



RODNEY WALTHER



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[www.rodneywalther.com](http://www.rodneywalther.com)

## Chapter 5

Piercing, high-pitched beeps from the bedside alarm clock bore into the brain of Danica Cortez. She groaned and pulled the covers over her head, but the insistent beeping continued. *Just a little more sleep*, she thought, pressing the snooze button and rolling onto her side.

Nine minutes later, the beeping started up again.

“Ugh,” she muttered and smacked her hand down on the alarm. She checked the time—two-thirty—and dragged herself out of bed. Even though she’d been a weekday news anchor for more than three years, she still hated waking up in the middle of the night.

With the energy of a zombie, Danica slogged through her morning routine. She poured a cup of coffee and microwaved a bowl of oatmeal—enough energy to keep her going through two hours of live broadcasting but not enough calories to change the size of her clothes.

From the kitchen wall came the song of a white-throated sparrow. Danica sipped her coffee and glanced up at the bird clock her mom had given to her as a birthday present. One more hour until she needed to leave. At least it’s Friday. She dropped her head, unexcited to spend the next hour selecting an outfit and applying makeup.

The outfit was the easy part. She opened the door to one of her two master walk-in closets

and surveyed its contents. All of her professional clothes hung neatly on satin padded hangers, blouses arranged by color just like she'd learned from her mentor at her first job. Danica knew better than to open the door to her other closet, the one that held her regular clothes and that was intended for the "man in your life," as the real estate agent had once told her. There hadn't been a man in Danica's life in a long time, so that closet was cluttered with everything from her personal life. Such as it was.

She sighed and selected a long-collared cerulean blouse over solid-black camisole, with a pair of coordinating black slacks. The slacks were never an issue—no one could see those behind the anchor desk—but the blouse had to meet a stringent set of requirements established by Eyewitness9's executive producer: professional-looking; free of any patterns or prints; and flattering to her features, which she took to mean "look sexy but not slutty."

Danica hit the switch next to the sink, and five million watts of artificial light washed over the bathroom. She opened her mouth in a toothy smile and stared into the mirror, inspecting her skin like some sixteen year old looking for overnight pimple eruptions. "These are your good years," her mom had told her last summer at her thirty-third birthday party. "After the acne but before the wrinkles and grey hair." Then her mom had whispered in her ear, "Danni, it's time to settle down and get married. You need to start making me some grandbabies."

As Danica smoothed foundation on her face, she considered how much easier life was when she'd been a field reporter. Sure, she'd still needed to wear makeup, but not to the same extent. For a profession that prided itself on revealing truth, the use of heavy makeup seemed the ultimate irony.

She brushed on some dark bronzer—"Look more Hispanic," her producer had told her—and inspected the results in the mirror. Through the makeup, the only features she could distinguish were the ones her parents had passed on: the wavy, raven hair and dark eyes of her Sicilian father; and the tiny dimples in her cheeks, just like her Irish mother. Mom probably wouldn't even

recognize me like this, she decided, then realized with a pang of sadness that today marked six months since Mom had died.

Danica began decorating her eyes and mused about her mom, a woman whose persistent optimism had been sorely tested throughout her life. Together, the two of them had tried to sustain the family through the difficult times, but now with Mom gone—with everyone gone—Danica was on her own. She had managed to keep herself busy at the station, often working late to check out story leads, trying to stave off the loneliness. She wasn't always successful.

As Danica was applying a strip of false lashes to her right eye, the bathroom suddenly plunged into darkness. "Are you kidding me?" she said.

She waited a few minutes for the power to return. It didn't. She rummaged through the other closet for some regular clothes, because she never donned her broadcast outfit—her costume—until she finished her makeup. Then she called Jerry Tomlinson, her news director and the most nocturnal person at the station.

"My power's gone out."

"And I should care because? . . ."

"Because right now it looks as if I got dressed in the dark. Which I did. This is a heads-up, Jerry. When I get there, I need to use the makeup room. And I don't want to hear any crap about how I look."

"Get here as soon as you can. Lots of news this morning."

"Really?" Even though Danica hated her morning routine, she did enjoy the process of news gathering, of writing and editing stories, of discussing what was important to viewers. Yet these days it seemed she'd been turned into another teleprompter-reading, journalism-lacking telegenic cutie. She wanted to be the hard-hitting reporter known as Danni Cortez, not "Houston's number-one morning anchor, Dah-nica Corrrrrrtz!"

“There’s a two-alarm fire near the Galleria and there’s been a shooting outside a nightclub on your side of town.”

“Is that all?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s not real news. That kind of stuff happens every day in Houston.” She sighed. “Forget it, I’m just cranky. I gotta go.” She hung up, tossed her makeup in a bag, and crawled into her car.

\* \* \*

Danica flipped on the low-beams and hazard lights before pulling out of her driveway. A white blanket of fog had fallen overnight, a byproduct of Gulf Coast moisture and pre-dawn cooling. She couldn’t see more than fifty feet.

The fog always reminded her of when she was a little girl. Her folks owned a cottage on Fidalgo Island, north of Seattle, and Danica used to walk with her mom to the ferry terminal, to watch the tourists in line for the San Juan Islands.

One day when she was seven or eight years old, Danica begged to go whale watching. It was summer, the time of year when the resident orca pods regularly cruised the strait, so her mother relented and they rode the ferry across to the big island. As the two of them sat on the cliffs above Lime Kiln Point, scanning the horizon for telltale whale blows or dorsal fins appearing in unison, a dense fog began to roll in.

Soon they couldn’t see the water, let alone any whales. Cloaked in a cocoon of white mist, the two of them lay on a cotton blanket, Danica’s head resting on her mother’s lap, which hardly existed anymore due to her pregnancy.

“I can’t see anything,” Danica said. “It’s like we’re in a cloud.”

“Well, honey, we kinda are.”

Danica could feel the moist air on her skin and could hear the rhythmic waves lapping the shore and the faraway call of a bald eagle. After a moment, she asked, “Do you think heaven’s like this? You know, all peaceful and white?”

Her mom shushed her softly and caressed Danica’s cheek with a delicate hand. Then she ran her fingers through Danica’s hair, soothing her as if she were an infant. That was the day her mom had wept the whole way back on the ferry and recounted stories about the grandfather Danica had never known.

At the main intersection leaving her south Houston neighborhood, far from the cliffs of Lime Kiln Point, Danica stared through thick fog to check for oncoming cars. She pulled onto Space Center Boulevard, the long artery running north of NASA. She’d left home later than she’d wanted, and she still needed time to finish her makeup. If traffic was backed up due to the low visibility, she was going to be screwed.

But so far the road was empty, which actually seemed to make the outside world even more ominous. It was as if the fog had swallowed up everything. She slowed the car and muttered to herself. Driving in the middle of the night, especially in bad weather, was another reason she hated being a morning anchor. That’s why her promotion to prime time, promised for a couple of years already, couldn’t come soon enough.

Off to her left, she could see the glow of runway lights for Ellington Field, the long-time military airport that now served NASA and handled small commercial aircraft. The place was like an old friend, a landmark that greeted her every morning.

As she rounded a curve east of the airport, a large, slow-moving shape appeared in her peripheral vision. Her mind registered it as an airplane, even though it was enveloped in a shroud of white. She’d seen airplanes land at Ellington lots of times, but somehow this seemed different.

She looked out to her right and watched the plane descend from the sky, its landing gear

deployed, its wings shuddering violently. Its engines growled a throaty rumble.

The plane's too low. "Pull up," she said, giving voice to an inner thought. "Pull up!"

Danica couldn't believe what she was seeing. The fog seemed to push down on the plane, as if the sky were smothering it with a pillow. A line of trees at the edge of a field reached up and tore off a wheel, and the plane tilted. Its left wing struck the tree canopy and sheared off.

The nose of the plane hit first, and the rest of the fuselage tumbled over it like the world's worst cartwheel. Debris littered the air.

Danica felt the shockwave and heard her car windows rattle. She yanked the steering wheel to the right and hit her brakes, fearing the crash would spill over onto the road. "Oh, shit!"

As the plane broke apart, red and yellow flames shot out from the fuselage. What was left then exploded, illuminating the sky with a brilliant orange fireball.

Danica steered her car to a stop beside the crash site. She jumped out and stood in the road, looking both ways so she could flag down a passing driver. A few seconds later, with no one in sight, she abandoned the idea.

Not knowing what else to do, she clambered over a barbed-wire fence and ran toward the smoking remains of the plane, while her fingers tried to wrest the cell phone from her pocket. She automatically punched some numbers, and a familiar voice answered.

"Eyewitness9 news desk."

She pounded the phone against her head. What was she thinking, calling the station? She hung up and dialed 911. "I need help. I just saw an airplane crash!"

"Where are you located?"

The question engaged something deep inside Danica, and all her journalism training and on-scene reporting gave her instant clarity. "An airplane went down. Not a jumbo jet. Maybe a charter. It crashed east of Ellington Field approximately . . . a mile and a half."

“Can you see where it landed?”

“It didn’t land—it crashed! Send ambulances and fire trucks to Space Center Boulevard, north of Clear Lake and east of the Beltway. Hurry!”

Danica hung up and dialed the newsroom again. When no one answered by the third ring, she realized she couldn’t just stand there and wait, not for the police or the firefighters or her colleagues at Eyewitness9. She had to do something.

Through the choking fog, Danica couldn’t make out anything but burning wreckage. She moved cautiously toward it, fearing another explosion. Intense heat radiated from what had been the front half of the plane. She extended a hand to shield herself.

Farther into the grassy field, more wreckage was strewn about. Her brain processed the images of jumbled metal and told her that she was seeing an engine, more fuselage, and the plane’s tail. How could anyone survive this?

A duffel bag that had obviously been ejected from the plane lay in the grass, but Danica didn’t see it until she tripped over it and fell onto her knees. She glanced back to the road, hoping to see emergency vehicles, but she was all alone. Stumbling to her feet, she ran toward the back half of the plane, the only section not engulfed in flames. “Anyone there?” she called, and squinted through a gaping hole in the wreckage.

Something—someone—moaned in response.

Danica froze at the sound but knew what she had to do. She took a steadying breath, braced her arms on each side of the open fuselage, and lifted herself up. Once inside, she was enveloped by total blackness. “Where are you?” she called, crawling along the aisle, patting the seats on either side to find survivors. But all the seats were empty. Finally she felt a bare leg and shook it. “Tell me where you’re hurt.”

No answer. She pulled out her cell phone to illuminate the darkness.

A woman sat motionless in the seat, and the first thing Danica could see was a broad swath of tattoos all over the woman's body. A tiger with thick stripes and bared fangs seemed to be crawling down her left arm, while her right arm was covered with a garish field of colorful skulls. A large scorpion was wending its way up her neck and below her ear.

Danica cast the light on the woman's face—it stared back, mouth agape and eyes wide. A necklace with a large teardrop-shaped emerald hung around her neck. Danica reached out to check for a pulse, but the woman's head rolled to the side. Metal shrapnel had lodged in her neck and skull; her body was practically decapitated.

Danica clamped a hand over her mouth and stifled a gag. She crawled past the woman and called, "Who's here? Say something."

A moan sounded from her left.

She climbed over a seat and found a man locked in his seatbelt. She shone her lighted cell phone at him and saw a bone protruding from his upper leg, his left arm flailing. A sheet of blood poured from a gash on his forehead, down his cheek and onto his shirt. He coughed and turned toward her, his famous face unmistakable.

Danica gasped. "Senator Hartwell?"