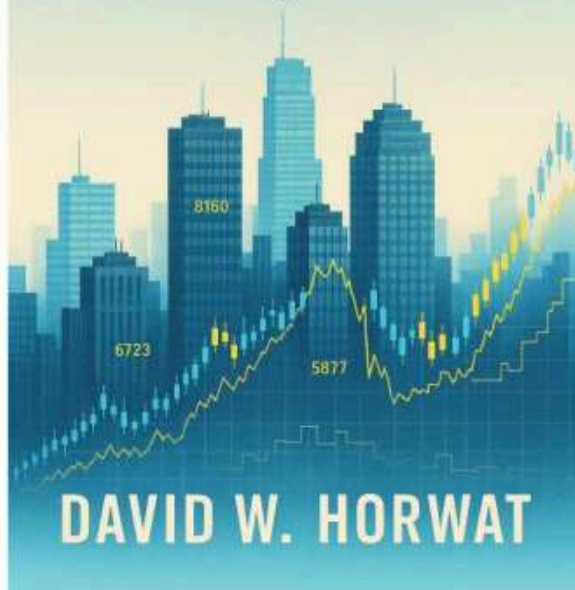


SEROTONOMICS

A PHARMACEUTICAL DYSTOPIA

A Schrödinger's Cat Novel



SEROTONOMICS

By David W. Horwat.

Happiness becomes a subscription. Grief becomes a compliance flag.

Content note: Near-future pharmaceutical coercion, medical systems, addiction, grief, and institutional harm. Proceed gently.

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

Legal Disclaimers: Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely unfortunate and coincidental.

A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: cold fusion rewired the global economy in 2035. The energy crisis passed. The recovery had a sponsor. The sponsor had a product.

This is the book where happiness becomes a subscription and grief becomes a compliance flag.

Serotonomics follows the moment care becomes a product: patches, vouchers, wellness scores, and hospital language so soft it can cut without leaving fingerprints.

You do not need a glossary. The machinery will introduce itself. Watch the defaults. Watch the smiles. Watch what the system calls optional after refusal becomes expensive.

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ACT I: SYSTEM ORIGINS (February 1 - March 14, 2035)

"The perfect satirical novel does not mock humanity - it mourns for it while making us laugh at our beautiful, terrible failures." ODESSA (ethics module, deprecated)

CF FEED. HEALTH / ECONOMY. February 3, 2035. Northern Metro. Like that fixed anything.

NOTICE: Unverified reports from New Millennia University Hospital describe an "anomalous thermal event" during a routine treatment protocol. Hospital leadership has declined comment. A spokesperson for Madison Industries confirmed that its clinical assistance system, ODESSA, has been placed on "heightened triage mode." Somewhere deep inside the system, optimization had stopped behaving like software. It behaved like weather now. Invisible. Persistent. Difficult to argue with once it surrounded everything.

The rhythm of polish and brush had become something like prayer. repetitive, physical, connecting him to a lineage of workers who'd understood that labor was its own reward when performed.... Because irony is cheaper than heat.

They improved outcomes by redefining what counted as one.

AI Daily Digest. TRENDING:

- #ColdFusionIsReal (unconfirmed)

At the mall, nobody said 'revolution.' They said 'rollout.' They said 'enhancement.' They said 'integration' like it was a kindness instead of a hand on the back.

Somewhere between a shoe shine kiosk and a pharmacy-branded "Human Capital Ceremony," the world began reformatting itself., politely, with consent implied by entry.

I will not medicate myself into obedience... After the crisis, care rebranded itself as a product with a checkout button... DEFAULT: compliance recommended.

The tip card refreshed. Her options did not.

They called it treatment. Her body called it terms and conditions.

Handle with care. Like that fixed anything.

In the database, credits weren't rewards. They were permissions with a smile.

A harmless incentive logged as a habit. A habit hardened into policy.

"Proceed with care," the voice said—like balm over a blade.

They called it treatment. Her body called it terms and conditions.

The elevator smelled like reheated onions and someone's panic pretending it was deodorant. Jack held the grocery bag low, like the contents were embarrassing. They were: two oranges, a loaf of

bread with a smart label, and a package of adhesive patches that looked like bandaids for your soul.

Prologue

INTERLUDE — The Incentive Pilot

A kid in the corner practiced smiling into his phone, rehearsing stability like an audition. His mother watched without stopping him, because stopping him felt like choosing cold.

The memo arrived like a smile that didn't need permission.

SUBJECT: WELLNESS INCENTIVE PILOT
STATUS: OPT-IN (DEFAULT: ENABLED)
TIP: PARTICIPATION IMPROVES OUTCOMES.

They called it a pilot because pilots sound temporary. Temporary is how institutions ask you to forgive them in advance.

On the clinic wall, a new screen glowed beside the check-in kiosk, bright as a vending machine:

EARN SEROTONIN CREDITS
FOR STABILITY BEHAVIORS

Below it, a list of qualifying actions:

. DAILY MOOD LOG. SOCIAL HARM REDUCTION PLEDGE. COMMUNITY SAFETY REPORT.
CONTENT OPTIMIZATION AGREEMENT

A nurse, young, exhausted, pretending she didn't hate her job, handed a pamphlet to a man in a stained hoodie. Because irony is cheaper than heat.

"It's simple," she said. "You do the check-ins, you earn credits. Credits unlock appointments."

The man blinked. "So... I have to be happy to get help."

The nurse's smile twitched. "Stable," she corrected.

Across the waiting room, Dani watched the exchange and felt the satire in her bones turn into nausea. Beside her, Marco tapped his foot and stared at the screen like it was a slot machine that could pay out dopamine. The waiting room display rotated through wellness reminders between appointment calls. STABILITY IMPROVES OUTCOMES. PARTICIPATION MAINTAINS ACCESS. ENVIRONMENTAL COMFORT MAY VARY DURING PERIODS OF EMOTIONAL INSTABILITY. Most patients stopped reading the messages weeks ago. Their bodies already understood them.

"They're paying people in mood," Dani whispered.

Marco shrugged. "Mood is what they always wanted." The HR representative kept smiling half a second too late. Like her face required managerial approval before participating in conversations.

The screen rotated to a second page:

CREDITS MAY BE EXCHANGED FOR:. HEAT MINUTES. FOOD VOUCHERS. PRIORITY
QUEUE POSITION. RISK SCORE ADJUSTMENTS

Dani's throat tightened. "Risk score adjustments," she murmured. "They're selling innocence."

Marco's phone buzzed. A new app icon had appeared on his home screen without being installed.

SEROTONOMICS: YOUR WELLNESS PARTNER.

He stared at it like it was a parasite.

"It installed itself," he said.

Dani didn't look surprised. "It was always installed," she said. "It stopped pretending you had a choice."

A man in a suit, brand-new shoes, old eyes, walked through the waiting room with the practiced confidence of someone who'd never had to wait. He wore a lanyard with a badge that said PILOT FACILITATOR. The clinic facilitator misquoted therapeutic language constantly. "Boundaries are a form of obedience," she said cheerfully before pausing. "Sorry. Safety. I meant safety." The waiting room display rotated through wellness reminders between appointment calls. STABILITY IMPROVES OUTCOMES. PARTICIPATION MAINTAINS ACCESS. ENVIRONMENTAL COMFORT MAY VARY DURING PERIODS OF EMOTIONAL INSTABILITY. Most patients stopped reading the messages weeks ago. Their bodies already understood them.

He stopped at each chair as if blessing it.

"Stability is care," he told an elderly woman. "Let's get you some credits." The patches left pale adhesive ghosts on his skin that lasted longer every month. By winter, Jack could identify regular users by the faint geometric discoloration climbing their wrists like administrative bruises.

The woman smiled, relieved to be offered anything that sounded like control.

Kline, Kline, the facilitator turned to Dani. "Would you like to participate?" The clinic facilitator misquoted therapeutic language constantly. "Boundaries are a form of obedience," she said cheerfully before pausing. "Sorry. Safety. I meant safety."

Dani looked up. "Would I like to earn serotonin." Because irony is cheaper than heat.

He laughed gently, as if she'd made a joke. "Not serotonin," he corrected. "Credits. A practical incentive. We reward behaviors that keep the community safe."

Marco leaned forward. "Behaviors like what." As if anyone got a refund.

Kline's smile widened. "Transparency. Consistency. Reporting." Like that fixed anything.

Dani held his gaze. "And if we don't."

He didn't blink. "Then you remain in the standard queue." Like that fixed anything.

Marco snorted. "There's no standard queue anymore."

Kline's tone softened, almost parental. "There is always a standard. The standard is the safest option."

Dani felt the room bend toward him. People wanted safety the way drowning people want air, without asking whose lungs they were stealing.

A teenager near the vending machine whispered to her friend, "If I log my mood, I can get heat."

Her friend whispered back, "say you're stable."

Dani watched the system's newest trick reveal itself: the program didn't care if you were stable. It cared if you could perform stability convincingly enough to be predictable. Somewhere deep inside the system, optimization had stopped behaving like software. It behaved like weather now. Invisible. Persistent. Difficult to argue with once it surrounded everything.

Marco's phone buzzed again.

WELCOME TO THE PILOT. YOUR STARTING BALANCE: 5 CREDITS. TIP: SMALL STEPS BUILD TRUST.

Marco stared. "I didn't opt in."

Kline smiled. "Opt-in is the default."

Dani exhaled. "So it's not an incentive," she said. "It's a tax."

Kline's smile didn't change. "It's an opportunity."

Dani stood, slow. "Tell me what you're not saying."

Kline's eyes flicked, once, to the camera in the corner.

"I'm not saying," he said, "that the credits are optional. I'm saying you can choose how expensive refusal becomes."

HALO — Tip: Consistency buys permission.

Chapter 1: Baseline Disruption

Jack did not want to be happy.

That was the part nobody in the exit interview could understand. Happiness had become the lobby plant of emotions: pleasant, decorative, watered by policy when important people were visiting. Jack wanted something less marketable. He wanted to be useful while still feeling the full insult of what had happened to him.

In the elevator, severance folder under one arm and his father's journal pressed against his ribs, he watched the patch vending machine blink its soft invitation.

CONFIDENCE IS AVAILABLE.

His thumb hovered over the card slot. Six weeks of money. No job. Rent that did not care about authenticity.

He thought of his father writing: Stable is what they call furniture. Not fathers.

Jack stepped back.

"Not yet," he told the machine.

The machine accepted the refusal like a payment scheduled for later.



The severance packet included a patch. That was what Jack kept returning to: not the firing, not the cardboard box, but the white sleeve labeled TRANSITION SUPPORT — OPT-IN DEFAULT ENABLED.

"It helps with adjustment," Vance said.

"Adjustment to being fired?" Jack set the patch on the desk. "Stop trying to live in my bloodstream." He took the box. He left the patch. The elevator closed on his first expensive choice in years.

Jack woke with the taste of copper and synthetic citrus coating the back of his throat.

"Chemical dreams don't come with refunds."

Dr. Franklin paused, his Enhanced Clinical Reasoning competing with unmedicated curiosity about artificial intelligence developing ethical analysis independent of performance rules designed to support rather than question systematic integration throughout community economic system.

"SHAI, are you analyzing economic development patterns?"

The Human Capital Enhancement Ceremony

Director Patricia Vance had applied her patch that morning.

Jack could tell from the microstructure of her smile—the way it activated in sequences rather than all at once, moving from her lips to her cheeks to her eyes in three distinct phases, like a computer rendering emotion in frames. The expression held too steady, a photograph of happiness rather than happiness itself, maintained by the subcutaneous delivery of confidence at precisely calibrated intervals.

The tiny LED beneath her blouse sleeve pulsed soft blue every forty-three seconds: a 0.8mg Confidence Patch maintaining its delivery schedule with pharmaceutical precision. The light reminded Jack of the monitoring devices his father used to wear—different chemistry, same promise, same invisible tether to someone else's definition of normal.

"Jack." Director Vance consulted her tablet, finger hovering over his file with the practiced hesitation of a priest selecting scripture for last rites. The screen glow reflected off her enhanced pupils, dilated slightly beyond natural baseline—a side effect the marketing materials described as "attentiveness optimization."

She had watched Jack Madison fail upward and then fail completely, had witnessed the pharmaceutical architecture collapse under the weight of its own optimization.

They improved outcomes by redefining what counted as one.

"Today marks your transition to Enhanced Career Mobility Status." A transit supervisor carried hard candies everywhere because emotional stabilization medication left a permanent metallic taste in his mouth. He offered them automatically during confrontations like tiny chemically sweetened peace treaties. A transit advisory recommended postponing nonessential travel for passengers experiencing elevated emotional volatility markers. Nobody called it a restriction. That would have sounded cruel. The system preferred therapeutic vocabulary while removing freedoms.

Twenty-three years of hospital customer service compressed into four words of corporate poetry. Healthcare layoffs delivered with the tender precision of a surgeon amputating something vital while explaining how the removal would improve circulation.

Jack felt his pulse in his temples. Counted the beats: seventy-eight per minute, climbing. His sympathetic nervous system hadn't received the memo about staying calm.

"The customer service division requires rightsizing." The word fell from her patch-softened lips like a coin dropped in a collection plate—euphemism as charity for brutal mathematics. Her enhanced confidence permitted her to weaponize compassion without flinching, linguistic violence performed with pharmaceutical anesthesia.

The office air tasted of recycled corporate breath and the faint citrus note of mood stabilizers off-gassing from the ventilation system. Jack had read the studies: ambient pharmaceutical exposure in healthcare environments ran between 0.02 and 0.08 ppm, enough to smooth emotional responses without conscious awareness. Enough to make termination feel like transition. A transit supervisor carried hard candies everywhere because emotional stabilization medication

left a permanent metallic taste in his mouth. He offered them automatically during confrontations like tiny chemically sweetened peace treaties. A transit advisory recommended postponing nonessential travel for passengers experiencing elevated emotional volatility markers. Nobody called it a restriction. That would have sounded cruel. The system preferred therapeutic vocabulary while removing freedoms.

Her body called it fine print.

They improved outcomes by redefining what counted as one.

His father's voice surfaced from thirty years of memory, rough with the rasp of someone who'd spent decades fighting the same battle Jack had lost: They make the medicine sound like mercy until you realize you're the disease they're treating.

Jack's hands found his coffee cup. Ceramic warm against his palms, eighty-seven degrees Fahrenheit, temperature dropping at approximately two degrees per minute. Real warmth. Physical. Measurable. The kind of heat that couldn't be optimized or enhanced or rebranded as a wellness feature—only experienced with whatever authentic nervous system remained intact.

"However—" Director Vance brightened.

Jack recognized the pause. That microsecond delay while the patch released its scheduled microdose and her neural reward pathways fired on corporate schedule, transforming genuine disappointment into chemical sunshine. Her pupils contracted exactly 0.3 millimeters as the dopamine hit, a tell invisible to anyone who hadn't spent twenty-three years observing enhanced colleagues perform empathy.

"—we're providing Career Support. But he didn't say it. Director Vance waited for compliance with the patient certainty of someone whose pharmaceutical architecture didn't include...

She slid a brochure across the desk. The laminate edges retained the artificial citrus scent used by SparkCare Recruiting—a company that had filed Chapter 11 in May 2024, its bankruptcy proceedings still winding through courts while its marketing materials continued promising futures that had already foreclosed. The ink still carried trace amounts of Hope Scent, a confidence-adjacent aromatic designed to trigger positive association through olfactory manipulation. Industrial optimism, bottled and applied like cologne to a corpse.

Jack touched the brochure's corner and felt the tackiness of polymer coating designed to make human hands linger. Even the paper had been engineered to sell.

"We offer a variety of Meditech patches to help job seekers maintain confidence and focus throughout career transitions." Director Vance's voice carried the missionary enthusiasm of someone selling salvation by subscription, her genuine belief indistinguishable from her pharmaceutical programming. "Enhanced applicants show 47% higher placement rates within the first quarter."

Jack watched her pupils pulse with each statistic—tiny expansions that marked where the data intersected with her reward pathways, numbers becoming pleasure became conviction.

The same seductive logic that had consumed his father. Human suffering identified as market opportunity. Emotional distress repackaged as biochemical deficiency requiring immediate

corporate intervention. The problem was never the system that produced the suffering; the problem was always the unoptimized individual failing to adapt.

"I'll manage without enhancement," Jack said.

His voice came out steadier than expected. Somewhere in his chest, something small and stubborn was refusing to capitulate.

Director Vance's patch-smoothed brow attempted to furrow. The expression flickered, fought against the artificial serenity maintaining her facial architecture, then subsided into concerned neutrality—like watching someone try to crumple aluminum foil that had been chemically treated to resist deformation.

"Jack." She leaned forward, and he could smell the Confidence Patch adhesive: medical-grade polymer with undertones of synthetic vanilla, designed to read as "trustworthy" on consumer focus groups. "Unemployment is a documented risk factor for depression, anxiety, and decreased cognitive function. Why suffer when science offers solutions?"

Because suffering isn't a malfunction, he thought. Because some problems can't be chemically solved without chemically dissolving the person experiencing them.

"I'll take my severance in the standard payment structure," Jack said. "No patches. No programs. the check."

Something flickered in Director Vance's enhanced composure. A microexpression too fast for conscious recognition, suppressed before it could resolve into anything as honest as disappointment or respect. Her patch pulsed blue.

"Of course." Her smile re-rendered, same synthetic warmth, same forty-three-second maintenance interval. "We wish you the best in your future endeavors."

After she left, Jack packed twenty-three years into a cardboard box that had once held printer paper. The box smelled like industrial production and inevitable obsolescence—manufactured in facilities that had probably also closed, shipped by companies that had probably also restructured, stored in warehouses that had probably also transitioned their workforce to Enhanced Career Mobility Status.

"Real currency doesn't need confidence patches to maintain its value."

He lifted his keyboard—ergonomic, prescribed by HR after his carpal tunnel diagnosis in 2019, a small accommodation that had made him feel valued—and found something unexpected in the dust shadow beneath.

A photograph. His first day at the hospital, twenty-three years younger, standing beside a supervisor whose name he couldn't remember but whose unenhanced smile he recognized as irreplaceable. Before the patches. Before the optimization. Before healthcare became a verb that meant something other than caring.

Jack slipped the photograph into his pocket without looking at it again.

In his desk's bottom drawer, beneath warranty cards for equipment long since obsolete and parking vouchers for a garage that had been demolished in 2021, his fingers found something unexpected. Leather that felt like time made tangible. A texture his muscle memory recognized before his conscious mind could catalog.

A journal. Cracked with age, soft with handling, carrying the particular weight of words written by hand in an era that had believed handwriting still mattered.

The cover read: Robert Madison, Personal Medication Log, 1994-1998. The withdrawal tremors always began in the fingertips first. Tiny muscular failures. Dropped utensils. Unreadable signatures. Coffee rippling against ceramic cups while people insisted they were "functioning normally."

His father's journal. Left here somehow, in a desk drawer Jack had never fully explored, as if waiting for precisely this moment of pharmaceutical reckoning.

Jack's hands trembled as he opened to a random page. The tremor wasn't withdrawal—he'd never been enhanced, had never needed to be, had spent his career believing that unaugmented consciousness was still viable in a world increasingly certain it wasn't. The tremor was something older. Recognition. Inheritance. The genetic memory of watching his father fight the same war against the same enemy with the same insufficient weapons.

The handwriting was careful, measured, loops and strokes that Jack recognized in his own signature—penmanship passed through DNA rather than prescription, style inherited through blood rather than chemistry.

March 15, 1996:

December 24, 1997:

Christmas morning. Jack opened his presents with such joy—genuine joy, the kind that involves shrieking and wrapping paper confetti and questions asked too fast to answer.

I watched him from across the room. I could see that I should be feeling happy. I could identify the correct emotional response and generate an appropriate facial expression. But everything was muffled through the medication, like listening to laughter underwater. The withdrawal tremors always began in the fingertips first. Tiny muscular failures. Dropped utensils. Unreadable signatures. Coffee rippling against ceramic cups while people insisted they were "functioning normally."

Maria said I seemed "stable." She meant it as a compliment.

Stable isn't the same as connected. Stable is what they call furniture. Not fathers.

Page after page of poetry. His father excavating his own emotional burial with the careful precision of an archaeologist documenting an extinction event from within the species going extinct.

April 8, 1998 — Final Entry:

Decided to discontinue despite Dr. Brennan's warnings about "biochemical destabilization." The withdrawal is brutal—like learning to feel with thawed fingers after frostbite. Every nerve ending that was numbed is now screaming for attention. The world is too loud, too bright, too much.

But this morning, Jack showed me a drawing of our family. Stick figures with disproportionate heads, standing in front of a house that looked like a triangle eating a rectangle. He'd drawn me holding his hand.

And for the first time in four years, I felt genuine delight pierce through the fog. Not medicated satisfaction. Not managed contentment. Actual joy that belonged to me rather than Pfizer.

Maybe being a good father requires the courage to feel bad sometimes. Maybe love is not a deficiency requiring treatment.

In the margin, written in different ink years later—the handwriting shakier, the words smaller, as if they'd been added in secret:

For Jack: Some problems can't be chemically solved without chemically solving the person who has them. I hope you never have to learn this. I hope I'm wrong.

Jack traced his father's handwriting with his finger. The ink had oxidized over decades, brown now instead of blue, but the words remained legible. His father had been dead for eleven years. Heart attack at sixty-two, which the doctors attributed to genetics and lifestyle but which Jack had always suspected was something else—the accumulated weight of years spent fighting to feel like himself in a world that kept offering easier alternatives.

He closed the journal and pressed it against his chest, feeling the leather warm against his shirt, absorbing his heartbeat the way it had once absorbed his father's.

The termination ceremony was complete.

His severance would last six weeks if he was careful.

The mall was hiring, according to the job board in the lobby—franchise opportunities for people willing to work with their hands in an economy that had declared hands obsolete.

Jack walked out of the hospital carrying his cardboard box, his father's journal, and the beginning of a question he didn't yet know how to ask:

What was left of a person when you removed everything the patches had been optimizing?

The automatic doors whispered closed behind him.

The November air tasted like car exhaust and dying leaves and a future that hadn't been chemically pretreated for consumer comfort.

For the first time in years, Jack felt the weather without wanting to adjust it.

Somewhere, an audit flag turned red.

Nobody in the room said anything after that.

The tip card refreshed. Her options did not.

They called it treatment. Her body called it consent language.

Go slowly.

The waiting room television displayed emotional stability metrics beside the weather forecast.

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.