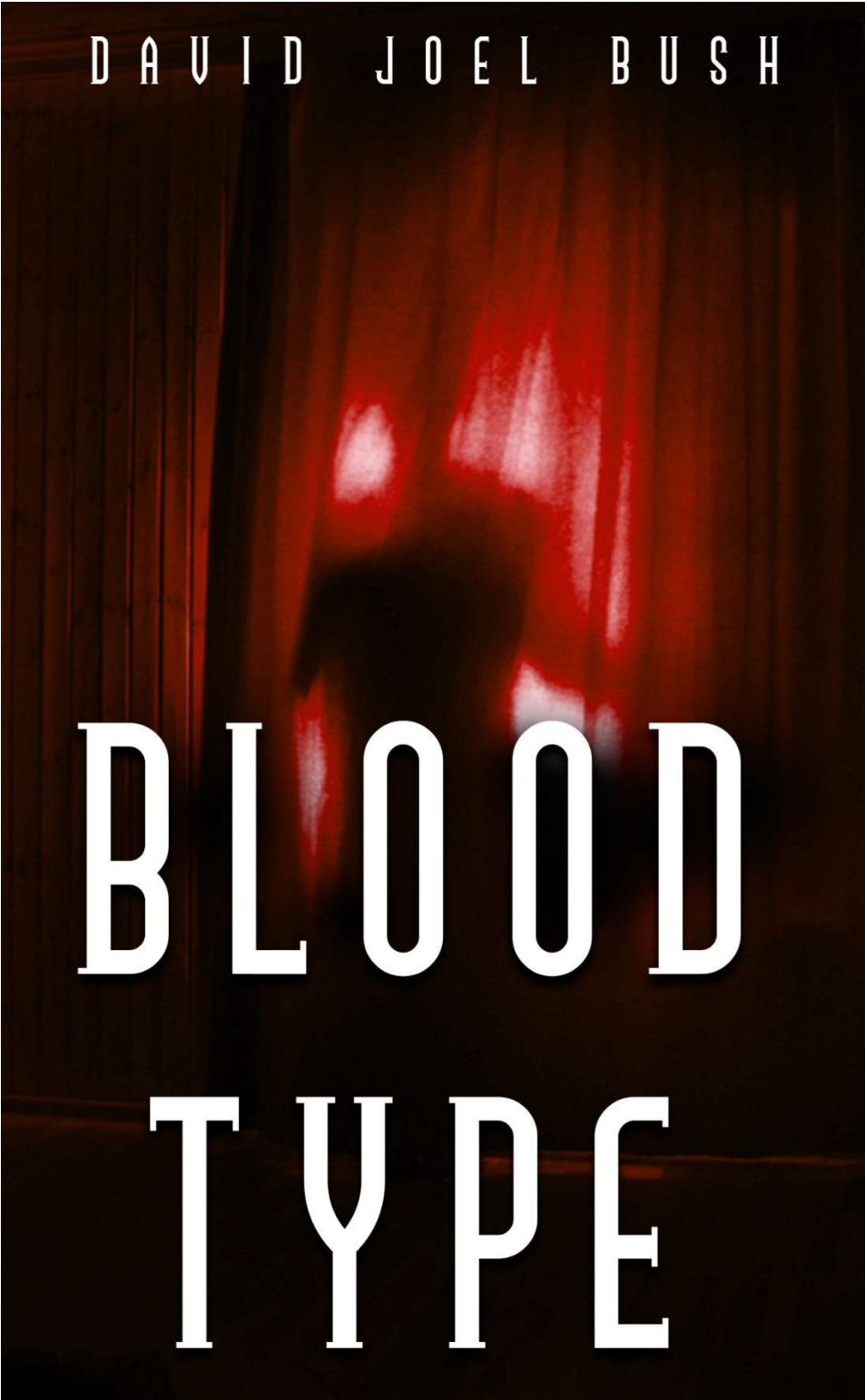


DAVID JOEL BUSH



BLOOD
TYPE

Blood Type

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“This looks incredible!” Ashley Brooks sang out, as the luxury coach passed through an ornate iron gate and entered a well-manicured landscape. Her husband, Tyler, offered an assenting grunt as he gazed ahead at the block of luxury cottages surrounding a tranquil, man-made lake.

Ashley and Tyler were one of eleven couples being chauffeured via air-conditioned coach to their new homes.

“I can’t believe this is all paid for!” a middle-aged man seated across the aisle announced. Like the other passengers, he, too, was astonished to be receiving a brand-new luxury cottage at no charge.

“You can see your cottages straight ahead,” the bus driver announced over the intercom. “The clubhouse is off to the left. You’ll also find that there are no stores or malls here.” He chuckled lightly and continued: “If you need

anything, and I mean *anything*, simply order it from the kiosk in your cottage. Same-day delivery is available for practically everything you need.”

The driver pointed out the pool house and two of the on-site restaurants before pulling up to the main office to disgorge the new guests. “The restaurants offer a variety of cuisine, from barbecue ribs and sushi to lobster fried rice and Polynesian chicken. All complimentary, as I’m sure you know by now.”

Tyler and Ashley, along with the others, gathered carry-ons and tote bags as they stepped out of the bus and into their new lives.

A slender female host, dressed in a white dinner jacket and slacks, stood waiting to meet the new arrivals. A smile stretched across her pleasant face as she announced in a cheery voice: “Welcome to Astoria Utah! We are *so* happy to have you here! You are saving lives!”

A few of the couples applauded lightly in acknowledgment.

“As you know,” the greeter continued, as a light wind gently teased her sideswept pixie, “your personal belongings are presently enroute and should arrive within one week. Please refer to the listing board to your right for your assigned cottages. You’re encouraged to get settled in prior to attending today’s 5:00 PM briefing in the main clubhouse.” She continued to smile at the curious strangers who hung on her every syllable. “Champagne and a selection of hors d'oeuvres—including cucumber party sandwiches, asparagus wraps, and cilantro tomato bruschetta—will be served at the briefing. Everything here is first class!”

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The 5:00 PM briefing was followed by an incredible dinner consisting of prime rib and lobster. Ashley and Tyler socialized with the other couples before adjourning to their new home for the evening. Tyler uncorked a complimentary bottle of Moet & Chandon Imperial and filled two flutes, one of which he presented to Ashley, as the couple walked out onto their porch to absorb a radiant sunset.

“I am *so* glad we are here,” Ashley said, as the couple toasted.

“Me, too! Dinner was awesome. We have good neighbors, no clocking in and out of a job. Our only obligation is to donate blood every week. Such a small price to pay.”

“I was skeptical at first,” Ashley replied, “but this is the real deal. I’m so glad we answered the ad.”

#

“I still can’t believe how much the world has changed,” Tyler confessed. His mind reflected on the events of the past year that had resulted in his and Ashley’s relocation.

The crisis had started in Waynesville, a rural Ohio town, in January. Ninety percent of Waynesville’s adult population began experiencing unexplained hemorrhaging of their lungs and hearts. They were dead within days of the first symptoms. A similar incident occurred in Bakersfield, California, the following week. Soon, residents of dozens of

cities had fallen victim to seven-day fatal endocardial-hemoptysis or FEH7, as it became more commonly known.

By March, as the body count escalated to hundreds and then, thousands, the CDC declared FEH7 a pandemic and stressed COVID-like quarantine procedures to minimize risk. While political finger pointing erupted in Washington, DC, researchers in Brisbane, California, announced a breakthrough that would protect the public from FEH7.

Following two rounds of successful human trials, the FDA had announced that biotech giant, PharmaTech, had developed a vaccination to protect against FEH7.

The vaccine had been an immediate success—even DC politicians stood aligned in this regard. The serenity, however, was short lived. Organ failure began occurring in May on a scale that far eclipsed the original infection. By the end of July, forty percent of the US population had perished from FEH7. As was later revealed in an expose, the antibody within the vaccine was doing its job too well. It wasn't going dormant as expected but was instead dissolving fibroblasts—

the type of cells that provide the lattice framework for heart and lung muscles. The result was far worse than the original infection. Organs were dissolving into a mass of oozing sludge.

The saving grace proved to be blood type AB negative. Researchers at the Minneapolis Science Center found that plasma donors who had AB negative blood seemed immune from FEH7. As universal donors, their plasma could be used to treat patients with FEH7. Demand for AB negative plasma donations skyrocketed. Some donors sought financial compensation for their precious plasma. Some, fearing for their personal safety, went into seclusion. Others, like Tyler and Ashley, sought—and were offered—a new life.

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“What’s wrong with these TV channels?” Tyler complained. “There’s nothing but reruns on every station. And every news network is having ‘technical’ issues.” The couple had just returned from their weekly blood donation and were relaxing and trying, albeit in vain, to couch surf.

“I saw a notice about that at the clubhouse,” Ashley replied. They’re having trouble with the central satellite connection and local feeds. They said it’s being worked on, but there was no estimate as to when it’ll be fixed.”

“Oh well,” Tyler answered, “I guess it could be worse. At least we don’t have to work anymore.” Tyler smirked. Of course, he thought, if I keep eating as well as I’ve been since we arrived here, I may have to start going to the gym twice every day instead of once.

Ashley smiled at Tyler and ran a hand through his auburn hair. “I’ve never felt so relaxed before. Everything is taken care of here. I feel so ... pampered.”

“Liquid gold,” Tyler said, pointing to the bandage on his bicep.

###

The following Saturday, Tyler awoke early. Feeling restless, he decided to go for a run. He had been building up miles on the gym treadmill, but today felt like breathing in the fresh morning air. The new running shoes he ordered had

arrived last night. *I still can't believe everything we need is paid for*, he thought, while lacing his sneakers.

Starting out from the cottage, Tyler vowed to run the whole perimeter of Astoria, a distance of nearly four miles. He exhaled, feeling energetic in the early dawn light. Tyler jogged down the main road and to the entry gate. He turned left, following the tree line that formed a natural boundary to the settlement.

A few minutes later, Tyler decided to extend his run. He turned toward the tree line and ran toward it, slowing to a walk to avoid a cluster of lower-hanging branches. As he walked through the trees, he heard a crashing sound behind him. He turned to look but saw nothing unusual. He felt awash with goosebumps at the thought that he was being watched. *Don't be paranoid*, he thought. Tyler soon emerged into a clearing and noticed a gravel road that ran parallel with the trees. Across the road, Tyler gazed at a stone wall that he estimated to be fifteen- to twenty-feet high. Atop the wall, the morning sun glinted off barbed wiring. It clung to the top

of the wall like a protective metal blanket. *Strange*, Tyler thought, *what's on the other side of the wall that needs to be kept out of the settlement?*

A vehicle approached from his right. Wanting only solitude on his morning run rather than a potential conversation with a stranger, Tyler ducked back into the grove of trees. He watched from the shadows as an olive-green Jeep adorned in military insignia crawled by, a machine gun mounted on its back.

###

Tyler sat at the kitchen table across from Ashley and sipped warm coffee. Morning coffee was sacred to him, though Ashley preferred tea.

“I followed the wall for the rest of my run. It appears to encircle the entire settlement.”

“I’m not surprised,” Ashley smiled. “Think about it, Ty. If our settlement wasn’t gated, we’d be overrun by everyone looking for a free ticket. It would never work. You also have to realize that we’re a rare commodity. You’ve read

about the abductions of people with AB negative blood. It's become a black market. If anything, the wall is probably there for our own safety."

"That all makes sense," Tyler replied. "Just seems a bit weird. Have you heard anything from Joan or Mike? Any of our friends from Lawrenceville?"

"Not yet," Ashley said. "It seems the satellite issue is causing problems with the Internet, too. It's been down since we arrived, and we're too remote for cellular use."

###

The next day, Tyler and Ashley met up with new friends, Ben and Brittany, for an outdoor brunch.

"You two really need to join us in the pickleball league," Ben said with a smile. "It's totally addictive!" He patted his stomach. "It also helps work off some of the calories from all this good food."

"It's *super* fun," Brittany added for emphasis.

"Sounds cool; maybe we'll join," Tyler said, pausing a moment from his smoked salmon Caesar salad. Ashley was

enjoying her meal, a grilled bison burger with fondant potatoes. Ben and Brittany, meanwhile, slowly devoured a freshly made vegan pizza with a garlic herb crust.

“Did you see the location transfer flyer at the clubhouse?” Ashley asked.

Ben and Brittany both shook their heads as they continued to eat.

“A few slots are available at the Astoria in Florida. Right on the beach! There are other locations, too, but the Florida residence looks amazing.”

“We’ve been considering it.” Ben added. “There’s something appealing about beachfront property. They say the transfer is easy, and all the moving is done for you, of course. Might be nice to have a change in climate. Brittany and I have been here four months, so we still have another week or so until we’ll qualify for relocation. Still, now would be the time to start the paperwork. What do you think, Britt?”

“Let’s do it,” Brittany said. “As much as I love everyone here, I do feel like I’m ready to relocate.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever want to relocate,” Ashley said. “I feel like I’m on a permanent vacation.”

###

“I’m so happy we have people like you.”

Tyler laid in a prone position as the massage therapist worked on his back muscles. Too relaxed to offer a response, he merely offered a light affirming grunt. Ashley laid atop an adjoining table as strong hands pressed deep into her shoulders.

“Just keep the blood donations flowing,” Ashley’s masseuse said. “We really appreciate what you are doing. You’re saving lives!”

Suddenly, Ben came bustling into the room excitedly, a sweat band wrapped around his head and a pickleball racket in his left hand.

“Tyler, great news! Brittany and I got a slot for Florida! She is *so* excited! We have to leave tomorrow morning, but the travel arrangements have already been

worked out. Concierge service, man! That's what I'm talking about!"

Tyler glanced up and grunted. "Tomorrow morning? That seems a bit rushed."

"No better time than the present."

"I suppose not. I'm sure you'll enjoy beach life. Who knows, I might be able to convince Ashley to follow you once we've put in our time here."

"Right on."

Following fist-bumps, Ben headed out of the room, swinging his pickleball racket and whistling a tune.

###

The next morning, Tyler embarked on an early run. Knowing that Ben and Brittany would be too busy for a send-off, he and Ashley had said their goodbyes last night. Ben had mentioned they would depart the community center at 7:00 AM and would likely arrive at their Florida residence in time for dinner.

Tyler headed down the road toward the main gate. After a few minutes he was sweating. It occurred to Tyler that he might be able to see the shuttle depart and issue a final farewell to Ben and Brittany.

Moments after stepping through the tree line, Tyler heard the distant electric hum of a bus engine. He waited for it to emerge around the last bend leading toward the gate. As it rounded the curve, Tyler spotted Ben. He was seated behind the driver with Brittany by his side. There were two other couples aboard the vehicle. *Another luxury bus*, Tyler thought. *They're gonna have a great trip!*

Tyler started to wave to the couple as the bus passed, but then paused, his hand frozen in midair. Ben stared out the window at Tyler with wide eyes, his mouth gagged, and his torso tied to the bus seat. He wasn't the only one, Tyler realized. Each passenger was similarly gagged and restrained, struggling violently against their bonds.

As the bus continued past Tyler and approached the exit gate, Tyler noticed that the vehicle lacked the typical

Astoria logo. The insignia was different than what he'd seen before. Just before the bus was out of sight, Tyler glanced quickly at the graphics in time to discern the writing on its exterior panels:

Trusted Transplants. Providing the finest and freshest AB negative organs ... so you can live the life you deserve!

It seemed impossible, but in his heart, he realized it made sense. Tyler turned, ready to run home to Ashley, take her by the hand, and leave Astoria as quickly and quietly as possible. A sudden weight struck his back as a black-gloved hand pressed over his mouth and nostrils. The glove smelled sweet, an ether-like quality. Tyler struggled, but quickly succumbed to the chemical's effects as everything faded to black.