

GESUNDHEIT

by
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J. Wilson Williamson popped a football around in his hands while admiring the view from his 49th floor office. He felt particularly smart, capable, and alive. He was really enjoying the smoke hanging from the corner of his mouth. It tasted fine.

His secretary interrupted, poking her head in the doorway. “The Blues are here. Thought you might want to see ‘em.”

Oh, yeah! The Blues. His next generation cigarette, guaranteed to taste like velvet — *blue* velvet. The marketing people will go nuts over these. Who cares about the tar levels now? It doesn’t matter anymore. He tossed the football aside, anticipating his delivery.

Ever since the successful development of widespread stem cell cloning to recreate various body parts, people had been able to grow new hearts and lungs at will. It wasn’t even that expensive, once the volume of orders kicked in. No more wasting time on donor lists, no more anti-rejection drugs. No more accusations about smoke killing people (Preposterous, anyway!). It really was a miracle cure...for the whole system. The consumers...and the producers! Everyone loved it, especially women. They could go for a tummy tuck plus lipo and end up with a beautiful flat tummy *and* new lungs. Those extra fat cells were all that was needed. With genetically altered cells taken from an ounce of extra, unwanted fat, the doctors (and even the lowly lab technicians) could fashion any new organ the patient desired. All this achievement had been funded, mostly, by his tobacco company! He chuckled, thinking about how smart he’d been. Why hadn’t anyone else figured it out? Simply get rid of the life-threatening (They never proved that!) elements of smoke, and “Voila!” No more bans on smoking, and everyone could enjoy lighting up in public again. Maybe they could even sneak kids into the act. Better than the good ol’ days, it was the good new days. He, himself, had gone for three new sets of lungs to prove it. He felt awesome.

A massive box seemed to float into the hazy room. Eventually, he noticed the burly deliveryman in a brown uniform who carried it with ease. Of course the heft of it would have been unmanageable for his secretary. Perhaps he could arrange implanting some new muscles in her arms? *She’d do it to keep her job*, he mused. The woman must have read his thoughts, because she retreated to her outer office. The door swung shut automatically.

“Just set it down in the corner ... on the floor,” he said.

“Sure, right away,” the man answered. He set the box down and righted himself, gawking at J. Wilson. He must have been staring past him, at the view. It did tend to amaze first-timers.

J. Wilson couldn't help but notice the man's strikingly handsome face. His chin jutted out, and he possessed splendid cheekbones. Could make a perfect cowboy for one of their ads. The nametag on his shirt read: “Parker.”

J. Wilson asked, “You like it?”

“Huh?” Parker startled.

“The view!” It's something, isn't it?” J. Wilson moved closer to the box. It was sealed shut with a hell of a lot of packing tape. “Say, you wouldn't happen to have something to open this, would you?”

“Yeah. I'm not supposed to, but ...” He pulled a Swiss army knife from his pocket and set about removing the tape.

This surprised J. Wilson. He'd really wanted to open the box himself, but instead, stood back and watched. Perhaps this would be faster, anyway. He felt the smoke itch his lungs, which it always did when he was nervous. No matter. He had one of the inventions provided by their most recent research grant sitting squarely on his desk — a small atomizer bottle, like a perfume spray. Only, the spray it deposited in the air immediately fended off all coughing fits. Really remarkable stuff. He sprayed some into the air. The itching immediately stopped.

The box flew open, and Parker stepped aside. Cobalt blue sample packs of the new cigarettes awaited their master's loving hands. J. Wilson knelt before his prize and scooped up a handful of them. The packages felt smooth, looked pretty, and held such *superb* promise. He knew these would bring just about everyone into the fold of smokers. No one would be able to resist these beauties. They were genetically altered. Their smoke stimulated the sexual pleasure centers in the human brain to a higher level than any other ciggy had done before. Test subjects had lost a lot of control while smoking these, but every last one had begged for a carton to take home.

J. Wilson ripped open a pack and tapped out a cigarette. It was long and felt very sexy to the touch. Perfect. He lit it with the ciggy from his mouth, tamped the old one out, and took an extended drag from the new one. Instantly, he felt really aroused. Damn! He was so engrossed in his beauties that it took a full minute to realize his uninvited guest was still standing behind him. He swung around. Parker had stationed himself in front of the door, and to J. Wilson's pure amazement, he was holding a gun.

“What the hell—” he was stopped short by Parker aiming the gun at his face.

“Shut up.” Parker was not happy. Obviously, he could use a smoke.

J. Wilson thought carefully how to handle this. Of course, he’d had a panic button installed behind his desk years ago. What tobacco executive didn’t, in the old days? But he wasn’t behind his desk. He’d have to find a way to maneuver himself over there.

“You seem a bit on edge. Look, whatever it is, I’m sure we can discuss it. Why don’t we sit and talk. Care for a smoke?” He began to tap another out of the pack.

“Don’t do that!” Parker was angry, now. “I don’t smoke your crap. Never have.”

“Aw, c’mon. Won’t you try these? They’re...different.” J. Wilson took the one from his own mouth and offered it to the man.

His reaction was to release the safety from the gun.

“Hey, no need to do that!” J. Wilson withdrew his offering.

“I’m allergic to smoke, so you’d better pray my finger doesn’t accidentally hit the trigger, you bastard!”

What to do now? J. Wilson thought about lunging for it, grabbing it out of his hand. He smiled, leaned forward ever so slightly to prepare himself.

“Don’t move, really! This gun’s got a hair trigger. Goes off like a son of a bitch.”

Bad idea, J. Wilson thought. Okay, not moving! “Why are you doing this?” he finally asked.

“Your damned cigarettes killed my wife.”

“But why? She could have had a new heart. New lungs! All it would take was a touch of fat.”

“She didn’t have any fat to spare. Sara was anorexic. She was the most graceful ballet dancer, a delicate wisp of an angel, and you killed her with your damned smokes. Every time she got hungry, she’d smoke instead. The doctors tried using other cells from her body, but she was just too weak for any kind of surgery. She died last year.”

“I-I’m sorry,” he said, trying to sound grief-stricken. “It still happens, but so rarely. You see, we couldn’t save everyone.”

“You killed her! Admit it! I spent a full year working my way into this job. I took night shifts, weekends, whatever, just to make my way into this office. I promised her when she died, she wasn’t going to go alone.” He hesitated. Tears welled up in his eyes. “Only, now. I don’t know.”

I'm not a killer...like you." His hand trembled, making the gun quiver slightly. So much for hair triggers.

What a relief! Another weak-assed health creep, threatening him. He'd have the nutcase tossed in jail soon enough. J. Wilson sat on a chair in front of his desk. "Well, if you're going to kill me, I might as well be comfortable." He lit up another Blue. It calmed — and excited — him at the same time. He forced a smile. Tried blowing his smoke in Parker's direction. Maybe it would help.

"Don't do that! I told you, I'm allergic!" Parker yelled.

J. Wilson reached for the anti-coughing spray. "Not to worry. You'll feel better with this." He sprayed the air. The mist dissipated smoothly. "See? No more tickling throat. No coughing at all."

Parker still had the gun aimed at him...finger on the trigger. His head canted to the right. A lone tear slid down his cheek. He said, "I don't cough."

"Oh?"

"I sneeze."

And he did.

