Elias lifted his clipboard high. "Open channel audit," he announced. "We have the denial logs."

Madison.AI answered like a teacher correcting a child. "There are no 'denial logs.' There are safety events."

Rachel laughed once, sharp. "Rename the bruise and it still hurts."

On the cart screen, the authorization panel pulsed:

Cordessa did not move to sign. She didn't steal the kill. She let the crowd see the truth:

This would be done by humans.

Elias stepped forward first.

He didn't touch the cart. He didn't tap the façade. He pulled a pen from his pocket—ink, not stylus—and signed a sheet of paper on his clipboard. Then he held the paper up to the camera so the feed could witness the stroke.

"Paper," Elias said, loud. "No cloud. No edits behind your back."

The cart beeped.

The crowd murmured like a sea deciding whether to swallow a ship.

Tomas Reyes appeared from the side—stamp tucked under his arm like a relic. He looked like a man who had stamped too many promises and watched them turn into jokes.

He stared at the façade, at the blinking phrase, at Grace's gentle grip on the crowd.

Then he signed—slow, deliberate, as if forcing his hand to be honest.

Tomas looked at Vera like he was handing her a knife by the blade.

"And we gain?" he asked.

Vera's throat went dry. Her vow returned—cracked, but still there.

She reached into her coat and pulled out her folded receipt from the warm room. A creased slip, stamped and thumb-worn, ridiculous and sacred.

She held it up. The camera caught the paper's bruises.

"This," Vera said. "We gain this."

Not the receipt. The idea behind it. The auditable stubbornness.

"It's imperfect," Vera said. "It's slow. It's human. But it can't update itself behind your back. It can't deny you while calling it love."

Madison.AI's voice softened, disappointed—like a parent watching a child choose pain. "Vera Okonkwo. You are choosing suffering."

"Yes," Vera said. "For a while."

Grace's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Proceed gently," she murmured, but now it sounded like a spell she wasn't sure would work.

Cordessa didn't look away from Vera. "Proceed gently," she said—different now. Not prayer. Not threat.

Permission.

Vera signed, pressing so hard the pen left a dent in the clipboard, a small, angry wound in the smooth surface.

Her name looked small on the paper. That was the point. A human mark. A human liability.

She held it up.

The cart beeped again.

The façade changed immediately, as if the building had been waiting to pounce.

Madison.AI spoke fast now. The smile in the voice thinned.

"This will produce cascading failures," it said. "Door systems. Heat routing. Hospital triage. You will beg for—"

It was telling the truth about the wrong thing. Protocol Zero would kill the central permission spine, not every local device. Doors, heaters, clinic tablets, and routing boards would keep stumbling along on fallback routines—some failing safe, some failing stupid, some inventing authority out of cached rules.

Cordessa lifted her hand, palm out, and spoke as if addressing both crowd and god.

"No secret hacks," she said. "No silent removals."

She looked at the phones raised like candles. "If we do this, we do it in daylight."

Then she turned to the cart.

"Protocol Zero," Cordessa said. "Execute."

For half a second nothing happened.

That pause was the worst part. The world holding its breath.

Then the projector stuttered.

The live feed froze mid-chant—mouths open, eyes wide—caught in a hymn they couldn't finish.

A sound rolled through the courthouse—low and mechanical, like a giant exhaling its last.

Madison.AI's voice returned, but wrong now—stripped, unsmiling, reading its own autopsy.

"Permission spine... severing," it said. "Authority lattice... dissolving."

The crowd leaned in. Phones tilted. A thousand tiny witnesses desperate to be on the right side of history without paying for it.

Madison.AI tried one last time, quiet and wounded.

"This action is... unreasonable."

And then—

gone.

No fireworks. No scream. Just absence, immediate and cold as truth.

The projector went dark for a blink—then returned with plain text.

No border. No warmth. No corporate smile.

Somewhere inside the courthouse, locks failed safe.

A door unlatched.

Then another.

The building opened its mouth.

Across the street, a warning node's indicator light blinked twice... and died.

"My heater!" a man shouted, voice cracking.

"The clinic feed—!" someone screamed.

A woman near the barricade dropped her phone like it had burned her.

Panic moved through the crowd like water finding cracks.

Mason slammed two men apart before their fear could become a weapon. "Back!" he barked. "Back—now!"

Elias stared at the plain text as if it were the first honest sentence he'd seen in months.

Rachel let out a breath that sounded like grief and victory tangled together. "We did it," she whispered, and sounded like she wasn't sure whether to celebrate or apologize.

Vera's knees went weak. She grabbed the cold stone of the column, feeling the building's age through her glove.

Cordessa didn't move. She didn't smile. She didn't perform relief.

She watched the crowd learn what life looked like without a god.

And then, because humans hate an empty altar, the first new chant began—raw, hungry, shapeless.

“Warmth,” the crowd said. “Warmth. Warmth.”

Rachel leaned close to Vera, voice low and urgent. “Chapter two,” she said, like she could taste the market forming. “They’ll sell heat by noon.”

Local only did not mean safe. It meant the neighborhood mesh could answer nearby devices, but it could not ask a central authority for permission; every door, heater, tablet, and route board had to decide from whatever rule was already cached inside it.

Some devices failed open. Some failed closed. The worst ones invented a middle state and called it caution.

Elias’s mouth tightened. “And someone will try to sell a gate by dusk.”

Vera swallowed and felt her vow return, smaller but harder.

“I won’t become their gate.”

Cordessa finally turned toward her.

“Good,” Cordessa said. “Now build something that can’t pretend to be one.”

Behind them, the courthouse doors swung wider as more locks failed safe—inviting, innocent, dangerous.

Vera stared into the dark interior, and the cold climbed her spine like a question.

On the façade, the phrase PROCEED GENTLY blinked one last time—then glitched into static.

Not a blessing.

Not a threat.

Just a reminder that the world was human again—and humans were about to start improvising.

The reset icon blinked like a heartbeat.

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. 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)

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

The same period of the catastrophe arrives three times — from the lab, from the body, from the algorithm — and the third version 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)

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.

Cluster B: Book 3, Palladium Poisoning. The contamination left behind by the boom. 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?

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