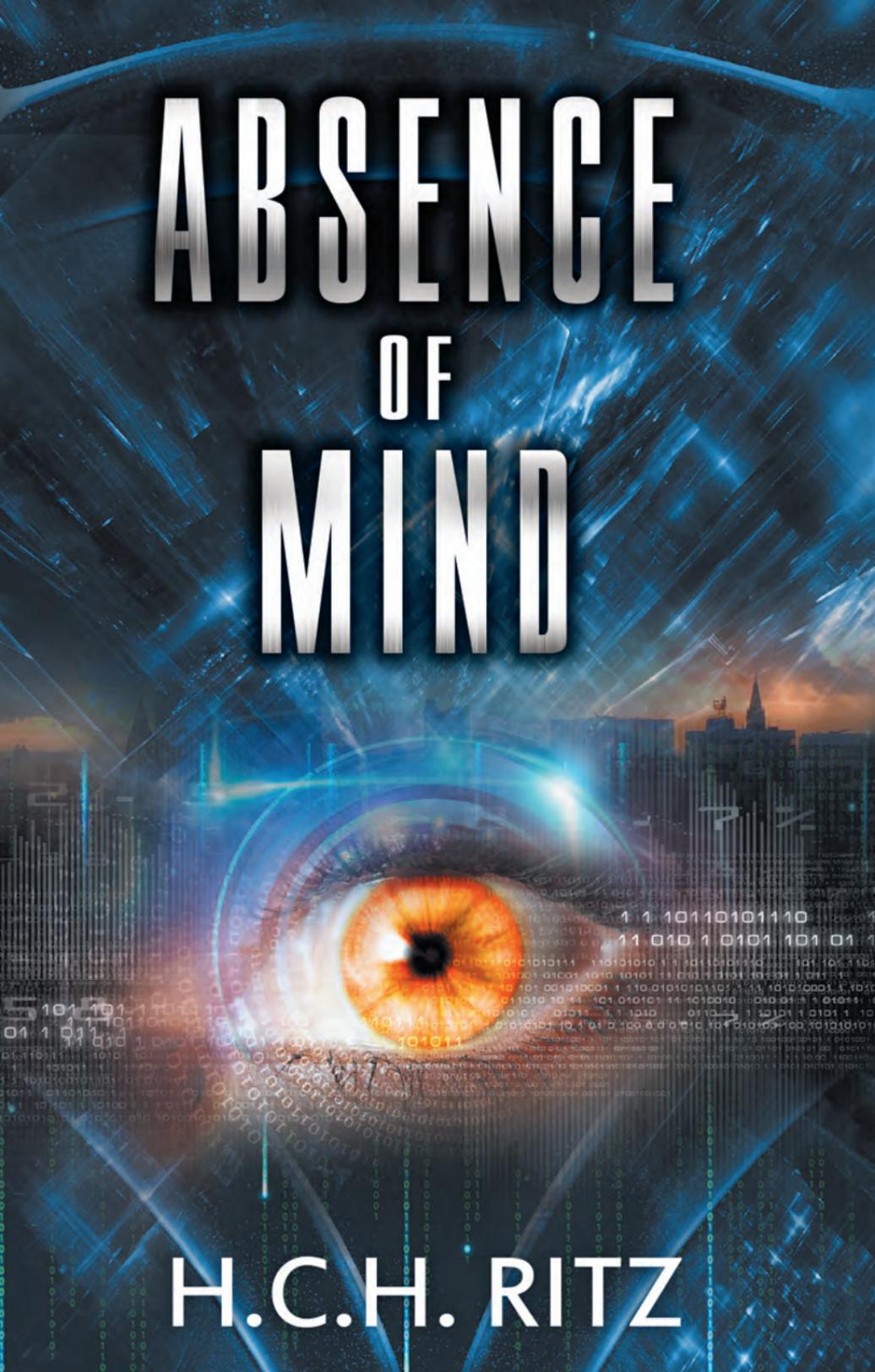


ABSENCE OF MIND

The background of the entire image is a vibrant blue digital cityscape. In the center, a large, glowing orange and yellow eye is superimposed over a circular digital interface. The scene is filled with streaks of light, binary code (0s and 1s), and various digital symbols, creating a high-tech, cybernetic atmosphere.

H.C.H. RITZ

**ABSENCE
OF
MIND**

H.C.H. RITZ



Text & Illustrations © 2015 by H. C. H. Ritz

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First Edition

To Lisa

**My beloved mother-in-law,
who was “Granny Day Care” for my son
so that I could write.**

ONE

My Navi reads the news to me inside my head. It has a smooth, masculine voice, which I chose, but also a robotic intonation that they've never been able to fix.

<< Tensions continue to escalate as Chinese officials refuse to respond to allegations that China is continuing to re-develop its nuclear weapons program twelve years after its defeat and disarmament—>>

< Next. >

Sunlight sweeps across my vision as my automatic car makes a right turn, and the game of GlowDisc I'm playing in my heads-up display almost winks out in the bright light, then returns.

<< Entertainment conglomerates Peake International, Big Wave, and Kimberley Corp posted record profits for the fourth straight quarter. >>

< Next. >

<< It's official: Elephants have gone the way of the dodo, joining the list of nineteen major mammals to—>>

< Oh God. Next. You know what, Navi? Don't show me sad news about animals anymore. >

<< Preferences updated. >>

It's early afternoon on a Monday, and Tobi—my blond German Shepherd—and I are heading to the dog park. I scratch Tobi's head as I watch my six opponents make their moves in rapid sequence. Then I mentally direct a yellow disc on top of a blue disc, and the neighboring red discs obediently turn green.

<< Call from work. >>

< Ignore. >

It's my weekend, which sometimes corresponds to the actual weekend, depending on what they do with my schedule at the hospital.

After the others take their turns, I shift a blue disc onto a red one. I grin as purple cascades across the playing board and my opponents shower me with rude comments and praise.

<< Smart drug Allivan proven effective in treating schizophrenia. The last of the most common neurological disorders has fallen victim to the newest smart drug produced by global drug manufacturer New-Phase, which expects the new drug to become commercially available within six months. >>

Well, that's cool. I can look forward to better treatment for the schizos in my ward.

Hmm . . . Nope. If I split the orange discs, I'll lose too many green discs . . .

<< Call from Family. >>

< Ugh. Ignore. >

"Family" means it's someone from back home in my family's weird community. Since it's a shared landline phone, my Navi can't tell me exactly who it is.

< Gimme more news. >

I feel Tobi's cold, wet nose on my hand and pet him some more as I consider splitting the brown discs into red and green.

Then I hear Jamie's voice. When messages are personal, they come through in that individual's voice, accompanied by a video image of their face in the corner of my display. Jamie is my youngest brother, out of the five of us, and my only family member here in Atlanta.

<< Okay, Phoebe, so are you too cool to come by my birthday party tonight? >>

< No, dorkamous. Of course I'll stop by. Glad you reminded me, though, because I forgot. Why don't you have your party on a Friday or Saturday night like a normal human being? >

Nearly everything on the GlowDisc game board shifts to blue, and I glare. I lost. I start a new game with new opponents.

<< Because today is my actual birthday. Duh. And only old people like you have to wake up in the morning anyway. >>

I snort.

< Only old people like me make actual money, you know. >

<< I make money. I earn scholarships. Unlike some, ahem, people I know. >>

< Bookworm. Nerd. >

I'm only teasing him. I'm proud of how well he's been doing in school—

Suddenly, the brakes squeal, and something big flashes past by my left window. A massive crunching sound batters my eardrums. Everything goes up into the air and comes back down again.

When things settle, my head is still swimming. I blink a few times. My eyes refocus from my heads-up display to the world

around me—the cars, the buildings, the bright blue sky and green trees.

Obediently following my attention, my Navi goes to text mode. The display disappears in the center, leaving only the notification and news feed panels on the right periphery of my vision.

Tobi collided with the front panel of the passenger compartment with the impact, but he looks okay. I give him a couple of pats with shaking hands while I twist to look out of the front window. There's a car to the right front corner of my own car. A tall, blonde woman gets out of it. I unbuckle my seatbelt and open my door, my mind still reeling.

Emergency messages in bold red appear at the bottom of my display and flash.

!!! There's been an accident. !!!

!!! Stay where you are. !!!

!!! Emergency responders have been contacted. !!!

I walk around the car unsteadily, looking.

Messages from Jamie and Sara appear in my notifications panel, in text.

| Jamie: You do realize those were
all compliments, right? News
flash: smart is in. |

| Sara: We need you to come in. Dr.
Foret said he called you. |

The corners of each of our cars are crumpled. It doesn't look too bad. Other vehicles are driving carefully around us. We're right in the middle of the intersection.

I approach the woman and extend the digital handshake. Nothing. I glance at her in surprise.

| Target is not equipped with a
Navi. |

I blink again. For a moment, I don't quite know what to do.

| Sara: We're super busy over here. |

The woman is studying her car and mine, frowning.

"Um, I'm Phoebe Bernhart," I say. "Are you hurt?" My voice rasps and I cough. I'm unaccustomed to speaking aloud.

"Uncertain," the woman says. "But unlikely, given the rates of speed, angle of impact, and safety systems of my vehicle."

Another message flashes red at the bottom of my vision, demanding my attention.

!!! Distance Insurance: You have been in an accident. Please enable video permissions to Distance Insurance for visual review of the accident. !!!

Christ on a—

I sit down somewhat abruptly. I feel dizzy, and I dimly recognize that I'm more unbalanced by this little wreck than I probably ought to be.

I glance over at my messages in the panel on the right, to remind myself of what they were, and I reply to Sara.

< I had a small car accident. I'll get back to you in a minute. >

"Oh, no!" I realize I left my car door open. *Tobi. Tobi, Tobi*—
I'm in my car, checking the passenger compartment. No dog. I jump back out and scan the horizon. No dog. My heart's pounding.
If he gets run over—
"No, no, no . . ."

| Sara: Oh, wow, really? Are you okay?|

I remember that I had Tobi ID-chipped.

< Navi, find Tobi. Please, please, please . . . >

The woman is looking at me from across the car. “What’s wrong?”

“My dog!” I shout, my voice hitting a higher octave than I thought it could.

| Tobi is northeast, fifty yards. |

A bull’s-eye appears in my vision to the left.

“Help me get him!” I shout.

The woman’s eyebrows go up at the prospect. I don’t care. This is my dog, the sweetest, most adorable dog ever whom I rescued from the city pound and who deserves nothing like getting hit by a car because I was stupid enough to leave the door open. “Help me get my dog!” I’m shrieking while I run, and my tone leaves no room for argument.

The woman is wearing pants and flats, at least, and she starts running, too.

Actually, she’s faster than I am. She overtakes me quickly and then looks back for me to point to where my Navi tells me Tobi ought to be. Which is right in the middle of about six lanes of moderately busy traffic.

I hear car horns and screeching brakes in the distance, and I’m hyperventilating as I run. And praying for all I’m freaking worth. *Dear God, I’ll stop drinking, and I won’t have any more premarital sex, I swear to God, please, please, save Tobi, please please please—*

Car horns, sirens now, cars everywhere, my feet hitting the pavement hard, sending jolts up my legs, it’s hot, the sun is blinding me, I’m between lanes with cars flying by me, which is dangerous and stupid, people are swerving—

I see the blonde woman bending over up ahead. I see yellow fur on the ground in front of her. My heart stops. Then she wheels around. She’s got Tobi’s collar in her hand, and she’s dragging the dog along—Tobi’s panicked and confused and throwing himself around, paws scrabbling at the air, trying to get away from the car horns. I don’t see any blood.

A moment later, I’m there, too—

!!! Atlanta Police Department: Ma'am, this is the police. Please return to your vehicle. !!!

—wrestling Tobi, panting, looking for a break in the traffic, and then pulling him along, the blonde woman still with one hand on his collar, too, the nearness of the stranger awkward, and then we have him off the side of the road, in a parking lot. Safe.

!!! Please enable video permissions to Distance Insurance for visual review of the accident. !!!

I hug Tobi for all I'm worth. He's shaking. So am I. Tears fill my eyes.

| Sara: So are you okay or what? |

I look up, and everything seems to grind to a halt as I finally look at this woman whose car I hit and who rescued my dog anyway. The sunlight frames her curly blonde hair. Her pale skin glows. Her eyes are ice blue. I realize that I'm staring.

| This might be an excellent time for a CoffeeBreak caffè mocha. There's a CoffeeBreak twenty feet ahead on your left. |

"Thank you. So much," I stammer. "I don't even know how to repay you for this."

I feel chunky and plain right now. She's slender and lovely. I'm envious. I look away, feeling awkward.

"We should go back," she says.

!!! APD: Ma'am, return to your car immediately, please. !!!

< I'm on my way. I'm sorry, my dog got loose and I had to get him. >

I get up and make sure I have an iron grip on Tobi's collar.

!!! Your vehicle is blocking traffic, ma'am. !!!

< As I said, I'm on my way. >

We head back to the scene of the accident.

"I'm sorry I hit you. Wait, *did* my car hit yours, or did your car hit mine?" I realize I don't know what happened.

"Your car was supposed to yield. You had a left-turn-yield."

"That's so weird. I don't know why that happened. I've never had my car do anything like that before. It usually does everything just fine."

"I'm sure."

I glance over at her. Her tone is aggravated, but her expression is placid.

It's so strange to be talking out loud.

!!! Distance Insurance: If you do not enable video review, you will be required to wait for an insurance adjuster to be dispatched to the scene. !!!

"I don't know your name," I say.

"No, you don't."

That was kind of cold. "Well, thank you again," I mumble. "Thank you for rescuing Tobi. He's important to me. And to Mrs. Jones."

"Mrs. Jones?"

"My neighbor. He's Mrs. Jones's, too. We time-share him."

Silence. Then, "You time-share a dog?"

"I'm never home. I work twelve-hour shifts at the hospital. Mrs. Jones is this old retired lady who's always home. It works out." I sound defensive, I realize.

We walk the rest of the way to the cars in silence while I reply to the messages that have been stacking up in my notification panel, including questions from the cops waiting at my car. I eye the messages from Sara with annoyance, because all I want to do right now is go get a drink, but eventually my sense of duty wins out and I tell her I'll come in as soon as I can.

Once we're back at the scene of the accident, I get Tobi settled in the back of my car again, and then it takes about half an hour to get all the details sorted out. I enable video review from Distance Insurance, and they direct me to walk around the car to give them a complete picture of the damage and to submit the video from the few minutes before, during, and after the accident. The claim gets processed, and I go ahead and request a tow truck to come take my car. I'll take the light rail system for a couple of days.

At the same time, I get a chance to observe the woman, whose name turns out to be Mila Bremer (she pronounces it "mee-luh brehmer"), and how she interacts with the cops. Normally, conversations are private, because they're Navi-to-Navi, but they're having to speak out loud, so I know everything that the cops know. I know her address, her phone number, her date of birth, and even the name of her insurance agent, who eventually has to show up in person. And it's all being recorded by my Navi, of course, since I have the Memory app running.

I notice that one of the cops speaks slowly and loudly, as if Mila were intellectually disabled or partially deaf. It makes me mad. She seems odd, but it's clear that she's intelligent, and it's not her fault that she can't take a Navi.

At least, I'm assuming she's non-Navable—a "Nonnie"—one of the 0.5 percent whose bodies still reject the implant, despite all the efforts of modern medicine. She doesn't seem like the sort of person who would voluntarily go without one. Those people are on the fringe of the fringe, like neo-Luddites . . . and like my family back home.

Next, the cop asks her, loudly and slowly, "Do you suppose you missed the light turning red?"

I'm confused until I realize that she was *driving*: hers is a manual-drive car. I wonder if maybe Nonnies can't use smartcars. Then I wonder, too, if it was even true that my car hit hers and not the other way around. It seems much more likely that a Nonnie would react too slowly or not see something than that a smartcar would malfunction.

"The light was green," Mila answers.

"You're only human," the cop says. "You may be confused. You may have thought you saw something besides what you saw." His condescending tone makes me regret my own thoughts along those lines.

Mila doesn't even blink. "Check the video from the smartcar."

"Okay. You know what? We'll do that." His chin goes up in the air as he turns to my vehicle.

We all wait, most of us reviewing messages on our Navis in the meantime.

After a moment, the cop says, "Both of your vehicles are drivable. I recommend you get them out of the path of traffic. Ma'am"—looking at me—"your vehicle's CPU has been reset and its drive path realigned. You should be good to go." Then he turns away.

What a jerk. Obviously, the video proved Mila was right, and he won't admit it.

Both cops leave right as the tow truck shows up. A moment later, without another word, Mila is getting into her car.

I find myself calling out to her, not wanting her to disappear.

"Wait . . . Mila! Can I buy you a meal? As a thank-you for helping me rescue Tobi?"

I don't know why I do it. I feel like I owe her one, and also, something about her seems interesting to me. Maybe that she's a Nonnie. That's pretty weird, after all. Or maybe I feel sorry for her because of how that cop treated her.

Those pale blue eyes consider me for a moment. "Fine. Did you record my number?"

"Yeah . . . well, my Navi did, yeah."

"Then you can try calling me. But I only have a land line, I'm not home much, and I don't have voice mail." Her tone is final. It seems to say, *Don't bother.*

She closes her door and starts the car, but then she pauses and looks at me through the glass. She rolls down her window. Her tone sounds as if she's conceding an argument. "Usually, I'm home by eight, though." She rolls the window back up and drives off.

I sigh heavily and study my hands. They're still trembling, but not as badly. I need a drink. But I promised Sara I'd come in, and I will, even though I'm not happy about it.

First, I have to get Tobi back home. I start to look around for a rail station before I remember that I can't take Tobi on the rail. I have my Navi request an automatic cab, warning the dispatch that I have a big dog with me, and I sit at a bus stop to wait.

I pet Tobi feverishly. I'm still weirded out that my car crashed like that, but I'm more freaked out that I almost lost my dog because of a moment of inattention. At least Tobi seems to have forgotten the whole thing already. He's just happy to be petted.

My Navi knows that whenever I'm not doing anything else that's auditory in nature, it can go back to audible mode, so it starts reading to me in that smooth, masculine voice again.

<< Breaking news: Great Britain has declared sanctions against China for the third time since the China War. >>

I groan.

< No. Skip it. >

I review my notifications to make sure I haven't missed any messages. Whenever I've gotten behind, the messages are always there waiting for me. I also review my news feed panel, below the notifications panel that is reserved for personal messages, to see what global updates I've missed while my Navi was in text mode.

There's random news, email newsletters, and then the social updates from people I knew in high school back in Ohio, old coworkers at my last hospital, random people who share my interests, and then the current coworkers. Together, I call them the Collective. It's a deliberate reference to the fact that most of the time, it doesn't even matter who said what. It's just nice to know you're not alone.

I make a post.

< Had a car wreck today. Yup, an actual car wreck. My car decided yielding on the left turn was optional.

Nobody got hurt, though. And the other driver? Was a Nonnie. But no, the accident wasn't her fault. Some sort of bug in my car's software, I guess. >

I use my Memory app to pull a few seconds of video of the accident, from when I got out of the car to when I sat down on the curb, and attach it to the post.

Almost immediately, responses come in.

<< Ian: Wow, she's hot. She's a Nonnie? >>

<< Shannon: Oh no . . . glad you're okay. >>

<< Wayne: I saw a Nonnie once at the grocery store. I mean, it had to have been a Nonnie. She paid a cashier—with a physical credit card. >>

<< Alyssa: Oh, I went to school with a guy who was a Nonnie. He used a laptop computer for all his schoolwork. >>

<< Chris: Wild. Aren't there, like, almost no car accidents anymore? Is your car defective? Are they going to replace it? >>

I chuckle. The automated cab pulls up, and I get in with Tobi.

< Navi, have the cab take me home, please. >

< Ian, ha. Eat your heart out, I'm going to have dinner with her. >

< Chris, no, they're not replacing it. They reset the CPU and something about the drive path. Said it should work fine now. >

<< Ian: You have a date with the Nonnie?! >>

< No, Ian, it's not a date. Sheesh. >

<< Shannon: Well, then, why are you having dinner with her? That's kinda weird. >>

<< Ian: You sure you're not gay? Come to think of it, you've never dated anybody, man or woman, that I know of. >>

< Why is it weird, Shannon? I mean, I owe her. I wrecked her car, and then she saved my dog's life. >

<< Alyssa: What, what, what?! What about Tobi?! >>

< Sorry, forgot to mention. Tobi got out of the car and almost got run over. She helped me get him back. >

I rub Tobi's ears even more vigorously than before.

<< Wayne: She used to date me. She's not gay. I can TESTIFY. >>

< Wayne, STFU. >

<< Wayne: *laughing* Anyway, what're you going to talk to her about? She's a Nonnie. >>

< Same stuff I'd talk to anyone about. Just because she doesn't have her smartphone implanted in her head doesn't mean she lives on a different planet. >

<< Patti: She kind of does, though, doesn't she? I mean, could you imagine not being able to get your messages real-time? Not having conversations like this one? It must be so lonely. >>

I have to stop for a moment. Patti's comment makes me think about my family back home, none of them with Navis—not because they're Nonnies, but because of their religion.

I hate how different my family is and how I never feel like I can talk to anyone about them, or about my weird childhood, without feeling embarrassed. But I don't like how Wayne and Patti make it sound like Mila must be some sort of alien or reject because she's a Nonnie. That would make all my family back home aliens and

rejects. I may think of them that way myself sometimes, but that doesn't mean other people get to.

< She can use a phone, you know. She's not that different just because she talks out loud instead of with her thoughts. >

<< Patti: I guess. >>

<< Ian: So, Wayne, tell me more. What does Phoebe like in bed? >>

< OMG STFU you two. Seriously. >

<< Ian: Eat your heart out, you said. Gonna make you sorry you said that . . . >>

< That's it! Done! >

I end the conversation, blocking any further comments, even though I'm giggling at the same time.

So maybe it is weird that I asked Mila to go to dinner. She is kind of strange. She didn't seem friendly, either, so I'm not sure what the point was.

I go ahead and review my Memory app to find the phone number, and then I make the call, even though I feel nervous about it. She should be home by now, I figure.

But I don't get an answer.

My Navi interrupts me.

<< You have arrived at home. Should the cab wait? >>

< Yes, please. I'll be right back down. >

I get Tobi upstairs and settled, and then I head back down and climb back into the taxi, still listening and responding to messages as I go. A few minutes later, I get another message directly from my Navi.

<< A Burger Boy is one minute ahead. The Baco-Burger meal is on special for \$9.99. Would you like to stop? >>

Hmm . . . I *am* hungry, I realize.

< Sure. Make it a #6 with a Coke. >

<< Deducting \$10.81 from your primary checking account and redirecting the cab. >>

Moments later, the car drives through and lowers the window for me to pick up the food. I down it fast and then lick the french-fry salt from my fingers in a state of pure bliss.

About three minutes later, I'm kicking myself. I wish fast food didn't hit my brain's reward center so perfectly. I keep meaning to give it up, but it isn't happening yet. In fact, every time I eat it, I think about ordering my Navi to stop telling me about my proximity to fast-food restaurants—the advertising messages can be adjusted so that they're less annoying—but I can never manage it. Fast food is *good*, and I jog enough to keep my weight down.

Or so I rationalize.

As the cab turns in to Grady Hospital a few minutes later, I call Mila again. But still no answer. Oh well. I'll try again later.

As I cross the threshold of the hospital, my Navi badges me in and automatically turns to text mode. I think that's because I do service work with actual people. Information workers are probably always on auditory mode. Of course, they don't have to go into a workplace anymore, either. Navis broke the chains that bound previous generations to their desks for their entire lives.

At the same time that I cross the threshold, I also enter the hospital communications network, and I start getting general broadcast messages from my coworkers. I note that the tone of the conversation is unusual.

As I ride an elevator and two travelers through the 1.2 million square feet of hospital to get to the neuro ward on the seventh floor, I read with interest.

| Derrick: Y'all, we've got another live one. Room #730. Acute paranoia. |

| Sara: Does anyone know if they're calling in extra doctors? |

| Abhay: They're saying we might hit drive-by in the next few days if this keeps up. |

My eyebrows go up. "Drive-by" means that if an ambulance or a cop is bringing someone in, they're supposed to keep right on driving, because our beds are full and we aren't taking anybody.

| Tolony: Wow, drive-by? Do we ever get that, even on Halloween? I mean, even during a full moon on Halloween? I've heard that's the busy time. |

| Rhonda: I've never seen a neuro ward on drive-by. Not even here at Grady. |

< Hey, peeps. I'm here to help. What's got everybody so busy? >

| Deonte: A lot of aggressive and paranoid people in the last twenty-four hours. |

| Melita: It's seriously weird. |

| Sara: Oh, good, Phoebe. I've got seventeen new cases to give you. |

< Wow—you've had seventeen new cases since yesterday? >

| Sara: No, we've had twenty-nine.
 These seventeen are the ones I need
 to give you. |

Ugh. My stomach sinks. I'm about to be overwhelmed. Dealing with "neurologically impaired" patients is stressful at best, and this is going to be a hell of an evening.

| Sara: Don't get written up again,
 Phoebe. |

I glower. Is she reading my mind now?

< Okay, now I'm regretting that I even told you about
 those write-ups. Sheesh. Mind your own beeswax. >

I'm only aggravated because she's right. I have a history of getting angry with the doctors when I'm already stressed and I think they're not acting in the best interests of the patients, which I think half a dozen times a day.

| Sara: Just sayin'. Didn't you tell
 me you've gotten fired from two
 other hospitals already? |

< *One*, woman. *One*. >

| Sara: Didn't management recom-
 mend an attitude-improvement
 plan? |

< That's it. I'm never telling you anything ever again. >

Grumbling all the way, I head to the break room and fix myself some coffee in the biggest mug I can find. I down it, and then I fix myself another cup to take with me.

I hate those Navi-based attitude-improvement plans. I tried one once, for maybe forty-five minutes, before I couldn't stand it anymore.

As I head down to my ward, I notice that I'm experiencing tightness in my chest and mild heart palpitations. I've had this almost daily for a couple of weeks now. The symptoms probably say something about how stressful my work is.

They may also say something about the sheer quantity of coffee I drink.

A few minutes later, I'm finishing the handover of extra cases from Sara in the south wing. My side of the ward—the north side—now has fifty-seven total patients, which is a lot for me, two LVNs, and three techs. We have only three beds left. Hopefully, Dr. Pinaar can get some of these folks moved out tonight. But I'm super curious about why there are so many.

Sara is the other day-shift RN in my ward, but she handles the south side. The LVNs—Licensed Vocational Nurses—and technicians handle most of the work, with us RNs supervising, but when things are this busy, we still have to do a lot of hands-on work ourselves.

I begin my day with a room-by-room environmental check for plastic bags, glass, fire-making materials, etc. I don't trust my techs or LVNs to do it carefully enough. Next, I supervise the initial dispensing of any new meds that the LVNs can't handle by themselves and double-check all the med pulls. I've had patients suffer serious adverse reactions because they got the wrong meds, and I hate it.

Then, I start my rounds. I have my Navi calculate how many minutes I have with each patient morning and afternoon—today, it's 4.35 minutes, which is absurd. Normally, I try to breeze through the patients when I can so that I can spend an extra couple of minutes with those who are distressed and wanting to talk, but today, I'm going to be sprinting from room to room.

All the while, I'm getting more messages.

| Bourey: What I wanna know is, why are all the new patients either pissed off or scared to death? Are hallucinations not trendy anymore or what? |

| Derrick: I feel ya, man. Not a single one who's suicidal or obsessive, either. |

| Melita: FYI, shift change told me #719 almost managed to set a fire again last night. |

I grimace. Patient #719 has summoned firefighters three times in two weeks.

< Is night shift handing out lighters now or something? >

| Bourey: Yeah, yeah, yeah. |

| Thiago: Anyone else scared spitless of #712? I don't believe in demons, mind you, but that man is *possessed*. |

< Yes. He is creepy as hell. It's gotta be a biotech mod, right? >

His eyes light up red. It was seriously unsettling when I saw it for the first time, especially given that he was cackling maniacally and screaming into my Navi, "You will burn in the fires of hell!" Especially given that I was raised by an ultra-conservative religious family.

!!! Emergency message—All available personnel:
Room #717. !!!

I'm just leaving #728, so I'm available. I book it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H.C.H. Ritz has a degree in theatre from the University of Houston and directs community theatre in her spare time. Originally from rural Mississippi, she has lived in Houston, Texas long enough to have turned into a city person. She is married to a wonderful human being and has a young son and a tortoiseshell kitty named Roxy Underfoot.



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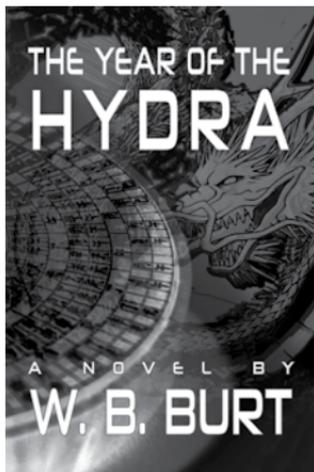
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<http://smarturl.it/review-absence>

RECOMMENDED READING

The Year of the Hydra
by William Broughton Burt



Could a dark agenda be woven into the architecture of China's most sacred ancient temple? An agenda that only Julian Mancer is seeing? Or is Julian off his meds again? If the structure were in fact a doomsday device awaiting an astronomical tripwire—could Julian stop it?

Julian is determined to discover the answer, as soon as he concludes a far more pressing matter involving a sixteen-year-old girl with a *most* intriguing mutation.



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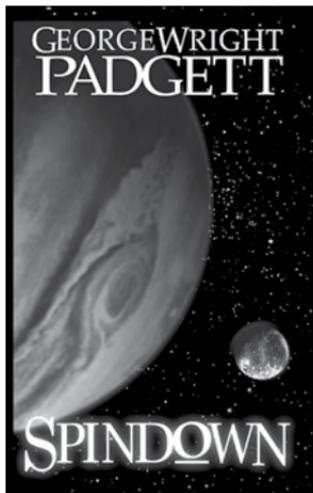
<http://bit.ly/ZuwdDQ>

RECOMMENDED READING

For over a hundred and fifty years, the rarest and most valuable substance in the solar system has been mined from the only location where it exists in significant quantity: Jupiter's largest moon, Ganymede. For all of this time, the remote mining outpost has been serviced by clone slaves who are drugged into mindlessness, and all of it has been monitored, controlled, and administered by the artificial intelligence known as Prinox.

But what happens when a failed rescue mission causes a small band of escaped clones to begin questioning their lives, their society, and their very existence? Hunted by deadly killing machines, confused and scared, these renegade slaves are about to find out—for better or worse—just what it means to be human.

Spindown
by George Wright Padgett



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ABSENCE OF MIND

It's 2034, and Phoebe Bernhart is a nurse in the neuro ward at Grady Hospital in Atlanta when her youngest brother becomes one of the first victims of a bizarre epidemic of aggression and paranoia.

When Phoebe suspects a technological cause, her strange, beautiful, antisocial new acquaintance, Mila Bremer, a software engineer, agrees to help.

In the end, Mila may be part of the cure—or she may be the cause. Or maybe she'll just prove to be indifferent to the fates of thousands of people, including Phoebe's brother.

"A disturbing and prescient look at an all-too-possible near future. Ritz shows us the dangers of technological reliance in a world where our greatest enemy is our own apathetic human nature. Fantastic!"

— **Jason Kristopher**, *The Dying of the Light*

"Ritz offers readers a disturbing glimpse into the future of human augmentation and its side effects with unexpected compassion and suspense."

— **George Wright Padgett**, *Cruel Devices and Spindown*



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