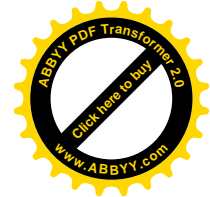




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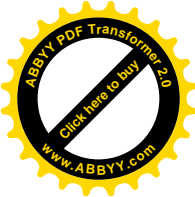
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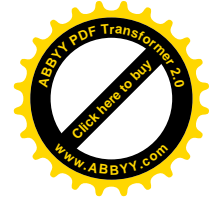
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PO Box 54016 1-5762 Highway 7 East

Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 CANADA

double-dragon-ebooks.com

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Dedication: To the grand kids: Doug, David, Cheryl, Jason, Bridgette, Robyn and Amy.

Author's note: Thanks to Jon Anderson and Craig Becker for stimulating my thinking while researching the science for this novel. Any mistakes are my own, of course.

CHAPTER ONE

The small city of Masterville is located in extreme northern Arkansas, near the border of Missouri in the heart of the Ozark mountain range. It sits at the bottom of a valley which is surrounded by rather large foothills. The hills grow even larger in the distance, rising finally to heights of several thousand feet before turning into rounded mountains, worn down by time. The valley, and the city it enclosed, might never have been noticed, or at least come into public awareness, had it not been for an obscure government clerk who worked as a statistical analyst for the Census Bureau. He was a career civil servant and conscientious to a fault. His name was Harry Beales and he had spent most of twenty years in the same office, sifting data from census figures as if the fate of the nation depended on what he wrought from his tables and graphs and rows of numbers appended to obscure facts. However, the fate of the nation paid Harry no mind until after the census of the year 2010, when the Census Bureau computers became sophisticated enough to sift out some anomalies, which Harry then noticed.

Other, more modern computers might have picked up on the figures earlier but Harry had no access to them, and he was the only person in the bureau whose job description specifically directed him to

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search for unexplainable blips. Even after the new computers were installed, it was several years after the census had been completed before the amoeba-like distribution of data was completed and found its way to Harry's desk. He could then begin the plodding search for unusual facts and figures from the last census that he was responsible for finding.

Give Harry his due. He recognized the first little oddity buried in the wealth of newly updated files and he followed up on it relentlessly. What he saw first was that in the small little city of Masterville, high up in the Ozarks, the national divorce rate didn't seem to apply. There were very few divorces in Masterville. Not only that, as his curiosity was piqued and he looked further, he saw that there weren't that many marriages, either. Both facts were anomalies and Harry was very good at anomalies. That was his job, after all. He searched some more.

Harry thought that the low divorce and marriage rate would indicate a greater percentage of people with different last names living together and that turned out to be the case. He knew from previous census data that as a rule, those households where couples lived together without benefit of marriage should have fewer children in residence, regardless of which parent they belonged to, or whether the offspring belonged to both. That turned out not to be the case; there were more, not less. Apparently the citizens of Masterville cared little for marriage but lots for children. About this time, he noticed that it was near five o'clock, and stolid bureaucrat that he was, he called it a day. The next morning he plodded back to his figures.

During the course of that day, Harry discovered several other disconcerting facts. Following up on family statistics, he keyed into Department of Human Resources files and found that, contrary to his expectations, very few of the unwed mothers in Masterville were on Welfare or Medicaid, or ever had been; in fact, most of them lived with the father of their children. This led him back to educational levels, an indication of income. These women had an average of three years of college and an average income even higher than that bit of data should indicate. He thought then that the racial balance in Masterville would be skewed toward a lower percentage of minority groups than average, but again the facts were contrary; the racial classification was about average for that area of the country. By this time Harry began developing a personal rather than a professional interest in the cluster of statistical aberrations. His curiosity was highly aroused, even though he was only doing what he was paid to do. It was simply that his work had finally become interesting rather than routine. He became so involved in his study that he actually put in more than two hours of overtime that day before remembering he



was working for nothing. Overtime wasn't authorized in his department. He hastily shut off his computer terminal and locked his little cubbyhole of an office and went home to his statistically normal wife and two children, a boy and a girl.

Usually, being a considerate husband and father, Harry tried to spend some time after work with Bertha, his wife, and John and Mary, their two children. After that, he watched TV, scanning over the several hundred channels his receiver would accept while looking for an interesting program.

This evening though, Harry was distracted. Right after dinner he zapped into a bland, uninteresting movie and left the channel selector alone while his mind wandered. Later, in bed, he found that he couldn't sleep; the problem from work kept intruding. In all his years as a statistical analyst, rising slowly but surely from GS-6 to GS-13, he had never seen anything like the data he had pulled from the computer files over the last two days, and he really didn't know what to do with it. The figures kept turning over in his mind like a school of fish slowly breaking the surface of a tranquil lake, rising and falling back into the depths, leaving only ripples behind. He finally slept, but badly.

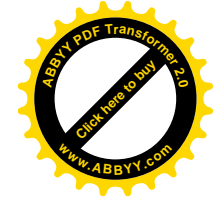
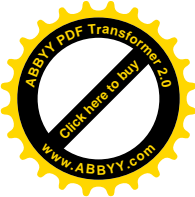
The next day being Saturday, Harry was off work, of course. He rose, red-eyed and irritable at his inability to sleep during the night. He showered, shaved, had his usual breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast then went out into his garage and began tuning up the lawnmower. Winter was over and tufts of St. Augustine grass were beginning to send out green tendrils in the front yard.

The mower wouldn't start, perhaps because Harry wasn't paying much attention to what he was doing and didn't tighten the sparkplug securely enough after replacing it. A little later he came back into the house, washed up and informed Bertha that he was going back to the office to catch up on a little work. Bertha stared at him. Harry had never gone to work on a Saturday as long as she had known him.

"Harry, dear, is anything wrong?" She asked.

"No, honey," Harry said. "Just a little problem at work. I'll be back soon."

Before Bertha could question him further, Harry departed in their new Suburban, purchased after his last promotion. Once on the way, he drove faster than normal, anxious to get to work for the first time he could remember, notwithstanding that it was his day off and that he certainly couldn't expect to get paid for his time. Nevertheless, he



entered his little office and booted up his computer terminal with all the enthusiasm of a four year old turning on Saturday morning cartoons.

Harry did not return home soon. Once ensconced at his desk he forgot all about what time it was. Following up on the facts he had already gathered, he flung his net wider and discovered that his data applied not only to Masterville, but to surrounding towns and villages, spilling out into the broad valley for miles around before beginning to taper off to more normal findings.

Once he had the anomalous area pretty well mapped, Harry began a search for other statistical aberrations within the plat. They were not hard to find, once he began looking, and knew what he was looking for. Crime seemed to be almost nonexistent in the valley and the surrounding area. Masterville had never accepted any government grants for parks or sewer systems, no government money to maintain or develop historical sights or any of the other programs congressmen were so fond of grabbing for their districts to help them get reelected. Federal and state Welfare programs were being utilized hardly at all. Masterville College, a private school, had never accepted a government grant. Both of the Masterville hospitals, and its single nursing home, operated entirely without government funds, not even Medicare reimbursement. Indeed, neither would have been reimbursed by the government because they had never applied for Medicare nor Joint Commission accreditation, a prerequisite for government help. Harry checked and found that both hospital and nursing home were inspected by the state, but that was all, as if the directors did only the minimum required by law.

This fact led Harry to check on the public schools. None of them were registered with the federal nutrition program or for school lunch funding or any other federal or state program other than those specifically prescribed by law. This induced Harry to search out income distribution for the whole population, not just the plethora of unwed mothers. He found that income followed a normal bell-shaped curve, but the curve itself was shifted somewhat to the right when compared with national figures. Valley residents earned more, on average, than would be expected for that area of the country and its industries. Home ownership also turned out to be much higher than in other parts of the nation, though he was hard put to find much financing by Freddie Mac, Freddie Mae, the VA and other government programs. The local banks appeared to hold most of the mortgages on homes in the valley. These facts made him wonder whether he had misread the minority population statistics. He went back to them.

No, they were about normal for that area of the country, but the

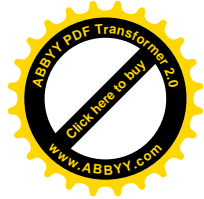


minorities in Masterville seemed to get along unusually well in life, as if no one there cared about their color or origin or religion. That didn't seem right, given the contrariness of human nature, but when he delved into other files he was accumulating at an astounding rate, he could find very few instances of discrimination suits or racial unrest, not as far back as he could check. In fact, he could find very few lawsuits of any kind when he decided to check into that area of Masterville's business and sent out electronic feelers for the data. Stranger and stranger, he said to himself, as intrigued as a small boy who has just discovered tadpoles or garden snakes.

The next thing Harry delved into was religious affiliation, and there he soon found another glaring blip. The most common religious preference of the inhabitants appeared to be "none," although that was implied data rather than hard figures, determined by the fact that there was a dearth of churches in Masterville. There were far fewer than usual for a city squarely in the middle of the "Bible Belt" of America, an area stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Midwest, where religion played a great role in most communities and the lives of their citizens.

By the time Harry had pulled all these bits from the files he had gathered, he was becoming excited. There seemed to be no end to the phenomena. At this point, impelled to action by all the statistical abnormalities, Harry did something which was specifically forbidden to government employees: he began delving into political affiliations. In order to get into this area, he had to use a few techniques which were generally known but never publicized by the computer operators of the department. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have thought of doing such a thing, but by this time he was far gone in his research. He hooked into the voting rolls of Masterville County and discovered that a very high percentage of registered voters listed themselves as independent rather than giving a party affiliation. Feeling guilty, he began checking local, state and national election results from Masterville. He found that most of them, and most especially the local elections, had all been very one-sided, almost as if the citizens had agreed beforehand on what the results should be or whom they should vote for.

Harry worked most of the day. He turned up other peculiarities, none of which would have caused alarm taken alone, but added to all the other oddities about the valley, were disconcerting to a degree. Average life span was several years longer than in the rest of the state or nation. Illegal drug use was very low. Enlistment in the armed services was high, though there appeared to be few military retirees from Masterville on government rolls. Interracial marriages, where there were marriages, were high. Most residents had been born in the valley, and apparently intended to die there. It took a while to ferret



out the data from obscure sources, but Harry found that Masterville apparently did not cater to the tourist trade. There were few motels or hotels in the area, unusual for being so near other highly rated vacation spots.

This last datum made Harry wonder how the residents of Masterville supported themselves. It took a while but eventually he discovered that the little city supported many cottage industries specializing in products which were usually imported from overseas. Masterville charged higher prices but produced such quality goods and niche items that they found a ready market. He smiled to himself when he found that one little factory employing a dozen or so persons was making a good profit by hand sewing shirts in the old sizes of neck and arm length rather than the three standards from overseas, small, medium and large. Harry remembered gritching to Bertha about how he could never find a shirt that fit right anymore. He happily book marked that data for his personal use later. Someone in Masterville was making a good living supplying that want, it seemed, and he intended to add his business to their list of customers.

There were more book stores per capita in Masterville than would be expected, and fewer Movie theaters and game rooms. The city supported a publishing house which specialized in books of fiction and nonfiction which didn't quite fit the mold of the big New York Houses, and checking their web site, Harry saw that they were making no attempt to imitate the giants; they simply looked for good literature to publish, and were doing so at a profit, though few best sellers had come from their presses. There were also a couple of ebook publishers with hundreds of titles in each of their catalogs.

It went on and on, but finally Harry had to call a halt. He had skipped lunch entirely and it was already past time for dinner. Reluctantly, he shut down his computer then locked up and went home.

Bertha insisted that Harry stay home and attend church with her Sunday morning and mow the lawn that afternoon. Harry would much rather have been in his office sitting at his work station, but he did as she asked. Besides, he needed time to think about what to do with his findings, and the monotonous rounds of the mower (which he had fixed) gave him leeway to consider the problem. Masterville and the valley in which it sat was a strange place indeed if his data was accurate, and he had no reason to doubt that it wasn't. By the time the yard was mowed level and Harry came in for dinner he thought he could sum up his thoughts in one short sentence: Masterville was just too good to be true. There must be something wrong there, though for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what it might be. He just knew that such serene, peaceful prosperity as the valley seemed to typify



was as out of place in present day America as an oil derrick on the white house lawn. He made up his mind to see someone about it, which he did on Monday morning.

* * * *

Harry Beales should have had a place in the history books, or at least a footnote for being the first to uncover the gentle mantle of peace and prosperity hovering over Masterville Valley, but he was after all only a GS-13 clerk and his role in the subsequent investigation was soon forgotten by those higher in the hierarchy of government service. Perhaps Harry would have wanted it that way. Once he turned his findings over to others, he went back to working his normal hours and channel surfing from his easy chair and mowing the lawn on Saturday mornings. Eventually he put the whole episode out of his mind and didn't think of it again until it became national news. Others did no such thing.

CHAPTER TWO

"I don't get it," Daniel Stenning said as he finished reading the condensed version of the Masterville data. He tapped an impatient finger on top of the stack of papers. He looked around the table to see if anyone else agreed with him. Besides himself, there were three other persons in the NSA briefing room located in the bowels of the headquarters building in Washington. Opposite him, the FBI liaison shrugged, but said nothing. To his right was a woman, an NSA field agent like himself, but one whom he had never met. She ignored him and continued perusing the report.

"What is it you don't get, Daniel?" his boss, Mandel Crafton asked. Crafton had hard flinty eyes and used them like a weapon.

"First of all, I don't see what this business has to do with national security. And second, why is it stamped secret?" He tapped the papers again. "Most of the data here is available to anyone who cares to sift through the census statistics or look it up on the web."

Crafton's eyes focused on Daniel like an invisible laser, hunting for a hint of insubordination. He hadn't wanted him on this case; the mild-mannered agent was far too successful at his work for him to think of him as anything other than a potential competitor. Better to use someone like Shirley there, whose loyalty to him was unquestionable. She had already pinned her career to his rising star. However, he hadn't had a say in Stenning's presence. His own superior had specifically ordered him to assign him to the case. Given Stenning's previous history of successful operations, it made him believe his



boss already thought there were wider implications to the assignment than he had voiced, and wanted one of the best field agents on it right from the start.

“It's not up to field agents to question an operation, Daniel. And as far as the secrecy goes, no one else other than that little stat clerk and his superior has made all these connections. They have been ordered to stay silent until we determine what's going on here.”

“But why? I don't see anything about Masterville that's really earthshaking. So what if the population is a little different? From what I've heard, some of those communities up in the Ozarks and Appalachians have been inbred for generations. Maybe that's the reason. Besides, they seem to be getting along fine as they are and not hurting anyone. Why go in and start them wondering about it?”

“Maybe too fine,” Shirley Rostervik said from beside him. She turned to him and smiled to take the sting out of the contradiction before addressing Crafton directly. Daniel sensed a layer of incipient sexuality beneath the smile, but it did little for him, even as attractively blond and slim as the other field agent was. Sometimes he wondered about himself.

Crafton allowed himself to return Shirley's smile as she continued. “There's something strange about that place. Just look at the gradient map.” She pulled a sheet of paper from the bottom of her stack and pushed it to the center of the table. It contained a map of northern Arkansas and southern Missouri, the heart of the Ozark mountain range. “See here, the anomalies begin tapering off the further away from Masterville you go. After thirty or forty miles, you can't tell any difference from the normal population. It's almost as if that city and valley are the center of an epidemic.”

“If it's an epidemic, it's been going on for a hell of a long time,” Daniel said. “Previous censuses show the same pattern once you begin looking for it.”

“That's the point,” Crafton interjected. “Whatever those people are up to, it's part of a long range plan. Perhaps a conspiracy.”

“I really can't see where they're up to anything, much less having a plan,” Daniel said, dropping his copy of the report onto the table in front of him. He reached for the coffee pot and poured himself a refill. Crafton might be a bastard, but his coffee was always excellent.

“That's enough, Dan. Our superiors think there's some phenomenon there worth looking into and that's all we need to know. You and



Shirley have been assigned to the case. You're to go in there, posing as tourists and find out what's going on."

"It seems to me we already know what's going on."

"Enough, I said."

Daniel shrugged. He had said what he thought and was willing to let it go at that. If the powers that be wanted him to go undercover into a happy, prosperous little valley and unobtrusively question its inhabitants, then he would do it, and do a thorough job while he was there. He looked across the table at the FBI liaison agent. "Is the FBI going in, too?"

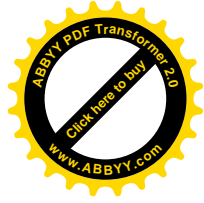
Crafton answered, looking smug. "No, it was just the first agency notified. When the Attorney General refused them a writ, the problem was passed along to us."

No wonder the Federal agent looked so glum, Daniel thought. All he was there for was as a hanger-on, just in case something illegal turned up that fell under his agency's jurisdiction. That government clerk, Harry something or other, must have gone to the FBI first, or his superior had. But then the problem had been passed on to the National Security Agency, and given the paranoia of President Smith, it was no wonder an investigation had been ordered. Well, whatever else, the operation would get him out of stifling weather of Washington and up into the mountains where it was cool. And perhaps there was a phenomenon in that valley not as benign as he imagined, though he couldn't begin to think of what it might be.

"We're going to need some more information," Shirley said, "Like the names of all the prominent citizens, addresses and workplaces and so forth."

"I'll have it for you tomorrow morning, along with your orders," Crafton said. "In the meantime, let's move on. As Daniel said, this business has been going on as far back as census figures go." He looked down at a sheaf of papers in front of him, thumbed through the stack, then glanced back up. "For instance, in the Civil War Arkansas was a slave state, yet records show that most of the men from around Masterville served on the Union side. Not only that, very few slave owners lived in the area at the time. Doesn't that strike anyone as strange?"

Daniel thought about it. "Not really. The valley is located up in the mountains, not a good place for large plantations. That's where most slave labor was used."



Crafton tossed it back at him. "Records show a normal proportion of slave owners outside the valley. Besides, according to news accounts of the day, sentiment in the valley was overwhelmingly pro-union."

Daniel shrugged. He didn't think that meant much, especially if the valley people shared a common heritage, something yet to be determined.

Shirley spoke up again while brushing a strand of fine blond hair away from her forehead. "Here's the anomaly I think is the most significant: the valley is smack in the middle of the Bible Belt, yet most of the population apparently has no religious preference. Now why should that be? It doesn't compute."

"That's one of the things you're going to find out," Crafton said.

"Why?" Daniel asked. "Or rather, let me put it this way: Wouldn't nosing into people's religious beliefs get us into constitutional questions?" He didn't bother mentioning that while he had no opinion one way or another on the existence of God, he thought all religions were rather silly and had never understood why anyone would believe in them.

Crafton stared at him, then answered, "We've already gotten a legal opinion on that. There's no conflict so long no attempt is made to change or influence beliefs. Mr. Phillips is very interested in the *why*, though."

Daniel had never met Murray Phillips, the NSC director, but he knew of him. Like many of the current cabinet members subject to congressional confirmation, he was an avowed, born again Christian. With congress edging ever further toward the philosophy of the religious right, and President Smith already there, it was hard for any other type candidate to pass muster. Worse, in Daniel's opinion, four new Supreme Court justices of the same ilk had been appointed over the last several years and the court was now delicately balanced on the issue of separation of church and state. Daniel thought that something like the present investigation, especially with Phillips in charge, might well tip the balance if the proclivities of the valley residents became public. He couldn't help wondering, though, why such a high proportion of nonreligious folks should be concentrated in that one area. Perhaps there really was something wrong there, but he decided not to comment any further and simply wait and see what turned up. After that he would decide. Over the years he had rarely prejudged a case. Sometimes he thought he had been born a natural skeptic.



Crafton gazed at Daniel as if his eyes could bore holes into him, then dropped his scrutiny back to the stack of forms in front of him. He shuffled the papers for a moment then looked back up. "I think that's about it for now. Daniel, you and Shirley get together this afternoon and get your stories together so you won't contradict each other. Probably it would be best to pose as a married couple."

Daniel caught the beginning of a smile from Shirley. It irritated him for no reason he could discern. He thought of telling Crafton that he preferred to work alone, then abandoned the idea. The cover would be reasonable in the situation, a married couple on vacation. He just hoped the investigation wouldn't take that long. He began picking up his copies of the background analysis.

Shirley smiled brightly at him. "Shall we have lunch and get started while we eat?"

Daniel glanced at his watch and saw that it was nearly noon. He shrugged. "May as well. Any preference?"

"I know a place."

"Let's go, then." He was already thinking of a reason why, as a married couple on vacation, they would be lingering in the unobtrusive little city of Masterville.

Just as they were about to leave, a briefing officer called them back. They spent an impatient hour with him, including ten minutes when Daniel joined him outside for a cigarette break. Afterwards, they were presented with some facts and figures about Masterville not mentioned in the initial brief, and were given Credit cards for the Operation.

*** * * ***

Daniel left his car in the parking garage and let Shirley drive. He raised his brows at her when she stopped by a Lucullan Deluxe and popped the two front doors open.

"I picked the right parents," she said, sliding into the driver's seat.

Daniel went around to the open passenger's door and seated himself. The new car smell of leather and plastic, oil and paint, upholstery and polish were as pleasant as he remembered it from years ago, but the distinctive odor was long gone from his little hybrid Ford Kitten, an aptly fuzzy name for its environmental friendliness, although he had bought it for fuel economy rather than a deep concern over global



warming or ozone levels. Personally, he would much rather be driving a big, well-cushioned vehicle like Shirley's Lucullan than his own, but they cost so much that he declined in favor of investing his money.

"Nice car," he told Shirley as she drove away, heading east. Daniel hoped she didn't pick an inordinately expensive place to eat. Once they received their orders and an expense sheet from Crafton, it wouldn't matter, but right now he didn't feel like spending three times what the food was worth in one of the trendy Washington restaurants.

"Thanks. This little dive we're going to doesn't look like much, but the burgers are good."

"Burgers? Somehow that doesn't go with a Lucullan."

"Not to worry; we're eating at Marvin's because I know it's just been swept for bugs. I finished up a case there yesterday."

"How come you're being reassigned so soon?"

Shirley shrugged. "Guess they thought I'd fit the Op, same as you. Crafton may act like an ass sometimes, but he knows what he's doing."

"That he does," Daniel agreed, remembering a bust he had been in on with Crafton. It had gone down bad but his boss never lost his cool, even with one of his agents down and another wounded. Daniel couldn't even remember him raising his voice as he gave orders in a clear, concise voice devoid of even a tinge of hysteria. Too bad he was so insecure that he worried about underlings upstaging him, he thought, then wondered where he had learned that bit of data. He couldn't remember anyone saying anything like that. He turned it over in his mind for a moment then dismissed the thought as something dredged up from his subconscious, unprovable and therefore meaningless.

* * * *

Marvin's cafe did look like a dive from the outside, but once past the entrance it turned into a clean, neat diner, with numerous alcoves set with tables and comfortable chairs with armrests. Daniel pulled a chair back for Shirley and held it for her while she sat down.

"No one has done that for me in years. You must have been brought up in the south."

"Guilty. Mostly Texas, as a matter of fact. Sometimes my attitude gets me in trouble, though. Not all women like the little amenities."



“I don't mind. I've been called a bitch before, but I can't find a thing wrong with good manners.”

Daniel seated himself, wondering again why he felt no attraction toward the agent. He felt as if he should have, given her blond good looks and a figure which was slim but possessed perfectly adequate curves. It was a puzzle he had run across before and still didn't know the answer to. He certainly wasn't gay; it was just that some women turned him on and some didn't. Shirley apparently was one of the latter. Well, it would make working together much simpler, assuming she didn't get the hots for him.

He let Shirley do the ordering, a relatively simple affair since all Marvin's served were hamburgers in various guises. He asked for a Coors draft beer to go with it. Shirley asked for white wine. The drinks were there within a minute or two of ordering.

As soon as the waiter was out of hearing, Daniel leaned forward and asked a direct question. “What do you think of all this?”

He got an enigmatic smile in return. “Actually, I don't have a clue. It should be damned interesting, though. I can't wait to meet some of those people in Masterville. They seem too good to be true, somehow.”

“There is that,” Daniel admitted, “but I still can't see where national security is being compromised.”

“Well, you know what the grapevine says about our leader: he sees a conspiracy against America under every rock, and Phillips aids and abets the paranoia.”

“Yeah, I've heard that, but who knows, really?”

“It seems pretty obvious if you follow politics at all. Bobby Lee is a slick one; he lets congress do his dirty work, then just signs the bills and gives them all the credit.”

“I don't follow politics much.”

“You should. The country is moving way too far toward the fundamentalist religious agenda. It's getting scary. You didn't hear me say that, though.”

Daniel nodded and smiled mirthlessly. Shirley was going to stay on the good side of Crafton and Crafton was staying on the good side of



Murray Phillips, the NSA director who would prefer a theocracy rather than a democracy, or so it was bandied about among lower echelon agents. As for himself, he simply tried to do his job as well as possible and avoid politics, office and national both, just as he had done in the Marines.

Daniel drew a finger across his lips in a zipping motion just as their food arrived. "He took a bite of his burger and raised his brows in appreciation. As soon as he had the burger a few bites along, he asked, "Does posing as a married couple in Masterville suit you?"

"So long as it's a pose. You?"

"Crafton had the right idea. A married couple on vacation is likely to arouse the least suspicion. We may have problems finding a place to stay, though. There seems to be a dearth of motels around that city."

"Terrell told me there's a bed and breakfast listed right in the city. Why don't we try there?" Terrell was the briefing officer who had called them back before they left the agency.

"Suits me. Do you have a number for them?"

"Yup. Wrote it down while I was going over all the data sheets. Here, you call." She handed him a slip of paper with a phone number below the notation, *Ruthanne's Bed and Breakfast*.

"Okay." Daniel pulled out the new credit card he had been issued. "I'm still listed as Daniel Stenning. What does yours say?"

Shirley set her wind glass down and rummaged in her purse. She held up the new card and chuckled. "It appears that we got married while talking to Terrell. I'm Shirley Stenning now."

"Sounds good." Daniel pulled his phone out and dialed. A few moments later they had reservations for a week, beginning three days from the present, time enough for the drive to Masterville Valley.

"That was easy, Dan. How does it feel to be suddenly married?" Shirley said, giving him a Cheshire Cat grin, promising further teasing.

Daniel simply nodded. He had never been married, even as a cover. This operation promised to be interesting in more ways than one.

CHAPTER THREE



In another part of the Capitol, President Robert E. “Bobby Lee” Smith was conferring with Murray Phillips, down in the basement of the White House. It was a small room reserved for NSA conferences and briefings, where he was constantly reassured that the room was bug-free and that conversations there wouldn't be overheard nor recorded, not even by nearby secret service agents. For someone like Smith, that was a comfort. He would just as soon not have what was talked about here ever get out, at least until it had been properly spun and sanitized so as not to offend any more voters than necessary. His agenda was advancing on several fronts nationally and he wanted to keep it that way. He loved being President; he loved all the perks and power and respect, and fully intended to continue enjoying them through a second term. And even beyond that, if a constitutional amendment allowing more than two terms could be passed in time. Even if not, it might still be possible if ...

The President's self-absorption with his future was broken by Phillips's discourse as he completed the standard NSA brief and began talking about his plans for investigating Masterville.

“Can't you hurry that along a bit faster, Murray? I don't like what you've told me about that place. A whole goddamn city that doesn't believe in religion or marriage? It's fucking un-American!” Smith felt no inconsistency between his language and his professed belief in hard core Christian theology, but he did feel a tug in his gut at the very thought of a city as sizeable as Masterville that had given him less than ten per cent of the vote. He ran his fingers through his shock of fine, silver gray hair. Something was very wrong there and he intended to find out what it was.

“It's not quite that bad, Chief. Masterville isn't large enough to influence anything more than local politics. And I told Mister Crafton to send two of the best field agents in the store.”

President Smith stared at his NSA Director, a blocky man with dark hair and a perpetual frown line between his brows. “You think it's not that bad, huh? Didn't you go back over the historical records of that goddamned place? Their attitudes and beliefs have been growing and spreading for decades. Some of the little villages and towns further up and down the valley have been infected over the years, and according to your own figures, the contagion is spreading faster nowadays. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if they had agents in other cities, trying to convert good Christians to their vile beliefs. Have you thought of that?”

Phillips hadn't, but now he did. He taught an adult Sunday School



class whenever he could free himself up that early on Sunday mornings and the thought of possible agents from Masterville proselytizing around the nation gave him the willies. "Sorry, Chief, we just haven't gotten that far along in the investigation, but we will. I'll put some more agents on the problem."

"Good, but don't delay. It's bad enough that we've got so many Jews and Moslems in the country now without having to worry about some cockeyed brand of atheism agitating the people."

Phillips made a mental note to infiltrate several more agents into Masterville, and also to begin tracking down the whereabouts of former Masterville residents who had moved from the valley to other areas of the country in the last few decades. It wouldn't hurt to see what activities they were involved in now. He made a swift mental calculation of how much manpower that might require, and quickly saw an opening for expanding the agency even further than he already had since Smith had secured his appointment.

"I'll probably need a supplemental appropriation to cover the costs of investigating all possible agents who have left Masterville."

"I can't go to congress; it would attract too much attention. I want this kept quiet. There are too many goddamn bleeding heart liberals ready to jump all over us for if they find out we're investigating American citizens for no other reason than that they're different from the mainstream."

"But these people are way different! They could pose a threat to the safety of the nation!" Phillips exclaimed righteously. If the President believed it, he was bound to convince himself of the danger, too.

"I know that and you know that, but we can't control the press, not yet anyway."

"All right, but I'll still need more money; either that or I'll have to cut back on some other operations. We haven't licked the terrorists overseas yet and you know how much of the agency we've got tied up with the discrediting and agitation ops against the damned Moslems here."

"I know, and we have to stay on the Moslems. We're making progress there. Sooner or later we'll chase them the hell back to where they came from. In the meantime, I'll transfer some money from my discretionary account, then ask for an increase in your budget next fiscal year. How's that?"



“Great.” Phillips had paid particular attention to the President's remarks about not controlling the press yet. Did that mean he thought he might gain control eventually? Wouldn't that be great! So far as he was concerned, the sooner those agitative papers and their reporters were brought to heel, the better.

“All right. Anything else? I've got a breakfast prayer meeting with some of our congressmen at nine.”

“No, sir, not today. We can discuss China any time. They aren't going anywhere.”

President Smith chuckled as he unfolded his lanky, slim frame from his chair. He paused at the exit to check his appearance in the full length mirror there, made a slight adjustment to his bright green tie. It would be subtly suggestive at the public signing of a Parks and Wildlife bill right after the prayer breakfast. *Never forget the spin* he reminded himself as he left Phillips to the nuances of investigating a whole city without the public catching on.

Phillips picked up his phone and asked his secretary to choose four more of the best field agents she could shake loose. What with all the investigations Bobby Lee had the agency involved in, he didn't have much more choice in the selection, but it really didn't matter. Next fiscal year he would have more money and a bigger agency. And Bobby Lee was right in his reasoning. Whether the American people realized it or not, the country was involved in a religious war, and he and the President were going to win it, in America, at least. And after that ...

*** * * ***

“They're on their way,” Marybeth Chambers said, looking at her friend, Lisa.

Lisa Berry smiled and nodded. “We got lucky, didn't we?”

Marybeth didn't return the smile. “If you call having our whole city investigated by the National Security Agency lucky, yeah I guess we did.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean it that way.”

Marybeth got up from her computer chair and went over to sit beside her friend. “I know you didn't.” She leaned forward and kissed Lisa on the lips. Her lips lingered there for a moment. When Lisa began to respond, she broke the kiss. “I know you didn't mean anything by the remark. And you're right; we did get lucky, having them call us for



reservations rather than staying outside the city. At least here we can keep an eye on them.”

“Tyrone was right, wasn't he?”

“He's a smart man,” Marybeth said. “He told me that sooner or later someone would pick up on how different we are. And that having a Bed and Breakfast in town might be a good idea.”

Lisa examined her friend, thinking, not for the first time, that they looked enough alike to be sisters, other than the fact that she had long brown hair and Lisa's was red, but equally long. Both had freckles chasing across their cheeks. “Well, I'm glad he asked you to run it, and that you wanted me to help. But how did he know-and you know, as far as that goes-that I wouldn't spill the secret?”

“He trusts me. Besides, he's a good judge of character. Shucks, you ought to know; he hired you, didn't he?”

“He talked to me for a few minutes after I had gone through all the paperwork for the application to work there.”

There meant only one thing in Masterville: Beamer Research Company, a private, unincorporated laboratory owned by Tyrone Beamer, the principal employer in Masterville. Beamer Research wasn't in the business of production to a very great extent. It was a state of the art genetics and molecular biological research facility that brought products to the commercial feasibility stage then licensed them out.

“But you've met him since then, haven't you?”

“Sure. At the Christmas party last year and I talked to him for all of five minutes.”

Marybeth grinned. “He's a good judge of character. He picked me, didn't he?”

Lisa grinned back. “Anyone would pick you. Are you still seeing him?”

“When he has time. It's not like we're living together. And he could have a dozen more girl friends for all I know.”

Lisa was silent for a moment as she gazed around the parlor of the old turn of the century home that had been converted into the small Bed and Breakfast establishment. The decor was traditional southern,



but of a time in the past when rooms were more crowded with furniture and paintings, rugs and shelved knickknacks. She turned back to Marybeth.

“It still doesn't seem quite real. I mean really, practically everyone in the city, including us, being that different from the general population? It's like something out of a science fiction movie.”

Marybeth took Lisa's hands in hers. “It does take some getting used to, but it's not like we're really so different. It's more a matter of lots of small things than something like having two noses or a brain that bulges out our ears. Hardly anyone around here even suspects they're different from the general population, and even fewer know it for a fact, like you and me.”

Lisa giggled then turned serious again. “But why should the government want to bother us? We're not doing anything wrong.”

Marybeth's grip on Lisa's hands tightened. “It's not that hard to understand. Any minority who is different automatically becomes suspicious. Tyrone told me he thinks it's a territorial thing, inherent in our genes, but I really don't know. We sure don't have problems like that here. All we can do is try to get along with outsiders now-if there is any getting along while Bobby Lee is President.”

“That man scares me.” Lisa shivered, causing Marybeth to draw her into an embrace.

“He scares me, too.” Marybeth kissed Lisa and moved her hand up to caress her breast. She moved her lips against Lisa's, murmuring “And just think: if he had his way, what we're doing right now would be a crime.”

Lisa didn't answer, but neither did she draw away. Marybeth continued caressing the other woman, moving her hand in a slow sensuous stroking motion from her breasts to the indentation of her waist, over the pleasant curve of her hip and back up again to her breasts. Presently, she broke the embrace and stood, drawing Lisa up with her.

“Let's go to the bedroom.”

Lisa nodded, flushing but acquiescent. Marybeth smiled to herself. Men were fine but there was no sensation in the world to compare with making love to a woman for her first time. This was going to be fun, and she could tell Tyrone about the agents in the morning; they wouldn't arrive for three days yet.



* * * *

Tyrone Beamer sat at his huge old oak desk, an antique inherited from his grandfather. From his position, he could look down on Masterville and the valley and today he was wondering how long it would remain so serene and peaceful, not only in appearance but in actuality. The feds were coming, and with that nutcase ex-preacher ensconced in the White House, there was no telling what might happen. He still shook his head in disbelief every time he thought of the past election, and it had been well more than three years ago.

If Beamer looked to one side or the other of his spacious but not overly large office, he could see doors. One led out into the alcove where Gina Lester and Timothy Powers, his administrative assistants held sway. The other led into an adequately furnished four bedroom apartment where he stayed much of the time when he had enough urgent problems that he didn't want to waste time commuting down from the side of the "mountain," as it was called, even though it was really only a large hill. Beamer Research sprawled on a flat expanse of granite near the summit. If it grew much more, this space would be used up and he would either have to build up or down. Or in some more-but he didn't like to think of the implications there. However, he didn't anticipate much more growth, nor did he want it. The bigger the company, the more attention paid to it by various government agencies, and they were doing fine as they were.

One of a bank of phones sitting to one side of the desk gave a muted ring and began flashing red. Beamer picked it up. "Tyrone here," he said, the way he always answered, even if it might be Gina or Tim. But not this time.

"Hi big man. Marybeth here. I thought I better let you know. Two NSA agents are due to check in here day after tomorrow. They're calling themselves Daniel and Shirley Stenning, but their real names are Daniel Stenning and Shirley Rostervik; or perhaps I should say that's the names on their paychecks. God knows what they were originally. Anyway, they're posing as a married couple."

"Field agents?"

"All the way. And very good ones, too, according to our source. He steered them to us, by the way. You ought to give him a bonus."

Beamer already knew that but didn't say so. "Great. But as of now, let's not mention any of this on the phone or by mail again. You can expect to have your place bugged within a day or two after they arrive."



“Oh, my. Sound or sight or both?”

“Both, probably, but it shouldn't bother you, exhibitionist that you are.”

“Ha! You should talk. Besides, it's not me I would worry about.”

Beamer laughed. “Lisa? That didn't take long.”

“It might have taken longer if you came down from that mountain more often.”

“You can always come up, you know. Anytime.”

“I may before the bad guys get here. In the meantime, Lisa and I need to get busy making this place look like a real B&B.”

“All right. Just remember, be careful what you say, but you and Lisa keep them razzled and dazzled. You can borrow Gina and Tim if you need them.”

“If you send Gina down here, I might keep her for myself. I like red hair.”

“Yes, I know,” Beamer chuckled, running his hand through the red hair which he wore cut short and without a part.

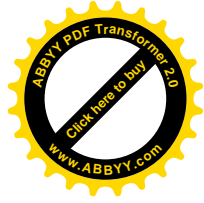
“Devil. Talk to you later.”

“By,” Beamer said, then touched the button which would summon Gina and Tim into the office. He trusted the feds, and the NSA in particular, about as much as he trusted World Peace to break out before dark. Just as sure as Politicians used tax money to further their own ends, Phillips or his underling would send more than two agents here, and Terrell wouldn't necessarily know about it and be able to warn him. Times were going to get very interesting before it was over-if it ever was over, which he doubted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Daniel and Shirley stopped the first night at a Holiday Inn. Before going in, Daniel asked, “Shall we start practicing now?”

“Being married, you mean? Sure Dan. The sooner we get in the habit, the better the cover. Get us a room with double beds, though, if you



don't mind."

"I don't mind," he answered, wondering what Shirley would think if she knew that a double was exactly what he wanted, and that she held very little sexual appeal for him. Or perhaps she already knew; things like that were more apparent to women than men, and maybe they are simply more attuned to the sexual dance between the sexes, he thought. Whatever, so far they were getting along fine without sex and that suited him.

After dinner at the adjoining restaurant, the two agents retired to their room and began discussing their assignment. He sat on one of the perennially uncomfortable motel chairs while she stretched out on one of the beds, facing him and propped up on an elbow.

"Doesn't this whole thing seem rather hurried to you?" Daniel asked.

Shirley plucked at a thread on the sleeve of her long sleeved red blouse. "Hmmm ... no, not considering the direction Bobby Lee and his minions are trying to lead the country-or drive it might be a better term."

"Do you agree with them?" There, Daniel thought. A direct question, right to the point. He was famous for those within the agency-and constantly in hot water with his supervisor for speaking his mind.

Shirley eyed him from the bed, as if were a professor who had just called on her in a class where she wasn't quite prepared to respond. She swung her feet off the bed and sat up. "It's not good to go into an Op if you don't really believe in it. If you don't, you should have turned the assignment down."

"That's no answer."

"It wasn't intended to be. What I believe, or you, too, for that matter, shouldn't have a bearing on the Op, once we're committed. Pour me another glass of wine, would you?"

Daniel had brought another bottle from the restaurant after they had consumed one during their meal, paying a usurious price for it. He refilled both their glasses.

"What brought you to the agency?" Daniel asked, wanting to get to know his partner, even if her beauty didn't excite him.

"Hell, it's hard to remember now. I was recruited right out of college. The salary was good and it sounded adventurous. And the training



wasn't hard for me. I've always been the athletic, outdoorsy type. How about you?"

Daniel shrugged mirthlessly. "Same story, more or less, except I did a stint with the Marines first."

"Officer?"

"Not at first. I enlisted, then went to OCS."

"Couldn't you have gotten a direct commission with a degree?"

"Probably, but I guess I wanted to see how the other half lived first. It made me a better officer, I think."

"Well, be that as it may, we need to start talking about how we're going to go about this thing. I'll confess, I've never been involved with anything like this Op."

"Me neither," Daniel admitted. "I suppose we should just act like an old married couple and do the same things they would."

"Have you ever been married?"

"No. How about you?"

"No," Shirley said, smiling. "I guess we'll have to fake it."

"How so?"

"You wander around to the bars and stores that handle men stuff; I'll try the beauty shops and boutiques and antique shops. We can compare notes at night."

Daniel nodded. "Sounds good, except for comparing notes. I'd rather do that somewhere besides the Bed and Breakfast place."

"Why? No one can possibly know we're coming, or what we're after."

"Just normal precautions, I guess. I always like to play the odds, whatever they are. And frankly, I'll confess that I'm not sure what we're after, either."

Shirley mused for a moment with a frown on her face. She sipped at her glass of wine and moved from the edge of the bed to one of the chairs. "Okay, we can find another spot. I see now why you have such a good rep. You don't take chances, do you?"



“Not unless it's necessary. Now back to the subject. Just exactly what are we after?”

Shirley quoted the Op Orders. “You will determine in so far as possible whether there is a unifying factor that causes the inhabitants of Masterville and the surrounding area to exhibit the following differences from the average or “normal” population base: Increased life span, less marriage, lack of religious affiliation, lack of...” She finished the entire list from memory.

Hearing her relate all of the anomalies to be found in the residents of Masterville, spoken in a precise, lecturing type of voice finally brought it all home to Daniel. The people they were going to investigate were different. And yet, he felt a vague affinity for the place already. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. Too many of the attributes were ones which could just as well apply to him. Whether there was anything in their makeup that might threaten national security was another question, one he wasn't prepared to answer yet. But there was one thing he was certain of: delving into their lives promised to be one of the most interesting assignments of his career. If they didn't catch on, of course.

That thought brought up a sudden association in his mind. “I wonder if the Masterville people are even aware that they're different?”

“Now that's in interesting observation. Phillips and the Agency sociologist and psychologist he consulted believe they must know.”

Daniel remembered scanning over that portion of the analysis and not attaching much importance to it. As predictive sciences, he believed both sociology and psychology were tight up there with Astrology as useful tools for anticipating human behavior. “I'm not that convinced,” he said.

“Oh? Why not?”

Daniel poured another glass of wine before answering, almost emptying the bottle. Shirley shook her head when he offered her more. “Well, in the first place, all the differences are minor ones if looked at individually. Would you notice if your neighbors were less religious than you, for example?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I would probably depend on how religious I was, myself. What else?”

“In the second place, if many of the inhabitants are consciously



aware that their city is different, the news couldn't possibly be kept secret. At least given that they're still relatively normal humans.”

“I think I have to agree with you, but suppose there's a cabal of sorts? Maybe they have some method of surreptitiously changing people without their knowledge.”

Daniel laughed. “You've had too much wine. A few people may know and not be saying anything, but I think we'll find that the average citizen is unaware, at least consciously.”

“You keep saying ‘consciously’. What do you mean by that?”

“Well ... let's take you and me, for example. Neither of us has married, yet we're past the age when most people have been. We're both more intelligent than average; otherwise, the agency wouldn't have accepted our application in the first place. That's just two factors, but I don't dwell on them and I'll bet you don't either.”

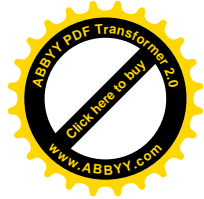
“True. Well, I guess we'll see, won't we? Do you want the bathroom first or shall I go?”

“Go ahead. I'll finish my wine.”

Shirley unlatched her bag and removed some garments. She took them into the bathroom which was closeted to the right of the little alcove holding the sink, mirror, coffeepot and other of the standard facilities always furnished by Holiday Inns. He heard the latch close as she shut the door. Presently, sounds from the shower could be heard.

Daniel hadn't been quite honest with his partner. He had indeed wondered why he had never met a woman he liked enough to think about staying together permanently, as in marriage. No, even that wasn't quite right. Back in High School there was a girl ... Marsha. They had gone steady for a year. Daniel still believed he had loved her deeply and that she had reciprocated that feeling. Unfortunately, her parents had taken overseas jobs and never returned other than for periodic vacations. Eventually they had lost touch, but he still remembered her-and hoped that someday he would find a woman he could feel so strongly about again. Over the years he had gone with numerous women for a while, when sexual tension built up enough to become demanding, but it never lasted, and almost always it had been he who broke the relationship. He had simply tired of them and he still didn't know why.

He finished the glass of wine he had been working on and poured the



last of the bottle into his glass, still musing while Shirley maintained control of the bathroom. Women aren't altogether the problem, he thought. He had become close friends with only a few men over the years, too. *It's probably the result of my upbringing*, he thought. He barely remembered his mother, who had died in an automobile accident when he was four, and had never known his father. He grew up with adopted parents whom he never felt comfortable with. His adopted father ran a strict, loveless household and totally dominated his meek wife. *He always was a sanctimonious sonofabitch*, Daniel thought, a hardass Pentecostal fundamentalist who never tired of preaching to the uninitiated and whose ultimate response to any argument was *Because the Bible says so!* The break became final and irrevocable when he enlisted in the Marines rather than accept his putative father's offer to support his college studies-if he would drop his interest in Biology and begin study of a respectable subject such as business or theology.

Water under the bridge he thought, and stood up as Shirley came back into the room, clad in a peach-colored robe with a motel towel covering her damp hair.

"All yours," Shirley said. "Watch the shower; it's wild!" She touched the towel for emphasis.

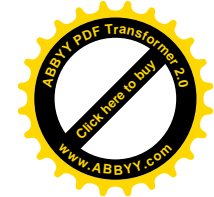
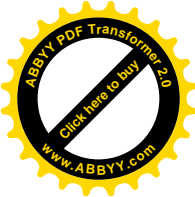
Daniel rubbed his short brown hair and smiled. "I don't have to worry." He picked clean underwear and a robe from his luggage and entered the bathroom. It was still steamy from Shirley's stay and he showered quickly, plugged his powered toothbrush in at the alcove where the sink lived, did his teeth and was ready for bed. The wine was making him sleepy.

Shirley was already in bed, her back turned and under the covers, as if she cared little about any further conversation for the night. That suited Daniel. He turned out the lights and was soon asleep.

* * * *

The sound of the outside door closing woke Daniel. He blinked, trying to orient himself in the near-total darkness, alleviated only by a thin shaft of weak light seeping into the room from where the window curtains weren't quite closed completely. He squinted into the darkness. Shirley's bed was empty, the covers turned back. He sat up in bed just as a shadowy figure paused by one of the small table lamps. Its light flared. Shirley was limned in the glare, holding a canned coke.

"What-?" Daniel began, but was interrupted.



“Sorry. Couldn't sleep and wanted something to take away the taste of the wine.” She tilted the can to her mouth.

“S'okay. What time is it?”

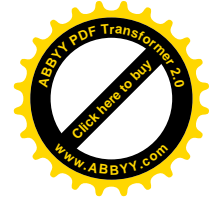
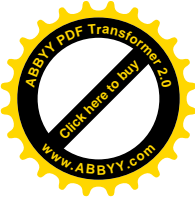
“Around midnight. Go back to sleep.”

Shirley turned the light off and slipped into bed, leaving Daniel to wonder why she had turned the light on in the first place if she hadn't wanted to wake him. He had trouble getting back to sleep but eventually dozed back off. He dreamed of Marsha, his childhood sweetheart and woke with a hard erection and an urgent need to relieve himself. Fortunately, Shirley was still buried under the covers and he didn't have to worry about her seeing him in that state.

After finishing in the bathroom, and feeling much the better for it, Daniel plugged in the Motel coffee pot, not expecting very satisfactory results. At the first sip, he was surprised. It wasn't bad at all. He shaved and dressed in jeans and a western shirt while drinking the coffee, then eased out the door to find a morning paper, an abiding vice since puberty. The day just didn't start right until he had his coffee and paper.

Daniel skipped the *West Virginia Gazette* in favor of a Metropolitan daily and brought it back to the room. Shirley was out of bed and out of sight, either in the alcove or bathroom. He sat down and perused the headlines. They didn't amuse to him. The filibuster in the Senate had finally been overridden and President Smith's nomination of Martin Luther Elton for the Supreme Court was confirmed. A sidebar to the article noted that President Smith confirmed the rumors that he intended to ask Congress to consider legislature placing certain restrictions on declared members of the Islam faith, citing great national security concerns as his reason. The story was continued on the next page but it was all speculation and no facts. He skipped it and went on to world news.

A quarter page black and white photo showed members of the Saudi Royal family being led to posts, where some were already fastened with hands behind them, waiting on the firing squads. The revolutionary council certainly wasn't wasting time-nor showing much mercy, he thought. The peace treaty the reigning family had signed with Israel had already been revoked and now they were paying the price for having negotiated it in the first place. Tom Meekins, Smith's Secretary of State, noted that neither Saudi Arabia nor Israel was of strategic interest to the United States now that a sufficient supply of oil was assured from Russia, Canada and South America. Daniel wasn't so sure, but then he wasn't an expert in



international affairs either, he admitted to himself.

If there was one thing he did agree with President Smith on, it was that he had continued to maintain and support the armed forces. On the other hand, if he weren't so strident with his foreign policies, the country might not need such a sizable military. Sometimes he wondered how the former preacher had ever managed to get elected, but again, he knew he wasn't any more of an expert in political theory than he was in affairs of state.

“Anything interesting in the news?” Shirley asked as she came from around the alcove. She was wearing white slacks and a short, pale green blazer. She looked very good in them. One side of the blazer drooped the slightest bit, where Daniel knew the weight of her handgun was pulling it down. He wore his own piece in an enlarged side pocket of his jean jacket.

“There's always something interesting, but rarely anything you can do much about,” he responded. “Coffee's made.”

“I saw, but I'll wait until we eat. Are you about ready?”

“Yup.” Daniel folded the newspaper to finish later when Shirley took a turn driving. He hadn't glanced at the editorial page, where a nationally syndicated columnist suggested that it would be a good thing to remove the constitutional limitation on a President serving more than two terms, and that now, while the sitting President was still in his first term, would be a good time to get started. Although the columnist never mentioned it in print, he was a strict Pentecostal and an acquaintance of President Smith.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Mmmm. That was, um, interesting, to say the least,” Lisa said. She stretched her hands over her head and tensed all the muscles in her body, like a lithe and rested cat getting ready for the hunt.

“Only interesting?” Marybeth gazed fondly at Lisa's naked body adorning the rumpled covers of the bed, thinking what a sweet girl she was. Too bad she hadn't found a man she cared enough about to live with yet; she knew that her friend was much more heterosexually inclined than she was.

Lisa turned to face Marybeth, feeling her breasts move with her, seeking a new center of gravity, and liking the way the other woman's admiring gaze followed them. She brought her hand over to touch



Marybeth's thigh, the nearest portion of her body to her. "Well, more than that. I never imagined being with a woman could be so ... so..."

"Pleasurable? Nice? Wonderful?"

"All of them. And it's not like it was better than with a man; just different, but every bit as good. Why on earth does it upset so many people? Especially since they've never tried it."

"Good question. Easy answer. Religion always tries to control sex and every other fundamental human drive, just like any other power group. Just be glad we're not susceptible to their arguments and enjoy it for now. However, we might have to be a little discreet after our guests arrive. And speaking of, we'd better get Tyrone to think about getting another couple to stay a day or so while the spooks are here, just to make this place look like a real B&B."

"Don't you know anyone to ask? I thought you were privy to all the secrets."

Marybeth moved close enough to Lisa to lean forward and give her a quick kiss from where she had propped herself on an elbow. "There are no secrets, remember? Or if there are, Tyrone hasn't told me, other than the fact that most of us in the valley are subtly different in lots of little ways from the general population-and that most of us don't even realize it."

"Seems funny, but then I didn't recognize anything odd about myself until you let me in on the details. Why don't we just put it all on the web and see what some good scientists could make of it?"

"Tyrone says that the media would go into a frenzy if it ever gets publicized. You know, hidden valley in the mountains, strange people, don't go to church or marry much and that sort of thing. And I agree. You do too, or Tyrone and I wouldn't have picked you to help out here."

Lisa ran her hand up and down the smoothness of Marybeth's thigh and up to the curve of her hip. She rested it there, a pensive look on her face. "But there must be a reason. Hasn't anyone ever looked into it?"

"Tyrone says he just discovered it himself a few years ago. He's doing a genealogical study to see if that matters, but he's being very careful about it and it's taking a long time."

"Why be careful? Lots of people search out genealogies these days."



“Just playing it safe. He farms little bits and pieces out to different search engines and experts on the subject, but never gives away the whole picture. And besides, there may be nothing at all to it, so far as we're concerned.”

“Yes, but there could be. Remember, I taught High School Biology before going to work at Beamer's. I know a little something about genetics.”

“You not only know something about genes, you inherited some good ones. These for instance.” Marybeth reached over and caressed the nearest of Lisa's breasts, partially covering it with her hand and rubbing her palm lightly over the nipple.

Lisa grinned. “Talk about me! Yours are just as nice, if not nicer.”

“Yes, but I like pink nipples.”

“Oh, pish.”

“Yeah. Who can tell the color when they're in your mouth?” Marybeth demonstrated.

Lisa held her close, loving the feel of Marybeth's soft lips engulfing her nipple and swirling her tongue around it, bringing it to sleek erectness. “Weren't we going to see about another couple moving in?” She managed to say through the rising excitement of her body.

“It can wait. It's still early.”

*** * * ***

Murray Phillips was again meeting with the President. As usual, the secret service team was made to leave the room, something they always did reluctantly.

President Smith was sipping at a cup of coffee and grimacing. “They don't make the coffee nearly as good down here as they do upstairs,” he complained.

“I could have a carafe sent down,” Phillips offered.

“No, no sense in letting the kitchen staff know how often I come down here, but I sure get pissed not being able to discuss matters in the Oval Office. Why can't you debug it?”

“I could, Mister President, but it would just call attention to the fact



that we've got something that we've kept concealed so far. This is much safer."

"All right, then, let's get on with it. What's doing with that damned valley today."

"There's nothing new yet, at least from Masterville. I have a set of agents who will arrive tomorrow. They'll be staying right in town at a Bed and Breakfast, posing as a married couple on extended vacation, and collecting folk stories. I have two other pairs on the way under other guises."

Phillips paused while the President reached beneath his suit jacket and brought out a package of cigarettes, his secret vice. If any of his opponents ever caught him smoking, he figured it would shave a good many points off his popularity polls. "Okay, what else?"

"I've started a genealogical study of the inhabitants. It will take a while since I don't want to do it openly."

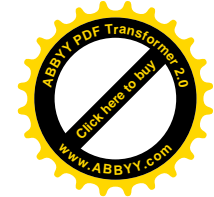
"What's that for? Who cares who their ancestors were?" The President was notoriously deficient in scientific knowledge but it didn't appear to hurt him politically. He knew that the majority of American voters were just as unschooled in science as he, and furthermore, that most of them had no interest in alleviating the situation even if they had the capability.

Phillips tried to explain in simple terms. "It might turn out that the people in the valley all derive from a small population base originally, and keep their gene pool more or less intact by not marrying too often outside the group."

Smith wasn't quite sure what a gene pool was but he understood about marriage within families, and the political implications, immediately. "You mean they're interbred, like dogs or those poor white families in the Appalachian Mountains? Hell, that's great! Talk about a ready-made issue! We can—"

Phillips dared to interrupt. "Sir, we don't know that yet, and it might take some time to find out. And it could very well be something else that's responsible."

The President wasn't listening. He leaned back in his plush chair, resting one arm on the padded armrest and dragging on his cigarette with the other. He blew smoke carelessly in Phillips's direction, not caring that he was a nonsmoker. "Just think of the possibilities. We can portray them as a threat to the whole country, then take credit for



containing the threat. And by God, we'll use them as a perfect example of what happens when you use genetics to breed a superman. Not that they're super, but we can make the country think they are. Oh man, I can just see it. Let the guy who winds up opposing me try to blather about protecting the rights of minorities or separating religion from politics. I'll eat him for breakfast!"

Phillips nodded agreement, knowing that Smith was capable of just such doings. He was ruthless, and devious about his ruthlessness, a potent combination of traits in a President, especially one seeking reelection in an America jittery about terrorism and illegal immigration and drug use and the rise of gay and lesbian influence in politics and the media and a hundred other seemingly insoluble issues. Phillips knew that some of the perceptions were vastly exaggerated but that wouldn't matter to the President; he would use them regardless. And so would his opponent, if he or she thought of it first, Phillips conceded. In the meantime, his job depended on the party in power staying in power, which meant helping Smith get reelected.

"I'll give you a daily brief on Masterville. And why don't we assign it a code word, in case I need to mention it where someone outside the loop is present?"

"Good idea, but be damn sure there aren't many in the loop. I want this held close to the vest until I'm ready to use it. Unless you discover something that's an immediate threat to the country, of course. In that case, we'll come down hard, immediately."

"Right. How about Freddy as a code word?"

"Freddie? That's my dog's name!"

"Exactly. If you hear me mention that Freddy may be causing problems again, for example, no one will think a thing about it, except maybe to laugh. But then you'll know to get with me as quickly as convenient."

"Problems! If that dog ever eats another briefing paper, he's going to the pound! But you're right, Murray; mention he's in trouble and that's what will come to mind. Everyone in the nation has heard about that episode. Freddy it is. How do you damn spooks come up with that shit right off your head like that?"

"Practice and training, Mister President. Now I've got something else for you. The drug boys just made another big bust in Little Rock. It appears that part of the proceeds were being smuggled out of the



country in cases of frozen chicken quarters, to Russia, and from there directly to several of the big Mideastern Mullahs to finance training and operations. The rest of it was being distributed here.”

“Goddamn them! Not only are they corrupting our youth with their fucking drugs, they're using the money to finance those damn Cyclesiders!”

Motorcycle Martyrs, as they called themselves, were a relatively new phenomenon in the country. Preached to by their Emirs until they honestly believed in Martyrdom to support the undeclared Jihad being waged on American soil, they were very hard to contain or stop. Any intersection, parking lot or downtown street could become a target at any time, and frequently were. Explosives packed in saddle bags or strapped inside shirts and jackets made terribly effective bombs when the young men and women immolated themselves.

“I know, boss. We're trying, but short of confiscating every motorcycle in the country, it's a damnably hard thing to stop.”

“Well, maybe we better start confiscating.”

“Motorcycle riders are a pretty big constituency group,” Phillips warned.

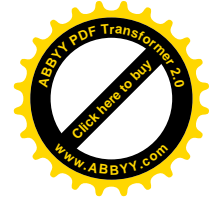
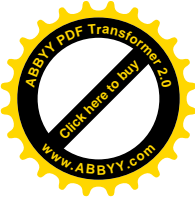
Smith rubbed his chin, then his eyes. In the closed room, the cigarette smoke had become irritating. “Well, we need to do something. Who's working on this, anyway?”

“Munoz in Homeland Security.”

“That wimp. The only reason I nominated him was for the votes in California he controls.

“Well, tell him-no, never mind, I'll tell him myself, at the very next cabinet meeting. Let him explain to the rest of us why he's letting those nut cases blow themselves up on every street corner in America!”

It wasn't nearly that bad, but Phillips wasn't about to correct the President on so minor a matter; minor in his eyes anyway. So far as he was concerned, the more ragheads who blew themselves up, the better. One less in the country, and by God, if he and the President could figure a way to do it, the whole damned Islamic religion would be outlawed in America. Every time he saw a scene with Moslems at prayer, butts sticking up in the air as if they were getting ready to moon God, he became incensed. If someone had to practice a



heretical religion, why couldn't they at least be dignified about it, like the Catholics?

Seeing that Phillips wasn't going to join him in railing at the cycleciders, Smith brought up another subject that was preying on his mind. "What are you doing with that missing Uranium? We ought to find a use for it somewhere, especially since those fanatics were planning on using it on us."

Phillips winced. He had been trying to ignore that subject. "It's a tricky proposition, Mister President. We're still holding on to it, but we're still looking for a way to get it out of the country, and in to somewhere it can be useful. You don't have to worry about it being found. So far as the FBI is concerned, it's like it disappeared down a black hole, but I have to tell you, they do think it's still inside the country. They've got the ports and terminals covered like wool on a sheep."

"Bullshit. Despite what Munoz says, our borders are still like a sieve. It could have been split up among a dozen or two wetbacks and hustled into Mexico by now. And from there, it could go anywhere."

"I'll keep working on it," Phillips offered.

President Smith lit another cigarette. He blew smoke across the table, then leaned forward across it himself, a beatific smile suddenly lighting up his face.

"No, I've changed my mind, Murray. Keep it where it is for now. I think we might have a use for it right here in the United States, by God."

Phillips didn't say anything. The official story was that the two scientists and three technicians implicated in the theft had all suicided and no other persons involved had been apprehended. It had been a masterful operation, one he still remembered with pride. He doubted that a real bomb could be produced from the uranium inside the country without attracting unwanted attention, but a simple dirty bomb was a different proposition. It wouldn't be all that dangerous, but it could cause a localized panic in a heartbeat. That kind of bomb was very easy to manufacture, given some explosives and the radioactive material. And he had both ingredients now. Through an incredible stroke of luck, his own little cabal had tracked down the gang inserted by Iran years and years ago, capturing the uranium they had stolen and disposing of the bodies after some hurried and bloodily brutal questioning. The only question remaining was whether and when to use the material, which was the President's



decision, of course.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Phillips shrugged and spread his hands. “We’ll do whatever you say, Mister President. What did you have in mind?” He kept his voice carefully neutral, knowing that there were some things he would do and some that he wouldn’t.

“I’ll let you know. You’re sure that everyone involved in that fuckup is dead?”

“Yes, sir. The ones we didn’t capture suicided. You know how they are: become a martyr and get to bang a hundred virgins in paradise or some sort of idiot belief like that.”

Smith chuckled. “I’ll bet they were awfully surprised when they wound up in hell facing the Devil.”

“Yes, sir. Well, we’re using less and less of their oil. Give us another twenty years and we’ll be totally independent of them. After that they can sit in the desert and swap camels with each other for a living; we won’t have to worry about them.”

“Except the fanatics. Pakistan and Iran have the bomb, you know. What if one or the others suddenly decide to make martyrs of their whole nation by nuking us? It could happen you know; they’re all crazy as Bessy Bugs.”

***Bessy Bugs?* Phillips hadn’t heard that expression before but didn’t ask the President what it meant. He would look it up later. “We’ve got operatives in both countries. I think we’d know in advance if they ever thought about such a thing. I doubt if their leaders ever do. It’s only the young ignorant fanatics who do the suiciding. Older men and women aren’t so stupid.”**

Smith stared at the NSA Director. He was so politically naive. Didn’t he know that younger men were always lusting for the power and positions older men held? “There’s such a thing as revolution, Murray. Keep a close watch on those two countries. What with a dozen different kinds of fucking jihad being preached nowadays, no telling what might happen. Which reminds me: we’ve got a meeting with the Joint chiefs in fifteen minutes to go over progress on the missile defenses. Time for one more cigarette, then let’s get moving.”

CHAPTER SIX



Shirley drove while Daniel finished his paper. She was distracted and still feeling guilty about placing that tracer on their car as Crafton had instructed her to. It didn't seem right that Daniel shouldn't know, and only her training kept her from blurting it out to him. Crafton had been very specific: Daniel was not to know that their car could be traced wherever it went. She had no idea why he was being excluded from that knowledge, other than the persistent rumor that he and Crafton didn't get along, nor see eye to eye on many issues. That still didn't seem like a reason to distrust him, but then she was just an agent, not a personnel supervisor. Maybe something was going on that she wasn't aware of.

Daniel put down the sports section of the newspaper, which he had only glanced at briefly. He wasn't much of a sports fan. Football was mildly interesting, but baseball and basketball didn't inspire him at all. "Do you want me to save any of the paper for you?"

Shirley took her eye off the winding road momentarily, startled by his voice after his long silence while reading. "No, I'll catch the news on television tonight after we stop. Unless you want to go all the way in?"

"No, our reservations are for tomorrow. Let's stay over at Memphis then go on into Masterville in the morning."

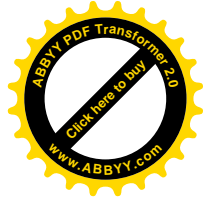
"Memphis it is. This is some beautiful country, isn't it?" Daniel looked out over a vista sloping down to a farm or ranch, then the next moment it was hidden by a rocky outcrop of slate and granite with heavy forests above.

"It's nothing compared to Colorado or Wyoming. Now there's some country."

"Is that where you're from?"

"No, I'm originally from back east but I vacationed up in that area one summer with my boyfriend back when I was still in training. We did a lot of hiking and rafting."

Daniel smiled to himself. He admired beautiful scenery but had little desire to go poking into it. Mountain training with the Marines had cured him of that, and so far as personal fitness, he much preferred jogging and inside workouts, practicing hand to hand combat moves and stunts with parallel and horizontal bars to keep in shape. He wasn't an accomplished gymnast but enjoyed the exercise whenever he could.



“This is some pretty wild country. I wouldn't want to get lost anywhere in this area,” he remarked.

“According to the map and our briefing, Masterville is situated right in the center of some of the wildest, and off the beaten path besides. We'll be driving on one lane roads tomorrow.”

Daniel hadn't looked that closely at the atlas they carried, but Shirley's mention of how isolated Masterville was, produced a thought. “I wonder if the original inhabitants settled in the area for that very reason?”

Shirley glanced over at him, thinking that she was paired with a very astute agent. “I don't know, but I imagine someone back at the shop is looking into it.”

“Yeah. Crafton and I may not get along as well as we should, but he's no dummy and neither is Phillips. He came up through the ranks.”

“We all know that, Dan. I think he's like Bobby Lee; a bit too far right religiously, but he's a good administrator, and it's nice to have someone running the shop that's one of us.”

“I suppose,” Daniel said, though he wasn't at all sure. While it was helpful for field agents to have the top administrator know something about what it was like in the trenches, it seemed to him that there were positive aspects to having political appointees controlling the government cabinet departments. It didn't stop bureaucratic fiefs and cowboys from running wild on occasion, but he did think it helped to keep a rein on them when the Chiefs changed almost every election year.

“You don't sound like you agree.”

“There are usually two sides to everything. Well, it doesn't matter right now. Let's just concentrate on getting this Op out of the way.”

“Out of the way? You don't sound very enthusiastic. Still having doubts?”

Daniel studied his partner's profile. She was really very pretty and he knew she was competent, having taken the time to get an opinion from a fellow agent who had worked with her once. And so far, there had been no hint of sexual innuendo between them, which was good. But he admitted to himself that there wasn't that spark of comradery present as yet, which would allow him to voice a lot of concerns he had about this Op. Well, maybe it would come, and in the meantime,



he would play it as professionally as she was doing. "I just like to know as much as I can on an operation. And we know diddley here. I think we're going to have to be careful about how we ask questions around town. In fact, they might have done better to send in a team versed in psychology and misdirection in order to get the people to talk."

"Maybe they'll talk anyway."

"Well, guess we'll see. Hell, maybe we should just treat it as a vacation like we're pretending it is and let-no, I've got a better idea. Why not pose as folklorists? We might get some genealogical information as well as the other stuff we're after."

Shirley glanced away from the winding road long enough to give him a brilliant smile. "Great idea! I like it. We've both got our Comphones with us; we can record that way without anyone giving it a second thought."

Daniel thought about it. "You're probably right, but let's pick up some writing material, notebooks and stuff in Memphis as a backup. And go easy recording with the 'phones until we see how the locals take it, and how many of them do the same thing. Remember, we're going to be in a rural area, even if it is a small city. And if these people turn out to be a ... a clan, so to speak, they might not be really tech savvy."

"Isn't there a biotech firm there of some sort? And a junior college?"

"You know there is, but they're both private, no government funding at all, so we don't have any data on them."

"And that's another indication of a closed society. Whoever heard of a school nowadays that doesn't accept government funds?"

Daniel grinned. "The people of Masterville, apparently. You know, this might turn out to be one helluva Op. I'm as curious about those people as cat is about a bird nest just out of reach."

Shirley laughed, a pleasant sound. She could tell that Daniel was going to be easy to work with, but it was damn strange that he hadn't shown any response to a few subtle flirtations she had thrown his way. In fact, if it kept on, she thought it might begin to be a challenge. And a fun one at that. She liked the way he carried himself, and the sense of quiet competence he displayed. I'll bet he would be a good lover, too, she thought. Maybe later, once they were settled in and she could be sure it wouldn't interfere with their work.

* * * *



That evening in Memphis, after stopping at a Wal-Mart for notebooks and pens, Daniel suggested that they bring takeout to their motel room, another Holiday Inn, and go over their preparations. There was a convenient liquor store near the motel and Daniel picked up a bottle of White Zinfandel to go with the double order of egg rolls each they were going to make a meal of.

Shirley managed to give Daniel a little hip bump as they were carrying their bags, the wine and their prospective meal through the door. She thought he reacted a bit to her closeness, but all he did was apologize for getting in her way.

Daniel recognized the maneuver and also recognized his reaction, a sure sign that sexual tension was building up again. *Hormones always bypass the rational mind*, he thought. Well, it wasn't that bad yet and this Op promised to take a while. It might turn out that they would get something going eventually, even though he knew it wouldn't be anything permanent. There was another factor, too, which suddenly popped into his mind. They were going to be staying at the Bed and Breakfast place for at least a week, probably longer. Any competent woman, or man for that matter, cleaning a bedroom can easily figure out from numerous little signs whether sexual acts were being performed in the bed and the room. It might turn out that they would have to have sex just to keep up appearances. He set the bottle down on the table in the room as the thought emerged and amplified.

“What's funny?” Shirley asked.

Daniel realized he must have been smiling to himself without noticing it. “Oh, nothing, really. Let's eat while the egg rolls are still warm. I'll open the wine if you'll get them unwrapped.” He went to his bag and fished for the corkscrew he usually carried, then after removing the foil from the bottle, saw that it wouldn't be needed. The wine had a plastic cork. He muttered under his breath at the near impossibility of getting the damn things out without straining a gut, but this one came loose with a minimum of fuss for a change. He got plastic glasses from the bathroom and poured for them both. She already had the food ready, except that they had forgotten to pick up napkins. Shirley solved that problem by removing a plastic carton of wet wipes from her bag.

“I've learned. Any time I travel, I always carry a package of these. You never know when they're going to come in handy.”

“Good idea. I'll get some for myself next time I'm shopping.”



The egg rolls were good and Daniel practically wolfed his down. They had only eaten small hamburgers at some little cafe for lunch. Shirley took longer with hers but was no less enthusiastic. She automatically began cleaning up while Daniel poured more wine. One day, some time in the far future, men will learn to clean up their messes, she thought. She didn't know that Daniel had intended to do just that; he just wasn't in a hurry about it.

Relaxed now, they both settled back in the same old uncomfortable chairs, which Daniel would swear before the Supreme Court were designed by aliens with backs permanently fused angles no human would ever assume. After a bit, Shirley moved to the bed, as she had the previous night and finally Daniel did the same. They faced each other across the short divide between the beds and talked for over an hour, deciding on their roles and a general line of questions they would try to get the citizens of Masterville to answer.

Daniel coded their final decisions into his Comphone with his own encryption rather than the agency's. He wasn't certain why he was doing it that way, other than that he still had vague misgiving over both the nature of the Ops and the hurried way it had been assigned to them. In his opinion, lack of detailed planning and practice almost always led to mistakes.

The line of investigation agreed upon had to do with such things as where ancestors were from, couched in innocuous comments such as *That's an unusual name. Are your ancestors from Germany (or England or France or Russia and so forth)*; Why couples didn't marry that often, asked after recounting an anecdote of married life and asking, *Anything like that ever happen to you*; Why government funding was used so little for schools and infrastructure, gotten into by telling of vague notions of perhaps settling in the valley and asking, *Are the School taxes very high here? How about property taxes?* And so forth. Theoretically, the subject being quizzed would never know it was anything other than casual conversation. There was a real technique to it, taught during agency training. Back then Daniel had been amazed at how much information a complete stranger could be induced to reveal using the right methods.

As before, Shirley took first turn at the bathroom while Daniel polished off the last of the wine; it appeared that she was a very light drinker. As he was sipping the last of it, he heard the door open. He couldn't help but glance up at her as she came into his line of vision. She was wearing the same robe as the previous night but somehow it seemed to cling closer to her obviously well-developed curves. Had she belted it tighter or was he imagining things? Either way, she had gotten a piece of his attention. The vision of her in the robe, long



blond hair flowing past her shoulders remained with him even after he was in bed. His sleep was restless, causing him to wake several times during the night.

* * * *

The one-lane road topped the pass between two moderately high peaks. Abruptly, the valley spread out below them, with Masterville resembling a jewel set at the base of a large, sharply rising hill on the left side of the valley. Farms and ranches dotted the floor of the valley in a sweeping panorama to the right, becoming increasingly sparse the farther away from the city they were. A small river, or perhaps a large stream, twinkled in the morning sunlight as it wound among low ridges and forested coves. Its source must be somewhere in the mountains behind them, but it first appeared down below, then disappeared at times beneath growths of pine and hardwood before exiting the valley in the far distance. There was a simple roadside park built in the pass and Daniel pulled over and stopped.

“My God, what a pretty place that is!” Shirley exclaimed.

“As good as Colorado?”

“Damn near. It reminds me of a place out there I've seen a few times, but this is much larger. I think I'll like it here.”

“Don't get too enamored with it; this is a job, remember?” But Daniel said it lightly, knowing that wouldn't be a problem.

The two of them stood there for a while, admiring the vista. He didn't know what Shirley's thoughts were, but even as he gazed out over the valley, he wondered why he had never seen such a picturesque place on a postcard or in a painting or on the Arkansas and Missouri web sites he had perused as soon as he had known where he would be going. Didn't they want any tourists, or the money they would leave behind when they departed? He added that to the questions he intended to ask.

“Well, shall we get on down there and get started?” Shirley asked while trying to brush away strands of hair blowing around her face.

“Let's do it. I'm anxious to meet these people.”

Daniel got behind the wheel and they began the descent into Masterville Valley.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Tyrone Beamer was a natural leader. He possessed charisma in ample quantities, but more importantly, men and women he came in contact with trusted him. His firm, Beamer Research, was the source of more jobs than any other company in the valley and he took that responsibility seriously. He personally passed on every person hired, and once hired, very few of his employees ever quit. Had Beamer chosen, he could have been Mayor of Masterville, or possibly a congressman from the district it was in, but he had no desire to become involved in politics-other than when absolutely necessary, as it was now. His main interest was in genetics, and in another research project just now beginning to bear fruit.

He had asked all the members of the informal council to come up to the plant, leaving only Lisa Berry, the newest member, to stay at the Bed and Breakfast in order to welcome the NSA agents when they arrived. Otherwise, everyone was present, from the Mayor and Police Chief on down. Other than those two officials, everyone else on the council was a private citizen. His assistants worked at the plant; the others didn't. It really didn't matter. The deciding criterion was whether they knew that they differed from men and women in other parts of the country.

Beamer sat at the head of the long conference table, waiting on Tim and Gina to arrive. As each of the other members appeared, he waved to the side of the room where coffee and cold drinks and snacks were arrayed. Most of them were drinking coffee. Seeing that Beamer was still waiting on the other two, Charles Masters, the Police Chief, decided to ask his question now.

"Tyrone, you know we don't mind coming up here, but I'm wondering why? Wouldn't it have been easier to convene this meeting in town and just have you come down? Or you could have plugged in by video and we wouldn't have minded." He chuckled and added, "Hell, my old truck damn near didn't make it up the mountain."

The door opened and Tim and Gina came in and seated themselves, Gina carrying a portable connection to her switchboard in case someone in the plant wanted to ask a question or needed help that wouldn't wait.

Beamer nodded and smiled at his assistants then turned to Masters, whose ancestors had been one of the first families to settle in the area. "Well, Charlie, from now on it's a matter of security. I can be fairly certain that this place isn't bugged but I can't say the same about your office-or anywhere else in town. The feds arrive today, and I guess I don't have to tell you, the bugs they use nowadays are so tiny it takes a



damn microscope and vacuum cleaner to find them, even if they're active. And if they're not, God himself couldn't spot them."

"Who in hell would be bugging us, Tyrone? Is that what this is all about?" Eileen Tupper had a sharp voice to go with her brown, angular face, but it didn't seem to prevent her from being reelected Mayor every four years.

"The feds are on to us-and they've started an investigation," Beamer said simply. "I said they're coming today, but it's possible some are already here and I just don't know about it. That's why the precautions so soon. Besides, we may as well get in the habit. This may go on a long time."

"Investigation? What in hell—" Charlie Masters half rose from his seat before he realized he was doing it.

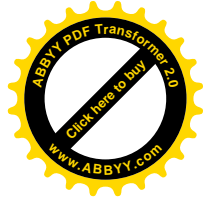
"Sit back, Charlie, and I'll explain."

The Police Chief sat back down but his body remained tense, as if coiled for a gunfight.

"Okay, here's the situation," Beamer began, making eye contact with each of the five other persons there, besides himself and his two assistants. "Some clerk in the Census department finally put a lot of the things we've discovered about ourselves together. He made a big deal over it, apparently hacking into data where government clerks aren't allowed to go, legally, and pulled up damn near everything that we know about. Then he turned it over to his supervisor. From there it went up the chain to the FBI and the National Security Agency. The President has authorized the NSA to investigate our valley, citing us as a possible security threat to the nation."

There was silence around the table as Beamer's words sank in. Fred Collins, a feed store owner who liked to play around with how religion shaped societies as a hobby, had stumbled over the rather obvious dearth of religious beliefs in the valley. From there he had gone on to discover a few other of the anomalies and had mentioned them to the mayor, which in turn got him admitted to the club. He was the first to speak, frowning as he did. "Tyrone, you know some of those people in Washington. Why in hell would they think we're a threat just because we're a bit different?"

"We have a hyper-religious President in office and the same kind of fundamentalist in charge of the National Security Agency. We're no threat to anyone, of course, but I believe we'll be touted as one, simply for political advantage if nothing else. Personally, though, I think both



the President and Murray Phillips, the NSA Director, really and truly believe our differences could be detrimental to the country. It's just another case of being an unfortunate minority.”

Eileen Tupper nodded silently, having heard tales about the old segregated south from her grandmother, who was still alive and active. And she had encountered some of the modern, more subtle methods of discrimination when she went away to college.

“But how? How on earth could fifty thousand of us threaten more than three hundred million of them?” It was a plaintive question from Eric Buffers, the Library Director. He, too, had independently discovered some of the differences and told the mayor about them, who had in turn informed Beamer.

“It's not even fifty thousand, Eric. Remember, we're in the majority here, but there are plenty of others living in the valley who aren't like us. Anyway, I imagine they think our beliefs might spread and corrupt all the good Christians who put Bobby Lee in office. There's no legal basis for it, of course, but the government can always come up with a logical-sounding reason to do whatever they care to-and in our case, find a religious minded judge to back them up.”

“You said the feds were coming. Is it just the NSA, or other agencies?” Eileen asked.

“Just the NSA for now, so far as I know; but you can bet your bottom dollar others will get involved before too long. Bobby Lee will make certain of that. An election is coming and he'll use us as an example of why he should stay in office. He'll make us out to be the bogeymen under the bed. He might even claim we're the home of the Anti-Christ; I wouldn't put it past him. The question we need to answer here today is what to do about it?”

Charlie Masters ran his hand through his thick thatch of graying hair. “Tyrone, what in hell can we do about it? I can just see myself arresting a NSA agent. About two seconds later I'd be the one behind bars. I know a little bit about those spooks, and they play hardball, believe me.”

“If we know who they are, why don't I just run an article in the paper and identify them-and demand that they tell us what they're here for?” Jeremiah Jones, a small thin man with a huge excess of energy, published the *Masterville Clarion*, a twice weekly small town newspaper, but a very good one. He had turned down offers to edit much larger papers. He had begun noticing differences in the valley people compared to the general population soon after Beamer had.



He had published one piece about fewer marriages in their population than the national average before Beamer had cautioned him about drawing attention to the valley. It was soon after this that Beamer had formed the “council” as they all called it, though so far it had been mainly a discussion group, a place to vent their knowledge among others who knew, rather than taking it public.

“Jerry, we can't do that; publishing their names would not only give away my source; it wouldn't help. They would just feed some more agents into place. We're just damn lucky we had advance warning, though I'll confess I don't know how much good that will do us. What I'm really thinking about is a pre-emptive strike.”

“How so? You're not talking about physical force, I hope,” Masters said.

“No, that won't work and we all know it. I was thinking more in terms of an internet and media campaign to present us in a positive light, along with seeing if we can co-opt some of the lawyers among us, and the one judge I'm sure of. That and getting Jerry to use his media connections to let the world know we're just ordinary people, not monsters.”

“In other words, you're saying we should go public, is that it?” Eileen asked, a worried frown on her face.

“Yes, but not just yet. Let's see what those NSA agents are up to first, but in the meantime have our preparations ready.” Beamer shrugged and spread his hands. “Hell, it might turn out that I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe no one will really give a damn if the people in some little valley don't go to church or marry that much.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Uh uh. I can guarantee you that this is the kind of human interest story that will make national headlines if it ever becomes public, especially if all our little differences are spread out for the public to see.”

“Some of them will get favorable ratings, like our city not always begging for federal dollars and keeping our schools out of the national grid and controlled locally. And paying for our own infrastructure, and so forth.” Eileen said.

Beamer and Jones both nodded a negative in unison. Beamer spoke. “Those things will get favorable publicity if it comes to that, but they can also cause resentment after the government puts a spin on the story. And the religion/marriage thing will overwhelm all other



aspects. Remember, we're in the Bible Belt. Once the story breaks, we'll draw all kinds of hellfire and damnation from preachers, and not just locally."

"And you think it will break, don't you?" Masters asked, looking directly into Tyrone Beamer's eyes.

"I do. I think we should wait before doing anything, but in the meantime, watch those agents. And we need to start bringing more of our people into the loop. Also, we need to co-opt someone real good with the net, so we can publicize our good points, and raise hell with the government for investigating us."

Fred looked around the table at the others then spoke up, directing his question to Beamer. "Tyrone, we all discovered this thing independently, except for Charlie. How in hell do we know who is one of us and who isn't? Have you discovered some sort of a marker, maybe?"

"No, but some habits of the ones we want to contact are common knowledge. Take Judge Myers. Remember the hoorah in the Capitol when he ruled against us being forced to use state Textbooks? And we all have friends that we know who share similar lifestyles. Just be discreet. Let's try to gather some names but not let them in on the fact that there is a council of sorts and that we're still trying to figure out what to do; not to mention that I'm still studying the nature of what we are."

All of the council members knew that Beamer had been investigating the phenomenon for some time, trying to discover just what was responsible for making Masterville a city akin to no other that they knew of.

"Have you discovered anything conclusive yet?" Jones asked.

"I'm getting closer, I think. Eric's library records and Eileen's old ledgers from the courthouse are helping. And speaking of, I'm not going to return them to you any time soon. There's no sense making life any easier for the NSA than we have to."

"So what have you found out so far?" Jones asked the question they all wanted the answer to.

"It's going slow, but it is beginning to look like our particular group originated back in Scotland several centuries ago. I have several genealogists and historians working on it, but none of them know what the others are up to. I'm correlating the data myself, or rather



Gina is.” He gave his assistant a fond smile. “A lot of this is still theory, but here’s what we think. It turns out that a number of reclusive clans in the highlands of Scotland thought of themselves as different from their neighbors. They never converted to Protestantism because they were never Christians to begin with, though-and I’m guessing here-they probably pretended, just to keep the peace. Then they were given a rather hard time during the reformation, which is when authorities first became aware of them. Some of them went into hiding. Some were executed, some probably pretended to convert. A goodly number migrated to America. From the east coast, they scattered in different directions, still trying to get away from abusive neighbors. One group eventually settled in this valley and managed to live in peace. There was some intermarriage outside the group, but not too much. What generally happened was that the men who couldn’t find a woman who suited them left the valley. That’s normal, of course and happens anywhere.

“What makes us different is that most of the time, when the men found themselves a woman to love, they moved back to the valley, among their own kind. During the twentieth century, women also went looking and they, too, moved back here when they could convince their husbands. Nowadays, some of us simply keep homes in the valley as vacation spots and secondary residences. However, their roots are here and their friends and family are here, and I expect most of them will retire here, or move back as soon as they can afford to.

“There’s something else that’s extremely interesting and that will probably give the spooks fits: I’ve been collecting specimens from a couple of doctors and from the hospital lab and running genetic scans on them. I’ve compared them to a base population from random samples from other areas of the country. So far, I’ve found no difference in the DNA of us and other humans.”

Charlie screwed up his face as if he had bitten down on something sour. “Isn’t that sort of unethical, Tyrone? Doing genetic scans on people without their permission?”

“Not really, Charlie. I make damn certain that I don’t know whose DNA I’m working with. The samples are given to me without labels. It’s completely blind, but I had to do something to get a base of sorts from around here, and another from outside. I thought for sure they would show some differences, but so far as DNA goes, we’re as normal, so to speak, as the preacher up the road or the crook in prison. It’s a damn puzzle.” He paused in contemplation for a moment then continued. “That’s good in a way. There are bound to be more people like us scattered around the country, but the feds won’t



have any way to identify them.”

“They identified us,” Fred said.

“That's because we're concentrated. But let me get back to the genetics of the thing for a moment. I can't find any genetic differences between us and others, but I doubt that we all derive from just those clans from Scotland; Eileen here proves that.”

“Slow down, Tyrone. Some of my ancestors were white, as should be obvious. I could have inherited the gene from them.”

“If I had found a gene. So far I haven't. I'm speculating here, I'll admit that, but I'm willing to bet that there are others like us, maybe in this country, maybe in others, especially since the immigrants from Scotland didn't all settle in one spot.”

Eric Buffer got up for more coffee. From the side of the room, he stood and sipped at it. “Haven't I read that scientists have decided that environment plays a big role in the expression of genes? Maybe that's what's happening, something in the environment here.”

Beamer shook his head. “What you say is true, but even if not expressed, the genes are still there, and I repeat; our gene pattern is as normal as anyone else's, so far as we can tell.”

Buffer wouldn't let it go so quickly. “Well, if you say so, but suppose something in the environment here causes our traits? Have you checked into that?”

“Yes, I've had my lab doing that for a couple of years now under the guise of an agricultural experiment. We haven't found anything unusual. And even if we did, it wouldn't explain the ones who are found living in other areas.”

Eileen thought that one over, then she had a question. “How is it that our ancestors-and our present day expatriates, so to speak, manage to find like-minded partners so easily? Is there something like a ... a special sense working in us?”

“If there is, it's not genetic,” Beamer said. “The government won't be able to call us mutants unless they lie about it.” He hated not to mention that there was another area he was exploring, and a second that he intended to, but he didn't intend to mention those yet for fear that the news might get out. While the courts and government departments and agencies were about the same as they had been on the surface since the so-called “War on Terror” had begun, a subtle,



and sometimes not so subtle shift in rulings and regulations were constantly eroding civil rights, using the threat of terror attacks as an excuse.

“Oh, they'll lie about it,” Eileen said with certainty, leaning back from the table. Her dark complexion and full lips plainly showed her black ancestry. “A politician will lie about anything that suits them. Listen, Tyrone, what else do you have? I've got to get back to town.”

“And I want to get back, too,” Marybeth said. “Lisa is there by herself.”

“I guess that's all for now. Sorry I didn't have better news, or something more definitive to do about it.”

The others nodded and departed, leaving Tyrone Beamer and Gina and Tim to go over their notes. He sent Gina down to talk to the doctor who had been providing specimens, with instructions to bring him gently on board. He wanted to start looking at brain scans of Masterville residents and for that he had to have someone in the medical community to collect them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

To Daniel, Masterville at first looked like any other small rural city, if quite a bit neater and cleaner. There was something missing, though, and he couldn't think what it might be. It wasn't until they had driven all the way through and were on a side street where *Ruthanne's Bed & Breakfast* was located that it finally occurred to him.

“Notice anything different?” he said to Shirley, who was driving.

“No, not really. Have you?”

“Yeah. No franchises.”

“Franchises?”

“Stores from national chains. Wal-Mart, Burger King, MacDonald's; that kind of thing.”

“Be damned, you're right. Now I wonder why that is? This place is certainly big enough for a Wal-Mart, and for damn sure it should have a Macdonald's. But maybe we just didn't see them?”

“MacDonald's always locates on the main drag through a town to



catch the tourists. There might be a Wal-Mart on this side of town farther out, but something tells me there won't be."

"But why?"

"These people are as independent as cats, apparently. They don't follow the beaten path in anything else; why should they want to take orders from a corporation boss off in New York or wherever? I'll bet every business in the valley is locally owned."

"Well, they seem modern enough from the glimpses I caught as we drove through. I suppose it's just one more puzzle about the place."

"Among many others. Hey, we're here!" The Bed and Breakfast advertised its presence with a sign almost too small to see from the street; in fact, it was the street number Daniel saw first.

"Pretty place. Well kept, too."

Daniel didn't know if it was pretty or not. Old homes, whether renovated or not, did nothing for him. However, the yard in front was well kept and aflame with flowers and bushes in full bloom. He thought some of them were azaleas, but had a vague notion that it was too late in the year for them to be blooming. One day, if he ever got married and settled down, he supposed he would have to learn about those things.

The driveway curled around to the back to where there was ample parking. A little walkway of paving stones made from irregular pieces of slate led to a small porch on the side of the place, near the back. A sign greeted visitors with a simple ENTER. What appeared to be a brass knocker turned out to be a doorbell. Daniel rang it just as another vehicle, one of the hybrids using electricity and gasoline, pulled into the parking area. An attractive woman with long brown hair blowing around her face in the light breeze got out and came toward them with rapid strides. The door opened just as she came up to them, holding out her hand.

Shirley saw the outstretched hand, but Daniel didn't. He found himself facing a woman with straight red hair and a light swath of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her smile was enchanting. For a moment the two stared at each other, neither saying a word, nor did Daniel pay any attention to the conversation going on behind him between Marybeth and Shirley. Something about the young woman was mesmerizing in a way he had never encountered. It wasn't that she was beautiful, though she was very pretty; and slim, with a nicely proportioned figure. No, there was more to it than that, though he



had no idea what it might be. And curiously, she was staring at him the same way, as though he belonged to a strange species of human she had never seen before.

Finally Daniel managed to get some words out. "Uh, we have-have reservations." He felt like a fool. Why couldn't he have said something intelligent? The woman smiled at him and held out her hand.

"Hi. I'm Lisa Berry. Welcome to *Ruthanne's* . That's Marybeth Chambers behind you talking to your wife. That is your wife, isn't it?" The inflection of her voice dropped with the question, as if expecting confirmation but not wanting to hear it. She saw that Daniel was still staring at her and dropped her gaze in confusion at a sudden jump in her pulse. She could feel her face flushing and knew he noticed it.

Daniel didn't want to admit to Lisa that he was married, even if it was spurious. He didn't know exactly why, other than that the co-host of the B&B held an immediate attraction for him-and by the way she was looking at him, he suspected the attraction was mutual. He didn't remember ever seeing a woman as an adult and feeling that way so soon-or perhaps ever. He almost denied that he and Shirley were a married couple before his training kicked in and he answered, "Uh ... yes, that's Shirley, my wife." Reluctantly, he turned away from Lisa and found the other two women examining him and Lisa curiously. And now he could feel a redness playing over his own face and neck.

"Dan, sweetheart, is something wrong?" Shirley asked, reminding him that he had a role to play.

"Umm, no. Guess I was just disoriented for a moment. Too much coffee this morning, maybe." He immediately turned back to Lisa and smiled at her.

Shirley looked from Daniel to Lisa and suspected what the problem was. It certainly wasn't the coffee, not if only two cups a couple of hours before could make him act like an adolescent on his first date. "Maybe we need to sit down for a bit. It's been a long drive."

"Sure, I'll show you to your room," Marybeth said. She, too, had caught the vibrations between Daniel and Lisa, but in her case, she thought it might be a good thing if the two were attracted to each other. She didn't believe for a moment that the agents were really married.

Daniel returned to the car for their luggage. He removed it from the trunk while the three women waited, still grouped around the entrance, with Marybeth and Lisa obviously on one side of an unseen



female barrier and Shirley on the other. They weren't even talking. Daniel hurried to them before the situation deteriorated even further. Shirley stayed close to him as they were led past a hallway going to the front parlor, which Marybeth pointed out to them, then on back to a bedroom with an old, iron-framed bedstead supporting what appeared to be a modern mattress.

"The bathroom is in here," Lisa said, her voice low, as if she were afraid to talk. She opened the door. Daniel glanced at it, saw that it had been modernized since the house was built and was satisfied. Shirley, on the other hand had questions which she directed at Marybeth rather than Lisa. They went inside the bath while Marybeth talked. Lisa and Daniel, momentarily left alone, stared frankly at each other; each knowing that something had happened when they first met, but not sure what.

Shirley came out of the bathroom first and saw them gazing at each other as if no other person in the world existed.

"Come on, Dan, let's look at the parlor. And I think you should lay down for a little while after that. All that driving has you fatigued." She was obviously irritated and wanted to get him alone as quickly as the amenities of checking in could be completed.

In the parlor, Daniel produced a credit card for Marybeth, who checked it quickly with a modern electronic box, sitting incongruously on the edge of an ancient roll-top desk. Even Shirley had to admire it.

"That is a beautiful piece of furniture, Ms. Chambers."

"Oh, please, call me Marybeth. Hardly anyone in these parts is formal. And I'm not really sure how old the desk is. It belonged to my great-grandfather. I don't know where he got it from."

"Haven't you had it appraised?"

"Marybeth looked perplexed. "What on earth for? We're not interested in selling it."

"Do you two own this place jointly?" Shirley continued with the questions, seemingly innocuous. Daniel knew that they weren't.

"Oh, yes. We bought it not too long ago from Fred Collins when we decided to start a business of our own." Marybeth was glad now that Tyrone had insisted that an actual sale take place and be recorded. When they no longer needed the cover, the title would be transferred back to him if he wanted it.



“Do you have any other guests right now?”

“Well, no. We're just starting out, you know. It takes a while to build up a clientele.”

“Maybe you need to advertise a bit more. We could hardly see your sign from the street.”

“Yes, perhaps we do. Thanks for mentioning it.”

Daniel listened to the exchange, admiring Shirley's technique. Nothing she asked was out of line but she had already gathered enough information to make him suspicious.

“Well, sweetheart, are you ready to rest a bit now before we look for a place for dinner?”

Daniel got up from the chair he had been testing and stretched in what he hoped was a natural way. “Sounds good.”

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Inside the bedroom, with the door closed, Daniel sat on the bed. It was solid and noiseless when he removed his shoes and stretched out on it, but soft enough nonetheless. Shirley came over and sat on the edge of it. She leaned down and whispered in his ear, “I think this may be a setup. Be careful what you say. And for God's sake, keep your eyes off that redheaded vixen and act like we're married!”

Daniel nodded. “Give me an hour here. I really am tired.”

“Me, too. Move over.”

Soon, they both dozed off, not hearing Marybeth and Lisa climb the stairs up to the second-floor bedrooms where they had been sleeping. Marybeth led the way into the one she had been using. As soon as she had the door closed, she grabbed Lisa and held her by the shoulders. “Sweetie, what on earth was that reaction between you and Mr. Stenning? I could practically see the sparks jumping back and forth between you; and what's worse. I think his so-called wife could, too.”

“You don't think they're married?” Lisa asked hopefully.

“Of course not. If you hadn't been blind-sided, you could have picked it up as easily as me. Now come on, give. What happened?”

“I don't know,” Lisa said in a voice like a small girl being asked a



question by an adult which she didn't want to answer. "It was like all of a sudden I had known him forever and at the same time like something bright and ... and terrific was taking place. I've never had that sensation before. I don't know what it was."

Marybeth pulled Lisa into her arms and hugged her. "Well, I do. You've met a man that resonates with you. Good God, what a turn of events!" She turned Lisa loose and pursed her lips. A fine vertical line appeared between her eyebrows. "I wonder—"

"Wonder what?"

"Could he possibly be one of us?"

"How could a NSA agent be like us? They're spies and dishonest and kill people and..."

"Don't believe all the stuff you find in books and movies. Most of them are probably as honest as the average person. And remember, there is at least one who is like us, or who sympathizes with us, anyway."

"Oh yes. How did that happen? No one has told me."

"Tyrone knew him from some business dealings of some sort before he went with the agency. They discovered that they think alike and Tyrone asked him to try getting hired. It worked, obviously. Tyrone is positively a genius for thinking so far ahead. It's like he just knew the NSA would eventually be investigating us."

Lisa shivered. "It sounds dangerous to me. What if he's discovered?"

"Try not to think about it. And especially try not to say anything downstairs that might be revealing. They may have already dropped some listening devices around."

"I'll be careful. I wonder where Daniel is from, originally?"

Marybeth shook her head. "So it's Daniel already, huh? Are you already so enamored that you wouldn't want to play with me any more?"

"No. In fact I'm suddenly feeling very sexy right now." She began unbuttoning her blouse.

Marybeth reached to help her, unwilling to wait to get her hands on Lisa's breasts. "We'll need to be quiet."



"I'll try," Lisa said as her blouse dropped to the floor, followed shortly by her bra and the rest of her clothes.

CHAPTER NINE

Once Shirley woke up and refreshed herself, she dropped two rice grain-sized devices in the corner of the room where a vacuum cleaner wasn't likely to pick them up, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. She made certain that they weren't visible to the casual eye, then slipped two more into the side pocket of her jacket to drop in other places. Anything they heard would be picked up by a relay attached to their car and from there sent by satellite back to headquarters.

Daniel came out of the bathroom and took his jean jacket off a hanger. He opened his suitcase and took out the little palm-sized automatic, checked the clip and load and slipped it into a side pocket. It wasn't much of a defensive weapon but it was the best he could do and still keep it concealed. The weather was turning warmer and tourists wearing suit jackets would likely be out of place.

Shirley had no such problem. Her larger caliber weapon fitted into a special quick-draw pocket of her purse. As she checked her weapon, she asked, "How did the chair downstairs sit. Okay?" The question was a cover for asking if he had planted a bug in it while he had the opportunity.

Daniel started to tell her that he had been so pixilated that he had completely forgotten, but the honesty that got him in trouble at times made him admit that he hadn't. "I'm not sure. I'll try it again later."

Shirley shook her head in exasperation. "Well, how about something to eat now? You can try again later."

"Suits. I'm ready if you are."

The parlor was empty when they stepped in to tell their hosts that they were leaving for a while. Puzzled, they left to explore on their own, without advice, although Daniel did drop into the chair he had sat in before and placed one of the tiny devices behind a fold in the seat cushion where he didn't think it would be found. Whether the things would help them or not was debatable, but so long as they were available, it wouldn't hurt to use them.

As soon as they were in the car, with Daniel behind the wheel, Shirley took out her encrypted cell phone and got in contact with Crafton. She



waited until she was certain that he was using the right phone in his office, then began. "Mandel, I'm a little suspicious. It's possible that we've already been made, or more likely, that they knew we were coming. Could there be a leak anywhere at the office?"

His voice was loud enough so that Daniel could hear his answer. "Goddamn it, no! How could there be?"

"Don't shout, I'm just giving you a heads up. You can check around or not; suit yourself." She hung up before he could say anything else, exasperated at his vehement denial.

"You really think we might have been tagged before we even got here?"

Shirley shrugged and turned off the phone. "I don't know; I'm just suspicious, that's all. And you should be, too. I think that redheaded little sexpot has you hypnotized. Hell, you didn't even fix the chair the first time you had a chance. If the parlor hadn't been empty, we wouldn't have been able to record anywhere but in our own room, if and when they come into it."

"They'll be cleaning after tonight. They'll come in then. Besides, we can plant some more this evening while watching the news."

Shirley let the matter drop, but she didn't intend to forget it. She wasn't sure whether she was irritated with Daniel because of an incipient jealousy over his reaction to Lisa, or whether it was from the lack of professionalism he had displayed. In either case, she decided that she would keep a close watch on every single aspect of their lives here. She hadn't gotten herself in line for another promotion by overlooking the small things.

* * * *

Crafton shut off the encrypted phone and placed it back in its cradle. Could it possibly be? If there was a leak, where could it have come from? He thought a moment, then touched a button on the console covering half his desk.

"Yes sir?" His administrative assistant answered.

"I want to see Mullins from internal affairs. Don't call him; walk over to his office and set up a meeting ASAP."

"Yes, sir. I'll do it right away."

Next, he picked up the reports just in from the two other pairs of



agents he had sent into Masterville, neither of whom knew of the other. He cursed. Both teams had to stay at motels way back on the other side of the pass leading into the valley, entailing a long drive back and forth, cutting into investigation time. The two small, locally owned motels were booked solid for months in advance. What was the matter with those people, anyway? What did they have against visitors? If the other two places were booked up so far into the future, it stood to reason that some enterprising entrepreneur should have opened a Holiday Inn or Best Western or some such in the valley. One more thing to add to the puzzle. Personally, he was beginning to believe the inhabitants of the city were disguised aliens. Well, not really, but they were a damned strange breed of human!

One of the teams had noted the lack of franchise establishments, and reported that one of them would drop by a real estate agency and inquire about property for sale which might be used for a MacDonald's. That ought to get some sort of answer. The other pair said they had gotten into Masterville, eaten supper at an inconspicuous restaurant which served superb food. No untoward conversation among the patrons had been overheard from their lapel mikes when they got back to their room and had the recordings computer-sorted and enhanced. The talk was mostly about kids, gossip about various sexual pairings and mild debates over home schooling versus the local elementary school and, as anywhere in the world, the weather. All perfectly normal except that two of the three conversations concerning purported sexual liaisons had been about whether their kids were ready for sex yet. There hadn't seemed to be any approbation to the talk, just discussion.

"A Goddamned strange place," Crafton muttered to himself. Did he have enough data yet to take to Phillips? He decided he didn't. Besides, he wanted Internal Affairs to run a detailed security check on every person who had come in contact with Daniel Stenning and Shirley Rostervik in the week prior to, and the days after, they had been selected for the investigation.

A light blinked on his console, almost buried among the assorted icons. A fighter pilot might have envied the electronic display, were it in an aircraft. NSA never scrimped on gadgets and electronics. "Mister Mullins is here," his assistant announced.

"Send him in, and shut off any recordings."

Corey Mullins was a chubby, balding man with dead-looking eyes that would have gone well in a funeral home. He also possessed not one iota of humor in his personality.



Before Mullins sat down, he took a gadget from his coat pocket and waved it around the room despite Crafton's assertion that his office was clean. It was swept twice a day.

“All right, what do you have for me?” Mullins asked, lips barely moving.

“There's a chance we've got a leaker in the building. I need security checks ran again on Daniel Stenning, Shirley Rostervik and anyone in this office who has been in contact with them from two weeks ago up until yesterday. Also, I want all of their histories and personalities compared to this profile.” He handed Mullins a list of the known aberrations attributed to the inhabitants of Masterville Valley.

Mullins glanced at the list without curiosity and nodded assent. “That all?”

“Isn't that enough?”

The IA officer didn't answer directly. “I'll get back to you.”

“Make it quick. I may have a team in jeopardy. Or a ringer.”

“How about the others?”

“No, they had a different briefing officer. Start with them, then if nothing turns up I'll give you the other names.”

Mullins departed without answering that comment, either, since it was “need-to-know” information, but Crafton knew he would do a thorough job. He always did. Once Mullins was gone, he began worrying about Phillips’ reaction should a mole or rouge agent be discovered working for him. How would it affect his chances for moving up another notch? Would catching a mole hurt or help him? He spent the next half hour turning the questions over in his mind without reaching any useful conclusions, except that he would accept Phillips’ invitation to attend church services the next time he asked. Crafton wasn't particularly religious, but he knew that pretending to be could only help him, not hurt, so long as Phillips and Bobby Lee were in office.

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The menu at *Roy's High Noon Cafe* was limited but very good. Daniel's porterhouse steak was cooked to perfection and the fries were just the way he liked them, not hard but not limp and grease-soaked, either. After eating, they drove back through the downtown section, looking for likely shops and businesses to explore.



“This place looks like something from out of the fifties or sixties I've seen pictures of,” Daniel remarked. “No big malls, no chain stores, lots of people on the streets-and the streets are clean.”

“I'll agree; it does look like a place from out of the past. If it were designed that way to attract tourists, I could understand it, but it's not. Notice how few vehicles have out of state license plates?”

“Yeah, I caught that. Let's go a couple of streets over on each side of the main drag and see what gives.”

Daniel turned at the first main cross street, drove two blocks and turned back the way they had come. On the left side of the street small shops predominated, interspersed here and there by what appeared to be residences. On the other side, a park opened up. From what they could see, it appeared to be in use by a fair number of people, but not that many vehicles were in the parking areas. Had the strollers walked from their homes? He spotted a barber shop, sporting the age-old striped pole. A few spots down was a bar and grill, *Tiffany's Mistake*. He pointed it out to Shirley.

“I like that name. In fact, in the morning you can drop me along here. I need a haircut anyway and a bar is always a good place to pick up on what the locals are talking about. The park looks interesting, too. I think I'll spend some time in it.”

“Good plan. I'll get my hair done, too, if I can get an appointment, then do some shopping along the main drag. Pick out a place to meet, say about mid-afternoon.”

Daniel was driving slowly, then spotted just what he wanted; a used bookstore. He pointed. “There. *Pageturner's Bookstore*. By golly, if nothing else, these people are innovative when it comes to naming their establishments.”

“That they are. Ready to head back?”

“Yup. I'm looking forward to the news and sleeping in that old bed. It sure did feel comfortable.”

Shirley wondered if Daniel was thinking that they would be sleeping together in the bed. From the dreamy look on his face, it was more likely his red headed friend he was thinking of. She couldn't know for sure, but she was exactly right. Daniel's thoughts had already turned back to the B&B and Lisa and how he could engage her in a conversation away from Shirley's scrutiny. He thought of one way



that might work, but it would depend entirely on how interested Lisa was in him and whether the opportunity to set it up might arise before bedtime.

* * * *

Marybeth's eyes blinked open from where she had dozed off after she and Lisa had completed their tryst. She remembered how hard it had been to keep their voices down and wondered whether it really mattered or not. Probably the agents didn't care a whit about what they did in their bedrooms. No, she would bet that one of them, at least, cared: Daniel Stenning. Suddenly realizing she was in bed by herself she sat up and looked around.

Lisa was standing in the window seat, already dressed, and had the curtains pulled back. Marybeth could see her in profile, a pensive expression on her face as she stared out past the well-kept yard into the street.

“What's interesting, Lisa?”

“I just saw them leave. I wonder if they heard us?”

“I doubt it, but even if they did, it would have been hard to tell what we were doing. Shucks, we could have been moving furniture for all they know.”

Lisa turned, and elfish smile crossing her face. “I think we did move the bed. Or maybe that was just the earth moving.”

Marybeth broke into laughter. She patted the edge of the bed and Lisa walked over and sat down, not quite able to meet Marybeth's gaze. Marybeth patted her thigh. “Are you worried about what Mr. Stenning would think if he knew we had a relationship?”

“I don't know. I don't know what I feel about him. Damn it, we just met for a few minutes!”

“Well, we got them to come here for a purpose. Why don't we try to separate the two of them and let you meet your boyfriend by yourself?”

“He's not my boyfriend!”

“Hah. You two were looking at each other like moonstruck calves. Tell you what, if they spend any time in the parlor this evening, I'll just ask casually what their plans are. If either of them says anything that indicates an opportunity where you could see him alone, do you



want to?”

“Yes,” Lisa said quickly, then blushed.

“Fine. Just remember who he works for. Now how ‘bout you running down and starting some snacks while I get dressed?”

“I thought we were just a breakfast place.”

“We are, but why not put on the dog? It might loosen them up. I'll run out for some wine and other ethanolic goodies while you're concocting. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Good. Kiss?”

Lisa complied, unable to keep her hands from straying to Marybeth's still bare breasts as she did. A moment later she hurried down the stairs, wondering what Daniel might like for snack food.

CHAPTER TEN

As Daniel and Shirley came through the unlocked side door, he remarked, “They don't seem overly concerned about burglars or breaking and entering, do they?”

“How so?”

“There's not even a lock on this door, other than the doorknob latch. A professional could be inside in two seconds flat.”

Shirley was about to comment when she heard Lisa, the red headed female of the two, call out and wave to them from the parlor entrance.

“Hi! We're going to have some snacks this evening about six or so, if you'd like to join us.”

Shirley hesitated, but Daniel jumped on it. “Sure, we'd be glad to. That's nice of you.”

“No problem. We want to make sure you enjoy your stay. Maybe you'll say good things about us to your friends and they'll want to stay here, too.”

Daniel gave her a casual wave and they went on to their room. Shirley



immediately pulled out their shared electronic sweeper and moved around the room. "Nothing here but ours. And I'll just bet they want our friends to visit."

"Why not give them the benefit of the doubt unless we know? After all, there are two other motels run by locals, and they said they're just starting out. An evening snack for a Bed & Breakfast is good advertising."

"You're too trusting, Daniel."

"Maybe. I'd rather be trusting than paranoid, though. Don't worry; I've never let anyone scam me while I was on an Op yet."

That was true enough, Shirley remembered. Daniel had an uncanny reputation for catching on to people's motives and reservations quickly. If it weren't for Crafton not liking him, she knew that he would already have advanced to a supervisory position. It didn't appear to bother him, though. He also had a reputation for carrying out Ops just as he was ordered to, though which ones he had been on would never be made available to anyone else, just as hers wouldn't.

Daniel hung his jacket up and removed the little automatic from the side pocket. He held it a moment in his hand, thought about leaving it in the room, then shoved it into the holster at the small of his back and changed shirts to get one he could wear stylishly outside and cover the evidence. He doubted seriously that either of the women was dangerous to them, but he had been well and truly trained; he always went armed in the field, no matter what.

Shirley flicked on the television monitor, hung like a picture across the room from twin lounge chairs. It was five thirty, just in time for national news.

Daniel sat down and leaned the backrest into the reclining position while he watched. The lead story was about a Catholic Archbishop pleading for world peace even as he insinuated that Christianity was the only true religion. He tuned the words out, having heard them all his life, to no effect that he could see. The President was on briefly, promising to step up efforts to stem illegal immigration, then making an announcement that he intended to ask congress to give the military more leeway to intervene domestically when public welfare and suburban peacefulness were threatened. The anchor commented that congress would probably be receptive to the idea.

Daniel's mouth tightened with disapproval. Robert E. Smith had been elected President on his campaign promises to step up activities



against terrorists, combat the still rising influence of radical Islamic Theology and bring Christian values back into government. He had succeeded in the latter all too well, Daniel thought. The nation was moving ever closer to becoming a theocratic state in being, if not in name. The more the Moslem fanatics railed against the rest of the world for controlling so much of the wealth and technology, the more smug and self-righteous the Christian religions became, like positive feedback running out of control.

Another story followed; an odd one for national broadcasting. It amounted to blatant propaganda, comparing a peaceful, law-abiding and religiously churchgoing little city's crime rate with that of another where drugs, violence and poorly performing schools were blamed on a dearth of churches in the community.

That one even brought a comment from Shirley, who usually kept her own counsel about the rightward shift taking place in the nation's politics.

"I'd bet my pension that Bobby Lee is behind that one. He's going to go too far one time and it will backfire on him."

Daniel raised his eyebrows at her. "You don't like religion?"

"I didn't say that. I'm religious; I just don't particularly care for it to be shouted from the rooftops by a stand-in. If the President wants to preach at us, he should have the guts to do it himself."

"He does."

"Not overtly. So far, anyway. Well, we elected him; we're stuck with him until next time, at least. These things run in cycles. Not too many years ago, we thought the government was too liberal. This is just a reaction. Give it a few more years and it will swing back the other way."

Daniel wasn't so sure, but he declined to comment. Presently he glanced at his watch. "Well, shall we go see what kind of snacks our hostesses have laid out for us?"

"May as well."

* * * *

Even though he had eaten in mid-afternoon, Daniel found his mouth watering at the smells of cheese, crackers, summer sausage and a shrimp dip. Lisa and Marybeth both got up from the chairs they had been sitting in and smiled a welcome.



“Come on in,” Marybeth said. “We were just getting ready to start. And don't be bashful; there's plenty. There's wine, or coffee or tea, whichever you like.”

“My, how can you make a profit feeding us like this?” Shirley said, nevertheless beginning to fill her plate.

“We couldn't, if we did it every day, but since y'all are staying a week, we though we'd make your first evening enjoyable. Besides, we usually snack in the evening rather than cook.”

“Good idea. I should try that instead of eating big meals at night then having to diet.” Shirley's figure belied that comment, and in fact, there was no truth to it. “May I try the wine?”

“Certainly. That's what it's here for. You, too, Mr. Stenning.”

“Daniel. I hate formality.” That was the truth. He got up to pour for them all and was amazed to see a tremor in his hand as he filled Lisa's glass.

“Thank you,” Lisa told him, smiling, though Daniel wasn't looking at her face. He noticed that her hand that was holding the wine glass was shaking slightly, just as his was.

“Sure.” He could think of no other conversational gambit.

“Come on and sit down,” Lisa urged, wanting to find a chair for herself. She felt a distinct weakness in her knees, as if the joints there had suddenly lost all the calcium from the bones.

Daniel found the cheese, and a type of cracker he wasn't familiar with, were both delicious. He said so.

“The crackers are from the local bakery. Lots of people here prefer them over Ritz or Saltines or the like.”

“I can see why.” Damn, was everything here made locally? Daniel made a note to wander into a couple of grocery stores, or a supermarket if he could find one, sometime in the next day or two.

“Where did you eat today?” Marybeth asked, wanting to get the conversation started in another direction.

“Roy's High Noon Cafe. It was very good.”



“I can suggest a few more places, if you like.”

Shirley answered. “Well, actually, we want to sort of wander around and get a feel for the city. We’re going to be doing a story about folklore associated with some cities of less than 50,000 population later this year. It’s for an on-line travel magazine called *Storied Stops*. Have you heard of it?” She knew they wouldn’t have, since Terrell had just beginning to put together a web site for the magazine to help complete their cover when they left Washington.

“Um, no I guess not, but then neither of us has traveled that much. Is there anything in particular we could help you with?”

“Well, possibly. Daniel wants to get a haircut. He spotted a barber shop while we were out today, but I could use a recommendation for a trim and shampoo.”

“Why don’t you try Martha’s place? It’s the one Lisa and I both use.”

“Fine. What’s the name of the place?”

Marybeth’s laugh was like the tinkling of a piano. “*Martha’s Place* is its name. It’s on the street running parallel to the park, on the west side of Main Street.

“Is that the park I saw across from-what was it?-*The CandyCane Barber shop*?”

“That’s the place,” Lisa interjected. “The park is called Spring Rock Park; don’t ask me why. It’s not an official name; it’s just what we call it.”

“Maybe the librarian would know. You do have a library here, don’t you?” Shirley said.

“Oh yes, it’s on Secondary Street, three blocks from Main and parallel to it, most of the way back to the edge of town toward the pass.”

Shirley had to ask. “*Secondary Street*, you said? And *three* blocks over?”

“Some of our ancestors had a quirky sense of humor. You’ll notice things like that all over town.”

“It sounds as if we may have found another good candidate for the article, doesn’t it, sweetheart?” Shirley said, noticing that Daniel wasn’t saying much and was constantly glancing in Lisa’s direction.



“Oh. Sure does. Is there a place in the park that gives any kind of history? If there is, I may take a look after my haircut.”

Lisa answered quickly. “There's a little renovated log cabin right in the center of the park, by the pond. It doesn't have much there, but there are some notes in a binder you might look through.”

“I'll do that,” Daniel said, tilting his wine glass to empty it and trying to prevent anyone from seeing how pleased he was at getting a meeting set up with Lisa-if indeed he had. Well, he had opened the door as wide as he could; now it was up to her to come in if she wanted to.

*** * * ***

Crafton was working late. His assistant was already gone when he heard a knock on the door of his office. Before he could react, Corey Mullins barged in. He walked over to his desk and dropped a folder on it. “Here's your data. Notice the designation. It's for your eyes only. Use the shredder when you're finished, and if you have to talk to Mister Phillips about it, have the facts memorized. I'll leave a man here to observe the disposal. Call him in when you're ready.”

With that, Mullins departed, his part in the drama completed, but Crafton stayed very late.

At last he decided that he had no choice; he would have to inform the director, no matter what time it was. Daniel Stenning's profile matched the oddities found in the people of Masterville Valley in every case where they could be verified. That wasn't necessarily proof that he was one of them, but there was far too much of a match to put any further trust in him, especially now that the first salvo against the valley had been broadcast, even if it hadn't mentioned the place by name. Even worse, it appeared as if Mark Terrell, one of his best men, one who had been rapidly promoted into his present position, might possibly be part of whatever the hell was going on in that blasted valley. He would have to report that, too. He wished he could simply take care of the business himself, but Phillips would feed him through his own shredder if he tried anything like that. Reluctantly, he picked up the encryption phone and dialed the Director's number.

“This better be Goddamned good,” were the first words he heard.

“Yes, sir, it is. I mean it's bad, but it's good that I caught it-uh, I thought I had better call you now rather than later.” Crafton didn't have to say who he was; the phone took care of that with its voice recognition program, even though he was stammering.



“All right, Goddamn it, spit it out.”

Crafton began his tale. He was interrupted several times and made to go back over details. The more he talked, the angrier Phillips sounded. At last, Phillips cut him off, deciding that he had all the pertinent information.

“All right, give me a few minutes to decide what to do about this clusterfuck. Stay right where you are and feed every thing relating to this to the shredder. If there's anything in computers, make damn certain it's permanently deleted. Who was the IA officer? Mullins? Get him back in there pronto. I'll talk to him when I call back.”

Crafton put in a call for Mullins, then poured himself another cup of coffee that he didn't want. He drank half of it, then emptied the rest into the sink and walked over to a tall narrow, mahogany-colored cabinet and touched his forefinger to the lock pad. It clicked open. He reached in, brought out a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels and poured a double shot into a Styrofoam cup. He closed the cabinet and gulped down the liquor as quickly as he could stand it. It created a fire in his gullet and stomach at first, then tapered off to a warmth that spread to his brain. He sat down heavily at his desk, took out a package of breath mints and chewed several of them at once. He had just swallowed the residue when Mullins walked into the office without bothering to knock.

“You got here awfully quick,” Crafton said.

“I expected to be called back. Have you shredded yet?”

“No, I was waiting on-”

“Never mind. Are you finished?”

“Yes.”

Mullins proceeded to dispose of the contents of the folder he had brought there only a few hours earlier.”

“Mister Phillips wants any references to the contents that might be on computers deleted, too.”

“Done already.” Mullins sat down, crossed his arms and waited.

Crafton wished he had another drink but was glad he hadn't tried for one; he would have been caught in the act; though in truth, he



wouldn't bet the farm that Mullins didn't know of his hidden bottle anyway. The man had invisible antennas out everywhere.

After an eternity of silent waiting which amounted to only ten minutes by his watch, the secure phone rang. Crafton jerked, as if from a sudden bite from an insect. He picked up the phone.

“Crafton-” He got no farther before Phillips began talking.

“All right, here's what's to be done. Terrell is going to be taken into custody. Start thinking of a replacement. Send word to one of your secondary teams, the best one, and have Stenning taken down. Make it look like an accident, you hear? We're not ready for publicity yet, and that Godless place has so few homicides that a direct termination might cause headlines.”

“Yes, sir. What about his partner?”

“She's clean. Once Stenning is out of the way you can pull her back here, have her pretend to be going to his funeral. We'll provide the props; he doesn't have any living family that we've been able to trace. Big mistake, Mandel. Every field agent should have family. It keeps them in line.”

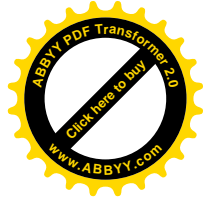
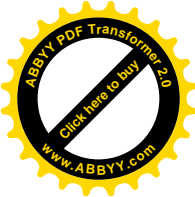
“I'm sorry, I-”

“Not your fault, but someone in personnel is going to lose their skin over both those ringers.”

“Yes, sir. Is that all?”

“No. Start briefing some more agents on the situation there, but hold them in reserve. I've got to talk to the President about this. Now let me speak to Mullins.”

Mullins had already stood up, knowing he would be called on. He held the phone to his ear for a few moments, saying nothing more than “Yeah” or “Uh huh.” Crafton wondered how he got away with being so disrespectful to the director, not knowing that he not only attended the same church as Phillips, but that he knew enough dirty details about almost everyone in the agency to make his job secure; and since he had no desire to advance further up the bureaucratic ladder, no one above him worried. Crafton knew the man could never retire, though. He knew too much. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if one day he turned up missing and his body was found at the bottom of a cliff or in a river. He was getting old. His reflections were broken up by Mullins hanging up the phone and leaving, not even saying good-



by. He knew that Terrell had only a couple more hours of freedom- and perhaps of life. And David Stenning's life was already forfeit; only the execution remained.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The bed in their room was queen-sized, but it seemed much smaller with Shirley under the covers next to him. She had come out of the bathroom wearing only a thin yellow nightie, transparent enough that the pair of matching panties she wore beneath it were plainly visible. The sight of her alluring body disconcerted him momentarily, especially when she climbed into bed next to him and her negligee was momentarily stretched across her breasts, revealing how firm and well-shaped they were. He felt himself beginning to get an erection and hurriedly turned his thoughts to Lisa, of how fresh and pretty she looked, how much he liked her bashful, yet assertive attitude, as if she were purposefully overcoming a part of her personality in order to relate to him. It worked, barely.

Shirley clicked the bedside light off, leaving only a bit of moonlight showing through the curtains and the dim glow of a nightlight for illumination. Daniel felt the shifting of the bed as she settled her body into a comfortable position. He hoped she wouldn't want to talk, and for a few moments, she didn't. Then she moved again and he felt her touch his shoulder.

"Dan?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Is there something about me that you don't like?"

Careful! "No, of course not. I do like you and I think we're working well together."

"Hmm. Well, I like you, too. In fact, when we've been here a couple of days, I think we should ... maybe act more like we're married?"

"You could be right," Daniel temporized, thinking that if he hadn't run into Lisa, the prospect would be more enticing.

"Such enthusiasm."

"Sorry, When I'm on an Op, my hormones are more attuned to action than anything else."



“It seems to me that they're also attuned to red heads. I could be wrong, though.”

Daniel couldn't make himself answer directly, but he was a quick thinker. “If we don't find anything threatening in the next few days, my attitude may change.” And it would, he thought. If he found out that Lisa's feelings were reciprocated, his attitude would indeed change, but not in the direction Shirley's might like. He knew he was going to have to find some way to get Lisa off to herself soon, especially if the meeting in the park he thought they had arranged didn't work out. He was already becoming frustrated and uncomfortable in his role as a “married” man, and Lisa was the direct cause of it.

“Well, a woman can hope. I think you're a good man, Dan. Just be careful here. Okay?”

“I will, Shirley.”

“Okay. Good night, then.”

“Night,” Daniel replied, but he was a long time going to sleep, even after Shirley's breathing leveled out into a relaxed tempo, indicating that she was at rest.

*** * * ***

Daniel gave Shirley a casual wave as she drove off, leaving him in front of the oddly named *CandyCane Barbershop* . It had turned cool overnight and he was again wearing his jacket with a matching pair of faded jeans and western boots.

Inside, the facade resembled any other barbershop he had ever been in, though perhaps a bit neater than some, and posted prices a shade higher than he would have expected in a semi-rural area. There were three chairs, two serviced by middle-aged men and one by a relatively young woman. One of the male barbers was just finishing with a customer, and no one else was waiting. Daniel stood, waiting until the chair was vacant and the barber had been paid before seating himself.

The barber draped a candy cane colored protective covering over him and tightened it around his neck.

“Don't remember seeing you around before. You new in town?” He said.

Good. A talkative barber. “My wife and I just got here yesterday. We're staying at *Ruthanne's Bed and Breakfast*. ”



“Didn't know they were opened yet. Good; glad to see they're already getting customers. How do you want it cut?”

“Just a trim. I like your name for the shop. The old barber poles are disappearing lots of places.”

“Well, I reckon this ‘un will stay the same. If you like more than a haircut, there's a couple other places; takes men and women. They do shampoos, manicures and the like.”

“You don't serve women here?”

“Oh, sure; just don't get as many as they do. Suzanne there does the ladies as they come in. Mostly they're just looking for a cut; the others do the curling and suchlike.” The barber ran his clippers around Daniel's ears, then took up his comb and scissors and began snipping, not getting in the least bit of a hurry. “Y'all planning on staying around or just passing through on vacation?”

“Hard to say. We're actually working on a magazine assignment, looking for cities about this size with interesting folklore.”

The snipping ceased for a moment then resumed. “Folklore? You mean like old timely tales?”

“That's it, more or less. Either written or spoken. Say, would you happen to know of any old timers that might be willing to talk to us?”

“Could be. I'd have to ask some of the oldsters, but generally, folks around here ain't looking for publicity. Mostly, they're pretty well satisfied and not much interested in getting involved with outsiders. Can't say I blame ‘em, tales we hear about the gov'ment trying to run schools and banks and elections and the like right down to the finest detail. Mostly it seems they wind up making things worse, you ask me.”

“Can't say I disagree with you there. I like to see my tax money handled locally instead of being funneled through Washington.”

“That's what the City Council tries to do. ‘Course it ain't always possible. There's laws as got to be followed, like for banks and such, but mostly we manage to stay clean of those boys from Washington and Little Rock.”

“Good for you. On the other hand, I bet you miss out of a lot of grants, matching money and that sort of thing, don't you?”



“I wouldn't know. You'd have to talk to the Mayor or some of th' City Council about that.” He twirled the chair around for Daniel to look at the results. “How's that?”

“Fine. My name's Daniel Stenning, by the way.”

“I'm Morris Whatley. Drop back by tomorrow. Can't promise, but I'll see what I can do about finding you some stories.”

Daniel paid, including a generous tip. There was still no one waiting, so he asked, “Say, that park looks interesting. Are there any jogging trails in it?”

“Sure. Lots of folks use them in the evening. Matter of fact, folks use the park a lot; there's benches scattered through it for folks to rest on, and eat lunch in good weather. You might find some of the old folks down by the pond as would talk to you, if you can get them away from their dominoes and checkerboards and chess games long enough.”

“Thanks. I'll have a look. This seems like an interesting place. We may wind up staying a while.”

He hesitated outside the door of the barber shop, debating with himself whether to try the bar first or the park. He checked his watch; it was way too early to start drinking, even if the bar was open. He ambled up the block toward the next crossing. Behind him, a man who had entered the shop just as he was leaving hurried back out. He got into a SUV which had been parked nearby.

Daniel waited for the light, then started across, not paying much attention to traffic. He had barely gotten past the middle of the street when some sixth sense, or perhaps his acute hearing picked up the sound of a car suddenly accelerating at a furious pace. He looked to the right and saw a SUV of a nondescript green color barreling around a slower vehicle and speeding down the lane toward him.

His first thought was that the big car shouldn't have been able to accelerate that fast; his second was an instant decision to turn and run back the way he had come, trusting that any traffic coming from that direction would be slower and miss him. The next few seconds were a kaleidoscopic cacophony of screeching brakes, slewing vehicles and banging of fenders and bumpers against each other as he dodged oncoming traffic, once almost jumping out of the way of one and getting run over by another. By the time the noise ceased, except for curses of vexed drivers and excited exclamations from bystanders, the SUV was long gone. He hadn't had either time or thought to get a



license plate number and doubted it would have done any good if he had; he recognized the assassination technique and knew the numbers on the plate would be spurious. He stood on the curb now, shaking from an adrenaline overload after his brush with death.

“Are you okay, mister?” Someone asked.

“I saw the whole thing,” another voice cut in. “That damn big sumbitch never even slowed down! It was almost like it was trying to deliberately run this feller down!”

There was no ‘almost’ to it, so far as Daniel was concerned. Someone had tried to kill him, and since he didn’t think he had any enemies, nor that terrorists would single a lone agent out for killing, even if they knew he was one, that left only a government agency. Or a planned elimination by the powers that controlled Masterville, if there was such an agency.

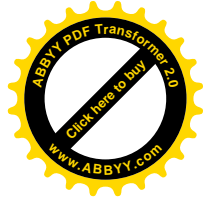
“Mister, could I get your name for my insurance company?” One of the drivers of a damaged pickup asked.

The man appeared to be a farmer of some sort. Daniel wrote his name down for the man after briefly wondering whether to give a false identity, then decided that it didn’t matter; whoever was behind the SUV attack would know his name and where he was staying already. He wrote it down for the man, then gave it again to the local trooper who arrived on the scene shortly thereafter. He describing the event briefly, and suggested that the SUV had just been in a hurry for some reason, rather than trying to run him down. He detached himself from the small crowd as quickly as possible, then headed for the bar. If it was open, he wanted a drink; early or not.

* * * *

Daniel made his retreat back down the street appear as casual as he could, using techniques from his training to try discovering whether he was being followed or not. So far as he could tell, he wasn’t. He pushed through the double-door entrance of *Tiffany’s Mistake* and paused just beyond to let his vision adjust to the reduced light.

There were booths, a piano bar and a number of tables with comfortable, well-padded chairs on rollers. Seeing that there was a waitress present, he took one of two booths where he could see out onto the street through a small window. The waitress, who looked young enough to be a college student, and probably was, took his order, Jack Daniel’s on ice. She brought it back, saw that he wasn’t interested in conversation and returned to the bar. Daniel looked around; there were only two other patrons inside this early and



neither of them was nearby. He took out his phone, noticing that his hands still had a tremor to them. Seconds later, he was talking softly to Shirley.

“Someone tried to kill you? Are you sure?” Shirley's voice sounded flabbergasted, even over the phone.

“Just about certain.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Call it in to Crafton, then go on with the itinerary we planned. We'll meet at the place we agreed on, same time.”

“You're sure? You don't think we ought to stick together now?”

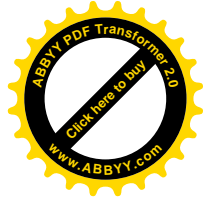
“Why give someone two targets together? No, let's stay separate like we planned. I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Watch your back.”

“All right, but be careful. And thanks for the warning.”

Daniel put his phone back in his pocket and began sipping his bourbon, trying to analyze the situation. It didn't make sense that an individual, or a cabal of some sort holding power in Masterville, would try killing him; not if they knew he was a NSA agent. It would only bring more agents and heat into the city. And if they didn't know, why would they be after him? That left the federal agencies. Surely the FBI had no reason to eliminate him, and that being the case, he could think of only two other possibilities: the CIA, and his own department, the National Security Agency. He hated to believe that his own cohorts would try killing him for no apparent reason, and the CIA supposedly wasn't allowed to operate inside the boundaries of the country. He mulled all this over in his mind but came to no conclusions other than that he was damn well going to keep his eyes wide open for the rest of his stay here, however long that might be. He dropped a bill on the table and departed. No sense letting alcohol dull his judgment.

* * * *

It was nearing the noon hour as he entered Spring Rock Park. The temperature had risen some but it was still breezy and cool. Yet despite that, a goodly number of strollers and joggers were already present. He found the center of the park easily, simply by following the widest path. He passed a number of groves of trees which would have made good ambush sites but he wasn't overly worried; if that were the way an assassin intended to work, the SUV hit wouldn't have been attempted, and he had already reasoned that a murder in



Masterville would be poor strategy. Nevertheless he kept a close watch on both foliage and people as he walked along, not hurrying, but not going slowly, either.

As the large pond (or small lake, depending on how you looked at it) came into view, he saw that he would have to make a half-circuit around it in order to get to the renovated log cabin. There were numerous benches along the way, some being used for workers on lunch breaks, but vacant for the most part; the wind made it hard for picnickers. Halfway around the lake, he was not overly surprised to find Lisa sitting at a bench and nibbling on a sandwich as if trying to make it last. Her face brightened when she saw him and he was sure his did too, if the increased thump of his pulse was any indication.

After the first surge of emotion at the sight of Lisa, Daniel's next impulse was to turn and run. Someone had just tried to kill him, and chances were, another attempt would be made. If it happened here, Lisa would be in the line of fire of whatever method was used next. He stopped, wanting to talk to her; yet scared to risk it.

It was Lisa who made the decision for him. She slid sideways off the seat where she had been sitting and stood up, smiling in his direction. The breeze was in her face, blowing her long red hair back and around her face in swirls of rusty red fire. It also whipped the becoming green dress around her knees and between her legs, presenting as pretty a picture as he had enjoyed for a long time. He stayed where he was, unable to move while she walked up to him.

Her smile faltered as she saw his face. "Daniel, is something wrong?"

"Hello Lisa." He scanned their surroundings and seeing nothing threatening, managed a weak smile. "No, nothing now. Someone did almost run over me as I crossed the street back there." As soon as the words left his mouth, he wondered why he should be telling her that.

Concern replaced her smile. "Are you hurt? Goodness, how could that happen right downtown?"

"I don't know. Anyway, it's nice to see you. Do you usually eat lunch here in the park?"

Lisa blushed prettily, but she was honest. "Not very often. Frankly, I hoped I would run into you here. Are you sure you're okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine," Daniel said. He studied her face, seeing no hint that she might have known anything about the attempt on his life. "So long as



we're here, why don't we sit down?"

They went back to the bench where Lisa had been eating. Daniel sat across from her, wondering what in hell he was doing making eyes at another woman when his cover presented him as a married man. Lisa's hand slid across the table and covered his.

"I hope you don't think I'm too ... forward, I guess. I know you're married, but I thought we connected somehow when we met. If you think I'm nutty, or just a brazen hussy, you can tell me to leave." Lisa told the small fib about "knowing he was married" with what she hoped was a straight face.

Daniel had to laugh. *Brazen Hussy* ! He hadn't heard that expression for years! "Lisa, you weren't wrong. I felt the same thing. It was ... unusual. I've never met a woman-anyone, I mean-who made such an immediate impression on me. I don't know what it means, though. And actually, I'm not really married."

His mouth dropped open after uttering the last sentence. His mouth appeared to be leading a life of its own this morning.

Before he could think of a way of covering up, Lisa nodded, smiling prettily. "I know." She hesitated, thinking of her instructions, to learn all she could of what the NSA agents were here for, but no one had told her that one of them would practically bowl her off her feet at first meeting. Looking at his honest, expressive face she felt something like a surge of weakness sweep over her body, but she managed to continue. "I knew-well, we both knew that you worked for the, uh, government."

If Daniel's mouth had dropped open before, it practically gaped now. He closed it, thinking of Shirley's suspicions. How right she had been! The problem now was whether the attempt on his life had anything to do with them-and he had to think it did, though from what source, he wasn't sure.

"Does anyone else here know?"

Lisa squeezed his hand. "I don't think I should say anything more just yet. I probably shouldn't have said as much as I did, but I wanted to be honest with you."

"Hmm. Thanks. Well, let me elaborate a bit. That close call crossing the street wasn't an accident. I think someone wanted to kill me, and probably still does. Would you have any ideas about that?" Daniel watched her face closely as she answered. He wasn't suspicious of her



personally, but he needed some answers.

“Oh, Lord, no! No one here would do anything like that! I'm just sure they wouldn't.” Her expression showed horror at the very notion.

“All right. I had to ask. And now I have to tell you something else: being near me might become dangerous to your health.”

“You mean someone might try to kill me, too, just because I'm with you?”

“No, not for that reason alone. But if you got in the way or were a witness, you could certainly be hurt, and I'm not talking about scratches. You could get killed as dead as me.”

“But who-?”

“I don't know.” Daniel scanned the area around them again. Strollers were about but none of them had that indefinable look he had come to recognize as a person trying to make themselves indistinguishable. “I had thought it might be someone from here. But if you say no—”

Lisa was almost crying. She couldn't imagine anyone wanting to kill this man, and even less could she picture herself being slain along with him. She couldn't believe that any of the members of the informal council would want him dead. Neither could she think of a reason his own agency might want him killed, but the initiative must have come from Washington, and if that were so, their source there was in danger. She squeezed his hand again, deciding, on her own initiative, that something must be done about it, and quickly. But the only way she knew to accomplish that was to reveal who and what she was, although he probably knew already. Or did he?

“Daniel, what do you really know about Masterville Valley? And the people here?”

Daniel slowly loosed his hand, feeling his heart sink. Could be this young woman, whom he had quickly developed such an attraction for, be going to tell him that she and others here were a different breed of human, such as Phillips and Bobby Lee feared? It didn't seem possible. Everyone he had met and spoken to so far seemed perfectly normal, if he didn't count the instant affinity between himself and Lisa. And that, he knew, could simply be the often written of, but seldom encountered “Love at First Sight” phenomena. But in the meantime ...

“All I know is that a clerk in the census bureau discovered a lot of



differences in the inhabitants of this valley and the general population. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true, we think, but it isn't general knowledge. Hardly anyone in the valley is aware that they're different. And some of them surely aren't."

"Which ones? Are you one of them?" Daniel held his breath, waiting on her answer.

"We haven't found a way of telling the difference yet, other than behavioral, and that isn't always indicative. All I can say is that I meet the criteria that ... has been established, and apparently most of the people do, too."

"What criteria?" He knew his voice was sharp but he couldn't help it. He didn't want Lisa to be different.

"Why, the same as that clerk found, I imagine. Or perhaps a few other things he didn't discover." She saw the stricken look on his face and her own softened. "Daniel, please don't think badly of me—us, I mean. We're just plain old humans. We work, love, play, go into business. All the things any other person does. And as for the oddities, it isn't that everyone has all the same proclivities; it's just an average. And as far as I know, we haven't yet discovered why we're this way."

"You say 'we'. Who else are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you that. Or rather I won't. I probably shouldn't have said as much as I have but I when I heard you had been attacked—" Her voice broke and tears appeared in her eyelashes.

The appeal couldn't have been resisted if he had known for a fact that she was a Martian Ogre in disguise. He reached and gathered her into his arms and held her to his chest. She sighed deeply as he began rubbing her back while holding her. It was he who finally had to break the embrace; she seemed prepared to spend the rest of the day where she was.

He gazed down into her serene face. "Is this one of the oddities we haven't discovered, instant attraction?"

"I don't know. Couldn't it just be natural?"

"If it is, I've never run across it before."

"Me either. Please kiss me."



Shakily, Daniel lowered his lips to hers. They were soft and yielding and altogether enticing. He could practically feel the emotion suffusing both of them during that first meeting of their lips, like a merging of pleasant waves passing back and forth between them. The kiss went on a long time, to the amusement of passers-by.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Crafton was both distressed and aggravated. He sat on the other side of the desk from the Director in his office, trying to look contrite when in fact he was angry. He had been summoned both to explain the incompetency of the agent trying to eliminate Stenning and to report on progress from the other two teams in place.

“Mister Phillips, I don't know how Bevins missed. He's an expert in wet work, which is why I sent him in, just in case it was called for. Don't worry, though. He'll take care of business next time for sure.”

“Remind him that he's not the only person we have on board who does that kind of work; it might serve to focus his attention a bit better.”

“Yes, sir, I'm sure it will. I'll pass the word.”

Mandel Phillips still wore his perpetual frown despite the assurances. He made a motion of shuffling a couple of the papers on his desk. “These reports don't tell me dick. Everything in them, we knew before sending anyone in. Explain, please.”

Crafton took a deep breath. “Sir, it appears that most of the citizens of Masterville aren't aware themselves that they're different, so how can we find out much more simply from talking to them?”

Phillips appeared to consider. “I don't know, but there has to be more to it than that.” He slapped the papers in front of him. “I can't go to the President with this. He wants answers. For that matter, so do I.”

“Yes, sir. I'm shifting attention away from the rank and file. All we've gotten from them is a smugness about how well affairs are run in their valley. We're going to try looking at records and talking to the mayor and members of the city council and so forth. Also, I'm going to have one of the teams bust their computers and take a look at medical records from a couple of the clinics and the hospital. Maybe that will turn up something.”



“All right, that's good. In the meantime, the President and his campaign manager think we ought to start ticking things up a bit. Masterville Valley is going to begin getting some attention, particularly about their religious and marriage habits. Once that gets going, your job is to look at who reacts to it; they will be the ones who know something. Believe me on this.”

“I do, and I agree.”

“Fine. Now tell me what your man Bevins is going to try next and when.”

Crafton didn't know and tried to finesse the question. “It will be within twenty-four hours. I'm giving him the option so long as it isn't a vehicular attempt again. Twice in a row would be too suspicious.”

“All right, see that it succeeds.”

“I will.”

Phillips' frown came near to disappearing. “Fine. By the way, we're having a guest preacher at our church this Sunday. He's supposed to be a real dynamo on Christian values. Would you like to hear him?”

“Certainly. Thanks for asking.”

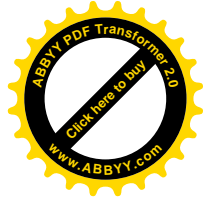
“Fine. I'll see you there.”

Just as Crafton was getting up to leave, Phillips gave him one more order. “Oh yes, I almost forgot. I'm antsy about Stenning's partner, no matter how clean her record is. Pull her back here tomorrow. Have her make up some excuse that sounds reasonable, a sick relative maybe.”

“Yes, sir. I will, but won't that blow her cover, leaving a dead ‘husband’ for a sick relative? They're posing as a married couple you know.”

Phillips waved a hand negligently. “Use one of our funeral home covers to get his body. She can say she's on the way home. Just do whatever it takes, okay?”

As he closed the door behind him, Crafton's mind was already working overtime with the latest developments. He didn't like an Op moving so fast with such slipshod preparation. Were Phillips and the President really that worried about one small city? Or was the President simply using its oddities for his own purpose? Not that it



mattered what he thought; he was going to follow orders.
* * * *

Several kisses after the first one, Daniel sighed and moved away from Lisa. "I could go on doing this all day but there's two problems."

Lisa smiled. "Oh?"

"Yes. Number one, we're making a spectacle of ourselves. And number two, I'm supposed to be trying to find out what makes the people here so odd."

Lisa smiled fetchingly again. "Am I that odd?"

Daniel returned her smile with a grin. "Well, physically, you're sure not odd; in fact, you're near perfection. But how about mentally?"

"In what way?"

Daniel began ticking items off on his fingers. "Are you religious?"

"No."

"Do you care whether or not you ever marry?"

"Not really. I would if the man I loved wanted to."

"Does the thought of gay sex bother you?"

That question brought a shrug along with a denial. "No. Caring is what's important."

"What's your I.Q?"

"I don't know. Above normal, I suppose."

"Do you have friends who are minorities, such as black or Hispanic?"

"Yes."

"What kind of work were you doing before starting the B&B?"

"We didn't-sorry. I taught Biology at the high School for a while. Now I'm a computer technician. I work part time at Beamer Research with Marybeth, and I do consulting work sometimes."

"How much school?"



“I have my teacher's degree. Is there a point to all this?”

“Yes. You said you didn't know who was or wasn't outside the national norm. It appears that you are.”

“Do you mind?”

“No. In fact I approve. I still don't know why we were sent here, other than my bosses suspect that you're mutants or some such thing, and that your lack of quote ‘moral values’ unquote, are a threat to the country.”

“Daniel, Marybeth and I were told what agency you work for. It's scary, because we're no threat to anyone, much less the nation.”

“I believe you. Are there many jobs open around here?”

“I haven't looked lately, but I imagine anyone who wants to work can find something to do. Why?”

“Because I might just resign and move here.” The minute the words were out of his mouth Daniel knew he meant them. He could hardly believe how quickly he had made up his mind about Lisa, the Valley and the whole scenario. Even if he didn't possess whatever defining characteristic that made the people, on average, different from the norm, it didn't seem to matter. Certainly not to Lisa, if he could believe her, and he did. Being orphaned at a young age and living with relatives had left him without much of a sense of home. Now he felt as if he might have found one.

*** * * ***

Shirley happened to be glancing out a window of the bookstore where she and Daniel were to meet and saw him and Lisa across the street, walking hand in hand. She shook her head despairingly. What in God's name did he think he was doing? It was one thing to try gathering information; it was quite another to become involved with their hostess, whom she was already suspicious of. This just wasn't like the man she had heard of. He wasn't acting like an agent at all. She continued watching and saw them embrace and kiss before Lisa turned and began walking the other way, back toward the park. The scene upset her so much that she left the store as quickly as she could check out with the pair of books she had purchased. She met him on the walkway outside which led to the entrance. He was whistling and had a dreamy look on his face.

“Have you proposed yet?”



“What-oh.” He grinned. “Not yet, but I may.”

“I knew these people don't worry about marriage much, but this seems a bit too blatant to be true; our hostess making out with my ‘husband’ right in front of me.”

“She already knows we're not married,” Daniel said lamely.

“You told her, I suppose? Or is she telepathic?”

“Can we talk in the car?”

“We'd better talk somewhere.”

Daniel had no idea what he was going to tell Shirley. He was still struggling to understand his own motivations and actions, all seeming to pile up on him at once. As they walked back toward where Shirley had parked the car, he began wondering why he had ever gotten into agency work anyway. It seemed to him that he had sort of drifted along on a tide, a quiet unassuming but firm-minded man who nevertheless was unsettled and always looking for a place or a woman or both to be satisfied with. The Marines had been a good experience, and it plus his college degree had put him in line for the agency recruiters. And from there, having nothing better to interest him at the time, he had accepted. That had been almost ten years ago, and while some of the time spent with the agency had been interesting, it still hadn't ever felt like a real career.

As soon as they were seated inside their car, Shirley began reading him the riot act.

“Daniel, when we started out on this Op, I thought I had been teamed with a professional. You're acting about as professional as a six-year-old T Ball player. What in hell is going on with you?”

Daniel chuckled mirthlessly. “I've been gathering information, just like our orders called for.”

“Sure you have. All right, tell me something you've learned.”

“I've learned that these people here aren't a threat to anyone. We shouldn't even be here.”

“And how did you manage to come to that conclusion so soon? Is that what your girl friend told you?”



“Look, Shirley-”

“No, you look,” She interrupted. “You've got the hots over a woman you just met, and if you told her we weren't married, you've compromised our cover. You did, didn't you?”

“Yes, but-damn it, Shirley, they already knew who we were.”

“What! Tell me how.”

“I don't know, and frankly, I don't care.” That was a pure lie. He did care. Now that Shirley knew, that meant someone back in Washington was compromised, someone who was working for the powers that be in Masterville. Or at least feeding them information. He thought back over how quickly the Op had gone down and settled on Terrell, the friendly operations manager as the likely source. They had tipped a few on several occasions when he was between assignments. Come to think of it, he showed much the same mannerisms as Lisa and Marybeth. Somehow tonight, he knew he was going to have to get Lisa aside and question her further. If Masterville was no threat, why did they have a spy in the agency?

“Dan, you need to start caring. I'm going to have to report this.”

“Ratting out your own partner?”

“If they knew we were coming, and who we were, there's a mole inside the agency working for them. It can't be anything else.”

“It could be another agency. The FBI might have jumped in and not told anyone. Don't jump to conclusions and don't get one of our people in trouble over something they might have had nothing to do with. Not unless we know for certain.”

Shirley twisted her lips into a gesture of capitulation. “You're right, and you've got a rep for being right, Dan. Okay, I'll let it be for the moment. But this isn't funny any longer, you have to admit that.”

Daniel agreed, but he also believed Lisa, and was confident that his instincts, both originally and now, were right: there was no National Security threat here. But there was a threat. He remembered that careening SUV, the driver's face hidden by a hat and by crouching far down in the seat, in precisely the approved agency method, looming larger in his vision like a rampaging elephant on the attack as it bore down on him.

“Damned right, it isn't funny. Shirley, suppose I told you that



someone tried to kill me today.”

“So, these people are dangerous. Damn it, Daniel-”

“Hold it. The attempt was going to be made to look like an accident. Remember our training? It went down exactly like that. If it wasn't agency, it damn sure resembled our methods. So don't get in a hurry to jabber to Crafton. It's possible that you could be in danger, too. Have you thought about that?”

“But why would we—they—want you out of the way? Or me? Hell, we just got here. You haven't been involved with these people before have you?” She peered closely at him, trying to gauge his honesty.

“No, I promise. I never heard of them before this Op. And before you even ask, I've done nothing that I know of which warrants being taken off the board. I've been just as loyal as anyone, despite a propensity for asking embarrassing questions. And I haven't run afoul of any other agency, government or otherwise that would warrant such a step.”

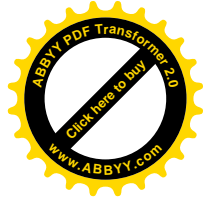
Shirley was quiet for a moment, her pretty face twisted up in a frown of concentration. “Something's screwy here. Come on, let's get something to eat. We can talk some more on the way.”

*** * * ***

Nothing was resolved by the time they picked a restaurant, other than that under persistent questioning, Daniel agreed to ask Lisa directly about the almost certain existence of a source in Washington. Shirley promised again to wait until after that before reporting back in, and they left it at that.

Daniel was so absorbed in thought that he completely missed the second attempt on his life that day—and if Shirley hadn't been alerted by the revelation that a previous attempt had been made, she probably would have missed it, too.

It was very straightforward and well played. Just as the waitress was bringing out their order, a patron who had arrived after them suddenly stood up in front of her, apparently speaking on a cell phone. He managed to bumble his way in front of the young woman while acting agitated by an imaginary conversation. Shirley saw his free hand pass over their open-faced burgers and iced tea, a seemingly innocuous movement disguised by waving his hand as if he were in distress. From where she sat, she caught only the barest glimpse of a nearly invisible spray descending over their food from something concealed in his hand. He stuttered and apologized to the



waitress, then cancelled his order, claiming an emergency of some kind, and hurried out the door. She never caught a good glimpse of his face.

Shirley reached out and caught Daniel's hand just as he was going to take a drink of his iced tea. He frowned at the look on her face and the pressure of her hand, her nails biting into his skin. He knew something was wrong, but not what.

"Leave enough cash on the table for the food and let's go, now." Shirley whispered as soon as the waitress left, leaning forward to avoid being overheard.

Daniel pulled out his wallet and dropped two twenties on the table and followed Shirley's lead as she got up and headed to the door. She paused at the exit, looking left and right as if searching for something or someone, causing him to do the same. His senses were alerted but he still had no idea of what had spooked his partner.

He followed Shirley out onto the sidewalk, noting the grim set of her mouth, lips drawn into a tight line. She didn't say anything until they were back in their car.

"All right, what was it?"

"I apologize, Dan. You didn't spot it, did you?"

"Spot what?"

"Someone just tried to kill you again, and apparently didn't give a damn whether they got me in the process or not. And just like you said; it looked like agency work"

"What happened?"

"The old bump-the-waitress-while-causing-a-distraction and doctoring the food and drink. Probably Toxigen." Her voice was shaky as she responded to the question.

Daniel shuddered. Toxigen was a substance which metabolized quickly in the body, leaving no trace byproducts and which caused runaway atrial fibrillation an hour or two later. If they had both died, it would have been seen as a rare coincidence and possibly led to an investigation by the health department, but nothing would ever have been proven since once exposed to air, it decomposed even without being consumed, not to mention that by the time its effects were felt, the contaminated food would probably have been disposed of. And as



a last defense against discovery, the toxin was a closely-held secret and matching spectrograph patterns were nonexistent outside the agency files.

Since the seat was already adjusted for Shirley, she took the wheel. She had hardly gotten underway when her phone rang. She hit the speaker button and listened as a series of code words, similar to those assigned to every field agent, came over the phone. Daniel had no idea what they meant since they were designed for passing on predesignated orders anywhere and at anytime with no fear of compromising the agent.

“Well, so much for this Op,” Shirley said, hitting the switch to turn her phone back off.

“What? Has it been cancelled?”

“No, I've just been recalled. So far as I know, it's still a go. I'm just not involved any more; at least not here and not for the time being.”

“Nothing about a replacement?”

“No.”

“Now what can that be about? Other than maybe someone wanting to get me alone.”

“Who knows? Listen, Daniel, I'll have to go, but drive me to Memphis first, then I'll fly back and you can keep the car.” She smiled grimly. “We can grab a snack on the way. They can't poison all the damn food in Arkansas.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Daniel offered to drive but Shirley elected to stay in the driver's seat on the way to Memphis. They used the time to go back to the beginning of the operation and discuss every aspect of it, including the assassination attempts. On that matter they came up empty, not being able to figure out why their own bosses would want one or both of them dead. Somewhere back in the archives of his mind, Daniel was beginning to get a hint, but it wasn't a conscious perception yet. On the other hand, he and Shirley were able to agree that the whole Masterville investigation must somehow be connected to politics, what with the President and director both displaying very public personas of pious churchgoing believers.



Shirley was disgusted with the conclusion but was unable to completely remove herself from it.

“I think there's a need for our elected officials to have some sort of moral code, and Christianity works well, so long as it's not overdone.”

“That's the problem, all right,” Daniel agreed. “Church and state are supposed to be kept completely separate, though in practice it's never been quite that way. In fact, I did some reading on that very aspect of government some time back, and I think we did very well at separating the two up until the second Bush was elected, despite blue laws and prayers and such by public officials. But Bush Junior sincerely believed he had been appointed by God to fight the war on terror, such as it can be fought. Personally, I think we're just in the middle of another of the great paradigm shifts that take place in religions every few centuries, and I doubt we'll see the outcome of it in our lifetimes.”

“What do you think the outcome will be?”

“There are too many factors in the game to make a prediction. Nuclear weapons, oil, religion and technology developments like those depolymerization plants you see everywhere now making oil from garbage and refuse will all play a part. That process may very well cause the Islamic nations to lose their principal source of revenue, and that will really open up a can of worms. It's already causing unrest, and I guess you've noticed a couple of those DP plants have already been targeted by terrorists.”

“So they have. I just assumed they were targets of opportunity. Are they really that important?”

Daniel shrugged, even though Shirley's attention was fixed on the highway. “A lot of money is being invested in them, and they appear to work pretty well. The stories you read say they're competitive, but that may be partly hype. I suppose we'll know in a few years. Regardless, if it's not the DP process, there's always natural gas and tar sands and shale oil and coal God knows what else. One thing is certain, though: Now that the government and private enterprise have really got going on alternative sources of energy, the Mideast is going to lose a lot of its geopolitical importance over the next decade or two, and that's bad news.”

“How so?”

“Their people are in bad enough straits already. Lose the oil revenue and they go the way of Africa, only in their case, you can bet we'll be



the ones getting the blame. Almost all of the Moslem nations have become theocracies and their leaders will tell the poor sots that Christianity is the culprit.”

“You sound as if you've studied the subject.”

“I read a lot, and history is one of my favorite subjects. I think the biggest question is whether the tide of fundamentalism slows down, both for Christianity and for Islam. If not, we'll have even more of a religious war than we already do. We can certainly prevail militarily, but there's always guerilla warfare, and it underwent a paradigm shift, too, with the advent of so many Moslems willing to martyr themselves. Damned if I know how it will all end.”

“Well, if you don't, I sure don't either. It's too deep for me. I just try to do my job.”

Daniel chuckled. “You do stay focused; I have to give you that.”

“You have a reputation of being the same way.”

“Well, apparently someone has decided I've lost my edge. Maybe when I resign, whoever it is will leave me alone.”

“You're resigning? When did this decision come about?”

“Maybe when I saw that SUV coming at me. No, something like that wouldn't have done it. I really don't know, Shirley; it just seems like the time to quit. I've never been tied to the agency like some people are.”

“Crafton and Phillips don't like resignations.”

“I'll send it in. Frankly, I don't want to go back to that office. And also frankly, I'm wondering why you're chancing it after that restaurant scene.”

Shirley glanced over at him then back at the highway. She twitched her shoulders. “I don't think it was meant for me. For some reason you've become a target. And we don't know that it was our people. Any field agent makes enemies.”

Daniel left it at that. Resigning wasn't mentioned again, though they did manage a pleasant conversation during the drive. There was even some laughter about the two sexless nights they had slept together, with Shirley teasing him about him having a fetish for redheads and him retaliating by accusing her of having a fondness for women. In



the end, when he pulled into the front of the terminal of the airport, she surprised him by giving him a firm kiss on the lips.

“Good luck, Dan,” She said. “I don't know what's going on, but I think you're a good man and I really hope it all works out for you. Be careful, okay?”

“Thanks, Shirley. I'll do my best. And you're a good person, too. Don't let the place corrupt you.”

“No chance of that.”

* * * *

Daniel watched Shirley's figure until she was out of sight within the confines of the terminal, then drove off. As soon as he was away from the airport traffic, he began looking for a pay phone. He found one at a Quick Stop Market and pulled in. One thing he hadn't told Shirley was that he suspected Terrell might have been the leak at headquarters. He dialed his number and was asked to wait. He held for a moment or two, then someone he didn't know answered.

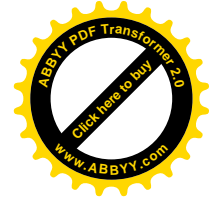
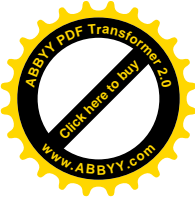
“I'm sorry but Mister Terrell isn't available at the moment. Can I help you in some way?”

“No thanks.” Daniel hung up the phone. He knew for a fact that Terrell rarely turned down an incoming call; he didn't have many of them. And he didn't recognize the voice that answered. Best bet was that he had been gathered up by Internal Affairs. He shivered involuntarily at the thought. Becoming entangled with IA was like going over Niagara Falls without a barrel: very few people survived the encounter.

He drove off, and on impulse, stopped at the first convenient place and checked his atlas, deciding to get back to Masterville by a route other than the most obvious. It would mean driving on some very rough back roads, but he didn't mind. Better safe than sorry. On second thought, he turned around and traded in the rental car for another one, just in case a tracer had been hung on it. In that, he was correct; Shirley might have told him after the attempt on their lives, but it had slipped her mind. In any case, he had already damned himself with the phone call; the technicians who monitored those devices would know just where he had been the next time they checked for movement.

* * * *

Three hours later, with Crafton having gotten a report that Daniel had been eliminated, but that unfortunately, his partner had been in the



pattern, he was reporting the fact to Philips. In the midst of the conversation, his AA burst into his office waving her hands frantically. Not daring to interrupt a monolog by his boss, he made writing motions with his free hand. Seconds later, she slipped a piece of paper into his view. It read *Not certain Stenning and Rostervik taken out. Their car traced to Memphis Airport and to rental lot.*

An involuntary curse escaped Crafton's mouth as he read the note. Just a short while ago he had gotten word that a lethal dose of Toxigen had been slipped into their food and that they would soon be dead. Now, unless someone had stolen their car and driven to Memphis, the latest attempt had failed again. And he didn't believe the car had been stolen. No, Shirley Rostervik must be on her way back, just as ordered and Stenning, good agent that he was, had switched cars. He just hoped he was going back to Masterville. It was incredible that Stenning could have escaped again, but it must be what had happened. Drawing a deep breath, he interrupted the NSA Director.

"Sir, I have to correct myself. It appears now that the latest attempt failed somehow and that-"

"Goddamn it, you said they were dead! Both of them!"

"Sir, I said they would be, but for some reason they must not have touched the food. I'm sorry. I'll contact Bevins and-"

"I've had enough. That man must be a goddamned telepath to have gotten away from Bevins twice. Tell him to take him out any way he can, just so long as he doesn't leave agency fingerprints on the scene."

Crafton shrank back from the phone, as if it were a lethal weapon suddenly pointed in his direction. He damn sure didn't want any wet work traced back to him. He was Stenning's immediate superior and he knew that if it became public knowledge that the NSA was involved, he would take the fall. "Yes, sir. I'll give him the word. It will be done tonight, somehow."

"You tell Bevins if he misses again, he's going to be the subject of the very next Op. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Crafton responded to an empty circuit. Phillips had already hung up. And he knew he would be hung up to dry if Stenning didn't head back to Masterville, to where Bevins could have another shot at him.

*** * * ***

It was after dark when Daniel finally made it back to Masterville. He



approached the B&B cautiously, driving by it a couple of times before deciding that it was safe to park and go in. He did intend to move out the next day to a different location though, and take Lisa with him if she would come. He hoped she would.

He parked and walked up to the side entrance and knocked from force of habit, even though the women had told him he didn't have to bother. Lisa opened the door. Her face brightened into a big smile as she saw that it was him. She came into his arms and kissed him thoroughly before remembering that he was supposed to have a "wife" with him. She stepped back, looking around. "Where's Shirley?"

"She got called back to Washington. I'm by myself now."

"Will they replace her?"

"They may try, but it wouldn't do any good. I'm going to fax my resignation in if you don't mind me using your phone line."

Lisa's smile widened to an almost impossible width. "You bet. Come on into the office and you can do it right now!"

"Good. Thanks. Would you happen to have anything drinkable around here? You can put it on my bill. No wait, my credit will probably be cancelled the minute I resign, if it hasn't already been."

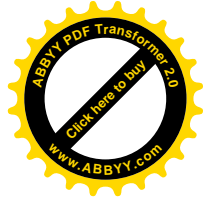
"It's on the house. Anything special?"

"Jack Daniels Black Label and ice if you have it."

"We have. Come on, I'll show you the fax."

Lisa disappeared while he was wording his resignation. He understood thoroughly that this wasn't the regular way to do it. Ordinarily there would be forms to be signed concerning National Security matters, payroll and other personnel items, but in light of the fact that he had decided the agency itself was behind the attempts on his life, he wasn't worried about it. In fact, he intended to ask Lisa where a good place in the area he could disappear to was.

Just as he was finishing, she brought in a large squat glass filled almost to the brim with bourbon and ice. He took it and sipped gratefully. The sour mash went down as smoothly as oiled Teflon and settled happily in his stomach, spreading warmth over his body. He sipped again and set down the glass. His career with the NSA was now over, even if not done in quite the official way. He looked up from the



terminal and nodded at Lisa.

“It's done.”

“Wonderful.”

“What's wonderful?” Marybeth asked, walking into the office.

“Daniel just resigned from the NSA. And Shirley went back to Washington!”

“And now I need to move out of here to somewhere the agency won't find me. My resignation was sort of unorthodox. And I need to get away from both of you; someone tried to kill me again today.”

Lisa looked as stricken as a High School senior who had just been stood up for a prom. “Oh, my! I can't believe what's happening around here. Marybeth, can TV-can we do something about Dan?”

“You two sit tight and let me try-”

The phone rang. Marybeth picked it up, spoke for a moment, then handed the receiver to Daniel. “It's for you.”

Puzzled, Daniel took it. “Hello,” he said.

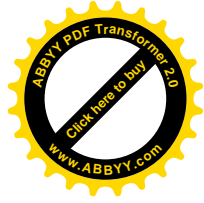
“Dan, this is Mark Terrell. I was arrested yesterday. Marybeth will tell you the story. This is just a heads-up. The big boss thinks you're one of the Masterville Mutants. He's put out a termination contract on you.”

“I already knew, Mark. And they're not mutants, not the way we think of mutants. But how in hell have you managed to call if you've been arrested?”

“They were transferring me to Splendor Hill and got careless. And it doesn't matter if they're mutants or not, so long as the chief thinks they are. Get me? Look, gotta go; they're on my trail. Good luck.”

The phone went dead. Daniel turned to Marybeth, questions burning in his mind. She spoke up before he could even ask.

“Mark was one of us, Dan. He was already with the NSA, just vacationing up here when Tyrone discovered him. He had decided to quit the agency and was applying for a job with Beamer Research. Tyrone talked him into staying with the NSA, just in case a situation like this came up.



Daniel's mind was whirling with all kinds of thoughts. "Beamer? That would be Beamer Research? Are they involved with this stuff?" The name of the company had been in their briefing data.

"Tyrone discovered that we seem to be a bit different several years ago. He hasn't publicized the information and hardly any of the folks here suspect that they vary from the norm. There's just a few of us who know."

"And why are you telling me this?"

"Marybeth shrugged. "Lisa trusts you. That's good enough for me. In fact, I'm going to call Tyrone and see if we can get you on the council, as well as getting you out of sight."

"Council?" Events were moving so fast that Daniel was having trouble keeping up. Only Lisa's firm hold on his arm kept him seated.

Marybeth explained, then said, "I'll call Tyrone now."

"Wait!" Daniel held up his hand. "I need to tell you right now that this place is bugged. I think it's safe here in the office, but anything you've said out in the parlor or in our bedroom has gone straight to Washington." He managed to look embarrassed at his revelation.

Marybeth and Lisa exchanged pensive glances. Marybeth answered. "I don't think we've said anything incriminating, but thanks for letting us know. The bug doesn't matter now; we'll close this place down tomorrow anyway. It was just a front for you and Shirley while we tried to find out what you were after."

Daniel laughed. "While we were trying to find out what made you different. That's funny."

"Maybe not so funny. If the government is that interested in us, I see trouble ahead. I think we need you on the council. Let me call Tyrone."

"Give me a sec to program it and then you can use mine. It's fixed so that anyone trying to eavesdrop only gets gibberish." Daniel quickly programmed his phone and handed it to Marybeth. She retreated to the outside of the B&B, just in case there was a bug in the office, though too much had probably already been said if that were the case. It did leave him and Lisa alone and they took advantage of it, embracing and enjoying a long, lingering kiss. They broke the last kiss but stayed close together as Marybeth returned.



“We'll close tomorrow,” She announced. “Do you think we'll be safe tonight?”

“I'll stay awake and make sure. What then?”

“We'll go see Tyrone. He said he could hide you, but also wants to co-opt you as a member of the council. He thinks all hell is going to break loose before long.”

“Can I come with him?” Lisa gripped Daniel's hand as if she would never turn it loose.

“Hmm. Do you know, that's one of the first things I asked, just in case you had ideas along that line?” She chuckled. “Tyrone is pretty sure you're one of us, Dan. Before Mark got caught, he told him that your boss ran a deep search on you and found that you're so typical of us untypical types that even if you're not one of the elite, it doesn't matter because no one could tell the difference. Not yet, anyway. Tyrone says he may have something to announce about what we are pretty soon.”

“You said elite?”

“Joke. Anyway, it's getting late and I have somewhere to go. Lisa, why don't you get Daniel to help you pack enough things to last a week or two? It's the least he could do.” She smiled sweetly at them and left the room.

“That was an invitation, by the way, just in case you didn't catch the drift,” Lisa said. “I was going to ask, but she beat me to it. Bring up whatever you need to stay with me tonight.”

Daniel decided that if Lisa and Marybeth's directness in sexual attitudes was a standard in the valley, it was no wonder that there weren't very many marriages.

*** * * ***

Helping with the packing didn't take long. Evidently, Lisa had already been thinking about it, or perhaps hadn't really unpacked. At any rate, he spent very little effort on that job. He brought his own suitcase when he followed her upstairs and sat it on a table by the window. He left the little automatic in the pocket of his jacket and removed the heavier automatic and two extra clips and placed them on top of what clothes were in the suitcase. He started to close it.

“May I see?”



Startled, Daniel turned around. Lisa had just returned from the bathroom. She was wearing a thin silk robe of pale green which not only made her reddish hair seem to glisten, it molded her figure in a way that left little to the imagination—and also revealed that she had little or nothing on underneath it.

“You mean this?” He asked, pointing to his weapon.

“Uh huh.” She came over next to him, picked it up, ejected the clip and round in the chamber, held it to check the balance then put it back as it had been. “A little heavier than mine, but nice. I use a .38 revolver. I keep it by the bed. Want to look at it?”

“I think I'd rather look at you.”

“That can be arranged.” She slid her robe off her shoulders and let it drop to the floor.

As Daniel had suspected, she was wearing nothing underneath, and if he had thought she was stunning in the robe, she was nothing short of spectacular out of it. In very short order, he was out of his own clothes and they were stretched out together on the bed. “You're lovely,” he told her, and meant it. It wasn't that she had such lush curves; it was that every part of her body was perfectly proportioned for the rest. Her breasts were firm and resilient in his hands, filling them nicely. Her waist was narrow and her hips slim but curved as if molded by an artist. Her legs were long and tapered, drawing attention to the triangle of red curls at the junction of her thighs. He couldn't remember ever seeing anyone or anything more beautiful. He told her that, too, but by then Lisa was more interested in performance than admiration.

Daniel did his best and it was easy to do so, with Lisa helping and guiding and participating as if they had been lovers for years. It was fortunate that no one attempted them harm during their first few hours together or they would never have left the room alive. As it was, they barely did.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At the same time that Daniel and Lisa were exploring each other's bodies and minds as if they had just invented sex, Tyrone Beamer and Harry Sildon, his Chief of Research, were having a very late nightcap, sitting across from each other in his office in the visitors' chairs, with a bottle of single malt scotch and an ice bucket on the low table



between them. The owner of Beamer Research was feeling both a great sense of relief, and a great weight of responsibility descending on him, as an answer to just what made Masterville different was finally coming to light-or beginning to.

“Go over it one more time now that we're here by ourselves, Harry. Your team is great, but they were so excited they sort of ran things together.”

Harry Sildon was a tall, gangly-looking man with an untidy shock of brown hair which was badly in need of a trim. It covered the earpieces of his black framed glasses. Sitting down, with his legs crossed and holding his glass with both hands, he looked like nothing so much as a caricature of the unkempt scientist who was too busy to pay much attention to how he looked or what he wore. He sipped appreciatively at his scotch before answering.

“Well, you heard them talking about prions, I'm sure.”

Beamer nodded.

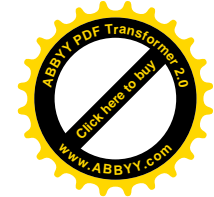
“I wish I could take credit for it, but it was Tarkington who came up with the idea. It's been known for a number of years that prions have an affinity for nervous tissue, particularly in the brain and spinal cord, and most particularly where synapses occur. Unfortunately, they are usually lethal under most conditions, like SBE, what they're calling the “Stumbles” in Africa, and several other diseases. However, there also exists what, for lack of a better term, we'll call normal prions which most of us possess. Normal or lethal, they are very tiny and have the propensity for folding themselves in odd ways, and inducing like proteins to do the same under the right conditions. You know all that, I'm sure.”

“So far I'm with you.”

“Good. Now after Tarkington suggested we see if our prions might differ from the general population, we went looking. Personally, I thought it was a wild idea until he showed me some of his results, indicating that we do have a different sort of prion.”

“So we are mutants, huh? Or have we just been infected?”

“That was a real puzzle to try figuring out. If we were infected, what was causing it? I lost count long ago of all the substances indigenous to the area that we tested, trying to find one that was infecting us. I decided that wasn't the answer and here I'll blow my own horn a bit.



“I've always been interested in the so-called ‘nonsense’ DNA, the Introns, that make up better than 90% of our DNA but doesn't appear to have a function. I went looking there, and don't ask me why; just a hunch, especially since introns aren't supposed to code for proteins. Anyway, it paid off, after a lot of time and effort that you paid for. I believe now that I've isolated a section of intron which does code for a protein, contrary to popular opinion. And that protein happens to be the little prion we suspect is the culprit making us different.”

“Be damned.”

“Yeah. Now take this theory here as not completely proven; we're still working on it. What we think is going on is that the section of the intron which codes for this prion is very innocuous and the code is for a very tiny prion, even smaller than those discovered so far. Given those two factors, if true, we doubt that anyone else has caught on to it.”

“So what do these little prions of yours do?” Beamer was excited. He kept up as much as possible with biological science but running the company kept him out of the labs and away from journals too much these days. He had begun relying more and more on Harry Sildon.

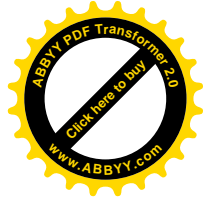
“Well, again, don't take this as a proven, but here's what we think happens. The prions are present at birth and they play a role in forming synapses as we mature, or perhaps I should say a particular type of synapse. Or to put it in laymen's terms, they help wire the brain in a particular fashion. As we grow up, these little fellers are always present and gradually increase in number as synapses grow in number. This in turn plays a subtle role in how our attitudes and beliefs form, ameliorated by environment, of course, particularly the way we're brought up by our parents. The primary result appears to be an enhanced ability to reason rationally, and that, of course, affects many other of our attitudes and the way our personalities develop.”

“So it's an inheritable factor after all.”

“Yep, it seems to be, but that's not all. Remember, prions are infectious.” Sildon paused, waiting for Tyrone to get it. In a moment he did.

“They're also passed down from mother to child, simply by the infectious route? Be damned again!” He picked up his glass and drank enough of the scotch to warm him all the way through.

“Right. They're small enough to pass the placental barrier. So in



essence, many of us get a double shot of our little helpers. It doesn't seem to hurt and may even help.”

“In what way?”

“Hell, Tyrone, I just told you, and you should know that facet better than I do. You've been studying attitudes and beliefs while I've been down at the molecular level. We're gentler, more intelligent, less territorial and somehow have better reasoning powers than the normal population. We tend not to accept unproven stuff like religion, astrology, racial inferiority and so forth without proof. We're self-reliant. Oh hell, we're just a better breed of human. Isn't that what you've been saying all along?”

“Yeah, but it's nice to see it confirmed, at least theoretically. Now let me ask you something else: can you duplicate our prions in the lab?”

“Of course; we couldn't have done all the research lately if we hadn't been able to do that. Now, mind you, Tyrone, all this is based on damned few samples, not nearly enough in my opinion. We need more data to firm it all up.”

“I'll see what I can do. You might have a lot of volunteers before long if all this becomes public.”

“Oh? When do you think?”

Beamer was suddenly lost in thought and didn't answer. An idea was forming in his mind, one he didn't want anyone to know about yet. It was horrendous and yet ... it might become necessary to preserve their existence. If it didn't turn the whole world against them. In either case, it would be a last resort, something he would consider only if everything else failed. And he would still have to get the council to go along with it. Or perhaps not. Maybe ...

“Tyrone?”

Beamer blinked and came back to reality. “Oh. Sorry, Harry, my mind was wandering. What else do you have for me?”

“Well, unless we publish our results, I think it's unlikely anyone else will duplicate them any time soon—unless they have some of our people to experiment with, and go at it really big time.”

“It could come to that, Harry. The government is on to us now, even if they don't know what we're made of. I wouldn't put anything past Bobby Lee if he gets the idea that we're harbingers of the Anti-Christ,



or some such crap.”

Seldin shivered theatrically. “Brrrr. I don't even like to think about it.” He did think about it, though, and suddenly made a connection. “Oh, shit, Tyrone, I just thought of something.”

“By the look on your face, it ain't good.”

“No, it's not. Or might not be. Did you know that once the structural and molecular formula of a prion is discovered, an enzyme can be created fairly easily to destroy it. Suppose the government declared us a threat, but couldn't just execute us for fear of public opinion? They could just inject us with an enzyme and destroy our prions. Now wouldn't that be a hell of a note! Something else I don't want to think about.”

“I don't either, but I must. And that's just more grist for the mill. By the way, I've got a couple of the docs giving me access to some brain scans to look at. They should be on the computer by now if that will help.”

“Depends on what kind of scans. What I really need is some more well-preserved neural autopsy tissue, and if you can swing it, samples of brain tissues from operations for tumors, stuff like that. Could you help us out there?”

“I'll see what I can do. The tissue from accident victims wasn't enough?”

“It was fine, just not enough to make a good statistical universe, which you have to have to prove anything for certain. Oh, by the way, here's all the data in case you want to review it.” Seldin handed him a tiny plug-in data cube.

“All right, thanks. In the meantime, make damn certain your computer network and files are secure. Check with Miles if you're not certain. That's what I'm going to do right now before I download this. Another drink?”

“Nah. It's way past bed time for me already.”

“Okay. Thanks for stopping by. At least we sort of know where we stand now.”

Seldin smiled sardonically. “Uh huh. If we're able to stand after we're officially discovered.” He departed, mind already on how further research should be directed and how much more money to ask for.



Would it be possible to develop a drug to counter a prion-destroying enzyme? He decided that had better be taken off the back burner and given top priority.

Behind him, Tyrone Beamer turned off the lights in his office and sat near his window, looking down over the lighted homes and businesses in the valley. Would they still be there this time next year? He shook his head in the darkness, admitting that he didn't know. There were so many ways this whole thing could play out. He felt obligated to try to think of every possible scenario and develop counter-measures against them. An impossible task, but one he would attempt, nevertheless.

*** * * ***

At the same time Beamer was looking down on the valley, Lisa was standing by the window looking up in that direction. She had gotten up to go to the bathroom and paused there on the way back.

“Dan, come look. You should see this; it's beautiful.”

Daniel gazed at Lisa's figure, limned in the moonlight slanting through the window. A shaft of pale light played over her bare breasts as she turned. They swayed gently with her movements.

“It sure is,” he said.

“You can tell me that all you like. I love hearing it from you, but you still should see the view from here.”

Daniel got up and went to stand beside her. From the upstairs window, they could see up the side of the valley, dotted here and there with glimmers from lighted homes. At the very top of the valley's edge there was an indentation. To one side was a cluster of lights; filling the indentation was the orange globe of a full moon. Its light shadowed that side of the valley just enough to be able to distinguish forest from roads and pasture but not much else.

Daniel slipped an arm around Lisa's waist. “You're right. It is beautiful. This will be a good place to live.” He gazed up at the moon, holding Lisa lightly, as content as he had been in a long time, even with all kinds of threats hanging over them. As he bent down to kiss her, he caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye. He blinked and saw it again, a human form dressed in dark clothing. It was moving, but hugging the shadows of landscape shrubbery that dotted the small yard on the side of the building opposite the entrance. Even as he stood stock still, holding Lisa tighter and tighter without realizing it, he knew what he was seeing. The figure turned



the corner and was out of sight now, behind the B&B, but Daniel was sure he knew where he was headed.

“Dan, dear, what is it?” Lisa asked, sensing the tension that had suddenly gripped him.

“Our goddamned friendly assassin, if I'm not mistaken,” he whispered. “Quick, Lisa, call 911, then let's get out of here.”

Even as she picked up her phone, then put it back down, he realized the lines would have been cut. And there was no way to get down the stairs now and out of the building without him knowing they were there, because he was certain the man would come in through the unlocked side door, and the stairs were visible from there. He also knew that the front entrance would be covered by a second person.

Lisa was already throwing on some clothes and he quickly did the same, keeping his heavy .45 by his side and ready. He finished dressing and waved for Lisa to get down, then used the barrel of his pistol to ease the door open, prepared to either fight or lead the way out. Just then a bright flare of light, along with a muffled explosion came from downstairs, destroying his night vision. He knew immediately what had happened.

“They've set us on fire. That was an incendiary device. Now they'll wait at both exits.”

“What do we do?” Lisa's voice was calm but he could see her body trembling. She was holding her .38 revolver, barrel pointed at the floor, but ready.

Thank our lucky stars most people here own guns, Daniel thought. He knew the doors would be blocked with probably one person at each; that was how the teams usually worked. They would stay until the fire engines arrived, hoping in the meantime that the ones in the building would rush out into their arms. That left the window, which he hoped would let them get clear. Already he could hear the roaring of flames from below.

“The window! Quick, strip the sheets!” Daniel commanded. Part of his training had been in a quick method of knotting two bed sheets together for a quick escape from a second story.

Lisa complied, still holding her weapon in one hand. Daniel quickly knotted the two together and got Lisa to help him shove the bed to the window. He used both pillowcases to attach the sheets to the nearest leg of the bed frame. He checked to make sure the safety was off his



weapon then steered Lisa to the window. Smoke was already beginning to fill the room.

“You go down first. I'll cover you from up here. As soon as you hit the ground, rush for the cover of the fountain and cover me while I'm on the way down. Try not to make any noise.”

Lisa nodded and pushed up the window. She threw the knotted sheets over the sill as he checked the pillow case knots. He moved into position by the window.

“Go!”

Lisa disappeared over the sill while Daniel tried to look three ways at once. It was good that he did. There was a third hitter in on the attempt. Daniel saw arms clutching a hand weapon rise up from a shrub. Luckily he was ready. His first shot came a microsecond before the other's, throwing off his aim. The figure sprawled forward, then raised his-no, her-arm, still trying to fire. Daniel didn't hesitate. He pumped two quick shots into her then slid out the window, trusting Lisa to protect him.

He tried to watch as he slid down, clutching his weapon along with the sheets, but they twisted, turning his body away from the action. A bullet punched a hole in the wood frame wall an inch from his face, peppering his cheeks with flecks of paint. He let go and dropped the rest of the way, falling heavily but holding on to his gun. On the way down, he saw Lisa kneeling in the moonlight, firing as calmly as if she were shooting at targets on a range. By the time he was down, and regained his feet, it was over. The other two had come around the side of the flaming house, expecting to catch them coming out the window when they heard the first shot. Instead, Lisa had caught them, shooting one from behind and the other twice in the chest as he turned.

In the distance, sirens began to wail. “Come on, let's get out of here,” Daniel said.

“But-but the police. They'll believe us!”

Lisa didn't know how feds operated. “Don't be a fool. Come on. An hour from now some federal officer would pull rank, arrest us on some trumped up charge and we'd be dead or disappeared before morning. Even as he was talking, he was dragging Lisa toward his rented car.

She held back. “No, take mine! I know the way!”



The way to what? But Daniel knew she was right; her vehicle wouldn't be followed as his might be. They passed his car and slid into hers, a five year old Ford extra cab pickup. Lisa started the engine and they roared away, tires screeching. Seconds later she turned on a side street, raced down it, then turned again. They beat the fire engines out of the street by a minute or less and the police cruisers by not much more. Just then, Daniel happened to think of Lisa's friend.

“Marybeth! Oh goddamn, we left her behind!”

“No we didn't,” Lisa said. “She's not there. Don't you remember? She was going to see her girl friend.”

“Oh yeah. Girl friend?” He laughed inside, thinking of how ludicrous it was, wondering about Marybeth's sexual preferences while zooming around with a woman driving a pickup, heading away from a place where they had damn near been either burned or shot to death.

“Sure. She likes girls as much as men. She's lots of fun. Can I slow down now?”

“Uh, yes. We ought to be clear by now. Where are we going, by the way?”

“Up to Beamer Research. Marybeth told you that Tyrone Beamer wants to talk to you. He's the one who discovered us, even before the feds did.”

“Is he the one you've been reporting to? That's what I gathered from Marybeth.”

“Not in that sense. We're not really organized. Tyrone sort of leads an informal council of people in the know-and it's not very many yet. You'll like him. He's a good man; he's done a lot for the valley.”

“What does, uh, Tyrone want with me? Marybeth said something about the council, but after we went to bed I forgot all about everything except you.”

Lisa glanced at him, smiled charmingly, then turned her attention back to driving. Daniel was impressed. She had just survived what he assumed was her first gunfight, had probably killed two men (or possibly one man and a woman) and wasn't showing the least sign of hysterics. He wasn't either, but he had been through two such scenes already in his life; once with the Marines and once with the Agency.



“I think he wants you on the council. For sure, he wants you out of Masterville, and Marybeth and I away from danger, too. He'll find a place for us up on the mountain.” She reached over and patted his thigh. “Welcome to the club. You're now one of us.”

“Great. But what are we?”

“We're us. That's enough for now.”

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

President Robert L. “Bobby Lee” Smith was incensed, as was Murray Phillips. They were huddled in their usual basement conference room, discussing recent events.

“Who was in charge of that clusterfuck, anyway? I want him fired,” the President said.

“It was Mandel Crafton, the AIC of the Washington office. If we fire him, we might have a whistle blower on our hands. We sure as hell don't want that. It's bad enough that he screwed up the Op in that fucking valley, but he let the mole they had in his office get away, too.”

“I thought you said he was killed during his getaway?”

“He was, but the local police got in on it before we arrived on the scene and ID's him first. He's going to be in the headlines in tomorrow's paper. We've got a cover story going on him but I can't tell you for sure that it will go over with the media or the public.”

“Fuck the public and the media both. Just make damn certain it can't be traced back to us.”

“Everything is being sanitized as we speak. I'm having Crafton transferred sideways and promoting that agent who was with Stenning, Shirley Rostervik, into his position. She knows as much as anyone about that valley, now that we've lost our other agents there.”

“How the hell could that happen? They're not goddamned Supermen, are they? And while we're on the subject, what have you done about them?”

“I don't know how it happened. I suspect luck as much as anything else. As for the three deaders in Masterville, the Police Chief there is



covering it up for now.”

“He is? Why would he do that?”

“That's what I'd like to know, but I don't even have an operative there right now. I pulled the last one out because they had gotten her address from a description and license plate. She was lucky to get away before they tracked her down.”

“It sounds to me as if whoever is controlling things there wants to keep a damper on publicity. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, it does. The longer they can sit quietly in their little valley and expand their population, the better off they are.”

President Smith got up and began walking in measured treads around the long conference table, trying to decide on the right course of action. He circled twice then stopped, clasping his hands behind his back.

“And we still don't know what they are, do we?”

“According to Rostervik, there's nothing really strange about them, other than what we've already noted.”

“Yeah, they're fucking atheist, free-loving, gun-totin', gook-loving radicals that don't want anything to do with the federal government. One or two of those traits are normal in a person. All of them together are as rare as an alligator in the White House swimming pool. I tell you, Murray, they're goddamn mutants. Have to be.”

Phillips did not attempt to dispute the President; he was beginning to feel much the same way. He followed him with his eyes as he resumed pacing. He circled the table twice more, then sat back down. He reached out for the silver coffeepot and refilled his cup.

“All right, here's how we're going to play this. I really do believe those Martians, or whatever the hell they are, they constitute a threat to the nation, but right now isn't the time to crack the whip on them, so long as they stay quiet and don't try any funny stuff. What I want to do is make the buildup slow. Plant stories about how odd they are, how atheistic.”

Phillips opened his mouth, preparing to inform the President that there was a considerable difference between being an atheist and not going to church, but he closed it before saying anything. After all, he could be right; they could all be atheistic to the core.



“Next, I want research stepped up radically, and no pun intended. Spend whatever it takes, but I want to know what makes those bozos tick. Don't let it outside the circle. If you need subjects to work on, I'm sure you can find some volunteers around the valley.”

Phillips nodded, understanding that the “volunteers” would never return. Alive at least.

“And I'm going to see the Joint Chiefs this afternoon. We'll reserve a brigade of soldiers trained for urban warfare in case we have to seal them off, or even go in and round them up. I'll take care of that end.”

Phillips nodded again as the President sipped at his coffee.

“Now I want you to set a date to have a complete campaign ready to demonize that place, whether we know anything else or not. I mean really let them have it on the atheism and free love business, plus whatever else Briggs feeds you. We'll let it run until we get the public stirred up, then use the Army brigade to seal off the valley for “National Security Reasons.” We'll let them sit and stew for a while, then a few weeks before the election, we'll round them up.” The President smiled maliciously at the end of his monolog. “How does all that sound?”

“It will work,” Phillips responded. “By God, I'll make it work.”

“Fine, fine. Hey, I gotta go now. Remember, get that research going. We pay those eggheads enough; let them start earning their money for a change.”

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Phillips sat for another fifteen minutes after the President left, drinking another cup of coffee that he really didn't want. An army Brigade sealing off the valley? Demonize them as security threats? Sure, both would work, but where would that leave his own agency? The only play he would get wouldn't be publicized. The Military and Homeland Defense would reap all the benefits of extra prestige, funding and expansion of their turf. What was fair about that? And then he thought of the stolen uranium still being held so close to his vest that only a few of his selected confidants knew of its existence. Them and the President. What would a dirty bomb do if it was exploded over Masterville? Or better still, what if it went off over that brigade of soldiers and he “captured” the ones who did it? *Nowthat* would make for some prestige for the NSA! And it would doom Masterville and all its inhabitants. Hell, an irate citizenry would probably migrate to the valley in swarms and overrun the place,



radioactive or not, killing everyone in sight! He closed his eyes, visualizing hordes of Christian men and women, rife with banners, crosses and righteous anger trekking into the valley with guns blazing. Damn Bobby Lee! Leave it to the army, and those people in the valley would use their guns to defend themselves and make it into a case of massive civil rights violation. But if citizens of Arkansas and Missouri, rather than the army, did the same thing, it was a Holy War. And who could argue against that? No one, not when it was Christians doing the Holy Warring for a change. Now that was really something to think about. He would try to get the President to see his viewpoint at their next meeting.

Murray left the conference room, making sure nothing incriminating was left behind. He wore a pleased expression for a change, incongruous to those who knew him. He wore it for hours as he fleshed out future contingencies and plans. Whatever went down, he was determined that the NSA, and himself as Director, got most of the credit and none of the blame.

*** * * ***

When Shirley reported to the office at mid-day, having swung by her place to freshen up and get a few hours sleep first, she was puzzled by the sideways glances directed toward her from colleagues she met in the hallways, and a quick averting of eyes as she returned the stares. It was only when she entered the Operations Office for assignment that she found out what the stares had been about. She was now the boss, having succeeded Crafton without even knowing it. She knew it now, though, having been directed to see Phillips before doing anything else.

As soon as she arrived and was seated in his office, Phillips explained the circumstances.

“You mean Bevins, Goodnight and Orson are all dead?” She knew all three slightly, but hadn't known they were even in Masterville.

“That's right. Gunned down at that so-called Bed and Breakfast you and Stenning were staying at.”

“What happened to Daniel—to Stenning?”

“He got away somehow, after killing those three, and those two broads did, too. We've lost track of them all.”

“Wait a minute. You mean we were responsible for trying to kill Daniel?” She decided this wasn't the best time to remonstrate about his use of the word “broads” when he should have said women.



“We were. You didn't know, but we ran a deep search on him and it turns out he's one of those people. Since we had given him all that information, we had to do something about him, and taking him off the board seemed simplest.”

“But-that's-”

“Drop it. You know we don't tolerate spies. We found out Mark Terrell made a call to him before he got himself killed, too. His phone wasn't quite as secure as he thought it was.”

“How did he die?” Shirley was sitting forward, arms folded over her chest in a protective gesture. My God, she knew the agency could be vindictive, but this?

“He escaped from custody.” Seeing Shirley's unbelieving countenance, he added, “Truly, he did. He overpowered his guards, hurt one of them badly, and then crashed his car when we tried to catch him a couple of hours later. Damn shame, too. He could have revealed a lot, I'll bet.”

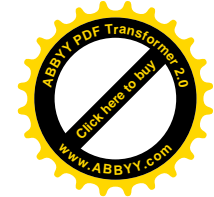
Shirley reached out and held onto the arm rests of the chair in Phillips' office where custom dictated that she should be seated. She eased her back into it and sank into the leather cushion, feeling lightheaded and grateful for its plush comfort.

Phillips gave her a few minutes to absorb what had happened while she tried to keep her face carefully blank. How could an Op go so bad so quick? And Daniel one of the Masterville people? How had that come about? But it must be true. Look how quickly he had fallen for one of their women, ignoring a beauty like herself. She sighed, and Phillips took that as a signal to continue.

“Okay, now that leaves you as the person most familiar with the Masterville Operation, or what's left of it. I'm going to promote you into Crafton's position if you think you can handle it. Can you?”

“Of course I can,” Shirley said automatically. *Never refuse a promotion!*

“Fine. I spoke to the President about you and assured him that you could handle the job. Now I want you to concentrate your energies on Masterville, and not on administration. You've got two AA's who are whizzes with the paperwork side of the position. Let them do the grunt work.”



“All right. What's next, then?”

“Fill yourself in on the job and go over the Op Reports on that clusterfuck in Masterville for the next day or two, then I'll get back with you. It may not be in person, but I'll pass some directives down the line to you. How you carry them out is up to you, but I do want them followed exactly enough so that the end result is what we intend for it to be, and I do want the big picture kept secret. So does the President. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Shirley said with quiet dignity, though she was still boiling with turmoil inside.

“Great. Congratulations, then. You'll have a budget to redecorate the office however you like, but don't spend a lot of your time on it. Hire someone. Like I said, Masterville is going to be your main concern for some time to come.”

Shirley took that as a dismissal, though Phillips did stand up and shake her hand and congratulate her again. She was in a daze as she took the elevator back down to the third floor and marched silently into Crafton's old office, now hers. The two Administrative Assistants rushed in behind her, ready and eager to get her off to the right start in her new role.

*** * * ***

Daniel was glad Lisa was behind the wheel of her pickup and not him. The road up the side of the valley to the site of Beamer Research was paved and well-maintained, but it curved back and forth in long switchbacks as it climbed upwards through thickly forested areas, broken up frequently by granite and slate outcroppings. Lisa apparently knew the route because she didn't hesitate along the way. Daniel kept conversation to a minimum while involuntarily flinching at some of the turns where the side of the mountain appeared to drop away into an eternity of darkness. At one point she pulled off onto a little roadside park and used her phone.

She spoke for a moment, then said, “Tyrone will be waiting for us.” She clicked off the phone and pulling back onto the road.

By the time they arrived, most of the lights had been turned off at the plant's labs and offices, leaving only security beacons lit. One picture window at ground level and near the front of the long rectangular building was still lit. There were few vehicles in the parking lot. Lisa pulled up near the entrance and killed the engine.

“This is it,” she said, superfluously.



Daniel got out and walked with her up to the covered entrance, noting that she didn't bother to lock her pickup. For that matter, he remembered that it had been unlocked when they raced to it from the burning building. The report he had gotten from Terrell days ago was correct. There appeared to be little crime in the valley. Days ago? It seemed almost like years ago, now.

He opened the door and held it for Lisa while she entered, drawing a smile of thanks from her. There was a short inside hallway which opened out on either side into railed, secretarial alcoves. Lisa pushed the gate to the one on the right aside, led Daniel past a large desk and several work stations to a door marked with a small, plain sign which read simply TYRONE BEAMER. It gave no title, as if anyone coming here should already know who he was.

Lisa knocked at the door just as it was pulled open.

"Hi," Marybeth said, grinning at them, then suddenly sobering. "Close call, huh?"

The two women hugged and at last Lisa spilled some tears. "I thought you were over at Cheryl's place," she said, wiping at her eyes with a forefinger.

"I was, but left early, then called Tyrone. He asked me to come up tomorrow-well, today, now-and I decided to leave a bit early. I'm glad I did now, or I would have been worried sick about you," she said, including Daniel with her words and gaze.

"Where's Tyrone?"

"Back in his apartment getting dressed, I would wager. Let's go see."

Marybeth led the way down a long hallway to an elevator which carried them up to the third floor, a smaller outgrowth sitting atop the rest of the building. He answered the door in a dressing robe.

"Hello Lisa. Glad to see you, Mister Stenning. I'm Tyrone Beamer."

"Thanks. I feel fortunate that we're able to meet after what's gone on the last few days, and especially last night," Daniel said, shaking hands, appreciating the firm grip of the older man and liking his honest face and confident bearing.

"Sorry you had to go through all that. If I had known you were one of us, I would have acted much sooner. Hey, let's not all stand here in



the doorway. Come on in.” He led the way into his apartment, furnished well but simply in the front room that Daniel saw first. Books of all ages and sizes were the most prominent feature of the next room to the right that he led them into. It appeared to be a combination of den and office. One side contained wall to ceiling bookshelves, built around a large workstation and desk which jutted out on both sides of the alcove containing a comfortable looking chair, then there was another area that had chairs for visitors arranged around a low coffee table. The other part of the room contained a leather couch and chairs arranged around another coffee table. The walls there were hung with three paintings, all realistic renditions. Daniel glanced admiringly at them, having no use for modern art, stuff that he couldn't tell from kitchen floor patterns, and which to him made about as much sense.

“Have a seat. It's getting on toward morning. I can offer either coffee or drinks, whichever you like.”

“If you have some brandy, I could use a dollop or two in some coffee. It's been a rather trying night. Lisa?”

“You bet,” She said, seating herself on the couch and pulling Daniel down beside her as if he were her newest possession.

Daniel chuckled inwardly as he sat down. He liked being possessed by her if that's what it was.

Tyrone disappeared for a few moments into the interior of the apartment and returned bearing a silver carafe. He went to a small, chest-high cabinet built into the wall behind the couch and drew forth a bottle of already opened brandy. He poured coffee from the carafe for all of them, then laced three of the mugs generously from the bottle.

Daniel recognized the brand name of the liquor; good, but potent; just what he and Lisa needed. He accepted the steaming mug gratefully and its warmth from the brandy even more so. He hadn't realized how tired he suddenly was, more from adrenalin overload than anything else.

Once he saw that everyone was settling down, Beamer spoke.
“Daniel-may I call you Daniel? We're rather informal around here.”

“Sure. I prefer it like that.”

“Good. I'm Tyrone to just about everyone, including my employees. Now, why don't we catch each other up on events. Shall I go first or



you?"

"I have a question first. What makes you think I'm one of you, whatever you are? Terrell, a friend at the agency, told me I match almost all of the characteristics which makes the people here stand out, but couldn't that be just chance?"

"I imagine it could be, but it's not. Marybeth suspected first and she suggested I run a genealogy search on you. Have you ever done that?"

"No, it didn't seem important. My parents died when I was very young and I was told later that I have no other relatives."

"Well, you do, but they're more in the way of third cousins, that sort of thing. But it turns out that your grandmother was from here originally, and if our theory is right, she would have infected your mother and she in turn infected you."

"Infected?"

"Yes, but let that wait. It's not like a sickness, believe me. I'll bring that subject up at the next council meeting, which I'm calling for this afternoon. Will you and Lisa feel rested enough to attend?"

"With a little sleep, yes."

Lisa simply nodded and slipped her hand into his.

"Good. Your friend, Mark Terrell is dead, by the way. He escaped after being arrested, then got picked up and crashed into a tree trying to take a curve too quickly while they were chasing him."

"Damn. I hoped he would get clean away after he called me. He was a good man, even if he was spying for you." Daniel lowered his head for a moment, regretting that he had been the proximate cause of Terrell's death. He was sorry now that he had ever gone to work for the NSA. The only saving factor was that if he hadn't, it was likely that he would never have met Lisa nor the other people here, apparently his own kind.

Tyrone saw the grief in Daniel's reaction and let him have his moment of silence before continuing gently. "He wasn't a spy in the normal sense of the word. All we ever wanted was a warning in case we were discovered. He provided that, bless his soul, and he understood the dangers."

Daniel drank the last of his doctored coffee and suddenly his eyes



began trying to close.

Beamer caught it and looked at his watch. "Why don't we all try to get a bit of sleep now? I'll show you to your rooms." He got up and led Daniel and Lisa back into another part of his living quarters. He opened one door and said, "You can have this one, Daniel and-"

"We're staying together," Lisa said promptly.

It didn't bother Beamer at all. "Great. Less work for the maid. Did either of you manage to bring any luggage?"

"Not a thing. We didn't have time."

"I didn't think you would have, according to what the Chief told me."

"Chief?"

"Police Chief. You'll meet him tomorrow-today, I mean. We're about the same size. I'll find enough from my closet for you to wear until we can send for replacements. Lisa, you can talk to Marybeth about what you need in the morning. Now let's all get some sleep." Beamer shook Daniel's hand, gave Lisa a quick hug and was gone.

Inside, Daniel commented, "He does seem to get things done, doesn't he?"

"Yes he does. Go ahead, I'll give you the bathroom first while I finish my Cafe Royale." She had carried her unfinished drink with them.

The bathroom had either been cleaned very recently or hadn't been used for a while. He suspected the latter, and was glad to find a new toothbrush and paste in the medicine cabinet. He brushed his teeth, used the facilities and came back into the bedroom.

Lisa was sitting in the little alcove the bedroom sported, enjoying the moon, now nearly out of sight. She looked up as he came out and began undressing then bumped his hip in passing as she went into the bathroom.

A bit later, Daniel watched her come out. She had undressed in there and was completely nude. She turned off the overhead light as she passed the switch, leaving the room lit only by a nightlight. Again, he marveled at how beautiful she was, even shadowed by the dim light as she was. He didn't even realize that she was merely pretty, not beautiful.



Lisa slid into the bed with him and they came together, not seeking sex now but just the comfort of their bodies close to each other. For a while they hugged, letting the tension and memories of the fire and gunfight drain out of them. Lisa kissed him then turned her back to him and snuggled up. He slipped an arm over her waist and cupped her breast. In a few minutes he was sound asleep. Lisa stayed awake a bit longer, enjoying the glow in her heart at finally finding someone who suited her so completely, right down to the way he held her breast as she snuggled, his hand cupping it firmly, but without any pressure. She lay there, enjoying the sensation for long moments and then she slept, too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sometime in the morning, Daniel heard a soft tapping at the door through a fog of sleep. Lisa slipped out of bed and went to the door. He heard muffled voices, then was asleep again before Lisa came back. When he woke up again, he didn't have to wonder what the barely-remembered, early morning visit had been about. Laying on one of the bedroom chairs were clean clothes for both him and Lisa, including underwear and socks for him, though he didn't see anything other than jeans and a blouse for Lisa. She was already up. Sounds of a shower going came from the bathroom. He relaxed and waited, contemplating his good fortune. If not for luck and a woman willing to fight, he could very well be dead now, not enjoying the luxury of clean sheets on a queen-sized bed.

The bathroom door opened and Lisa stepped out, wearing the missing underwear. Her panties and bra were pale green and resembled a minimal bikini more than anything else. He whistled.

Lisa posed for him, leaned over the bed to kiss his cheek, then pointed.

“Yep, you don't have to point. I know I can use a shower. Who brought the clothes?”

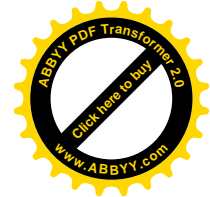
“Marybeth. Come on, lazybones, they're holding breakfast on us.”

“Rats. I was going to strip you and drag you into the shower with me.”

“Later. I'm hungry and I bet you are, too.”

Daniel suddenly realized there was a hollow place in his stomach that needed filling. He got up.

* * * *



As soon as he opened the bedroom door, the wonderful aroma of frying bacon and fresh bread coming from an oven assaulted his senses. Lisa was already gone but he didn't have to call for help in finding his way; he simply followed his nose to the source of those heavenly odors.

The two women were already seated. Tyrone Beamer was just removing a pan of biscuits from an oven across from the dining table.

“Hello, Dan. Have a seat. Did you sleep well?”

“Like I was dropped on my head. If that's biscuits I smell, I sure won't complain about the service here.”

“He just likes to show off for strangers,” Marybeth said. “We probably won't see another biscuit for months unless we cook them ourselves.” She smiled to take the bite out of the words.

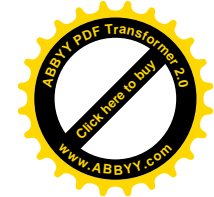
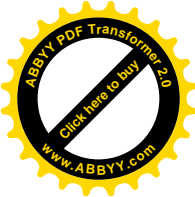
“I'm usually too busy to cook, but I enjoy it when I have time.” He tipped the skillet and plopped the biscuits onto a plate and brought them to the table and sat down. “Dig in, folks. I cooked; I'm first on the butter.”

Daniel helped himself to scrambled eggs and bacon and buttered two biscuits to go with blackberry jam. No one mentioned a thing about saying grace, for which he was grateful. All his life he had felt like an alien on religious occasions such as prayer, though he hadn't made a point of it since he matured enough to realize nothing he said or did was going to change anyone's mind. He began eating.

*** * * ***

After breakfast, Beamer led them all into his office again. He waved his hand in the direction of the chairs. “Coffee's on the table and the morning paper is there. Sorry, only two copies so one of you will have to share. I've got a bit of work to do here, so don't mind me.” He turned his back on them and sat down at his desk, where his computer screen was already active and waiting.

Daniel picked up the Little Rock daily newspaper, the larger of the two. The story of Mark Terrell's death was halfway down the front page. He read it closely, thinking evil thoughts about his own government, that it could so distort facts in its own interest. Terrell was made out to be an “Agent of a Terrorist Group” caught spying. His escape and subsequent death was slanted toward glorifying the agents who tracked him down. Toward the end, there was a subtle hint that he might be connected to three “Government Employees” who had



“gone missing” and that he had been in contact with unnamed persons in an unnamed city in Northern Arkansas.

He could understand the NSA not wanting to publicize its activities, but this was pure fiction, made up by disinformation specialists in the agency. Only his death was accurate and no mention was made of how he had been uncovered.

Further inside the body of the paper, another small headline caught his attention. A fundamentalist religious group was set to begin a survey of the United States east of the Mississippi, with the aim of identifying areas ripe for revivals and soul-saving. Just the way it was worded made him fairly certain that the Agency was probably behind the survey, or at least prodding and providing laundered funds, disguised as donations from wealthy individuals. He knew that it was probably a preliminary setup, to lay the groundwork for declaring Masterville a “Godless Community” by a group other than the Agency. That way, they could claim it was brought to their attention, with never a mention that they had been spying on law-abiding American citizens all along.

He wondered if he should call the inside story to Tyrone's attention, then decided he probably already knew. Certainly the story of Terrell's death wasn't news, other than the way it was presented. If no one else mentioned these two stories, then he might say something. Right now he was ready to see who the “Council” consisted of. He put the paper down and became aware that Marybeth and Lisa both were watching him. He looked down at himself, saw nothing wrong.

“Do I have egg on my chin?”

The women laughed. Marybeth answered. “No, we were just comparing notes. Both of us agree; you're a hunk. Doesn't that make you feel good?”

Their scrutiny was more embarrassing to him than anything else. He had heard them whispering to each other while reading and wished now that he had paid more attention. The impasse was broken by Beamer spinning around in his chair.

“It's about time. The others are here now, including the Chief.”

Daniel felt a sense of relief. At last, he might find out just what he had fallen into, though if he could do it over again, he would; Lisa was worth any amount of stress.

The four of them left together, taking the elevator down to the ground



floor then following the central hallway almost to the back of the building. From there, another elevator took them down.

At the sight of Daniel's raised brows, Tyrone said "I designed this conference room when the bugging and listening devices got so small and powerful. I hate to have the others come all the way up the mountain to meet, but at least I feel like our conversation will stay private if they do. Originally, I feared industrial espionage, not government spooks, but it's just as well; we're protected from both."

Daniel didn't bother disabusing him. If a government agency wanted to listen to someone badly enough, or wanted information badly enough, they could find a way, even if it meant suborning or blackmailing employees.

The elevator opened into a room with stainless steel walls and ceilings with light fixtures covered with what looked like glass, but if Daniel had to guess, he would say it was of some other material. There was no apparent way to change the odd looking bulbs inside the fixtures; another source of bugging stopped. There was a metal door at the other end of the room which was closed securely. This man took no chances. He approved, thoroughly.

The seats at the long table were almost all occupied. Daniel scanned the mixture of individuals, ranging from young to old, men to women and persons of varying colors. They could have posed for one of the diversity ads being bandied about with no problem.

Daniel began heading toward one of the middle vacant seats, but Tyrone touched his shoulder, steering him closer to the head of the table, where he and Lisa were given seats next to each other. Marybeth sat down by Tyrone at the head of the table. She pulled a new Comphone device from her purse and clicked it on to record the session.

Daniel glanced down at a tablet of clean white paper on the table at his place, just like those in front of the other individuals. At the head of each sheet was a quote.

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Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. C.S. Lewis.



“It looks as if everyone is here, so let's get started,” Tyrone said. “First, I'd like to introduce Daniel Stenning, late of the National Security Agency. Besides Mark Terrell, it turns out that we had another of us strategically placed in the NSA; we just didn't know it. Fortunately for us, Daniel realized where he belonged and has joined our circle. That's very good; we may be needing his advice on security matters before this is over.”

Charles Masters, the Police Chief, grimaced. “Tyrone, I trust you, but how the hell can we trust someone from the NSA? He could be a ringer.”

Tyrone smiled. “There are several reasons to why we should believe him. First, you don't really think that fire and shootout he and Lisa were in was staged, do you?”

Masters rubbed his chin where a mix of white and dark unshaven whiskers were showing. “I suppose it could have been. By the way, I've got it covered so far. All I've let out is that three John Does were killed trying to break into Lisa and Marybeth's place. So far, the feds haven't contradicted me.”

“All right, but even the NSA would think twice about sacrificing their own men just on the chance of planting someone here. Besides, it wasn't the first attempt on his life. Remember that SUV that almost ran a stranger down the other day? That was him. And in a restaurant where they were eating, they poisoned his and his partner's food, trying for him that way.” Tyrone paused for a moment, then asked, “Do you know where the leftovers from Sammie's go?”

“Yeah, I think Jim's hogs wind up with them most of the time. Why?”

“Has he lost any hogs lately?”

“Well, Goddamn. Yes, he called the vet as a matter of fact. Lost a whole passel of them yesterday, so I heard. Was it from that food?”

“Almost certainly. And if that doesn't convince you, the Agency and me both ran a deep search on Daniel. Turns out his grandmother was from here.”

“Doesn't prove anything.”

“I think it does when he has all the traits. Besides, I'm vouching for him.”

Masters nodded slowly, reluctantly conceding.



Daniel didn't blame him, or anyone else here if they doubted him. Hell, he doubted himself in some ways. It was all still so new!

“All right, let's move on. Where's Harry?”

“Over here.” Harry Sildon had come in while the others were still seating themselves and had stayed by the coffee and pastries, filling himself up enough sweets to convince anyone that he seldom stopped work long enough to plan a meal.

“Harry, can you stop eating long enough to go over the data you gave me last night? I think we need to start spreading it around.”

“To everyone? Damnit, Tyrone, I told you it's not a proven theory yet!”

“I know, but you're certain in your mind that you've found the key, aren't you?”

“Well, yes, but-”

“Never mind. I appreciate your good scientific methodology, but I doubt that events can wait. Spill it, and give it to us in laymen's terms as nearly as possible.”

Sildon began with simple wording, but quickly devolved into jargon, drawing tolerant laughter from the room. He backed up, tried again, then looked helplessly at Tyrone.

He laughed. “Harry, you ought to try your hand as a stand up comic. You'd make a fortune!”

“I wasn't trying to be funny,” Harry said mournfully.

“I know, but let me give it a try.” Tyrone began speaking, telling the group in simple terms what had been discovered, then going over it twice more to be certain it had sunk in. He then mentioned the two items in the Little Rock newspaper Daniel had seen and gave his interpretation of them. “Okay, the floor's open. Let's hash this out and get a consensus on what action, if any, we should take.”

Daniel sat back and listened. Chief Masters was inclined to wait and react to events. He was scared of the power the federal government could bring to bear if it wished.

Marybeth spoke up strongly for announcing Harry's findings in a



reputable journal.

“Why would you want me to do that-not that I'm in a position to publish yet anyway.”

“Couldn't you do a-a, what do they call it, a preliminary report on findings?”

“Well, I could, but my reputation would sure suffer if I wound up being proved wrong.”

“Listen, Harry, it's going to be more than reputations that suffer before this is over. If the public ever gets the idea that we're trying to conceal the idea that we're mutants—”

“Are we really mutants?” Fred Collins broke in to ask, as if it were some dread disease.

“Everyone is a mutant in the ultimate sense, Fred. Hell, if it weren't for mutations, we'd still be amoebas,” Eric Buffer said. He ran the library but he also kept up as well as he could with scientific developments, besides being a science fiction fan.

That got a laugh from everyone but Fred. “You know what I mean. Are we really mutant humans?”

“Yes.” Tyrone and Harry responded at once. Harry started to elaborate, then nodded at Tyrone, not wanting to be laughed at again.

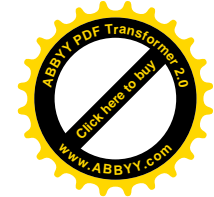
“Fred, I guess you can say we are mutants, but it's not a significant deviation from the norm, like say, having telepathic powers or superman muscles or the like. Just to look at us or talk to us and no one would know the difference.”

“Until they start in with religion and marriage and intelligence and-”

“That's the problem, all right,” Tyrone conceded. “We happen to be different in the very ways that strike at normal people's beliefs and morals. It's going to be a real problem.”

“Unless we defuse it first,” Marybeth said.

“I don't think we can,” Eileen Tupper said. “People aren't rational on those issues like we are. The best we can do is ask for tolerance, and as far as I'm concerned, the longer we wait before we have to ask, the better.”



Harry Sildon couldn't stand it. "Eileen, Marybeth may have a point. I wouldn't like to publish anything except what I would call a preliminary finding, but think of this: how do we know we're the only ones with this prion mutation?"

The silence in the room after that remark couldn't have been greater had it occurred in a vacuum. Finally Daniel spoke for the first time.

"It's possible for sure. I never knew I was from here until very recently, and the way I understand it, Mark Terrell was discovered accidentally. If we go back a long way, as Tyrone says we do, there could be little colonies like us scattered all over the world. The European world at least."

"I don't know if that would help or hurt," Tyrone said. "Look at what's happened to the Jews over the centuries. And at least they have a religion. Picture what the fundamentalists will think of us."

Lisa, the newest council member had kept silent so far, but this remark induced her to speak. "Read those two pieces in the paper again. If the feds are going to start coming after us anyway, I can't see what harm a pre-emptive strike can do. Why don't we simply put Harry's discoveries out on the internet and at the same time publicize the NSA's efforts to kill Daniel and the way they treated Mark? And if we have to fight, we—" Uncharacteristically, she broke into tears. The understanding that she had taken two human lives at last swept over her in full detail, wrenching her emotionally and mentally.

Daniel put an arm around her while she brushed the tears away and continued, the emotional stability and reasoning power of her mind quickly coming back into play. "I killed two persons yesterday. And if those bastards try to harm me or Daniel or anyone else in our valley, I'll do it again! In the end, it's going to come down to them trying to wipe us out, isn't it?" Her green eyes swept the room, flashing defiance.

Tyrone lowered his head for a moment so that the others wouldn't see his amused smile. He had suspected Lisa would become a valuable addition to their group, and this only confirmed it. He raised his head back up and saw that the others were waiting on him to respond.

"I'm afraid Lisa is right. That's what will happen eventually. Best we try to control events rather than letting them control us."

The discussion went on for another hour before Tyrone glanced at his watch and called a halt to further debate. "Folks, we can talk the issue to death but we need to agree on what we're going to do, even if it's



nothing but a wait and see. Why don't we have a show of hands? I'll go around the table. The question is, do we expose ourselves or wait on the government to do it for us?"

Chief Masters was reluctant but he went along with the others. Everyone else was in favor of letting the news go out and see what happened. Once it was clear that they all agreed, Tyrone outlined a general plan for their consideration. First would come Harry, with an easily understandable report on his research sent out to a plethora of sites on the internet, followed quickly with commentary by Eileen from the Mayor's office and the true version of events at the B&B from Chief Masters. Eileen would then call for a town meeting to let the citizens of Masterville speak for themselves once they learned they were, not a different species, but a different breed of human.

"And that last should be emphasized in everything we say," Harry said. "We may carry a mutation, but so long as we can interbreed we're as human as anyone else. I'll repeat that again and again in my preliminary paper."

Fred Collins didn't speak often, but when he did, the feed store owner almost always made a point, sometimes one that the others hadn't thought of, as he did now. "This here town meeting. That's going to be the most unwieldy sumbitch we ever heard of."

"If it's announced in advance, there will also be ringers there from the NSA, FBI, CIA and maybe from NASA for all I know, checking us out to see if we're responsible for all the Mars probes we've lost. Certainly we'll draw some UFO buffs and other fringe elements."

"We'll have to hold it at the football stadium," Eileen said. "Either there or in the park."

"Stadium," Tyrone said. "And let's do it quickly."

"Agreed. I'll set it up for day after tomorrow. At least we already have facilities there, but I'll order up more of what we need, like Porta Potties for the overflow, and contract out for some extra food booths. I can have some flyers printed up, too, if Harry will give me the specifics of his paper in writing."

"All that will help, but it's still going to be like Rosicrucians and Scientologists scheduling their conventions in the same hotel on the same dates," Fred said, but he was grinning, as if he anticipated the coming hoorah.

"And there's going to be a lot of questions flung our way about what



**right we had to make decisions for everyone,” Tyrone said.
“Hopefully, most people will ignore that and concentrate more on learning about what we are.”**

“What if we get kicked out and someone else gets picked to run things?”

“A recall for town officers requires lots of signatures and a cooling off period,” Eileen reminded them. “It couldn't happen real soon. As for the rest of you, I think I can convince the city council to leave us be for the time being, so long as we keep them and the people well informed. I'll put out a daily briefing for the paper, Jeremiah, if you'll print it.”

“That I will, and comments pro and con to boot.” He rubbed his hands together and broke into laughter. “This is going to be more fun than a basketful of puppies dumped into a ton of hamburger. The big boys at the major sheets are gonna cry their eyes out with envy at my Pulitzer Prize, not that I give a flying fuck about it. When can I break the story?”

“How about as soon as you can get it printed? We'll release Harry's preliminary research report to all the right places on the internet tomorrow, then you can have at every day afterwards. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like I better go make sure my shotgun is loaded-and you boys and girls should, too. Once this story breaks, that's what it's going to take to run the national reporters and photographers off your front lawns.”

With everything agreed on, Tyrone declared the official meeting closed and opened his liquor cabinet. After most of them had departed and Marybeth and Lisa had taken Daniel out for a tour of the facilities, Tyrone got Harry aside. “Harry, stay for a bit once we're alone. I have one more question to ask you.”

“Sounds important.”

“It is, Harry, it is. Perhaps the most important question of them all.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Once they were alone, Tyrone put it to him. “Harry, let me ask you a theoretical question: suppose I gave everyone in the world a spoonful of our prions. What would happen to them?”



“Be damned if I know. There's no way of telling without experimenting on humans and I'm not going to do that. Besides, it wouldn't take a spoonful. Prions multiply once ingested.”

“Okay, let me put it another way: what do you think would happen?”

“Nothing, probably.”

“Why do you say that? Wouldn't our prions make it to the brain through food? Isn't that the usual route?”

“Infectious, disease-causing prions, yes. And presumably, ours too. But you're forgetting something: prions take a long time to act. And in our case, we've had them all our lives. Most likely, they've been folding and unfolding, and interacting with, and affecting our synapses, right from birth. Thankfully, they seem to have a positive rather than a negative affect. But remember, they multiply as our synapses increase while we're growing, presumably with the result of enhancing our reasoning power as we learn and mature; from birth right on up to old age. Giving them to an adult who has never had them probably wouldn't cause much more change than an upset stomach. Or it might kill them, though I doubt it. Who knows?”

“Well, suppose they were given to infants. What then?”

“Ah, that's a different case entirely. They would grow up with them then. I can't say they would eventually affect a person like they do us, but I can't think of a reason right off hand why they wouldn't. Tyrone, I know what you're thinking and I won't do it.”

“Yes you will, Harry, once you realize that humanity can't afford to lose this mutation. Just imagine a whole world that thinks and behaves like we do. What couldn't the race achieve?”

“The race would have us both executed for doing it, that's what they would achieve first thing.”

“You don't have to have anything to do with it Harry, other than manufacture the prions for me. I'll take the responsibility after that.”

“Don't bullshit me, Tyrone. I would be as guilty as you. Goddamn, are you really serious?”

“Insofar as wanting to have the prions in my possession in case we have to dispense them clandestinely to save our mutation, I'm serious as hell. I've never been more serious. And if they try to wipe us out, just the threat of spreading them around might stay their hand.”



Harry was silent for long moments, staring off into some world of his own. Tyrone let him be, knowing he had to be silent while the scientist mulled over all the possibilities, pro and con. Finally he blinked and shook his head.

“You really think the government would kill us?”

“Yes, I do. They would have very good reasons, of course. Harry, get it through your head. We're *different*. Humans don't like different. They never have. And they really don't like different when it threatens their religious beliefs. We're-they, I mean-are just built like that.”

Harry went into another long contemplative silence before answering Tyrone.

“You realize if we did it, we'd go down in history as two of the maddest sons of bitches since Hitler and Stalin. Or if it goes the other direction, the greatest benefactors of humanity since Xerxes got his ass kicked by Darius trying to invade Greece. God, how did I wind up in this crazy situation?”

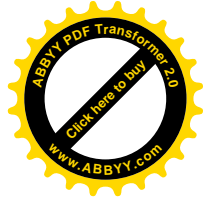
“Same as the rest of us, Harry. We care what happens to the race. The ones we're against don't. They'd rather depend on some pie in the sky heaven and rarely look beyond the next election. Besides, it might not be necessary. Hell, it could be that governments and prospective parents will *ask* us to supply them with our prions once the positive benefits are known.”

Harry shook his head, laughing out loud with a total lack of humor to the sounds. “You're the godawflest optimist I've ever known, Tyrone, but this one time, I surely hope you're right.”

* * * *

While Tyrone and Harry were talking, Marybeth was showing Daniel, and to a lesser extent Lisa, around. They were going down the long hallway they had traversed before, but this time Marybeth occasionally opened doors to show off offices, labs and other facilities.

“I don't know much about the manufacturing side, but Beamer Research doesn't manufacture too much, anyway. Mostly he licenses the products out. By the time they finished the third floor and had descended back to ground level, Daniel thought he had a good idea of how the place was arranged. It appeared to be an enjoyable place to work. The employees all were friendly and didn't appear to be stressed or in a hurry. The whole place was clean and neatly



constructed to maximize space. The building very nearly touched the back of the mountain, where a cliff of granite sloped upward for a hundred feet before the forest began again.

Outside, as they walked around, first Marybeth and then Lisa would point down into the valley at buildings or edifices, describing what they were seeing. He had to admit that the view was magnificent from this high up. And the view right next to him left nothing to be desired, either. As they walked, Marybeth slipped her hand into his, the same way Lisa was holding onto the other one. Lisa didn't appear to mind. He felt uncomfortable at first, then relaxed. It felt nice to be escorted by two good-looking women, both holding his hand as if they possessed him. Well, Lisa did own him now, but Marybeth? He didn't know what that was about. Some local custom? He decided to ask later, but for the present, he simply enjoyed the tour and the view.

* * * *

While they were walking around, Harry was depositing his research results with Tyrone, who sat with him long enough to translate the data more or less into laymen's language for one release, and left it as it was for the more scientifically erudite web surfers. When they were finished, he took the results to his office and gave both sets to Gina and Tim.

"You can split up the work and send these out to as many sites and groups you can think of where they'll make the biggest impact. After that, spend as much time as you can spare monitoring feedback. Summarize it and give me a report every few hours. And send copies to the Mayor, the Chief and to Jeremiah at the *Clarion* of everything you give me."

"Don't want much, do you boss? No problem, we'll get right on it," Gina said, handing one copy of the report to Tim and keeping one for herself. They both began scanning the paper copies. Harry liked to print things out and read them off real paper for some odd reason.

That done, Tyrone found himself at loose ends. He had worked hard over the last few days at his administrative tasks, feeling that a crisis was upon them, and was glad that he had. Now he could devote most of his attention to developments sure to arise from the revelation. He leaned back in his soft leather manager's chair and sipped at his coffee, trying to plan ahead.

* * * *

One of Crafton's erstwhile Administrative Assistants, now reporting to Shirley, burst into her office without knocking, brimming with excitement. He held a printout in his hand and placed it on her desk.



“Look at this! We did our usual morning search for any references to Masterville and this is what we came up with!”

Shirley took the printout, which was the layman's version of Harry's research, and scanned swiftly down the lines of type. She felt her heart thump as a surge of adrenaline coursed through her body. Her heart missed a beat, then she made herself slow down. She went back to the start and read the account in detail. Finally she looked up.

“So that's what they are. Mutants! Good God, what will the world see next?”

The AA didn't answer, being unaccustomed to having opinions solicited from him. Crafton ordered and told, rather than asking.

“Is this it, or is there more?”

“Oh, there's more, and it's building up faster and faster. It's just a matter of trying to sort out and summarize all the opinions and comments and advice and ... well, it's a bombshell!”

“Is it accurate, do you think, or some kind of scam?”

“Ms. Rostervik, I don't know, but it does have Tyrone Beamer's name on it. His company has a good rep, according to our research. I don't think he would sacrifice his company's reputation over a hoax like this.”

“I don't either. All right, get me some good scientific advice about the accuracy of the purported research as well as the plausibility of his conclusions. Then fix up a quick summary of public reaction and have it ready for me by this afternoon. In the meantime, I'll try setting up an appointment with Mister Phillips. If this is all true, you're right: it is a bombshell. It was going to be, anyway, but it looks as if they fired first.”

When the still excited AA left, Shirley began turning the data over in her mind. She could just imagine how it would affect Phillips and the President. They would probably pass right over the part which emphasized that the inhabitants of Masterville were as human as anyone else, just different, like many other variants of the race were. They would both jump on the irreligious and immorality (in their biased opinions) of the people there, to the exclusion of almost everything else about them, admirable or not. She shook her head at herself as she read over the report again, especially the summarized amendments tacked on to the bottom by the AA. There was an offer to



cooperate with private scientific establishments in search of final proof of the theory, a stated desire to be left in peace by the Mayor, a statement from the Masterville Police Chief discrediting the Agency's account of Terrell's death and a demand that interference from NSA "hoodlums" cease and desist immediately, hinting that some of them had come to bad ends already. There was a reference to an advance story that would be the forthcoming lead of the *Masterville Clarion*, covering recent events and explaining to the citizens in detail just who and what they were—and complimenting them on their good fortune.

* * * *

Shirley was disconcerted by the revelations, and had no one to talk to about them. Beforehand, she had begun to believe that there was nothing threatening about the people of Masterville Valley. They seemed perfectly normal to her. But now she didn't know. She wasn't a scientist and was unable to judge the importance of the mutation. What really bothered her was that apparently most of the inhabitants hadn't even realized they were that different themselves. That was an amazing fact in itself, if true.

The other AA came running in with another printout of copy fresh off the internet.

"Look, Ms. Rostervik, there's going to be a town meeting in Masterville tomorrow night to explain it to all the people. We can infiltrate that and maybe pick up something useful!"

"All right, send whoever we can spare, but stay on this story and see how it develops. I'm going to call the director. And by the way, I don't like that Miz business Call me Shirley, Okay? And tell the others to as well."

"Yes ma'am. Will do." She ran out, leaving the latest copy behind.

Shirley merely glanced at it since she didn't doubt the accuracy of the report. And she had some qualms about sending more agents into Masterville, but knew that if she didn't, she would simply be replaced and someone else would do it, anyway. She picked up the red phone and turned on the cam. Phillips liked to see expressions when he talked to subordinates.

"What have you done so far?" Phillips demanded as soon as he came on the line.

"I'm sending some agents in to the town meeting. Have you heard about it?"



“Just did. Go on.”

“I'll have the propaganda guys in, and get them going. They aren't anywhere near prepared. This took us by surprise.”

“It took everyone by surprise. Those goddamn Martians know what they're doing. You can't tell me the whole goddamn city doesn't know exactly what they are. Town meeting, my ass. I'll bet that's just for show.”

Shirley despaired of either Phillips or the President ever interpreting anything except in the manner they wanted to, which meant in either religious or political terms. She had stated plainly in her Op report that she didn't think the citizens were aware of their significance. In fact, she had stated that she thought that leaving them alone for the time being was the best policy, since they certainly weren't hurting anyone. Apparently that was no longer an option.

“Is there anything else to do now?”

“Just use your spinners for damage control for the time being. They'll know how to handle it. Damn, Bobby Lee isn't going to like this. He wanted a gradual buildup going toward the election before taking care of those atheistic mutant bastards. Okay, stay with it; I'll get back to you later.”

The phone clicked dead. Shirley leaned back in her new manager's chair and thought the whole situation over again. Try as she might, she couldn't help but feel that the Masterville situation was being used for political purposes, which in turn was being driven by religious conviction. She thought it was wrong, but still, there was a chance that there really was a national threat. Would she want her children to become infected with their mutation and grow up as atheists? Or were they really atheists? Perhaps they just didn't subscribe to a particular religion?

Looking back, she couldn't remember anyone in Masterville commenting one way or another, although every time she asked a leading question, such as where she could attend church, she had gotten vague answers about there being a couple or three churches in the valley if she was interested.

And the way they apparently lived together and had children more often than not without worrying about marriage; suppose she actually lived there? Would she have a problem with that? Perhaps, if she were married herself. Someday she intended to marry, if she found the right man, and she wanted to have children. But right now she was



thinking more on how to advance her career. And that meant following orders from Phillips. She touched the intercom and asked the female AA to send in the senior disinformation specialist.

* * * *

“Those goddamn atheists knew what we were going to do, Mister President. They had to! They completely pre-empted our plans. Now how the hell would they have known something like that?”

“Are you certain your sections are secure? You had one mole and one turncoat. Why not more?”

“Yes, sir, I realize that and I apologize for it. But this came too quick. Hell, we had barely got our plans laid when this broke.”

“Then they either eavesdropped on our conversation or they're fucking mind readers, and I sure hate to think that. Nothing would ever be secure if they are. What are you doing about it?”

“Just disinformation right now, Mister President, just as fast as we can churn it out. I'm also sending in some agents to that town meeting they called and see what they pick up. That's all we can do right now unless you want to order the army in, or call a news conference and denounce them.”

“No, no we can't call the army in. Not yet. And I want more information about what that place is up to before I comment publicly on it. Now listen, it's all right to get some human intelligence going, but don't let those agents get near you, or anyone else who knows anything when they report back, just in case. You hear?”

Phillips hadn't intended to come in contact with anyone who came from Masterville anyway, but he agreed, then went on. “You will have to make a statement soon, won't you?”

“If the story keeps building like my press secretary says it is, yeah, I'll have to, so get to work. And just in case, take your stuff out of hiding and get it moving in that direction.”

Phillips winced, but agreed. “Yes, sir. I'll do that now.” He put down the Presidential phone and unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk. He pulled out another phone, entered encryption codes into it, then dialed, while his heart bounced around in his chest like hockey puck gone wild. He had thought of using the dirty bomb, but that was just his imagination working. Now that it was a real possibility, he wasn't as sure as he had been. But this was just an order for movement, not a detonation. Maybe Bobby Lee would leave it at that.



“Simmons? Is that you? Okay, good. Listen, I want you to start that special product moving east, toward Arkansas. Why? You don't need to know that yet, but get it started. There's a possibility we may need to use it. What? Yes, I'll send more funding. Have it picked up at the usual drop. I'm also going to double the deposits to your offshore accounts. There'll be more coming, too, if we have to use the product. You understand? Fine, only trusted people now. This can't go beyond your group, not ever. And I rather think you're going to be in a position to start spending some of that money before too much longer. Right. Get going.”

Nothing at all had been said that would incriminate him. The use of off budget funding would be discounted as simply the way the agency sometimes had to work. The CIA used it all the time and it wasn't past the FBI to play dirty on occasion, either. He was in good company. And encouraging Simmons a bit wouldn't hurt a thing. Would it?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The internet stories about Masterville were picked up almost immediately by the national media, especially after Jeremiah Jones wired an editorial which he wrote for his own paper to every big daily, and to all the national television networks and web news sites.

MASTERVILLE: A MODEL COMMUNITY

Yesterday Tyrone Beamer and other prominent citizens of our small city of Masterville, located in northern Arkansas, announced some startling research findings derived from a study of traits displayed by the inhabitants of Masterville and some surrounding villages.

According to Harry Sildon, Chief Scientist at Beamer Research Company, also located in Masterville Valley, most of the citizens here have acquired some traits that the rest of the country may envy and could well emulate.

We are very thrifty. We run our own schools without any assistance from the national government. In fact, we run our city without the need to rob other taxpayers, even while scrupulously paying our own share of taxes to the national coffer. We come out way behind in the bargain, yet don't complain a bit. Being able to run our own affairs is compensation enough for our good people, it seems.

There is virtuously no crime in Masterville. Doors are mostly unlocked at night and parents know where their children are.



Besides, the children are well behaved, even the teenagers. The juvenile justice system here has hardly anything to do.

Most citizens own their own homes, bought without government assistance from the VA, Freddie Mae, Freddie Mac, or any other government program.

There are accidents and illnesses here, just as there are anywhere, but the people manage to run their two hospitals without being accredited by the Joint Commission, a megalith “non-profit” organization which has grown into an octopus that arbitrarily sets hospital standards, without which they cannot receive government funding. Our Hospital Administrators say that they neither want nor need outside funding; they prefer to run their medical facilities by themselves.

The doctors in Masterville manage to practice medicine without paying massive malpractice insurance premiums. In fact, they pay hardly any at all. Just about every person and every practitioner in the city is insured by one of two companies, both located in the city. They are regulated by the state but charge much less than medical insurance companies elsewhere.

The infrastructure of Masterville is paid for by citizens residing in the valley. No money has ever been requested from the government, either state or national, to help with our water or power or sewers or roads.

Some small-minded persons might sneer at the low marriage rate found in Masterville, but no one can complain about the low divorce rate, or the lack of children or mothers receiving federal assistance, such as food stamps, medical insurance, free lunches or the like. Children whose parents can't afford school lunches work in the school cafeterias in exchange for their meals, and do you know what? It doesn't seem to hurt them a bit! But those are a minority. Most children live in homes where they know and love both their parents, whether married or not.

The high schools in this small city produce a higher percentage of graduates than just about any in the nation. Most of the kids go on to college, but most of them also return to their valley afterwards. We can't say we blame them. Where else would they find such a fine place to live? Some of them volunteer to serve in the Army and our other defense services first, then come home. Surprisingly, there isn't a recruiting station in the city. The young men and women make up their own minds. They think learning a trade is a fair exchange for a few years service defending the country.



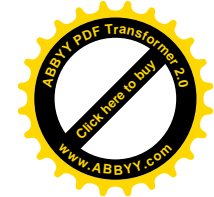
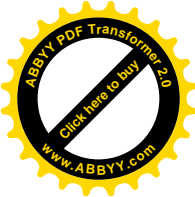
There aren't that many lawyers in Masterville, simply because there isn't much crime nor is there much courthouse lawyering from personal action suits. The people get along so well with each other that they don't find a need to sue. They obey the law, and raise their kids to do the same. Personal quarrels are rare and usually settled through arbitration rather than lawsuits.

There is little poverty in Masterville. Almost everyone has a job and makes decent wages. The cottage industries in the city, like the little shirt factory for example, produce quality goods, manufactured in quantities sufficient to meet demand. They publish books and support writers. Think of some product you've bought that is of substandard quality, such as shoes and boots and you may find a place here which makes them to your specification, and makes them to last. There is a moderately sized research firm which has made significant discoveries in genetics and biologicals and a few other small industries that provide jobs for anyone wanting to work-and our citizens aren't afraid of a bit of physical labor. They believe in the dignity of work, whatever the job, and try to do it well.

Where there is want, the citizens give generously, knowing that half their money won't go into fund raising or paying zillion dollar salaries to "Directors."

How do minorities get along in Masterville? Why, just like any other citizen. There is no "Black" or "Mexican" or "Other Side Of The Tracks" divisions here. We all get along with each other because we respect each other, and we don't need fire and brimstone preachers to tell us how to do it, nor do we need them to tell us when and where and how we should or should not marry and worship and live our lives as we have been doing for two hundred years.

Given all these virtues, we are now asking why the National Security Agency has sent agents here to investigate us? Do they think we are going to contaminate the rest of the nation because we happen to possess a small mutation, just now discovered? A mutation just like the mutations all of us possess, some good, some bad. Contaminate the nation how? By showing what it is like to live in a community with hardly any crime, prejudice or poverty? Where you rarely hear the word "minority" except maybe in English class at one of the high schools. Where we work and play and have kids and enjoy life the way it was meant to be lived? If that is the case, we suggest that every city in America apply for a supply of those same little prions we're supposed to have. It might do them all some good! And while we're on the subject, we will be more than glad to provide them to politicians of any ilk. They need them more than anyone else we can think of.



* * * *

By the end of the day, the editorial, and the city of its origin was being touted on most of the national network news programs and by the next morning it was in most of the media; print, electronic and radio.

Tyrone had turned his den over to Daniel, Marybeth and Lisa, telling them that he had to go down into the valley to see the Mayor and Police Chief and would probably spend the night. The three of them enjoyed a light scratch meal that evening from Tyrone's kitchen, with Marybeth telling them she would see to replacing his supplies. After that they settled down on the big leather lounge and watched the media reaction to the still growing story. Lisa and Marybeth were working on a bottle of Berringer's White Zinfandel while Daniel contented himself with some more of Tyrone's smoky single malt scotch, making a note himself to replace the bottle as soon as he had a chance. Tyrone was being very generous, sharing his home with two women and a relative stranger, although Marybeth was no stranger here, as he understood it. And he was again wondering about the way she stayed almost as close to him as Lisa, and had been touching him almost as frequently. As usual in those types of situations, he ultimately decided to just wait and see where it went.

"Look," Lisa said suddenly. "The White House is issuing a statement."

Indeed, Gregory Sullivan, President Smith's press secretary had just entered the press room and was adjusting some papers while he stood in front of the podium. Very shortly, he began.

"The President has asked me to issue the following statement concerning the revelations yesterday and today about the City of Masterville in northern Arkansas. The President and his science advisors are still studying the situation and he will have something more definitive to say later. At the present time, he has said that he wants to be certain of the facts before taking any action, if action is called for. However, the President wants it to be known that if the reports of a valley of atheists are proven to be true, and that the beliefs are indeed caused by a type of prion, the same sort of protein that is responsible for Mad Cow Disease, the Stumbling Syndrome turning up in Africa and other prion-caused diseases, then it might become necessary to institute some sort of quarantine to make sure the disease doesn't spread. After all, this is a country founded on moral principles derived from Christian religions and he is sure that no one would want an infection that apparently leads to atheism to contaminate the whole country.



“As for reports that the National Security Agency has been investigating the city of Masterville, the President says that it appears to be quite the opposite; agents from Masterville who were working for the NSA have been identified and have been discharged. As you all must know, the NSA, along with Homeland Security and the Armed Forces, is charged with protecting the nation's security, and we certainly can't allow divided loyalties within those government agencies. Therefore, those agents have been removed. Unfortunately, one of them, Mark Terrell, committed suicide by ramming his car into a tree after he was asked to stay in Washington for questioning. The other one, Daniel Stenning has disappeared.

“Now I believe that is all I have for you today, and I won't be taking any questions. However, the President wished for me to tell you that he will be having a news conference in the near future, once all the facts about Masterville and its citizens have been separated from conjecture and innuendo. Thank you.”

Sullivan closed his briefing book and strode away from the podium, ignoring shouted questions.

“That's about as twisted a statement as a ball of yarn after a litter of kittens has batted it around,” Marybeth said. “None of the positives mentioned and the negatives distorted.”

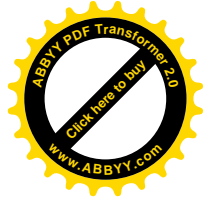
“And not a word about those three dead agents,” Lisa added, giving a slight shiver as she mentioned them.

“Well, at least he got one thing right,” Daniel said. “I have disappeared.”

The instant analysis team of network experts came on next, giving their opinions on a completely new situation which they had never before encountered. It didn't even slow them down, as first one then another gave their take on the Secretary's briefing. A nationally prominent scientist was trundled in front of the cameras and induced by clever questioning to make a fool of himself. The shot had been taken earlier in the day and showed staged skits of him walking up the steps of the University where he reigned over the Genetics Department. Another view pictured him in his office, pontificating about how deviously the mutation might harm humanity if allowed to spread.

“I wonder how big a grant the National Science Foundation offered him for that little skit?” Marybeth said.

“A lot, probably,” Daniel answered her. “I thought better of him. The



only thing he said that made any sense at all was that there might be others like us. Are there?"

"Not to our knowledge, though there almost certainly are," Marybeth said, "and you can bet governments everywhere will start looking now."

"Switch channels," Lisa said to Marybeth, whose voice was programmed into the zapper.

Marybeth spoke and the screen changed. One of the smaller, more aggressive networks was taking a different track. Their pet scientists were suggesting that the people of Masterville submit themselves voluntarily for testing, with the end being to find out how much nurture, rather than nature, played in forming their attitudes, while suggesting that perhaps other communities could simply copy their methods.

Daniel laughed. "They sure got to be experts quick, didn't they? But they missed the science almost completely. Hell, I'm no genius, nor even a scientist, but I could have done better than that if they had pulled me off the street before I ever heard of Masterville."

Marybeth patted his thigh, slim fingers lingering a moment, giving him more cause to wonder about her. Lisa couldn't have helped seeing it, but she apparently paid no attention.

Marybeth switched channels again and got a commercial but kept it there. After the ad for a vacation in the Cayman Islands flickered off, another news program came on. This one was taking a still different track, as if all of them were vying for fresh approaches to a story that was so new there couldn't even have been old ones yet.

There appeared a shot from the air, from not very high up. The reporter was doing the commentary from a helicopter, judging the faint noise of thwoking blades in the background.

"Below we see the two lane highway leading into the already notorious Masterville Valley. Inbound traffic is much heavier than normal for this time of day, as confirmed by one of our observers on the ground. Jessica?"

"Yes, Greta, I'm speaking to a resident of this end of the valley right now and he says he's never seen it like this. The camera view switched from overhead and panned in on the face of a bewildered looking farmer. "Sir, can you tell us your name?"



“Why do you want to know?”

“Uh, well, you're on national television. Our viewers would like to know who you are.”

“So you say. I doubt it, myself.”

That interview ended quickly and they were again taken into the cockpit of the helicopter. “That seems to be the typical reaction of most of Masterville's residents. They don't appear to care whether they're on camera or not. Now back to the studio. Michael?”

An evening anchor came on. “Thank you, Greta.” He turned to his co-anchor. “I have to say, it has been a long time since I've seen a story gain so much attention in such a short time. The public is very interested in it. Is that your take too, Roxanne?”

“Yes it is, Mike. This is a human interest story and I don't think it will go away soon.”

“The President said it might be necessary to quarantine Masterville. Do we have any information about that from the Surgeon General yet?”

“Her office issued a statement. She said she is studying the situation in order to determine whether there is a health threat to the nation, as her charter specifies, before a quarantine could be ordered. I imagine she will dispatch a team from the CDC to test the population.”

“But Roxanne, suppose they don't want to be tested? According to their newspapers and what limited information we've gleaned from the citizenry, they seem perfectly content to remain just as they are.”

“That's true, Mike. We'll just have to wait and see how it plays out.”

With that profound statement, the anchor assured them that they would be right back after a commercial break and insisted that they stay with his network as they followed “this fast-breaking story.”

“I think we'll pass on staying with this particular young man, if you don't mind,” Marybeth said, pointing the programmer at the big wall screen. “All right?”

“You can turn it off for all of me,” Daniel said.

“Me, too. I'm getting sleepy,” Lisa said. “Why don't we all go to bed?”



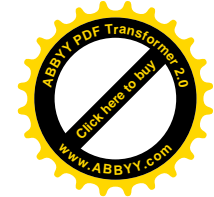
“Wonderful,” Marybeth said. “I need to run to my room first, though. See you in a bit.”

Daniel and Lisa began walking the short distance back to the room Tyrone had given them. Lisa already had her arm around him, leaning close to him as they moved and rubbing her head against his shoulder.

As soon as they were inside, Lisa began discarding clothes in all directions, then as soon as she was naked, began helping him out of the last of his clothes. She gave him a push and he laughed as he fell backward onto the bed, then braced himself as she landed on top of him, as lithe and sleek as an otter with silken skin. He hugged her to him, wound his tongue into her mouth in a long lingering kiss, then began giving her breasts, with their enticing pink nipples, his attention, marveling at their beauty as he did so. He felt the bed give behind him and rose up far enough to look over his shoulder. Even as he saw it was Marybeth, she was snuggling up next to him. *So that's what she meant when she said she would be back in a minute! And that's what they've been giggling about all day-they were planning this!* The thought held his mind captive until he felt the softness of her breasts flattening against his back, then disappeared completely as she snaked an arm around his waist and urged him over onto his back.

Lisa was smiling mischievously. She began kissing him from one side while Marybeth did the same from the other. Before long he found himself more excited and stimulated than he had ever been in his life, with Marybeth's lips moving down his body and Lisa hovering over him so that he could hold one of her breasts in his hands and tease and taste her firm pink nipples with his lips and tongue. He gasped as Marybeth closed her mouth over him. Lisa's laugh tinkled in the semi-darkness as she moved back down to where she could kiss him again while Marybeth did delightful things below. At the end, he thought it was almost more than he could bear. He didn't realize that the night was just getting started.

Later, spent for the moment, he watched languidly as Lisa and Marybeth made love to each other. Although he knew most men fantasized about being in bed with two women, he had never thought too much about it. Now he realized that it took someone, or in this case two someones, who were totally unashamed of sex in whatever variety they enjoyed it, to make it pleasurable for him. And it was. He loved Lisa, he knew, but he also knew that she would never try to own him, nor him her. And Marybeth was a woman he both respected and (he admitted now) admired. With both of them together, it was a wonderful feeling, one he knew most men outside of Masterville



would never experience.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Let's move out,” John Simmons said in his gravelly voice. He climbed into the cab of the big pickup with the camper shell on back, assuming without question that his two partners would follow in the smaller trucks. Simmons didn't care much for transporting this load, but he kept the counter and dosimeter on his person all the time he was near the truck. It wouldn't do much good to finish this Op and then die of radiation poisoning before he could spend the money. So far it was working out well. The radioactive material was buried deep in the middle of the ton of explosives carried in the camper.

The dirt road twisted down out of the Mountains of New Mexico where they had been hiding the goods, each of them spending time at the camouflaged storage site while the other two rested in a decrepit motel used most frequently by migrant families. This time of year it was mostly vacant, and they encouraged no conversation with the few transients who rented there from time to time.

Simmons was elated to finally be moving, and at the prospects of action. Even more, he knew that after this mission was completed, he was through. He could retire to the Caymans or anywhere else he wanted to. That was what he had been working for, ever since his less than honorable discharge from the Army. He was getting old enough for security, rather than adventure, to become the guiding principle of his life. The agency had provided no security. Even though they paid well, it was all off the books. No retirement, no separation pay. But this time ... he didn't like it, but whatever it took. Fuck the government and fuck the country. He was going to get his now.

He glanced into the rear view mirror and wondered what arrangements the other two men had made with Phillips. He had never asked and didn't want to know. All he cared about them was that they follow orders until after the Op was finished and they split up. He began whistling, thinking of all the money that would soon be his due, and not at all about the consequences of his actions.

*** * * ***

Daniel woke up wondering what was wrong, then realized that a female body was snuggled up on either side of him. Now how was he going to manage to get up without waking one or both of them? They had him wrapped up so securely that he could barely turn to see the clock on the bedside table. When he did his face nearly touched Lisa's. Her long lashes were closed and her lips had the touch of a contented



smile. He wondered how much longer she would sleep. Sometime soon he was going to have to get up, regardless.

Lisa's eyes opened and caught him staring at her. She winked at him, then yawned and moved far enough away to stretch her arms up over her body. The sheet which had been covering her fell away to her waist. She touched a finger to her lips in a motion of silence and slid out of bed. He waited until he heard the sounds of the shower going then moved to the edge of the bed and stood up, trying to keep his movements to a minimum and not wake Marybeth up.

He entered the bathroom, used the facilities, then tapped on the shower door. Lisa responded with a welcoming tap of her own. He slid it open from the far end and joined her. The water ran for a long time. Marybeth was gone when they returned to the bedroom, flushed but clean.

“Where's Marybeth?” Daniel asked as they began dressing.

“She's probably gone by now. I know we talked last night, but what do you think this morning?”

“I think I died and went to heaven. How about you?”

“I've been there ever since we met. I mean about Marybeth, now that the, um, stimulation isn't around to blur your thinking.” A faint blush appeared on her face.

Daniel laughed and hugged her. “I noticed that Marybeth sort of ordered the sequences. Am I wrong in thinking that she's the more experienced in this type of arrangement?”

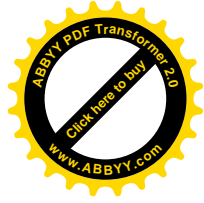
The faint pink color on Lisa's cheeks darkened. “I guess. It was just the other day that we-that was the first time I-oh heck, does it matter?”

“Not in the least. Just curious. I love you.”

“And I love you. And I'm hungry. Let's go eat.”

*** * * ***

Chief Masters had spent the day organizing security for the town meeting and finding volunteers to deputize. Twice he had gone out looking for more deputies as he spotted increasing numbers of strangers and out of state license plates on vehicles parked along main street. Camera crews with their reporters had begun arriving the previous day, then finding no place to stay overnight, had left



sometime after dark. Now they were back, in greater numbers than before, accosting people on the street, blocking traffic and crowding the restaurants and cafes. By late afternoon the situation was beginning to get out of hand. He personally visited every news van which was blocking traffic or parked on private property and told the crews in no uncertain terms to either move or face arrest and impoundment of their vehicles. When that didn't work, he carried through with the threat, backed up by his new deputies. His older, more experienced ones had already been placed in charge of contingents of newly deputized men and women to provide knowledge and guidance. The last thing he wanted was an incident where someone got hurt.

It took only a few arrests to get the word spread that the sheriff wasn't taking any nonsense from out-of-towners. The news vans remaining either moved out of town to a state park just outside the valley or paid property owners to park. A few found takers, then sent their reporters and cameramen into town on foot. There was no way to keep them all from the football stadium, though, simply because some of them got blocked in by the influx of Masterville residents showing up as early as midday. There the townspeople began talking among themselves and passing flyers and printed copies of internet news back and forth. Many carried Comphones with ink book cradles to download data to. New bits of information were quickly passed around by mouth until someone with a laptop printed the news, which was then taken into the stadium offices and reproduced in volume. The school board had managed to get a voluntary crew together for that very purpose.

By the time the town meeting started, half an hour behind the announced time, the stadium was filled and most of the football field was crammed with citizens, intermixed with curious strangers who had flocked into the valley like carnival patrons jamming into a freak show tent.

Daniel wasn't able to attend, much as he would have liked to. He wanted the NSA to believe he had gone to ground somewhere and wouldn't be heard from again. Lisa had asked Tyrone to excuse her so that she could keep him company. Now they were channel surfing and watching the news feeds from the proceedings. As they saw the first frames, it looked as if there had just been a victorious conclusion to a football game and the stands had emptied onto the field, covering all but a small area at one end. It looked that way, but the stands were still full. Comphone recorders and expensive webcams were ubiquitous, mostly belonging to people other than Masterville citizens.



There was no way to keep the events from being recorded, even if they had wanted to, and the council never tried. They simply sat at the end of the field reserved for them and waited, while Chief Masters bellowed for quiet over the intercom and finally got a reasonable amount of it.

Daniel and sat on the loungeer sipping a scotch with one hand while Lisa was stretched out with her head in his lap, facing the wall screen. His other hand was rested comfortably on her breast, moving idly from time to time.

“I'll bet that's the most people from here who have ever gotten together at one time,” Lisa said. “What must they be thinking?”

“What did you think when you were told?” Daniel responded.

Lisa gave a subdued chuckle. “I thought Tyrone and Marybeth were kidding at first, then when I saw that they weren't, I started thinking, and everything they said made sense. I'm pretty well-read, like most of the folks here, and I had wondered about some things in the valley already, like the lack of violence and hardly any churches and so forth. In a way, it's been like living in fairyland for most of us. This is just such a good place to live compared to most other cities that I think we were subconsciously afraid to know what made it that way. But once I was told, it didn't present a problem; it just made everything I had been wondering about make sense.”

“No qualms about being a mutant?”

“No, of course not. However, everyone isn't as well educated or as well read as me. There will be some who won't want to accept it. And of course there are some who aren't like us; they just live here because they like it.

“The mayor is getting started, looks like. Let's listen.”

*** * * ***

Eileen Tupper's sharp, penetrating voice cut through the babble like a keen knife through cardboard. The background noise died out and the cameraman on the channel they were tuned to panned in to get a good head shot of her.

Eileen gripped the microphone and referred to notes she had made after conferring with the chief.

“This is America, and we all have freedom of movement for which we're grateful. We do not have freedom to trample over private



property without permission nor to create refuse on city streets and parks. The citizens of Masterville have never had a problem with this. Now we do and it is my duty to inform you here who are not citizens that we take our civic responsibilities seriously. Chief Masters asked me to announce that he has already made a number of arrests and stands ready to make more if that's what it takes to enforce the law. Visitors are welcome but not at the expense of citizens, so please behave yourselves." Heads in the audience nodded or looked back and forth at others, as if accepting a well-deserved scolding from a parent.

"Now, let's get on with the town meeting as we planned. I'll give a quick background then we can open things up for discussion. Some time ago, Tyrone Beamer became aware that there existed some differences between most citizens of Masterville and the so-called normal population of the country. None of the differences are significant taken singly; many people have the same traits. Here, though, many traits are combined in most people. You've all seen the flyers so you know what these traits are.

"After this was discovered, Tyrone came to me and a few others who exercised some authority or influence here, and we formed a sort of informal council to investigate the matter. We never intended to keep it secret for long; we simply wanted to get the facts straight before giving them out and possibly upsetting folks for no good reason. You all know the results of the investigation, again from the flyers, so I won't go into it all over again.

"You've heard many stories since yesterday morning, many of them either untrue or slanted in unfavorable ways. Take anything you see or hear from outside media sources with a hefty grain of salt. My office will be publishing daily briefings from now on which you can get from our web site, from each edition of the *Clarion*, which by the way will be published daily now, and from postings at the courthouse. You can believe what we say, just as you always have. I can tell you, for instance, that the National Security Agency sent at least three pairs of agents here to investigate us once our differences became apparent from the last census. Why the government thinks we were in need of investigation escapes me, but perhaps they were trying to discover how to govern effectively, something which has so far escaped them."

The last statement got a huge laugh which Eileen had trouble quieting. When she was finally able to continue, it was in a more sober vein. "The fire at Ruthanne's B&B, in the old Stanton Home, was a direct result of NSA agents attempting to assassinate one of their own people, simply because he turned out to be one of us. Fortunately, the attempt failed; in fact, he managed to kill three of the



agents and escape. He did have help there but I won't reveal who assisted him.

“Why agents from the National Security Agency were even here, I don't know, unless it's for political purposes. We certainly don't pose any threat to the nation. And Chief Masters has asked me to announce to any federal agents who are present tonight that most citizens here are lawful gun owners, and they do not appreciate bullying from the federal government for no good reason.

“I could go on and on but let me keep it short. Yes, we're a bit different from other people, just as Hispanics, for instance, have slightly darker skin or Orientals have epicanthic folds to their eyelids. It's nothing more than a simple variance and we are as human as Bobby Lee Smith or the football players you watch in the Super Bowl.”

Eileen paused here for effect, looked over her vast audience, then continued.

“Basically, what we, the informal council you see before you, would like, is for you to appoint us, along with others as you see fit, to help your elected officials cope with this sudden awareness that we are a bit different; to cope and to guide our efforts to remain as we are, a simple, happy valley where citizens can live and love and raise families without hindrance from outside sources. Thank You.”

*** * * ***

“Talk about throwing the ball back into their court; your-our mayor, that is, makes a good case. And she kept it short and sweet. That's good, too. Shall we watch the debate or not?”

“Let's watch for a while. I want something to drink. Are you ready?”

“Uh huh, but make it a single. I want to stay alert in case something dramatic happens.

Lisa was gone for several minutes. When she did return, she had doffed her clothes and was again wearing her pale green dressing gown.”

Daniel accepted the refill of scotch, set it down and caressed Lisa's body while she stood beside him. “Thanks. Mmmm. I love the way you feel in this gown. Out of it, too.”

Lisa sat down, but snuggled against him. She liked the way he complimented her and showed that he appreciated her. “Anything happen while I was gone?”



“Just that the mayor told everyone to look for representatives with red hats and to funnel their questions through them in order to keep the shebang manageable. I was wondering how she was going to accomplish that.”

“It's still going to be a mess.”

It was, and it went on for three hours before Eileen finally got her agenda approved. The informal council was approved as an official advisory group to the Mayor and City Council, and expanded to include another dozen members, to be elected in one week from each precinct of the city. Before then, though, there were raucous catcalls of “atheist mutants” and “dirty sluts” and the like, almost all from individuals no one recognized. Those didn't last long. The women of Masterville, in particular, didn't appreciate the epithets and let them know it. Daniel thought it almost had to have been rehearsed. A person would no sooner hurl a derogatory remark at a speaker than he or she would be quickly surrounded by a group of citizens, who then moved as a group toward the exits where a deputy would quietly explain that they could talk if they could prove they were local voters and were recognized by the chair; otherwise it was a misdemeanor offense to disrupt a legally called town meeting and that the offense carried a penalty of 30 days in jail. Period. No fines as substitutes for jail time. If that didn't do it, the suggestion that prisoners took care of potholes that needed cleaning and drainage ditches that had to be cleared usually did the trick. There were very few arrests.

All the while Daniel watched, not the speakers but the crowd, whenever close ups were shown. Once or twice he thought he saw NSA agents he knew, but he couldn't be certain as the cameras panned by so swiftly. He was sure that some were present, though. Once an agency Op started, it was hard to stop, especially when initiated from the top-it took on a life of its own then.

When it began breaking up, Daniel remarked, “It went down a lot smoother than I ever thought it would, especially for such short notice. The mayor and chief really had it organized.”

“She likes to be called Eileen.”

“Oh. What does the Chief like to be called.”

“Chief.”

“Ask a silly question-”



“Yup. Let's see what the talking heads are saying, then get some sleep.”

Daniel zapped the television to another channel. The analysts were already busy. A few were trying to be fair to all opinions, some were playing it for sensationalism, some thought the government was right or some thought it was wrong to investigate the city, but what they all agreed upon was that trouble lay ahead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Daniel felt increasingly helpless as the days passed. There was simply not much he could do to help. Chief Masters refused to give him permission to so much as show his face in the valley for fear that the NSA would accuse them of harboring a fugitive. He had Lisa for company and that helped to alleviate some of the restlessness and impatience at being confined to Tyrone's apartment, but that didn't cover everything. As he and Lisa followed the happenings, he could almost predict the agency's course of action. He relayed what he thought to Tyrone or to Chief Masters, and over the next few days he was proven right. Not that much could be done about it.

Outsiders continued to pour in. Many of them were paid agitators; hired by the agency, Daniel believed. But there was no way to prove it, even though some of them confessed to taking money to become rabble-rousers. Others were legitimate protestors, sent by groups like *Right To Life*, *Baptist Missionary Outreach*, *Jehovah's Witnesses*, *Moslems For America*, *United Atheists Of America*, and a plethora of similar groups, both pro and con, but mostly con.

A small horde of federal bureaucrats suddenly began sniffing around the hospitals and schools, looking for any violation of federal laws or regulations, and finding them, even if some of the “violations” stretched the meaning and intent of the laws and regulations well beyond anything ever intended.

Jeremiah Jones began putting out the *Masterville Clarion* twice daily rather than once, simply to keep up with an insatiable demand for written news from an unimpeachable source. Subscribers using Enk downloads got a bargain; others had to pay for each edition. Jeremiah used its pages and its web site to refute and complain about the outrages being committed by the government for no other reason than that they were different. He had so many contacts across the country, and was so well respected, that his voice began to be heard over the clamor of religious and moralistic defamation and distortion.



The local television station began feeding its news and comment to other sources across the country, citing facts, figures and reporting every incidence it could find of unwarranted federal nitpicking.

Eileen Tupper invoked some laws on the books which had been very liberally enforced up until then, such as camping overnight in the park or sleeping in parked vehicles. This frustrated the agitators and bureaucrats because they had no place to stay at night and had to drive over congested roads back and forth each day to do their dirty work.

Had it not been for the religious and moral factors, Daniel thought the city could have overcome the campaign against them, but he knew that when it came to religion, logic played no part in people's minds. At the end of the first week after the revelation, Tyrone finally made an appearance back in his home, with Marybeth accompanying him. The four of them had dinner together, cooked by Daniel and Lisa while the other two freshened up and rested.

It wasn't until after dinner, while they were having drinks, that Tyrone revealed what he had come up the mountain for.

“Daniel, do you know whether the NSA had anything to do with trying to track down that radioactive material that got stolen a few months ago?”

Daniel's antenna began quivering. “Yes, we did. I wasn't involved myself, but I know the agency was. Something like that can't be kept secret. What I heard was that the terrorists were caught but killed themselves rather than surrender. The stuff was never found, so far as I know.”

“Right. And the government still tries to quell any mention of it, other than that the FBI is still investigating. Now what would you say if I told you that I was contacted, through several intermediaries, and told that the stuff was in government hands?”

“Now how in hell could you get that kind of intelligence when the government can't?”

“Not everyone is against us, Daniel. And my company does business with companies that do business with the government, especially Homeland Security, building vaccines against prospective biological agents and so forth. We even do a bit of business directly with the government, but I keep it to a minimum because of all the bureaucratic nonsense and oversight. Anyway, what I heard is that a



certain small group of highly placed individuals in the NSA have their own little cabal, closed to anyone else. And that they have the material."

Daniel sighed. "I hate to admit it, but your story is plausible. There are always cliques and gangs in the spook business running their own agendas when they have no business doing so. But this is ... well, if it's true, then this is traitorous; that's the only word I can use to describe it."

"That's how I feel, too. Anyway, my contact was simply someone paid to deliver a message."

"And the message was....?"

"The first part was that the material has been found and might possibly be moving in our direction. The second part is that someone wants to contact you. In Masterville."

"Tell me exactly what the wording was," Daniel said. So far he couldn't tell whether this was genuine or possibly the agency setting up a sting.

"All right. I'm quoting now:Radio. Big P a player. Heading your way. Beware of use. Meet corner park near fire. Same daytime as embarrassed. Remember pink panties.

Daniel blushed to the roots of his brown hair, causing the other three to look at him curiously.

"The contact is genuine, I can tell you that much," he said. "The last sentence is a reference to an, um, incident that only me and two other people would know about. One of them is dead. I haven't heard from the other one in years."

"Could it be a trap? A setup?" Tyrone's face was wrinkled in a concerned frown.

Daniel thought it over. "The other man worked with me on an Op a number of years ago. I heard that he left the agency, but that's not necessarily so. Sometimes names are dropped from the official rolls but the person stays on." He clenched his hands together. "I'm not doing you any good up here and trap or not, I think I have to meet with him."

"What do these abbreviations mean? I think I can figure most of it out, but give me your take."



“The radioactives that were high-jacked are in Murray Phillips’ control. He’s the NSA Director, by the way. He’s ordered them to move to somewhere near here. The contact wants to meet me at the corner of the park nearest to the B&B where the fire was, and the date he wants is tomorrow night at eight o’clock.”

“That must have been one hell of an incident,” Lisa said, with a huge grin on her face. “Care to tell us about it?”

Daniel blushed all over again. “Maybe when we have grandchildren. Not before.”

“Well, what do we do about it, Dan?” Tyrone asked.

“I think I have to go. Just the thought of a dirty bomb near here gives me the willies.”

“Is that all that could be done with the missing Uranium?”

“The way I hear it, yes, but a dirty bomb is bad enough. It could cause us to have to evacuate the city.”

“Okay, another question: why would Phillips be sending the stuff here? Never mind, I can guess. He’s planning to set the damned stuff off and blame it on us! I agree, Dan, you just about have to meet with the man. I’ll call Chief Masters and get you some backup.”

“No, best if I go alone,” Daniel said. “These guys aren’t dummies and they’re trained to spot a trap. And it’s entirely possible, even probable, that someone will be watching Wesley.”

“Wesley?”

“The uh, pink panties guy.”

“Oh. Still, can’t we send anyone? They could stay well away, but still keep an eye on you if trouble develops.”

“I’m going,” Lisa announced.

“No!” Daniel and Tyrone said together, then Daniel saw the expression on Lisa’s face and wished he could have recalled the word which had burst from his lips without thought.

Lisa put her hands on her hips. “And just how are you two planning on stopping me? Chaining me to a bedpost? I’m not letting Daniel go



down there by himself!"

"But Lisa—" Daniel found himself torn between wanting to protect her and the knowledge that women were every bit as good as men in crisis situations-if not better.

"I said I'm going and that's all there is to it. Now why don't you two quit arguing and figure out a way to make it work without putting Dan in even more danger than he already is."

While Daniel was trying to come up with a scenario that would allow Lisa to accompany him, protect her and yet not scare Wesley off, Tyrone offered a solution.

"You said that the meeting is at the corner of the park closest to where the B&B fire was. There's a little clothing shop on the other side of the street. I know the owner and he has a young daughter who works for him. We could have Lisa watch from there."

"Wesley might still suspect. It's a logical place for backup."

"Well, how about all afternoon we have his daughter go back and forth across the street and cut through the park as if she's going home; she does that all the time, anyway. Then an hour or so before the contact, we put Lisa in her place and let her make a pass or two. It will be getting dark then and he won't be able to tell the difference even if he has been watching. Besides, his daughter has long red hair, just like Lisa."

"You should have been an agent. Okay, that might work," Daniel said. "Just go about it openly and wear clothing that you can carry your gun in without using a purse. Thing is, will the owner and his daughter go along with the charade?"

"They will if I ask them to," Tyrone assured him.

"All right," Daniel conceded reluctantly. "I don't like it, but I have to admit I will feel better having someone watching. And I can tell you, Tyrone, not only is Lisa a damn fine shot, but she doesn't panic, either."

Lisa smiled at him, relaxing now.

"I know she's a good shot. She beat me in the city revolver championship match last year. And she proved it all over again at the B&B fire; otherwise I wouldn't have suggested this setup."



There was one more thing which had suddenly piqued Daniel's curiosity. "It just now occurred to me. There sure seem to be a lot of redheads in Masterville. Is that right, or is it just my imagination?"

Tyrone and Lisa both stared at him.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Tyrone murmured. "Dan, you may be right, come to think of it; a few years ago Jeremiah did a humorous article for the *Clarion* about all the redheads around here. Whether it means anything or not, I'm completely clueless. It's worth looking into though, that's for sure."

* * * *

That night Daniel and Lisa slept together, without company, even though Marybeth was back on the mountain. Daniel thought about asking what the criteria was for the sleeping arrangements, but let it go. The night last week had been enjoyable in the extreme, but he was perfectly satisfied to have Lisa to himself. Apparently, Lisa had the same thing on her mind; either that or she wanted to explain the situation.

As they were undressing, she said "In case you're wondering, I want you to myself most of the time. Last week was great, but it won't happen that often, especially while Marybeth is with Tyrone."

"Lisa, sweetheart, whatever you want to do is always going to be fine with me."

Lisa unhooked her bra and tossed it in the general direction of a chair. It missed. Daniel decided that she just enjoyed throwing clothes about while disrobing. "Marybeth and I-well, she-oh, never mind. She's a good friend and a free spirit and she likes you enough to want to be in bed with us. We'll do it again sometime." She peeled down her panties and stepped out of them. "Hurry up, slowpoke."

Daniel laughed. "I think you just like to throw clothes around, but never mind-it turns me on. In fact, everything you do turns me on."

"Good, come show me."

He wondered if he would ever get enough of Lisa. She was as much of a free spirit as Marybeth, so far as he was concerned. At least she made love with abandon and no hint of shame or embarrassment. They were no sooner in bed than she threw a leg over him then moved to sit up. She adjusted her position a bit and he slid into her. She began rocking slowly on him, leaning forward just enough so that he could easily caress her breasts. He held one in each hand and felt the



firm, resilient flesh push against his palms each time she rocked forward. The movements rubbed her nipples against his hands and he felt the friction stimulate them to hard little buttons. That excited him even more in turn, as it must have Lisa. She leaned her body lower and lower until finally she stretched out on him and began rubbing against him with furious back and forth movements while he held her breasts and lavished attention on first one then the other with his mouth and tongue. He felt his excitement rising and strained up against her, coming to a climax just as her whole body tensed and trembled. She cried out at the delightful joy of total release before collapsing on top of him, as utterly spent as he was.

Later they made love again, this time slower, and with the positions reversed. They slept cuddled together, holding each other as if this might be their last night together. Daniel didn't mention it, but he knew that it very well could be.

*** * * ***

Lisa left earlier in the day after Tyrone called and set up the cover at the shop for them, apparently with no problems. Daniel thought it spoke well of his reputation in the city. Tyrone left them alone part of the morning and he had run Lisa through a few basic techniques for acting innocent but held it to a minimum. Trying to make a field agent out of her in one day simply wouldn't work. He did show her how to wear some clothes where she wouldn't have to carry a purse but could still keep her revolver handy. Most female agents used specially made purses with quick-draw pockets for their weapons, but there wasn't one available for her and no time to devise one. He felt bad about sending her off with so little preparation but it was all he could do.

Daniel and Tyrone left the plant shortly before dusk. On the way down, Tyrone turned on the radio to catch the news at the top of the hour. As it had been for days, Masterville was the main story, but this time they caught three pieces of breaking news in a row.

First they heard that Chief Masters had earlier in the day asked the governor for permission to activate the National Guard Company stationed in Masterville to help control the crowds of outsiders still clogging the streets of the city. Permission had been refused, with the reason cited as there not being enough of a disturbance nor enough violence to warrant calling out the guard.

Next, they heard that the Surgeon General had declared a quarantine of the whole valley, citing public health and the possibility of spreading infectious prions as the basis for the action.

Daniel started to let loose a disgusted comment about the origins and



probable destination of the Surgeon General when the last piece of news rocked them. Gregory Sullivan, the President's press secretary announced that an army brigade had been designated to seal off the valley in accordance with the Surgeon General's orders, and would be moving into place as soon as possible. Mister Sullivan said that the President was taking the step reluctantly, but he was bound to follow the expert advice of the SG.

Daniel again started to make a derogatory remark, but Tyrone beat him to it. "Oh Goddamn, I didn't expect this, at least not so soon! Damn, damn, damn! Daniel, you're going to have to ride back up with Lisa when you're finished. I can't wait like we planned. Look me up when you get back."

"Is something the matter?" Daniel asked, concerned at the obvious agitation Tyrone was displaying.

"Yes-no, hell I don't know. Depends on how fast they move. Anyway, it's not anything to concern you right now, so stay focused on what you're doing and maybe we'll talk about it later," Tyrone said, though he didn't intend to talk about it to anyone yet, except the special persons who had chosen to volunteer.

Tyrone was morose and silent the rest of the way into town. He let Daniel out several blocks away from the prospective meeting place and drove away, pausing only long enough to shake his hand and wish him good luck. Daniel kept his car in sight until it turned a corner, then began walking slowly toward the corner of the park where Wesley would be waiting for him if all went well.

* * * *

Simmons was beginning to have doubts about Wesley Carron. They had arrived at their destination, a mile or so beyond a small break in the valley wall that was still heavily forested, with no trouble, but then he had been acting as if something were bothering him. Simmons was an old hand at reading emotions and body signals and he knew that something was amiss. Wesley had almost quit talking to either him or Canton Bass, the third man of the Op. Bass was a former native of the area, though not from the immediate area. He knew the old logging roads, though, and had directed them to a very good hiding place. Even if they were discovered, Simmons had already put out all the props to make the site look like a simple camp, where they were presumably enjoying some time in a wilderness setting.

While Wesley hadn't actually done or said anything to arouse suspicion, Simmons still decided to follow him when he volunteered to go down into town and purchase staples enough to last another



week or so. He could feel secure leaving Bass behind; the man was the type who always followed orders, never questioning. Besides, it didn't matter. He owned the only phone between the three of them; he had insisted on this for security reasons. And if that weren't enough, there was the Dead Man's switch he had activated as soon as they arrived. He had to reset it every twenty four hours; otherwise a timer would start, and in another forty eight hours the bomb would go off. To wrap it up even tighter, once the timer started, even he couldn't stop it. All he could do was get out of the fallout pattern. If he did get orders to set off the bomb, then the three of them would separate and go their separate ways. Simmons didn't know where Bass or Wesley would go, but he had his place already picked out in the Cayman Islands, where his offshore account was located.

Once Wesley's truck was out of sight, Simmons set the Dead Man's switch, then waited until he could no longer hear the sound of his vehicle. He then followed in the other pickup with the lights out. He had an excellent memory and there was still enough of a moon showing to keep him on the old logging roads. As soon as he turned onto the first blacktop, he could see the taillights of Wesley's vehicle far in front of him. He waited until it went around the curve of a switchback then turned on his parking lights; he had no desire to run off the road. Once onto the main highway leading down into the valley, he put a couple of vehicles with lights between them, and only then turned on his headlights. After that it was a simple matter to follow Wesley on into town and watch as he pulled into the parking lot of the City Park.

Simmons quickly turned off on a cross street before reaching Wesley, then parked along the side of the street and hurried back to the park. He was just in time to see Wesley stop on the far corner, look around then seek out a park bench to sit on, as if he were taking a short rest. Simmons noted the location. He circled around into a forested section then quietly made it back to within forty yards of where Wesley sat, concealing himself in a clump of bushes just out of the tree line. He hunkered down and waited. Wesley sure as hell wasn't intent on buying groceries, not the way he was looking around and fidgeting. He had to be meeting someone.

* * * *

Wesley Carron waited and wondered how he had ever gotten involved in this mess, and whether his desperate plea had gotten through to his old partner, Daniel Stenning. He had taken the only chance he had gotten to try to stop this abomination without implicating himself, and had called in a huge favor back at the agency to get even that much done. While waiting at the old motel and watching television he had seen the news accounts that Daniel was now a fugitive, but didn't



believe the agency's story. He must still be somewhere in Masterville, and he had asked that his message be delivered to the city's most prominent citizen, Tyrone Beamer, with a mention that it was imperative for Daniel be receive it. He wasn't going to take a chance on anyone else, figuring the chances were fifty-fifty they would simply report it to the government. If he were caught, he knew that prison was the best outcome he could hope for, but execution would be far more likely.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time when Phillips proposed it. Go off the agency payroll and work for him personally at a huge increase in remuneration. He had taken the bait, then after a few unsavory Ops, knew that he had been a sucker. Phillips owned him now. He had quieted his conscience and gone along, even to the point of helping hide the stolen radioactive material after it had been recovered, thinking Phillips would send it overseas to be used some place where a dirty bomb explosion could be blamed on the country's enemies. Even after Simmons had arrived at the hiding place with the explosives-laden truck, he still thought they were destined for overseas duty, probably exiting through Mexico then to somewhere in the Middle East, where stolen pickups had a big market.

When they got the orders to move to a location near Masterville he could hardly believe it, but he knew it would do no good to protest. Even the promised extra money and retirement held no lure. He had quit believing Phillips. More likely he would end up as shark bait in the long run. No, he had done the only thing possible to both try to alert someone who knew how the agency worked, and one who might possibly keep his name out of the ensuing mess. If it went off anyway, he intended to run, just as fast as he could, and get out of the country to somewhere he could go underground and eventually send for his wife. He sighed and looked at his watch again. If Daniel was coming, it was time.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Tyrone sped back up the mountain toward Beamer Research, hurrying as fast as he could without chancing a wreck; that would be disastrous. He very nearly ran off the road anyway, trying to pay attention to adjust the buttons on the phone panel in the car. His voice shook enough so that the phone mis-dialed; he had to speak up again to get his office. The call would ordinarily have been redirected to one of his assistants, but Gina was there, working late. She answered.

“Get the couriers and Harry into my office, as soon as possible,” he



said, then listened a moment. "Just tell Harry to bring the goods and we'll go with however many we have on the premises. If there's time, we'll deal with the rest of them later." He rang off, hoping his call hadn't been monitored by the NSA; they could probably break his encryption if they wanted to.

Once he arrived at the plant, Tyrone hurried to his office. Harry was there, carrying a plain cardboard box in his hands. Standing around and against the walls of his office were a dozen men and women, all trusted employees he had recruited. The only thing they appeared to have in common was that they all had a Hispanic countenance.

Tyrone greeted them all, then held out his hand to Harry. He was given the box, which he opened. Inside were more than a dozen capped vials containing a cream colored liquid, each little more than the size of his finger. He began handing them out to the others in the room, talking as he did so.

"I guess you all heard about the President calling up the army to seal off the valley." Muttered epithets greeted that remark, telling that they had heard, all right. "I doubt that they'll have the passes covered yet, but there's damn little time, so be on your way. If they do have roadblocks already up and you get stopped, you probably won't be searched; you'll just be turned around and told that you can't leave. In that case, you all know the back trails. Get out anyway you can.

"Now remember, you are not to release the prions except under two circumstances: one, if the army moves into the city and begins rounding up our people with the intention of transporting them to a concentration camp of some kind. We've already talked about that, but now there's a second scenario. There may be a dirty bomb near here, a regular explosive device, but laced with radioactive material. If a dirty bomb does blow here, you can be sure the feds will try to blame it on us, and begin imprisoning every last person in the valley. And that will be your other signal, a dirty bomb explosion. Either of the two is a go." He waited for heads to nod agreement, then turned to his Lab Chief. "Harry, is there anything else they need to know?"

"It's really pretty simple," Harry said. "The stuff in those vials can be aliquoted down to ridiculous proportions and still be effective; it just might take a little longer for the prions to multiply after ingestion."

"Aliquoted? What's that?" Someone asked who wasn't familiar with laboratory jargon.

"Diluted. You can dilute it with just about anything, then dilute that portion all over again, et cetera. That should give you enough of a



supply to last a long time.”

“Okay,” Tyrone said. “Get going. I don't have to tell you how important this is, and that you all have my thanks. If for some reason you get caught, I'll do all that's in my power to help you. Godspeed and good luck.”

The others filed out of the office as Tyrone stood by the door, shaking each hand as the men and women departed.

After the office was cleared, Harry looked down at the remaining vials in the box. He shook his head, thinking about the others being transported out of Masterville. “How are they going to do it Tyrone? You haven't told me. Or is it a secret?”

Tyrone debated with himself for a moment, then decided it wouldn't matter whether Harry knew or not; if the feds or anyone else ever caught on to what he was doing, Harry's name and his role in the seeding would inevitably surface. “You could figure it out if you gave it a bit of thought, Harry, but I'll save you the trouble. What's the best way of getting our prions into babies, so that they will grow up with them?”

Harry thought a moment then grinned. “Baby formula.”

“Right. There are only five or six large formula producers in the country, and the couriers won't have any problem getting jobs at the initial processing part of the assembly lines. It's a fairly smelly business, believe it or not, and they use mostly immigrants, plus a lot of illegals who have forged documents. If they get the signal, roundup or dirty bomb, it won't be long until most of the babies in the country who are being bottle fed will be ingesting our prions. And that can go on for-oh, a year or so, wouldn't you say?”

“At least. Prions are hardy little critters. It's hard to destroy them and it doesn't take many, according to my latest research. And our prions are curious little devils; they seem to multiply only up to a certain saturation point around certain synapses, then stop. After that, they go into the typical folding routine, but not in the typical way of disease-causing prions. I sure hope we don't do any harm, Tyrone. There's a hell of a lot we don't know about them yet.”

“If they don't hurt us, they shouldn't hurt babies. And if we're right, they will only help. We could see a whole generation of children growing up like ours do, able to reason effectively. That's if the feds act the way I think they will. Otherwise, we'll use persuasion to try to get them accepted. It will take longer, but it's a hell of a lot more



ethical.”

“Amen,” Harry said.

*** * * ***

Daniel walked toward Wesley. His old friend, acquaintance really, got up from the bench as he approached. Daniel tried not to show how startled he was at the changes which had occurred since he had last seen him. His hair was thinner and grayer and his face looked like that of a much older man. He kept his lips pressed tightly together as Daniel approached. They passed each other without speaking, as if they were strangers, but as their paths crossed their hands brushed together and Daniel palmed a piece of tightly folded paper. He slipped it unobtrusively into his pants pocket and kept going.

“Stop right now or you're dead,” A voice that had been hoarsened by too much liquor and too many cigarettes ordered.

“Ah, shit,” Wesley muttered. “Stop, Dan. He's got a silencer on his gun.”

Daniel halted, not even trying to draw his weapon, knowing he was covered. He made up his mind not to give it up, though, just as doctrine called for. He was trying to figure out where the voice was coming from when it spoke again.

“Walk this way. Slowly, very slowly.”

Daniel made a hesitant half turn, facing into the park, and now he could see a shadowy figure concealed in a nearby clump of bushes. Slowly, he began to walk in that direction, alert for any chance at all to get himself out of this situation.

Simmons had seen Lisa once as she came to, and departed from the shop, crossing the street and heading off in the opposite direction on a paved pathway that led toward the opposite corner of the park. When she came back a second time and went inside, he noticed that she wasn't even carrying a purse. He concluded then that she was no threat. Nevertheless, while he was holding a gun on Wesley and his friend, he watched her leaving the shop out of the corner of his eye. She had stayed inside only a minute or two and was headed off again, back in the opposite direction she had come from, obviously having forgotten something and come back for it. No threat. As soon as she was out of sight, he returned all of his attention to the two men in front of him.

“Come on, move, or I'll kill you both now,” he ordered.



Lisa had seen Daniel approach the man on the bench, whom she assumed was the contact. She watched carefully as they brushed past each other, then stopped abruptly. A second later they both turned toward the shadowy bushes and tree line, as if something threatened them from there.

From her angle she thought she could make out an anomaly in the bushes, a darker pattern against the moon-lit branches and leaves. That was enough for Lisa. Daniel had told her that it wasn't likely that he and Wesley would speak; they would simply cross paths and he would be slipped a message. She left the shop, walking rapidly but trying to act as if she were simply anxious to get home. She didn't even look in the direction of Daniel and the other man, though it was all she could do to keep from it. As soon as she passed the first concealing trees, she darted into them and began running as fast as she could, making what she hoped was a short circle back. She kept her forearm out in front of her to keep from being knocked about by any low-hanging branches; it was dark beneath the trees. Once she stumbled and bit her lip to keep from crying out at the pain from a scraped elbow. When she thought she had come far enough, she slowed and moved forward cautiously, trying not to make any noise now.

*** * * ***

Wesley knew his life was over. He tried to delay the inevitable, stopping and trying to talk to Simmons several times, only to be ordered to shut up and move forward. Simmons would kill him and Dan just as surely as the sun would rise in the morning, and just as soon as he knew why he had come here. Or even if he didn't learn why, for that matter. He couldn't afford to do anything else. Thinking about it, he decided that Simmons might not even try for information; he was probably just waiting on was a quick sure shot at both of them. He decided to act; there was certainly nothing to lose. And it had to be now.

Daniel was thinking almost the exact same thing but Wesley beat him to the action. The other man suddenly flung one arm out to his side as a hopeful distraction, then tried to fall and roll in the opposite direction.

Simmons was quick as a coyote on a cornered rabbit. He fired several times in rapid succession. One shot hit Wesley in the side as he fell, the second tore up his belt buckle as it went into his gut. A third and fourth missed. Hardly pausing at all, he swept his weapon around and emptied the rest of the clip at Daniel.



Daniel had seen the faint tightening of tension on Simmons' face and saw the barrel of his weapon move slightly upward, pointing from waist to chest level. Like Wesley, he flung himself to the side while simultaneously trying to get to his gun. Wesley's move had given him a bare chance; he rolled over and over as the bullets chased him. One hit the outside of his upper arm, another ploughed all the way through his calf, making a much bigger exit wound than where it entered.

Daniel felt no pain at all. He was simply aware of the *phht, phht, phht* sounds coming from Simmons' silenced weapon, like the knells of approaching doom.

A third bullet scraped a rib before he heard the snap of a firing pin hitting on empty, making him think he might have a chance now. He finally got his pistol loose and raised it to fire, knowing even as he did that he was going to be too late. Simmons already had a second gun aimed at him and his finger was tightening on the trigger. Daniel knew he was staring death in the face but made an effort, anyway.

A microsecond before Simmons was ready to pull the trigger, his head suddenly exploded. His gun fired anyway, but the round was thrown off just enough. It pinked the skin just to the right of his eye, more like a bee sting than a bullet wound. Daniel shot twice at Simmons as his body fell, hardly noticing the last wound.

Lisa had seen the shadowy figure pointing what looked like a gun at Daniel and the other man. She wasn't certain but raised her revolver and aimed. A sudden flashing of fire from the muzzle of the other person's weapon almost blinded her but she didn't hesitate. She pulled the trigger twice in succession. The glare further limited her vision. She thought she saw her antagonist fall, but she couldn't be sure. She dropped to the ground and stayed there, blinking her eyes, trying to get her night vision back.

"Lisa?"

It was Daniel's voice, the most welcome sound she had ever heard. "Daniel!" She cried, standing up and running forward. She stopped in front of him and knelt down.

Daniel reached up with his good arm and touched her face. The final wound which had barely pierced his skin was emitting a stream of blood that trickled down the side of his face.

Lisa gasped, seeing that wound and his bloody arm at the same time. "Dan, you're hurt!" She fumbled for her phone.



"I'm okay, I think," Daniel said, starting to get to his feet. A sudden sharp, fiery pain shot through his lower leg and he collapsed back onto the ground, drawing deep breaths. He hadn't realized how badly the bullet had mangled his calf muscle.

"You are so hurt. My God, your leg is all bloody, too!" She punched out a number on her phone and spoke briefly, telling the operator where to come. It was hardly necessary; Daniel could already hear sirens in the distance.

"I'll live. Help me look at Wes. I saw his chest move. We have to try to save him."

Between the two of them, with Daniel directing and Lisa doing most of the physical work, they managed to get a pressure bandage around his wounds; both of them sacrificing their shirts for a bandage.

Wes's eyes flickered open. "Dan ... sorry, should have known bastard would follow. There's ... there's dirty bomb..." His voice trailed off.

"Dirty bomb! Yes, we know but where, Wes? Where is it?" Daniel shook the man out of frustration, thinking he was dying and desperately wanting that information.

"Simmons..." Blood bubbled from his mouth and his eyes closed.

"Is he dead?" Lisa asked.

Daniel gritted his teeth against his pain as he felt for a pulse. "He's still with us, but that ambulance better hurry. How 'bout you, love? Are you okay? You did great."

"I'm not hurt at all. Oh goddamn, Daniel, I thought..." She put her face down and rubbed her cheek against his, unmindful of the blood that smeared her face.

The ambulance and two patrol cars arrived almost simultaneously.

Daniel declined treatment at first, telling the patrolmen that it was vital to get the other man to the hospital alive. Fortunately, one of them knew Lisa and believed her when she backed him up. He made sure they understood the importance of the dying man and got them sent off. Another ambulance arrived shortly afterward and he took it without dissent, but asked Lisa to come with him. He had pulled up the tatters of his pants leg and seen the severity of that wound and knew he would be having surgery shortly.



Once on the way, he said "Lisa, I think Wes may know where that dirty bomb is and who's responsible for it. Make damn sure those patrolmen know it and that he's guarded constantly. Call the Chief and tell him, too. And make sure Tyrone knows."

"I'll do it, just relax and don't worry, okay?"

Daniel managed a feeble grin around increasing pain. "How the hell can I relax with four bullet holes in me?"

"Just be glad that's all you have. At least you're alive."

"There is that. Know what? We've got to stop meeting this way."

Lisa leaned down and kissed his bloody face, tears leaking from her eyes, but she, too, managed to grin.

* * * *

Wesley was already being operated on when Daniel arrived at the Emergency Room. He was wheeled into another operating room two hours later and didn't wake up until several hours after that. By then it was long after midnight. He saw a blurry vision of Lisa at his bedside and an equally unfocused picture of Tyrone behind her. He fought his way back to coherence over a period of a quarter hour. The first thing he wanted to know was whether Wesley was still alive.

"Just barely," Tyrone said. "The docs say they think he'll make it, but he's still in intensive care and heavily sedated. He won't be able to talk until this afternoon, at least. Lisa told me that you thought he might know where the dirty bomb was located. Is that right?"

"I think so. That's if it wasn't moved after Wes and that other guy didn't come back. Have you got any ID on him yet?"

"Yes. His name is John Simmons according to his fingerprints. Retinal scan was useless after what Lisa did to his head." He put an appreciative arm around her shoulder. "You better watch your step around this lady."

"Damn straight I will." He winced as he tried to reach up and touch Lisa's cheek, forgetting his shoulder wound. Daniel concentrated, trying to remember. "In the meantime ... Simmons. Doesn't ring a bell, but once Wes wakes up and we can talk to him, I'll bet he knows. And I'll also bet he turns out to be an agency goon, one of those Black Op specialists who don't officially work for the agency but really do."



"I thought that kind of stuff only happened in thriller novels," Lisa said.

"Don't fool yourself. The FBI and CIA have the same kind of people they use when they can't do something officially. It's against the law, but the higher-ups get around it when they feel like they're justified."

"How high up?" Lisa asked.

Daniel shook his head, making it hurt, too. "Probably right on up to the President. You'd have a hell of a time ever proving it, though. I think Nixon was the last one we're sure of, but..." The pain was returning. Soon he knew he was going to have to ask for something more to alleviate it. Was there anything else he needed to tell them or to ask, before he numbed his mind? Oh yes. "Did the army move in yet?"

"Not yet," Tyrone said. "I think they got taken by surprise by this mission. So far, people are coming and going through the passes without hindrance." He looked obscurely pleased to be able to share that information.

"Good. How about getting the nurse to increase that pain drip a bit, would you please?"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Daniel felt much better after the painkiller took him off to dreamland for another four hours. When it began to wear off, he woke up. The pain still there but much more bearable. Lisa was dozing in a slumped position in one of the two chairs in the room. She looked very uncomfortable. He whistled.

Lisa blinked and opened sleepy eyes. She tried to smile but yawned instead.

"Sweetheart, go home and get some sleep. No, don't yet." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "What time does the doc make his rounds, do you know?"

"No, but I'll go ask the nurse. Wait here." She bent and kissed him.

"As if I could go anywhere without a wheel chair."

"Knowing you, I wouldn't put it past you to try. Stay here."



“Damned if I'll argue with a woman who can shoot as well as you can. I'll wait.”

The surgeon who had stitched up his wounds came into the room just after Lisa had left, zigging while she zagged. After being assured that with proper care, he would heal nicely, Daniel asked “How about Wesley Cannon? How is he doing?”

“The other gunshot wound? He's awake now, but still on pain medicine and very weak.”

“Can he talk?”

“A little.”

“Then I need to see him, right now!”

“No you don't. Tyrone told me that he would ask all the questions. You need to stay here.”

The phone rang just as Lisa came back into the room. She picked it up, said “hello,” then handed it to Daniel. “It's Tyrone.”

He took the phone while Lisa talked in a low voice to the doctor. In a moment he hung up. Lisa looked at him inquiringly.

“Wesley won't talk to Tyrone. He doesn't know him. He wants me. Doc, sorry, but I have to see him. It's vital, more important than I can say.”

“All right, let me tell the nurse to get you a wheel chair and take out your IV. You don't need it any more.”

*** * * ***

Daniel was hurting again by the time he had gotten up and into the chair and been wheeled into the intensive care unit, but he refused the offer of an oral pain pill. “Let me finish here first.”

Wesley looked awful, with lines, catheters and drains running from his body but he could talk in a whisper and was fairly coherent.

“Dan ... glad to see you. I didn't think either of us would make it.”

“Wes, I'm sorry I have to get right into it, but before you conked out back at the park you said something about a dirty bomb. Do you know where it is?”



“What's going to happen to me?” He looked over at Tyrone, who was openly recording their conversation.

“You know I'm not the one to make those kinds of decisions. And you can talk in front of him; he knows everything I do and then some. The note! What did that note say?” Daniel had suddenly remembered. Reflexively, he felt for his pants pocket but found only the hospital robe.

“Oh. Don't worry if it got lost. It's a map showing where the bomb is, but I can tell you.” He did so, in a halting voice. “There's one other guy there guarding it, but he's more likely to run than fight. You should be able to recover it if the army doesn't get there first.”

Abruptly, there was a hole in the air where Tyrone had been standing, as if he suddenly remembered that there was some urgency to the matter. He left his camcorder behind, still running. Wesley glanced at it and gave a resigned sigh.

“Dan, I'm in this far, I may as well tell you the rest of it. Murray Phillips is behind this. We caught up with the terrorists who stole the uranium, but after they were all killed or suicided, Phillips concealed the Op and kept the uranium for himself. I think he intended to use it overseas somewhere, but when this stuff about Masterville came up, he sent me and Simmons with the explosives to make a dirty bomb, then ordered us here. I don't know if he intends to use it or not, but if it goes off where it's parked now, it won't be the city that gets hit; it will be those army units I heard were moving in. They'll be up in the hills to keep people from getting out that way.”

“Who else besides Phillips is involved, Wes?”

“I'm not certain, but he and Bobby Lee are tight. I wouldn't be surprised if the orders aren't coming from him. I do know that Phillips told me the President is aware that he has the uranium; whether that's true or not, I can't say.”

“My God, what the government won't do. Lisa, can you find a television and see if the army is on the way yet?”

Lisa left while Wesley continued to talk. His voice was low but he spoke clearly, implicating the NSA and its Director several times over. When Lisa returned, her face was pale.

“The army just parachuted in on both sides of the valley. They've closed the passes.”



“Wes, are there standing orders of any kind about the bomb?”

“Sorry, Dan. Simmons was in control of the Op. I don't know how he had it wired. I was just there to keep an eye on him and the other guy.” He shook his head and gave a small, mirthless grin. “Seems like Simmons was watching me, too, huh?”

“Yeah. Damn it, I wish I hadn't forgot about the paper you slipped to me. After I got hit, all I could think about was saving your life, then they doped me up with pain killers until just a while ago.”

“I doubt it would have mattered, Dan. The truck is pretty well hid. Even with that half-assed map I drew, and the directions I just told you and your friend about, it's going to be hard to find. And knowing Phillips, it might already be set to blow.”

Wesley's eyes closed and he began to drift off again as more of the narcotic in the IV was released by a timed pulse. Daniel tried to question him further but got no intelligible answers. “Let's go,” he said to Lisa. “My leg is hurting like hell.”

She wheeled him back to his room. He took one of the oral pain pills, then eased back into bed to get all the weight off his leg. He sent Lisa off to at least freshen up, then waited. He had almost dozed off again when he heard the door to the hospital room open.

Tyrone came in, holding his Comphone in one hand and looking grim. When he saw that Daniel was awake he sat down in the chair that Lisa had moved close to the bed.

Daniel glanced at the clock. Almost noon. “Have they found it yet?”

“No. Wesley's map either wasn't that accurate or his directions were flawed, or both.”

“How about the army?”

“They're spreading out from the area of both passes and refusing to let anyone out. I called the brigade commander. When I finally got his adjutant, I told him there was a dirty bomb in the area and that they should move away from here. He didn't believe me, of course, and wouldn't connect me to the commander. Not that it would have done any good. He wouldn't have believed me, either.”

“And now that you didn't convince him, if it does go off, we'll get the blame, won't we?”



“You know it. Listen, I just talked to the doc and I'm sending you back up the mountain. You'll be safer there.”

“Where will Lisa be?”

“She'll be right by your side; in fact, she's driving you, and I'll get a nurse to come up a couple of times a week to check on you. Damn, I wish your friend had drawn a more accurate map, or given better directions.”

“He probably didn't get much of a chance to copy from an atlas.”

“Yes, and I know how deceptive those old logging roads can be once they've started to grow over. I own some of the land around here and know about them.”

“Nothing to do but wait, and keep hunting then, I suppose?”

“That's right. Listen, Wes was starting to wake up again. I'm going back and talk to him again. Maybe I can get better directions. And more names of the ones involved.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“Of course you can.”

“Tyrone if you're going to hide me, I suggest that as soon as Wes can be moved, find a place to tuck him away, too. He's our only witness that we had nothing to do with a damn dirty bomb.”

“Already thought of it. I've got transportation arranged in case the army starts moving into town and the chief has him well-guarded in the meantime. Is there anything else you can think of to do?”

Daniel had been worrying the problem over in his mind and had thought of one thing he could try, which might or might not prove effective.

“I'd like to talk to Shirley if I could. We need someone in the agency besides Wes to help us prove that Phillips is involved.”

“Shirley? That agent you came here with? Do you think it's wise to contact her?”

“Well, I don't see where it can hurt. And it might help. She's agency, but I think she's good people. She might be able to ferret out some little secrets that we don't know about if we put it to her that the



Director is involved with a dirty bomb, and is apparently ready to set it off here.”

“All right, call her.”

“No I need to get away from here to make the call. They know my encryption code and I'm a fugitive, remember?”

“All right, give me a number where I can reach her and I'll call for you. What do you want to say?”

Daniel thought it over, then said, “Just tell her that it's a message from Class Pest—that was my ID code while we were here—and that Phillips has been holding the missing uranium himself, along with Wesley and Simmons and several others we don't know about yet; and that he's got the uranium already incorporated into a truck bomb and has sent it to this area. Give her all the background on Simmons and Wesley that we've been able to find out, including a set of fingerprints. Then tell her that she may be the only person who can prevent the bomb from being set off now that Simmons is dead and Wesley incapacitated. Say that I trust her to do the right thing.”

“All right, got it.” Tyrone tapped his Comphone. “Anything else?”

“If she will help at all, that's enough. It's all we know to give her, anyway.”

Daniel turned at the sound of the door opening. Lisa came in, dressed in fresh clothes, jeans and a light windbreaker worn loosely over a button up blouse.

Lisa held up a bottle of pills. “Sorry I took so long; I had to get these filled at the hospital pharmacy for you. Has Tyrone told you we're leaving?”

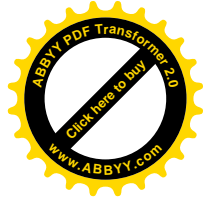
“Yup. Leaving with my favorite girl.”

She shook a finger at him. “Favorite, hah! Listen to the guy. One night with a spare and I'm just the favorite now, not the only.”

Daniel glanced at Tyrone to see if he knew. Apparently he did because he winked at him from behind where Lisa was standing.

“Come on, out of bed now. I want to get back and start nursing you. This ought to be fun.”

Apparently Daniel had little to say about the matter and didn't care



anyway. Two gun battles in two weeks, and he was ready for some rest. If nothing else happened to prevent it. He suspected that something would, though. Shirley was their last best chance, but he wouldn't bet the farm that she would succeed, even if she believed what was going down here when she was told.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Shirley did have a hard time believing, but eventually she decided to give Daniel the benefit of the doubt. Too much had gone on in Masterville while she was there to take a chance on him being wrong, even if it did put her career, and perhaps her life, in danger. And look at what was happening now. The army, the very organization charged with defending the country, assigned to confine citizens to one area and not allow entrance or exit. She thought it must be preparation for even more drastic measures, actions which she knew in her heart weren't necessary. There wasn't anything threatening about those people; it was just Bobby Lee, with his self righteous dogmatism, and belief that he carried a writ from God to turn the country into a religious Mecca for Christianity.

Once she decided to try to help, she knew that the big question was proof. Without it, Phillips could probably wiggle his way around any accusations. And there was a secondary problem. All phone conversations at agency headquarters were recorded. The call she had received a few minutes ago would be on the record. If she didn't do something before it came to light, then she might be accused of involvement herself! She thought some more and finally came to the conclusion that the only way forward was to bluff, and God help her if the information she had been given was wrong. Or even partially wrong. Either one would be disastrous.

Decision made, Shirley called Phillips' office and asked for an appointment as soon as possible, citing a matter of the highest urgency. After being put on hold for several moments, she was told to come upstairs in fifteen minutes.

She felt her heart beating faster as she made preparations for the meeting and reviewed what she would say and how she would say it to make the encounter turn out her way. She forced herself into a shaky calmness as she twirled the combination lock to her personal safe. She reached in and took out a tiny camcorder concealed in a pendant, made sure that it was working, then fastened it around her neck. It went well with the color of blouse she was wearing and shouldn't be noticed. Next she took a bundle of hundred dollar bills from the safe, part of her emergency contingency funds, and slipped them into the



pocket of her suit jacket. Ten thousand dollars in cash would be a great help, because she knew she would have to disappear for a while, even if this worked. If it didn't ... well, she might have to go underground for an extended period, perhaps forever. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost time. She took another deep breath, checked her pulse and strode out of her office and past her assistants, telling them she was going to see the boss.

* * * *

Phillips looked alert and concerned, but Shirley noted that there were bags under his eyes that normally weren't present. Maybe he was short enough on sleep to allay his normally suspicious nature.

“Hello, Shirley. Sit down, but let's make this as short as possible; I have other appointments waiting, so I hope it's as important as you say it is.”

“It's important all right. Has your office been swept this morning?”

“Damn right. It's done after every visitor, so don't worry; you aren't being recorded.”

Shirley knew that was a lie, but continued, trying to present the countenance of a worried, loyal subordinate. “I just got a call from someone named John Simmons. He said that the dirty bomb he's in charge of was in place above Masterville, but he was having problems with it. Mr. Phillips, what is that all about? Do we have a dirty bomb of some sort?”

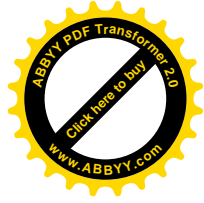
The reaction from Phillips was everything she had hoped it would.

Phillips barely heard her last remarks and exploded before thinking. “What! No wonder he hasn't called me! What kind of problems?”

“He said someone by the name of Wesley Cannon had tried to foul up the bomb so that it couldn't be used, then disappeared. He's not sure it will go off now.”

“Oh, Goddamn it. How the fuck could that happen? Wait a minute! Why did he call you?” His eyes narrowed suspiciously, suddenly realizing he had given out more information than he should have.

Shirley shrugged with what she hoped was a confidential manner. “He told me that he had gotten into a fight with Wesley over using the bomb on those fucking mutants and his phone got broken during the scuffle. He couldn't get through to you, but he knew from the news that I was in charge of dealing with those damned atheists. Listen, if



you're planning on using that uranium to clear those creeps out Masterville, I want my piece of Stenning if he's found. He killed one of my friends."

Her disparaging remarks about Masterville and Stenning appeared to relax her superior. "We all want that, but there's more important factors than revenge in place here. What else did he say?"

"Just that he thought he could fix the bomb, but he can't call you. He said if you have any new orders for him, to relay them through me. He said he would check back in tomorrow with me at the same time."

Phillips' face had gradually begun change as he thought of all the implications of what Shirley was telling him. She noticed a vessel on his temple was visibly throbbing. "Of all the fucking times for someone to suddenly develop a conscious, this has to be the worst." He rubbed his eyes while wondering what to do now. One thing for certain, Bobby Lee would have to be kept in the dark about this screw up. He just hoped nothing had happened to the dead man's switch on the bomb. They weren't ready to use it yet, nor had the final decision even been made. If it went off prematurely, Bobby Lee would sacrifice him rather than share the blame; that was certain.

"All right, make damn sure you're in your office well before it's time for him to call tomorrow. What time was it?"

Shirley made a play of looking at her watch. "A half hour ago. Make it two o'clock, give or take a few minutes."

"Okay, tell your assistants that we're going to be having a long meeting in your office tomorrow, from 1:30 on. I'll be there to talk to him, myself. And Rostervik? Not a goddamned word of this to anyone, you hear? This is an operation approved at the Presidential level and he's the one who will make all the decisions about that place."

"Well, so far as I'm concerned, I think the President is doing the right thing. I hope he either locks all of those mutants up for life, or sterilizes them so they can't have any more little mutants. The country is going in the right direction now and we don't need a bunch of dirty atheists spoiling the landscape and maybe spoiling his chances for re-election."

Phillips smiled for the first time since she had entered his office. "That's the girl. I'll mention your name to Bobby Lee; and, if I have my way, you're going to get bumped up a notch on the ladder."

Shirley made her face brighten, then become solemn again, as if



trying to conceal her elation at the probability that she would be getting promoted again so soon. "Thank you, sir. I just try to do my job as well as I can."

"I know, and you've done a good piece of work here today. Go ahead now, and keep all this under your belt. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." Shirley got up and walked out, trying not to let her legs tremble; she felt as if they would collapse any minute, and right now, she needed to get as far away from headquarters as fast as she could, before Phillips thought to review her fictitious conversation. God, what on earth were the men thinking? A dirty bomb, set off by her own government, right in the heart of the country! She didn't even stop to retrieve her purse from her office. She always kept alternate identification concealed in her car. And she wouldn't even stay with the car for long. Abandon it, buy a junker from someone on the street, and go to ground until she could figure a safe way out of town.

As she was driving off, she thought of another way to protect herself, but first she had to get rid of her car. When she thought about the exposure of trying to buy a junker, she changed her mind, for the moment at least. Part of the academy training for field agents were methods of stealing a car if the need arose, and opportunity presented. She certainly had the need, and she knew just where the best opportunity would be waiting.

* * * *

Shirley parked her car near the entrance to a Wal-Mart Superstore, circling twice to find a place close to the storefront. That accomplished, she abandoned her car, then walked into the huge parking lot of an adjoining mall and quickly found easy prey, an unlocked old pickup truck. She had brought her tools from her own vehicle and had the pickup running in less than two minutes. She drove away, stopped at another mall miles away and switched cars again, going in first to purchase mailing envelopes, a tablet and a pen. In this last vehicle, she drove to the airport and left it sitting in a long term parking lot. From there she took a taxi downtown, then walked over a mile to where a cluster of cheap motels were located. Along the way, she stopped at a computer store that she knew had compatible connections for the tiny digital recorder she had worn in Phillips' office. She paid for a dozen data cards and made copies of their conversation in a little customer booth. By this time, the day was almost over, but she had one more chore to perform. She made it to the nearest post office just before closing and purchased two rolls of stamps. She addressed two of the envelopes to local newspapers, wrapped the recordings in a note citing the urgency, then asked for a list of zip codes. She used them to fix envelopes and notes for



television stations and newspapers across the country. She saved two copies for herself. She dropped the packages into the mailing slot and left, noting that out of town mail would be picked up that night.

She walked out of the post office and on to the motels. She rented a room for the night, drawing a leer from the clerk who noted that she arrived without luggage and paid for the room in cash. Good, let him think what he would; it was safer than having him become suspicious of her other activities.

* * * *

Once in her room, Shirley tried to think of what to do next. NSA agents, especially NSA field agents, weren't noted for being fast friends with newspaper or television reporters; such associations were discouraged as a matter of routine. There was one person she had met, though, a former evening news anchor with one of the smaller networks who had made a career change. She now made her living as a free lance writer. But would Nancy help? Shirley thought she might, though it would put her in danger, too. But it would be nice to have someone with connections who could verify that she wasn't a nut, and who would have access to voice recording of Phillips to match against her own recording. And who had a national following.

She picked up the motel phone and dialed. It was a local number so she didn't worry about being overheard. Fortunately, she caught Nancy at home. She gave her friend a few hints and shortly Nancy Primmerton was on her way. Shirley sighed with relief. Maybe she would get out of this with a whole skin yet.

* * * *

Simmons and Cannon had left and neither had returned. When Canton Bass saw the parachuting army troopers, he abandoned the camp as quickly as his legs would carry him. He wasn't about to drive the explosive laden truck, even if it hadn't contained radioactive material. He first tried to retreat the way they had come in, but the troopers were well trained; they began sending out patrols and organizing the troops to cover all the terrain faster than he ever thought they could. He was forced to back up, and that left only one way to go: down into the valley. He just hoped the damn bomb had a safety lock on it; he had no desire to wander into a fallout pattern. Had he bothered to check the prevailing winds the last week or so, he wouldn't have worried. The place they had picked was in a high, small pocket that swirled and directed the wind, when there was any, directly toward the same side of the "mountain", where the army brigade was setting up headquarters.

* * * *



Nancy Primmerton was burning with curiosity as she drove through the streets of a lower middle class neighborhood, then picked up the highway Shirley had told her to take. She had no trouble at all in finding the motel, and Shirley answered her knock on the door immediately. She did have trouble believing Shirley's tale until she listened to the recording she downloaded into her Comphone from Shirley's data card. She recognized the grating tone of voice of Murray Phillips, or thought she did. She had met him once at one of the perennial political parties which never really ended in Washington.

When the recording ended she stared at her friend as if she had just returned from a trip to the Twilight Zone.

"Shirley, please tell me this is a big joke."

"No joke, Nan. In fact, I felt guilty for calling you, once I thought about it."

"Guilty? What on earth for?" Nancy wore her strawberry blond hair cut short and dressed as if she were on the verge of going out to chop wood or hoe the garden. The only time Shirley had ever seen her in anything other than jeans was at a formal party. Right now, her face looked like the way she dressed.

"Because once Phillips finds out that I'm gone and he can't find me, he's going to start trying to track me down. And that means questioning my friends."

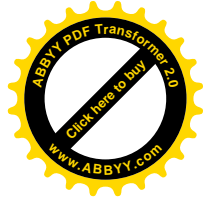
"Oh." Nancy thought about it and didn't like the idea at all. "Well, I guess the best way to avoid that is to get this stuff publicized as soon as possible. Tell me which papers and networks you mailed the recording to. I'll get in touch with them. But the most important thing is to get this out on the net right now. I'm surprised you haven't already done that."

Shirley spread her hands. "I didn't even go back to my office for my purse, much less my phone or laptop. Now you know why, though I was a dunce for not buying a new comp while I was at the store where I put the recording on the data cards."

"I do, indeed understand why you were in a hurry, and I probably wouldn't have thought of a new computer, either. All right, you stay here and I'm going to go to ground somewhere else and get to work."

"Why can't you stay here? Doesn't your laptop have phoneware?"

"Duh. Good girl. Gimme some room and show me the phone jack. I'll



get started.”

Shirley breathed a great sigh of relief. She was no longer alone with the secret.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

“Any progress?” Daniel asked. It was mid-afternoon of the day following his return up the mountain, as everyone insisted on calling it. He had just woke up again, in their room at Beamer research, after having to take an extra pain pill following a dressing change of his wounds by the nurse he had been promised. As usual, Lisa was with him, but now she was still collapsed on the other side of the bed, sound asleep. Weariness and stress had finally caught up with her. Daniel doubted that anything short of a major earthquake would pry her eyes open for a while.

“Nothing at all,” Tyrone said wearily. “And now the army is in the area so now there's no chance of finding the bomb. We just lost this one and we may as well accept it.”

“Damn. Anything else from Wesley?”

“No. Chief Masters or one of his men is questioning him whenever he's awake enough to talk, but he's already given us about as much as we can hope for.”

“Which was a hell of a lot, Tyrone. He risked everything he has in the world to try warning us-and damn near lost it all.”

“True. We'll see what we can do for him, but we're not making him any promises. In the long run, I think the best thing we can do for him is keep him out of the government's clutches-if we can avoid being charged with harboring a fugitive.”

“I can handle that, if we stay out their clutches ourselves,” Daniel said, a sudden sense of impending catastrophe coming over him. “What time is it, anyway? Somewhere along the way from ambulances to surgery to here I lost my watch.”

Tyrone glanced at his wrist. “A little past three. Dan, forget all that. The real reason I stopped by is that things are looking up. Apparently, the call to Shirley paid off. Look at these.” He handed Daniel a stack of printouts from various web pages.”

Eyes widening in pleased surprise, Daniel scanned the pages, almost



not believing what he was reading. He looked up at Tyrone, who was grinning like a politician with a baby in his arms.

“Oh, boy! At last, something going our way! What kind of reaction are we getting from the media? Do they believe it?”

“Turn the television on. I believe that's just about the only thing on the news today.”

Daniel did so. For a few moments, he surfed the channels and found that Tyrone was right; the story was just about the only thing he could find. The pundits were having a field day, speculating pro and con about what would happen to the President and the NSA head if the conversation with Shirley Rostervik was proven to be true and not a fake. Most of them were already detailing how laboratory analysis of voice prints matched those of Murray Phillips and giving their instant opinion of what effect the revelations would have on the coming elections, especially should the implication that the President himself was involved prove true.

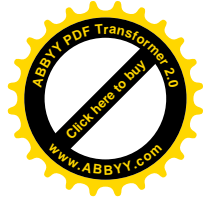
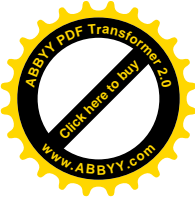
Even more frenzied attention was devoted to the prospects of a dirty bomb in the hands of the NSA and what could be expected if it exploded near Masterville, or close to the army units scattered about near there. The pentagon had just issued a statement implying that they had the situation all in hand and that there was no cause for panic or evacuation “at the present time.”

The President's press secretary had issued a statement strongly denying that the President had, or had ever had, any knowledge of the lost uranium, and that an investigation would be launched immediately to determine the true facts. Sullivan also said that the President thought that it was very peculiar that, if the reports proved true, the uranium high-jacked months ago by terrorists had turned up in the vicinity of Masterville where all the “mutant atheists” lived.

Tyrone was still grinning. “Nice try, Bobby Lee, but you aren't getting out of this one. Dan, I think we're over the hump now, in more ways than one. Excuse me; I need to make some calls.”

Tyrone walked toward the door, intending to go to his office and call Harry to tell him to hold off on dispensing any more couriers with the remaining vials of Masterville prions; perhaps they wouldn't be needed now, after all, and the risk was greater now, with the army in place. Daniel's shout caused him to twirl about in place. All he saw at first was Daniel's face, shocked into an open-mouthed stare.

An excited national anchor, looking as if he had just come into the



studios from changing the oil in his car, was talking rapidly. Other blurry studio figures could be seen scurrying about in the background. The anchor was saying that an Army spokesperson had reported that a dirty bomb had gone off near Masterville and that the wind was carrying the fallout over portions of the army brigade surrounding the valley.

Tyrone walked slowly back into the room as he absorbed the knowledge. This might be the one thing which would get the government to leave them alone, but it was also a signal for the couriers he had dispatched to begin contaminating baby formula with Masterville prions. And there was no way to stop it now. The explosion of a dirty bomb had been one of the signals to begin; a recall would have been a classified ad placed in the local papers nearest where they were working. He had been intending to place them when he thought Shirley's account was beginning to turn the tide of public opinion. Now it was too late; by the time the ads were placed and seen, contamination of the mixing tanks would already have begun. There was no turning back now, so he might as well let it run its course. And, as the old saying went, *God Help The Right*. If there was a *Right* in this situation, not to mention that he didn't think there was a God, either, at least not one who kept a personal, omniscient eye on human affairs.

Daniel glanced at the peculiar expression on Tyrone's face.

“What's wrong? Besides the bomb, I mean?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Tyrone said. He had yet to decide whether or not to reveal what he had done to either the council he chaired, or the city council. He had taken an unprecedented action, one that he hoped would never be discovered. He closed his eyes to get the sight of the blathering anchor out of his vision. Someone would have to be told, if for no other reason than that he didn't want the knowledge lost if anything happened to him or Harry. He had picked his couriers with care; he believed they would carry out their mission, then use the funds he had given them to settle down somewhere and live out the rest of their lives and never tell anyone what they had done. He had emphasized the repercussions should they talk publicly: prison and/or execution as terrorists; exactly the same limited options awaiting him and Harry if their role in the dispersion of Masterville prions was ever discovered.

“What do you think Bobby Lee will do now?” Daniel prompted, trying to get Tyrone to talk. He didn't like the sense of resignation he was displaying.



Tyrone shrugged. "Who knows? I hope Congress impeaches the sonofabitch, but that's probably too much to hope for."

"How about the army?"

"The army takes orders from the President. Same answer: who knows? Listen, I have some things to do; I'll talk to you again later in the day." He left, unconsciously squaring his shoulders as he made a decision. Gina and Tim were already in the loop, as was Harry, but he needed someone else to share the knowledge with. Lisa and Daniel, he decided as stood in front of the elevator, waiting for it to come up to his level. Lisa and Daniel, and for an outsider, maybe Dan's friend, Shirley, once she got back in good grace with the authorities. And perhaps that reporter, Nancy something or other. Soon, he knew, Shirley would be protected under the whistle blower's clause in government civil service regulations. In the meantime, he needed to get back and do some work. In particular, a couple of more rooms behind his apartment needed to be cleaned up and prepared for living quarters. And that quick egress that only he, Tim and Gina knew about needed to be checked to make certain it was still free and clear. In the meantime, maybe Wesley Cannon was doing well enough to answer some more questions. He decided to call and find out.

*** * * ***

"That sucker did remember one more name. He says he thinks someone by the name of Mandel Crafton might know something about the bomb, but he isn't sure."

"Can we contact him?"

"Do you think a call from the Chief of Police in Masterville to the NSA would go through? I don't. Try Stenning's friend, the one that broke the story about the bomb."

"I would, but I don't have a clue about where she is."

"Well, I sure don't either. Listen, Tyrone, I gotta get back to work and try to get some sleep one of these days. I'll leave a couple of deputies to guard this dude."

"Make sure it's one of your best people. I wouldn't put it past the NSA to try popping him."

Chief Masters laughed at the antique phrase. He sobered quickly, though. "Will do. In fact, I'll even get them dressed up like a doctor or nurse."



Tyrone hung up, feeling a bit better. But what would the army do? Or rather what would the President order it to do?"

* * * *

Jeremiah Jones was in his element. The *Masterville Clarion's* presses were running almost constantly, trying to supply citizens of the valley with updated and accurate news. He and his news editor were being buried under a load of stories, items and fillers sent to the *Clarion* in response to his plea to all of his contacts for honest reports and factual information. He had other temporary hires surfing the net for more data and he was paying stringers across the country that he trusted for news items.

Each completed edition of the *Clarion* was in turn sent back out to every form of media, over his personal assurances that he had checked every word, insofar as he could, for accuracy. Up until Shirley's story broke, the battle had been somewhere close to a draw, with roughly half the country believing Masterville's version of events and the other half going with the President. And then the radioactive bomb went off.

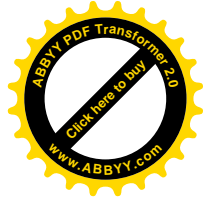
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The explosion didn't kill a single soldier directly, though a few would die soon from radiation poisoning. Others would succumb later in life from being unfortunate enough to have been in the fallout pattern, but overall effects of the explosion were relatively light. It was the President who got caught in the real fallout.

* * * *

Murray Phillips knew the game was up as soon as the President stopped returning his calls. Within a few days, maybe even sooner, Bobby Lee would come out with a statement absolving himself of any connection whatsoever with the stolen uranium and subsequent use of it. He would blame it on the Director of the NSA, and say that Murray Phillips had formed a rouge cabal within the NSA in order to use the radioactive material in a weapon without his knowledge.

Phillips didn't know whether the President could get away with his story or not, and at this point he didn't care. He was running for his life, literally. Like Shirley, he controlled a contingency fund of already laundered cash, though his stash was much greater. He closed and locked the door to his office then opened his personal safe. He filled his briefcase full of stacks of bills, mostly hundreds and fifties with a few tens mixed in, then pulled clothing he kept in a closet to place on top of the bills. He placed his passport in his inside jacket pocket. He scanned the room swiftly. Was there anything else to take? His gun? No, he couldn't get through the airport security with it, not without a



ton of trouble, even if he was Director of the NSA. His gaze fell on the picture of his wife and daughter, now in college, sitting in a prominent place on his desk. He closed his eyes in a brief prayer, knowing the kind of scrutiny they would come under after his disappearance. It would go hard on them, but not nearly as hard as it would on him if he were caught. He picked up his briefcase and walked out of his office, leaving the picture where it was.

"I'll be gone for a while," he said as he passed the outer office where his administrative assistants lived. "You can get me on the portable number if you need me."

Downstairs, he walked out to the street and waited for a cruising taxi to come by. He fidgeted uneasily and eyed each passerby with his flinty gaze. He was almost in a state of paranoia now, worried about being caught, thinking of thieves who could pass him and grab his briefcase and all the money it contained.

He saw a taxi coming his way and stepped forward to get into position to hail it. Just as he raised his hand, a familiar voice shouted at his back.

"Mister Phillips, wait! Wait up!"

He turned, recognizing who it was.

"Mister Phillips, don't leave yet!" Crafton was panting heavily, as if he had run down the stairs in order to save time. In fact, that was exactly what he had done.

"Sorry, Crafton, I have some urgent business to take care of." He turned his back on his subordinate.

Crafton grabbed his upper arm and pulled. Phillips staggered and watched the taxi pass. "Let go, you fool!" He said.

"Mister Crafton, you have to help me. They're accusing me of knowing about that stolen uranium. Please, you've got to tell them I had nothing to do with it!"

"I'll take care of the matter for you, but later, Crafton. Right now I have to go!" He saw another taxi coming his way.

Crafton backed off, suddenly suspicious. He had read every story he could, and had been watching the television in his office almost constantly. Phillips was in deep trouble himself, deeper than his own. And he was leaving on urgent business he said. Where was his



limousine? Why was he standing out in drizzling rain waiting on a taxi? And his briefcase? Didn't an aide usually carry his belongings? Everything about him standing here like this was wrong, and he could think of only one explanation: Phillips was going to make a run for it.

Crafton waved the taxi away before Phillips could hail it. He wasn't going to take this fall. Bad enough that Shirley had named him as the former Officer In Charge of the Masterville Op, a clusterfuck if he ever saw one, but this was worse. Now a source was reporting that he might have known something about that dirty bomb. He couldn't let that go unanswered; not and stay out of prison-or worse. He grabbed at Phillips again as he started to walk away.

Phillips turned angrily, wishing now that he had brought his pistol so he could threaten to shoot this fool if he didn't get the hell away from him. He shook himself free momentarily but Crafton was persistent.

"You're not going off and leaving me holding the bag, you bastard!" Crafton yelled, reaching for his superior again as Phillips tried to leave. He got a hold on the tail of Phillips' coat and dug his feet in.

"Let go! Help!" Phillips shouted, not the wisest move he had ever made in his life. Passers-by halted at the shouted plea for help, watching the struggling men, trying to decide whether to intervene or not.

Phillips swung his briefcase and caught Crafton a solid blow to the head with it. Unfortunately, he had been in such a hurry once he decided to leave that he hadn't completely snapped the lock closed. It burst open, spilling clean underwear and bundles of money to the ground. The spectators suddenly became less anxious to help and more anxious to enrich themselves. A tangle of shouting bodies dived after the money, knocking both Crafton and Phillips both off their feet. As Phillips tried to get up, still holding the opened briefcase, he saw a pair of blue clad legs filling his vision. His gaze followed them on up to the gun belt and blue shirt with sergeants' stripes. He realized that the policeman was shouting at the crowd to disperse. Another policeman, probably his partner, was grappling with bodies, trying to get them away from the stacks of money. Having little success with physical force, he backed up and drew his pistol. He pointed it into the air and fired a shot.

The policeman in front of Phillips dropped his hand to the butt of his own handgun, apparently thinking his partner had the right idea. Phillips lunged for the gun, knowing it would be his last chance. His leather soles slipped on the wet grass by the sidewalk where he had fallen. All he got was the officer's hand, gun already in it. The sergeant



jerked his hand free, retreated a step, and cocked the hammer on his pistol. He pointed it directly at him. Phillips heard the click plainly, even over the clamor of cacophonous voices. It sounded to him like the latch of the trap door on a gallows coming unfastened.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Daniel was able to get around with the help of a cane three days later when Tyrone knocked on the door. Lisa threw on a wrap that, for all the good it did to conceal anything, could have been left where she had thrown it earlier in the day. She walked over and opened the door and admitted Tyrone. He stared at her, frankly admiring her body, then asked if he and Lisa wanted to join him in his office to watch a special newscast. Daniel hobbled over to join them.

"Some old friends of yours are going to be featured," Tyrone said.

"Oh? Who?"

"Shirley Rostervik and Mandel Crafton."

"Be damned. Well, I can certainly count Shirley as a friend now, but not Crafton, even if he is a hero."

"Whatever, just thought you'd like to know. Have you seen Marybeth? I want to tell her, too."

"Here I am," Marybeth said from the depths of the bed covers. She threw some of them aside and stretched languidly, partially flattening her generous breasts.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, attacking a sick man?" Tyrone said to her.

"Well, the doctor did say bed rest, didn't he?"

"I think 'rest' was the operative word."

"Oh, he's been resting. We've been doing all the work. Go on, before Dan turns any redder than he already is. We'll be there in a minute."

"Lisa is the one that's red," Daniel said.

"Yes, but I'm a natural. I'm supposed to be," Lisa retorted. "Come on, guys. Let's get dressed. I want to see this."

*** * * ***



Shirley and Crafton were being “interviewed” by Nancy Primmerton. The interim NSA Director had reluctantly given permission after the tide of public opinion had swung so dramatically against the agency. Daniel suspected that permission had been given in a hurried fashion, as if ordered by a higher authority, because it rather obviously had been staged without professional props. In fact, he saw the preparations being made on camera, while a talking head gave a background description of events that lead up to the encounter of Crafton, Phillips and the briefcase full of money. Even before the program began, it quickly became apparent that Shirley and Crafton had been interviewed separately and that they would be seeing clips of each, not a live cast.

Daniel sat between Lisa and Marybeth, as comfortable as a puppy on a warm sheepskin rug except for his calf muscle, which still ached sometimes. Tyrone sat cattycorner from them, with Gina on his lap and Tim beside him. That was something he hadn't seen before. The man did seem to get around. And he had a mysterious smile on his face, as if he knew something the rest of them didn't.

Perhaps he did, Daniel thought. Just as the interview was about to get underway, the anchor came on with breaking news. The Surgeon General had come out with a second statement, which declared that upon further investigation, the prions that were carried by the majority of Masterville citizens were not contagious. Therefore, there was no longer a reason to quarantine the valley.

The President's press secretary issued a statement a few minutes later saying that the President would withdraw the army to a safe distance from the fallout pattern of the dirty bomb and allow residents of Masterville to come and go as they pleased so long as they were neither contaminated by radioactive material themselves, nor carried any contaminated material with them away from the valley. However, the President thought it “prudent” to keep the army brigade nearby in case of possible violence between “atheists” and “normal Christian folk.”

Daniel cursed softly until Lisa shushed him with a finger across his lips.

“Bobby Lee and the Surgeon General sure do have identical viewpoints, don't they?” Marybeth said. “Why, if I didn't know better I would think they arranged that little charade in advance.”

“Charade is right,” Tyrone said, “but it could have been worse. Now let's see what else Shirley managed to squeeze out of them.”



* * * *

The interview began with Shirley answering questions about what she found the people of Masterville to be like personally when she had been assigned to investigate them. Crafton was as masterful as any newly promoted Washington bureaucrat Daniel had ever seen. He claimed to have been suspicious of the motives of both Phillips and the President all along and that was why he had kept an eye on his boss. Furthermore, he claimed to have seen nothing in the nature of Masterville to have warranted an investigation in the first place, and even promised an investigation into the source of some of the original data, saying that it might have been obtained illegally. It was a classic cover up and a superb spin, Daniel admitted to himself.

Shirley, knowing better, still didn't contradict Crafton when her turn came. She complimented Crafton on his promotion to Assistant Director and wished him well. Nancy then led her through the steps she had taken, and the risks it had involved, in order to prove that the nation had been plagued with a rouge NSA Director; one who ran a cabal of similar rogues as his own little fief. The President's place in the scheme was not mentioned.

“What the hell?” Daniel burst out when it was over. “Is Bobby Lee going to get away clean? That weasely little ex-preacher should be hanged!”

“Easy, Dan,” Tyrone said from around Gina's shoulder, which had somehow become bare since the last time he had looked in that direction.

“Easy, hell. Isn't anything at all going to be done about him?”

“It's already been taken care of.”

“What! How?”

“The powers that be in the party have already decided that he won't be running again. He's finished in politics, and if he's not careful he's going to wind up destitute from civil action suits.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I didn't. Jeremiah does, and he told me. None of you heard it, though.”

“We didn't?”



“No. Besides, there's something more important to talk about. Gina, honey, could you bear to unloose yourself from my lap long enough to go mix a pitcher of this and that and bring it back in here?”

Gina nuzzled his neck and slid off his lap. She paused to adjust her blouse then grabbed Tim's hand and led him away.

“I can start without them, since they know it, anyway,” Tyrone said. “I have to tell you about something I did, entirely on my own...”

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“...so you see,” Tyrone concluded, sipping at his second tall glass of ‘this and that’, which was monstrously alcoholic, though well-flavored, “I had no way to stop it after the bomb went off. And once started, I saw no good reason to stop. I can be hung for a sheep as well as a goat if I'm ever found out.”

Daniel found that the alcohol was welcome. He and Lisa sat together holding hands, fingers twining and untwining as they absorbed the new revelation. He finished his second glass of the rum punch and stood up. He used his cane to walk around Tyrone's office, taking small steps. He returned to his seat and let Lisa pat his thigh. “What you're saying then, is that you're just telling selected people, and then only to make certain that someone knows the story in case you ... uh...”

“In case I'm not around any longer, yes. You know how easily it can happen. If you don't, you should, after these last few weeks.”

“So right now, all over the world, babies on formula are getting our prions, and they'll grow up with them. What about the next crop of babies after these quit being bottle fed? Will you just let them be, or infect them, too?”

“That wouldn't be right, either. I did it the first time when I thought there was an excellent chance we would all be taken to a concentration camp and sterilized, at a minimum, or wiped out completely in the worst case scenario. But now that it's started...” Tyrone filled his glass for the third time. Daniel had never seen the man drink so much. For that matter, everyone in the room was putting away more ethanol than usual. With good reason, he thought, when Tyrone continued. He gazed into space for a moment, as if searching for words, then misquoted, *“Getting on and riding a tiger is the easy part. Getting off is when you run into difficulties.”*

“So you're going to continue the program?”



“Yes. And I want you to help me. You and Lisa, if she will. And selected others.”

“For how long?” Lisa asked, frowning.

“Oh, I should think thirty years would about do it, if we could make it that long. It's almost certain that someone will catch on before then, though. All we can reasonably hope for is a good start and to get our prions spread widely enough so that babies born over the next few years will be able to grow up sane.”

“Sane. You think this program is sane? You're proposing to change the psychic makeup of everyone on earth. Without yet knowing the consequences!” Daniel was on his feet again, this time with Lisa by his side.

“Masterville shows you what the consequences will be. A world where people can think without crazy and illogical beliefs getting in the way. Where you can love and live and have children in peace, without having to worry about the barbarians roaring over the hill, destroying and killing. Where education and politics are practiced by those with the interests of everyone in mind, not just themselves. Where...”

David waved a hand at him to stop. “Never mind the propaganda. I've heard it all already. Listen Tyrone, I agree that this is a fine place to live, but you have to remember that I didn't grow up here like the rest of you. All I really want is to stay with Lisa and to have a family. I'm tired of wandering around.”

“Dan.” He felt Lisa's arms steal around him and cross over his chest. Her breasts flattened softly against his back. “I want a family, too. But I agree with Tyrone. The world needs our prions. Why don't we work for him for a few years, then come back here to live?”

Daniel felt his resistance slipping. It was surreal, outrageous, to think of a few individuals like he and Lisa slipping into and out of places where prions could be injected into the food supply meant for babies. Sooner or later they would probably get caught. And the President hadn't withdrawn the army yet. Hell, they might not even get out of the valley. He was still classed as a fugitive by the NSA. The details of Tyrone's plan might get out and send the army down into the valley, this time for real. On the other hand, Tyrone could probably get something done about his status with the agency. If he could, then...”

“Well, hell. I've been a field agent for ten years. I guess I can go a while longer.”



Tyrone grinned. "Good. Now I have someone I want you to meet. Gina, why don't you go bring her in?"

Gina left the room while Daniel and Lisa stared curiously at him. Her? Who could she be?

A few minutes later Gina returned, leading Shirley by the hand.

Daniel's curious frown broke into a huge grin. "Shirley!" He ran to hug her.

Once they had all settled down again, with fresh drinks from a new pitcher, Daniel asked, with a definite slur to his words, "What's-what are you up to now, Tyrone? You've already got half the world upset with us. Have you taken over the NSA now, too?"

Tyrone laughed. "Not at all. Mister Crafton has just appointed Ms. Rostervik as official liaison to Masterville Valley. Actually, she's been sent here by order of the congressional oversight committee, but they didn't specify a particular person. Shirley volunteered and Crafton approved. I think it made for a happy ending for both of them since their personalities are, shall we say, the types which tend to clash. And now we have an insider again."

Daniel bolted upright, spilling half his drink. "Shirley? Are you one of us?"

She smiled ruefully. "I wish. No, it just turns out that I mostly think like you do, so I've been made an honorary member of the inner circle. And I'm also one of the first of Tyrone's adult volunteers. I got my first dose of prions today. Believe it or not, some parents of very young babies are asking for them, even against the Surgeon General's advice. Adults are shopping for them, too. I suspect that it won't be too long before a supply will find its way onto the net."

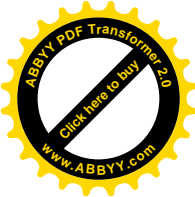
"This is going too fast for me," Lisa said. "Daniel, you're getting sloppy drunk. Come on to bed and we can take up where we left off tomorrow. Marybeth, are you coming?"

Marybeth eyed Shirley's beautiful face and figure. "No, I think I'll stay up a while longer and see what else develops."

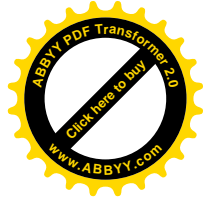
As he and Lisa wobbled off to their room to reflect, Daniel couldn't help but wonder how *that* would work out.

THE END

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Author's note: This novel was such fun to write that I believe I may do another or two and continue the story. If so, they will be listed as books in the STRANGE VALLEY series. Also, if I do continue, the next book will probably be titled A STRANGE VALLEY: DISPERSAL.

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