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Prion Promises

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PRION PROMISES
A STRANGE VALLEY NOVEL

By
Darrell Bain

DEDICATION

To Jamie Jones and Gregory Sorenson and to all the other policemen and law officers in the country who protect and serve us twenty four hours a day, almost always in unseen ways, sometimes giving their lives, and all too often providing much better service to our communities, towns and cities than our behavior deserves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I originally said that if I wrote another novel aboutStrangeValley it would probably be titled DISPERSAL: A STRANGE VALLEY NOVEL. Up until a short time ago, I still was fixed on that title. And then this one suddenly popped into my mind and I decided I like it better. Maybe this will teach me not to try giving a book a title until I've written it first. At any rate, here it is, the second book in THE STRANGE VALLEY Universe. It is not necessary to read the first book before this one. Each stands alone and the two are related only in that they have some of the same characters and the premise of how their prions function is the same.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank Jamie Jones for educating me in some aspects of firearms and for preventing me from introducing some erroneous information into this book. The specs on the new Urban Assault Weapon listed in the appendix are taken from a weapon he designed, but which has not been manufactured, at least in that form.

My thanks also go to Deron Douglas and Lida E. Quillen, two of my publishers, for their help in getting my books out into the world.

CHAPTER ONE

Daniel Stenning was having intermittent problems seeing the big screen taking up most of one wall of the spacious den in Tyrone Beamer's apartment, built into the Genetechnics plant owned by him. The plant was located halfway up the "mountain", actually a large hill, that overlooked Masterville Valley. Daniel's visual problems were caused by Lisa Berry, who was sitting in his lap. Periodically, she insinuated herself between his gaze and the screen by placing her lips against his or tickling his neck and ear with her tongue. He had to admit that it was much more pleasant than watching the inauguration of the new president, what with his adjective-laden speech about "new paradigms", "reaching out generously to others" and the like. Nevertheless, he thought they should watch it. The new president's thinking could have enormous implications for their future.

"Do you really want to sit through the rest of this?" Lisa murmured against his lips, then slid her tongue partway into his mouth. Strands of straight red hair tickled the arm he was supporting her with, and more strands blurred his vision.

"We should. What he says may mean a lot for our future."

Lisa blew at the vagrant wisp of hair. "Oh, poo. He's not going to say anything in this speech that means a hill of beans and you know it."

Dan had to admit she was right, but nevertheless...

Lisa moved back to his ear with her tongue, making him laugh, even as he felt the familiar warmth she always induced begin to build in his body. Lisa wasn't bashful at all; very few of the Masterville women were. She didn't care that others were in the room with them, watching the same speech.



"If you're that interested, you can watch it from bed," Lisa whispered.

Daniel squirmed and ran his hand up the length of her bare thigh to where her shorts began. "Would we watch?"

"You can if you like. I'll be busy." Her tongue moved in his ear, making promises.

Daniel stood up abruptly, dumping her from his lap, but catching her hand to prevent her from going sprawling. He drew her to him. He was learning not to be embarrassed, too. "All right, let's go."

Just as they turned their back on the rest of the group, the volume and character of the broadcast changed abruptly. He heard screams, shouts, crashing sounds and a cacophony of voices going shrill with excitement, all trying to speak at once. He whirled back around to see what was happening.

On the screen, Daniel could see a tangle of bodies bent over a figure, with the commentator shouting that the President had been shot, and being overridden by other voices yelling unintelligibly. He felt Lisa gripping his hand fiercely. The scene opened up momentarily, showing the new president laying on his back with blood pouring from his mouth while hands and heads came into view, and receded just as quickly. He heard cries for a doctor and other voices yelling for an ambulance. In the background, the huge crowd that had gathered in the Washington Memorial Plaza for the inauguration was moving like a huge erratic amoeba, with pseudopods of humanity going first this way then that, but making little overall progress. The wail of sirens sounded in the background and became louder and louder.

Daniel didn't have to look any longer, even though he still stared at the chaotic scene. He had seen death before and he knew that President Sheffield was a goner. The blood had been coming from a hole in his chest directly over the heart as well as from his mouth. He found himself thinking that whoever shot him must be an excellent marksman.

"We're in for it now," Tyrone Beamer said.

Daniel looked over Lisa's shoulder. Tyrone Beamer, the head of Beamer research and the true leader of Masterville Valley was shaking his head, lips drawn into a grim line.

"Why?" Lisa said. "We didn't do it."

"We'll be blamed for it, if for no other reason than that religious bigot



who's going to be president now."

Daniel felt his stomach knotting in distress. Tyrone was ahead of the rest of them, as he usually was.

John Sheffield had selected Manfred Williamson as his running mate, a southern born again Christian, in order to help pull in the votes of the fundamentalist and religious right wing of the party. Before that, Williamson was one of the ones who had called for isolation, if not outright imprisonment, of the population of Masterville Valley. "Mutant Atheist Prion People", he had labeled them, ignoring other voices like the Surgeon General, who advised against any sort of pogrom. And though the people of Masterville weren't exactly confined to the valley, one battalion of the army brigade that had been moved in by the previous president was still in place. Theoretically, it was to keep tourists away from the area that had been contaminated by a dirty bomb, one that a rouge cabal of the National Security Agency had exploded close to one of the passes leading into the valley, but Daniel knew that wasn't the only reason. They were there as the forerunner of even more troops if they were needed—and he knew who defined "need". The media kept the valley in the spotlight because of the differences of its population from the norm; differences that he knew could instigate violence from bigoted know-it-alls at the drop of a politician's speech or the whim of a publicity-seeking preacher.

Daniel started to comment about Masterville taking the blame for the assassination but Lisa shushed him by pushing him back down into the chair where they had been sitting and again plopping down into his lap. "Just watch for now," she said.

As it had in the past, the assassination played out on television during the long afternoon in all its gory detail, with disoriented reporters probing at every possible ramification, like a hive of bees swarming over a single honeycomb. The group in the apartment stayed silent as the big wall screen eventually showed feeds of the new president taking the oath of office, his cherubic face belied by hooded gray eyes resembling those of a lizard. There were flecks of blood spattered on the jacket of his light gray suit. Daniel, being a natural cynic so far as politicians were concerned, was certain that he had kept wearing the blood-adorned garment purposely, knowing it would make a great image for later use.

When the screen began showing reruns from just after the assassination, where the new president had disappeared from view into a phalanx of limousines headed back to the White House, Tyrone Beamer shut off the television. He got up from where he had been



sitting with Marybeth Chambers, his part time lover, and went to the bar to freshen their drinks. Daniel suspected that only the succession of crisis' over the last year or so had prevented them from making their relationship exclusive, or as exclusive as Masterville people ever got. Or perhaps not; he and Lisa had been out of circulation, away from the valley for most of those months. They could have tied the knot for all he knew, though he doubted it; marriage wasn't a big thing here.

Tyrone sipped at his new drink as he leaned back against the bar. He said nothing, but raised bushy red eyebrows, denoting that the subject of President Williamson was open for debate.

Daniel had a question for him immediately. "Tyrone, a while ago you said >we're in for it, now'. You didn't mean immediately, did you?"

Tyrone rubbed at the beginning of reddish whiskers on his chin. "Hard to say, Dan. For certain, there's going to be those who blame us immediately, not even stopping to consider how much better off we would have been, relatively speaking, with Sheffield than with Williamson. But officially, I'd say it won't begin right away. Williamson may be ignorant about most things, but he's no dummy when it comes to politics. He'll let things stew a bit, then hop on us when he needs to stir up the people to get his points across in Congress. And that's the real problem: the House and Senate are split three ways just about evenly now between the conservatives, religionists and the moderate factions. It won't take much agitation to swing the majority against us, and he has two years to work at it."

Lisa leaned forward a bit from her position in Daniel's lap. "Daniel and I have been outside the valley for months, Tyrone. I can tell you, the people are jittery. Most of them still don't quite know what to think of us, and the religious-minded are damned scared of getting infected with our prions for fear they'll turn into atheists. They think we're emissaries from the devil. Or the fundamentalists do, anyway."

She leaned back against Daniel, making him speak past her freckles. "Lisa didn't mention that there are lots of people who *want* our prions, especially for their kids. There's even a black market, despite the penalties for selling them."

"Which means there are a few sane people out there," Gina Lesters, one of Beamer's administrative assistants said. "And we know about how many, since we supply the black market." Like Tyrone Beamer, she was a redhead. There were lots of redheads in Masterville.

Timothy Powers, Tyrone's other administrative assistant said



"There's more than a few; more like fifteen percent, maybe."

"What are you talking about?" Lisa asked, covering Daniel's hand where his fingers had begun tickling her bare knee.

"That's our estimate of the percentage of the population who don't believe in religion at all." Timothy said. He ran his fingers through thinning brown hair and smiled at Gina.

"And everyone else is insane, is that what you're saying?"

Tyrone spoke for him. He grinned, making him look younger than the mid-forties he admitted to. "Look at it like this," he said. "Suppose that you not only went around telling people that you regularly talked to an invisible superman, but that you did it in public. Further, suppose you claimed that this invisible superman was responsible for everything either good or evil that happened to you and that if you were good and pleaded with him, that he would sometimes intervene in your behalf and help you, and that if you didn't believe this, you would be punished terribly, either in this life or when you die. Suppose that you regularly thanked this invisible entity for your every meal in public, out loud, and talked over your affairs with him at regular intervals, pleading for guidance. Then just think: if you called your superman anything but God, you would be judged totally insane and locked up for the rest of your life!"

Everyone in the room burst out laughing.

"Bravo!" Eileen Tupper said, clapping her hands. She was the Mayor of Masterville, a slim woman with a sharp voice and an angular face. "Now I know why I like you, Tyrone. You don't take prisoners."

That got another laugh from everyone but Tyrone.

"I'm perfectly serious, he said. "I believe most of humanity is slightly insane, by our standards. A belief in invisible entities who are responsible for all the unexplained phenomena which scared our cave-men ancestors witless came into being as a survival trait. As our distant ancestors gained in intelligence, that was the only thing that kept them from becoming quivering hulks, just waiting for the next bolt of lightning to strike. And it helped to alleviate the all pervasive fear of death, too. Just remember that back then, death occurred openly, not hidden away in hospitals, and a great deal of death was violent. Thinking that superbeings would succor you after you died helped to control the fear of death. And then, like any other basic trait that becomes expressed in behavior, institutions grew up around it. And once established, the institutions acted as any other group led by



humans always have; they did their damndest to perpetuate themselves. Thus we have religion, with all its quirks and irrationality. But we should also remember that the religion genes helped humanity to survive at one point in our evolution. Unfortunately, the genes for it are still around after we no longer need them."

"That only applies to some people, Tyrone," Lisa said gently, then added, "but you're perfectly correct about the rest, those where the expression of the genes that hadn't been moderated by environment. Hell, I always feel like an alien at a human convention when I'm somewhere that praying is going on, or even when someone insists on saying grace before a meal. That's kind of rare here, but Dan and I ran across it a lot on the outside."

"Well, sure you feel odd. I do myself. That just goes along with the fact that so many people are constitutionally unable to live without religion—unless they grew up with our prions, of course."

"And they can't help it, for the most part."

"True, but that doesn't help us, either." Lisa got up and headed for the bar, knowing that Daniel was ready for another drink. She was ready, too. This was not turning into a good day.

"We've strayed," Eileen said. "What I want to know is how the new administration is going to treat us, so I can prepare the city for whatever may happen." She joined Lisa at the bar and held out her glass for a refill.

"You're a politician; you should be a better judge of that than I am," Tyrone said.

"You know better, Tyrone. I'm not a politician. The voters keep me in office because I do a damn good job, that's all. You're the one who knows how Washington works."

"No one knows how Washington works," Tyrone said. "It's gotten beyond reason."

"You know what I mean. How long will it take Williamson and his crowd of fanatics to get their act together?"

Tyrone conceded. "A couple of months, at least, I'd say. He'll have to search out a lot of new people to fill posts that Sheffield already had picked others for before he can do much of anything."



"Good," Lisa said. "In that case, Daniel and I have other things to take care of." She picked up their refilled glasses and motioned to Daniel. He got up and took one of them from her. She grabbed his other hand and tugged. "C'mon, Mutant Atheist Prion Person, let's go do this and that."

Chuckles followed them out of the door, but they started an exodus. Others wandered off to their rooms, or back down the mountain, as it was called, to the city, leaving Tyrone and Marybeth alone. She promptly draped herself around Tyrone.

"I think Dan and Lisa had a good idea. Let's go do some this and that, too. We can go over Dan and Lisa's report later."

Tyrone didn't take much persuading. Marybeth sometimes preferred women as sexual partners, but she never stinted when she was with men, either.

CHAPTER TWO

Lisa bumped Daniel with her hip as they entered the bedroom/sitting room that was part of Tyrone's many-roomed apartment, built into the Genetechnics office building. She began unbuttoning her blouse. Daniel grinned as he watched. Lisa took undressing before sex as a game, tossing her clothes toward chairs or loungers but not really caring where they landed. He admired her technique until a bra landed on his head, one cup dangling down in front of his face, then he began disposing his own clothes.

Lisa beat him, of course, having less to discard and having got the jump on him, and not least because she slid her shorts and panties off together, tossing them in the general direction of a chair. They missed but Daniel didn't notice; he was looking at Lisa.

Daniel never tired of Lisa's body. As he sat down on the edge of the bed to remove his pants, she posed for a moment in front of him, as unashamed as a cat in heat. Her generous breasts were firm, with virginal pink nipples and a sprinkling of freckles across their upper slopes. They went well with the rest of her figure, with its narrow waist and long, school-girlish legs, also adorned by freckles here and there. Daniel kicked his pants away and held out his arms. She came to him, breasts swaying with the movement.

"Gotcha!" Daniel said and swung her around onto the bed. He slid over beside her and their lips and hands began exploring eagerly, as if



it were their first time together all over again.

*** * * ***

"This and that was as wonderful as ever," Daniel said later. He propped himself up on an elbow, the better to admire the whole length of Lisa's body.

"Mmm. I have to agree. And Tyrone's place sure beats some of the dumps we've had to stay in lately. I was ready for a vacation."

"Me, too," Daniel agreed. "And he says the new place he's building into the mountain will be even bigger and better. I just hope this lasts a while. Even working for the NSA wasn't as nerve-wracking as what we've been doing."

"It was worthwhile. And still is. Like Tyrone says, most of the world is still slightly insane, and I don't just mean about religion."

"You're preaching to the choir, sweetheart. I should know better than anyone what it's like out there. Remember, I lived on the outside before you came along."

"Before I came along? Ha! You were investigating me!"

"Not you specifically." Daniel grinned down at her. "At least not at first"

"Lothario. You just like my body."

"You betcha. Your mind's not bad, either, barring a tendency to forget there's such a thing as cookbooks and clothes hangers."

Lisa stuck out her tongue at him. He tried to grab it with his lips, then had to go exploring into her mouth to see where it had gone.

When he sensed that Lisa wasn't completely into the kiss, he broke contact and gazed fondly at her. "I know. Work first, then play. Spoilsport."

"This won't take long. We just have to review our report to Tyrone to be sure we didn't leave anything important out."

"Sooner started, sooner finished. Shall we dress?"

"Not if you can keep your mind where it belongs. It will save time later."



* * * *

Daniel Stenning had been working for the National Security Agency when a Census Bureau clerk discovered that the population of Masterville differed from the norm in many ways. None of the anomalies would have been significant, taken alone, but together they added up to a city inhabited by a population distinctly skewed from the average. They married less, were almost totally without religion, had higher IQ's, were more sexually liberated, were mostly apolitical, although a very high proportion of adults voted. The city disdained federal or state help for their schools and hospitals, as well as roads and libraries. There was little or no racial tension but a high interracial marriage rate, where there was marriage at all. They were better off financially than the average, and spent their money wisely. They read more and watched less television. Almost every adult owned at least one gun but accidents were rare and homicides even rarer. In fact, all types of crime was rare in Masterville. And the strangest finding of all was that hardly any of the valley people recognized that they were different; they simply believed that they lived in a good place among good people and tried hard to keep it that way.

Finally, the clerk took his findings to his superior, and from there they wound their way upwards and sideways on the bureaucratic ladder until the problem landed in the lap of the FBI's legal office. There, after deciding there was no justifiable basis for an investigation, the FBI turned the data over to the national Security Agency.

The NSA had no legal basis for investigating the inhabitants of Masterville, either, but they did anyway. Daniel and his partner, Shirley Rostervik, a slim blond beauty, were the agents assigned to the initial investigation. They posed as a married couple, but that ruse proved impossible to maintain very long, for Daniel found himself falling in love with Lisa Berry, a citizen of Masterville, who knew in advance that he was connected to the NSA because Tyrone Beamer had a friend there who fed him information. Lisa quickly reciprocated his feelings and they had been inseparable ever since.

As it turned out, Daniel eventually found that his roots derived from Masterville. He was one of them. He resigned, but in the meantime the Director of NSA initiated a rouge program involving a dirty bomb made from pilfered uranium, planning on blaming the valley residents for the explosion. This was in direct collaboration with the President of the United States, a highly religious politician, but a smart one. He jumped on the "Mutant Atheists" as a means of gaining



even more support from voters. He ordered an Army brigade to surround the city, intending to have every inhabitant in the valley eventually sequestered and possibly sterilized once it became known that most of them really were mutants, in a small sense of the word.

The people of Masterville valley possessed a gene originating in the intron part of the DNA, the “nonsense” portion. It caused tiny prions to be produced that congregated around the synapses in the brain and somehow (though the exact method wasn't known) enhanced the reasoning power as the brain grew and matured.

When Daniel resigned, the NSA thought he knew too much and put out an order to have him killed and Shirley Rostervik, his partner, recalled. That was a mistake on their part, for Shirley had seen that the people of Masterville posed no threat whatsoever to the nation. She knew that even the prions were not infective (though they were almost always passed from mother to children in the womb). Shirley had eventually helped stop the persecution of Masterville and for her efforts had been assigned by the NSA as liaison officer to the city and its people.

Eventually, thinking that if the dirty bomb exploded and was blamed on them, that their genes might be lost to humanity, Tyrone Beamer had sent trusted couriers out into the hinterlands to infect the big baby formula plants and bottling factories with the Masterville prions. Even Daniel and Lisa volunteered. They worked in two different plants, among the smelly mixing vats, clandestinely infecting each batch of baby formula with samples of the Masterville prions. At the same time they carried out their secondary assignment from Tyrone, checking on the temperament of the general population and how they were reacting to the continuing publicity about Masterville. They were still at it when Tyrone called them back. They still didn't know why; the assassination had overtaken the meeting where he had told them he would reveal what came next.

* * * *

Lisa sent their final report directly to Tyrone's computer with a question symbol attached. He answered almost immediately. His face appeared sober at first, then widened into a grin. Lisa's face and bare torso were centered prettily on his screen.

"You forgot to turn off the visual again," He said.

Lisa blinked, then grinned elfishly. "Are you complaining?"

"Um, no, no. Not at all. Is this the balance of your report?"



"That's it. When does the meeting start?"

"It doesn't; I'm cancelling it. This assassination has changed the whole picture. You and Dan go on with whatever you want to until we see where we are."

Lisa smiled. "Good. See you at suppertime. If we're not there, tell the cook to save us something."

"Tell her yourself. Her name is Lisa."

"Whoops! I forgot I have to take a turn. Well, maybe I can induce Dan to help."

"Dressed the way you are now, I imagine he will be glad to—if you can get him to the kitchen."

"He'll come, if he wants anything edible. He knows I can't cook worth a flip." Lisa closed the phone, got up and stretched theatrically in front of Daniel. "Which comes first, me or tea?"

Dan eyed her extended figure speculatively while thinking of the big comfortable bed they had just gotten back to. "Well, I always did want to take a mutant to bed. I wonder if I can find one around this place?"

There appeared to be one on the premises, for dinner was late and consisted of hot dogs and beer.

*** * * ***

Shirley Rostervik was beginning to get suspicious. She sat at her temporary desk in the NSA building that had been assigned to her while she was in Washington for the inauguration and for the latest updates, and mused. As the official liaison of the National Security agency to Masterville Valley, she should be informed about anything having to do with that subject, but even before the inauguration, she had begun to notice that she was being cut out of policy decisions she should have been a party to. Perhaps Mandel Crafton, he of the flinty eyes and plastic morals, thought she was becoming too close to those in charge of events in Masterville Valley. If so, it was no more than the truth. Almost immediately (though she hadn't revealed the fact to Crafton), she had volunteered to be one of the test subjects to explore how the prions peculiar to the inhabitants of Masterville valley affected adults. It was already known from mother-to-fetus infection that infants adapted readily to the prions and grew up as if they had inherited them. Further, when those infants matured, the females



could in turn pass it on to their progeny, with results comparable to having the intron genes that produced the prions to begin with.

Over the course of months, Shirley had noticed some changes. Her libido increased and her reasoning had become more acute, or at least she found herself changing her opinion on a couple of positions she had held for a lifetime. It appeared that adults could benefit, to a degree anyway. It was still hard to tell, because most of the volunteers so far, including her, already held viewpoints fairly commensurate with those of most of Masterville's citizens.

Shirley also, very secretly and carefully, passed along information not released to the public to Tyrone Beamer. She was in total sympathy with the Masterville Valley inhabitants and totally in disagreement with the way the previous administration had attempted to persecute them. Only a secret recording of her former boss, passed in turn to a friendly reporter, had kept her active in the NSA hierarchy.

She wondered how Daniel and Lisa were taking the assassination, and what Tyrone would want her to do now. On impulse she decided to call him. She picked up her phone, then on second thought decided to make the call from somewhere else. She had come in to work the day after the assassination out of habit, before listening to any news. *I should have known this would be a holiday*, she thought as she picked up her purse and left, making sure her office was thoroughly locked behind her.

Shirley drove toward the suburbs, shrinking inside as the freeway passed vast ghettos and seedy housing tracts. Washington could use some of our prions, she thought, but then chuckled to herself. As if anything as simple as Masterville prions could cure the ills of a city so entangled in politics and racial divides that nothing short of a nuclear bomb could ever straighten it out. Then again, she thought that she had changed some. Perhaps even politicians might benefit from the prions if they would take them, a very unlikely proposition.

She stopped at a convenience store she used when needing to pick up just a few items for home and used the phone there, assuming a random outside phone wouldn't be tapped. She dialed the apartment number from memory, thinking idly that she used to not be able to remember phone numbers so readily, and wondering if the prions were responsible for that improvement. Probably. Maybe. Tyrone answered on the third ring, interrupting that train of thought.

"Hello. Main Mutant speaking."



Shirley laughed. "This is Shirley. You sound happy, Tyrone.."

"Nah, not happy. Just laughing to keep from crying. What's news?"

"Right to the point, as always. Just checking in to see what you want me to do."

Tyrone answered immediately, as if he had been thinking about her. "Shirley, rather than come back here, how about staying in Washington for a while and see what kind of rumors are making the rounds. Okay?"

"Sure. Anything in particular you want me to listen for?"

"Well, anything having to do with us, in particular, and any hint of a change in policy toward us, specifically. That ought to keep your ears busy for a while."

"No problem. I wanted to stay a week or two anyhow to renew contacts and so forth. I was getting the impression that I was sort of out of the loop, even before the hit on President Sheffield. Perhaps it is just a reflection of me staying in Masterville most of the time rather than Washington, but I was going to check it out."

"Fine. You are on your secure phone, I hope?"

"Even better; it's a public phone at a place where I shop, and I've already checked to see whether it's bugged or not. If I use our encrypted phones anyone listening will know I don't want to be overheard even if they can't tell what we're saying. Here, we can speak plainly. Don't try to teach an old pro, Tyrone. I'm always careful."

"Sorry, force of habit. I held onto the secret of the valley so long by myself that I still get paranoid."

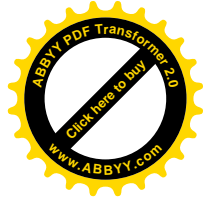
"You're not paranoid if they really are out to get you. And in our case, that's probably going to be true, what with Mad Manny in office."

"Mad Manny? Is that his call sign?"

"Nope, just what the troops named him as soon as he took the oath. Everyone in the agency isn't as crazy as their bosses, you know."

"Good thing. Okay, I'll see you in a couple of weeks. Take care."

The line went dead before Shirley could reply. She hung up, paid the clerk for the items she had picked up and left.



As soon as he was certain she was gone, the owner of the place pressed the hidden contact switch that turned the bug off and dialed his contact number. He played back the recording he had made, then fed it into the line connected directly to the office of Corey Mullins, Director of Internal Affairs for the NSA. The swarthy little owner grinned avariciously. Business was always good in Washington.

CHAPTER THREE

Two weeks after the assassination, President Williamson was beginning to breathe easier. There was no hint so far that the Congressional Commission, which had been formed under his direction, was looking in the correct direction for the person or persons involved, nor was there inklings that it might be a conspiracy. It appeared that the little cabal inside the agency that his old Friend Mandel Crafton directed had done their work well. He thought it should be safe to have a private meeting but nevertheless, he was taking precautions.

"Stay outside and don't ever mention who was here. Understand?" President Manfred Williamson instructed the closest Secret Service agent. He ushered Mandel Crafton, Director of the National Security Office inside and closed the door behind him. The President went over to the mini bar built into one wall of the minuscule conference room and retrieved a bottle of Irish Whiskey. He poured for both of them, then handed Crafton his glass and gestured toward the conference table. It was very small, built for six people, but the President and Crafton were the only two present.

"You're certain this room is clean, now?" President Williamson asked. He looked around furtively, as if he might be able to spot a listening device.

Crafton smirked inside. As if anyone could see a bug just by glancing at fixtures; an impossibility in this age of microminiaturization. And recording devices carried upon a person, such as he was doing, were just as hard to find. *As the saying goes, there's no friends in politics*, he thought smugly. "It's clean, sir. I had it swept just before you arrived. Anything we say here is completely off the record."

The President let his shoulders relax as his frown disappeared. He took a big sip of his Irish Whiskey, savored it a moment, then swallowed. "Good. Well, did I get away with it?"



"Almost certainly. All that's left is to eliminate the shooter and leave evidence linking him to those atheists in Masterville. That's taking place even as we speak."

"Seems like a poor reward for such a good job."

Crafton shrugged. "You started this; you should know it's necessary. We can't afford to have any loose ends left dangling. And it's a perfect way to plant the evidence. Now there won't even be a whisper that we might have been involved. You took the chance and got away with it; now we just have to take advantage of it."

Manfred Williamson bowed his head and murmured a prayer of thanks, then looked back up. "The Lord will forgive us for what we had to do. He knows we're working for a righteous cause."

"Certainly," Crafton said. Rationalizing murder came easily to him, just as easily as a Senator excusing pork barrel projects in the interest of getting re-elected, so that a "greater good" could be accomplished, the good usually meaning a longer stay in office. He hadn't initiated the assassination, but the shooter came from his agency, that small portion of it controlled directly by presidents.

"All right, then. Blaming those prion people for the assassination was a real master stroke, no pun intended. That will help calm down the jitters from the moderates over us being in office. I'll take it from here on the political front. In the meantime, you need to keep up the pressure on Masterville, and especially that Tyrone Beamer bastard. He's the real power in the valley. If you can get something on him, or contrive something, that would be great."

"I'll see what I can do. Any suggestions?"

"That's more your field than mine. Too bad we don't have the Surgeon General's office in our lap. Wouldn't it be nice if we could "prove" that Beamer was poisoning our water supply with prions, or something like that?"

"Good idea," Crafton admitted. "I'll get a couple of our rocket scientists to work up something plausible."

"Won't that give us away?"

Crafton gave the President one of his patented, hard as flint stares. "Not at all. They're just studying the possibility, so we can take counter-measures if it happens. See?"



Williamson guffawed. "Ha! Just like the old germ warfare theory they used to keep us and the Soviets in the biological warfare business. I like it!" He took another healthy drink of his whiskey, hesitated, then finished it off. "All right, now let me tell you what Mike Snow is cooking up so you won't be taken unaware or be duplicating his efforts."

Michael Snow was the new White House Chief of Staff, pending congressional approval, and a long time political operative of the president. His ethical and moral sense of rightness was not quite as loose as Crafton's, but it came close. The secret service had given him the call sign of "Snow White" as a tribute to his thick thatch of prematurely white hair as much as from his name.

The President spent another ten minutes briefing Crafton. He looked longingly at the bar then made himself stop thinking about another drink; for the moment at least. It was hard, having your every move and word and action monitored, or if not actually monitored, having someone know. Like the White House stewards. There was no way to keep them from knowing how much liquor came into his private quarters, but so far his wife was cooperating and ordering for him much of the time.

The new president was unaware that his every preference in food and drink had been discussed and tabulated almost the minute after he succeeded to the office. The stewards weren't fooled, and they did talk, at least among themselves. And he was also not aware that, while the Secret Service agents were extremely discreet, they too, talked among themselves and were sometimes overheard by others performing the many chores needed to keep the big mansion functioning smoothly and safely. His meeting with Crafton in the closed room was known by most of the White House staff before much time had passed, and eventually the news was passed on to Shirley Rostervik in the form of gossip.

*** * * ***

Daniel and Lisa were by themselves in the big den for a change, relaxing with an afternoon pitcher of rum and flavorings. It had been a very enjoyable time since they had seen the new president shot before hundreds of millions of viewers from all over the world. Even worrying about the consequences couldn't dampen their enthusiasm for being back in Masterville valley, and being as safe as they were ever likely to get now. Tyrone had yet to give them another assignment and they contented themselves with hikes into the mountains above Masterville, being careful to avoid the army outposts still being maintained. Tag ends from the last snowfall still



hugged the bases of pine and oak and sweetgum, and in crevices guarded from the sun. The weather was normal for Arkansas in March, hovering in the fifties or sixties most days, but dropping to near freezing at night. They had camped out last night on a whim, but Lisa was telling him now that it was her last time, stating emphatically that she much preferred a soft bed, especially for activities other than sleeping. Daniel had to agree. He had damn near frozen to death, even in the padded sleeping bag they had bought for the occasion.

"I have to admit this is more to my liking," Daniel said. Lisa was scrunched up next to him on the biggest lounge in the den, one which traveled eight feet then bent at right angles for another four. They were sitting at one end of the long section, where Daniel could prop his drink on an end table and Lisa could set hers on the coffee table, which was a good six feet long, made from polished pine cut at an angle from a huge section of tree. He kept his arm loosely around her shoulders, and used his hand to toy with her breast. It felt firm and smooth under the silken fabric of a button-up blouse, and also enticing, since she wasn't wearing a bra under it.

"You bet. Whatever possessed you to carry me off into the woods overnight like that? For all you knew, a bear could have eaten us."

"Uh uh. They're hibernating this time of year." Seeing her expression, he added, "Aren't they?"

"No. Bears this far south don't hibernate; they just sleep a lot, then go looking for nice munchy humans when they get hungry."

Daniel was surprised. "Really?"

"Trust me. Didn't you see me packing my heavier pistol?"

"Now that you mention it, yes, but I thought you brought it along in case I insisted on kinky sex and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Why would I have said no to kinky sex? Nothing like a little variety to keep a man where he belongs."

"And that is...?"

"In the kitchen, where else?"

Daniel squeezed her breast and laughed. He brought up his glass and tipped a good swallow of ethanol into his mouth, wishing this hiatus from responsibility could last a couple more weeks. If it did, he thought he would be ready to go back to work. Vacations were great,



but after a while inactivity palled. A working man demanded work to stay happy.

"You have to admit I'm learning to cook, aren't I?" Lisa looked up into Daniel's face, admiring his even features and dark brown hair. She thought him handsome, if a bit boyish looking. Lines were just beginning to form on his face, very faintly yet, but precursors of deepening ones to come.

"That you are. And speaking of cooking, how about—"

The big wall screen began blinking, heralding a breaking news story. "Volume. Increase to normal," Daniel said, instructing the television. The sound came on and they began listening to the anchor, a pretty blond of indeterminate age.

"...news conference just concluded by Samuel Cokesey, the FBI Director. It was reported that the FBI, acting on a tip, assembled an undercover team and attempted to quietly apprehend the purported Assassin of President Sheffield. Upon arrival at the location, they found that the suspect had taken his own life. However, Mr. Cokesey reported that evidence was found with the body implicating him in the murder.

"When asked about the nature of the evidence, Mr. Cokesey said that a sniper's rifle with rifling that matched the characteristics of the bullet recovered from the president's body had been recovered. Mr. Cokesey also said that literature was found on the body of the suspect, implicating an unnamed power group from Masterville Valley, the place where so much unrest and controversy has originated in the past year. Masterville is the home of the infamous "Prion People" whose genes reputedly enable them to dispense with belief in a Deity and the moral values associated with religion.

"Eileen Tupper, The Mayor of Masterville has already issued an emphatic denial of culpability by any citizen of Masterville, stating that the very nature of the act is inconsistent with the basic personality and deportment of Masterville citizens. Ms Tupper has promised a more detailed statement in the very near future. In the meantime, White House spokesperson Marilei Presley gave a cautious statement praising the FBI and..."

Lisa spoke up and turned the set completely off. She leaned against Daniel and clutched him tightly. "That can't possibly be true, Dan."

Daniel patted her shoulder. "Of course not, sweetheart. That's a bag job and a set up if I ever heard of one. Damn it, Mad Manny didn't



waste any time, did he?"

"What do you think is going to happen?"

Daniel shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, but whatever, it will be bad." He thought for a moment, then chuckled mirthlessly. "What bothers me is that Sam Cokesey is endorsing the report. From all I've gathered, he's one of the of the few really honest men in Washington. I'll bet a backrub against my next turn in the kitchen that he's being taken in by Crafton. Damn it, I think we should have been feeding our prions to politicians instead of babies."

"Dan, we don't even know if they work on adults yet—nor what the long term effects might be. We know babies are safe, because mothers here have been infecting their children for generations."

"I know, I know. I was just musing. However, the last time I talked to Shirley, she said she thought she was noticing some changes in herself."

"The last time you talked to Shirley? Hmm. Why haven't I heard about that conversation?"

"Whoops! And here I thought our affair was secret."

Lisa pinched him. "Talk!"

"Ouch! All right, I just forgot. Shirley reported in yesterday. I saw Tyrone a minute when I went to get us that brandy. He said he would call a meeting as soon as he finished digesting her news."

"How could you forget something like that?"

"Well..." Daniel began recounting in detail what they had done with each other after he brought the brandy back. He continued for several minutes.

"Did we really do all that? Wow! Okay, you're forgiven, but I wonder why we haven't seen Shirley yet? We've been in and out of the lounge here a lot of times."

"I think she and Marybeth were, um, renewing their acquaintance."

"Oh. Oh! Boy, maybe our prions are having an effect on her. I knew Marybeth was sort of sweet on her but didn't really give her a chance with Shirley, knowing how straight she was from talking to you."



"Marybeth can be very persuasive, as best I remember."

"Hah! I bet you remember every detail, right down to what color of underwear she likes."

Daniel did remember, and remembered how surprised—and pleased—he had been when Marybeth joined him and Lisa in bed one night. "So I do," he admitted, but I bet you do, too."

Lisa stuck her tongue out at him. "I already knew before that night, so there." She looked up at the sound of footsteps. "We've got company."

Tyrone Beamer, Shirley, and Marybeth entered the den, along with Harry Sildon, Beamer's chief of research for Genetechnics, the company Tyrone owned and the source of his wealth. All four wore grim countenances. Daniel sighed. It appeared that their vacation was over.

CHAPTER FOUR

Daniel winked at Shirley when she and Marybeth sat down together on a lounge built for two, assuming that the two were very close friends. Shirley blushed, then stuck her tongue out at him, a gesture no one but he and Lisa saw, and causing him to think that Shirley suspected that he and Marybeth had a more than casual acquaintance.

Tyrone said nothing but headed to the bar. Daniel got up and joined him there. He knew that Tyrone was here in his capacity as head of the Masterville Council, which dealt with problems arising from their unique heritage.

"Hi Dan. Glad to see you. If you hadn't been here I was going to send Marybeth looking for you."

"I take it our vacation is over, is that it?"

"I'm afraid so, and it's not just because of the breaking news. Or have you heard about it yet?"

"We just turned the news off. What a bunch of crap that was. And did you listen to how the anchor was reporting it? As if we had already been tried and convicted. Mad Manny must have that station in his pocket."



"As a matter of fact, he does," Tyrone said, "but that's sort of a mute point. The other networks are almost as bad. Anyway, let's go sit down and talk."

"Let me fill our glasses first. Or should I break out something stronger than rum punch?"

"You may need the strong stuff later. Stick with the punch for now."

Daniel refilled his and Lisa's glasses. He had been a bit facetious with Tyrone; the rum punch was potent enough for any news.

Tyrone and Harry Sildon sat down across from them on the short side of the angled lounge. Sildon hadn't bothered with a drink. He immediately began shuffling papers he always seemed to be carrying, as if they were a prop rather than really important.

"Shirley, why don't you give Dan and Lisa a quick brief, then Harry and I will follow up?"

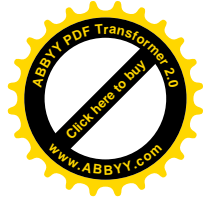
Shirley crossed her legs, displaying an interminable length of thigh, to the detriment of Daniel's attention to what she was saying—until Lisa punched him in the ribs. Shirley was just as beautiful as ever, if not more so.

"Basically, the new administration intends to use Masterville to solidify their hold on the government. President Williamson and Mandel Crafton, the NSA director, were friends before Williamson got picked for the second spot on the ticket. I can't prove anything, but I believe they had a contingency plan for the assassination even before they won the election, and once they did, they accelerated it."

"How sure are you of that information?" Daniel asked, as much surprised as he was outraged. "I know most politicians are venal, but that's really going way down into the gutter."

"It's not being bandied about for fear of making themselves suspect, but a few people have talked, and the internet is never silent. Rumor has it that Williamson talked Sheffield into the inauguration arrangements so his shooter would have plenty of time to prepare and plan his escape. Some other rumors have Crafton planning it. No one is going so far as to directly accuse either Crafton or the president, but if that was their scheme, it worked, as you well know. Unfortunately, their shooter didn't realize he was part of a bigger campaign."

"How about the bag job on the shooter? Whose people pulled that off,



or do I need to ask?"

"Crafton's people, of course, though I can't prove that, either. What I do know is that he and Manny met secretly a couple of days ago, and when I say secret, it wasn't intended that anyone outside the secret service ever hear about it. The only way I learned is that I have a—a friend who happens to be friends with another agent who was on the detail. He doesn't know it, but he talks in his sleep." Shirley finished her statement with a little smile of remembrance. The agent not only talked in his sleep, he talked more than he should have during and after sex, too.

"And that's not all. Again, I can't prove it, and the information I have is nebulous, but I believe Crafton and the President have gotten another rouge element together, like last time. I doubt that I'll be able to find out much more about it, though, unless I get really lucky—or unlucky."

Lisa acquired a pensive expression at the last remark, but Daniel knew what Shirley meant. Inquiries into deep cover operations sometimes caused the questioner to disappear.

"Maybe you shouldn't try for anything else," Tyrone remarked.

Shirley shrugged. "It probably doesn't matter. I've been cut out of the loop lately in a lot of cases where I should have been included, even when working from here, and it started before the election, not afterwards. In fact, I doubt that I'll be effective much longer in Washington. Word gets around when someone at my level is in disfavor. I'm surprised I managed as much as I have."

Daniel wasn't surprised. Despite the short time he had worked with her when they had originally been assigned to investigate the phenomena of Masterville, he knew her to be an exceptionally astute agent. Her beauty sometimes helped in that respect, causing adversaries, particularly men, to underestimate her.

"Okay, I think Dan and Lisa have the picture now, so far as Washington goes. Let's move on to something that will be more momentous, in the long run. That's assuming our preliminary results are in fact what happens to adults who ingest our prions. Harry?"

Harry Sildon ran the Genetechnics research division with an efficiency that rivaled that of Tyrone in management. Daniel knew him to be a brilliant scientist. He had ferreted out the cause of the deviation of Masterville inhabitants from "normal" humans and had done much more research on how the Masterville prions worked



since then.

Harry shuffled some pages of the ever present folders he liked better than referring to computer files, then looked up and began talking, pausing periodically to adjust his glasses or run his fingers through his mess of untidy brown hair that was growing over his ears and down his neck. He looked as close to a caricature of the brilliant but unworldly and untidy scientist as was possible, right down to rumpled clothes and scuffed shoes. "We're beginning to see some results from our adult volunteers here in the valley who weren't privy to our prions beforehand, but wanted to try them. There's also a black market in them, as you probably know, and our web searches are garnering lots of anecdotal evidence. I've also been doing advanced MRI's on our volunteers on a monthly basis and I'm seeing some changes in their brains, but they are very subtle. You must remember that even our own doctors never noticed differences from the norm until we knew what to look for. Most importantly though, the volunteers themselves are beginning to notice changes in their attitudes and beliefs."

Harry looked up from his notes and pushed his glasses further up his nose. They appeared to have one misaligned frame that had been wired back into place. "The changes in our volunteers all appear to be related to the basic reasoning ability; that is, where before they might have taken something such as, oh, sexual attitudes for granted and continued to think much as they were brought up to believe about them all their lives, never questioning. Now we're seeing the first inkling that they no longer take certain attitudes as givens, such as homosexual conduct being wrong or perverted. They are able to reason about such behavior now, instead of thinking reflexively."

Daniel had the grace not to smile when Shirley's face began to redden, the color becoming very visible on her fair skin, especially when Marybeth noticed it and patted her knee for reassurance.

Harry Sildon continued as if he hadn't struck a sensitive chord in the room; indeed he never noticed. "Political beliefs is another area where we've been able to discern some changes. Rather than adhering blindly to a particular political philosophy and political party, they're now beginning to question and analyze the mouthing of politicians." He looked up and grinned toothily. "Not that they ever say much that's sensible to begin with. And one more item: the volunteers noticed themselves reading more than they did before, and asking questions about what they read. There are some other possible changes but it's too soon to be sure.

"Also, I'm happy to say that we've noticed no adverse side effects at



all; it appears that the induced prions function in much the same manner as inherited ones or those passed to fetuses from their mothers. They remain inert in the body until they come in contact with synapses in the brain. There they begin multiplying, much like pathological prions, but ours reach a certain point and stop. What I believe is happening is that they begin replacing the so-called "natural" prions that congregate around synapses, and when those have been displaced by the Masterville variety, the reproduction stops."

Harry stopped talking, apparently finished with what he had to say. Shirley was still curious, though.

"You've told us everything except how they work," she said.

"Ah, yes. How do they work? Well, I think it has something to do with the way they continue to fold and unfold, but a couple of my colleagues dispute that theory. One of them believes they function as an enzyme that stimulates the firing mechanism of neurons and another thinks it's more of a mechanical effect, a multiplying factor, if you will, where they congregate. It's all very complicated and may take years to work out. Remember, it wasn't all that long ago that no one had ever seen a prion and many researchers didn't even believe in them. And even now, most of the government research into prions is focused on the pathological ones, like those that cause Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis, or mad cow disease that can infect humans. Or like the so-called *Stumbles* making an appearance in Africa now."

"You've told us everything but what it means for us," Lisa said.

"You mean for Masterville, or the whole population?"

"No, I mean specifically for Daniel and myself and Shirley. You and Tyrone didn't come here to give us a lecture on prions, nor what Mad Manny is up to, did you?"

Harry looked to Tyrone. Lisa followed his gaze, but Daniel didn't have to; he had already guessed what was coming and was already trying to think of a good reason to keep Lisa out of it, although he knew that was pretty well hopeless. Where he went, she would insist on going. He laughed at himself but silently. The old male protective instinct, he thought, still alive and well, even though women had proven over and over again that they hardly needed all that coddling any more, other than the normal protection society provided to citizens in general. His reason was telling him one thing; his genes another. The Masterville prions made the difference. Reason overcame instinct. He knew Lisa



would go with him—and as a full partner.

Tyrone took his time about freshening his drink, though all he had to do was pour and add an ice cube. He looked toward the entrance where he had induced the door to post a message in bright red letters announcing that a meeting was in progress and for others to use his smaller rec room for the time being. He came back and sat down, then leaned forward, hands on his knees.

"You're right, Lisa. The lecture, as you put it, was just to let you know how urgent the situation has already become. And to ask you, Dan and Shirley to try to do something about it. It's going to be a dangerous assignment and you're perfectly free to refuse it. I couldn't blame you if you do, considering the situation. I even consulted with the Council before asking you."

The Council Tyrone referred to was an informal grouping of knowledgeable and responsible authorities he had told about the prions carried by the people of Masterville when he first discovered the fact. For all practical purposes, it was almost the same as the Masterville City council that ran valley affairs under the Mayor's direction.

"Come on, Tyrone. Spit it out and tell us what you want. We're not kids," Lisa said, a trifle impatiently.

"All right, here it is. I want Shirley to try to penetrate the cabal. And I want you, Dan and Lisa, to find some way to infect the President and his cabinet and both houses of congress with Masterville prions."

Dead silence greeted Tyrone's blunt statement. Daniel had been expecting it, but still was speechless for a moment. Finally, he did get his mind and mouth coordinated. "Goddamn, Tyrone, why don't you ask us to do something easy, like seduce the president's wife without the Secret Service catching on?"

"Or hypnotize Crafton into turning on his cohorts while on national television?" Lisa added.

"Or ... or call a conference on the White House lawn and make the reporters believe I've just returned from Mars and need to pow wow with our leaders," Shirley said, laughing.

Tyrone barely smiled at the comments. "What I—and the Council—want isn't impossible. And if you don't volunteer, we'll ask someone else, but frankly, you three by all odds have the greatest chance of success. And even then, it's not certain how the prions would work on



a person with a such a rigid belief system as the President has. He may be beyond change. It's our best hope, though, unless Shirley can break the cabal and having done that, get the information publicized. Frankly, I think she has the worst of the assignments."

Shirley spoke sharply. "I haven't said I would do it yet, Tyrone. In fact, I don't even know how to go about it right off hand."

"I'll bet Daniel does."

Shirley's gaze turned to her former partner. "I think I do, too, now that you mention it, but I doubt that I could get away with it. But let me hear what Dan has to say."

"The only way I see for you to get inside that cabal is to convince Crafton that you're completely in step with him and further, that you're willing to do anything they ask in order to see that the whole valley is blamed for a conspiracy against the rest of America, or the world for that matter. I just don't know how you could pass it off, though. They would be certain to question you under every method they know of. Scopalomine. The traditional lie detector. MRI questioning. Pentathol anesthetic. Laughing gas."

"I know how they can do it," Harry said. "Unless the NSA and FBI has discovered the same thing I have." He stood up and adjusted his unruly clothing while searching his pockets. "Ah!" He exclaimed as he brought forth a crumpled package of cigarettes. "Anybody got a light?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Have you got another one of those that's fit to smoke?" Daniel asked, eyeing Harry's cigarette package, which had the appearance of something picked out of a dumpster.

"And one for me, too," Lisa added. She got up and took the proffered cigarettes. She straightened them out and decided they might work. First though, she headed to the bar. She bypassed the rum concoction and picked up one of the bottles of scotch. She poured two fingers for Dan and a smaller one for herself, added ice, and brought them back to where Daniel was still seated. He lit both of the cigarettes and inhaled his deeply, enjoying the opportunity to indulge. If ever a situation called for a smoke and a stiff drink, this one did. He was glad that he could have an occasional cigarette without going overboard.



"Tyrone, what is Harry talking about?" Daniel asked.

Tyrone shrugged. "Ask him; it's a new one on me."

Harry inspected his cigarette as if trying to decide which end to put into his mouth. Finally he put it between his lips and struck a paper match. He sucked on it, blew out a plume of smoke and sighed with pleasure. "I don't let myself have many of these."

"You'd never know from their condition," Lisa said. "Why, that package looks brand new!"

The humor passed Harry by completely. "As I was saying, I've discovered something new about how our prions work. While I was researching the MRI scans we've done on our people, I found out by accident that it's possible for one of us to lie if necessary—and not feel guilty about it. Shirley, I think that if you really feel like telling your boss that you want to rat on us, and if you believe sincerely that it serves a noble purpose, you could get away with it—at least so far as the MRI and the older methods of detecting falsehoods, like blood pressure and galvanic response and so forth is concerned. Once you've gotten yourself into that state of mind, all you'd have to worry about is questioning under drugs. I don't know about that yet."

"Well, I guess it's time to find out, then, isn't it? Do you have anyone who can do the honors?"

"Sure. One of my boys knows the setup and how the questioning works."

Daniel detected a hint of uncertainty in Harry's reply. "Has he ever actually conducted an exam with drugs?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, not that I know of, but there can't be much to it. While we were doing the MRI's he mentioned that we should try the drug method to see if we got the same results."

"Hmm." Shirley said. "Just how much research have you done? MRI included."

"Not much," Harry admitted, "but what I have done is very promising."

"Maybe we need to practice a bit before I step into the arena with the lions. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll talk to Mel and get him to set it all up. Is tomorrow okay?"



"Fine."

"Maybe Dan and I had better practice, too," Lisa said. "If we manage to get anywhere close to the president, we'll be questioned, too. Or me, I should say. Dan is too well known now."

Daniel grimaced at the implication of Lisa taking the risks, but Tyrone looked very satisfied. "And right now is a great time for Dan—or Lisa, to try infiltrating, while the White House is still hiring new people to replace those from the old guard they want to get rid of. Their administration is still in flux because they couldn't pick their new crew in advance. Too much chance of a leak."

Daniel's mind was already busy trying to think of scenarios that might gain access to the president's food or beverage supply. There were many, but very few that were anywhere close to easy, and all of them carried an inordinate risk of being caught. And he knew what that would mean: imprisonment, certainly, perhaps a death sentence. He could face death, he thought, but the idea of Lisa doing the same made him shiver.

"Someone walking on your grave?" Lisa whispered, seeing the goose bumps on his arms. She spoke so softly that only he heard her.

"Something like that. Don't worry about it. We'll manage." He turned away from Lisa before she could inquire further. "Tyrone, is this everything you wanted to go over?"

"For now I guess. Get with Harry and run through some simulations and let's see how it goes. Regardless, I'm going to want you three to make the effort, so long as the Council approves."

Daniel knew that it would. The original members Tyrone had picked when he discovered the differences between Masterville residents and the rest of humanity were all still in place and not inclined to disagree with him.

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Harry followed Tyrone back to his home office. Tyrone motioned for him to go in. He waved at Gina in a gesture that meant he wasn't to be disturbed except in an emergency and closed the door behind them.

Tyrone seated himself behind his desk while Harry sprawled in a chair, his gangly body making it look extremely uncomfortable.



"Have you got another batch ready for me?"

Harry nodded, but didn't speak.

"Problems?" Tyrone asked.

Harry nodded sadly. "Not material ones, but problems nevertheless. Tyrone, I went along with doctoring baby formulas when we thought that was the only way to preserve our heritage. What are you up to now?"

"We're riding a tiger, Harry. Once you're on, it's hard to get off. And we're still doctoring baby formula, as you well know. Even if Masterville should be wiped off the map, our prions will survive now, even if the genes that produce them don't."

"All right, but what's all the extra production for?"

"The tiger, Harry. The government is going to be coming after us again, and I don't know where it will stop this time. But before they get us and shut down production, if they do, I'm going to spread our prions far and wide. And that means adults as well as babies."

"Tyrone—Damn it, man, we don't know a thing yet about long term effects when they're given to adults, even if the first data is promising. It's terrible science—and rotten ethics, too, to spread them around with so little knowledge."

"It's my decision, Harry. I've already got most of the licensing in place for other companies to begin manufacturing our prions in countries all over the world, at least where it's legal. And I'm setting up methods to make them where it isn't. You don't have to be involved with the details; I'll take care of all that. You just keep your replicators rolling for a little while longer, until the production sites overseas kick in."

"Overseas? I take that to mean you think Congress will ban the manufacture of Masterville prions here?"

"It's almost a certainty, Harry, barring a political upheaval. It's a technicality anyway; it's already illegal to sell them in this country."

Harry threw up his hands in defeat. "All right, all right. How much extra do you need beyond what we're still sneaking into baby formula and supplying for the black market?"

Tyrone named a figure.



"Whew! That much? Goddamn it man, what are you trying to do? Infect the whole world in one fell swoop?"

"As much of it as I can. The world will be a better place for it."

"Maybe," Harry said, and turned to go. "If you don't start a goddamned war beforehand."

Tyrone didn't reply. He knew very well what he was doing—as well as Harry did, despite his protests. Masterville prions weren't approved for sale by the FDA yet, and he knew they probably never would be under the present political atmosphere. Hence the black market he was supplying. Tyrone Beamer's ethical and practical moral sense was highly developed, and under ordinary circumstances he would no more have thought of infecting food supplies with Masterville prions than he would have of putting arsenic into a grade school cafeteria. These weren't ordinary circumstances, though. He knew, if no one else did, that the discovery of the Masterville prions and the way they affected humans was going to cause—and already was beginning to cause—one of the great paradigm shifts in religious and social attitudes and beliefs that occur only two or three times in a millennium. He believed that the prions were so vitally important to the human race that he would go to considerable lengths to perpetuate them, especially since a majority of the race was on opposite sides of the fence from his position. He sighed as the door closed behind Harry and sat for a moment at his desk, wondering how much longer he would live before some fanatic individual or government managed to eliminate him.

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Daniel, Lisa and Shirley spent the next day together, working with Harry and Mel Worster, one of Harry's assistants, testing their reactions first under MRI and then the older lie detecting methods. It would have gone much faster, but neither Harry nor his helper was a professional, nor was there one in Masterville; its citizens lied much less than normal humans—and had less to lie about to begin with. It was repetitious and boring work and took up much of the day. The only saving grace was that it gave Lisa and Shirley more time to get to know each other, and for Daniel to renew their friendship.

"Wrap," Mel Worster announced, studying his monitor. "Why don't you all take a break while we analyze this last trial." His boyish face radiated good nature and enthusiasm, like a teenage gamer with a new computer.



Daniel shook his head. "I'm ready. It's getting hard for me to tell myself whether I'm lying or not." He was the last out from the MRI scan this run. Shirley and Lisa were waiting right outside the exam room, heads bent together and giggling.

"What are you two figgling about?" He asked.

"Figgling? What does that mean?" Shirley said.

"Females giggling. What else?"

That got him another louder, giggle.

"Never mind, it was just girl talk," Lisa said. "Let's go relax. Harry said we have an hour before we have to be back."

Daniel went along with them, still wondering. Lisa wasn't normally secretive and he distrusted her euphemism of "women talk". On the other hand, she had never done anything he disliked so far, which boded well for whatever they had been laughing about.

Marybeth and Tyrone were standing together in the big lounge, as if they had been waiting. Tyrone was jiggling a set of keys impatiently. He looked around when he heard the door from the outside open.

"Hi folks. Just who we were looking for."

Daniel noticed that Tyrone and Marybeth were dressed a bit more formally than the old clothes they usually slouched around in, the same as he and Lisa and Shirley did.

"Be careful what you ask us," Daniel kidded. "We can all lie with impunity now; at least according to Harry."

"That's great. I mean great for your mission, that is. There's nothing I wanted, other than to let you know that Marybeth and I are going down the mountain for a couple of days. She needs to take care of some business and I need to talk to Eileen Tupper and some of the others on the council."

"Our missions are still on then, I take it?" Shirley said. Her gaze was focused on Marybeth rather than Tyrone, though. Daniel knew that before he and Lisa left on their last prion-infecting mission, Marybeth had displayed an interest in Shirley. It hadn't surprised either he or Lisa. Marybeth was Lisa's best friend and had even shared their own bed on rare occasions. What had intrigued him, though, was that Shirley had apparently responded to the attention. He knew that she



had never been married, but during casual conversations while they were partners, she had spoken of living with a man once or twice, and in favorable terms. On the other hand, Masterville people were extremely liberal in sexual attitudes and she had been taking the Masterville prions for almost a year now—and said they were having an effect on her.

Tyrone nodded. "Absolutely. I just checked. Harry and Mel said you're all finished here and shouldn't have any problems passing lie detector tests."

"Great. When will you be back up here? Two days you said?" Daniel asked.

"More or less. Depends on how things go. But both of you take your time about getting ready. I'd rather see you well prepared than in a hurry."

"I'll guarantee you we're in no hurry, Tyrone. I may have been handed a harder nut to crack in my life, but I sure don't remember when."

"Same here," Shirley admitted. "We'll manage, though, if it can be done at all. If the agency is good for one thing, it's their training. I talked to a guy once who went through the CIA academy and NSA school both. He says the agency training is much better."

"That's good news. If I'm not back by the time you're ready, contact me through Eileen. She'll know where we are."

"Will do."

Tyrone turned around but Marybeth hung back. She came over to where Shirley was sitting and whispered in her ear, squeezing her shoulder as she did so.

"She's a real free spirit, isn't she?" Lisa remarked brightly after they were gone.

"Hell, everyone in Masterville Valley is a free spirit if you ask me!" Daniel said. "Before I came here I used to think some alien had dropped me to earth then abandoned me. Now, look: I even consort with redheads!"

"Keep that up and you won't," Lisa said. "You might have to settle for a blond."



"Hmm," Daniel and Shirley said at the same time, then they laughed together. There really has been some changes, Daniel thought. Before coming to the valley, he hadn't been particularly attracted to Shirley—or to any woman for long, but he had changed. He and Lisa were paired now, yet she seemed to almost insist on having other women in their bed occasionally. He found that he didn't mind—on the contrary! But it was only for amusement and enjoyment and only with Lisa's approval, he thought. Lisa's happiness was always uppermost in his mind now, and he knew she felt the same way. Nevertheless, Shirley was an extremely attractive woman, even wearing old jeans and a pullover, the same as he and Lisa were dressed.

Daniel ran some beans through the grinder and brewed enough coffee for each of them to have a cup. Harry had been specific about not drinking stimulants or depressants while the testing was going on. As soon as it was ready, he served Shirley and Lisa, then himself.

"See how well trained he is?" Lisa said. "Thanks, sweetie."

"I do tricks, too, given the proper incentive."

"Hmm," Shirley said again.

"Enough, kids. Let's talk practicals for a minute," Lisa said.

"Practicals?" What's that?" Shirley said.

"You know, practicals. Like how are we are going to make it through the next couple of years with our skins intact, not to mention the rest of our bodies?"

"Oh. Well, I've got my itinerary all planned, but I don't think I should say anything to you or Dan."

"Why not?"

"In case I get caught. On second thought, I guess it doesn't matter. I already know what you're going to attempt. All we need to do is set up a way to contact each other in Washington, being very careful that none of us leave a trail that can be followed."

"How about your reporter friend?"

"Nancy Primmerton? Good choice, except she's probably being shadowed, bugged and probably has an agent camped out under her bed. On the other hand, it will seem perfectly natural for us to get together occasionally, despite her bad rep with Crafton. We've been



friends ever since I came to work in Washington."

"Great. First chance you get, let her know. We'll settle on a code phrase before we go."

"Good," Lisa said, waving ascent and smiling impishly at Dan. "Now that you've proved you can make coffee, how about something decent to eat? And I don't mean hot dogs and beer, either!"

CHAPTER SIX

Daniel was in bed, enjoying the post-coital contentment suffusing his body. He had prepared steaks, a salad and nuked potatoes in the microwave. He added buttered french bread and opened a bottle of white zinfandel with another in reserve. There had been no complaints about his cooking. In fact, Lisa had been properly and enthusiastically thankful after they went to bed, leaving Shirley sitting by herself with a book and a glass of brandy. Thinking about it, he said, "I wonder if Shirley has any of that brandy left?"

"I doubt she'll drink the whole bottle. Want me to go and see?"

"Sure. It's still early. We can indulge a bit."

"Be right back," Lisa said. "Turn on the light so I can find my nightgown."

"If you would hang it up instead of throwing it to the four winds, you wouldn't need a light to find it again."

"Ah, but then you would miss seeing me put it back on, wouldn't you?"

Daniel switched on the light and enjoyed the sight of her naked body as she shrugged into the little short gown and fastened two of the tiny buttons. It was pale green and fit her body loosely but revealingly, as if it had been measured so that it draped the right places in just the right manner to be seductive. He could see the outline of her breasts, lined against the silken fabric, her nipples making little points of interest where they pushed against the thin covering. He smiled fondly and made a kissing motion at her. "Hurry back."

"I will," she said. But she didn't.

Daniel waited and waited. At first he supposed that Lisa had stopped



to chat with Shirley, or use the bathroom in the den or for some other innocuous reason. When she still didn't return, he began actively wondering why she hadn't. He sat up in bed and was about to swing his legs over the side when Lisa returned—with company. For a moment he wondered who the lovely vision Lisa had her arm around was, then he blinked and it became apparent.

Shirley had shed her clothes and donned a yellow nightie that was translucent to the point of being nearly transparent. She had shook her hair out and the blond tresses flowed around her shoulders like pale moonbeams. She took a tentative step forward, a bemused smile softening the classic beauty of her face. Lisa's hand fell away from her waist. As she took another step her breasts, larger than he had imagined but not out of proportion, swayed gently, moving beneath the gossamer garment she was wearing. Had he not been in love with Lisa he would have thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"She followed me home. Can we keep her?" Lisa said, trying to keep from laughing at the expression on Daniel's face. "Look, she even saved us some brandy."

Daniel hadn't noticed the bottle Shirley was holding at her side, nor the glasses Lisa was carrying in the hand that hadn't been resting on the curve of Lisa's hip.

"I—I uh, what—I mean, um, If it's all right I..."

"I think that was a yes, Shirley," Lisa said, "though it's hard to be certain with his mouth hanging open like that."

Shirley eased herself down to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. "I wasn't sure, Dan. You never acted like you were interested when we were pretending to be married. Are you now?"

Daniel had to force his eyes away from her and turn his gaze toward Lisa as she came around to the other side of the bed. She was grinning openly now.

"He is, love. I know that look by heart."

The last of any resistance Daniel might have been harboring disappeared. He reached out and pulled Shirley onto the bed, already beginning to breathe heavier. He lowered his lips to hers and felt the moist velvety touch of her tongue as she slid it into his mouth. His hand moved to her breasts, and even as they yielded to the pressure of his fingers and palm, he felt Lisa's feathery touch on his thigh,



stroking and then moving higher. His last thought before he became too busy to think at all was that if this experience was anything to judge them by, the Masterville prions Shirley had consumed were working to perfection.

*** * * ***

Samuel Cokesey was thinking of how much he would like to stay on as FBI Director, but he knew he didn't have much of a chance. He hadn't been to church since he was a boy, and had no interest in going any time in the future. It wasn't that he was an atheist; he did believe in God and did pray occasionally, but he had never been able to sort out in his mind which of the many competitors was the right religion, if indeed, any of them were. That wouldn't be good enough for Mad Manny, though; he knew that. The vetting by the new president's staff never came right out and demanded a strict belief in Jesus Christ, but the undertone of the questioning in the past months since the President had assumed office had been clear, like a shark cruising just beneath the waves and threatening unwary swimmers. Now, though, he thought he might have something that would endear himself to the president. After all, no one liked to look as ridiculous as the President would if the accusations against Masterville continued, even after clear proof was presented that the evidence had been planted.

Cokesey had been aghast when the young Special Agent risked her very career and perhaps her life to bring what she had discovered to his attention, bulling her way into a secretive appointment by repeatedly stating that she possessed information that only he should examine.

Special Agent Corine Benning sat rigidly in the chair in front of Samuel Cokesey's massive and cluttered desk, knees together and hands in her lap, moving them only to periodically tug at the hem of her skirt so that it would at least partially cover her knees. She felt her heart still racing, even after thirty minutes of questioning, interspersed with the increasingly despairing look on the Director's face as he read and re-read the pages of information she had presented to him. She had tried very hard to make the report brief and concise, yet thorough. Initially, she had even questioned herself, not believing what she uncovered, until the evidence became irrefutable. What was horrible was that she didn't see how her supervisor and his assistant could possibly have missed it, leaving her with only one conclusion: they knew, and had known from the first. That was when she began agitating to see the Director.

Finally, Cokesey dropped the papers onto his desk. He knew



Benning's supervisor only vaguely; he hadn't been Director all that long, even though he was a holdover from the previous administration. He had been picked after the mid-term elections. In fact, he had yet to meet the new president, but that wasn't his concern right now, or not his main concern. The first priority, he thought, was to find out why and how two career Special Agents had been suborned into this felony. And second—no, make this his first objective: who were they working for? His first guess would probably turn out to be correct. The National Security Agency had been involved up to its eyeballs in the affairs of Masterville ever since the discovery of how different the people there were compared to normal, whatever normal meant. He wasn't sure it meant anything, but leave that be; right now he had to do something.

He clasped his hands and rubbed them together, a nervous mannerism that appeared every time he found himself in a stressful situation. "Special Agent Benning, I must commend you for the way you handled this matter. Even if it turns out to be incorrect, you did the right thing."

Special Agent Benning looked stricken. Her young face paled. "You think I'm wrong?" She asked, voice shaking.

"No, no. I think you are very likely correct in your conclusions, but this is like thunder from a clear blue sky; it has to be checked and double-checked. In the meantime, I want you to keep absolutely silent about the things you've found out. Not a word, understand?"

"Yes, sir. What—what do you think will happen?"

"To you? If all this is true, you're going to be promoted and someone else is going to be very sorry. And just to be sure that there's no leaks, I want you to apply for emergency leave right now. Go home and stay out of sight until you're notified that it's time to return to duty."

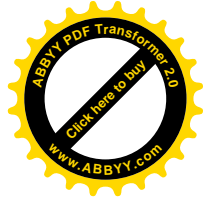
"Yes, sir."

"That will be all, then. And again, thank you. You've done the Bureau proud."

Special Agent Corine Benning left the Director's office practically walking on clouds. The day after she arrived at her home in Houston, she was raped and strangled to death while out jogging.

*** * * ***

Samuel Cokesey decided to take no action until he could absolutely



verify the contents of Benning's explosive report. The only way he knew to do that without compromising either himself or Benning was to delve into his contingency funds and hire a team of private investigators. He waited until he got home, then went out onto the back patio and used his cell phone to call his own attorney; he didn't trust the Attorney General on this one. Morgan Wimer attended the same church as the president.

"Jim? Hi, this is Sam. Howya doing?"

Cokesey chatted with James Severs, his old friend and long time attorney, for several minutes, then said "Jim, do you have an absolutely trustworthy private investigator, or an investigative firm you could recommend to me?"

There was a startled silence at the other end of the connection then Severs answered, jokingly. "What's the matter Sam? Don't you have anyone you can trust in your own office?"

"Not on this one, Jim. It has to be completely outside the department. Not only that, it's urgent and vital. I need someone, or several someones right away."

"Well, sure, I can find you some help. In fact, I'll give you the name of my own investigator. No, wait, I'll do even better; I'll talk to her first, then have her call you. How's that?"

"Great. And Jim? This is absolutely confidential. Not a word of it can get out until I decide what to do."

Severs responded in a hurt tone. "Goddamn it, Sam, I ought to be insulted that you even said that."

"Sorry, Jim, but I had to."

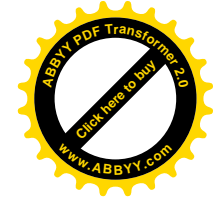
"That important, huh?"

"Absolutely. When do you think I'll hear from him?"

"Her, Jim; it's a her. She owns the agency but hardly anyone knows that. I'll have her call you at home."

"Tell her to use my mobile phone. You have the number don't you?"

"Yes, but give it to me again, just to be sure. If she doesn't call tonight, she will tomorrow night for certain. Her name is Suzanne Summerton."



"Okay, Jim. Thanks. I owe you one."

* * * *

After he finished giving verbal orders to his most trusted operative, Mandel Crafton wiped beads of sweat off his forehead and upper lip. To think that everything he had worked for could have been shot into as many pieces as a clay target at a trap shoot was completely disconcerting, and even more so considering that aneophyte FBI agent had caught on to the bag job ordered by the President. How on earth had that happened? He could only think that it was either gross incompetence or someone suddenly developing a conscience. In either case, once the bag job down in Houston was taken care of, there would be another one right behind it. That kind of fuck-up deserved the ultimate punishment. Besides, if he didn't order it, the President would.

The question now, he thought, is whether Mad Manny will ever know. He probably would. Trust that ethical-minded cretin in the FBI Director's chair; he would probably go to the President even when his proof turned up missing, which it would be as soon as the cleaning crew moved into the FBI building after dark. His man would see to that business. He mentally patted himself on the back for that one. Putting an operative into the Director's office was one of the slickest operations he had ever initiated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Isn't it horrible how religion denigrates sex so much? How they try to control it and try to make everyone practice what they believe rather than what's natural?" Shirley said, her voice a bit hoarser than normal. She had made more noise than she would have ever dreamed could come from her during sex, no matter how good.

"Mmm. Most of them don't believe what you're doing is natural, but don't stop. Who gives a damn what they think?" Lisa said. She was stretched out on the long side of the big lounge with her head in Shirley's lap and her lower legs laying across Daniel's thighs. Shirley was idly caressing first one of her breasts, then the other, and thinking about how her attitudes had changed since the discovery of Masterville Valley. Two years ago she would never have imagined herself with a woman. But what was the harm? It wasn't like she was looking for a replacement for men. This was just an exceedingly titillating variety that would only enhance the act with males later,



now that she had succumbed to a woman's gentle touch a few times.

"That's the nice thing about our prions," Daniel added. "Even people who carry the religious genes can dispense with the belief system when the Masterville prions are there from birth. And maybe even later on. I hope so, anyway. This place proves that you don't need religion to develop a decent ethical and moral culture, even if it's not quite what most of the world subscribes to." Daniel stroked Lisa's thigh, inching the hem of her skirt up past her lower thighs.

"You guys aren't playing fair; two on one!" Lisa complained, but there was no approbation in her voice and she kept a tiny smile on her face, like her Mona Lisa namesake. It was late afternoon of the day after the tests Harry had administered.

"Just getting back. You woke me up at three o'clock in the morning, remember" Daniel said.

"I can't help it if you were in the way when I wanted to tell Shirley something. Besides, us mutants don't need much sleep."

"Well, whatever it was you told her, it worked," Daniel said, remembering the subsequent acrobatics.

"It sure did," Shirley said, "But I'm not a natural mutant like you guys. I'm sleepy. Besides I'm leaving tomorrow. I want to go to bed early."

"Good. I don't guess one more night will do Dan any permanent damage. Or cause him to develop an insatiable desire for blonds instead of redheads."

"It won't," Daniel said. "But about that insatiable desire..."

Shirley tossed a pillow at him. He ducked, causing his hand to shoot up under Lisa's skirt.

"Whoops!" He said.

Lisa grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand back down. "Whoops, indeed. Men come up with the damndest excuses. Are you really sleepy, Shirley?"

Shirley moved her hand from one of Lisa's breasts to the other. "I was, but I'm beginning to get unsleepy. It must be the conversation."

"Women come up with the damndest excuses," Daniel said. That



remark got the remaining pillow in Shirley's reach tossed at him, but it also got everyone moving.

* * * *

Cokesey held his forehead in one hand and the phone in the other. "They're certain of the identification? Yes, I know, I just have to be sure. Who do you have on it? Well, add some more people. I want whoever killed that poor girl caught and I want it done quickly, I don't care how much manpower you have to expend, or what your budget manager says. Yes, right. And be damned certain that her personal effects, computer files and so forth are scrutinized with a fine tooth comb."

He listened for a moment then continued, "You'll know if you find it. And if you do, I want it kept absolutely compartmentalized, understand? As few persons as possible should have access to anything you find that's suspicious, or has anything at all to do with the investigation into the suspected assassin. And I want to be notified immediately if you find out anything like that. Right. Right. Keep me posted, now. My assistant will know to put you through."

Cokesey put down the phone. A gut-wrenching sense of guilt washed over him as he thought of the young, idealistic attitude Corine Benning had displayed in his office the previous day, even when she was frightened that she might have made a mistake that would end her career. Her sense of duty and idealism had shone through the strain she was under from going outside the chain of command as plainly as sunlight through cheesecloth. Goddamnit, he should have had someone assign some guards to her, knowing what she was carrying around in her head. Well, he still had all the information she had given him, including the duplicate set of documents supposedly "found" with the shooter. She had filched them from the lead agent's desk, where they had been inadvertently left unguarded. That should be enough; more than enough considering that she might have died for bringing it to him. But if that were true, it raised other questions, didn't it?

Abruptly he got up and walked over to his personal wall safe and punched in his code. He pulled the safe open and reached inside. His heart skipped a beat, then speeded up like a rocket lifting off, going faster and faster as it accelerated toward orbit. For long moments he couldn't believe the papers were gone. Half-hoping that he had shoved them under other of his secret files and forgotten that he had done so, he took everything out and went through the pile of documents and folders one by one, knowing all the while that his search was useless. The papers were missing and that was all there was to it. No, not all.



He shoved everything back into the safe and locked it while muttering a swear word he hardly ever used. Someone not only knew the combination to his safe, they had access to his office after hours. And they had known just what to look for, which meant that his office was almost certainly bugged. Not only bugged, but done with some device that the morning sweep the security team did every morning couldn't detect. He picked up the phone again and punched the button for Raymond Dickey, his chief administrative assistant, and told him to have the security chief report as soon as humanly possible.

* * * *

Shirley looked none the worse for wear the next morning as she prepared to leave for Washington, despite another night of sleep deprivation. She was smartly dressed in an off-blue jacket and slacks, with her hair back in place. She looked very pretty, Daniel thought. Very pretty indeed. Hardly anyone would suspect that such a petite beauty was a trained NSA operative, and entirely capable of using that training should the occasion arise. Even though she was into the administrative hierarchy now, she still carried her weapon and kept physically fit.

Lisa embraced her tightly then stood back. "You take care now, you hear? It's not like we have enough lovely blonds around here to spare. Besides, if anything happened to you, Dan would just pine away, and then what would I do for a cook?"

Daniel didn't trust himself to speak. He simply hugged her tightly, kissed her on the lips and let her go. He stood with his arm around Lisa's waist, watching her go into the little waiting area. Masterville's airport was even smaller than would normally be the case for a city of its size. Many of its citizens had no intention of ever leaving, for any reason, and most of their relatives lived in the valley. As soon as Shirley was seated, he and Lisa turned to go. Holding hands, they walked back outside and toward their car. On the way, Daniel stopped suddenly and pulled her into a kiss.

"Thank you for the last two nights, sweetheart. I never knew redheads were so generous."

"Generous? Not hardly. Goodness sakes, most of the time we barely noticed you."

"Oh. Guess I must have been dreaming. Seems as if I remember..."

Lisa hip-bumped him. "Shush. I can't help it if Marybeth taught me to like tits, too. Sometimes. Occasionally. Like when a certain man I



know falls asleep in the middle of the night."

Daniel grinned as they began walking again. "Well I'll be damned! And here all this time I thought people were supposed to sleep at night. My mistake. Hey, have you noticed it's daylight? As soon as we get back I guess we'll have to go to bed."

Lisa bumped him again with her hip, but her smile disappeared. "It's really going to be dangerous for her, isn't it? More so than for us, I mean."

Daniel nodded. "Yes it is. She'll be trying to penetrate areas that are watched very carefully. As far as that goes, I suspect she will be watched very carefully, too. On the other hand, we may be worrying too much. Shirley is very innovative."

Lisa's smile returned. "Yes, she is, isn't she?"

This time she got the hip-bump.

*** * * ***

At the airport, there was a delay. It didn't cause Shirley to miss her flight, but it did make departure almost an hour late. At the check-in counter, a man in a dark suit had set up shop beside the regular attendant. He appeared to be checking names of departing passengers against some sort of list on his monitor. Another terrorist threat, she thought—until she saw two people in a row refused permission for a boarding pass. Both looked perfectly ordinary. The fact that neither of them protested vigorously told her that they carried the Masterville prions. Public fits of anger wasn't their style. On the other hand, as she stood in the short line she saw one couple whom she had met in town and knew to be life-long citizens passed without difficulty.

When her turn came, the extra man winked at her and she was given a boarding pass with no questions asked. After she was seated in the departure lounge, she pulled out her phone and dialed Tyrone's office number. Tim Powers answered.

"Hi, Tim, this is Shirley. There's someone here at the airport terminal checking names and stopping some people from departing. Do you know anything about it?"

Tim's voice was calm, but Shirley could detect anger just below the surface, barely being held in check. "This is the goddamned NSA acting up again. They're trying to pass themselves off as reps from Homeland Security but they're not. There's no immanent terrorist



threat that we've heard of, either, no matter what they say. They want to see who's leaving the city and how much luggage they're carrying and where they're going and so forth."

"But what's their purpose? They're letting most people through but I saw them turn down two people I know."

"Tyrone thinks they're stopping anyone who's at all prominent in valley affairs from leaving. We just heard that they've set up check points on the highway at both ends of the valley, too. And those are being backed up by the army. As to what it means, we're not sure yet, but it can't be anything good, not with the way we're being blamed for the Sheffield assassination now. I've got some people in Washington working on the problem, but I don't know how much they can do at the present."

"Tell Tyrone I'll see what I can find out when I get to Washington."

"Good. Be careful."

"Thanks. I will," Shirley said. Everyone is telling me to be careful, she thought. How can you be careful when you're getting ready to spy on your boss, who is already suspicious of you? Instinctively, she reached into her loose-fitting jacket for the comforting touch of her weapon, but of course it was already being hauled out to the plane with the other luggage.

* * * *

On the way back up the mountain, Daniel asked Lisa "How would you like me with a beard?" He was still trying to decide on his appearance for when they left the valley. It definitely had to be changed; his face was too familiar.

Lisa looked sideways at him. "So far as looks go, or in general?"

"Damned mutants. They want to analyze everything you say."

"Wait until I start growing antenna from my forehead and can read your mind. That's when you have to worry."

"Not me. My thoughts are pure as those of a day old baby, and when they aren't, it's because I'm thinking of you."

"Hah. Whose tits are bigger, mine or Shirley's?"

"Shirley's, but I noticed only as an intellectual exercise of my



observational prowess. Yours are prettier, though."

"Thank you, kind sir. Now if I were to compare..."

"Why don't we get back to the beard? No use over-doing this intellectualizing."

"Uh huh. It's a good thing you said mine were prettier."

"I can't help it; freckles turn me on. But about the beard...?"

"What color?"

"I want it to be natural so forget the color. Besides, it has sort of a reddish hue when it grows out, courtesy of my Irish ancestors."

"Really? Grow one then! And make a point of always ordering Jameson's or Bushmills or something like that. Just don't try dancing a jig after a couple of drinks. Somehow I think that would give you away."

"I know it would. Irish jigs are right up there on my list of things to avoid, ranked right below facing a firing squad but somewhat higher than Russian Roulette."

Lisa had to laugh. She loved bantering with Daniel, even when they were serious. She held her next question until he had navigated one of the more grievous switchbacks on the mountain highway, then continued.

"Okay, beard is in, Irish jigs are out. What else?"

"Glasses might help, depending on what economic level we're pretending to be at, but they're getting to be so rare in the middle and upper classes nowadays that I'm afraid they would attract attention rather than deflect it. Unless we go the ignorant redneck route again, and frankly I hope we don't have to, ever again. I've had enough of run-down houses and cockroaches in the kitchens. How can people stand to live that way? But seriously, why don't we just stick to the basics? I've still got a kit. We'll fix ourselves up with something that's easy to maintain but still changes our appearance."

"Ours? Why do I need a disguise? I haven't been publicized."

"I know, but almost certainly there were enough people who saw us together, probably including Homeland Security, FBI, NSA and probably Klingon agents to boot, that we'll have to cover up that



pretty hair of yours, among other things."

Lisa was initially surprised by Daniel's words, though once she considered it, she realized she should have known that her face and name would be associated with him by this time. But why hadn't they been in disguise when they had been doctoring baby formula? She tried to figure it out briefly, then gave up and asked.

"Because we were always masked while we worked with the mixing vats and I made sure I usually wore dirty clothes and needed a shave. Remember? And we were working way down on the economic ladder, where the people we associated with couldn't even speak good English, much less read it. And remember, I wasn't being hunted then. I suspect both of us might be before long, this time. If the job didn't really need to be done, and if I weren't the best qualified to do it, you couldn't get me outside the valley if you hooked me to a set of mules and dragged me."

"What happens if we get caught?"

Daniel didn't want to tell her, or even think about the possibility. "Let's just make damn certain that we don't."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I don't believe it," the President said flatly. "In fact, I think you're being hoodwinked. That girl you say had all this stuff—"

"The Special Agent, you mean?" Cokesey said, raising his voice to interrupt President Williamson and not caring that he did so. He saw the secret service agent in the oval office with them tense his body when he did so. He forced himself to relax.

"—she was unstable. Did you know that she requested an emergency leave when there was no crisis at all?"

"I told her to do so, Mister President."

"Then you're as culpable as her. I have the report right here on my desk and the lead agent has given absolutely no indication that the evidence was planted. Who am I supposed to believe; him or some young twat stupid enough to let herself get mugged in her own home town?"

Cokesey could see that the President was having none of it, but he



made one last try. "Sir, you're doing a disservice to the country by letting Masterville be blamed for the assassination when it simply isn't true. Don't you see how that's going to stir up emotions as strong as those on both sides of the abortion question or gay marriage or genetic manipulation?"

"We need strong emotions on those subjects, Mister Cokesey. I don't feel that the country needs abortion or gay marriage, and we certainly can do without the evils of the geneticists who want to change the makeup of our bodies that the good Lord in his wisdom has given us. And no matter what the constitution says, the same goes double for those atheistic mutants in Masterville. We can do without them. Now I don't want to hear any more about it, is that clear?"

Cokesey stared at the man sitting behind the desk, his hooded eyes glinting with enjoyment of the power imbued by the office. *They shot the wrong man, whoever it was*, he thought. Aloud, he said "It's perfectly clear, Mister President. You'll have my resignation on your desk by day's end." He started to suggest his most able deputy as caretaker until another director could be named and confirmed, but he knew that Williamson wouldn't accept any recommendation from him. Instead, he rose, nodded his head and walked out.

Behind him, the President was already calling for his press secretary. He wanted to get a statement out with the proper spin right away, just in case the fool tried to go public with his accusations. It's a good thing I was warned, he thought.

* * * *

Samuel Cokesey couldn't go public immediately, at least not that specifically. There was no way he could compete with the wealth of negative publicity presidential press contacts could bring against him. Anything he had to say would be buried in charges he couldn't refute, not without the proof he no longer had. But he still retained his reputation, and that counted for more than perhaps the President realized.

Back in his office, he wrote out his resignation by hand, cleaned his desk of what few personal items were in it and walked out. He dropped the resignation on his admin assistant's desk.

"Seal this and send it to the Oval Office," he said. "Good luck with the new director."

Her mouth was still hanging open in surprise as he left.



On the way to his home in the Maryland suburbs, he wondered what was going to happen to the country with Williamson in office. Over the last decade or two, more and more power had been vested in the office of the President, with concomitant loss of authority by both houses of congress. And the Supreme Court of late was leaning more toward decisions that meant loss of privacy and freedom. Terrorism was responsible for some of that, of course, but over the years he had seen those in power use the anti-terrorist agenda more for their own purposes than to protect the country. And even when their intentions were good, the cure was more often than not worse than the disease. But what could he do about it?

He was pulling into the driveway of his rather unpretentious home when he finally decided upon a course of action that might slow down the rush to what he thought of as an abhorrent miscarriage of justice. The problem would be getting Bonnie to go along with it. She had a mind of her own, even though she hadn't objected when he accepted the appointment as Director of the FBI. She had complained afterward when she learned first-hand about the political labyrinth of Washington that would have put Byzantine politicians to shame.

Bonnie met him at the door, as usual.

"Hello, Dear. How was your day?"

"I resigned," he said bluntly.

"Oh dear. Over the Masterville thing, I suppose."

"Yes. Come have a drink with me and I'll tell you about it, or as much as I can. It's not pretty."

After they were settled, Bonnie listened attentively to her husband. She was appalled to hear that the President himself, from all indications, might be using the assassination of his predecessor as a means to stir the country up again over Masterville Valley—and using faked documentation to do it at that.

"Sam, is the man so enamored with power that he believes he can get away with anything he wants to do, like Nixon did while he was president? I thought that could never happen again."

Cokesey gazed fondly at his wife. Her hair was almost totally gray now, and her body had softened but he still thought her as beautiful as she had been when he met her as a college freshman.

"Apparently so. And don't let his mouthing about religion fool you. I



can respect a person who truly believes in a religion and practices its teachings, but he's a real hypocrite from the rumbles I've heard around the capitol. He pays a lot of lip service to religion, but uses it for vote-getting and little else. Give him credit where it's due, though. He's no fool. He knows how uneasy the country still is about the Masterville thing and he's going to use that emotion to try bringing enough of the country behind him to solidify control of his agenda in congress. Hell, it will work, too; that situation is ready made for demagoguery."

"Is there anything you can do? Can't you go to the media and tell the truth?"

"Not without anything to back me up. I'd be laughed off the rostrum if I called a news conference without evidence."

"So there's no stopping him? Oh, those poor people. I feel so sorry for them. It's not their fault how they were born, and besides, we both know they're no threat to anyone. Just the contrary."

Cokesey felt relieved to hear his wife still held a good opinion of Masterville. It made his next statement much easier. "I—we, that is, might be able to slow him down a bit. That is, if you're ready to retire."

His wife smiled at him. She reached over and patted his hand. "Sam, dear, I've been ready to retire for months now. I know you liked what you were doing, but now that you're free, why not? We can well afford it. You've always wanted to write and I'd like to spend more time with my historical society."

"Wonderful. What would you say to moving back home?"

"To Missouri? In Branson, you mean? No way. It's turned into a horrible place. Crowded, worse traffic than here and tourists thicker than fleas on an old hound dog."

"Not there. They've turned our old neighborhood into fast food places and mini-golf courses, not to mention the movie and music studios on every block, separating untalented youngsters from their money. No, I was thinking of somewhere farther south, back to the state we were born in."

Bonnie knew her husband so well that it took only seconds to grasp what he had been trying to lead up to gradually.

"Samuel Cokesey, if you want us to move to Masterville, why not just



say so?" A puzzled expression crossed her face as she remembered what else he had said. "But how would that *slow down* the President, as you put it?"

"It will take a little while for him to get his machine rolling again after what I say. All I have to do is call Nancy Primmerton and tell her that I've resigned and that we think Masterville Valley is the perfect place to retire. How's that?"

"I love it! Tell Nancy I said hello and that we should get together before we leave."

"I will. You're sure now?"

"Of course I'm sure. Do you think we could ask the Masterville people for some of their prions? Or do they have any effect on us old folks?" She winked to be sure her meaning was clear.

"Not but one way to find out." Cokesey grinned and headed for his cubbyhole of a home office, to call the newspaperwoman.

*** * * ***

"Hey, there's Nancy!" Lisa exclaimed when she turned the television on. Most of the group currently in residence at Tyrone's apartment was relaxing at the end of the day and watching the news. It had become sort of a ritual since the Masterville story broke, and sometimes they heard more quickly from one of the anchors than even Tyrone's Washington contacts.

As quickly as the anchor had finished introducing her, Nancy began speaking. This particular channel provided Spanish subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

"Why do they always think we can't understand English?" Ernest Estabanez said disgustedly. He was Tyrone's production manager and had come over to stay the night and go over some problems with the biotechnical equipment.

"It's those stupid—"

"Shush, let's listen," Shirley said. "This may be important."

"...in addition to the suddenness of his resignation, Mister Cokesey dropped another bombshell. He announced in a call to this station that he and his wife intended to move to Masterville, the city which has been in the news so much the past year or two, as soon as



arrangements could be made. He also stated firmly that he saw no threat whatsoever to the nation from the prions carried by the population of Masterville. When asked whether his resignation was due to a conflict between his notions and those of the White House he refused comment, stating that his actions spoke for him, as they always have. He did say, however, that he doubted the veracity of the recent revelations linking Masterville to the assassination of President Sheffield.

"Samuel Cokesey was nominated for the Directorship of the FBI by former president Smith and was a controversial figure in his administration. A source close to President Smith said that he retained his post in that administration simply because he was well known for his honesty and forthrightness, and that after Smith's rumored involvement in...

Tyrone burst out laughing. "By golly, I told Sam Cokesey he'd wind up here some day if he didn't quit telling the truth all the time, and by god, here he comes!"

"I didn't realize you knew him," Daniel said.

"I try not to let who I know in Washington get around. I guess I can tell you now; he's the reason the FBI declined to investigate us back when that clerk found out about us. He's a good man and I hope he becomes a good friend, for that matter."

The big screen began blinking again, as it always did when Tyrone's programming turned up anything concerning Masterville.

The Anchor was on again.

"...and in related news, it has just been learned that travel into and out of Masterville Valley has had some restrictions placed on it, and that identifications are being scrutinized by Homeland Security agents. A spokesperson said that the restrictions involve only certain persons and should be of limited duration. All further comment was declined.

"In other news—"

Tyrone told the set to mute.

"What's that all about, I wonder?" Daniel asked.

"More to the point, what does it mean for you and Lisa? How are you planning on leaving here now?"



"What—oh. Damn. How are we going to get out of here now without letting anyone know?" Daniel wrinkled his brow, already wondering whether it would be best to go overland through the forested mountains or to try a disguise.

"Are you and Lisa about ready?"

"No," Daniel said, "but if the Washington NSA goons are starting to restrict travel in and out of here, I think we'd better scoot while we can. Thing is, I don't want our departure to be known, and if they're checking identifications of everyone leaving, that would do us in."

Tyrone frowned. "I just assumed you were going to use some fake IDs."

Daniel gave a short, pungent laugh. "If they're going to try to keep the top echelon of Masterville right here, or at the least know where they are so they'll have some public figures to grab and put on trial when the times comes, then I think we need to come up with a better way to get out of the valley."

"I can take us out over the mountains," Lisa said. "Or rather Marybeth can. She loves to hike and knows all the trails and paths and old logging roads."

"And I can have someone pick you up on the other side if you'll name a place and time," Tyrone said. Seeing Daniel's hesitance, he continued "Don't worry; it will be someone absolutely trustworthy and he'll drive you all the way to Washington."

"Can Marybeth come up here on such short notice?"

"As it happens, she was coming up anyway to spend a few days with me. I'll call and have her bring her hiking clothes."

"Sounds good." Daniel said. He stood up and held out his hand to Lisa. "Come on, Mutant Atheist Prion Person, Female Type. Let's go grab something to eat and get ourselves ready."

Lisa let Daniel help her to her feet, but asked "You mean tonight, don't you?"

***"Twere best done quickly,"* he said, shortening the quote. It had been a long, wonderful vacation. He would remember it fondly in months to come.**



CHAPTER NINE

"What's that?" Lisa asked when Daniel returned from the underground garage beneath the main Genetechnics building where he was keeping his car stored. He had brought back a suitcase and was beginning to empty it.

"Night vision goggles, latest model, and a few other little odds and ends. The Army isn't patrolling much beyond the check points, but I wouldn't put it past Mister Crafton to already have ordered some agents to watch out for people sneaking out of town at night." And this," he said "is my alternate handgun, also known as a shootin' arn in these here parts."

"Oh! May I see?"

"Sure." He handed it over.

Lisa removed the clip and racked the slide back and forth to check the action. Lisa was a former champion pistol shot and entirely familiar with weapons, like most of the valley residents. "Nice. Why this one instead of your old .45?"

"Because I figure this little Glock will be easier to conceal on the outside."

"Oh. Well, I hope you don't have to use it."

"You and me both." Daniel said, remembering the last time he had drawn a weapon. It was right here in Masterville, when the NSA was trying to have him killed for resigning after being assigned to investigate the people of the valley. He continued removing items from the suitcase while Lisa went to answer a knock at the door. He thought it was probably Marybeth.

It was, and as soon as she had finished greeting Lisa with a kiss that was more akin to mouth to mouth resuscitation than osculation, she repeated the performance on him.

"Just like I remember," Daniel said. "You must keep in practice."

"You betcha. Tyrone told me that you two want one of my guided tours. Right?" Marybeth was wearing her hair in two attractive pigtails, as if she had been anticipating a hike.



"Right. And we would rather not be interrupted by anyone resembling a hominid if you don't mind."

"Can do. I think. It's already getting dark outside so let's get on with it."

A half hour later they were on their way.

*** * * ***

Daniel waited until they were nearing the top of the little mountain that the Genetechnics Corporation was built on the side of before donning the night vision goggles. After that, the going was much slower for he insisted on leading the way, though he kept checking with Marybeth to be certain he wasn't going astray. They had put two ridges behind them when the path they were following intersected an abandoned logging road. It was an old one, but it had been kept fairly clear by off-road vehicles used by hunters during the season.

Marybeth touched Daniel's arm and rose on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "To the left leads on down to the county road, then another left and go a half-mile. That will put you at the old abandoned service station where Tyrone should have a car waiting."

"All right, thanks. We can make it from here."

Marybeth gave them each a brief hug and disappeared back the way they had come. He and Lisa continued on, Daniel leading the way. They had gone only another two hundred yards when a short guttural command froze him in his tracks.

"Stop and don't move!"

Lisa stopped, too, just as he had warned her to in case this happened. He knew that they must have blundered into one of the old bunkers that the Army had used when there was a full Brigade surrounding the city. A figure rose into sight, seemingly coming up out of the ground as seen through the distortion of his night goggles.

"Now!" He whispered to Lisa and shut his eyes.

Lisa thumbed the little flare she had been carrying. At the first hint of brightness, Daniel flung himself to the ground, ripping off his goggles and drawing his weapon at the same time. He saw more than heard the shot fired at them, for that weapon was silenced. He was pulling the trigger of his gun before he hit the ground. He fired twice more in rapid succession, once at the level where the flash of gunfire had



bloomed in the night, and once lower in case whoever was shooting was going down, too.

"Dan! Are you okay?" Lisa's urgent whisper came from close behind him.

Never taking his eyes from the bunker, he whispered back. "I'm fine. You did great."

When nothing else happened for several minutes, he began feeling slowly around him, brushing at weeds and dirt until he touched his night goggles. He put them on and peered into the landscape that became an eerie green as seen through the glasses. Nothing moved.

"Stay here, I'm going to look." He said softly. He began crawling forward. Shortly more of the outline of the little camouflaged bunker came into view, almost at ground level. No wonder he hadn't seen it. Being very careful, he crawled up to it. Down inside the bunker he heard a suppressed moan, then the gasp of a person trying to breathe. He moved around to the side of the bunker in case a gun was being pointed toward the front and raised his head high enough to peek in.

There was only one person there and he was no longer a threat. His automatic lay beside him but he was busy trying to keep on living rather than thinking about fighting. Daniel wondered if he could help him now that the danger was over, though his inner sense was telling him to leave quickly. He crawled down into the shallow hole. Still using the night vision goggles, he peered at the face, then cursed, loud enough to bring Lisa scurrying toward him. He looked up and saw her on hands and knees peering down over the edge of a sandbag. "Is he dead?"

"He is now," Daniel said as the little gasping noises suddenly stopped. He looked up at Lisa and began crawling out of the bunker.

Even in the semi-darkness, Lisa could see that something was wrong.

"Daniel, what is it? Are you sure you didn't get hit?"

"I'm fine. It's just that I knew the guy down there. We went through the academy together."

"Oh, Dan! Was he a friend?"

"Not really, but it's bad enough. Come on, let's get out of here before someone comes to investigate. I don't want to have to kill anyone else who's just doing their job."



Lisa didn't argue, but she wondered how innocent the man could have been if he followed affairs at all closely. A good portion of the country admired the Masterville people, though it was mixed somewhat with jealousy over their good fortune. Unfortunately, a far greater proportion were suspicious of them—or worse, and the second administration in a row was fanning the flames. *Probably he was just misled, like so many others in these times. That doesn't help us, though*, she thought, as she followed Daniel. *Or him either, the poor man*. In a few minutes they turned from the logging trail onto the county road.

As soon as they came into view of the old abandoned service station, the car parked there beside the rusting pumps began moving toward them, lights off. Daniel stopped, weapon ready until he saw two brief flashes of light from inside the cab, their signal. He and Lisa slipped into the back seat. The driver turned on the headlights and sped off into the night before he even introduced himself.

* * * *

NSA Director Crafton was feeling good. He had gotten word to the President about that bitch FBI agent who had almost fouled up their plans and the situation was under control, although not so quite so tightly as he had envisioned at first. When Cokesey announced that not only was he resigning and moving to Masterville, but that he didn't believe anyone from there was involved with the assassination, he had to downplay the story he had instigated with the false evidence. Damn the man, his reputation for honesty and plain speaking was so rock solid that he didn't dare contradict him too much for fear of stirring up the opposition. He wondered briefly why former president Smith had even brought him into his administration, then remembered that his honesty was the very reason; to hope some of it spilled over and blessed the rest of his staff. He sniffed to himself at the memory. It hadn't helped Smith at all. He had even come to regret the nomination but had been scared to fire him. Well, that was in the past; Williamson wouldn't make mistakes like that. He was nominating hard core supporters to all the important positions, cabinet and otherwise, and firing most of the holdovers. And as soon as he won re-election, he himself was promised the Vice Presidency. Crafton didn't intend to let anything at all interfere with that prospect.

Now for the next item; Shirley Rostervik. He didn't trust her, especially since reading transcripts of her phone conversations with that Beamer man in Masterville. She was their liaison to the place, but she was supposed to be working for him, not Beamer. Surprisingly,



she had asked for an appointment to see him right after she returned from that damned valley. It reminded him that he needed to see just exactly where her loyalties lay, though from her phone conversations, he suspected that they resided a bit father west, in the state of Arkansas, as a matter of fact.

* * * *

"Is that really true about the shooter being from Masterville?" Shirley asked as soon as she was seated in Crafton's office. She wanted to take the offensive and this was the best way she knew to go about it.

Crafton shrugged, as plainly as if he were saying "I told You so". "That's what it looks like to me, despite what Cokesey said. And listen, I checked with Tripenn, Cokesey's fill-in until the President nominates a successor, and I think we can discount Cokesey's denial of Masterville being responsible for the shooting. I mean, after all, he's moving there, isn't he?" He gave another cheerful shrug.

Shirley thought of the gentle people of Masterville Valley, who would have been quite content to live their lives unnoticed by the world at large had it not been for that census clerk who discovered them. Of course they were gentle only so long as left alone. She didn't like to think what might have happened—and still might happen—had President Smith been able to carry out his original plans of using the Army to invade the valley and imprison its inhabitants, or if the new president took a notion to do the same. She thought it likely that Williamson would eventually try that, and she had to hope she could help stop any of his plans.

"Well, moving there; that's suspicious enough I guess." Shirley leaned back in her chair, trying to appear relaxed. "Listen Mandel, I know I'm supposed to be liaison between us and the valley, but knowing someone or some group there is responsible for killing the president ... well, I don't think I can be sympathetic to them anymore. I'd like another assignment." She tried to breathe normally while hoping he would take the bait.

Crafton was as surprised as he would have been had she asked him out on a dinner date. Could it be possible that she was really turning on the Masterville mutants, after having such a good relationship with them? He didn't think so, but there was one way to find out; he had been trying to think of a good excuse for re-vetting her anyway. This would do it. If she failed the test, he could have her dismissed from the agency and get rid of one more person who knew how chance and not intent had gotten him to his present position. And if she passed—well, she wouldn't get another assignment, not until she had worked



with him long enough to get something on the Masterville elite, Beamer in particular.

"A new assignment can probably be arranged, Shirley, but you'll have to be vetted again."

"Since when?"

"Since a few days ago. It's a new policy and even though I know you're straight, we can't make exceptions. It would get out."

"You mean you really want me to undergo an MRI exam to see if I'm lying? Damn it, Mandel, I ought to walk out of here," Shirley said, pretending indignation. She made signs as if really were going to leave.

"Just cool it, okay? I'm sorry, but I'm not going to play favorites. You want to do something new, you get vetted. The whole nine yards."

Shirley took a deep breath and hoped the disgust she was trying to display showed on her face, although it was doubtful that Crafton noticed it; his gaze was fixed on her chest. "All right, damn it, but I better not find out later I'm being picked on just because I've been working the Masterville scene. You hear me?"

"Relax. Go make an appointment with security, then when they're finished with you, call me." He made dismissing motions with his hands and Shirley took the opportunity to leave. Crafton knew what she thought of him. He had propositioned her once and she turned him down flat, even mentioning his wife, as if that had mattered for a long time now. Not only that, she knew full well that he had only been trying to save his own skin when he inadvertently prevented his successor from skipping the country. He wondered how much leverage he would have on her if she got caught out this time. Beauty like hers shouldn't be wasted, especially not on those supercilious bastards in Masterville that he suspected her of consorting with. Mandel Crafton enjoyed the prerequisites of power quite as much as the President of the United States did, despite his alleged Christian beliefs.

Crafton was quite correct in his intuition that Shirley had enjoyed physical as well as mental liaison with someone in Masterville, but he would never have guessed it included Marybeth and Lisa Berry. Nor did he have an inkling of who her lover in Washington was, nor that he was a secret service agent assigned to his entourage—which sometimes intermingled with the president's guard.



CHAPTER TEN

"It's for you, Sam," Bonnie said, holding out his special phone that she had answered for him, since her husband was down on hands and knees cleaning out the contents of the bottom drawer of the dresser in their bedroom, the one where he kept all the miscellaneous stuff he didn't know what else to do with but didn't want to throw away.

"Thanks, hon." Cokesey sat up on the carpet. "This is Sam."

"Samuel Cokesey?"

"That's right. Who is this?"

"Suzanne Summerton. I was asked to give you a call."

For the first time since resigning, Cokesey remembered asking his attorney for the name of a private investigator. Events since then had overshadowed the need for a private investigation into the circumstances surrounding the killing of the purported assassin of President Sheffield.

"Oh yes. Missus Summerton, thank you for contacting me, but I believe that the reason I needed you is no longer viable. No wait—let me think a moment."

"Certainly. I'll hold."

A pleasant voice, Cokesey thought. Cultured and pleasant to listen to. He thought of asking her where she was from then discarded the idea. It was unimportant right now. He needed to decide whether it was worthwhile to try to recoup some of the evidence the young FBI agent had uncovered. He doubted that it would be possible now. On the other hand, there had to be a reason why two career agents had deliberately subverted their oaths and planted false evidence. If he could find the reason behind that, it might be possible to bring them over to his side, especially if he could promise them a safe haven somewhere. Masterville? He knew Tyrone Beamer, but would he agree to anything like that while he was under pressure from other sources? Well, first things first. He had to try to find out what drove the agents to begin with, and if that succeeded, he could take the next step.

"Sorry for the wait," Cokesey said. "Before going any further, are you on a secure phone?"



"Always, Mister Cokesey, in my business. Always." The woman laughed, a merry tone in it that added to the richness of her voice.

"Good, so am I. Here's the question, Missus Summerton: Would you consider investigating two FBI agents?"

There was a pause, then acceptance. "From you I would. And please call me Suzanne. I dislike formality."

"Good. I'm Sam. Let me give you the details."

Cokesey spent almost a half hour revealing what he was after, how she was to report to him and the method and amount of payment. As soon as he asked about money, she took the initiative.

"Sam, I'm not a rich woman, but this one is on me, other than expenses. I'll let you know how much afterward, and if I need financing in the meantime, I'll ask. What you're saying happened is vile. And I'm sure you realize it must go higher in the government than those two agents, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, but for my purposes all I need is to discredit them so that Masterville won't be blamed."

"Well—if I turn up anything more extensive, it will be in my report, too, then you can do with it as you will. How's that?"

"Wonderful. You sound like a fine woman. I wish we could meet sometime under more pleasant circumstance."

"Perhaps we will. In the meantime, I'll put a priority on this and get some of my best people to work on it right away. Don't expect results too soon, though. This is sort of delicate."

"I understand. And thanks again."

"You're more than welcome." Summerton hung up and Cokesey went back to his packing with a lighter heart.

*** * * ***

President Williamson thought the meeting with Michael White, his Chief Of Staff and primary political advisor, would be a pleasant interlude from the more boring appointments that took up so much of his time, but it wasn't.



Michael White, called "Snow White" behind his back, wasn't happy at all as the President could tell by the way he constantly brushed his loose white thatch of hair away from his eyes and ears. It hung down over his neck to his collar and had become one of his trademarks.

"Mister President, you need to slow down with this Masterville business. It's a great issue but it has to be played properly, not used up all at once."

"Why the hell not, if it's all that good?" Williamson was always impatient about exploiting any political advantage that came his way, whether fortuitously or created deliberately, such as the feigned tracking of the presidential assassination to Masterville.

"Because it's not going to go away, that's why. We can drag this out slowly, constantly ratcheting up the pressure right on up to the mid-term elections. It's big enough to shake loose some of the secure seats of the opposition in congress if it's played right. But it can also backfire on you if you drum up a lot of fear of those people and nothing ever happens to justify it. And not everyone is against them, you know. It's a well known fact that there's already a black market for their prions, and not just here; it's world-wide."

"Well, damnit, what do you want me to do? Nothing?"

White chose his words carefully. "Mister president, the first thing you have to do is back off on blaming the assassination on Masterville. People are beginning to question it, particularly since Cokesey quit over the issue. We have more important irons in the fire."

"The Vice Presidency?" Williamson muttered, not wanting to think about how the House of Representatives had rejected his first choice.

"Yes. If you want to get re-elected, you're going to have to make some concessions. In fact, if we want to change the make-up of Congress, you have to. We control the house, but a quarter of the party will bolt if you push your agenda too hard. And the Senate is even worse. It's split and I need some more time to work on Vice President Byerly in case of tie votes."

"All right, all right. But I'm not going to back off too far. Stay on Byerly to make sure he'll vote our way if we need him." The President mused for a moment, then stood up and leaned forward with his hands on his desk. "And as far as the Masterville connection to the assassination goes, what do you want me to do? Say that we were wrong?"



"Exactly. Be gratuitous. It doesn't hurt to admit a mistake."

Williamson sat back down. *Damn the man, if he weren't so useful...*

"It will make me look like a dunce."

"Not if we play it right. Besides..." White hadn't intended to mention it to the President but now he thought he had better. Besides, it would clinch his argument.

"Mister President, I'm pushing this issue because it looks as if the report was wrong. There's already someone nosing around into that FBI agent's death and the background of the two lead agents in the investigation." White wasn't going to go any further for fear of "shooting the messenger" syndrome.

Williamson still looked indecisive.

"I think I can spin it so that you're the one who got suspicious and started looking. How's that?"

"Okay, do it. Now give me some good news."

"Yes, sir. Oil prices are down again." White didn't really know if that was good or not. It hurt the Islamic world, but damaged the economies of friendlier nations, too.

"Good. I think that's all then. Who's next?"

"The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, I believe. I'll send him in. Be sure to push him on purging Muslims from the services. He's been dragging his feet on that issue and it's a good one for us."

*** * * ***

Tyrone had gone down to the valley to talk to Jeremiah Jones, owner and editor of *The Masterville Chronicle*, the city's only newspaper. Jeremiah had an awesome reputation as a journalist and could have worked for any big city daily in the country had he wanted to, but he preferred the relative obscurity of Masterville—or as Masterville had been up until a year or so ago. He also had media contacts throughout the country. Jeremiah was a small energetic man with a mind as quick as lightning.

"Come on in, Tyrone. I've been expecting you. Which part of the government is most deserving of some Augean journalism today?"



Tyrone wasn't in a mood for levity. "Go after those restrictions they're placing on travel for some of our people. And I wouldn't mind a bit if you turned up evidence that it's the NSC rather than Homeland Security behind the sudden scrutiny."

"Yes, I've already heard about it, first hand. Hell, I got turned back! I had planned on going over to Nashville to talk to a few editors at the Small Press convention. I've got an editorial campaign on that going already in my syndicated column. What else?"

Tyrone didn't relax. Jeremiah had far more influence outside the valley than in it and being confined here was cause for concern. A convenient "accident" could still one of their most important voices to the outside world. "I'm becoming more and more worried about what Mad Manny is up to. I would feel a lot more comfortable if you moved up to the mountain where you wouldn't be so accident prone."

"What? Oh!" Jeremiah smiled grimly and touched his jacket where a suspicious bulge disrupted the lines of the garment. "I've got Mister Glock here for protection, Tyrone. Don't worry."

Tyrone shook his head. "I do worry. The government has more and more goons nowadays, and they're trained to kill and you aren't. And admit it; you're a thorn in the administration's side."

"That's what I'm supposed to be, Tyrone, and I can't do my job up there. Besides, once you start letting the government scare you, there's nowhere to go but downhill."

"You're right, but I don't have to like it. All right, how about that planted evidence implicating Masterville in the Assassination? Do you know anything else about that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I know Sam Cokesey. I had a call from him yesterday. He's paying for a private investigation into that nasty business while getting ready for his move to the house he bought here. I suspect they'll turn up evidence it was a bag job—if *they* don't get assassinated. But I don't think they will. Rumor has it that Mad Manny is trying to take credit for ordering an investigation into the whose thing, while continuing to castigate us mutant atheists for every little facet of our lives his supporters don't agree with."

"That imbecile! If he stays in office we're going to wind up with a Theocracy yet."

"An imbecile he may be, but don't sell him short, Tyrone. He's got some mighty smart people working for him."



"Yes. Well, I guess that's all I wanted to see you about. Keep me up to date. And watch your back, Jeremiah."

"Will do, on both counts." The editor glanced at the big wall clock he ran the Masterville Chronicle by. "It's time for lunch. Would you like to join me?"

"Give me a rain check. I need to get back up the mountain. I've got some other things going."

"Don't get caught," the newspaperman said, grinning. "You do and we're all in the soup."

Tyrone blinked, then turned and left. Damn his ornery hide, there wasn't much that got by Jeremiah, but he knew that if he disagreed with his plans he would already have said so.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The driver Tyrone had provided for Daniel and Lisa at long last pulled into the driveway of a middle class suburban home on the outskirts of Washington. He had been taciturn to a fault on the long drive from Masterville to the Capitol, providing for their needs but not answering many questions, and refusing to stop overnight for a rest.

"This is it, folks. Your new home. There's a computer inside. Boot it up as soon as you can. The boss left some data on it for you. Here's the password and keys to the house and cars. They're in the garage." He slipped a card into Daniel's hand and gave Lisa a handful of key rings.

As soon as they were out of the car he took their luggage, such as it was, from the trunk, wished them good luck and drove away.

"I hope there's a change of clothes in this place," Lisa said. "I'm to the point of not wanting to stand downwind of myself."

"You and me both," Daniel agreed as he stretched, trying to get the kinks out of his body. "Come on, let's see what's here."

Since their only belongings were carried in the two backpacks they had worn when hiking over the mountains, they were both wanting to see a well furnished house. What they found only increased Daniel's admiration for Tyrone.



The two bedrooms had closets and drawers stocked with clothes in their sizes and the dressers contained undergarments and such other accouterments as might be found in a normal home. Inside the bathrooms, towels were hanging ready and soap and toothbrushes and razors ready to be used. Lisa stopped in the room containing feminine clothing.

"Dan, would you mind doing the computer? I just have to get a shower and brush my teeth before I do anything else."

"Go ahead. I spotted the computer in an office off the hallway. I'll see what it has in store for us."

Lisa immediately began removing and tossing garments in all directions. Daniel waited only long enough to give her his usual admiring gaze while he ducked sailing underwear. He laughed and headed for the office. He wanted to clean up, too, but didn't think the computer should wait.

He was still perusing details of information Tyrone had somehow left for them when he heard a noise behind him. He turned. Lisa was coming toward him, wrapped in a thin pink robe and wearing a towel around her hair.

Daniel grinned. "Ah, Mrs. Smithers is out of the bath, I see."

Lisa was taken aback for a moment, then caught on. "And you're Mister Smithers, I presume?"

"Yup. Donald and Linda Smithers according to the files here. By golly, we got married without even seeing a preacher!"

"Poo. When and if I want to get married I'll let you know. What else?"

"I'm a freelance software designer, specializing in gaming construction and working from home. Spy thrillers, would you believe? And you're a lowly housewife, but looking for a job."

"Oh, that's great! How long have we been married?"

"We're newlyweds it says here." He wiggled his eyebrows. "So any time you like, you can start acting like a bride."

"Not until you hit the shower, Mister Smithers. Go, while I see what the kitchen has to offer, so long as I'm a housewife now."



Daniel went, willingly. By the time he came back, completely refreshed and wearing a blue robe he had found in the closet, Lisa was just finishing with scrambling eggs and making toast and coffee, pretty close to her limit so far as cooking went. Daniel sniffed and suddenly realized how hungry he was after two days of nothing but crackers and candy bars. While they ate, he told Lisa some other details of what he had found on the computer.

"We have a joint bank account, and if you looked in the purse in your room, you found the checkbook. Also credit cards and an ATM card for our bank. We got married a month ago and are just completing a move here from our home town in Nashville, Tennessee. I've just signed a contract with Polygames, Inc. and will be working on it for the next year or so, right here from our little home, where you are a housewife but looking for at least a part time job. There's a Ford minivan and a Toyota sedan in the garage. Our clothes appear to have been worn, but not too much."

"Why couldn't we have had a setup like this while we were working in the baby formula plants instead of those dinky places we had to live in?"

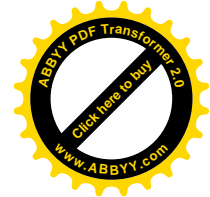
"Out of character. But now we're an upwardly mobile couple just raring to make our fortune."

"I'm surprised Tyrone didn't leave a couple of kids here in the house, just to complete the picture. That's not like him; he never does anything halfway. How did he manage all this from Masterville?"

Daniel scooped up the last of his eggs with a corner of toast and bit into it. "I'm not sure," he mumbled around the food, "but he could pass muster as an agent any day. We've got a good, safe disguise here, or will have as soon as my whiskers finish growing out and you cut your hair. After that, all we have to do is figure out how to contaminate Congress and the White House with our prions." He stood up and took his plate to the sink then turned around. "Of course that part should be easy. We can place you in the White House kitchen since it says here that you're a certified chef and have a secret clearance."

"What! Dan, you know I can't cook pinto beans, much less..." She stopped abruptly as she realized that Daniel was joking. "Daniel Stenning, you're going to pay for that, just wait!" She couldn't help but laughing, though, while Daniel came over and put his arms around her.

"You're so sweet I can't help teasing some times."



"It's all right, you clown. But Dan?"

"Hmm?" He raised his brows in response to the expression on her face.

"I'm not going to cut my hair, or dye it, either. I think I can stuff it under a wig of some sort, or wear a scarf. It's not like my face has been bandied about like yours has. And besides that ... once we finish with this mess, I think I'd really like to have a couple of kids. Since Tyrone seems to have forgotten to include them in the operational plan." She smiled wistfully at Daniel, waiting on his reaction.

Daniel bent his head and kissed her waiting lips. "Me, too sweetheart. For the first time in my life, me too."

*** * * ***

Shirley lay beside Troy Borden on the king sized bed in her new apartment, still partially dressed, purposely teasing him. As a lover, he was rather sweet if uninspiring, almost as if he were a little bit afraid of her beauty, a trait she had run across in a majority of the men she went with. In Troy's case, she didn't know why he should feel that way; he was handsome in his own right, with blond good looks and a tanned, muscular body. As a Secret Service Agent, she thought he was very careless. She never went into strange bedrooms herself without checking them for bugs or hidden cameras, but Troy never bothered, apparently thinking that no one would dare eavesdrop on the Secret Service, the agency charged with protecting the President. And it wasn't hard to get him talking with her about some aspects of his job, completely unconscious that he might be giving away critical information to someone with designs on the President. He was so fearful of offending her that he often said more than was wise.

In a way, Shirley felt bad about using her beauty to deceive him, and even worse about turning on her own agency people, but she now believed that the Masterville prions might be the one best hope for the world, teetering as it was on the brink of an all-out Islamic Jihad against the so-called "Infidel Nations", an epithet that pointed to any non-Islamic nation in general, and America, Israel, and the European nations specifically. Whatever she could learn about how the White House staff functioned while serving the President would be gist for Daniel and Lisa's plans to somehow get the President and his cabinet infected with the Masterville prions—and then hope that they worked as well as they apparently had on her. If they did, she thought that perhaps the generation-long shifting of the political spectrum toward catering to religion and race and sex and ethnic groups might begin to



be reversed. One could hope, anyway.

Shirley sat up on the side of the bed, acting as if she intended to get up before she and Troy had even made love.

"Where are you going?" Troy asked. He had stripped down to his pants but gone no further when Shirley had stopped undressing with her undergarments still on. His voice was uncertain, like a little boy whose mother had just decided to leave on an errand rather than make his dinner.

Shirley remained sitting up. "Why, nowhere, Troy. I was just waiting for you to unfasten my bra. Why haven't you done it yet?" Her lips turned up in a smile hidden from her lover while her back was turned.

Troy moved over closer to her and fumbled with the tiny hooks of her bra. He was as clumsy as most men with the process, or even more so, perhaps because of the tremor in his hands.

Shirley shrugged the bra straps off her shoulders and dropped the whole thing to the floor. When Troy attempted to pull her down beside him so that he could see and feel her really lovely breasts, she shrugged off his hands and lay down on her stomach. "Aren't you going to scratch me where it's made marks?" She wished suddenly that it was Daniel in bed beside her, or even Lisa. Either of them would already be running fingernails lightly along the creases in her shoulders and back left by the bra, a sensation she delighted in. Unfortunately, most men never thought of such a thing, or were too impatient if they did.

Tentatively, Troy began feeling out the marks and scratching uncertainly at them.

Shirley squirmed. "Too hard."

"Sorry," Troy said, then eased up so much that she could hardly feel it.

"That's okay. You're doing fine," she said, even though he wasn't. "I'll bet you have things to do with the President that are harder to get right than scratching my back!"

"You've got that right. He's a hard man to please, and it's his own fault." His hand stopped moving, hoping he was finished and could get on with making love.

"Umm. Don't stop, Troy. That feels nice. "What do you mean, its his



own fault?"

"Aw, you know the rumors that get around. He drinks a lot in private and smokes, too, but he tries to make out like the stuff he asks us to get isn't for him by changing the brands he tells us to buy."

Shirley turned onto her side, facing Troy. She laughed appreciatively. "That's funny. I bet the Stewards get a laugh out of it, too." She allowed him to cup her breast. He began squeezing it rhythmically, without moving his hand, detracting some from the pleasure she would ordinarily have felt.

"Yeah, they do, and I have trouble keeping a straight face when I re-supply his meeting room."

"What room is that, love? The Oval Office?"

"No, no. The place he goes when he wants to get real secret with someone." Troy laughed and moved his hand from her breast down to the curve of her hip. "He thinks if he has the stewards supply his living quarters and us his conference rooms, no one will know how much he's boozing. And smoking. He orders different brands, thinking that will fool us. What a dummy!"

Shirley leaned back against her pillow, opening the way for Troy to move his hand between her thighs. He rubbed his fingers against the sleek fabric of her panties, harder than she would have liked, and out of position anyway. It was still somewhat pleasant, and Troy was telling her things now that she could use—if she could keep him talking.

She reached up to touch his cheek and smiled at him. "God, Troy, how do you manage to screen all the different food and stuff to make sure it's safe?"

"Oh shucks, Shirl, same as the stewards do; there's a special detail that takes care of buying the food and smokes and drinks for the President and his cabinet, and another that supplies his conference rooms. Who cares about that, anyway? If terrorists ever try for the White House again, they'll go for something more dramatic than contaminating the groceries and booze. Besides, I'd rather do something else, like this." He slid his hand beneath the elastic of her panties.

Shirley decided she had gotten enough information for right now. Later she would try to find out how to spot the re-supply trucks. She began concentrating on making the sex as enjoyable as was possible



with Troy, but it didn't help that he went off too fast, as usual. While Troy was still on top of her she began wondering what Daniel and Lisa were doing. She needed to call Nancy Primmerton and meet for lunch. Dan had promised to get in touch with Nancy once he and Lisa arrived in Washington and were ready to try infecting President Williamson with Masterville prions.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nancy Primmerton was an attractive strawberry blond who had once been an anchor for one of the network news shows. She had earned a reputation for honest and interesting reporting, but eventually the pressure from above to slant the news enough to keep it in accordance with the right wing views of the CEO and a major stockholder caused her to quit in disgust. She resigned on one of the newscasts, giving explicit reasons why she was quitting before she got cut off, and that only solidified her standing with her audiences. She was glad she had quit now. She didn't earn nearly as much by freelancing her work, but she wrote a nationally syndicated column and was approached by enough sponsors wanting her to do special broadcasts that she was able to pick and choose from among them. She liked to do investigative reporting, too, when she had time and a solid story, like the one when she helped bring President Smith into so much disfavor that he couldn't possibly run for re-election. He was still tied up in lawsuits.

She leaned back in the big manager's chair beside the desk in her office at home, converted from the master bedroom. She needed the space. Computer screens and file cabinets and telephones and other furniture, including a small refrigerator and bar had filled the room to capacity as her freelance work expanded. There was still room to prop her feet on the edge of the desk, though, which she was doing when the phone rang. She picked it up.

"Primmerton," she said.

"Hi Nancy. Shirley here."

"Hi girlfriend. What's up with the mutants these days?"

"Oh, more of the same. Just wanted to let you know I was back in town for a while. How about lunch."

"Sure, that would be great. It's been too long. Anywhere special?"



"Oh, just the usual place, if that's okay," Shirley answered, a code phrase they had agreed on some time before. It meant that Nancy was to call her back soon with a disposable cell phone and arrange a meeting at some out of the way restaurant. Shirley hoped that Daniel would have contacted her by then.

"Sounds good. Do you have any tidbits about Masterville I can use for my column?"

"Don't your readers ever get tired of you writing about Masterville? That's old news."

"Maybe so, but it's still interesting. Hey, want to hear some juicy gossip?"

"You bet!"

Shirley continued talking for several minutes to allay suspicion just in case anyone might be listening. That and using code words was becoming standard practice in the Washington political environment with the proliferation of so many almost undetectable listening devices and the routine tapping of phone conversations. After Shirley told Nancy goodbye and hung up, she went on with her work as if it had been a purely routine phone call to her old friend. Even though she had passed all of Crafton's new tests, she still worried that he might be on to her. As much as she disliked him, she was still wary of his sharp and devious mind. And it never hurt to take precautions, not in her profession.

* * * *

Nancy Primmerton had become increasingly dubious about the privacy of her phone and computer conversations ever since she had broken the story of the previous administration's conspiracy against Masterville. And with good reason, she thought. The International terrorism movements had given government agencies everywhere the opportunity to push for and have written into law methods of prying into the private life of its citizens, and America was no exception. The laws might be designed to ferret out terrorists but they were often used for other, more nefarious purposes by departments such as the FBI and NSA. It was for that very reason that she hadn't spoken to Shirley yet about the note passed to her in a Fedex package, a service she used fairly frequently. The note indicated to her that it was from Daniel Stenning, though it didn't say so. She was to meet with either he or Lisa Berry in three days at a park near her home to see if Shirley had given her any information of interest. Nancy was looking forward eagerly to the meeting. She loved being part of a conspiracy,



particularly when she thought it might get her a big story, and even more so if she thought it might eventually get the President out of office. She positively loathed the man.

* * * *

"Did you know that my boyfriend is having rather more frequent meetings than usual with his boss lately? And would you believe that he's gotten so paranoid that he has his closest friends doing the grocery shopping for that little room because he's scared of being poisoned? Can you imagine?" Shirley said brightly, leaning forward over the table of the little booth in the restaurant where she and Nancy were having lunch.

"Wow! Sounds like he ought to see a doctor and get some pills or something! Is he doing the same thing at home?"

"Oh, no. He's still letting his family take care of that. But he's drinking more and making his wife order different brands so the cook won't think it's all for him. As if he could conceal something like that!"

"I would never have imagined such a thing from him, not in a million years," Nancy said, feigning surprise.

Both women knew they were talking about President Williamson, of course, and Nancy's response told Shirley that she had made clear that the President was drinking more and that his "secret" meeting room was supplied separately from the White House.

"And that's not all. Listen to this!" She motioned to Nancy and when she had leaned over the table she whispered the same information into her ear, just to be certain. After that she went back to talking normally, going on to other subjects.

There! She thought. Let Mullins make something out of this conversation, just in case he has one of his sleazy crew tailing me! Even though she had passed all of the re-vetting tests, she doubted that the Chief of Internal Affairs for the agency would be satisfied, not as closely as she had been working with the Masterville people, and not as close as she had been to Daniel Stenning. She wouldn't put it past the man to even have someone watching Nancy as well. As she was getting into her car after their lunch, she thought that perhaps she should have warned her. Next time, she would, she decided.

* * * *

Nancy wasn't as unaware of the dangers as Shirley might have



imagined. A successful career as a national evening news anchor and further success with her syndicated column and investigative reporting had made her unusually cynical for a woman still in her thirties. She kept a careful watch in the rear view mirror as she drove away and kept watching until she was several miles away. She saw nothing suspicious but decided to keep up her guard nevertheless. Playing for these kind of stakes wasn't a kid's game, nor anything like going after a crooked congressman. She knew how far Presidential authority extended these days and how subverted the government investigative and surveillance systems had become since the fanatical Islamic terrorist movement had gotten into high gear. Nevertheless, she was lucky that Corey Mullins, the Internal Affairs Director for the NSA had only limited manpower and it was stretched very thin. He had already made his choice and it was Shirley who was being watched, not Nancy.

*** * * ***

Daniel and Lisa walked hand in hand along one of the trails in the little park. It was an anomaly in this part of Maryland, where so many high rises and developments had burgeoned with the growth of the federal government. The area was populated by lawyers and lobbyists in teeming abundance, along with a substantial number of upper level government workers and congressional staff.

At times like these, when he drove through the miles of buildings and homes and apartments devoted solely to supporting the swarms of people involved in one way or another with the government, he despaired for the future of the country.

Lisa might have been reading his mind. "Wouldn't it be nice if our government was as clean and simple as this little park?" She said.

Daniel chuckled. "It would indeed, sweetheart. I doubt it ever will be, though. There's something in politics that seems to bring out the worst in humans and party affiliation doesn't appear to make much difference. On the other hand, no one has invented a simpler system that actually works, either, so I guess we're stuck with it. About the best we can hope for is that enough people always care enough to keep a damper on the worst of it."

"I would say you're cynical, but it's only the truth. Dan, I wonder about our kids. What kind of life will they have?"

"A happy one, let's hope." Daniel rubbed his hand over his new beard that had grown out a reddish brown. "They can have fun tugging at my face hair."



"Let's hope you won't need it that long," Lisa said.

Daniel came to a sudden halt. "Does that mean something specific?"

Lisa looked up at him. With her hair up and concealed by a scarf, her lightly freckled face made her resemble a happy pixie when she smiled. "Well, could be. Stay tuned for further bulletins."

Daniel bent and planted a kiss on her mouth, then on each eyebrow. "I shall." He gave her a quick squeeze and urged her back into their walk, only now he kept his arm around her waist. He had suddenly grown more protective.

"Look, there's Nancy. I bet she doesn't recognize us." Lisa pointed to the reporter.

Nancy was sitting on one of the park benches, feeding bits of bread to the ever present pigeons. She was dressed casually, in jeans and a short sleeved pullover and light windbreaker. She glanced up, looked back down at the birds, then slowly raised her head again. Her lips parted in the lopsided smile that had become a trademark during her time as an evening anchor.

"Hi! Mind if we share the bench with you?" Lisa said as they followed the sidewalk up to where Nancy was sitting.

"Of course." She moved over a bit to make room for them both. "You're good. It took a minute to recognize you."

Lisa sat down next to her and immediately got down to business, just in case they were interrupted. "What can you tell us, Nan? Anything?"

"Here's something you can take to the bank. Manny likes his booze and he likes to meet with Crafton in one of his little so-called secret briefing rooms. That particular room is re-supplied separately from the rest of the White House, probably through the basement entrance. It's usually re-stocked each Wednesday from a catering vehicle of some sort. I was scared to ask what the name of the company is, but it has to be rather small and I'd take odds that they buy their liquor directly from a retail store somewhere near by. Mad Manny likes Irish Whiskey. He also has his wife order Irish Whisky for their quarters and then switches the Southern Comfort he supposedly gets for himself for the Irish Whiskey his wife purportedly drinks. I think it's supplied by the usual White House Catering service, but I don't know whether they buy it retail or wholesale. The food is tested in both places by the Secret Service, but they pass the liquor so long as the



seal is unbroken." Nancy paused for breath, then added, "There. How's that for undercover work?"

"Crafton should hire you, except that I doubt your name is a household word with him since you broke the story that got his predecessor sent to Prison. I imagine he has nightmares about winding up there himself one of these days if he's consorting that heavily with President Williamson."

"Well, I may be good at prying stories out of reluctant responders, but this stuff is strictly not for publication or dissemination. You can probably guess where Shirley got it from, and I added a bit from my own sources. According to them, he isn't very popular at all with the Secret Service. They think he's a little bit nuts."

"They don't call him Mad Manny for nothing," Lisa offered.

"They sure don't," Nancy said. "I knew him when he was a Senator and I can tell you that he's a nutcase if I ever saw one. Unfortunately, he wraps it in religion and so far, only a few of us know just how far around the bend he really is. And also unfortunately, there's nothing anyone can prove. Give the bastard credit; he's been damn careful to keep his mouth within bounds and off the record, so there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Daniel shook his head in resignation. For someone like Williamson, he doubted that even a dose of Masterville prions would shake his beliefs; they were too solidly meshed with his basic personality. It had to be tried, though. And perhaps Crafton drank with him in that room, although that man was also a long shot. "Thanks, Nancy—and thank Shirley for us next time you see her. And tell her I said to please be careful. We want to see her again."

"I will. And you two be careful, too." Nancy glanced at her watch. "I've been here a while now. I'd better scoot. Why don't we try meeting again exactly two weeks from now and I'll let you know if we have anything better."

"Suits me, and we'd better be going, too. I don't want to hang around too long in this neighborhood. I suspect that the people living here have some spotters around to watch for undesirable elements and suspicious characters. Everyone that's anyone in government is becoming scared of being kidnapped or assassinated now."

"You don't know the half of it Daniel. I envy you for living in Masterville."



"You're welcome to move there any time, Nancy," Lisa said sincerely.

"You bet," Daniel added.

Nancy stood up to go. "Thanks, guys. I may take you up on it if things get any hairier around here. I could write my column just as well from there and depend on my stringers to dig up anything I need from the locals." She shook Daniel's hand and gave Lisa a brief hug and buss on the cheek, then walked away with her usual purposeful stride.

*** * * ***

Daniel saw that Lisa's clothes had already been discarded and flung to various parts of the bedroom when he came out of the bathroom that night. He looked around, grinning. "No show tonight?"

"No. Come here. I just want to be held and petted."

Daniel stretched out on the bed beside her. Lisa cuddled into the comfort of his shoulder and rested her head on his chest.

"Dan?"

"Uh huh?"

"Can we go back to Masterville soon? I miss being there. I never feel safe out in the world, even with you."

Daniel took his time about answering while stroking her body along the curve of her hip. Finally he said, "Sweetheart, there's nothing I'd like better than to go right now, but I feel like we just have to try completing this mission. If I can infect the President and Crafton, it's possible that it might make a safer world for our children to grow up in."

Lisa's lips moved against his chest. Her voice was barely audible. "I know, but then someone else will just replace him. There's no end to it." The touch of her lips on Daniel's body stirred her into wanting more than just petting, as it almost always did. Sometimes the intensity of her desire for him frightened her and made her wonder how she could ever stand to lose him.

"We have to hope there is. I would feel better if you left, though, and let me try this alone."

"No," Lisa said immediately. "I'm not leaving you. Besides, I haven't told you yet, but I got a job at the Congressional cafeteria. Those



identities Tyrone gave us must have showed a pristine background. It won't take much to slip some of our prions into the food and drink, but I want to do it a lot of times, like when they're having banquets for members of congress and so forth."

Daniel thought of Lisa's culinary skills, or lack of them and asked, "Uh, hon, just out of curiosity, what sort of position did they hire you for in the kitchen?"

Lisa sat up in the bed and looked down at him. Her breasts swayed only slightly with the movement. "I'll have you know that I'm now a food service pantry specialist. I get to open cans, just like at home." She gave out a little-girl giggle, but her desire heightened with the bubbling mirth, increasing its intensity.

Daniel couldn't stop himself. He laughed out loud despite the enticing sight of her body.

Lisa pretended to pout. "Just for that, Daniel Stenning, I'm going to show you how I open things." She paused, waiting.

Daniel reached to cup her nearest breast, causing the nipple to begin rising against his palm. He felt a stirring in his groin and the wonderfully familiar thrill of the need to possess her beginning to sweep over his body. "Okay, I'm willing. Show me."

Lisa lay back down and spread her legs. "See? All open. All you have to do is fill me up."

Daniel moved over her body and settled between her willing thighs. She reached down and guided him inside, giving out a little gasp as he entered.

"Now open again," he said against her lips. When she started to answer him, he slipped his tongue into her mouth.

Lisa scissored her legs around him and pressed down with her hands against his hips, urging him in as deep as he could get. She caressed his tongue with her own until she could stand it no longer and broke the kiss. She clutched him hard, muttering unintelligible endearments and urging him to hurry, hurry.

As Lisa gasped out her orgasm, Daniel thought it would be impossible to ever love anyone more than he did her, or love her any more than he already did. His emotions overflowed with passion while their bodies were merged, so much so that tears flowed from his eyes and wet her cheek and neck.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tyrone Beamer shook hands with Neil Womack, the Masterville contractor he had hired. "Thanks, Neil. I appreciate the quick work. And remember, if you ever need to use the facilities, don't hesitate."

Womack looked beyond Tyrone, back toward the edge of the mountain to where a new home had grown up beside the main plant. The home appeared to be built into the mountain, and in fact, was. Only Tyrone, the contractor and the special crew who had worked around the clock while the home builders went about their business knew exactly how far beneath the mountain the construction went.

"I hope none of us ever have need of anything but the house, Tyrone, but I'm forced to say I think it likely if the present administration continues in office. They've really got the propaganda mill rolling about us, haven't they?"

"That they have. Jeremiah is countering as best he can but he's outnumbered. And all a propaganda campaign really needs to be effective over the long term is repetition and appeal to the basic emotion and drives of people."

"Yeah, well I hear a lot of people are asking for a dose of our prions. Eventually that may help."

"We'll have to wait and see, I guess. There's really no good data yet on how adults respond, not for certain, anyway. Besides, I can't sell them legally."

"Oh, yeah. Damn government. Well, thanks for the business. Let me know if you have any problems."

Tyrone walked Womack to his big pickup, shook hands again and turned back. He strode off toward the new home rather than toward the side entrance to the plant, where his old apartment had been built within it.

Marybeth Chambers was waiting for him, sitting on one of the all-weather recliners that graced the large, screened front porch. It would be a good place to sit in the evenings to watch sunsets or chat with guests. Right now, though, he wanted to go inside.

Marybeth sensed his intent as soon as he opened the screen door. She



got up and accepted a quick kiss that he paused just long enough to give. Tyrone ushered her inside first, an old gentlemanly custom handed down to him through the generations, along with the rest of his gracious manners.

Inside, he put an arm around Marybeth and stood still in the large den that greeted anyone who entered. From it, three hallways split off, with multiple doors breaking the paneling on either side of the hallways and marching off into the distance. If you looked far enough, each of the halls ended with a door.

Marybeth leaned into Tyrone, thinking that he was the only man who had ever satisfied her for any long period of time. Well, there was Daniel, but she didn't get to see him very often and he was so in love with Lisa that there was no chance of ever settling down with him. She hadn't told Tyrone yet, but she was thinking seriously of conceiving with him, perhaps even moving in with him on a permanent basis. He wouldn't hinder if she strayed occasionally, with either men or women.

"Is it all furnished and stocked?" Tyrone asked.

"Everything. I saw to that." Marybeth had practically lived up on the mountain for the last month, doing the inside furnishing room by room as the workmen finished, then stocking the kitchens, pantries and bar..

"Good. Then I take it we can have a drink to celebrate?"

"If you promise to take the rest of the day off and all day tomorrow, I'll fill your every need."

"Now how could a man ever resist that kind of offer? Especially from such a beautiful woman." He held her facing him, holding her shoulders. Marybeth almost always dressed casually, as she was now, in a simple skirt and open throated blouse of matching pale blue color that went well with her glossy brown hair, hanging in waves to below her shoulders.

Marybeth leaned up on tiptoe and planted a kiss on his lips. "Sit down and I'll fix us a pitcher of punch and make some snacks." She left him and went over to the bar that was built against one wall of the den behind a breakfast counter with bar stools for guests who liked them. Personally, she preferred to eat or drink in a more comfortable position.

Tyrone smiled to himself as he went over to one of several long



loungers scattered about the den and sat down. Marybeth's idea of punch was half rum and half flavoring over ice. But it was always good, he thought, and God knows I need a break. He closed his eyes and leaned back.

"No fair sleeping," Marybeth said, rousting him from his reverie, where he had been thinking over all the preparations he had made.

"Sorry. I've been waiting to relax so long that I almost got a jump on us. I'm not really sleepy."

"Hah. Just like you're not really sexy. And I want to make use of it on more than a passing basis for a change, so drink up." She poured a glass of her concoction and handed it to him.

He accepted with a grateful sigh and leaned back again, taking a healthy sip of the drink before setting it down on the end table. He propped his feet up and watched as she leaned forward to fill her own glass, tightening the blouse over her back enough to see that she had dispensed with her bra already. Not that she really needed one most of the time, regardless of how generous nature had been to her. He had really been unfair to her these last months, he thought, spending so much of his time on urgent affairs and not enough on her. She had never complained, though, and happily gave him an immense amount of help in getting this place in operation. One of the doors right off the central hall contained an extension to his office at the plant and to the one in the old apartment. He planned on staying here most of the time for the indefinite future, where he would be safe, or as safe as possible from repercussions when one of more of the exploits he was directing was found out. He had first warned Marybeth of the possible consequences of becoming too closely associated with him and when that hadn't discouraged her, he had taken her entirely into his confidence. She knew as much now about his whole operation as Tim and Gina, his chief assistants, did.

"Is everything in place now?" Marybeth asked, just to get him to talking.

"You know it is. The last of the money I wanted out of the country has been transferred and the financing for the little companies making our prions on the sly is done. The only ones we'll have to ship now are when we want to target a specific group—and even then, I don't want to run any more risks here than I can help. Those places can furnish the prions to our couriers and the ringers who are planting them, and the owners won't even know we're controlling them. And we've done about all we can overseas now. The Islamic countries will never accept them legally. Hell, just having them in your possession, or even



being born with them, carries the death penalty in most of the Mideast now. Can you believe that? On the other hand, the Europeans will probably accept them more readily than our own country. Even the Asians and Southeast Asians will probably take to them quicker than here. They still have the tradition of wanting their kids to improve themselves, and what better way than increasing their reasoning powers? Now all we have to do is get away with it for another couple of decades and a lot of the world will think like we do. I hope."

Marybeth sipped at her drink. "You've taken an awful lot on yourself, Tyrone. One man trying to change the mind set of the entire world. If I didn't know the details, I'd never believe it."

Tyrone shrugged as if the fact didn't bother him, but in fact it did. He had spent hours and days agonizing over his decisions before finally making peace with himself and going ahead. He was committed now, for better or worse—probably worse. He held out his glass.

Marybeth picked up the pitcher and replenished his drink. "I just hope Lisa and Daniel are able to come home before anyone discovers what you're up to. They should get a chance to try the new apartment you built in here for them."

"Oh, they will, I think. They're both very resourceful. But so far as someone getting caught spreading our prions, it's almost inevitable. All I can hope for is that once started, it can't be stopped. Even now, think of the hundreds of thousands of babies right in this country who are going to grow up sane, assuming their parents don't disown them if our baby formula caper is discovered. And year after year there will be more."

Marybeth nodded her head at him. "It's almost too much to contemplate."

"That it is. Oh, you mentioned Daniel and Lisa. Lisa is in place and ready to go to work soon."

"Great. Or maybe not so great. Will she be in much danger?" Marybeth thought of her friend, imagining her delightfully curved body next to her own, or more likely next to her and Daniel together. Lisa wasn't adverse to company in bed occasionally, but she didn't like being separated from Daniel for long.

"Not nearly as much as Daniel will be, I imagine. He has the harder task. I've had a couple of my people running down the source that delivers Mad Manny's liquor supply to his conference room. I passed



the information on to Shirley a while back." Tyrone took another swallow of punch with one hand and rested the other on Marybeth's lower thigh and knee, liking the feel of her skin beneath the thin fabric of her skirt. He moved his fingers along its hem.

"Oh. He'll have to contaminate it somehow, huh?"

"Yup, but he'll manage, I think. He's a pro, and a good one." He moved his hand up, bringing the border of Marybeth's skirt with it. Presently it bunched up enough so that it fell back over his hand. He caressed the inner side of her thigh with his fingers, not in a hurry, but enjoying the sensuous feel of her soft skin and the firm flesh beneath it. It felt nice to be sitting with his favorite woman, relaxing with the shop talk and contemplating what would surely come later.

Marybeth decided she was in a hurry. It had been too long since Tyrone had time to spare and she intended to make the most of it. She leaned toward him and took his face in her hands, turning it to her. She kissed him, letting her lips linger and enjoy the sensation. Presently Tyrone sat up straighter and put his arm around her. He renewed the kiss and began fondling her breasts, pliant and ready beneath the blouse. Eventually, he moved his hand back to her thighs and slid it up under her skirt. He couldn't help but chuckle when he found that not only had she met him sans bra, but she had already dispensed with her panties as well.

Marybeth stood up and held out her hands. Tyrone got to his feet. He didn't think about the pitcher of punch, slowly warming and shedding beads of moisture until much later.

* * * *

Daniel sat and stared at the array of liquor bottles he had bought and brought back to their house. They were the right brand, and the carefully applied counterfeit labels were well-nigh undetectable. They were laced with Masterville prions and he now knew the route of the modified van that was used to supply the President's favorite conference room. He had settled on the delivery van because no matter how hard he thought, he hadn't come up with even a half-way reasonable scheme to get his prion-doctored bottles directly into the room to replace the regular bottles. Somehow, he would have to intercept the delivery truck and switch bottles without the driver noticing. So far, he hadn't come up with an acceptable method there, either, even though he had followed the van periodically and noted its every move. He had that part memorized and didn't want to try it again for fear of being discovered.



He was still mulling the problem over in his mind when he heard the front door open. Lisa came in, smiling. She set her purse down and came over to him, bending down to kiss him, then standing back up. She reached up to where her hair was bound with ribbons in two twin pigtails, coiled back on themselves so that a hairpiece would cover them at work. She carefully untied each ribbon, then and picked up a large coffee can. She removed the cover and dropped the ribbons down inside among others of varying colors. She replaced the cover then shook the can vigorously before setting it down again.

"I still say you would have made a great agent," Daniel said, getting up to mix them both a drink. He knew how nerve-wracking the operation must be for her, but so far she was showing no sign of strain, even after many months on the job.

"Poo. Just because I had an idea doesn't make me a spy. Besides, I don't like this pretending; it goes against my nature."

"Well, whatever, your idea is so good that it's going to help us finish up sooner than I thought, if I can ever come up with something comparable. All we have to do is hold out until after the midterm elections so we can get to the newly elected members, then if I've done my job, we're calling it quits." He brought the drinks over to the lounge and accepted another kiss as he handed Lisa's glass to her.

"Ahhh," she said. "That's good. After a day like today, I need a good hefty drink"

"Success?"

"Absolutely. No one suspects a thing. Today ought to be good for infecting another dozen congressmen and three ambassadors, assuming they all eat their peas like good little girls and boys."

Lisa took another swallow from the cold glass, remembering her day. Duty in the kitchen of the congressional cafeteria wasn't that hard, nor did it require a great amount knowledge in the science of food preparation, not starting at the very bottom of the food chain as she had. She was strictly minimum wage help. One of the bull cooks was her immediate supervisor. Lisa learned quickly and within a day or two she knew where the various cans and bottles she was responsible for opening were kept. After that, she was able to work mostly from the menus and order forms that Mario Pulsatta, the Italian bull cook gave her.

Sometimes Lisa felt younger than she was, working at such a menial job and wearing her hair either coiled or in doubled pig tails under



the tight hairnet, but it was the perfect cover for her.

Today she had worn her hair in the doubled braids, held by hair ribbons. As she placed the two-liter cans of creamed corn and string beans on the cart by the can opener she was assigned to, she reached up as if pushing her hair back up under the required head covering. She did it again several times as she traveled back and forth to fetch more cans and bottles.

"What's wrong, is the hairnet too tight?" Pulsatta asked when he saw her touching it for the second time. He liked to look at the young woman and wanted her to stay, and perhaps get to know her better.

Lisa kept her hands on the can of beans under the whirring opener. "No, I don't think so," she said calmly. "I'm just not used to wearing my hair up so much. I'll get used to it." She removed the can and dropped the lid into a kick-bucket and reached for another one.

"Is the work going all right?"

"Oh, yes, it's fine. I like working here; it's so interesting. So many different kinds of people and such a big place. I never knew how complicated a big cafeteria was. I guess you have to know a lot to be a bull cook, don't you?"

"Oh yes," Pulsatta beamed, displaying a row of shiny white teeth behind his full lips. "I have an associate degree in food service. Once I get a promotion, I'll go back and study to be a chef. That's where the real money is."

"Well, that's great, Mister Pulsatta." She reached up to adjust her hairpiece again before grabbing another can, fruit salad this time.

"You don't have to call me mister. Just Mario is fine."

"Oh, thank you."

"You're welcome. You're sure everything is all right now?"

"Oh yes. I'll be sure to ask you when I need to know anything." She smiled at the cook and turned back to the can opener. Her finger slipped and dipped into the contents when she removed the lid after it was opened. The finger displayed a cheap gold wedding ring Daniel had bought at a pawn shop for her to display.

Pulsatta ignored the minor breach in technique; it happened to everyone from time to time. Reluctantly, he moved on. It wouldn't do



to pay too much attention to such a pretty girl. Too bad she was married. But she would be due for another evaluation soon. Perhaps then...

Lisa had devised the scheme to infect the food cans that she opened on a daily basis. She simply dusted the hair ribbons that she wore each day with almost invisible prion powder, then ran her fingers along them before opening a can, where she almost always managed to fumble a finger or two down into the contents without being noticed.

"I still think it's ironic," Daniel said. "Here I was trying to concoct all these bizarre methods for you to get our prions into the food supply there and all it took was a bunch of ten cent hair ribbons." Daniel laughed, wishing he could come up with something so simple.

"For your male information, my hair ribbons don't cost ten cents. I'm not some cheap hussy. I always pay at least fifty cents apiece for my ribbons."

"I stand corrected. By the way, I did us a Cornish hen for supper."

"Mmmm. With stuffing, I hope?"

"You hope right."

"You're a good house-husband. I may keep you around just to cook."

"Sorry, but I won't stay just to cook. The chef has to have some privileges to go with the duty."

"I'll see what we can work out. Let's have one more drink then eat. After that, I'll tell you how you can do the truck thing."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Corey Mullins had been monitoring Shirley's movements for months and still wasn't satisfied. "I can't put my finger on anything specific, but I just don't trust that broad," he said to Mandel Crafton.

Crafton winced at the politically incorrect epithet. He was always very careful to use the currently correct jargon when speaking where anyone might overhear. *But Mullins doesn't seem to care*, he thought. Probably because he has something incriminating on every damn person in Washington. Rather than bring up the use of the term broad



in place of woman, Crafton said "Why are you worried? She passed every single one of the tests when we vetted her again. And by the way, she's still pissed about it. I had to do a lot of unnecessary testing of other personnel just so she wouldn't get suspicious."

"Any test can be beaten if you go about it right, Mandel, and that includes MRIs and PET Scans. Besides, she's been seen talking to that reporter, the Primmerton broad that screwed over us before."

Crafton didn't bother objecting to Mullins' accusation about who had been screwed. He couldn't complain himself. He had come out of the stolen radioactives scandal smelling like the proverbial rose. Instead he asked, "What do you want me to do? Pull her off the Masterville assignment? She is passing us some good intelligence, you know."

"Every bit of which is completely innocuous. I want more personnel, enough to put a tail on that Primmerton cunt 24 hours a day as well as the Rostervik broad. And authorization for more wire taps on both of them." Mullins stared at Crafton with his dead eyes, looking like two still pools of brine sunk in his chubby face.

Crafton shuddered inside. The man was intimidating. He felt tiny beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead. "Jesus, Corey, we can't be going around wire tapping reporters! We'll both wind up in jail."

"No we won't. The law is on our side now. Hell, those raghead terrorists were the best thing that could have happened to us. Damn near every law passed to control those nuts can be used in other ways, so long as you call your suspect a terrorist, and even that isn't necessary in this case. We have a writ from the President to investigate those Masterville mutants in any fashion we care to. I know, Mandel. I've see all the orders. I have to see them in order to do my job effectively."

Crafton thought that was debatable, but again, he wasn't inclined to argue. He wasn't all that certain he trusted Shirley completely himself. "All right, he said. I have to give the President an update this week so I'll let him know what you're doing."

Mullins raised his lips in what might have been called a smile had it not been limited to his mouth. His eyes were as dead looking as glass marbles and held just as much emotional content. "Fine. Give him my regards. And send me the authorization for the new taps without delay. I want to get started." He got up and left Crafton's office without a leave-taking, just as he had not uttered a word of greeting when he came in.



Sighing to himself, Crafton began writing out the top secret operational orders for Mullins to go ahead with his plans.

*** * * ***

"I feel so contented and safe here," Lisa said, snuggling closer.

Daniel pulled her closer to him, where he was leaning back against the headboard of their bed, smoking a post-coital cigarette and finishing up a small glass of Irish Whiskey over ice, though the ice was mostly melted now. He had been unable to resist keeping one of the bottles he had bought for himself and leaving Lisa to the blackberry brandy she preferred. "You shouldn't feel safe in this city, ever," Daniel said.

"I meant here in your arms, silly. She reached and drew his hand over her breast and pressed it with her own. She liked the feel of his strong fingers and the smooth calluses of his palm.

"Oh. Thanks, sweetheart. I just wish we didn't have to be here, taking these kinds of risks. I worry about you all the time."

"Yes, I know." She raised his hand to her mouth and kissed it then pulled it back down. "In fact, you've been worrying so much about me that it's affecting your work."

"What! Why do you say that?"

"Well, admitting that I'm no trained agent, but it seems to me that you're overlooking the obvious when it comes to getting those bottles of liquor into the president's grubby little hands. I think I know a better way of doing it than trying to switch them after they're in the truck."

"I don't want to involve you; that's what's giving me problems. I can think of several ways to distract the driver without arousing suspicion, but it still takes two people to make the schemes work. And I sure as hell don't want to trust anyone else. Besides, there's always the chance of a foul-up and that would be the ball game. I wouldn't get another crack at it."

"But why worry about the truck?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know where the stuff is bought, don't you?"



"Sure. Big Creek Liquor Store. But hell, I can't replace their whole stock."

"Dan, you don't have to. Didn't you say the President only drank one brand?"

"Yes, but.."

"And aren't you agents trained to break and enter places when it's necessary?"

"Yes, but.."

"Then why don't you just burgle the place and switch our stuff with all of the president's brand? It won't matter if someone else gets a bottle or two so long as he gets his, will it?"

Daniel felt a sense of utter relief coming over him. It told him plainer than words just how much of an idiot he had been. He had been worrying senselessly about the possibility of him, or perhaps both of them getting caught trying to switch bottles in the delivery truck, or just him being apprehended and leaving Lisa to have to cope by herself, when he should have kept his mind on the objective. As if Lisa weren't fully as competent as he was, even if she hadn't had his training. He had broken a cardinal rule of undercover operations: don't let personal affairs interfere with your judgment. On the other hand, he could forgive himself somewhat. He had never been on an operation with a woman he was in love with. And not only in love, so smitten that he would gladly give his life for her if it came to that point.

"Dan?"

Daniel turned his head and pulled Lisa into a kiss, a tender one. After a moment, he leaned back. "You do have a habit of being right, don't you? I've already checked the place out, and it won't take that much to get inside, if the batteries on my little burglar gadget and the one in the night vision goggles still work."

"Couldn't you replace the batteries?"

"Uh uh. They're special made just for cases like me. I didn't turn in my kit like I was supposed to when I resigned. The batteries are crafted and encrypted to interface with the individual instruments alone. When they go, the instrument becomes useless. In fact they're useless for anyone who doesn't know the key beforehand. I'll test



them tomorrow and if they're okay, we'll set a date and do it."

"We?"

"Not you, Lisa. I'll hire a local thief. We can afford to pay him or her enough..." He paused and shook his head. "No, that won't work. I'm trying to keep you out of it again, aren't I? And I couldn't trust anyone else because all it would take would be for them getting caught somewhere else and confessing to this burglary. The Secret Service would replace every bottle and bangle that ever came from there. I could probably get away with it by myself, but the odds would be better if you helped. Would you mind?"

"Not only wouldn't I mind, but I damn well insist. Poor boy, you lived outside the valley all your life. You still haven't gotten used to the idea that Masterville women don't get hysterical and can reason just as well as men."

"I've never doubted that women are as smart as men—if not smarter. It's just that when you enter the equation, I get the willies."

"Well, get this one done and it will be over, because after that I'm quitting and so are you. We need to go back to the valley."

"Is there a real urgency about it? Why such a rush.?"

"Because I've done all I can, and after we pull off the switch, so will you. Someone else can get to the new electees after the elections. But besides all that, we need to get back and start looking for a house to buy."

Daniel felt his heart miss a beat, then speed up. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Yup. We've waited long enough and I didn't renew my shot when it was due. We could catch any time. Now let's forget business for the rest of the night. I want to be loved again."

*** * * ***

"I think I'm being tailed, Nancy," Shirley said above the cacophony of sounds coming from the kitchen of the large cafeteria they were eating at. They had purposely carried their trays to seats in that area.

"Oh crap! Is it the goddamned NSA again?"

"Almost certainly. But I don't know why. I've passed all the tests for



all my clearances, right on up to the top. There's no reason I should be mistrusted."

Nancy played with a lock of hair then began arranging her plates on the table. "Maybe it's because of me. I'm not well-liked in Washington these days."

Shirley wondered what to tell her friend. Best to lay it all out, she decided. "You're probably right. And if they're checking on me, they're almost certainly doing the same for you. Have you noticed any vehicles of the same make around you lately? Or parked near your place?"

Nancy began toying with her food instead of eating. She had suddenly lost her appetite. "I haven't seen anyone or anything suspicious, but then I'm sure that if I'm being watched, they're good enough to fool an amateur like me. The more important consideration is, what does it mean? Do you think they might be on to you?"

"I don't know. I've taken every precaution I can think of, and anyway, it would be hard to prove I'm doing anything wrong. After all, I'm the official liaison to Masterville valley. It's really you I'm worried about, Nan. Reporters have been known to get hurt when they start getting involved in undercover operations like you are with me."

Nancy saw the worried look on her friend's face. It gave her pause. She had no desire to be picked up and questioned under some of the anti-terrorist laws, and she said so.

Shirley looked down at her salad then back up. "Even worse would be if you were picked up and just parked in a cell somewhere and simply called a suspected terrorist. That's about all it takes to lock a person up and throw away the key nowadays. I think you should opt out now, while you have a chance."

Nancy thought about taking the suggestion, but only briefly. She hadn't gotten to her present stature as a nationally known columnist and reporter, and more importantly, a nationally trusted one, by playing safe. On the other hand, the present administration was paranoid when it came to anything having to do with Masterville. "How much longer will D ... your friends be uh, visiting?" She felt funny trying to talk around the fact that Shirley was involved with what some would call traitorous activities—and that she was just as guilty herself, even though neither of them thought they were doing anything inherently wrong, not when the government was persecuting a whole population that was innocent of harmful intent to others.



"I think they should cut their visit short. Let them know, will you?"

"I will. And maybe you should begin thinking of taking a vacation, Shirley."

Shirley pushed her plate away. Suddenly she was overwhelmed and disgusted with having to go through such gyrations and her prion-enhanced reasoning power was telling her that she had better wrap this whole thing up while the two of them were still free—and able to. She stood up.

"I believe I might just do that, Nan. And why don't you do the same? Maybe we could go somewhere together." She winked, hoping Nancy got the message. If they were being followed, Nancy could be wearing one the tiny bugging devices, courtesy of one of Crafton's bully boys brushing against her in the food line. And so could she, for that matter, and if it were true, she had probably already said too much. It wouldn't be a bad idea to run a probe over her clothes when she got back to the office—and carry one with her from now on.

"That sounds like fun," Nancy said.." I've been in Washington too long this time. Let me know when you can get away and we'll make plans." She gathered her purse and the check and the two of them departed.

Alert now, Shirley spotted her tail, but Nancy didn't have the experience. She failed to detect the car that was following her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Corey Mullins leaned forward and turned Crafton's office recorder off. He pulled the tiny chip out of the machine and put it back into the little protective carrying case. He pocketed it and leaned back in the visitor's chair across from Crafton's desk. "Are you convinced now?"

Crafton rubbed at his cheek where a nervous tic was making him look like a guilty felon being questioned about a larceny that would damn him to life imprisonment. "I guess I have to be, don't I?"

"You do. The question is, how much rope do we give her? Should we pull her and her friend in now or let them run for a bit and see what we turn up?"

"What do you think?" Crafton wasn't willing to commit himself yet. In



fact, he wasn't sure what to do. Shirley Rostervik hadn't said anything surely damning on the recording, despite several times voicing what sounded very much like suspicious circumlocutions.

Mullins gave him one of his humorless imitation smiles. "I think she's passing unauthorized information to Masterville."

"That's what it sounds like," Crafton agreed.

"What did Manny have to say?"

Crafton was more comfortable with the question about the president. "He's getting along better now after more than a year in office, but he wants a good issue that has some staying power. In fact, he's still hung up on Masterville. He's convinced himself that those people are the very incarnation of Satan's minions, even though we still haven't got anything really damning on them other than their weird prions. Regardless, he's going to have Snow White step up the heat on them all the way up to the mid-term elections. He thinks it's big enough issue to get him a majority in congress he can work with."

Mullins snorted, then pulled out a handkerchief from his coat pocket and dabbed imaginary spots on his tie, a mismatched green color to go with his blue suit. "We'll have something for Michael White way before the elections."

"How do you know?"

Mullins snorted again. "I can sense these things. Those broads are conspiring against us. I could lock them up right now if I were a mind to, but I'd like to have a bit more to go on first. Maybe I need to talk to the Secret Service."

"The Secret Service? What on earth for? Why in hell do we need them?"

Mullins waved a hand negligently. "We may not, but it would be a nice hole card. You do know Rostervik is sleeping with one of your Secret Service entourage, don't you? And that he's cleared for that conference room you and the President like to use?"

Crafton was so dumbfounded that he couldn't answer right away, not that he doubted Mullins; he wouldn't have said anything like that if it weren't a fact. Still ... "No, I didn't know, but sex lives are pretty open these days. Unless she's doing something kinky, that won't work."

"Suppose he's feeding her information about the president? Maybe



he's been turned by that Beamer guy in Masterville. Maybe they're trying to set up an assassination. Lots of possibilities. But let's give her a bit more time, shall we?" Mullins' mouth split in a toothy, malicious grin that still stopped short of his eyes. "However, just to be on the safe side, I think her boyfriend better go missing."

Now Crafton was getting worried. What was the man thinking of? The NSA had a writ for Masterville, but he didn't think it went that far. Hurriedly, he objected with the first thing he could think of. "Won't that warn her?"

"If she's as good as you've said she is, and as her personnel records say she is, she already knows we're the ones tailing her. I think picking up her boyfriend may shake her up just enough to make her run. Or try to run. Do you agree?"

Crafton knew it would do no good to argue. "All right. Do as you think best. Just remember that her and Primmerton both still have some political cover from when Phillips tried to leave the country."

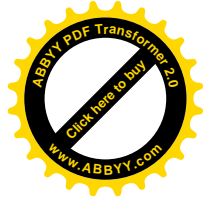
"That's old. No one will protect them if I can prove a conspiracy. Which shouldn't take much doing, I would think. Wouldn't you?" Mullins stood up, signaling that his visit was over. As usual, he left without saying a word of farewell.

Crafton stared at the door as it closed. He looked down at his desk and saw that his hands had a fine tremor to them, almost unnoticeable, but still there. Now when had that started? Perhaps since that day he had eaten with Senator Janter in the Congressional cafeteria. He reminisced briefly over that working dinner date with June Janter. She was a first term Senator from Missouri, but elected well before the scandal over the stolen radioactive material and persecution of the Masterville people by the previous administration. She was up for re-election this year.

It was she who called him, asking if he would mind having an evening meal with him in the cafeteria. She was waiting in the alcove when he arrived.

Crafton recognized her immediately, even though he had not met her personally before. And he certainly hadn't minded being asked to have a meal with her. June Janter was not quite forty and still very good looking, a widow who had been in politics only a little over ten years.

Crafton smiled and shook hands as she rose to meet him.



"Thanks for coming, Mister Crafton. I'm sorry I couldn't come to your office, or you to mine, but there is simply too much distraction from staff, don't you think?"

"Yes, Senator, I know exactly what you mean. Besides, I eat here a lot. Shall we?" He took her arm in what he thought of as a gracious gesture and led her to the table he had reserved in one of the little secluded rooms used so often by those wanting to talk in private.

Once they had been served, she started in immediately with business. "Mister Crafton, I'm wondering if you could brief me on exactly what the National Security Agency is looking for in Masterville?"

"Crafton hedged. "It's not something I can talk about publicly. Matters of security..."

She cut him off. "Come, now. I'm a member of the intelligence subcommittee. You don't have to act like you're guarding Fort Knox." She smiled at him to take the sting out of her voice.

"Still, the situation there is politically sensitive, to say the least. There's very little I can say..."

"Don't give me that." The Senator bit into her sandwich and waited.

Crafton had heard she was given to plain talk. "Senator..."

"Call me June. We're not being formal here. Look, what I want to know is whether there really is a threat there, or is the President just chasing after votes? It may make a difference in how much of that supplementary appropriation you asked for is granted." She raised her brows suggestively.

Put that way, Crafton opened up a bit. Or thought he did. "The President thinks there definitely could be a threat there. He's taking advice from the Surgeon General. She thinks there could be an unknown, long term menace from their peculiarities should their infection begin spreading."

"He has the Surgeon General in his pocket. And if there was a long term threat, the very people carrying those prions would be the ones most susceptible. Now come, on, Mandel. You know what happened to the last president who tried using Masterville for political purposes. He's either going to prison or going bankrupt from civil damage suits. Probably both, unless he's pardoned, and I doubt that he will be."



The use of his first name relaxed him somewhat, along with her directness. But what could he tell her? And what did she want? He decided to ask and let her talk while he ate for a minute. The food was very good here. "Senator. June. What exactly do you want? Or perhaps I should ask, what can I do for you?"

Senator Janter proceeded to tell him. "Mandel, this issue is dividing the country. Hell, it's dividing the world and there are more important issues I think you should be involved with than a small town of people who carry a little mutation that appears to be much more of a benefit than liability. Now if there's anything else there, I want to know. Otherwise, just tell me: is it all political?"

"It's political," Crafton said, utterly surprised at the words coming out of his mouth.

"That's what I thought. Thank you. Now if you need more money for something important, let's discuss it. Otherwise, why not tell me something about yourself?"

Before the meal was over, Crafton found himself opening up to her in a way he hadn't done with anyone since coming to Washington. He couldn't figure out why, but by the time they parted, he felt better than he had in a long time. He wished there was something he could do to dissuade the president, but he knew there wasn't.

Thinking about that day, he said her first name to himself again. *June*. What a pretty name. And she seemed interested in him, once he told her that he was separated and was divorcing his wife. Maybe he should get out of government before he endangered her. That thought startled him. Where had it come from?

* * * *

Daniel picked up the phone and said "Hello."

"Is this you?" It sounded like Shirley's voice, trying to avoid saying his name.

"It's me. Is this who I think it is?"

"Yes. Have you seen the news this evening?"

Daniel sat up straighter, pulling his arm from around Lisa, who was snuggled up next to him on the big lounge. They had been simply sitting together and enjoying each other's company with no distractions other than an after dinner glass of wine. "No, we haven't.



What's happening?" He made motions for Lisa to turn on the television.

"There was a Secret Service agent murdered this morning."

Daniel relaxed. It wasn't that he was so blase about a federal agent being killed; rather, he had initially thought some disaster had occurred, judging by the tone of Shirley's voice. Then he suddenly tensed up again. She wouldn't be calling him here unless it was extremely urgent.

He listened as Shirley continued to talk when he didn't respond immediately. "I had been seeing him outside of work on a fairly regular basis. The way he was hit has Agency written all over it. I think they're on to me, and I don't have to tell you that I'm scared!"

Daniel thought rapidly. "Where are you?"

"I'm just driving around right now. I left the house as soon as I saw that it was Troy who was killed."

"How did you find out about it? They don't usually release names until next of kin have been notified, and sometimes not even then."

There was a short silence on the other end of the line. "You're right. It was the anchor who said his name. It's agency work, all right; they slipped Troy's name to the reporter anonymously, and the station reported it quick to avoid being scooped later, the bastards. No empathy for his family at all."

"Never mind that," Daniel said. "Listen, do you remember where we first met outside of work?" He was thinking of the hamburger place Shirley had taken him to right after they had been opted to investigate the Masterville phenomena. It felt like an eternity ago now.

"Of course," Shirley said, and nothing else.

Daniel breathed a sigh of relief. She had caught on immediately to the indirect reference. "Good. Meet me there at four o'clock. We'll fly out of here together." He hoped that would keep the agency busy covering the airports, public and private, while they left by automobile. He didn't tell her whether the four o'clock was morning or evening. Let them guess. Shirley would know that he wouldn't risk them flying out.

"All right. Thank you. I'll see you then."

"Right. And I'm sorry about this. It's bad business."



"Yes." Her voice was trembling as she hung up.

Daniel was so glad now that he had agreed to let Lisa help him with the liquor store burglary; otherwise she might have been working the late shift at the congressional cafeteria. As it was, she had resigned already. He didn't know where Shirley was calling from, but he figured there was about an even chance, or perhaps more, that someone had been listening to their conversation. He had originally intended for them to try it after he had gotten more of a feel for the layout of the store, but Shirley's call had just advanced the schedule. He was scared, too, for himself, but more for Lisa.

Lisa was staring at the television screen on the wall. Daniel glanced at it, saw that they must have already finished that story and moved on to something else. Not that it mattered whether they saw it now or not. He already knew as many details as necessary. He turned it off and got up. Lisa rose with him.

"Time to go, sweetheart. Shirley's secret service lover and contact has just been murdered. She wants to get out of Dodge right now, and so do we."

Lisa touched his arm, then gripped it tensely. "But—don't we have to do your job first?"

There's nothing of the shrinking violet in Lisa's nature, he thought grimly, and she was right. The job still needed to be done.. "We'll make the swap on the way out tonight." He glanced at his watch. "I think we've got enough time to throw a few things into your car. If they knew where we were and who we are, they'd already have us. As is, I still want us away from here quickly."

Lisa didn't argue but simply gave him a peck on the lips and hurried toward their bedroom. Daniel followed, wishing he had been given a little more time to size up the store, but he knew it was his own fault; he should have thought of the store rather than the van before Lisa did. He just hoped it went off smoothly and Lisa wasn't harmed.

Daniel had six bottles of the brand of Irish Whiskey the President liked ready in a sturdy shopping bag. He quickly secured both of his weapons on his person, making certain that a round was chambered in each, then carried the bag containing the bottles outside while Lisa was throwing some of their things into suitcases. He put the bag into Lisa's car on the back seat, being glad again that he never took unnecessary chances. Two weeks ago, figuring that their stay in Washington was nearing its end, he had given Lisa money from his



emergency kit that he had never turned back in. With it, she bought a seven year old car from an individual through a newspaper ad, using the fake identity he purchased from a former contact who trafficked in them. He thought that ought to be good enough to get them out of town and protect them from a casual hunt for the license plates on their other cars, barring an all-out search, and he didn't think the NSA was ready for that much publicity yet, even if they tracked them to this house.

Lisa met him at the door with the two suitcases. "Here, take these and get the car started. I just need to get my purse and your kit and we're ready."

By the time he got the suitcases stowed in the trunk she had closed the back door and was hurrying out with her purse in one hand and his kit in the other. Daniel pulled out from the garage and onto the street. He looked all around carefully as he drove, trying to spot a tail if there was one.

Lisa saw what he was doing and didn't speak so that she wouldn't distract him. She was watching herself, even though she knew that Daniel would be much more likely to spot impending trouble than she was. After they had been driving for ten or fifteen minutes she saw that Daniel was visibly relaxing, but that they weren't headed toward the section of town where the liquor store was. "Where are we going now?"

Daniel smiled for the first time since the phone call. "It's still too early to start our criminal careers, but I don't want to go to any public place to wait, either."

Lisa waited for an explanation or further comment, but Daniel only kept the mysterious smile on his face. Finally, she could stand it no longer. "So where are we going to wait?"

"Thought you'd never ask. It just so happens that while I was grocery shopping for us one day, I overheard some kids talking about the local lover's lane. I know I'm rushing you on this date, but would it be okay if we went parking? And maybe make out a little? I promise not to tell."

Lisa tried to hold it inside but it was no use. She burst out in such merry laughter that Daniel finally had to join in. She shifted over in her bucket seat until she was as close as she could get without sitting on the console. "Why, of course we can go parking, but just remember how shy and reserved I am when we start to make out. All right?"



That laughter finished breaking the tension.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Do you like it?" Bonnie Cokesey asked anxiously. She had just finished showing her husband the outside and now the inside of their new home in Masterville, built on a small knoll a few miles down the main highway past city limits, and another two miles down a county road.

"It's great, honey. Just great," Cokesey said, looking around the spacious den as if searching for something. "Is the phone hooked up yet?"

"Is something wrong, dear? You seem awfully distracted."

Cokesey put his arm around his wife and hugged her fondly. "You did fine. I'm sorry I couldn't be here with you to help you look, but..."

"I know, I know. You had business to take care of. But isn't this wonderful? Neighbors just near enough, plenty of room for visitors, and the price—can you believe it?" Bonnie Cokesey had bought the home from a couple who decided to leave the area once Masterville became the object of curiosity by the rest of the country and scrutiny by the government. She had paid less than she believed possible for such a beautiful home.

"It is. In fact, we'll have a drink to celebrate, but I do need to call Suzanne and give her our number. You did say the phone was working, didn't you?"

Bonnie sighed. "No, I didn't say, but it is. Come on, I'll show you."

Suzanne Summerton's voice held a tone of excitement to it when she answered. "Samuel! I've been wanting to talk to you since yesterday. You must have left town right before I called! Is your phone secure?"

"It should be; it was just connected. Do you have something for me?"

"I certainly do. I'm sorry I couldn't do it sooner, but I had to tread careful and it took a long time get those two agents to talk to me—or even to find them, for that matter, without alerting their superiors. I was scared that if I tried the direct route, they might just conveniently disappear.



Permanently, you know?"

"I know," Cokesey said sadly, "but it's still hard to realize our government has come to the stage where it could even think about such a thing."

Summerton didn't answer for a moment. When she did, her voice was gentle. "Sam, you're one of a kind. You always believe the best of people, even the ones in power and wanting to stay there. It wouldn't be the first time witnesses have vanished, and it will take place in the future no matter who is in charge. But forget that, let me tell you what I've got."

"I'm listening."

"The two agents were ordered to fake the evidence. You knew that, of course. What you didn't know is that they belonged to the NSA, and don't ask me when our National Security Agency started infiltrating other government agencies because I haven't got any idea. However, these guys have had second thoughts about the whole deal. Trouble is, they don't know how to recant without implicating themselves in the shooter's death, though they swear they had nothing to do with it and didn't know he was going to be killed in advance. They tell me that must have been something ordered by the NSA at a higher level than they work at, and furthermore, they think the shooter himself must have been working for their bosses."

As Summerton paused for breath, Cokesey broke in. "Suzanne, this is incredible. Are you telling me that the assassination of President Sheffield was ordered by our own government?"

"Well, someone in an agency of our government at the least. Mind you, neither them nor I have any proof; it's just what they said."

"I'm surprised they said anything."

"It took some convincing, but once I told them that their careers were over as soon as I went public, proof or no proof, and after I offered them some financial inducements, they gradually came around."

"Well, that's great Suzanne. I don't mind paying, so long as it doesn't completely break me. After all, it happened on my watch."

"Sam, I just love you! You really would spend a fortune to try putting things right, wouldn't you? But not to worry. A friend of yours is taking care of it for you."



"A friend?"

"Uh huh. His name is Tyrone Beamer."

Cokesey was stunned. "Well I will be damned. Suzanne, I don't even know the guy very well! How did that come about?"

Suzanne's laugh came over the phone like a burst of music. "You don't know him that well, Sam, but I do. When I told him the whole story, he was more than glad to help. As a matter of fact, either him or someone speaking for him will be calling you soon, and you'll be put in touch with both those people. After that, you can make your own announcement and see how Mad Manny likes it!"

"All right, great. Thanks for a good job. Just send your bill; it will be forwarded to my new address."

"Tyrone already gave it to me. Have fun with the reporters, Sam."

"Thanks. Thanks from the bottom of my heart. I'll sleep better tonight with this out in the open."

Cokesey hung up the phone and went to find his wife. He felt so good after the conversation that he wanted more than just a drink to celebrate moving into their new home. And Bonnie was still very much interested in such things, white hair or no.

*** * * ***

Daniel figured he had just enough battery power left in his little gadget to stifle the liquor store's alarm system for fifteen minutes, perhaps thirty at the very most. Once attached, he would have to get in, switch the bottles, and get out quickly enough to avoid an alarm.

"I'll be waiting," Lisa said. "Please be careful."

Daniel leaned toward her and gave her a quick kiss. "No problem, I've been in there twice now as a customer and know where everything is. I've seen them bringing bottles from storage. Give me ten minutes then start driving around the block."

He slid out of the passenger's side of the car with his bag of bottles in one hand and his kit hung at his hip like a fanny pack. Seconds later he was in the alley behind the store. It was empty, as he had expected. He set his bag down and began working at the back entrance. Trying to determine what sort of internal alarm system the liquor store carried was what had taken him so long to get ready for the break-in.



First he laid out the tools he knew he would need to gain entrance, then took a little pencil flashlight, hooded at the end, and placed it in his teeth. He took a deep breath and activated the alarm suppressor. It began broadcasting a soundless barrage in the most likely wavelengths that the alarm system used, completely nullifying them. He waited, then let his breath out while thinking to himself that it was a damn good thing this gadget hadn't gotten into the hands of the underworld yet. Satisfied, he jacked into the telephone wires with another, smaller instrument that would keep an alarm from being sent to a precinct station or the home office of the security firm. After that, he began dismantling the door locks.

Halfway through, he knew he was running short on time. This place had obviously been burgled before and was well secured. Only the fact that he didn't intend to go into the main part of the store enabled him to break in at all. A fine film of sweat appeared on his forehead and upper lip, but there was no time to stop. He heard a faint snap and gave a sigh of relief. Now for the chain and it would be done. He squatted down to pick up his next tool. Something poked him in the seat of his pants.

For an eternity, he couldn't breathe at all. His heart missed a beat then began racing wildly while he held still, not daring to move. He felt pressure and a rubbing motion across his hams, then his calf. He looked down and to the side, unwilling to believe he could have been caught this easily. A thin, half grown alley cat butted its head against his shin. It meowed softly, then began purring.

Daniel almost succumbed to wild laughter. He touched the cat and rubbed its head and behind its ears. "Cat, you damn near scared the prions out of me," he whispered. "Now shush, and if I have time I'll hook you something to eat while I'm inside."

He made quick work of the chain and eased the heavy door open. He picked up his tools and bag and slipped inside, closing the door loosely behind him. Safe now, he turned his flashlight on high so that he could see well enough not to trip over boxes of liquor and wine stacked in the storeroom he had entered at the back of the store.

It took only a couple of minutes to locate the Irish Whiskey, then a few more seconds to substitute his bottles for theirs. He had enough with one bottle left over. He glanced at his watch and saw that he dared not delay in order to find some crackers or chips for the friendly cat. Besides, it was crazy to even think about risking it. Too bad.



The cat was waiting on him outside. It looked up at him and meowed, then began rubbing at his ankles as he put the locks back in place, saying just as plainly as a cat could explain that it had been promised a meal and wasn't leaving until it got one.

"Sorry, cat," he said softly. "No time." He turned off the alarm suppressors and tucked them back in his bag, then gathered his tools and hurried to the head of the alley. Providentially, Lisa was just coming up to that spot while making her rounds and spotted him. She slowed and stopped. He opened the passenger door.

"Meow?" He looked down. The cat had followed him out of the alley.

"Dan, come on! Get in!"

"Just a minute." He handed her the bag of bottles, tossed his kit over into the back seat, then bent over and picked up the cat. He got into the car and shut the door.

"What on earth?"

"Let's go, I'll explain if it doesn't panic when we start moving."

The cat had apparently ridden in a car before, because it settled into Daniel's lap. He remembered the remnants of a package of cheese and crackers in the side pocket of the door. He rummaged around, found it and took out a loose portion. As soon as he began feeding it bits of the cracker and cheese, it began purring happily as it ate.

"All right, I can't stand it any more. Where did you find your assistant burglar, and how did it manage to get hired?"

"It's not an it, it's a he, I think. And he got hired by promising to be quiet and not attract attention until I was finished. I told him I would pay him off with something to eat."

"I take it you are finished, then?"

"All done. No problem, other than our new friend. He damn near made me have to change pants when he sneaked up behind me there in the alley and started rubbing on my behind."

"I won't even ask how ask how he managed that." Lisa stopped at a light and took the opportunity to turn the inside car lights on. She reached over to pet the cat. "Why look! He's an American Wire Hair! How nice."



"Meow," The cat agreed.

Daniel examined the cat's curly, heavy pelt. It appeared to have had a rainbow run through a blender and poured over it. "What did you say he is?"

"A Wire Haired American. It's a mutation that occurred here in the United States. They always have springy, curly hair of all different colors mixed together. What are we going to name him?"

"Huh?" Daniel said.

"You always answer questions so intelligently, sweetheart. Why, you must be trying to make Acey think you're really smart."

"Acey?"

"Initials for Alley Cat. A.C. Acey for short. See? That's his name."

"Always glad to add to my store of knowledge," Daniel said. He realized that both of them were using the cat to dissipate some of the nervous energy and excess adrenalin from planting the prion-laced bottles of Irish Whiskey, which he devoutly hoped would eventually wind up in the president's hands—and change his mental state. "Acey, you're a fuzz-ball. And I suspect you may be harboring a flea or two. When we get you home, you're going to get a good brushing, a nice can of Tuna and a shot to keep the fleas and ticks off you. And incidentally, off of us."

Acey purred contentedly and presently dozed off in its new human's lap. Daniel continued with his petting motions and presently smiled mischievously. He had just thought of a good present for Lisa. But then the smile disappeared. They still had to pick up Shirley and get out of Washington and back to Masterville. He glanced at the console clock and told Lisa to pull over for a moment. There was still time to do a little contingency planning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Corey Mullins stared at the bruised, bloody face and naked body of the woman tied to the chair. They were in the basement of the house that only he and John Mondez knew about. It was located in an upper middle class development at the base of a little court on a side street. The other two homes there were also owned by the NSA. Mullins kept them empty, but had the outside grounds serviced regularly to make



them inconspicuous. The woman's body had been used almost as mercilessly as her face. In some places it was hard to tell where skin began and bloody remnants left off. She was sobbing hopelessly, her breath coming raggedly from between puffed lips and broken teeth. Mondez was Mullins' closest aide and the only person in the world who was not only privy to his secret vice, but was always very eager to help with the sadism. Mullins had an unquenchable desire to torture attractive women, but he almost always was able to keep it in check until an actual need arose. Like now.

"You know, I don't have to kill you, but I certainly don't mind doing so if I have to," Mullins said.

Mondez moved closer, an evil, anticipatory look on his face, incongruous above an immaculate coat and tie. The killing was what he liked and waited for. The suit was part of his fetish, just like the corkscrew was for Mullins.

Mullins waved Mondez back. "Not so quick. She hasn't told us what the other broad is up to yet."

"Maybe she doesn't know," Mondez said. He was tired of waiting.

"She knows. She's held out so far, but I know how to get it out of her." Mullins would have liked to play a while longer but it was getting late. He picked up his bloody corkscrew with one hand and grabbed a handful of Nancy's hair with the other. He used it to yank her head up. "See this? There's one place on your body I haven't used it yet. Want to know where?"

Nancy Primmerton didn't answer. She closed her eyes, waiting for whatever he intended to do. She already knew she was dead, but if she could help it, she wasn't going to betray her friend and Daniel and Lisa. Then Mullins touched the tip of the corkscrew to her right eye and began twisting. Nancy screamed uncontrollably, utterly and completely terrified. The torture had been almost unbearable but she had stood it somehow, knowing that there was much more than just a few lives at stake. This was too much though. Being blinded had been an abiding, ever-constant fear ever since her mother had lost her eyesight to diabetes. She couldn't even think of living, not even for five more minutes, without her sight. For some people it is being buried alive. For others, cancer is a terrible, unspeakable fear. Some women would rather die than be raped. For Nancy, it was her eyes, her sight, the fear of never being able to read or see again. She broke, utterly and completely and immediately. Five minutes later, Mullins had all he needed to arrest Shirley and to pull in Daniel Stenning and Lisa Berry along with her. Stenning could be dispensed with, but the



two women would come back with him, right to this same place.

"Let's go," he said to Mondez.

"But Boss, I want to..."

"Later. We'll pull Rostervik in first, then we'll bring the others back here where they can take a good look at both these cunts before we get down to business." He quickly checked Nancy's bonds to make certain she could not escape while they were gone, then took out his phone and dialed the two vehicles that were trailing behind Shirley.

"Report," he ordered when a voice answered. He listened for a minute or two, then said "I'm going to take over. Call back every five minutes till we get close, then talk me into the pattern. One team can go home then, but have the other one stay and back me up until I have her in control, then it can leave, too." Besides the other enjoyable business, Mullins had himself convinced that he needed to get out into the field occasionally to keep his techniques sharp. He was savoring it this time, even more than usual.

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Now that she was looking for it, Shirley eventually spotted her tail. *Now What?* She asked herself. *They'll never let me get out of town, that's for sure. And sure as hell, my car phone and comphone are both being monitored. If I try to call and tell Dan I'm not going to show up, they might be able to figure out where he's supposed to meet me. But if I don't, he and Lisa will probably stay in town and try to find out what happened to me. But—if I don't get away, I'll be picked up soon and made to talk anyway, maybe before they've left town!*

Shirley was under no illusions about her chances of avoiding trouble; her main concern now was protecting her friends. She knew, as well as she knew the sun would rise in the morning, that she could be made to talk. Anyone could, with the right drugs or enough torture. She thought of Corey Mullins standing over her and shuddered. Something was wrong with that man. She dithered as she drove, knowing time was running short, but still trying to think of something she might do. At last a possible solution came to her. It might or might not work, but doing something was certainly better than simply driving around and beating her hand on the steering wheel in frustration. She continued driving in a random pattern but began routing it closer and closer to the restaurant where Dan and Lisa were supposed to be waiting, while hoping that he hadn't forgotten his training.



He hadn't. She had to drive by twice before Daniel noticed her, but that was all right. Just as she had hoped, he and Lisa were sitting at one of the two tables where customers could see out the lone window of the little café. She had hoped they would be there. The café was open all night, but at this hour was well nigh deserted. She went by once more, this time slowing as she passed, then speeding up, a plain signal that she was being followed. Whoever was in the trailing car probably knew the signal, too, but it was the best she could do, and possibly they were far enough behind to miss it. Now, if Dan could just help—and without putting himself or Lisa at too much risk. She doubted that he would be able to do much, and she couldn't blame him if he simply took off for home, but there was a chance he wouldn't. And if he did stay and managed somehow to get her out of the jam she was in, perhaps they could find out who was behind all the nasty business. Not that she had much doubt; Mullins or Crafton, probably both, were almost certainly the main culprits. She felt for her purse on the seat beside her and retrieved her weapon, a revolver that she favored for not having to chamber a round before it was ready. As she was touching the gun, her phone rang.

"Give it up. Pull over and let's get this over with," a voice said when she answered. She ended the call without replying. When it rang again, she turned the phone off. She had recognized the voice on the other end, and now she was really scared. It was Mullins himself who was tailing her.

* * * *

"Let's go," Daniel said, standing up and dropping two twenties on the table.

"But..." Lisa saw the look on his face and reached for her purse. She hurried outside with Daniel, not questioning him until they were in her car, with her in the driver's seat as they had planned.

"Shirley is being followed closely. She just let me know. Remember what we were talking about?"

"Perfectly," she responded. "I hope Acey doesn't get hurt."

"Let's hope we don't get hurt. Listen, we're going to just hang back until we see what Shirley is going to do, and see if there's a backup for that vehicle behind her. If I've got it figured right, it shouldn't be long. She can't just keep driving around." He spoke while keeping his gaze fixed on the street outside. "As a matter of fact, here she comes now."



As soon as she passes, scrooch down so no one else can see us."

Daniel watched Shirley's vehicle pass, then slumped down in the seat, but he held Lisa's hand beneath the booth, and kept just enough of his head up to see over the edge of the window. Just as he suspected it would, another car passed them seconds later. He started to tell Lisa it was all right to sit up, but then he spotted the backup car behind the other one. He cursed under his breath. That wasn't good, but he was determined to try anyway. "All right, we've got two cars, but let's go. No lights for us. When you see them put their brake lights on, slow down then I'll give you the signal."

Lisa pulled her car away into the street and began following the tail lights of the car ahead through the early morning streets, almost completely deserted now. Daniel hated that Lisa had to be involved in the coming fracas, especially untrained as she was, but the alternative was leaving Shirley to the mercies of the people in the NSA that were wreaking havoc on the constitution—and on good, innocent people.

The crisis came even quicker than he thought it would, catching him with his mind not quite as focused as it should have been. Fortunately, Lisa was an apt pupil.

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Shirley decided that if Daniel was going to help, he would be in the chase by now. *May as well get it over with*, she thought. She waited until they were well past the last stop light, on a darkened, deserted stretch of the street. She tromped hard on the brakes, causing her car to slew sideways and bounce off the curb before it came to a screeching halt. She put it in reverse and tried to ram the car following her. Unfortunately, Mullins still knew his business and had reflexes as good as hers.

"Damn," Shirley cursed as Mullins cut sharply and steered around her, barely missing but that was enough. She had hoped to set off the air bags in his car and hopefully stun the occupants enough to give Daniel time to get the drop on them—if he were following. If not, she intended to sell her life as dearly as possible. She reached for her gun as Mullins stopped his vehicle in the middle of the street. Behind her, another car pulled in and screeched to a crossways position and jolted to a stop. Now she was blocked in and her pursuers were perfectly intact. She killed her lights and flung open the car door, holding her gun by her side in the folds of her skirt, but she doubted that would fool a professional even for a second. *Never mind*, she thought. *It's been a good life, mostly*



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* * * *

Daniel saw what was happening up ahead of them and came out of his reverie in time to shout "*Brakes!*", but Lisa was already slowing down. Daniel drew his Glock and forced himself to breathe slowly. The car that had gotten in front of Shirley had doused its lights a second after she did, presumably to keep from shining them into their partners' eyes, and the one behind quickly followed suit, not wanting to blind the occupants of the other car. It left the street in darkness, except for moonlight.

Perfect! Daniel thought, as he saw Shirley get out of her car almost at the same time as her pursuers. Almost immediately things began happening almost too fast to comprehend.

Lisa had perfect eyesight. She didn't wait for Daniel's signal. As soon as she saw one of the figures from the car parked in front of Shirley come out with his gun drawn, and the ones behind Shirley turn in her direction as they heard her vehicle drive up, she flicked her lights on, then up to bright, and stopped the car. Daniel was outside in a shot, almost not in time as the windshield starred from a perfectly placed shot, right where he had been an instant earlier. It was the last one to go true. More wild gunfire followed, but the shooters had been nearly blinded by the sudden brightness from Lisa's headlights.

Daniel rolled over, then went to one knee to present a smaller target while shouting for Lisa to stay down. He didn't have time to turn and look because he had underestimated the opposition. They were badly outnumbered. Four figures had poured out of the car in front of them instead of the pair he expected. Two of them hit the dirt and stretched out flat, offering a harder to hit target than when standing. The other two raced forward, braver than he would have given them credit for. He fired, and fired again, bringing one of them down, but the other disappeared from view to the side. He agonized, knowing that if he turned to try protecting Lisa they would both die. Instead, he concentrated on the two prone figures, emptying his gun at them. Both jerked and stopped moving, but at the same time a bullet that felt like a sledgehammer tore into his right leg just below the knee, knocking him sideways and causing him to drop the spare clip he had been holding in his other hand. He immediately flattened his hand and began running it over the ground, searching for the clip, but then the pain hit, feeling like a red hot poker being shoved into his leg. It blinded him to anything else for long moments while the action swirled around him.



* * * *

Lisa had no intention of staying down; not while Daniel was in danger. As soon as she could get her foot off the brake, she was out of the car, paying no attention to the bullet hole in the windshield, nor to Acey the cat, who landed on her chest and clung there when Daniel tossed him aside. She had remembered to do exactly what Daniel had told her to. She shut her eyes when she turned on her lights. Her attackers were half-blinded; she wasn't.

A man came running at her, firing at her blurry figure but missing. Lisa didn't. She shot him in the chest. He flung one arm into the air, but didn't go down. He stumbled on, ducking his head just as Lisa fired again. Her bullet went just over his head. At the same time Acey leaped away from her. Startled, her opponent made the mistake of firing at the cat instead of Lisa. He missed again. Lisa's next bullet hit him in the upper shoulder, just outside the edge of his bulletproof vest. He dropped his gun. As he fell, Acey bounded back in her direction, scared and hissing at all the noise. Lisa gathered him to her chest and kept her gun pointed at the wounded man, realizing now why he had not died from her first shot to his chest. The armor of his vest was tattered, but it had held..

* * * *

"Grab her," Mullins said to Montez in a peculiarly calm voice. He realized almost immediately what was happening, but emotion played no part in his life outside of his penchant for torturing helpless females. He would kill Shirley if he had to, but he doubted it would come to that. Instead, he hoped this would be an opportunity to get rid of Montez without him having to order it. He knew she was holding a weapon. It didn't matter. Whoever was attempting the rescue almost certainly hadn't been expecting to encounter so many opponents. He followed right behind Montez, prodding him in the back and using his body for protection.

Shirley heard shots behind her and hoped it was Daniel, but she didn't turn. That situation would have to take care of itself. She had recognized Mullins before shutting her lights off and it was him she wanted before she died. Montez was waving his gun and shouting something at her in Spanish, having reverted to his native language in his excitement. Unable to get a clear shot at Mullins, she was forced to concentrate on Montez. She didn't raise the revolver from her side where it was still wrapped in her skirt, thinking it would probably give Montez an excuse to shoot. Instead she simply elevated the barrel and pulled the trigger.



The shot took Montez in the upper chest. He continued his forward motion but began slumping. Shirley raised her arm and fired again, aiming for Mullins' head, now visible behind Montez's falling figure. The shot brushed his hair, then he was on her, jumping Montez's body to get to her. He pushed her gun hand up and twisted savagely with strength she wouldn't have credited his chubby figure with having. She cried out as the pain forced her to drop her revolver. She tried to get to her backup weapon under her skirt but Mullins was too wise for that. He twisted harder, making her go senseless with pain. His hand groped her thighs, searching for her other weapon. He found the little derringer and chucked it away.

Daniel became aware of events again through a haze of agony that was almost suffocating. He gritted his teeth and tried to analyze what was happening. *Lisa*, he whispered, forcing his mangled leg to move so that he could look behind him. At the same time, he pulled another clip from his pocket and reloaded.

It was all over where he was. Lisa was standing over a prone figure who was groaning but beginning to come back to life and trying to sit up. "Check his ankles!" Daniel shouted. His voice rasped, coming out hoarsely, little more than a whisper, but Lisa heard him. She said something to the figure on the ground and he lay back down. Lisa shifted something to the arm holding her gun as she bent down. She removed a little automatic from the man's ankle holster and tossed it away. Daniel breathed a sigh of relief—until he looked in front of him again.

Corey Mullins was grinning cheerfully behind Shirley, who had her head thrown back and was sobbing hopelessly. "Drop it," he said to Daniel and Lisa both, coming closer and pushing Shirley along in front of him, obviously in command and loving the feel of a helpless woman in his arms. Unfortunately for him, he tended to stereotype beautiful women, thinking of them as little more than potential objects for his secret vice. Once in control, he relaxed enough to give Shirley her chance.

The crying had been a ploy on Shirley's part, using it to make Mullins think she was finished. Once she felt him relax, she made a violent move with her hips and legs, bringing Mullins' body halfway around and in line with the balled fist she swung at his groin. It glanced off his hip. Mullins tightened his grip and regained the advantage, but he was in line of sight for Daniel for a long second or two. Hoping he wouldn't hit Shirley by mistake in his weakened condition, he took the split second opportunity and shot at Mullins. He didn't hit Shirley, but he missed Mullins, too.



Lisa didn't. She glanced up from her prisoner at the sound of Mullins' voice shouting at them to drop their weapons and saw Shirley struggling with a man. She didn't know who it was, but she didn't hesitate. Taking quick, careful aim in the semi-darkness, she fired one time.

Mullins dropped like a bag of sand. Lisa's aim was as true as ever. Her bullet took Mullins squarely in the head, bursting his skull with the impact. He was dead before he hit the ground.

*** * * ***

"Come on, we have to get Dan to a hospital," Lisa begged. Now that the fighting was over, she was crying freely, kneeling by Daniel's side.

"No," Daniel groaned through his pain. "That will bring in the law, if they're not already on the way. We can't stand that. Someone help me into the car. We have to get out of here."

"This one is still living," Shirley said, standing over the man Lisa had shot. "I hate to kill an unarmed man, but we'll have to if we want to get away with this."

The man on the ground began jabbering so fast he was almost unintelligible. "No! Wait! I know something! I know where the other woman is! They think no one knows, but me and Jim followed. Please! I'll take you there!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The reporter woman. We snatched her today."

"Nancy!" Shirley moaned.

"Hurry," Daniel said with his last conscious breath.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

For the next several hours, Daniel was only vaguely aware of events. He remembered being placed in the back seat of someone's car, probably Lisa's, he thought, for he remembered his head in her lap and a strange buzzing that he couldn't comprehend. He tried to bear the pain but it got worse, unbearably worse. He asked Lisa to open his kit and find the morphine ampoule there. Following his instructions, she injected him. After that, things became very fuzzy indeed.



* * * *

There was someone doing things to his leg that hurt even through the morphine euphoria. Daniel thought he heard someone saying something about a shattered kneecap and wondered who it might be. Some bright lights hurt his eyes. Was he on television? It seemed as though someone was talking about Nancy. Must be someone else, his befogged mind concluded. Someone else named Nancy. He felt a prick on the top of his hand, more like pressure than pain, and after that he got sleepy. The bright lights dimmed. *Lisa*, he whispered. *Where's Lisa?* He thought she answered but he couldn't be sure. And then he didn't remember anything else for many hours.

* * * *

"Neither of us knows of anyone else, but that doesn't mean there couldn't be." Jimmy Browning was acting as the spokesman for the two rogue FBI agents who had been turned to work for the NSA.

Samuel Cokesey shook his head in disgust. "And you two apparently didn't think anything was wrong with infiltrating another government agency, as if *five* were the enemy?"

"It wasn't that simple, Mister Cokesey. Originally, we were told that we would be going after some bad apples that terrorists had slipped into place with your regular recruits. After that, Mister Mullins sort of took over. He—that SOB knew every goddamned thing we had ever done wrong in our life, right down to when I stole a penny from my second grade teacher's desk. He told us we had to do what he said or he would tell on us. Then ... well, it just seemed to get worse as we went along. Pretty soon he had us doing things we didn't want to do, but by then it was too late. He could have sent us to prison if he had wanted to."

Cokesey nodded at the two men sitting across from him in the den of Tyrone Beamer's old apartments in the Genetechnics plant. They both had hangdog looks on their faces, like husbands being confronted by their wives with evidence of clandestine affairs. Cokesey understood, in a way, how such men, basically decent to begin with, could be suborned into crimes that only grew worse with time. But this ... never mind, they were going to try to make amends. "Here's the deal," he said. "You're both going to make a full, recorded confessions that you were responsible for planting the fake evidence that blamed Masterville for the president's assassination. After that, you'll be given a reasonable amount of money and sneaked into a foreign country where you can pose as retired businessmen. Once you get out



of the country, you're on your own."

Browning shook his head. "Mullins will come after us. He'll never let this go. He'll take us back and make us say we were lying, then kill us."

Cokesey smiled thinly. "Mister Mullins is dead. It seems he picked on someone he shouldn't have."

"Dead? You mean it?" Browning's face lit up like a child just given an ice cream cone on a hot Summer day. His relief was obvious.

"It's real enough. The government is suppressing the news, but we're going to announce it right after we broadcast your confession. They won't be able to deny it once the reporters get hold of the story."

"All right, we'll do it. When do we get started?"

His partner nodded agreement.

"We already have. We've been recording this since I came into the room. Go ahead now, just tell the whole story."

Browning began talking, haltingly at first, but with increasing confidence as he went along, letting the confession purge his soul. Cokesey stopped him occasionally in order to have the other agent confirm that he, too, was guilty. It was obvious to Cokesey that anyone who watched the recording would be able to see the relief on the faces of the two men as Browning related the events surrounding the planted evidence, including who they got their orders from.

Cokesey figured Mandel Crafton would deny everything, especially since there was no proof that he had been involved, but their stories would be damning nonetheless. He just wished he could connect the dots well enough to implicate President Williamson, but that was very doubtful. He had never had been one to leave himself open to incriminating evidence.

*** * * ***

Daniel gradually regained consciousness, but his head felt as if it were filled with cotton. It slowed his thought processes and kept making him woozy all over again. He dozed and woke up, drowsed and then came to his senses enough to sip some water from a straw being held by Lisa. *Lisa! She was safe!* That knowledge brought him back to full awareness, though he was still so weak that he could barely lift his hand to touch the wet path tears had made on her



cheeks.

"I'm so glad. I thought we were all going to die and I couldn't stand for it to happen to you. It's like a dream, seeing you here." He took her hand and pulled it to his lips, kissing it gratefully. He looked around. "Where is here, by the way?" He wasn't in a hospital room, that was certain. It looked more like a bedroom in a middle class home than anything else, with the standard bedside table, a television screen hanging on the wall across from him and a mirrored closet.

"We're at one of Tyrone's hideaways. We had to take a chance and call for help. I guess we got away with it because no one has disturbed us."

"Is Shirley..." he couldn't remember.

"She's fine, barring a sore arm. Nancy Primmerton isn't in very good shape, but she'll live."

"Nancy? How did she get involved. Oh ... Damn it, my brain isn't working right yet. I remember..." He looked down the length of his body and saw that his right leg was contained in a transparent air cast, covering heavy bandages from above his knee down to the middle of his shin.

Lisa saw where his gaze had gone. "Yes, you got hit. The doctor said you're going to have to have a new kneecap put in and a bunch of bone grafts and temporary pins and stuff, but it can't be done here. She just patched you up temporarily. We have to get you back home where the gunshot wound won't be reported."

"How..."

"Don't worry about it, sweetie. Now that you're awake, we're going to get started. They aren't searching inbound produce and food and supply trucks going into the valley yet, but no telling when they might start with that madman in the white house being able to order the Army around."

"You mean I'm going to have to imitate an orange?"

"Hah! More like a potato for being dumb enough to get shot." Lisa wiped at her cheeks with the knuckles of one hand, being unable to free the other from Daniels's grasp. "Did you know you were the only one of us that was wounded?"

Daniel managed a grin, remembering the last time he had been shot.



Lisa had been present then, too. "We're going to have to stop meeting like this, sweetheart. I love you, but I can stand being shot only so many times."

Lisa used her knuckles on her eyelashes again, though she managed to smile "Your career as a superman is over with, bud, so don't worry about it." She bent to kiss him then left the room, saying that she would be back soon.

Daniel was dozing off again when she returned, this time with a man and woman he didn't know. They had a stretcher with them.

"Mister Stenning, we have to move you over onto this stretcher so we can get you into the van. How's the pain? Do you need another dose of morphine?"

Daniel said that he didn't, but changed his mind very quickly when they began moving his leg. He tried to suppress a moan but it escaped through his gritted teeth. "Wait ... I think I'll change my mind about the morphine, if that's okay."

"Sure thing," the woman said. She brushed a lock of brownish hair out of her face and reached out to the tubing depending from a saline solution attached to a short, upright pole behind the bed. The tubing led to his hand where a needle had been inserted and taped down. She did something with the tubing and waited. "By the way, I'm Sayne Wilson, your doctor." She pointed to the man, who was dark skinned and hook nosed. "And this is Tonto, my faithful companion. He has a nursing degree, but I really just keep him around for heavy work."

The man grinned and nodded, unoffended at the designation. "You can call me Ton for short. My parents had a weird sense of humor. Besides, you couldn't pronounce my real name with a spell checker and a dozen dictionaries to help you."

Daniel nodded at him, trying to keep his eyes open. The additional morphine had flowed directly into the line. Just before his eyes closed, he saw the doctor nod to her Amerindian companion and they began shifting him to the stretcher. He felt some pain but it came to him as though it belonged to someone else.

They carried him outside in the stretcher to a big moving truck and trundled him up a ramp to the inside. He looked around. Instead of produce, the truck was loaded with cabinets and dressers and other solid furniture, heavily braced along each side of the van and forming a hollow inside it. From the stretcher, he was gently transferred to a soft mattress laying directly on the floor along one side of the



compartment. There was an empty one on the other side.

"Be right back," the doctor said.

Daniel waited, then a few minutes later another stretcher appeared. It was set down, and the person on it transferred to the other mattress. Just by looking, it was hard for Daniel to tell whether the figure was a male or female. The face was heavily bruised and the lips swollen. One eye was heavily bandaged; the other one showed only a slit between puffed lids. His eyes tracked down to more bandages, including some on the chest, but one breast appeared to be undamaged beneath its covering, telling him the figure was female, at least.

"Be right back." This time it was Tonto who spoke, throwing Daniel a white-toothed grin, as if something funny were going on.

"Hello," Daniel said to the injured woman, wondering who it was.

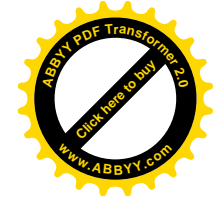
She mumbled something he couldn't understand, and then it hit him. That must be Nancy! *Oh goddamn* , he thought. *Those sorry, evil bastards* . How could anyone do something like that to another human being?

Tonto reappeared a moment later, carrying two rolled up sleeping mats and a pair of folded lawn chairs. "You're going to have to look at my ugly face for a long time," he said, and disappeared again.

Daniel began wondering what else was going to be brought inside. He only had to think about it for a few minutes. The man came back, carrying a small suitcase and what looked like, and later proved to be, a medical bag. Very shortly he lost interest in it, the Indian, or anything else, for right behind him came Lisa, grinning like a Collie pup. She carried Acey the cat cuddled to her chest. He gave her a grateful, sleepy smile in return. He should have known that she wouldn't let him travel without her, even if he did have an accompanying nurse. And a half grown rainbow colored cat for company.

Once they were inside, more furniture began appearing, carried by two workmen. Soon, their little cubbyhole was blocked off. Within another couple of moments he heard the rumble of the big diesel engine starting up. Lisa and Tonto unfolded their chairs.

The Indian punched a button on the back wall of the compartment. "Ready," he announced, and the van began moving.



Daniel wondered where the sanitary facilities were located, but the question soon faded from his mind under the influence of the narcotic. He closed his eyes and slept.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"What!" Crafton yelled, then looked toward the door of his office to be sure it was closed. "When did this happen?" He listened intently for a moment, then cursed. "All right. Thanks, Tommy. You did good. I'll take care of you for this later. Right now, I want you to leave your partner at the scene and get over here as quickly as you can and pick me up in the rear lobby at headquarters. Tell him—" He got an irritated look on his face, then continued. "—her, then, to try to find out exactly what happened, but to refer any questions by the locals to my office. Martha Zimmerman is the contact. She will handle all the PR. Understand?"

Crafton waited until he was sure his instructions had been repeated back to him, then hung up the phone and punched the button on his desk to summon his chief deputy. Seconds later, Martha Zimmerman popped through the door.

"Martha, I just got word that Mullins and several of his men have been killed. The press is bound to get on it soon. When they do, just issue a statement over my name that he was on an undercover operation and that we can't disclose any details because it is still ongoing. I'll have my phone if you absolutely have to find me, but until I tell you differently, I'm not talking to anyone except the president. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Crafton practically ran out the door of his office. He knew where he needed to go immediately, before the local yokels beat him to it with a court order. No telling what kind of horrendously implicating information Mullins has hidden away in his home, he thought, but he knew that there would probably be some kind of dirt there on half the movers and shakers in Washington, probably even including the president. He wanted to get there first, with just one operative to back him up, in this case Thomas Broussard, the one who had been dispatched by operations when word had come in about Mullins. He would have to trust the man to keep the nature of his present mission secret. It wouldn't do to have the public know that the NSA director himself saw fit to search his Internal Affairs Director's home immediately after his death. That would attach too much importance



to it and give the investigative reporters a trail to begin sniffing at. And he certainly wasn't going to trust his usual limo driver; that man was just a hired flunky, not someone trained by the agency.

Broussard appeared within 15 minutes of his call. While Crafton waited, he tried to think of what could possibly have gone wrong with the pickup of Shirley Rostervik and the reporter. Surely one lone girl wouldn't have resisted two cars full of agents? Would she? Like Mullins and many others, he tended to underestimate his female agents in general, and Shirley in particular because of her beauty. Unable to come up with a plausible scenario in his mind, Crafton decided to let it be for the time being and began thinking about damage control. Mad Manny wasn't going to like this at all if he heard about it; and he would, there was no doubt of that. So would Snow White, for that matter. Well, he would have to bring the President into the loop, but for White, he could always claim national security and clam up. That would hold things at bay for a while. In the meantime, he had to hope he could find some of Mullins' files he could use. That would really help.

Crafton couldn't stop himself from thinking that this whole Masterville phenomena was being blown way out of proportion by the politicians, most of them seeking some kind of advantage to their re-election prospects, which meant coming out against Masterville and its inhabitants. It seemed to be the only issue nowadays. So far, much more of the country was against them than for them and hardly any Senator or Congressman or woman was willing to step up and say outright that they thought the people of Masterville Valley were harmless. Crafton didn't mind seeing interest groups being pitted against each other, but this thing had already spiraled almost out of control once and now Mad Manny was fanning the fires again, even after the previous Surgeon General's statement that the prions carried by the Masterville people weren't infective, other than from mother to child. And hells bells, even if they were, so what? It wouldn't hurt some people he knew to swallow a damn big dose of them, if it would keep them from accusing those poor people of consorting with the devil and corrupting the country when he knew perfectly well that they had existed in that valley for well over a hundred years without damning anyone to perdition.

Crafton shook his head, trying to get the renegade thoughts out of his head. He had to focus on keeping the President happy and assuring his place as a vice presidential candidate on the next ticket. After that ... he shook his head again. If he didn't get the present situation under control, he wouldn't even be Director for long, much less Vice President.



Broussard pulled his car to a stop in front of an unpretentious one story home in an upper middle class neighborhood. "We're here," he said, pulling up into the open garage.

"This is Mullins' home?"

"Yes, sir, according to the directory."

Crafton was surprised. He wondered what Mullins had been doing with his money. He could well have afforded a much better place than this, and he was even more surprised that he didn't live in a gated community. Perhaps he should have examined his personal safe first? No, he wouldn't have kept anything important having to do with people there, not when he had to give Crafton the combination in case something happened to him. There would only be classified documents and files on lower class employees there. If he was going to find anything to help him, here would be the place.

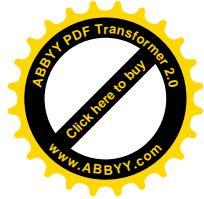
"All right, let's see if you can pick the lock here and get us inside."

Crafton watched as Broussard worked on the side door inside the garage, looking like the perfect example of an urban thief, with his baggy pants, thin mustache and deft fingers. He was surprised that it took less than two minutes. He thought Mullins would have secured his home better than that. He felt his heart sinking. If it was this easy to get inside, would he have left sensitive material here? Perhaps he should have checked his office safe first. And damn it, he should have had someone with a background in safe cracking meet them here, too. Too late now. If necessary, he could tell the police there was sensitive material inside and have the house sealed off. Far better to find anything incriminating first, though.

"Okay, Tommy, why don't you stay outside in case someone gets curious about a strange car parked here," Crafton said. He was irritated that the garage had no apparent way to let the door down but there was nothing to do about it.

"Okay, but if you need help with a safe, I've got some experience with them."

"Okay, thanks." *Maybe there is a God*," Crafton thought, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. Bedroom and den first, he thought. The two most obvious places. He started with the den, simply because he came to it first. It contained what looked like a combination television/computer screen on one wall, an easy chair across from it, a well stocked bar, bookshelves that were mostly empty, a desk with a PC atop it and an office chair shoved under it.



Crafton explored the computer first, although he seriously doubted that Mullins would store information there, not with so many hackers employed by the agency. Nevertheless, he removed all three little drives attached to ports, almost certainly serving as backup files. He pocketed them and continued his search, intending to take the computer's main drive before he left.

He pointed the little metal detector at the walls and floor and found nothing suspicious, nor was there anything of note in the desk drawers. Stymied, he moved to the bedroom, trying to be thorough even as he hurried.

The bedroom search was fruitless, too, so far as a hidden safe went, and he could find nothing at all in the closet that might indicate hidden alcoves. He began looking through the dresser drawers, starting from the bottom and working up to the top catchall drawer that men are inclined to use for odds and ends not worth carrying around but not wanting to throw them away, either. He sorted through brushes, old billfolds, pens and pencils, combs and other bric-a-brac, including a cheap, throwaway cigarette lighter. He was closing the drawer when it occurred to him that Mullins didn't smoke. He looked around the bedroom. No ash trays. He picked up the lighter and flicked the lighter wheel. It didn't light. He started to drop it back into the drawer then hesitated. Something about it didn't feel quite right. He fiddled with the thumb catch again, holding it open as he peered at the works. Again, they didn't look quite right; he knew that from the days when he was a smoker. He held one end of it and pulled on the other. The top part came away, and there, like a precious jewel, was a connection that would fit a computer port.

Crafton smiled to himself. *The devious sonofabitch* ! It had been completely safe from a burglar or casual smoker looking for a light. He pocketed the little hard drive and continued rummaging through Mullins' belongings. He didn't find anything else, but before abandoning the house, he booted up the computer and inserted the drive into a port. When he was asked for a password, he knew he had found what he was looking for. He could find a hacker later to break the password. And it was time to go; it couldn't be long before the locals would be here looking for clues. He had to hurry and put a NSA hold on the contents, just in case.

* * * *

The lack of movement was what woke Daniel from his drug-induced slumber. His eyes blinked open and he raised up from the mattress to see what was happening. Lisa was bent over Nancy Primmerton, whispering something too low for him to hear, but if he knew Lisa, it



was words of encouragement. He was relieved to see that Nancy was still with them; as horrible as she had looked when he last saw her, he had wondered if she would survive.

Lisa raised up and started to sit back down in her chair, then saw that Daniel was awake.

"Welcome back, Danny Boy. How do you feel?" She pushed the chair away and sat down beside his mattress, crossing her legs and leaning over to kiss him.

Daniel felt his strength returning. While their lips were touching, he reached up and caressed her breasts through the thin tee shirt she was wearing.

"Aha, my man is feeling a bit better, is he?" She held his hand to her breast for a moment with her eyes closed. With anyone not from Masterville, he would have thought it was a silent prayer being sent heavenward.

"How's Nancy? Can she talk yet?"

Lisa glanced over toward where Nancy was laying. Nancy turned her head and tried to say something, but Daniel couldn't understand her.

"She's going to be fine. In fact, she'll probably be going into surgery right behind you for a little repair work."

"Surgery?"

Lisa's face became less animated. "Don't you remember? I told you that we couldn't trust a hospital in Washington not to report a gunshot wound, or a battered woman, for that matter. We have to get you both back to Masterville."

"Oh, yeah, I remember now. I'm surprised Tyrone doesn't have the connections to have it done outside the valley, though. He seems to have his tentacles out everywhere else."

"Don't complain. If it weren't for Tyrone, we'd probably all be in a camp somewhere, with all of us sterilized—or worse. He saw all this coming before hardly anyone else even knew we were different, and started preparing for it. The man's a genius."

"I wasn't complaining," Daniel said. "I was speaking with admiration. Where are we, by the way?"



"More than halfway home, at a truck stop. Tonto is inside using the facilities and buying some snacks."

Daniel felt a sudden urge. "Um, speaking of facilities, I'm feeling a little hydraulic pressure myself."

"Nonsense. You've got a catheter in. That's what you're feeling. Tonto just emptied yours and Nancy's bags. If you need anything else, there's a bedpan here."

Daniel thought about it. "How much longer?"

"About eight hours, more or less."

"I can wait." A sudden thought occurred to him. "Where's Shirley?"

"She's up front with the driver. Tonto's jealous. I think he has the hots for her."

"For Shirley?"

"No, for the driver."

"I didn't know he was gay."

"He's not, dummy. The driver is a woman."

"Oh. Have I ever told you how much I love the way you use those little terms of endearment on your future husband?"

"No, but we've got eight more hours cooped up together here. You can tell me all about it while we're traveling. Unless you'd rather watch television? We've got a screen we can hang up and plug in back here."

"Hmm. As much as I love the sound of your voice, I wouldn't mind hearing a bit of news, such as it is these days."

"Coming right up. We'll have to wait till we get started, though. It wouldn't do for anyone to hear voices coming from inside the van."

Lisa removed a small screen from a cubbyhole and attached it to a hook, then taped the corners down to keep it from bouncing as they traveled. While she was occupied, Acey crawled up onto his chest and butted him in the chin, buzzing happily.

Daniel petted the springy, multi-colored furball. "Nice to see you



again, cat. You sound cheerful enough that I suspect you've already collected on that tuna I owe you."

A noise from the rear drew their gaze. Daniel saw Tonto crawling through a hollowed out cabinet on his hands and knees. He looked up at them.

"What's the matter? Didn't they teach you in school how sneaky us Indians are?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Wow! I know Mister Cokesey said he was moving to Masterville a while back, but he's really going all out for us, isn't he?" Daniel said.

The lead story on all the news channels were the confessions of the two FBI agents, with Samuel Cokesey in attendance. He had made a short statement following the revelations, explaining how they had come about, but the networks were only giving out a few sound bites from it. They were concentrating more on Cokesey's final words.

".... call on every person working for our government or elected by its citizens to adhere to the truth and try to show compassion for your fellow man. We have come a long way in this country along the road to eliminating discrimination by race, sex and ethnicity. Why should we now discriminate against religions different from our own, or against persons professing no religion? Please judge your fellow man by his actions, and nothing else. The people here in Masterville want nothing more than to be left alone to pursue their lives in peace, as they have been doing for almost two hundred years. Thank you."

"Politically incorrect. He used mankind instead of people-kind and fellow man instead of fellow persons. Should we ask someone to arrest him when we get home?" Tonto asked.

"That'll be the day," Lisa said.

"Yeah. Besides, people will listen to Sam regardless of how he says things. He's as honest as a judge."

"Do you know him?" Lisa asked, surprised.

"Yeah. He and my Dad were friends from their Army days. He gave me a good recommendation when I applied to the academy."



"FBI?" Daniel asked.

"Uh huh. But when he left, I left. Went to work for a private agency for a week or two, and from there got tangled up with you folks."

Lisa frowned. "I thought you were a nurse."

Tonto rubbed his overlarge nose. "I was, but didn't like it. Or rather I should say I couldn't stand the way the government has screwed up medical care in this country. I wound up doing senseless paperwork every shift while half-trained LVN's and Aides did the nursing. After a while I dropped out."

"Maybe you should try for a job at one of the Masterville hospitals. They don't fool with the government."

Tonto gave them both a pitying shake of his head. "What do you think I'm heading there for? Just to shepherd you clucks that don't know enough to stay out of the way of bullets and madmen?" He cocked his head, then turned back to the screen. "Hey, listen, the President is making a statement. I've got a big dollar bill that says he doesn't know a single thing about the horrible way those naughty FBI agents acted. Any takers?"

There weren't. If there had been, they would have lost.

"...assure you that an immediate investigation will be instigated to find out exactly how this came about and who was responsible, although I can assure you that our National Security Director, Mandel Crafton, is a good and trusted public official and is above suspicion. He has assured me that the allegations concerning his agency having a part in this are absolutely untrue. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. I might remind the American people in the meantime that Mister Cokesey, the former FBI Director, has apparently become a spokesman for the notorious atheist mutants of Masterville Valley, where not so long ago a radioactive bomb was exploded over our brave Army troops, and that some died from being close to that bomb. Many others are still suffering from radiation poisoning.

"If Mister Cokesey is truly a patriot, he will immediately turn those so-called rogue agents over to the justice system and let qualified persons do the questioning under controlled conditions, not from some place hidden from sight, where any number of things might have been done in order to coerce them into slandering the fine and selfless men and women of our Federal Bureau of Investigation.



"Thank you and good evening."

President Williamson strode confidently away from the podium in the Rose Garden, leaving his press secretary and Coy Trippen, the interim FBI Director, to continue the press conference.

Daniel lay his head back down on his pillow. "That sonofabitch is a master of the spin, I'll have to give him that. Do you think they'll go after Cokesey now? Physically, I mean, not with words?"

"They won't be able to pin anything on him," Tonto said. "They can't even charge him with harboring fugitives, since they both sent in their resignations once Summerton convinced them to come here. And if I know Sam, they're already out of the country by now. He'll see to that."

"Him and Tyrone both. I swear, it's like that man planned for every possible contingency that's happened to us so far. Excepting that dirty bomb, of course, and that actually worked in our favor, not the government's." Lisa said.

"You really admire the man, huh?"

"You bet. I'll admire him even more if he can keep Shirley out of their hands."

"And us, too, love," Daniel said. "By the way, when can I see Shirley?"

Lisa looked down at him. "When you're recovered, maybe. I don't trust you not to hurt yourself otherwise. You're already getting rambunctious." She removed his hand from her thigh. "Stop that, you'll embarrass Ton."

"I can stand it. Hey, look, how 'bout at our next stop, I let Shirley ride back here and I go up front? You can get me on the intercom if you need me."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Lisa told him.

"Sure, but I noticed he wasn't listening."

"Men. All right, if Dan promises to behave."

*** * * ***

President Williamson was so mad that his face was red. A blood vessel throbbed at his temple, lending credence to his flushed



features. "Can't you do any fucking thing right? What if they had been able to trace those agents back to you? Where would we be then?" He got up and walked over to the liquor cabinet in the little conference room where he always met with Crafton. "Goddamn Irish Whisky, I'm tired of it," he said, loud enough for the other two men in his private conference room to hear him. In truth, he had noticed his secretary wrinkling her nose the last time he came back from this room and had decided to switch to vodka. He poured himself a double shot and added ice and Collins mix, swirling everything together as he went back to the table.

"Well?"

Crafton couldn't meet the president's gaze. "Sir, I'm sorry, but how was I to know that Cokesey was going to turn on us? Besides, you did a masterful job there in the Rose Garden. I'll bet half the media will be blaming him by tomorrow rather than the NSA."

"They better be. Have you found where they're hiding those bastards yet?"

"No, sir. We have only a very few agents in Masterville that we can count on. Most of them seem to be uncovered before they learn much. And the ones that are still hidden aren't reporting much more than gossip. I don't know how they manage to keep our men so baffled."

The President took a big swallow of his vodka Collins. "They're Goddamned mutants. Probably mind readers, if you ask me."

Crafton didn't want to tell the President that he had watched too many science fiction movies as a kid. If they were truly mind readers, they would have had the President and half of congress in prison by now. But what could he tell him? His agents did have a hard time there. They didn't have the same mind set as the Masterville people and were made almost as soon as they opened their mouths. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants legs beneath the table.

Michael White spoke up before he had a chance to comment. "Mandel, what about Mullins, your IA Director? What happened there? We need to get a story ready. It's going to break by tomorrow. We can't keep a lid on it any longer. In fact, we're damn lucky we've managed to do so this long."

Crafton had already given a great deal of thought to that matter and he was ready with an answer. "We can say that Shirley Rostervik was acting suspiciously and that we thought she was passing secrets to the authorities in Masterville, and that Mullins was investigating her."



"You mean you want me to tell the country that she was responsible for murdering five agents and kidnapping another? Get serious, man. The public likes strong female characters but they won't buy that one. In fact, it would probably make her into some kind of anti-hero, if anyone believed it. She had help and you know it." White looked disgusted. When neither the President nor Crafton said anything, he added, "Besides, she would just deny everything, and that's even if you or Trippen managed to find her in the first place."

The President drained his glass and headed for the bar again. "We're spending too much time on those two cluster-fucks. Give me an option where I can take some sort of action."

Crafton started to speak up, but White beat him to it. "I think it's time for the Surgeon General to issue that statement we discussed."

"You mean about long term harm from their prions?"

"Exactly. I hate to put out unscientific information to the public, but in this case, I think it might fly, particularly since no one really knows yet what the long term impact of a prion infection on an adult might be. I know I wouldn't want to take a dose of them, like a lot of people are doing." White moved to the president's bar without an invitation and poured a shot of his Irish Whiskey into his coffee. It was the third meeting in a row where he had sampled it and he was developing a definite liking for the stuff. It certainly gave the coffee a kick and helped him keep his temper in check.

"All right, do it, but for damn sure don't say that some people are actually *asking* for that damned stuff. Now tell me how you think my speech is going to go over at the Baptist convention. Am I coming on too strong, do you think?" The President directed his question to White. Crafton hadn't heard about it yet.

White sipped at the Irish coffee, savoring the taste and the warmth it imparted to his body. "Mister President, telling all the Messengers to go home and induce their congregations to send missionaries to Masterville is a great idea. All I suggest is that you don't put it like you're giving them marching orders. Try to be subtle."

"Like how?"

"Oh, maybe just imply that their foreign missions are being wasted so far from home when the need is much greater right here in America, in certain areas of the country. They'll get the idea."



Crafton had gotten himself a glass of the president's Irish Whiskey over ice once he saw that he hadn't objected to White using it. He gripped it, started to raise it to his lips, then saw a contradiction in their two positions. "Won't having the SG talking about harm from long term infection on the one hand and you urging the Baptists to send missionaries to Masterville on the other sort of conflict with each other? Won't they be scared to go for fear of catching a dose of their prions?"

White shook his head. "Nah. Just have her repeat that bulletin about how low chances of infection are, so long as it's not done deliberately. And we'll have our media outlets keep repeating how much missionaries are needed there. We'll get Baptists, Methodists, Catholics—hell, we'll have Snake Handlers and Holy Rollers going there if it's repeated often enough. People are curious about the place anyway and this will provide them a good excuse to go see the monkeys in the zoo."

The President guffawed. "Hey, I like it. Monkeys in the zoo. Hell, I wouldn't doubt that they really are descended from monkeys. They're probably the ones Darwin was talking about, not us normal humans."

How can the President of the United States be so ignorant? Crafton thought. He caught White's eye and saw that he was probably thinking the same thing.

"Okay, anything else?"

"That's all I have," Crafton said, rising to his feet. He found himself enjoying these meetings less and less as time went on. He wanted to get away.

"All right. You can go, then. Mike, you stick around for a few more minutes. There's a bit of political strategy we need to discuss."

As soon as Crafton had left the room, President Williamson pointed to the door. "I'm going to drop that man from the VP list for the next presidential election. He's fucking up too much lately. Find someone else we can work with besides Byerly and start grooming him. Make sure it's someone we have a good firm hold on, and if they're in Congress, make sure they're safe for the mid terms. I don't want any more mavericks like that girrly boy we have now."

"Yes, sir," White said. To himself, he thought *"He's the real maverick. How did the nation ever get stuck with someone like him?"*



CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"Are we there now?" Daniel asked as the low rumble of the diesel cut off after what felt like some backing and maneuvering on the part of the driver.

Shirley had stretched out beside him on one of the sleeping mats. She moved her head close enough to blow in his ear, then sat up. Lisa reached out a hand to help her to her feet. As she came upright, their bodies met in an embrace that turned into a prolonged kiss.

"Are we there yet?" Daniel repeated again, amusement in his voice.

"No, but we're getting close. We might even make it if someone wouldn't interrupt us for a few more minutes," Lisa broke the kiss long enough to say, then shushed Shirley's giggles with her lips.

"How about me?"

"You're sick, you don't count."

The sound of the big rear doors of the van opening broke up the kidding. Someone pulled the false cabinet out of the way and slid the metal ramp out and dropped it to the ground.

"Heads up," Tonto said, coming inside and carrying a stretcher, with a woman that Daniel hadn't met on the other end of it. They and Shirley both assisted in getting him transferred from the mattress to the stretcher. As they were carrying him down the ramp, Tonto said "By the way, Maureen here was your driver. You can thank her for getting us through the pass. They were going to search the truck until she made a date with one of the guards. Right in front of me, too, damn her pretty eyes."

"Ah, but won't he be surprised when he can't find me because I've been captured by an Indian?" Maureen laughed merrily..

"Thanks Maureen," Daniel said to the tall, sleepy looking woman while looking around for Lisa. She was waiting at the bottom of the ramp. She winked at him and grabbed one handle of the stretcher to relieve some of the strain Maureen was showing from holding one end by herself.

Daniel saw that it was dark outside, and what was within sight from his angle appeared to be a well kept alley and a large loading dock, evidently for a building that handled a lot of bulky cargo. Then he



spotted the ambulance and it dawned on him that they weren't at the hospital where he had expected the trip to end.

"Where are we going now?" He asked Lisa.

"To Manson Hospital, soon as we get Nancy loaded. And in case you're wondering why you haven't had anything to eat the six hours, it's because a surgeon and an operating room are waiting on you."

"That quick? Why didn't we go directly to the hospital—oh. Moving van."

"Right. Not how patients are normally delivered to hospitals. We couldn't take the chance. But we'll be there shortly. Dan, love, Ton says we're pushing the limit now. You should have been operated on two days ago so you could start healing. Same for Nancy."

"Will she be all right?" He asked as his stretcher was brought alongside the ambulance gurney.

Lisa bent to give him a quick peck on the lips for thinking about Nancy before himself. "Both of you are going to be fine if you'll be quiet now and let us get going." Her voice was so gentle that Daniel suspected his wound might be a bit more serious than she and Tonto had been telling him it was. He shut up.

As soon as Nancy was loaded, Tonto adjusted something on his I.V.. "Your pre-op shot," he said. A few minutes later they were on their way, with Lisa and Tonto riding in the ambulance with him and Nancy. By the time they arrived, Daniel was feeling the effects of the narcotic. Everything after that was like a dream, sometimes vivid, sometimes incomprehensible, and all of it seen as through the veil of very pleasant fog. The last thing he remembered was being wheeled into the operating room.

*** * * ***

"Here's your password, Mister Crafton," the computer tech said, handing him a slip of paper. "And here's your little HD back. I'd guard it real careful, sir. There's files in there on half the nabobs in the city and some of them outside it. Including the president." He didn't think it necessary to mention that his boss' name was also in the files.

"Did you read any of it?" Crafton asked, apprehensive that the things Mullins knew about him might have been seen by the technician.

"No more than I had to, Mister Crafton. All I did was check the files to



be sure there weren't any secondary passwords, then I called you and came straight here. I couldn't help seeing the names of the files, though."

He actually looks scared, Crafton thought. *Good!* "I have to thank you, uh, Morton," he said, finally remembering his name. He hadn't wanted the man's name or duties written down anywhere. "I'll see that you're properly rewarded for this. But not a word to anyone. I mean *anyone*. Understand?"

The technician shook his head back and forth. "Mister Crafton, I don't *want* to know what's in those files. In fact, you can forget I ever saw that little hard drive if you want to."

Crafton felt a sense of relief. "All right, Morton, but I'll still reward you. You've done a fine service to your country with this, if that will make you feel better. I really do appreciate it."

"Thank you, sir. Can I go now?"

"Sure. Thanks again. Remember, not a word."

The tech made a zipping motion with his finger across his lips and departed.

Crafton sighed. One more problem out of the way. He just hoped the man was telling the truth about not having seen the contents of the file. He thought momentarily of simply having the technician eliminated, just to be sure, but discarded the notion almost immediately. That would be totally wrong, he told himself, then began wondering about his motives. *Why have I developed a conscience all of a sudden? It doesn't help in this crazy business. Better not to think so much!* He touched the intercom button on his desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"Martha, I'm leaving for the day. You can get me at home if you need to, but nothing except emergencies. Okay?"

"Yes, sir. Are you feeling bad, Mister Crafton?"

"No, actually, I'm feeling fine, Martha. I just have this sudden need to get away for an afternoon. I've been going rather hard lately."

"Yes, sir."

* * * *



"Beamer here," Tyrone said to the phone.

"Mister Beamer, this is Jan Langley at Manson Hospital. The doctor wanted me to call and tell you that your friend Larry just went into surgery. The doctor also said that he didn't expect any complications and would notify you as quickly as possible after it's over."

"Thank you, Jan. I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"No problem, Mister Beamer. It's just part of the service."

Tyrone breathed a sigh of relief as he put down the phone. That was one more problem taken care of, assuming that Daniel and Nancy Primmerton came through their surgery with no problems, and he had just been told that none were expected. The term "Larry" was code he and the hospital had cooked up for letting him know that Lisa, Daniel and the others had arrived safely and that Daniel and Nancy were already having their operations.

"That was the hospital, Jeremiah," he said, looking across his office at the editor and owner of the *Masterville Chronicle*. Jeremiah had decided to make the trip up the mountain to confer in person with him. "They got here without any problems and Dan is in surgery already. Nancy Primmerton will go in right after an ophthalmologist looks at her eye."

"Great. I hope Nancy stays here in Masterville once she's recovered. If she does, I'm going to try hiring her. I could use another good professional. The workload at the *Chronicle* is getting a bit much for me, and it doesn't look to end anytime soon."

"Not after that press conference. Of all the slanted, biased...."

Jeremiah Jones held up his hand. "Stop. We all know that, Tyrone. Thing is, too many people believe the crap that comes out of his mouth. God knows what he'll say next."

Tyrone grinned. "God may know; I sure don't. Well, what else can we do to refute him?"

Jeremiah shrugged. "Tyrone, I've been doing all I can and my editor and writer friends and stringers elsewhere are helping, but it's tough. It's just a fact of life that the majority of the country is religious and don't like the thought of a whole city full of "Atheist Mutants" running around loose." He raised two fingers of each hand in the familiar old symbol for quotation marks. "What we really need is an



administration and a president that doesn't constantly agitate the situation. You know, most people would be pretty well content to leave us be, so long as we don't rub our differences in their faces and aren't seen as a danger."

"Unfortunately, the government seems intent on doing the rubbing," Tyrone said. His face lost the mirthless grin and began to resemble a thundercloud filled with incipient lightning.

Jeremiah thought this was as agitated as he had ever seen Tyrone in their long friendship. "Is there something else the matter that I haven't been told about yet?" He looked over the rim of his coffee cup at his host and raised his brows.

Tyrone picked up a transfer cube and skidded it across his desk to Jeremiah. "Delete everything on here and destroy the drive once you've finished reading. It's the preliminary text of the speech the President is going to give at the Baptist convention next week. That's what I'm pissed off about."

Jeremiah palmed the little drive and examined it as though it were some rare artifact, thinking it must be bad for Tyrone to curse, something he didn't do lightly. "Now how in hell did you get a copy of his speech so far in advance? No, don't tell me. Better I shouldn't know, just in case. Is it as bad as the look on your face suggests?"

"Bad enough to make a drinking man out of a nun." Tyrone examined his watch and pulled out one of the drawers of his desk. "Speaking of, the sun is long past the yardarm." He unscrewed the cap on the bottle of brandy and added a half inch to his coffee cup, then tilted the bottle toward his friend. "You?"

"Might's well." Jeremiah held out his cup and let Tyrone top it off with the brandy. "And that's a silly comparison, Tyrone. Drinking man out of a Nun? You can do better." He sipped appreciatively. "Now tell me what Mad Manny's up to this time. Just briefly; I'll get the details from the transfer cube."

"I think he's going to try inundating us with missionaries. At least he's going to tell all the Messengers at the Baptist convention to go back home and tell their congregations how much we're in need of them; that's if the notes I just gave you are anything like the speech he actually delivers."

"They probably are. That sounds like something he would pull. Damn it, Tyrone, do you realize how many Baptists there are in the country?"



"Yes, and that's what worries me. Not to mention every other cockeyed evangelist and soul-saver in the country who will take up the chorus once the President mentions it. And I'm not just picking on the Baptists, even if the President is one. He's just using them because they're big on missionary work. Hell, Jerry, I'm surprised he's waited this long to rouse them up."

Jeremiah nodded and leaned back in his chair. "I can answer that. He was trying other approaches and has gotten burned. He's probably listening to White now. You know, I used to like the Snow White until he hooked up with Williamson." He shrugged. "Well, one good thing, we don't have but two motels here so there's hardly any facilities for visitors, and Chief Masters can arrest anyone trying to live in the parks or on the streets. He'll probably have to deputize a bunch of citizens again, though." He ruminated a moment, then added, "Too bad we can't use our National Guard troops."

"No chance," Tyrone said. "Our beloved governor is beholden to the president. He would never go for it."

"Yup, you're right. Well, could be worse. Look at what's happening in other places. Our poor Muslims are being persecuted almost as bad as we are, and most of them are just normal folk like us: they want to be left alone same as we do, for the most part. Same for the Jews in France and Germany. They're being hounded like rats. It's a great paradigm shift in religious attitudes in the world and I doubt that we'll see the end of it." Jeremiah sipped at his brandy-laced coffee, then added, as if an afterthought, "You know, Tyrone, when I figured out what you were up to, I disagreed at first. I didn't think you had the right to infect individuals with our prions, much less whole populations, but I'm beginning to believe our little prions might be the only hope for the world—not to mention us."

Tyrone stood up and looked sharply at Jeremiah's benignly smug countenance, a slight smile playing over his features. "Jeremiah Jones, damn your eyes, how did you find out about that?"

The newspaperman took out a pack of cigarettes, looked at them and put them back in his pocket. "Damn things, why are they so satisfying?" He muttered, then in a louder voice, said "I didn't know for sure until you just confirmed it, but I was sure as hell suspicious. When some of our Hispanic families quit their jobs for no good reason and left the valley, I started thinking. Then later, when other non-Hispanics did the same, and particularly when Dan & Lisa risked going back out into the world, I pretty well guessed. What I don't know is whether it's working. Is it?"



Tyrone frowned. He examined his coffee cup, discarded it and went to the bar for a glass and ice cubes. He poured brandy over the ice and finally answered. "I don't know about the babies and little kids; they're still too young for us to know much. But theoretically, they should develop just like children here that are infected by their mothers. The adult volunteers are showing promising results, but most of the ones we know about already shared a lot of our beliefs. It's a long term project, Jerry."

Jeremiah added brandy to his coffee, not nearly as much as Tyrone had put into his glass. "How about the non-volunteers. Have you got to the President yet?"

Tyrone nodded. "The President and congress both. It's too early to begin showing results from the president, though, even if it works."

Jeremiah stood up to leave. He swallowed the rest of his cooling café royal and set the cup down. Then he reached out to shake Tyrone's hand. "Old friend, I sincerely hope you succeed. I really do. Otherwise, I think, to quote a former president, "we're in deep doo-doo. "As he left, he turned at the door to add "Let me know if I can help with the project."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Mandel Crafton took extra care with his grooming. He had left his office early in order to get home and shower again before dressing for dinner. He found himself whistling as he toweled himself dry, and he smiled at his image while putting drops into his eyes to help remove the reddened veins. He hadn't been sleeping well lately, and his dreams were peculiar, almost always involving him in a conflict of some kind, as if a subconscious struggle was going on in his mind that he couldn't fathom while awake. And more and more, the periodic erotic content involved June Janter. Feeling like a teenager approaching a very popular girl for a date, he found himself barely able to get the words out when he asked her to have dinner with him. He was inordinately pleased when she not only agreed, but suggested a place he hadn't heard of that she said was so out of the way that they probably wouldn't be recognized or bothered. Now it was almost time.

He dressed casually, as he had asked her to. He didn't want to be recognized any more than she did. In the world of Washington political intrigue, they were each telling the other that the date wasn't the type where they wanted to be seen and be the cause of speculation



of one sort or another. He thought it was an auspicious beginning.

* * * *

She's very attractive, Crafton thought, looking across the table at his companion. June Janter was wearing a pale red sleeveless blouse with a tuck beneath her breasts and a filmy beige wrap that covered her shoulders and hung attractively to either side of her waist. Both went very well with her black hair. Crafton caught the glisten of the occasional strand of gray that reflected the light from the candle. That told him plainer than words that she wasn't vain enough to try hiding the first signs of aging, like so many Washington socialites did. That impressed him as much as her simple good looks and confident, almost regal, bearing.

"So what's new in the halls of congress?" Crafton asked, dispensing with any attempt at diversionary conversation. Their talk would turn to business eventually anyway, he thought.

June glanced up from the menu. "Perhaps you should be the one to speak of what's new, Manny. The NSA seems to be in all the headlines lately. But why not dispense with that stuff, at least until after dinner, anyway? Otherwise, I might lose my appetite." She smiled at him and went back to perusing the menu.

"Fine with me, so long as you don't call me Manny. That's the President's nickname."

"All right, Mandel, I won't, though—never mind. Are you ready to eat?"

"I'm ready. What would you like?" After Crafton had ordered for them, he found himself annoyed that he had forgotten just how to go about getting a romance off on the right foot. Or was this a beginning romance? He didn't know. He would like it to be, though. He suddenly realized that he was staring at June and dropped his gaze.

She laughed. "Mandel, you look for all the world like a man that's suddenly realized his fly is unzipped. Come on, relax! I promise not to laugh when you tell me what you do for amusement now that you're separated from your wife."

Mandel knew he was blushing, but he managed a game grin. "I guess I've been married so long that I've forgotten how to make small talk with an attractive woman. You look very nice tonight, by the way. I should have told you earlier."



"Hmm. That's a pretty good start. Any woman likes to be complimented. Do you like museums?"

Before long, Crafton found himself conversing freely, asking and answering questions as if he had known June Janter for a long time. It was a pleasant dinner and the food was good, tending more toward home style cooking than most Washington restaurants. The house Chablis wasn't bad either, he decided. They shared a split, then another one before the meal was finished.

"Dessert?" He asked.

"I'll pass, though I really don't want to. Feel free to indulge yourself, though."

Crafton patted his stomach. "I've had enough. Brandy?"

"All right, but just one. And stop me from finishing that one if I start acting silly."

***Her silly?* Crafton couldn't imagine it. From what he had heard around Washington, she was all business, trying to do a good job in an environment that tended to corrupt even the most well-intentioned politicians.**

June barely sipped at the snifter of brandy. She used it more as a prop while talking than as a drink. "Mandel, can you tell me anything more at all about what the President is up to? And I'm not speaking of breaking political confidences or official secrets. I'm not a favorite of his, but I do have constituents that are beginning to wonder about him. For that matter, I'm beginning to wonder, myself. He's giving you more intelligence funding and the way the requests have been worded, it's like he's trying to use them as a cover for more domestic operations rather than for overseas. Is that right?"

"Well—June, I can't say much, other than that I think we're getting a handle on the latest domestic terrorist activities. Overseas is another ball game altogether, though. We're involved in what more and more is a purely religious war, one that doesn't have much of a front line. And frankly, I believe some of the religious aspects of it are pure jealousy on the part of the Arab world. Islamic world, I should say, because all Muslims aren't Arabs like so many Americans think."

June toyed with her snifter. "That's not what I asked, but go on. I'm interested in the jealousy part. Why do you say that?"

"Jealous of our standard of living, June. The mullahs are doing their



best to attribute poverty in their nations to all the other religions of the world picking on them, Christians and Jews in particular. Of course they've been doing that for decades, ever since Israel began turning its little piece of their world into a hi tech oasis in a sea of mud huts, but now it's taken on the wrappings of a real, honest to goodness Jihad, a true religious war. We've got a whole generation of their kids who have been brainwashed with the concept of Holy War, and it's all wrapped up in Arab pride and adherence to the Koran and so forth. If you could see some of the stuff I see, you'd be scared to go out of your house any more."

"I do see it, remember? I'm on the intelligence committee. Go on."

"Well, I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know, but for all the bricks our educational system gets thrown at it, all anyone has to do is compare the rate of patent applications on a per capita basis from the Islamic nations and the rest of the world, most of Africa excluded. It's a special case. Anyway, patent applications from the Arab world hardly make a blip on the chart. All they really have is their oil billy club and even that's not going to help them much longer, not with the depolymerization plants and coal technology here showing such promise, along with more drilling. They have to quit teaching religion and start teaching math and language in their schools or they'll be in the same condition most of Africa is before long."

June nodded. "That's interesting about the patents. I wonder why that fact isn't better known? And you haven't even mentioned corruption. That's what did Africa in as much as AIDS."

"Right." Crafton was enjoying this. In President Williamson's conversational circle, politics always took priority. That and Masterville Valley.

"I wonder whether a good dose of Masterville prions in their water supplies would help them. What do you think?"

Crafton was at a loss for words. It was like she was reading his mind. He had just been thinking about Masterville and...

June smiled mischievously, making her look much younger. "What's the matter? Did I use a dirty word?"

"Well—in the President's circle, you did."

"And you're in that circle," she said, smile disappearing.



Crafton fidgeted, not knowing what she was getting at. "He appointed me, I have to support him," he offered.

"In everything? Regardless?"

"Well..."

June raised her snifter, took a small sip and put it back down. "Come now, I'm a member of the president's party and I certainly don't support him on everything."

"A cabinet post is different."

"So it is. My apologies. On the other hand, some matters are too important to blindly follow the leader, don't you think?"

Crafton knew what she meant. "You're talking about Masterville, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Mandel, the President is around the bend on those people, and I suspect that's where his extra funding is being spent. Or don't you think so?"

Crafton sighed. "June, I just don't know any more. I used to honestly think they were a threat to the country, of at the least a good whipping horse for politicians. Lately though, I've been thinking..." His voice trailed off.

"Good man. Any conclusions?"

He sighed again. "I've always been a party man, for better or worse. And I'll call you a liar if this gets out, but yes, the extra funding is being used to pay for anti-Masterville propaganda, research on an antidote to their prions, and some other stuff you don't want to hear about. But let me put it this way: if he gets really out of hand, I have the means to stop him. Does that make you feel any better?"

The Senator's gaze sharpened like a cat suddenly zeroing in on a careless bird. "That depends on what you mean by *means*, to paraphrase another famous disclaimer."

"Corey Mullins had some files on the President that came into my hands when he was killed." The words popped out of his mouth like a gambler showing his cards after a huge bet. The words hung in the air like the tension of waiting for the next player to show whether the cards were winners or losers.



"And I take it the files are derogatory?" June asked quietly.

"Yes. All of them are. June, he had dirt on half the pols and lawyers and lobbyists in Washington. Including you and me."

She sucked in her breath. "Did you read mine?"

"No. I deleted your file without ever opening it. I kept the president's, though." He waited while the waiter filled his glass with another inch of Hennessy's. "June, I like you. If there's anything in your past you want me to know, I'll wait for you to tell me."

"Thank you. Shall we go, then?"

Crafton thought their relationship might be ruined after admitting that he retained the capacity to blackmail the President of the United States. She was very quiet as he drove her back to her condo. Then, as he started to turn away at her door after nothing more than a handshake, she said "Would you like to come in? I haven't had a man to talk with in a long while."

When Crafton left the next morning, he felt very good, like an unwatered house plant suddenly given a drink. It had felt so good to be with someone who was honest, and actually seemed to have the good of the country much more in mind than reelection prospects. Not to mention the sex. Then when he thought back over his career in the Capitol, it made him want to get home and shower to wash the dirt off as quickly as he could. Except that washing wouldn't remove it. He knew that the dirt would remain with him for as long as he lived. The best he could hope for was some way to make amends.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Daniel winced as he took another painful step. "Damn it, I've been shot before and it never hurt like this," he complained.

Lisa held tightly to his arm. She looked around the hospital corridor to be sure no one was listening, then put her mouth close to Daniel's ear. "Hush. You're not to mention gunshot wounds or anything about them, not here. You and Nancy were in a car wreck. That's what the hospital records show and that's what Chief Master's police report shows."

"Sorry." He took another step, wincing as his knee bent.



"That's okay, love. We got away with it, looks like, but no sense tempting fate. Besides, think of poor Nancy. She still has some more skin grafts to get through and they don't know yet whether she's ever going to see out of that eye again."

"Yeah, I should be thanking my lucky stars, and thanking you and Shirley for getting us back home. But it still hurts."

Lisa forced him to move some more. "I'm hurt, too, right to the quick. Here we are engaged and everyone thinks you had a wreck while you and your reporter friend were out gallivanting together. How can I ever hold my head up again?"

"Same way you're holding me up. And I doubt two people in the whole valley believe that story."

"Well, we tried. Can I help it if everyone knows you only attract redheads and blonds? Besides, that's the official story, so shush and keep walking."

"Ouch. Why didn't you tell me I was hurt so bad? And Nancy is a blond."

"Strawberry blond doesn't count. And we didn't tell you so we wouldn't have to listen to you cry all the way here. Men are babies."

"I agree. It still hurts."

"Come on, then. Back to your room. Walk all the way back and I'll give you a present soon as lights are out. I like to nuzzle again now that you've lost those whiskers."

"Deal. Ouch!" Daniel made his way back to his hospital room with Lisa's help. Once at the doorway, he gritted his teeth and made it to his bed on his own, determined to get motion in his bad leg back to normal as soon as possible. Or as close to normal as was possible with an artificial kneecap, several bone grafts, and a few strategically placed bioscrews to hold them in place. Eventually the screws and grafts would blend together into bone almost as good as his own, but he would always have a plastic kneecap. He sat on the edge of the bed long enough to remove his little Glock automatic from the pocket of his robe and place it in the drawer of the bedside table.

Lisa watched this maneuver with raised brows. "Don't you feel safe yet?"

"No," Daniel said flatly. "And you shouldn't either. Whether there's



proof or not, someone is going to figure out that I'm involved after Nancy starts broadcasting and writing again, which she said she's ready to do right from her hospital room. You should go armed all the time, too, I don't care if we are in Masterville."

Lisa turned around and pulled up the back of her blouse enough to display the butt of a little automatic similar to his, riding snugly in the small of her back. She turned back around and stuck out her tongue at him as she readjusted her clothing.

Daniel laughed and nodded approval. Neither of their weapons were big guns, but Daniel had always believed that accuracy was more important than stopping power in a pistol. Most of the time they were used close up anyway, if they were used at all, and the Glock 40 was a little gem, heavier than a 25 caliber but not much bigger. And it held an eleven shot magazine, which was even more in its favor.

"How 'bout some coffee?" Lisa said.

"Sure." Daniel glanced at his watch and searched the bedside table for the remote. It was just out of his reach. "Wait!" He called to Lisa, catching her just as she was about to close the door behind her.

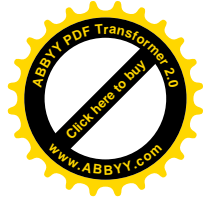
She saw his outstretched arm and knew immediately that the attendant who cleaned his room had placed the remote control out of his reach again. She came back and handed it to him. "You ought to keep it in your PJ's," she said.

"Already full of something else." Daniel clicked on the news channel, thinking again that he ought to take the time to program it for his voice commands but he never thought of it when the thing was within reach.

Lisa was at the door again when she heard the thunderous applause coming from the television screen at the end of Daniel's bed. Curious, she turned to look.

President Williamson was being shown behind a podium decorated in stars and stripes. His tie was loosened just the right amount and the top button of his shirt was undone. His jacket was draped over one edge of the podium as if he had taken it off after he began speaking. He gripped one edge of the surface in front of him for support and raised a clenched fist halfway into the air.

"Yes, my friends, that's what we need to do. I said it once; I'll say it again. Go out into this great country of ours and show the Godless that we're not afraid to stand up for our religion! Take the message



of God into the hills and valleys where the secular heathens reside and show them the way! Show them you're not afraid! Tell them that your president is not afraid to speak up for the missionary spirit, the spirit needed so badly in this age of misguided young men and women who are wrongly convinced that martyring themselves will send them to heaven! And take the missionary spirit especially to those who don't believe in God at all!"

More cheering, yelling applause rang out. The display panned out and over the Messengers, 40,000 strong as they rose to their feet in a burst of revivalistic fervor akin to rapture. The President had them now and he wasn't about to let up. He talked into the applause, shaking his fist enthusiastically at his spellbound audience, overriding their voluminous cheers with his trained voice.

"...friends, right here in America is where your missionaries and your missionary spirit should be concentrated. Take it to those in our country who need it most! Show them that you care, that your compassion and belief will sweep all before you! Make them know, make them see, that the reins of government are no longer in the hands of the secular disbelievers and will not be after this next election, for God is with this country. God made this country great and your missionary message will keep it great! Go, my friends, go! Go and make believers of the Godless. Go and make believers in the valley of the atheists and agnostics! Make believers of all true Americans!"

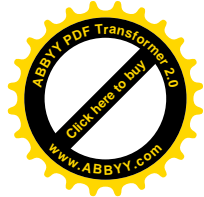
Wild, tumultuous shouts and cries and clapping rumbled through the stadium, seeming to shake the very screen that Daniel and Lisa were watching the performance on.

"He's really got them, hasn't he?" Daniel said, shaking his head in disgust.

"Not only has he got them, he's got them going, now. He's a shrewd son of a bitch, too, picking the last day and the last delivery of the convention to address them, knowing that's what they'll take home with them. And notice he didn't say outright to come here; he just said the valley."

"Yeah, but you know that they know what he means. How the hell did we come to this, our president giving sermons and siccing those poor misguided people on us? Church and state are supposed to be separate."

Lisa patted his arm. "Poor Dan. Always has to have a cause. Don't you know that's how you wind up getting shot all the time?"



"I notice you always seem to be right there when the shooting starts."

"Ah, but I know how to duck. And besides, whither thou goist and all that. I'll go get our coffee. I've seen about all of this I can take."

Daniel left the set on but switched to another channel where he was satisfied that national and world news was reported rather than slanted. There wasn't much on, other than the instant commentary on the president's speech to the Baptist convention. The anchor was remarking that President Williamson was riding a wave of revulsion at the increasing chaos overseas and the continuing suicide bombers in America. The poll numbers, shaky only weeks before when the news about the turncoat FBI agents had broken, and further weakened by the still publicly unexplained death of Mullins and his agents, were now rising again. At this point the mid term elections were a tossup. The voters, she reported, were volatile. They were disinclined toward the sheer shrillness of the president's religious views but all for increased funding to fight terrorism and for building up the armed forces in response to turmoil in the Middle East and Asia—and for more funding to fight terrorism within the country. And President Williamson was telling the voters that he needed more members of congress who thought like him.

Lisa was coming back in, bumping the door open with her hip as she balanced Styrofoam cups of coffee in each hand, and Daniel was reaching for the remote to turn off the news, when the anchor announced that a new story was just breaking.

The screen swirled with color then coalesced into a shot of a terrified mob of people scrambling toward the cameraman. The only sound was the accompanying voice of the camera operator and it was unintelligible against the background noise of an aircraft. The horde came on and passed below, indicating that it was an aerial view. The shot panned back into the distance to where smoke was rising from the top of a skyscraper.

The young woman at the studio looked very grim as she spoke.

"This scene is coming to us from Tel Aviv, where a large explosion has just rocked the top of the Robinson Bank building, home of the Israeli branch office of the Robinson Bank here in America. At almost the same time as reports began coming in about this event, we received word here in our studios that the bomb blast that erupted from the top floor of the building occupied primarily by Robinson employees was highly radioactive. The terrorist group calling itself the Islamic Army Of Redemption is claiming responsibility for the bomb.



"The Islamic Redemption Army has been threatening to use a so-called "Dirty Bomb" somewhere in the world for the last several months and now they have apparently succeeded, if this claim of responsibility is true.

"What the Israeli reaction will be to this horrible event is unknown. The IAR group claims that its members come from virtually every Islamic nation in the world and that its rolls are augmented by volunteers from America and European countries. This leaves the well-known and always expected retaliatory response from Israel up in the air. While their armed forces might be able to mount a strike against most of the Islamic countries in the Middle East, it is hard to envision military action against all of them. But a strike will surely come ... somewhere, and soon.

The scene shifted to a camera on the ground. The picture panned upward, showing thick black smoke, tinged with red highlights, billowing from the top of the building. The wail of sirens could be heard in the background, almost drowned out by the louder screams and shouts of the people running past and sometimes knocking the picture askew as they bumped the cameraman. Almost every one of the throng would pause at times to look over their shoulder to see if the building was falling, as the Twin Towers of the trade center and the other two skyscrapers had in their time.

"Damn, damn, damn," Daniel exclaimed, shaking his head.

"My sentiments, too, love. How can anyone do that to innocent people? I just don't understand."

Daniel held out his arms for Lisa, who was trying unsuccessfully to blink away tears. She came and stretched out on the bed beside him.

"Just hold me, Dan. And please turn that off. I don't want to see any more of it." She pillowed her head on his shoulder, wet lashes closed over her eyes.

Daniel didn't know anything comforting to say. Events like this were too huge, too horrible to take in all at once. He simply held Lisa in his embrace while she cried softly into his chest. He had a guilty thought that perhaps this would turn the government's attention away from Masterville, but in his heart he knew it wouldn't. It was a bad thing to admit, but the world had become so used to bombs and terrorists that it would distract little attention from the impending election, and in fact, would probably bolster President Williamson's chances of remaining in office.



After a few minutes, Lisa sat up and reached for a tissue. "Sorry. Us pregnant women are subject to crying jags, in case you didn't know."

"What!"

"Whoops. I goofed. I was going to wait for a really romantic moment, like when your cast comes off, to tell you. I should have..."

Daniel shushed her with a long kiss. When he finally let her go, he brushed gently at her still-wet eyelashes with a finger. "Any moment with you is romantic. How long have you known?"

"Just a few days. And stop grinning like Sylvester the cat. I'm the one that's pregnant, not you."

Daniel couldn't help it. He had often wished that they could start a family while they were outside the valley, first working in the baby formula plants and then infiltrating the presidential and congressional defenses, but the danger in both assignments had dissuaded them. Now, though...

"I Guess I better get on my feet real quick. If Mad Manny keeps stirring up the troops, I want us up on the mountain where I can keep you safe."

Lisa slid off the bed and stood up. "It might not even be safe up there eventually, but I guess you're right. The longer we stay down here, the more likely some of your former comrades put two and two together. Especially as soon as Nancy starts writing and broadcasting again. We're known associates of hers, you know."

"Of course. Where are you going?"

"To visit with Nancy for a bit. It's time for your physical therapy and I don't want to listen to your moans and groans. Have fun." Lisa bent over and kissed him long and lovingly.

Daniel watched her as she left, wondering, as he frequently did, how he had ever gotten so lucky.

*** * * ***

Nancy heard the knock and saw Lisa's head peeking around the side of the door to her room. "Hi Lisa. Come on in, but be careful and don't trip over the clutter. Just ignore these people. I'm just getting ready to tape a quick show."



The clutter consisted of cases that contained the professional equipment needed to make Nancy look accomplished and rested—or as well rested as she could look with an eye patch and one arm in a sling. Lisa was startled at her whiteness until she realized it was the makeup used by journalists when they knew they would be on camera. She stepped over an open, empty case of some kind and went over to where Nancy lay propped in bed.

Nancy reached out with her good arm and took Lisa's hand. "This won't take long, but I'd like to get it over with while we're all ready." She squeezed Lisa's hand. "Don't make any sudden noises or move into camera range. We're doing this live as well as taping it for later. In fact, we're on in five minutes. We can visit soon as I'm done."

Lisa backed into one corner of the room, out of the way of the three technicians. Rather than watching Nancy, she focused on the big wall screen already tuned to the channel that would catch the feed from the hospital room. One of the techs held up a finger and began counting down. On screen the anchor was preparing the audience.

"This segment of our show is coming to you live from Manson Hospital in the city of Masterville, Arkansas. We now bring you a special report from Nancy Primmerton, a former evening anchor for this network and a nationally known syndicated columnist and investigative reporter. Nancy?"

The tech closed her fist and pointed at Nancy.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

In Daniel's room, he was watching the same program, having turned the television back on as soon as Lisa left the room. He wanted to catch up with all the happenings in the nation and the world while he had been incapacitated, mainly so that he could try to figure out what to expect next. *Not that the world runs on my guesses*, he thought. Nancy's face looked even more compelling than normal with an eye patch, which was colored a bright green. It went well with her short, strawberry blond hair and distracted some attention from her still puffy lips, though her smile showed that her teeth had been repaired. The makeup didn't quite cover all the old bruises on her face.

"As you can tell, I am making this broadcast from a hospital bed. The eye patch and bandages you can see are only part of the injuries I received during the long torture session carried out by Corey Mullins,



the former Director of Internal Affairs at the National Security Agency, along with one of his henchmen. I have reason to believe, though I can offer no direct proof, that Mandel Crafton was responsible for ordering my arrest. I do not know whether he gave the order to torture me. I also do not know whether the President was party to the events.

"The reason I was tortured is that Corey Mullins suspected that I was involved in an investigation that might implicate him in illegal activities, and he wanted the names of my contacts. You have only to look at my face and body to be assured that Mister Mullins was indeed carrying out illegal activities. We do not countenance torture in America under any circumstances. Mister Mullins also intended to arrest my friend, Shirley Rostervik, NSA Liaison Officer for Masterville Valley, and some of her friends. I regret that I finally broke under his and his assistant's torture and gave up those names. Shirley Rostervik was already desperately trying to avoid arrest and the horrible suffering and humiliation that Mister Mullins inflicted on me. He said as much when he left me tied and helpless and suffering at the place where he beat me unmercifully and used a corkscrew on various parts of my body, including my eye. It is my firm belief that I would have been killed as soon as Shirley Rostervik and her friends were apprehended and brought back to the house where I was being held. It is a miracle that I managed to resist as long as I did, and a double miracle that I was rescued by some very dear friends whom I will not mention by name, but who were the very ones Mullins was after. Suffice to say that they risked their very lives and freedom in order to help me escape from the torture chamber run by our former Director of Internal affairs at the National Security Agency. I have given the address of the home where those events took place to the Washington police and to the FBI, and to ensure public scrutiny of my claims, also to various media sources. I have no doubt that forensic evidence will place Mullins and his cronies at that very place.

"The fact that such activities can take place in America in this day and age should be a wake up call for every thoughtful person. There is no room in our society for such abhorrent notions and actions. I will have to undergo several more operations before I will be able to leave this hospital and I may or may not regain vision in the eye you see with the patch over it.

"I will now move on to the real subject of my broadcast, and I emphasize that what I say is strictly my own opinion and in no way reflects an editorial position of this network."*She paused to flash her famous lopsided smile for a second then continued,"*Although it is possible that the executives who decide what is reported here might possibly agree with me. And, I might add, so that there will be no



question of favoritism, I have just signed a contract to appear opposite another columnist, of different , um, persuasions each week on this network. I have no idea what that gentleman will be saying, but each of my weekly shows will be devoted to discussion of my syndicated newspaper and web column.

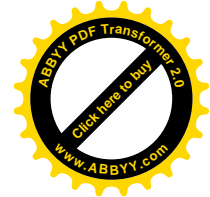
"The subject matter of my column today that concerns me, and should concern every American, is the way President Williamson has begun to use religion to exhort honest, church going people to become "missionaries" as he calls them, missionaries to certain portions of the country that may not believe the same way he does. This is wrong. This is not the way a president should act. As president of all the people, he has a solemn obligation to uphold the constitution of the United States of America, which states explicitly that the state and religion must be kept separate. When he begins asking members of certain religions to go out into the hinterlands and proselytize he is going against the very oath he took when he became president.

"Even now, a so-called "Army of the Lord", an organization that is reported to have had an influx of funds from many of the president's supporters, is organizing a number of motor convoys from many states, under the banner of an umbrella organization they have named "The Army of the Lord", with the avowed intention of descending on this peaceful valley where I am hospitalized and attempting to convert the residents to their own beliefs. This broadcast is coming to you from Masterville, as noted at the beginning of this broadcast, where I am recuperating, and I can assure you that the population here seems quite content with their own beliefs and want nothing more than to remain here and live in quiet seclusion, as they had been doing for many many years, until our government began persecuting them.

"I urge my fellow Americans to refuse to take part in this "Army of the Lord" effort, and further, I urge my fellow reporters to look into the funding of this group. I will do so myself, so far as I am able to from a hospital bed, but my efforts cannot be as effective here as I would wish. I hope that I do not see any convoys of motor vehicles upsetting the peaceful pursuits of the citizens of this city and the valley in which it resides.

"I will now take questions and read statements from the internet, selected in a completely random manner so that there will be no accusations of picking only those which favor my position. Thank you."

Daniel watched a few more minutes, then turned the set off when his physical therapist appeared, grinning fetchingly. He would have



appreciated her smiling face much more if he hadn't known how much her ministrations were going to hurt, despite the way she always told him how good they were for him. On the other hand, he wanted out of the hospital, and the sooner the better. He mentally girded his loins and made himself ready for the manipulations to come.

* * * *

"Yessir," Martha Zimmerman said to President Williamson, shoving her lunch bag out of the way so that she could take notes if needed. Having the President of the United States wanting to talk to her personally was so unusual as to almost cause her to choke on the last bite of the sandwich she had brought from home. Her thrifty soul was unable to abide the prices in the Congressional Cafeteria or other Washington eating places when she had to go with Crafton to testify at committee meetings. The most she had then was coffee or tea. The call from the President came in over the encrypted phone line, but almost always it was the president's secretary who called and asked for her boss first. She had no idea what this was all about.

"Missus Zimmerman, I've had your background thoroughly checked once again, and I feel that you can be trusted to carry out orders. Is that correct?"

"Oh, of course Mister President. Whatever you say. But shouldn't Mister Crafton be here, too?"

"He is the very reason that I'm talking to you, ma'am. I have an inkling that very shortly you will be inheriting the mantle of NSA Director. If you are agreeable to the promotion, that is?"

"Well, certainly, sir, but..."

"In the meantime, I have an order that needs to be carried out, and I'm sorry to say that I no longer trust Mister Crafton, which is why I am speaking to you. The matter is urgent."

"I'll do whatever you ask me to, sir," Martha Zimmerman said, while wondering what Crafton had done to get into the president's bad graces.

"Good. I'm glad. Now we have a situation on our hands that is very delicate. I suppose you've either heard, or have heard of, that scurrilous anti-administration speech yesterday by that reporter, Nancy Primmerton?"



"Uh, yes sir. I happen to have heard of it."

"Well, I can assure you that not only is everything she said is a pack of lies, but that she has ties to the Islamic Army of Redemption. Unfortunately, she is a prominent public figure and the country simply can't stand the publicity and controversy her arrest and trial would entail. Therefore, under the provisions of the revised Homeland Security Act, Section three ten, I'm giving you an order. You're familiar with that section, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," Martha said. Her pulse began beating faster. That was the provision that both Congressional Intelligence committees had inserted into the latest revision of the Homeland Security Act, a presidential authorization to act as he saw fit "in the best interests of the country, under extraordinary circumstances".

"Good. Now I want you to put out a Code Zero order on that woman, to be carried out as discretely as possible, but done as quickly as possible. I want only one of the most trusted of your operatives to receive the order, and only one. Is all that clear?"

"Yes, sir, Mister President." Martha managed to get the words out through a throat suddenly constricted and through lips gone dry as mummy dust.

"Good. Get this done and be assured that I'll be talking to you just as soon as the midterms are safely past us. I don't want to stir up any more fires right now."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. You are doing your country a service, rest assured on that score."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

The phone went dead. Martha Zimmerman closed her eyes and put her hands to her breast. She began praying for the strength to give the order, knowing it would mean the death of Nancy Primmerton.

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"How long will they take to start affecting the President once he's got our prions in his system? Bottom line?" Tyrone asked.

Harry Sildon, Tyrone's Chief of Research shrugged, the motion seeming to radiate all through his ungainly body where he was sitting



across the desk from Tyrone at one of their frequent consults. "Too soon to say. Not enough data on enough subjects.. If you use Shirley as an example, she started showing the effects fairly quickly. A couple of our other volunteers took a little longer but they're beginning to exhibit signs of attitude change now—and I'm glad to report that the changes appear to be positive. But Tyrone, I repeat, we just don't have the data to back up our assumptions, and the only way to get it would be studying adults who have started taking them. There's plenty of them, but we haven't attempted to contact any of them outside the valley for fear of drawing attention to our long term goals. By the way, that Primmerton woman has volunteered, but her doctor nixed it until she gets better."

"Damn."

Sildon shrugged again. "My sentiments exactly. On the other hand, I doubt she needs them."

"Probably not. I hope it doesn't take long to see some effects on the president. He's acting weirder and weirder from what I hear."

"Too bad the public doesn't know much about it. We might have better prospects for the elections if they did."

Tyrone sighed. He found himself sighing more and more lately, a reaction to events he had no control over. "I know some people that I could get to leak a few things, but this is an election year. Who would believe them?"

"Well, that's your province. I just do the science. And by the way, our little prion friends seem to be resistant so far to any kind of antidote, which goes with the nature of prions. Once in the brain, they're hard to get to and even so, an antidote would probably kill before it cured, so to speak. I think we're safe there."

"How about before then?"

Sildon thought for a moment before answering. "It's possible to develop an antibody to most any protein, so long as they don't mutate too rapidly. Prions are a different bug, though. The ones humans carry are normal proteins, so to speak. It would be like developing an antibody against part of our own body. It's entirely possible, but the reaction might kill the person it was designed to immunize, much like a wasp sting can kill a person sensitized to the venom."

"But Harry, our prions aren't found in most humans."



"Doesn't matter. They're very similar. The big difference is the way they fold and unfold along our synapses, as best we've been able to find out so far. And I might emphasize that the data there isn't hard fact. They're also smaller, for what that might mean. I haven't figured that out yet and it might not mean anything, other than making them harder to work with."

Tyrone got up from his desk and moved to the bar.

"None for me," Harry said. "Too early in the afternoon and I still have work to do."

"Well, I don't. I'm going home for the day and do some hard thinking. I can't concentrate here for being interrupted. Oh yeah, there is one bit of data I'm checking into. Some of our congress critters have begun changing their minds on a few issues. Nothing major and not many so far, but perhaps it's a good omen. Lisa was able to start salting the food in the Congressional Cafeteria well before Daniel hit the president's liquor supply."

Tyrone looked at the bottle of Jack Daniels in his hand, then replaced it without breaking the seal. "On second thought, I think I'll wait. Damn, this situation is making me nervous and I'm not usually like that. Those prospective convoys of the faithful seem to be gathering steam. Lots of self-proclaimed missionaries are signing up for them. What in hell are we going to do when they start flooding the city with their cars and amateur preachers?"

Harry's face wrinkled with amusement. "So long as they stay down in the city and don't try coming up here, I'm not going to do anything. I have work to do." He got up to leave, but stopped at the entrance. "Are we still clear with all our people out there?"

Tyrone knew what he was asking. "No one has gotten caught infecting food supplies so far, but keep your bags packed. That could change any time, you know."

"How well I know," Harry said as he departed.

Tyrone gathered up the few papers and some data cubes he intended to take with him and went out to talk to Tim and Gina to see how many new agents had been recruited to spread the Masterville prions around the world. He had decided that the risks were worth it, with everyone holding their breath over what Israel was going to do in retaliation for that dirty bomb. He suspected that a major war was going to begin in the Middle East before long, and travel might be restricted. He wanted to get his agents in place before then, if



possible.

Gina looked up when he entered their alcove. Tim continued perusing something on his monitor, listening with an earphone as well as reading.

"Gina, honey, I'm leaving for the day. Maybe tomorrow, too. I'll be at home."

Okay, boss. Oh hey, Marybeth called. She's coming up day after tomorrow. With guests."

"Guests?"

"More like permanent residents, I suspect. Daniel and Lisa."

Tyrone grinned for the first time that day, visions of being able to relax with good company and of having Marybeth in his bed again brightening his spirits. "Great! Maybe we'll have a party!"

Gina winked at him. "Sounds good to me! Gina knew that Marybeth came first in Tyrone's affections but an occasional tryst with her boss had been fun before, and might be again. Maybe even with Marybeth there. She had hinted at the possibility, although it hadn't happened yet. And she still wasn't sure she really wanted to. She had never tried it that way.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Daniel was able to walk on his own now, without support other than a cane. He used the hospital corridors for the exercise the physical therapist required of him, but that was about to end. He had just been given the word that he would be discharged from the hospital the next day. He and Lisa were walking down to Nancy's room to see her and tell her the news. Lisa kept her arm around Daniel's waist in case he slipped. It wasn't really necessary, but they both pretended it was, just to be able to touch each other.

Daniel was wearing a hospital jacket over the scrub suits given to ambulatory patients. As with most hospitals, the staff kept it about five degrees too cold for real comfort. He carried his little Glock in the side pocket of the jacket, still not feeling entirely safe even though nothing untoward had occurred during his hospital stay. It would be nice to leave, he thought, even though the staff had the time to be very friendly and helpful, not having to burden themselves with so much



paper shuffling as in most hospitals.

What appeared to be an orderly was just entering Nancy's room as they turned the corner into her ward. Daniel didn't recognize him, even though he thought he had seen, and in most cases become well acquainted with all of the staff. *Must be someone new*, he thought, not getting in a hurry. Yet there was something about him that began tugging at his memory, like the first nibble of a fish bobbing a cork in the water.

Daniel separated himself from Lisa and knocked on the door.

"Just a minute," a male voice sounded from inside the room.

Daniel hesitated a moment, then pushed the door open despite the admonition to wait. He had heard that voice before, and his senses were jumping to high alert, trying to figure out where.

The orderly was just raising up from something he had done to Nancy's I.V. line, and turned toward them at the sound of the door opening. He had a syringe in his hand. And then, as Daniel got a full view of his face for the first time, he recognized who it was. Moses Bellers was a big man with a shaved skull. His bigotry had caused problems in the operations section of the NSA and he had eventually dropped out of sight several years ago. Rumors told of him moving into black ops, but Daniel had ignored the rumors, as he did most unsubstantiated gossip. Apparently it was true in this man's case, for he could think of no other reason for him to be here other than to eliminate Nancy Primmerton.

"Get away from her!" Daniel shouted, fumbling for his Glock. It hung up in the unfamiliar pocket of the hospital jacket as Bellers dropped the syringe and rushed forward. Daniel braced himself on his good leg just as the Glock came free, but it was too late. Moses Bellers was a big man and he hit him full force, leading with his shoulder. Daniel was knocked into Lisa and they were both flung back against the door to the room, pushing it partially shut again. As he was going down, he caught a glimpse of Nancy's eyes rolling up in her head.

"Get her I.V. loose!" Daniel shouted to Lisa as he rolled to his feet, ignoring the pain shooting like knives through his bad knee. He had his weapon out now, and thumbed off the safety as he was still moving. He leveled the Glock at Bellers, who was just realizing he had made a mistake in trying to flee before taking care of Daniel, whom he had not recognized, nor expected to be armed. He had the door open and was halfway out of it when Daniel fired, a moment sooner than he would have liked to, but there was no time to wait. His bullet took



Bellers in the side, spinning him halfway around.

Bellers was incredibly fast for a big man. He had his weapon out and was almost ready to fire before Daniel got off another shot. He had hesitated, hoping the wounded man would surrender and almost got himself killed for his efforts. Instead, his next bullet ended the gunfight, hitting Bellers right at the bridge of his nose. The Glock was little, but very lethal. The NSA agent sank to his knees, then toppled over.

Daniel knew he was dead and paid him no more attention. Instead he looked over to where Lisa was with Nancy. Lisa had looked back once after she regained her feet and saw the effect of Daniel's first shot. She paid no further notice to Bellers or Daniel, understanding immediately what Daniel meant about getting the I.V. loose. She ripped the tape from Nancy's arm and jerked the needle out, ignoring the trickle of blood that began flowing from the site. Then she saw Nancy's chest move in a great spasm. Her mouth opened and stayed that way as her breathing stopped. Lisa climbed up onto the bed. and began pushing rhythmically on her chest.

A nurse and doctor burst into the room, stopping first to glance down at Bellers, then stepping over his body when they saw the wound in his head. The doctor took one look at Nancy and pulled out his comphone. He thumbed it quickly and shouted "Code Blue, Room 202!" His words came out forcefully over the hospital public address system, heard everywhere. He and the nurse then pushed Lisa aside. She looked back once, then came over to Daniel.

"I'm okay," he said before she could ask. "Is Nancy breathing?"

"I don't know. I..." She was interrupted by the hospital crash cart being pushed into the room, with Tonto leading the way.

"Out!" The nurse with the cart said, seeing what was going on. Tonto threw them a brief glance of commiseration, even as he pointed his finger imperatively toward the door.

Reluctantly, they left the scene and returned to Daniel's room, only to be met a few minutes later there by Charles Masters, the Police Chief of Masterville, whose ancestors had first settled in the valley.

"How did you get here so damn quick?" Daniel asked, frowning as he came into the room after knocking. Daniel removed his hand from the jacket pocket where he kept the Glock.

"Me and Trent, one of my deputies, were already here, getting ready



to come up and talk to the reporter lady. It looks like we should have come a little sooner. How is she?"

"I don't know, Chief," Daniel said. "That man on the floor by the doorway of Nancy's room was a NSA operative several years ago. I suspect he still was, though I doubt you'll ever be able to prove it." Daniel was sitting down and rubbing his knee. It was still hurting, but surprisingly, didn't seem to have been seriously re-injured.

"Was he after the reporter, the Primmerton woman?"

"Yes. You better go collect the syringe I saw in his hand before I killed him. Tell your men, or the medical people if they have it, to be damn careful. It probably still has some Toxigen left in it."

"What's that?"

"A very lethal, quick acting poison that doesn't leave any traces in the body. If that's what he was using, you'll never be able to prove he was trying to kill her." Daniel uttered a short, pungent expression. "Hell, the NSA may try accusing me of killing Bellers without cause. I wouldn't put it past them."

"I doubt that, not when you have a witness. Besides, they're not known for admitting failure. You said his name was Bellers? Maybe there's a book on him if you know his full name."

"It's Moses Bellers, but I doubt you'll find that in his Identification papers. He's been missing from sight for a while and has probably been using another name."

"His fingerprints will nail him."

"If they're still on file. Probably they aren't. When an agent goes underground, they pull the prints everywhere. Plausible deniability, you know."

The Chief shook his head while removing his hat and playing with the brim. "All right, soon as y'all settle down, I'll need a statement from you. No hurry, and you can net it to me if you've left the hospital. I'd better get back and see how Trent's doing." He ran fingers through his thick mane of graying hair, resettled his hat, and left them alone.

Lisa was sitting on the arm of Daniel's chair. As soon as the Chief left, he pulled her down into his lap.

Lisa sat quietly for a moment, letting Daniel stroke her back. She was



worried about Nancy but still managed a small inner smile at Daniel's instinctive protectiveness. He hadn't grown up in Masterville where most men learned as they matured that the women of the valley were mostly capable of protecting themselves. Still, she had to admit she enjoyed it. An inherent attitude, dictated by her genes, even if not conscious, helped with the feeling of liking to have a strong man around when she was pregnant. Especially when he was close enough to have his arms around her.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, sweetheart. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just hope that man didn't have time to give Nancy much of that stuff, Toxiwhatever."

"Toxigen. Yeah, I hope so, too." Daniel didn't mention that it only took a very small amount of the drug to kill a person, and that once imbibed, there was very little hope, even with the medical attention that had so quickly responded. "By the way, did you know that Tonto had started work here? I didn't."

"I heard a real American Indian was on the staff and sort of assumed it was him."

Daniel nodded. "I'm glad he's here. I like him, but right now I'm interested in getting out of here. Do you think we could go on up the mountain today instead of waiting? I'm afraid they may try for you next time."

"I'm no use to them dead, sweetheart, but I want to see you safe, too. I'll ask the doctor. No, damn it, I'm going to tell him. We're leaving, soon as I can find us a ride."

"Marybeth was thinking about going up to see Tyrone the last time I talked to her. Let me call and see whether she's left yet." Lisa moved from his lap and went over to her purse. She retrieved her comphone and told it to dial Marybeth's number. A few minutes later, she had the arrangements all made, including asking her to bring Acey along. She had been keeping him. All Daniel had to do was convince his doctor to release him.

Marybeth took care of that for him. She quickly got in touch with Tyrone and he arranged for a private nurse to come up and continue Daniel's therapy for another week. Tyrone took care of contacting Daniel's doctor. Very few persons, even medical people, went against his wishes.

* * * *



"I'm ready!" Daniel agreed enthusiastically when Tyrone knocked on their door and suggested a get-together. He and Lisa had just gotten such few items as they brought with them stored and arranged in their rooms in the new apartments Tyrone had built back into the mountain, an extensions of his new house.

"Good. Shirley decided to stay in the city, by the way."

"Did she say anything about Nancy?"

"Just that she's in Intensive Care. She told me she would stay there and keep in touch. I've got some private security guards at the hospital now. Damn it, I should have thought of it before."

"At least she's still alive," Lisa said.

Daniel didn't have the heart to tell either of them that there was very little chance of survival, not after he had seen her immediate reaction. They would find out soon enough.

"I'll let you rest a while now and we'll see you this evening," Tyrone said. He shook Daniel's hand and gave Lisa a brief hug. "I'm glad you're both okay, but could you try not to schedule any of your gunfights up here, please? I don't want any bullet holes in my nice new home."

Daniel and Lisa had to laugh as he departed.

"Come on, let's take his advice and get some rest," Daniel said, taking Lisa's hand and leading her to the bedroom.

Lisa glanced over at the big king sized bed, then back at him. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Too bad if you're not." She didn't wait for a response; instead, she pulled her top up over her head and tossed it aside without worrying where it landed.

Daniel felt himself responding, suddenly not the least bit tired. He loved the way Lisa undressed, flinging her clothes away with an abandon that promised volumes—and always delivered. He undressed, while not taking his eyes off her as she shook her hair back in place, then unfastened her bra and flung it over her shoulder, not watching where it went, either. She slid her slacks down and kicked them away. The panties went last, landing on the arm of a chair then sliding off it to the floor.

Lisa stood and waited until Daniel had his own clothes off, enjoying



the way his eyes roamed appreciatively over her naked body. As soon as his clothes were gone, she said "Move over, lover, and make some room."

"Meow!"

Lisa looked toward the sound. Acey's head was peeking from beneath one of the cups of Lisa's bra. "Go away Acey. You're not old enough to be interested in sex."

Acey didn't agree and had to be ousted from the bedroom, under strenuous protest.

Daniel slid to the middle of the bed. Lisa followed him and came into his arms. Daniel gathered her into a tight embrace, just holding her at first and enjoying the closeness, but Lisa was more than ready. She found his lips and began kissing him with an urgency even more intense than their usual love making. He found her breasts, nipples already erect. The touch of his hands on her breasts made her moan against his lips. Her hips moved, pressing against him. She threw her leg across his thighs and broke the kiss.

Daniel kept his hands on her body even as she moved to sit up and straddle him. She reached down and guided him inside, giving a gasp of relief as he entered her. Daniel reached up and gathered her breasts in his hands.

"I'm sorry this is the only way we can do it yet," he said.

"Uh huh, I know how sorry you are. Men like women on top." She leaned forward, filling his hands with the fullness of her breasts, her hardened nipples thrusting into his palms as if seeking attention. He moved his hands in gentle, caressing motions as she began rocking her hips, slowly at first, then faster and faster until she threw herself full length on top of him, crying out again and again, so utterly intense that Daniel wondered if the old adage about being brushed by death stimulating sexual desire applied to women as well as men. And then he quit thinking at all as his nails dug into her back and he shuddered with one of the most satisfying releases of his life.

He slowly came back to his senses with the awareness of the weight of Lisa's body stretched on his chest, still trembling slightly from her orgasm. "Oh, Dan, I didn't think it could get any better but it just did," she murmured, her breath warm against his neck from where her head was resting on his shoulder. Daniel moved his hands up over her back and into her hair, dampened with sweat from her exertions.



"I didn't either, Sweetie, but I should have known better. I'll never stop loving you."

"Even when I'm old and gray?" She raised her body, letting some air get between them to cool their bodies for a moment, then lay back to her full length. She tightened the muscles of her thighs, not wanting to let him go.

"Age cannot wither nor time detract from your loveliness. Or something like that. I read it once but didn't believe it. Now I do."

"You always say such nice things after a gunfight. And just think, you came out of this one without a scratch. Which is more than I can say for my back right now." She chuckled gently.

"Sorry. Your turn will come soon. My knee is almost well."

"I'll remember. Mmm. Can we just stay like this for the rest of the day?"

Daniel felt himself slipping loose. "Let me recover a bit and we can try."

"Oh, poo. Wait here. I'll be right back." She rolled off of him and went to the bathroom, followed all the way by Daniel's gaze, heavy with love.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Daniel's leg was still sore from the scuffle with Bellers at the hospital, but he could stand when taking a shower without undue effort. He found that especially encouraging, with the bathroom in the part of the house Tyrone had granted to them being equipped with a shower spacious enough for Lisa to be in it with him, unlike at the hospital where he had been forced to sit in a cramped position while his leg was healing.

Lisa helped him dry off afterward by having him hold onto her naked shoulder with one hand while toweling himself with the other. That very nearly made them late for Tyrone's invitation to join him and the others in the den for dinner. He pulled on jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, debated for a moment over the necessity, then stuck the little Glock into his waistband under the shirt. When he saw Lisa watching him secure the firearm, he eyed her skimpy shorts and pullover, with her nipples plainly limned beneath it, and said "Well, one of us should



always carry, and there's certainly no place you could conceal a weapon with what you're wearing. You'll give Tyrone a heart attack."

"If I know Marybeth, she's already given him one—or cause for one, anyway. But compliments will get you anywhere. Except back in bed right now. Come on." She led the way to Tyrone's part of the big home, walking slowly to allow Daniel to keep up with her.

As soon as Daniel saw the faces of the others gathered in the room, he knew what had happened, but he asked anyway. "Nancy?"

Tyrone nodded from where he was seated, with Marybeth as close to him as she could get. "Shirley just got here with the news. The doctors couldn't keep her going no matter what they did."

Daniel put his arm around Lisa. She said nothing, but brushed at her eyes as they found a seat. Daniel handed her his handkerchief. She took it and balled it up in her hand, as if unaware of what it should be used for. "Where's Shirley?" He asked.

"She's gone to her room for now. That poor girl has had a rough time of it. Not as bad as Nancy, of course, but still ... her Secret Service boyfriend was murdered, and now one of her best female friends had the same thing happen to her." He looked around the room, stopping his gaze where Daniel and Lisa were sitting close together. "Not to mention having to run from Mullins, get into a gunfight and help rescue poor Nancy in the bargain."

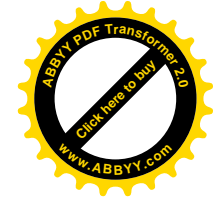
"She was our friend, too," Daniel said. "In more ways than one. We couldn't have done what we did without her. Shirley will manage, though. She's a strong person."

Lisa finally used Daniel's handkerchief. "Dan's right."

"Right about what?"

Daniel turned at the sound of Shirley's voice. She was just entering, her hair still damp from a recent shower and wearing an old pair of faded jeans and a rose colored blouse with the tails tied in a knot beneath her breasts. He tried to find something comforting to say but the words stuck in his throat. What could you say to someone whose best friend had just been murdered?

Lisa separated herself from Daniel and went to Shirley. She hugged her, whispered something in her ear, and led her by the hand back over to the lounge, making sure that she took a seat between her and Daniel, knowing that the presence of them sitting on each side of her



would be some comfort. Daniel took her hand and kissed it, then her lips, a gesture of sympathy and nothing else. "Sorry, Shirley," he managed to say in a choked voice, as visions of the fight with Mullins and his crew raced through his mind, along with the horrible scene he had been told about that they had come upon when Nancy was rescued.

"Folks, this was intended to be a celebration, of sorts, for you all arriving back here safely and without any permanent damage. I'm just sorry as hell I didn't go to further lengths to protect you while you were in the hospital. I guess I still don't truly understand the lengths some people will go to when they want to maintain a position of power—or when they have perverted mentalities. It's just alien to our way of thinking. If it hadn't been for you, Dan, we might not even have known why she died."

Daniel couldn't disagree with that, but on the other hand ... "I think they would have targeted Shirley, too, if they had been able to pin down her location quickly enough. Marybeth, it's a good thing she spent so much time with you while Nancy ... while Nancy and I were recuperating. Otherwise they might have gotten to her, too. Toxigen, that stuff they probably used, is so lethal that it's easy to kill someone with it."

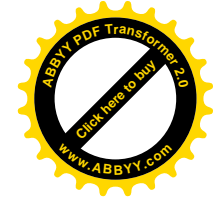
Marybeth nodded from where she was mixing something at the bar. "And probably a good thing we both decided to come up the mountain, too. There's nothing that says there was only one agent trying for us."

Out of the mouths of babes, Daniel thought. "Marybeth is right, and I should have thought of it. You're not the only culprit, Tyrone. You know, I think it would be a good idea to call the Chief and have him check all very recent hires at the hospital and around the city—and also nose around at the two motels to see who's checked in lately and for how long they've had reservations."

"He's already doing that," Tyrone said. "Marybeth, are you going to drink everything up by yourself or can we have some, too."

"Sorry. It's ready for anyone that wants the usual punch. Anything stronger, you can make it yourself." She brought a pitcher to the central table where glasses filled with ice cubes were already waiting.

Tyrone picked one up then glanced at his comphone. He thumbed the voice program and said "Channel 22 on at next six o'clock." A few minutes later the wall screen brightened and they were all watching one of the evening news programs.



* * * *

Nancy's last broadcast had stopped some of the convoys beginning to move toward Masterville under the banner of "The Army Of the Lord", but not all of them. They saw scenes of long lines of cars and pickups and vans congregating in marshaling areas, mostly at church parking lots, all with headlights on, some sporting banners, others with newly painted slogans on their sides. President Williamson, speaking through his press secretary, was unapologetic about mixing politics with religion and hotly denied that his administration, or anyone supporting it, had anything to do with the events broadcast by Nancy Primmerton, nor with the attempt on her life that the Masterville newspaper publisher, Jeremiah Johnson, had just reported a few hours ago. A new poll showed the president's party now having an edge in the coming elections. Israel had not yet struck back at the terrorists responsible for the Robinson Bank dirty bomb, though they were expected to take some action "shortly". Actual deaths from the bomb had been low, but radiation had completely shut down surrounding portions of Tel Aviv. The Robinson building had not collapsed as other skyscrapers had, but the economic damage from lost commerce was expected to hurt the Israeli economy. When the anchor announced "breaking news" of Nancy Primmerton's death, Tyrone shut the set off.

* * * *

The party was more like a wake than a celebration. Shirley drank more than she usually did and told stories of how she and Nancy had enjoyed each other's company and commiserated over broken romances, stupid boyfriends and the idiocy of governments and politicians. Lisa made sure that she and Daniel stayed close to her as the evening dragged on. Finally Lisa caught Daniel's eye as he was returning with fresh drinks and made a tiny motion with her head toward the door. He nodded and came on over but remained standing.

"Folks, I'm going to take Shirley to the room and give her a back rub and see if we can get some sleep. It's been a hard couple of days. We'll see you all tomorrow," Lisa announced.

Shirley was instantly agreeable, suggesting to Daniel that she had stayed up this long more in deference to her friends than through desire. Trust Lisa to spot that. Shirley turned to leave.

"Give us a few minutes," Lisa paused long enough to whisper to Daniel.



Tyrone saw that he wasn't leaving immediately and called him over into a corner. "Dan, you and Lisa come see me around ten tomorrow if you would. Bring Shirley with you."

"Sure. Anything special we should prepare ourselves for?"

"Maybe another job if you want it."

"Tyrone, we appreciate your generosity, but there's something..."

"It's all right. You won't have to go anywhere, I don't think. Go on now, take care of Shirley and we'll talk tomorrow."

Daniel left a few minutes later after saying goodnight to Marybeth, Tyrone and the others. He noted with amusement as he left that Gina had migrated toward Marybeth's seat and that Tim and Tyrone were conversing in low voices.

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In Washington, at just about the same time, Mandel Crafton was leaning back on a comfortable couch in June Janter's condominium, with his stockinged feet propped on the low table in front of him and a glass with an inch of single malt scotch over shaved ice in his hand. He wasn't nearly as comfortable mentally as he was physically. June had greeted him enthusiastically enough, but now as she sat at he end of the couch, with her body angled toward him and one leg up on the cushions, he felt like a student wilting under the gaze of a disapproving professor.

"Mandel, tell me again, did you or did you not have anything to do with that reporter's death? I have to know."

Crafton met her gaze squarely. Or almost. He knew nothing about Nancy's death personally, but he knew the man whom the Masterville authorities were claiming had killed the reporter, and theoretically, he had been under his direct command. "June, I swear I don't know how that came about. And I promise you, I had nothing to do with it."

June continued her scrutiny. "There is something you're not telling me, though, isn't there?"

"I..." He set his drink down and pulled his feet down to the floor. "There are some things I can't tell anyone, June. You know that." Ordinarily Crafton's gaze was sharp enough to stop a charging rhino, but he found himself unable to out stare June.



"So you do know something, don't you?"

He started to slide toward her on the couch then stopped when he saw the hint of anger in her eyes. She wasn't going to be mollified. He picked up the scotch again and sipped at it. As he thought about the reporter, he found that he didn't want to try appeasing June. He wanted to be honest, as honest as she had been with him so far. But what would that do to their relationship? He didn't know, but he did know that he couldn't lie to her. "That man they're claiming was a NSA agent?"

"Yes, that man," June prompted.

"He is NSA. But June, I swear, I knew nothing about him being in Masterville, much less being ordered to assassinate Nancy Primmerton."

"So it was a murder?"

Crafton managed to meet her leveled gaze. "Yes, almost certainly. Bellers probably managed to inject her with a lethal dose of a drug we use sometimes when extraordinary circumstances call for it. The Police Chief in Masterville isn't letting on who killed him before he could escape, but it wasn't the reporter, you can be sure of that."

"Then who?"

"Probably Shirley Rostervik, my missing Director of Operations that Mullins was trying to arrest when she, with someone else to help, most likely, killed him."

June's eyes had lost their angry glint but she wasn't finished yet. "All right, now tell me who gave the orders if it wasn't you?"

Crafton drained his glass and started to get up and replenish it, then set it back down. Might as well finish the matter and see where June went with it. "There's only three people who could have possibly been responsible. Two of them are my deputies, Martha Zimmerman and Calvin Perloins."

"And the other?"

"The president," he said simply.



CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

President Williamson was riding high with the new poll numbers. He expounded to Michael White about them in the Oval Office. "Didn't I tell you that missionary speech would work? We've got convoys of The Army Of The Lord heading to that damned valley from everywhere. They're going to smother the place!"

"There aren't nearly as many as there were before the speech that Primmerton reporter made before she died," White said quietly. He was bothered about the death, and the fact that the Masterville authorities were blaming the NSA for it. More and more he was beginning to believe that the President of the United States, the man he was working for, was mentally unstable—and becoming more so.

"But look at our poll numbers! And they can't do anything but go up once the AOL starts mixing it up with those damned atheists. I tell you Mike, we're going to win a majority in congress, then you can start back working on the amendment to let us run again."

White hoped that changing the constitution to allow a third term would never happen, with any president, but especially this one.

"Yes, sir. By the way, the VP wasn't very happy about that speech. He wants to talk to you about it."

"You tell Bobby Byerly to shut up and soldier. He has no business being upset. What the hell, can't you control him any more?"

White got up from where he was sitting across from the presidential desk and began pacing. "Mister President, I'm trying, but he doesn't seem to be listening as much or as hard as he used to, despite what we know about him. When I met with him for lunch in the congressional cafeteria a month or two ago, he was fine and working hard for us. Now I just don't know about him. And there's some rumblings in Congress, too."

Williamson's face turned red. He half rose from his chair and leaned across the desk. "What are they saying about me now?"

"It's not so much about you, sir. Well, some of it is, but it's more like a quiet revolution against the party line in general, not serious yet but worrisome. Senators not voting the way we expected them to, Congressmen beginning to ask some rather pointed questions about how we're using campaign money, bills being brought up out of turn that we're against. Those unexpected announcements about retiring. Other little things. I can't put my finger on it, really, but it's like a



miasma in the air that's making everyone nervous and edgy." White didn't mention that he was feeling much the same way, what with his growing revulsion at some of the long established political pandering to pressure groups, huge unwarranted subsidies to industry and dislike of the enormous waste of money caused by vote swapping and pork barrel politics. The whole atmosphere of re-election first and country last was fueling his determination to resign as soon as the election was over. Only the fact that he wasn't the type to quit a job before it was finished was holding him in place as it was.

Williamson sat back and laughed. "Hell, Michael, you're sounding like an old fishwife. Who cares about a couple of Senators or Congressmen swapping votes? Or a bit of money that finds its way to where we want it to go in spite of those stupid campaign finance laws? It'll be forgotten two days after it's reported. This is an election year, or have you forgotten?

"I haven't forgotten, Mister President."

"Good. See that you don't. And don't let up on those atheistic mutants, hear? It's playing good and we want to win big this year, so it will set me up for reelection.

"Yes, sir. Do you want to tape another ad for any of our candidates?"

"No, I've got other things to do. Israel is getting ready to jump, so CIA says. Just keep using footage from that convention. Vary it and mix it up. You know how."

"Yes, sir. Same time tomorrow?"

"No, I've got something else on tap for then. Day after tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have some new numbers ready for you by then."

"Good." The President waved White away and punched for his next appointment.

* * * *

The lights were dimmed by the time Daniel got to their bedroom after speaking with Tyrone. He could discern two shapes close together on the bed, with room left on one side of it for him. He undressed as silently as he could, hoping that Lisa had remembered to give Shirley something to help with the hangover she was likely to have the next morning. Well, she was entitled, he thought. He slid into bed without



disturbing either of them, glad that Lisa had brought Shirley back here for comforting. He closed his eyes.

Some indeterminate time later the sensation of a small feminine hand stroking his chest brought Daniel out of a light sleep. He opened his eyes to the still darkened room, lit only by the diffused glow of the night lights on each side of the bed. He stretched, still half asleep. Shirley's petite curved body slipped into the shelter of his arm. He looked to the other side of him, then back at her.

"Where's Lisa?" he asked.

"She said I needed a man. Do you qualify?"

"Last time I looked, I did, but..."

"Shh. She knows what she's doing, Dan. I wish I had someone who loved me the way she does you." She smoothed her hand over his chest in a slow back and forth motion.

"I love her, too, Shirley. You have to know that."

"Oh, I do. Everyone should love her. She always gets right to the heart of things. Like now, leaving us together. I argued at first, but she's right. I did want a man to cuddle with and comfort me. And not any man, I wanted you."

Daniel tightened his embrace. How many other women, he wondered, would even think of bringing another female as beautiful as Shirley to their bed, much less leaving them alone with their man? The women of Masterville, if Lisa was an example, appeared to be in tune with the real sexual world, not the imaginary one imposed on society by religions and circumstances that no longer applied to a modern, technical society, no matter how much the old institutions would have citizens believe it did. As he and Shirley began making love, he vowed that he would never, ever abuse Lisa's trust nor ever even think of doing anything that would hurt her. Or let anyone else harm her, mentally or physically.

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As the convoys of The Army of the Lord began merging and heading on their slow, publicly heralded journey toward Masterville Valley, Mayor Tupper made a formal request to the Governor of Arkansas to call up the reinforced infantry company of the National Guard stationed in Masterville. She figured it would be useless but she wanted to say she had tried everything else before taking more drastic



steps.

"Governor, there are at least three thousand vehicles, maybe more getting ready to descend on this city before long, every one of them carrying at least a couple of these so-called missionaries that we neither requested nor desire. The facilities and infrastructure we have here are totally inadequate for that number of people and cars. I want them stopped before they leave the Interstate and get onto the Arkansas highway into here.

The governor's voice had a rich, deep bass timbre to it, a fortuitous accident of genes that more than anything else had propelled him into the governor's Mansion. That, and the backing of the National Party's king makers. "Mayor, I'm sorry, but those people have done nothing wrong as yet to warrant activating the guard. We still have freedom of movement and expression in this country and I won't be the one to try halting it."

"You're afraid of the President, is that it?" Eileen Tupper taunted him, hoping it would nudge him toward doing something.

"I resent that statement, Mayor. President Williamson has nothing to do with this phenomena. Indeed, it is the attitudes of the citizens of Masterville that has been causing all the fuss since you were, um, discovered."

"We haven't caused anything, Governor. The Federal Government is the culprit, as you well know."

"Well, if you say so, perhaps it is. But in that case, we can let them take care of the situation. After all, they are still maintaining an Army company in the vicinity in case of unrest, aren't they?"

"You know very well they are, and it isn't in case of unrest. They're hanging around at the behest of the President in case he finds a good excuse to use them on us."

"No, no," the Governor disclaimed, his voice booming with laughter. "Our good president has them on hand to protect you in case of need, and to keep tourists away from that radiation zone. I've been assured by him personally on that point." As soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew he had made a mistake.

"Good. Then let them start protecting, and what I mean by that is to keep those vehicles out of the city. We can't handle them. If they try stopping here and disrupting the city, I've given the police chief authorization to deputize as many citizens as he feels necessary to



keep order. And just to protect us both, this conversation is being recorded."

There was a long silence. "All right, Mayor Tupper. I'll see if I can get the president's attention and talk to him about this matter. But I can't call out the guard unless there's clear case of unrest. Understand?"

"On your head be it," Eileen said and hung up. The ball was in their court now. "Get Chief Masters on the phone for me, Chris, will you?" She said to her secretary. While she was waiting, she skimmed through the organization and equipment list of the National Guard company stationed here. The TO & E, the army called it. Troops, Organization and Equipment. Could she legally request some of their weapons to arm citizens in case of need? Had such a thing ever been done before? The Chief had reported to her the day before that the nucleus of the army brigade still concentrated around the passes into the valley had been showing signs the last few days of making ready for an influx of more troops. Evidently, they had been alerted by higher headquarters to prepare for more than simply keeping the radiation zone free or checking vehicular traffic to see who was coming and going from the valley. Eileen hoped desperately that it wouldn't come to a fight with federal troops. That was a battle that ultimately, they couldn't win. She knew, though, that her fellow citizens wouldn't allow themselves to be pushed around either, and that it was her duty to help them if it came to that.

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Lisa flicked on the overhead light and threw the covers back from Daniel and Shirley's nude bodies. "Come on, sleepyheads. Jump up and hit the shower. We're due for breakfast with Tyrone in thirty minutes. He just called."

Shirley rolled over onto her back and threw her arm over her eyes. "If that's Lisa, I'm not responsible. It's all Dan's fault. Besides, I have a headache."

"Of course, silly. Men are always responsible for women's headaches. Sit up and take this."

Shirley sat up in bed, bleary-eyed, but with a body that felt like her bones had evaporated, leaving her drained of the enervating tension she hadn't even been aware of. "What's that?" She asked, holding out her hand for the glass and pill that Lisa was offering.

"A weak Bloody Mary and a medium dose of this and that with codeine. Trust me. Or trust Daniel. He said the combination was a



sure-fire waker-upper after too many drinks and other activities. A concoction thought up by spooks who had to attend too many embassy parties."

Shirley downed the capsule.

Daniel asked, "Nothing for me?"

Lisa eyed him with speculative good humor. "Maybe later, if you're a good boy. Now hup hup."

There wasn't time to shower separately. Dan and Shirley went in together. Daniel tried his best to behave but it was hard, standing next to such a lovely blond apparition, with water streaming over the contours of her body like a mountain stream winding its way around pretty hills and into lovely valleys and dells.

"Poor men," Shirley said, looking down at him.

"That wasn't what you were saying last night."

"Smarty. Come on, let's go see what Tyrone wants."

"If he wants anything, he better have breakfast ready," Daniel said, stepping out of the shower and handed Shirley one of the big fluffy towels. He was almost glad when she finished drying off and went back to her room for fresh clothes.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Tyrone was just bringing in a platter of cheese and sausage omelets as Daniel and Lisa made their appearance. He nodded and smiled to them as he set the omelettes down on the low center table in the den amidst a stack of paper plates, glasses with ice cubes and a pitcher of Bloody Mary mix.

"Help yourselves. It's all ready," he announced and promptly began filling a plate for himself.

Daniel said hello to Gina and Tim, Tyrone's assistants and the major shareholders in Genetechnics besides Tyrone himself.

Marybeth, looking fresh and cheerful in a bright green dress was following Tyrone around like a newly bonded chick, much to Lisa's amusement, but she doubted that Marybeth would stick to just one



man—or woman—for very long. Although from the satisfied expression on her face, perhaps she could be fooled.

Tyrone already had his “do not disturb” icons on both the entrances to the den, a caricature of a mean-looking farmer holding a shotgun beside a “No Trespassing” sign. After everyone appeared to be finished eating, Tyrone allowed them time for another helping from the pitcher then began.

"Let's get started," he said. "Gina, you and Tim already know it all, or most of it, but I wanted you here to be sure I didn't leave anything out. For the rest of you—well, I've got a confession to make. Besides the ruses I instigated to infect baby formula plants with our prions, and the attempt to get them into the food chain of congress and the president, I've done some other things, that like infecting baby formulas, I'm not particularly proud of. I took the action because I felt it was necessary for our survival and the propagation of our genes and our prions, which are the best hope I know of for the future of the race. Soon after the assassination of President Sheffield, I saw what was coming and began setting up companies all over the world with the sole purpose of using them to infect as much of the population of the world as possible with our prions. I did this knowing full well that research was far from complete on what the effects of Masterville prions might be on mature persons. Again, I did this on my own, without consultation."

Here Tyrone paused and looked around at his audience, gauging their reaction. All he saw was conditional acceptance, which eased his mind greatly. He continued with his big surprises.

"Probably most of you aren't aware of how much medicine in the world is fake; not in the sense of not having the proper ingredients, but counterfeit, stolen, if you will, from the pharmaceutical companies by manufacturing it without their approval and selling it with their brand names. There is a huge market for such medicine, for a number of factors I won't get into, but suffice to say that a majority of the people on earth needing one medicine or another simply can't afford to pay what the pharmaceutical giants charge. And that goes for many, many people right here in America, primarily as a result of the increasing percentage of the population who are old, need medicine, but can't afford all they require. It's one of the consequences of geriatric therapy; we keep people alive longer but at a constantly increasing cost.

"What I've done is take the fact that so much of the medicine is counterfeit and used it to finance the manufacture of some of it myself—and to send it out with our little prions in every batch. That's



not the only way I'm disseminating our prions, but it's one of the ways. Gina and Tim will tell you about some of the others later. I've also begun quietly selling off a lot of my shares of Genetechnics and stock in other companies I own and converting it into overseas bank accounts. Those accounts will be set up in the names of all of you here, a separate one for each, for you to use as you please." He paused for effect, letting himself show some amusement at the befuddled expressions on the faces in the room.

Lisa spoke first. "Why are you telling us this, Tyrone? About the way you're trying to convert the world? And about the money?"

"Frankly, because I hope you all will carry on with the work when I'm no longer able to, or when my effectiveness is reduced. I expect one or both of those scenarios to happen sooner or later, probably sooner."

"But why? Are the feds on to you? Or customs?" Daniel asked. He didn't quite get it yet, but he saw that Lisa already had that understanding expression on her face that he had seen so often.

Tyrone shrugged. "It's a simple matter of chance, Dan. Sooner or later, probably sooner, someone or some government is going to discover what I've been doing. When it does happen, I'm going to disappear and try to take the whole blame, and also try to take some of the heat away from Masterville with me."

"You're going to pretend like you were a mad scientist and concealed what you were doing from everyone, even the people of Masterville," Lisa stated flatly. Her fingers tightened their grip on Daniel's hand.

"That's right. And before anyone says anything, you all knew already what I had done with the baby formula and congress and the president. I know you all agreed that it was in our best interests and the interests of the nation and the world, and that you helped with my efforts, but I've set up a paper trail that will be easy to follow—and that will show me and Harry Sildon were the only responsible parties. I'd like to absolve him, too, but no one would believe me if I tried. He knows all this, by the way, and has been with me every step of the way, as you all have to the extent that you knew. Harry will also disappear with me when the time comes."

"You'll be under a death sentence almost everywhere in the world, Tyrone. Do you realize that?" Lisa said.

"Of course I do, especially in the Islamic world. They won't take kindly to the fact that their people may begin to use a little reason instead of blindly following what their Mullahs tell them. Or what



their educational institutions have instilled in them.” He grinned like it was all a big joke. “Hell, even the European Union might reinstate the death penalty, just for me.”

Tim and Gina already knew, of course, but Lisa guessed what was coming next. “And you want us to hold the fort after you’ve gone, so you can go right on with what you’ve been doing.”

Tyrone nodded. “That’s about it. Stay here and use the remaining assets of Genetechnics and the other money you’ll have if you need it to protect Masterville and its people. I’ll make sure that the council knows in the very near future that you five are my heirs and the new owners and custodians of everything here on the mountain.”

“Damn it Tyrone, Dan and I wanted to settle down and start raising a new crop of little mutant atheist bastards, or some new little Stenning mutant atheists if we decide to get married. Why the hell do you have to be so right all the time?” Lisa said.

Tyrone’s countenance brightened at first in response to her humor, then saddened, like a pregnant woman being told she was going to lose her baby. “I have this abiding notion that the human race deserves better than it’s gotten so far. And that it has a future of unlimited potential if we can survive the next fifty years or so. I’ve never married or settled down because this vision has been driving me ever since I read my first upbeat science fiction novel as a kid. There’s a whole universe out there to explore, and I’ve tried as hard as I can to make humans worthy of it. And I’ll continue to do so. Just because a few of my factories are discovered won’t be the end of it. I’ll figure out a way for us to communicate, and rest assured; I’ll still be working on that vision. I may not live to see it, but I want my children to.” He put his arm around Marybeth.

Lisa and Daniel both realized at the same time why Marybeth had been acting so differently than normal. Like Lisa, she was going to start a family, too. With Tyrone, no matter where he was.

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After Tyrone and Marybeth had left, Shirley finally spoke for the first time. She was looking much better than when Lisa had thrown the covers off her and Daniel. “I agree with what Tyrone is doing, in principle, but isn’t he taking a hell of a lot on himself? Shouldn’t people have a choice about whether they want our prions or not? Like I did?”

As usual, Lisa went to the heart of the matter. “In an ideal world, yes,



everyone would have a choice. But in an ideal world, there would be no need for our prions, would there?" The last time she had gotten up, she had sat back down in Daniel's lap.

"Hmm. Good point. Very good point." Shirley agreed.

"I have to agree, too." Daniel said. "I've seen more of the seamier side of human nature than the rest of you, except perhaps Shirley. The human beast isn't very pretty in a lot of its manifestations, and religious bigotry is one of the worst offenders. It's been the cause of more human misery than everything else put together. Living in Masterville, and living with Lisa, has been like a breath of fresh air when you've been having to wear a gas mask all your life. There's no telling the heights we might reach if everyone on earth was born with our prions."

"It might not take as long as Tyrone is predicting," Gina said. "The President has blocked FDA approval of legalizing prions for the ones who want them, but like any substance the government bans, that just creates a demand for it. Many prospective parents are buying them on the black market, and not just in America. It's happening all over the world. Tyrone has been backing the manufacture of them and doing his best to keep the crooked, fake stuff off the market."

"There's still the backlash," Shirley interjected. "I've seen that from my position in government. Religious leaders are doing their damndest to turn people away from them, and politicians listen to the religious crowd like any other pressure group. The preachers are calling our prions a gift from the Devil, a sin against man and God, all that stuff. Shucks, you don't even have to be in government to hear that."

"Well, I've heard enough about it for now. If we're going to inherit the mantle, I want to relax and have some time to enjoy being back here before starting work." She slid off Daniel's lap and held out her hand. "C'mon, Danny, come help me relax. Sex is good for pregnant women, or didn't you know that?"

"I didn't know Shirley was pregnant."

"Smarty. You don't know where I slept last night, either, so there. Come along, now. To quote some recently espoused views, being with Masterville Women is like a breath of fresh air."

Daniel got up. "So they are, but that isn't exactly what I said."

"It's what I meant, which is all that counts," Lisa said, smiling over



her shoulder at the others as she led Daniel out of the room.

* * * *

President Williamson sneaked a drink from the flash kept in his desk and popped a breath mint before taking the call from the Arkansas governor. He listened for a moment, hating that deep resonant voice because it sounded so much better than his own. His face reddened and a scowl appeared.

"Why in hell did you have to mention me, you fool! Now I'll be forced to take some kind of action. Damn it, next time let me know when anyone from that atheist haven calls so I can listen in!"

Governor forbore to ask how he was supposed to cut the President into a conversation. He simply replied, "Yes, sir, I will. In the meantime, what shall I do?"

Williamson thought for a moment. "You don't do anything. I'll issue an order for the Army to divert the missionary convoys to that State Park near the valley. That will give me some cover, and give me a good excuse to bring back at least a full battalion of troops to the area, maybe a whole brigade."

"But won't that make you look like you're in favor of leaving Masterville alone?"

"Not if I know my people, and I do. They're not going to stop once they're that close, and my intelligence people tell me that most of them are armed. There'll be some fighting, I hope, then I'll order the Army in to restore order. Hah! The media will go crazy when those atheist mutants start shooting at my missionaries, and I'll look good both ways. First for stopping the vehicles; that'll get me in good with the moderates, then when I stop the Masterville people from killing honest, God-fearing people who simply want a chance to convert the heathens, it will play wonderfully with the religious side of my support."

"Well, I certainly hope it works out like you hope it will."

"Oh, it will, it will. We've got this election in the bag now and I'll have a hell of a lot more leeway to do what I want once the new congress convenes. Hell, you did me a favor on this, but consult with me in advance next time, all right?"

"Yes, sir." the Governor hung up, mollified but still uneasy. He knew from his own intelligence that the people of Masterville Valley were



better equipped and much better trained with their firearms than most of the so-called missionaries were likely to be. And he suspected that the Army wouldn't have an easy time of it trying to disarm Masterville, should it come to that.

President Williamson waved his appointments secretary back out of the room by holding up his hand, fingers spread. He made a fist, then spread his fingers again, the signal to give him another ten minutes before bringing anyone else in or taking any calls. As soon as the door to the Oval Office closed, he got up from his desk and went into the little privacy alcove that he had been assured was not bugged or watched, even by the Secret Service. From there, he picked up the encrypted phone and punched in the number of the private line he had set up to Martha Zimmerman.

Martha answered almost immediately. After a very short greeting, the President got into the subject of his call. "Ms. Zimmerman, Mister Crafton once told me about a drug the agency had on hand that instilled an aggressive attitude into subjects it had been used on. Do you know about this?"

"Yes, sir," Martha said, feeling her heart beginning to beat faster.

"Fine. Tell me what you know about it and how much of it the agency has on hand."

Reluctantly, Martha began telling the President about the drug that only The NSA Director and his two deputies had access to, including the fact that it could be diluted tremendously without losing its effectiveness.

"Fine," the President said. "That's exactly what I wanted to know. Now I want you to send a consignment of that drug large enough for at least five thousand people to the agents we have traveling with The AOL. Tell them to use whatever ruse they have to in order to spread it around. It sounds as if their water supply would be a good bet."

Martha's knuckles showed white where they gripped the phone. "Mister President, I really don't want to be responsible for..."

"Isn't it a little late to be developing an aversion to these ... methods, Ms Zimmerman? You're already an accessory in the death of that reporter, Nancy Primmerton. You wouldn't want to stand trial for that, would you?"

"But I didn't order..."



"Young lady, I have a recording of what you ordered done. There is no such order on record from me. Do I make myself clear?"

Martha couldn't get an answer past the sudden tightness in her throat.

"Do I"

"Yes, sir," she finally managed, her voice barely audible.

"Fine. See that this matter is taken care of, then. Don't worry, you're doing fine."

"Yes, Mister President," she said. As soon as she heard the line go dead, she pressed her hands to her face, trying to hold in the churning sickness she felt inside. After a few minutes, she began carrying out the president's orders.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Crafton made certain that Martha had indeed vacated the building, then waited patiently until the rest of the staff had left the office for home before he began his snooping, already fairly certain what he would find. Knowing what he was looking for, it took only fifteen minutes to find the new computer file and break Martha's password. He smiled as he did so, mentally patting himself on the back for not letting either of his deputies know about the program he had gotten one of his experts to install with the last upgrade. No one in the agency had any secrets from him with that program in the computers, not when he began really looking. Poor Martha, he thought. She had no way of knowing that her phone link to the President was so obvious. He thought it too bad that their conversations hadn't been recorded, but he didn't trust the technicians that far. It was sufficient to know that she had talked to the President and the dates. From there, he began looking elsewhere.

An hour later, he stopped, alarm written large on his face. Martha Zimmerman had authorized release of almost the whole supply of the highly secret aggression drug to a courier. The code word for his destination was Masterville, and *that* transaction had automatically been sent to the file he was reading. *So that was the president's plan!* He made a recording, adding it to the times and dates of Martha's talks with the president, then backed out of the computer in slow steps, leaving no record of having been there.



His sleep was restless that night, broken by bad dreams that woke him up, then periods of withering self-examination before dozing again. He really wasn't working for the President any more, he thought, nor was he doing any good for the country, yet he kept returning to his office day after day. He badly wanted to talk to someone about what he had found, but June was the only person he trusted and she was back in Missouri on a campaign trip. His only consolation was that lately Martha Zimmerman had begun looking as if her nights were even more haunted than his.

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It appeared that nothing was going to stop some elements of The Army of the Lord from converging on Masterville Valley. After the President issued his order to the Army to divert the vehicles to the state park, some of them turned back toward their homes, but many of them simply parked there, then flooded Amity, the small town in the next watershed over from Masterville Valley, seeking food and supplies. The little town was glad of the influx of money and didn't try to hinder the flow; their merchants simply charged higher than normal prices for their goods, then quickly ordered more. Within a few days, a contingent of several thousand evangelistic-minded men and women began hiking slowly along the road toward Masterville, their leaders paying Amity farmers and merchants to provide food and water along the way. One of the agents sent by Martha Zimmerman made sure that the water was laced with the aggression drug, and other agents had already begun their diatribe of hatred of Masterville to the leaders of the missionaries, who compliantly passed it on, mixed with appropriate quotes from the Bible.

A smaller contingent of the missionary army, made up of more rugged individuals, broke off and went into the hills, still going toward Masterville, but taking a more indirect route. Tyrone had his own agents traveling with the Army of the Lord, but he was getting spread very thin and they missed seeing the first few small columns of missionaries breaking off from the main group and going into the hills. When they did finally notify him that he might have more to worry about than a direct assault on Masterville, it upset him. It was those smaller groups that began to worry him, especially any that might come into contact with isolated farms or homes and either surprise or overwhelm the families. He sent word down to Chief Masters and asked him to try warning outlying farms and ranches and little homesteads that were part of the prion population, but lived outside of the valley. He had no idea that Genetechnics might be in the path of any of the groups going overland.

*** * * ***



"Is there any gun cleaning equipment around here?" Daniel asked over the rim of his first cup of coffee of the morning.

Tyrone laughed out loud, causing Daniel to wrinkle his face in puzzlement. Without explaining the laughter, he said "I was hoping the order to keep the vehicles from coming to Masterville would give an impetus to those people to go back home, but I should have known better. It's just the fanatics left now and they won't stop, short of being ordered by the President to turn around, and I guess he isn't going to go that far. Hell, they might not even leave anyway. They're all stirred up, and he has agents in with them, regaling them with tales of how we mutant atheists eat Christian babies for breakfast every day and like nothing better than to shoot evangelists and rape their wives and daughters. I swear, Dan, I just don't understand the mentality of those people."

"Neither do I, but I think we better start making plans for defending the city, diatribes or not."

"Oh, that's all taken care of. The city council is voting on a motion today to let the Chief deputize and organize as many men and women as he thinks necessary—and to confiscate the National Guard armory if it comes down to an all-out brawl, or if that army contingent takes sides. It's really the little bands of fanatics acting on their own that I figure we'll have the most trouble with. I've just received word that some of them are coming through the hills. In the meantime, I want to show you three something, now that you've asked about guns. Of course I was going to anyway; this just makes it a bit more urgent. Are the girls around?"

"They're still getting dressed. I just came in for coffee, caught the news, and decided I'd better go over my weapons, just in case. Should I go get them?"

"Yes. The women, not the weapons. Do that, if you would. What I have in mind won't take too long."

Daniel headed back to their bedroom but never made it there. He met Lisa and Shirley walking down the corridor toward him, arm in arm, both dressed almost identically in old, tight-fitting cargo pants with loose pockets, and in tops that he couldn't quite figure out. They were colored green and resembled either a light jacket or a heavy shirt. Beneath, they wore tee shirts, Lisa's a pale cream color and Shirley's a rose red.

Lisa circled his neck with both arms, kissed him, then stepped back.



"How do you like our outfits?"

"Very becoming, but what's the occasion?" They had been wandering around the apartment and outside in the big den in shorts and pullovers or casual skirts and blouses up until now.

"You should know, Dan," Shirley said, giving him a kiss nearly as enthusiastic as Lisa's had been. "This is the latest fashion for women getting ready for infantry duty."

"Lisa is not going to do any fighting," Daniel said, looking from one to another. "And you shouldn't—oh hell, why do I bother? Pregnant or not, I couldn't keep Lisa out of a gunfight if I clubbed her unconscious, and you're not much better, Shirley. Come on, Tyrone wants to show us something."

Shirley went ahead while Lisa kept Daniel back long enough to whisper, "I'd never be able to hold my head up if I had to tell my children I cowered in my cave while their father was out fighting the barbarians. The best way to protect children is to be ready to fight for them, to keep them from harm, physical or mental."

"I know," Daniel admitted. "Old attitudes die hard, okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart. Come on, before Shirley runs off with our leader. She says the thought of fighting makes her feel sexy."

"How about you?"

"I always feel sexy, or haven't you noticed?"

Daniel followed meekly, properly put in his place.

Tyrone lead them down the corridor past entrances to the apartments built into the mountain behind the big new house and on down to its end, an apparent blank wall, with a door on either side. He pressed his thumb against the fingerprint lock of one of the doors, paused while his retina pattern was read from an adjustable camera, then led them inside. The lights came on automatically as the door opened.

Daniel peered around the long rectangular, low ceilinged room and let out a whistle. It was large, and crammed with weapons and lathes and metal working tools. Rifles and pistols lined one wall, another was replete with the civilian version of military assault rifles. Crates of ammunition took up the remaining space. Daniel assumed some of the tools he saw were for converting civilian versions of weapons into



the military variety.

Tyrone gave them the tour, showing them how to obtain rifles and hand weapons from the locked racks, and pointed out which boxes and crates contained ammunition for each model of them. All of the ammunition boxes were already opened, needing only a lifted lid for access.

"When you need extra ammo, you usually don't have time to break open the crates," he said. "Lisa, I took the liberty of having your arsenal sent up with Marybeth's belongings. It should be here any time. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all; I was planning on going to get it today. You just saved me a trip."

"It damn near took two trips. Who would ever think a freckle-faced little redhead would have a half dozen long barreled guns and a suitcase full of pistols in their house? By the way, where did you get that Wasteland UAR? I thought I was the only one who had pried a few of those out of the government's hands."

"Shirley got it for me. Isn't it neat?"

"That it is. I hope you never need it, but if you do, I feel sorry for the bad guys on the other end."

"I won't. If I ever use it, whoever I'm shooting at will deserve it."

"Have you already trained with it?"

"Not yet, but I will now."

"Good. That's a fine weapon." The Wasteland was the military code name for a new urban assault rifle, a combination twelve gauge shotgun and assault rifle, with shortened barrels and sixty round clip, with a simple mechanism for switching from shotgun to rifle and back. It carried the shotgun shells in the stock. It was lightweight and rugged, designed specifically for urban warfare.

"I think I'd like one of those, too," Daniel said. He had read the specs on the new assault rifle and liked the design, but he had never actually seen one of the lethal weapons.

"You already have one, lover," Lisa said. "Shirley got it for you when she got mine. You may properly reward her tonight. After I'm fully satiated, of course."



"I may not get rewarded," Shirley remarked.

"Um, if you all would like to continue before we get sidetracked, I'll need your prints and a retina scan when we get back so I can get you into the system in case I'm not handy when, and if, you need to use this room—and the other one I'm going to show you," Tyrone said.

The other "room" wasn't a room at all, but an opening into the end of the corridor that broadened into another small apartment. The bedroom closet in it concealed an ingenious arrangement that, when properly operated, revealed a narrow tunnel, lit in front but darkened toward an indiscernible end.

"Where does it go, as if I need to ask," Lisa asked.

"Through the mountain and out into an old concealed mine shaft. No one from the other side will ever discover it, except by accident. This, by the way, is my escape path if all else fails. I suspect that if the feds ever discover what I've been up to and decide to arrest me, I won't have much warning. But if I can make it to here, I'll be fine. There's a Hummer with all my records and extra money, false passports, et cetera waiting at the end of the tunnel. I hope that you will never have to use it, but if you do, there's a couple of spare vehicles there I brought up as well, and I'll get all of you some papers fixed up to go with them in case there's ever a need. Gina and Tim know about this escape hatch, too, by the way. They'll show you how to open it in case we lose both electricity and the generators. I hope it doesn't happen, but they may have had too close an association with me to get away without blame if I have to leave."

"How many other people know about the tunnel?" Daniel asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. It must have taken a lot of work to drill through the mountain.

"Fortunately, very few, and I would trust them with my life. Most of the way was already accessible through some underground caverns and the old horizontal mine shaft. And those mining documents showing where the shaft is located have been pulled from the county and state archives and put in a safe place."

"You know, I sure wouldn't want to get on bad terms with you," Daniel said. "I suspect it wouldn't be healthy."

"You would suspect right," Tyrone said, leading them back out and locking up behind them. Tyrone Beamer had spent years preparing to protect Masterville after he learned of the uniqueness of its people.



He considered it fortunate indeed that he had made enough money to enable him to do everything he had in the past and what he planned to do in the future. He had concealed the true value of his assets well. His worth went far beyond what most people imagined it did, even the group he had just turned over fortunes to.

Back in his office, he took each of their prints and retina patterns, then left on some other business.

"Well, what shall we do today?" Daniel asked. "After breakfast, of course."

"Play with guns, what else?" Lisa said.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Mandel Crafton's eyes looked haunted, rather than piercing. There were bags under them, indicative of the way he hadn't been sleeping. "You've heard, I guess," he said to June.

"Yes, but I'm not sure I understand what the President is trying to accomplish now. First he instigates that Army of the Lord business, then he turns around and stops their convoys from entering Masterville but doesn't do anything about the people. What is he up to?"

"He's up to no good, June. Would you mind going for a drive with me, maybe get some takeout?" He winked at her.

June caught on. "Well, okay. Let me get my purse."

Once in the underground garage of June's condominium, she led him to her car, which they usually used when going out from her place. He opened the door for her to slide into the driver's seat and went around to the other side to get in. As soon as he closed the door, he reached over and put his hand over hers, where she was just getting ready to turn the key. She looked at him with a questioning of raised brows.

Crafton reached inside his suit coat and took out a little box-shaped instrument. He flipped a switch on it and watched its display as he pointed it around the passenger compartment. He frowned, held it steady for a moment aimed at the dashboard, then turned it off and put it away. "Your battery must be dead," he said, giving her another wink. "Guess we'll have to stay in after all."



As soon as they had gotten out of the car, Crafton stopped her and held her by the shoulders. "Just like I thought. Your car has been bugged, same as mine."

"Good Lord, Mandel! What is going on?"

"I'm being prepared to be booted from office right after the elections, apparently. This is the president's doing. He's trying to catch me in some compromising position, or just doing something contrary to the administration's agenda, maybe. Whatever, someone surely knows we've been seeing each other and what we've been doing. I suspect your apartment is bugged, too. I'm sorry, June. I didn't mean for anything like this to happen."

She looked him in the eye, trying to gauge his courage. "Isn't it about time for you to do something about it then? Didn't you say you had a derogatory file on him?"

"I don't want to stoop to his level. Mullins collected plenty of evidence of how much he's drinking now, but I'd rather not use that. For one thing, it would put you in danger, as well as me. For another, I doubt it would make enough difference anyway."

"Why?" June asked, while looking contrite that Crafton, the man supposedly having the lesser moral underpinning, upended her notion of using the file.

"Because the NSA is the only agency that does this sort of thing since that last flap with the FBI got them restricted. He would know where it came from, and June, trust me on this, the President has some people working for him that I not only have no control over, but which I don't even know about. Williamson was on the inside with Smith before the party kept him from running again, and I'll bet Smith turned his apparatus over to Mad Manny right after the assassination. Even if he didn't, I'm sure they got in contact with the new president real quick."

June started walking slowly back in the direction of the elevators, holding hands with Crafton and bringing him with her. "But Mandel, where do these people come from? How do such things ever get started? And more importantly, what can we do about it?"

Crafton gave a resigned shrug. "It's been going on a long, long time, probably ever since the end of World War Two and the rise of Communism. Now it's probably being justified as necessary in the war on terrorism."



"Acts like they've pulled are never necessary, Mandel. They bring us down to the level of the ones we're trying to defeat."

"Yes. You're right. I'm sorry now that I ever got involved in this business. And I guess I won't be much longer. He'll replace me right after the elections. June, if that man stays president, I fear for the country. Let me tell you what else he's done with that damned Army of the Lord he got started, and what he's doing with the NSA agents in that little section of the intelligence community controlled by the President alone." Crafton related what he had found out about Martha probably giving the order for Nancy's assassination, and NSA agents under presidential order contaminating the drinking water of the missionaries on the road to Masterville.

June stopped, forcing Crafton to face her. "Mandel, that is absolutely horrible! You can't stay in office knowing that! You have to resign, and let the country know what's happening. That might stop him."

"It might get me thrown in prison for revealing official secrets, too. And June, you're the only woman I've ever loved. My marriage was one of convenience and I'm grateful to you for giving me the courage to end it, once and for all."

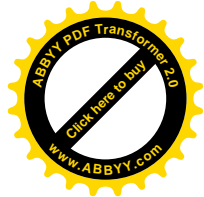
"Yes, I love you, too. But ... first we have to figure this out. Why would you get thrown in prison? Hell, just tell the press that someone in the government has bugged your car and my car and my home first of all, then see how much further you can go without getting arrested."

"Your bedroom is bugged too, June. That's standard technique in case there comes a chance to record kinky sex of any kind."

"My bedroom! Damn it, Mandel, that's too much. If you don't act, I will."

Crafton bent and kissed her on the lips. "If you feel that way, I will. But I don't want to stop with just the bugging, though. I doubt that's enough to swing the elections, and besides, I have some things I'm not proud of that I want to make up for. Telling the rest of what I know he's been up to lately would be one way to do it, but I won't without your permission. June, think very hard and bear in mind what I said: coming clean will put us both in danger. More than you might imagine."

"I don't think he would dare assassinate a Senator, nor you either, not after our joint press conference."



"Joint, did you say?"

June nodded. "That's what I said. Or don't you agree?"

Crafton felt an enormous sense of relief washing over him. "It's what I really wanted, June; I just didn't want to risk you getting hurt." He didn't mention that there were worse things than death that could happen. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

"See? You do have a conscience." She resumed walking, tugging him along until he was in step with her again. "And if anyone wants to watch us making love, then I hope they get an eyeful!"

"We still need to decide how to go about this, without giving any advance warning, and we want to time it right. We have to be careful or we'll be grabbed and stuck in a hole in the ground somewhere and never get a chance to talk."

"We'll decide on all that later. Right now I'm feeling very amorous, and to hell with any hidden cameras. If they ever make any recordings of us public, I'll sue the britches off them!"

Crafton entered the elevator with a much lighter heart than when they had descended. The thought of leaving the NSA now, rather than waiting to be dismissed, made him feel exuberant, especially when he started visualizing the president's reaction to the revelations he could safely link to him. Even without broaching the Official Secrets Act, President Williamson was going to be very unhappy at what he and June had to say. Just the fact that they were both being bugged would be a front page story, even without the other elements he would add to his resignation story.

Neither Crafton nor Senator Janter had any inkling at all that their changing attitudes about the government and their more liberal outlook on sex could be attributed to the tiny Masterville prions in their brain tissue that were busily multiplying and going through their peculiar folding and unfolding process around the billions and billions of synapses that enabled their minds to function.

*** * * ***

The group of Missionaries going into the hills surrounding Masterville had an advance contingent that neither Tyrone nor anyone else on the Genetechnics mountain was aware of. Elijah Christman was a country preacher and an accomplished faith healer with visions of eventually becoming a big televangelist. His motives were sincere, as he honestly believed what he preached. In the case of



Masterville, he had been haranguing his congregation for over a year with fire and brimstone sermons, preaching that the inhabitants of Masterville were possessed by demons and had gone on to convince a number of the Messengers at the convention to believe the same thing. They in turn had taken his beliefs back home to their congregations in almost undiluted form.

Elijah Christman was handsome in a rugged sort of way, with only a weak chin to mar his features. He concealed that with a short beard. He let his dark hair grow over his ears in a shaggy cut intended to convey the notion that he was too busy and unconcerned with ordinary affairs to see a hair stylist. He was a big man, too, and all this, plus the suggestion that mutant women must be stripped naked before an exorcism could be properly performed, went into his being able to convince the owners of two big all-terrain vehicles his lot had run across in the hills to join them. That the two owners of the vehicles were already armed was just an added bonus, and the fact that they had somehow gotten beyond the army check point that stopped vehicles was even better. They would probably be taken for locals at first. Anxious to get some good footage of him personally driving the devils out of the Satan-spawned mutants, he and four others, plus the owners of the ATVs, ranged on ahead of the rest of the group, all of them now feeling the effects of the drugged water supply, which Christman had shared with his new drivers.

* * * *

Tyrone had set up his range on Genetechnics property and while it was free for his employees to use, the trip up from Masterville was arduous enough that it was usually vacant early on weekend mornings. Knowing this, Daniel expected that he and Lisa and Shirley would have the rifle range to themselves this early Sunday morning, as they had the previous one. All three were still practicing with their Wasteland UARs. It was a formidable weapon but took some getting used to. Daniel didn't begrudge the time, nor the effort it took to hike there on his bad leg. Handling the Wasteland was fun in itself, and if there was any fighting at all, he expected most of it to take place in the streets and suburbs of Masterville. He wanted to be ready. He just wished that Tyrone had gotten some of the grenades the Wasteland was capable of firing.

* * * *

Daniel wasn't expecting trouble, nor was Lisa or Shirley. The rifle range, as it was called, even though any sort of weapon could be used there, was on the other side of the mountain from Gentechnics, on a plateau abutting a cliff that rose at a sharp angle. There was an old



logging road that some people used to get to the range, but most preferred the pleasant hike over the mountain. Tumbles of scree had been piled up behind the targets and hay bales set in front of them to help absorb possible ricochets. They were just coming into sight of the range, well off to the right of the path, which made a wide loop to protect hikers from stray bullets. The two women were trailing behind Daniel, taking advantage of a widening in the downhill trail to walk hand in hand with their weapons slung. For a time their cheerful voices and laughter overrode the sounds of the other voices from farther down the trail. When he did finally hear them, the sounds were bizarre, coming to him almost like cheers, interspersed with sharp snapping noises and what sounded like muffled screams. The cheers would have been understandable had they been hearing gunfire; cheering at a well placed grouping would have been natural, but the other clamor definitely was not normal.

Daniel half-turned and made shoving motions at the women to stop, while at the same time he shrugged the rifle off his shoulder and snapped the safety off. When Lisa and Shirley saw what he was doing they stopped. Daniel cupped a hand to his ear. All three listened for a moment.

"Something's wrong," Daniel said in a low voice.

"I can tell. Let's go see," Lisa said, looking down at her weapon to be certain what mode it was in. Shirley followed suit.

Daniel didn't bother suggesting that they stay here and let him scout ahead. Neither of them would have listened anyway. The best he could do was ask them to circle around so that they could come upon the range from two directions, making certain that he took the more direct route. Shirley, with her training, saw his motive and smiled but let it go. Unconsciously bending low, they both backed up then began the circuit on another path, more of a game trail than anything else. Daniel crouched down and moved slowly through the bushes just off the old road they had been following.

As he came closer, the cheering became louder and more unrestrained, as did the other sounds, like moans coming from the victims of a car wreck, or wounded soldiers on a battlefield. When he finally was close enough to see what was happening, he almost lost it. Only the fact that he knew that Shirley and Lisa hadn't had time to get in position kept him from bursting upon the scene with gun blazing.

Marybeth and a woman he vaguely recognized as having seen in town both had their hands tied together behind them. Their bound hands were in turn attached to a short rope that was looped around a pair of



saplings growing close together at the edge of the range. This gave them some freedom of movement, but not enough to avoid the whips being wielded by a couple of wild-eyed men. Both women were totally naked, and their bodies bore numerous red stripes from the short, braided whips being applied to their breasts, legs and abdomens. Where some of the stripes had crisscrossed, thin rivulets of blood trickled from the ugly wounds. Gags were bound tightly enough around their mouths to keep their screams to a minimal level but a lot of noise was still getting through. The other woman's eyes were frantic with terror but Marybeth's showed only a blazing hatred that promised mayhem if she ever got loose, not so much against the men doing the whipping as to the one supervising, a big man with shaggy hair and a fanatical glint to his eyes. He reminded Daniel of some of the radical Islamic Mullahs who were driving their poor believers to acts of unbelievable carnage.

Just when Daniel thought he could take no more of the sight, the big man called a momentary halt to the brutal beatings with the whips. Incongruously he began praying with a deep rolling thunder in his voice, imploring God to cast out the demons and bring the poor atheist women back into the loving arms of Jesus. That just about did Daniel in. Only by the grimmest of discipline was he able to hold off attacking, no matter what the odds. Instead, he forced himself to take stock of the number of men involved in the horrible tableau. The big man still praying was evidently in charge. He thought he could discount him and the two wielding the whips since all three had leaned their rifles against a nearby tree, but there were three others in sight watching with either rifles or shotguns held loosely in their arms or over their shoulders. He suspected that there must be others on guard but he couldn't spot them.

The one doing the praying stepped back and nodded to the ones holding their bloody whips. The other woman shrank as far back as her tether allowed, but Marybeth let the one advancing on her come close, then lashed out with her foot, catching him in the groin, making him howl and clutch his genitals. The others turned toward him and laughed. While their attention was on their doubled over comrade, Daniel decided to act, hoping Lisa and Shirley were nearby now. Using the shotgun barrel, he leveled his weapon on the ones holding weapons and began firing left to right as fast as he could, not deliberately trying to kill, although he wanted to. Instead, he aimed for their middle, hoping to disable them with hits to their hands and arms where they were holding their rifles, and if some of the shot killed them or went into their guts and put them in the hospital to contemplate their sins, he didn't intend to worry about it.

As soon as he fired, the big bearded man who had been praying away



the supposed demons began running to where his weapon was leaning against the tree. He was incredibly fast. By the time Daniel could get his weapon pointed at him, he had grabbed his rifle and was swinging it in his direction. They both fired at the same time. Daniel's last round of buckshot hit the man in the shoulder, causing him to drop his rifle, but not before he had almost emptied the clip on automatic fire. One of the rifle slugs hit Daniel on the edge of his upper thigh; another tore into the stock of the Wasteland, shattering it and ripping it from his hands.

The big rifle slug, though it did Daniel no serious damage, had enough force behind it to knock him off his feet. As he went down, he heard shots from over to one side, and a feminine scream, whether in triumph or pain, he couldn't tell. He didn't stop to worry about it. The three men on the ground he had shot were no more finished than a wounded grizzly bear robbed of its meal would have been. Instead, they seemed to gain a will to fight, acting more like rabid animals than men. Two of them were carrying hand weapons in jacket pockets and they pulled them out and began shooting wildly in Daniel's direction. The third produced a hunting knife almost as large as a Bowie and amazingly, got to his feet and charged Daniel as if he had no idea of the recklessness of his act. Before Daniel could get off a shot at him with his little Glock, one of his own men's wild pistol shots took him down. He fell, then gritted his teeth and continued crawling forward, still clutching the huge knife.

More shots were coming from where he hoped Lisa and Shirley were, but they weren't helping here, if indeed it was friendly fire. The other two were still alive and Daniel had only the Glock to work with now. A pistol is no weapon to fight with at long distance, but Daniel's opponents made it easy. Apparently caring nothing about danger, first one then the other put new clips in their pistols, then struggled to their feet and rushed toward him, shooting their hand weapons inaccurately as they ran. Both of them lurched repeatedly as Daniel's bullets tore their bodies, but they came on. Firing a pistol while moving is certainly not a good way to take out an enemy, but even so, one of them got lucky. Daniel, aiming carefully, finally killed the first one, but a wild shot hit a log only inches from his head, spattering wood chips into the side of his face, half blinding him and throwing off his aim. He missed once then got most of his vision back. He moved the muzzle back to center on the running man's chest and pulled the trigger. It clicked on empty. Grinning and bleeding from hand and stomach wounds, the former whipper ran up to where Daniel was crouched and stopped triumphantly. He pointed his automatic at Daniel's chest and fired. His weapon clicked on empty, too. Cursing, he reversed it and flung himself forward, trying to club Daniel to death.



Daniel rolled and kicked, knocking the man off his feet. He leaped and grappled with him, using hand combat techniques to overcome the missionary's maniacal strength. Finally he got his thumb on a pressure point and held it tightly even under the man's wild struggles until he finally collapsed, unconscious. Gasping, Daniel let loose, leaving his opponent laying in the dirt, and got to his feet. He had lost his Glock in the struggle, was half blinded by the wood chips, covered with dust and debris from rolling around during the hand to hand struggle with his last enemy and had no idea what else was happening until Lisa came running up.

Lisa took one look at Daniel, decided that he was going to live and grabbed his arm. "Come on, I think Shirley's in trouble. She wasn't where I left her when I went to look, then I heard her scream, and now I can't find her!" It was then that Daniel realized the big man doing the praying had made his escape while he was taking care of the others.

Daniel looked around until he found his Glock, laying near the still form of the man he had overcome, and incongruously right next to the man's own empty weapon. He tossed that one into the brush, picked his own up, then looked back toward where Marybeth and the other woman had been tied. Lisa had apparently taken a moment to slash their bonds because they were free. He followed Lisa, letting her lead while he got his only spare clip inserted. He hoped it would suffice. He hadn't intended to shoot the Glock; in fact he had almost decided not to bring it since he was carrying the UAR. He decided right then to never go without it again—if they got out of this alive.

Lisa still had her Wasteland, shotgun barrel in the firing mode. She slowed and Daniel began taking in their surroundings and looking for signs, while still letting her lead and trying not to worry about Shirley. Presently, he spotted drops of blood. He reached out to touch Lisa to show them to her, still having said nothing to her. He had simply followed her lead, hoping to find Shirley. A quiet had settled over the forest after all the gunfire, like the silence in a hospital waiting room, and just as ominous and oppressive. There was certainly no longer any noise coming from off to the side, where he presumed Lisa and Shirley had been.

Abruptly, the sound of cursing came to them, from further down the trail. Daniel's outreaching hand touched Lisa's shoulder, bringing her to a halt, wanting to get in front of her if more fighting was required, not stopping to consider that she had the superior weapon. And then, like the welcoming sound of a newborn baby's cry, came the sound of Shirley's voice, speaking almost normally. But to whom?



CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

"It's us, don't shoot!" Shirley said loudly.

Daniel and Lisa were both speechless. Shirley appeared to be none the worse from whatever part she had played in the gun battle, nor did Tyrone, who was with her. And between them, they kept a tight hold on Elijah Christman, whose arms were bound behind him with strips of his own bloody shirt. When he saw Daniel, then Lisa, he cursed.

"God will damn you demon-possessed mutants! Nothing will stay his wrath!" Shirley rapped him across the face sharply with the barrel of her rifle. He struggled in their grasp. She hit him again, harder. It brought blood and he shut up momentarily.

"What—" Daniel and Lisa attempted to start asking questions at the same moment.

"No time to stop," Shirley said. "I spotted another gang coming up the trail after I left Lisa and dropped back to keep them away while you rescued Marybeth. Are they all okay?"

"Yes, I think so, barring some scarring, maybe but—"

"Let's move along," Tyrone said. "There's more behind them, according to the preacher here. Or whatever he thinks he is. I decided to come up when Marybeth didn't return from the range when she said she was going to. I was just in time to catch this bozo sneaking up behind Shirley while she was taking potshots at the gang below. She scattered them, but they didn't look like they were backing off much."

"They walk with the Lord!" Elijah shouted, earning another hard rap on the head from Shirley.

Just then, Marybeth appeared, coming down the trail from the range. She hadn't even bothered to dress, but she had recovered her weapon. She made a scary picture, bleeding from multiple whip marks and carrying a rifle that she now leveled until it was pointed at Elijah's middle. Tyrone saw her finger tightening on the trigger and said quickly, "No, Marybeth, we need to question him."

Marybeth stared daggers so sharp that the preacher, even fired up with the aggression compound, withered under their impact. "All



right, but don't be long. And he's mine when you're finished with him."

"Is this caveman one of the ones that did that to you?" Shirley asked, horrified at Marybeth's appearance.

"He supervised it. Two others did the actual whipping."

Shirley swung the Wasteland UAR in a vicious arc, smashing Elijah across the mouth, cracking some teeth, splitting his lips and knocking him to his knees. That was enough to finally shut him up for a few minutes, other than a weak blubbling.

"Easy," Daniel said. He helped the preacher back to his feet and got him moving again. "We've got other problems and we still may need this lowlife."

Tyrone didn't try to argue. He simply said, as they regained the plateau of the range, "Grab your clothes and let's get back, quick. Where's Melodie?"

The other woman wasn't around, nor was the man Daniel had left unconscious. A sound came from the bushes nearby, a muffled scream.

Marybeth was ahead of them all, and there was nothing that could have saved the crazed, wounded man who still raged with irrationality. He had Melodie, Marybeth's friend, down on the ground and was both choking her and raping her at the same time, blood from his wounds mingling with hers.

Marybeth crouched down and touched the barrel of her rifle to his head, then as he looked around, she shot him, being careful not to hurt Melodie. His brains splattered sideways. Marybeth reached down and grabbed his shirt collar and pulled the body off her friend. She helped her to her feet and put her arm around her. She was crying uncontrollably.

"Hurry," Tyrone said. "We have to get going."

"The Lord will punish you, woman. Your demon shall not prevail!" Elijah's voice came out in a lisp through his puffed lips.

This time it was Marybeth who slammed the barrel of her gun into his forehead, gashing it open. After that he shut up completely and allowed himself to be hurried along, stumbling because of the blood in his eyes and beginning to moan from his wounds. Lisa led the way



while Shirley brought up the rear. Tyrone had his phone out, talking to someone back at the Genetechnics plant. After a moment he tucked it back in his pocket.

"We've got some people at the plant getting organized, but there's not that many there on weekends since I farmed out so much of the manufacturing. Gina and Tim are on the horn trying to get us some help up from the city."

Tyrone didn't know it, but while he had been looking for Marybeth, fighting had already started in Masterville.

* * * *

Chief Masters had hoped the marchers bearing down on Masterville would keep the peace, but it was not to be. Even before they reached the edge of the city, altercations began. Missionaries of The Army of the Lord, fired up with religious rhetoric and doses of the aggression drug, insisted on their right to preach to the "mutant atheists", not caring whether they were on private property or not. The preaching quickly turned to fighting when they were ordered off the premises of homes and businesses. Under the influence of the drug, their first reaction to hindrance was aggression. When the dispatcher couldn't get a deputy there quickly enough, Bebe Stillson pulled a weapon on a crowd of motley men and women cluttering the lot of her specialty hardware store and preventing customers from parking. She was killed for her trouble.

Neighbors, who saw the altercation, took the offensive. Though too late to save her life, they thought to drive the marchers away and hold the killers for the police. Instead, the missionaries stood and fought, appearing to take gleeful pleasure in the opportunity to use their weapons rather than words.

By the time Chief Masters got two squad cars with well-armed deputies there to disperse that crowd, killing two and arresting several others, fighting was already breaking out in other places. The Chief got in touch with the Mayor. Eileen Tupper called out the National Guard company, not bothering to notify the governor nor worrying about the legality of her order.

It was then that Chief Masters got the first call from Gina, requesting help to protect the Gentechinics plant and the weekend employees still present.

The chief was at the police station, where he and his few permanent employees were setting up a command center to coordinate all the



city services. Eileen Tupper and several members of the City Council had also reported there, after a call went out for their help.

"Gina, honey, we've got a situation here, too. How serious is it up there?"

Masters listened for a moment, then put Gina on hold. "Eileen, Gina just called from Genetechnics. They've got fanatics coming up the mountain at them. I'm going to send some of my new deputies there to help until the NG company can get organized. We can't afford to lose that place."

"We can't afford to lose Masterville either," Eileen said, but nodded her acceptance. Tyrone Beamer and Genetechnics were both too important to the city to let them go undefended.

Masters put the phone to his ear again. "All right Gina, tell Tyrone I'll get some men up there as soon as possible, but it won't be too many. Tell him Eileen has called up the guard. They'll be able to handle these civilians once they get organized but it may take a while. We weren't expecting these nuts to be looking for a fight at the drop of a hat."

As quickly as he stopped talking to Gina another crisis was waiting on him. The first wave of the AOL missionaries were spreading out into neighborhoods along their route of march. Wherever they went, at the least sign of dissension, they became belligerent, and if provoked further, violence occurred.

Word soon spread through the edges of the city from neighbor to neighbor, over the phone lines and by the few patrol cars racing from spot to spot to aid men and women trying to defend their homes and businesses. Dirty columns of smoke began rising into the sky from fires set by the irrational invaders. The rattle of gunfire became almost constant throughout the fringes of one side of the city as more of the missionary army arrived and immediately joined their enraged fellows.

Eileen Tupper sent an envoy up to the Army Headquarters to ask them for help. The commander sent word back that he could do nothing without orders. As the day wore on, the situation became worse. Chief Masters had hundreds of men he had deputized, and while most of them knew their weapons, they were hard to get organized into an effective defense force, much less an offensive one to drive the maddened missionaries out of the city.

*** * * ***



Daniel volunteered to stay at the summit behind the Genetechnics plant in order to warn of how many and how numerous the groups who had abandoned the main road were—and to discourage them from reaching the peak, if he could, since it would be much easier to defend than a line downhill somewhere. He kept Shirley's Wasteland and tried to get Lisa to give him hers and go back with the others.

"No way, Dan. I guess someone has to stay here and relay news of what's coming at us back down to the plant, but if you stay, I stay. I'm not leaving you. Not now, not ever."

Daniel glanced helplessly in Shirley's direction but she merely shrugged. "Tyrone says he wants me to help organize the people Chief Masters is sending up."

"If they get there in time, we'll try to bring them up to you and hold those nut cases at the top of the mountain," Tyrone said. "It's a better place to fight than down below, and there's still a few of the bunkers left from when the army was patrolling there."

"And don't try to reason with them," Marybeth said sourly, still hurting, and embarrassed at allowing herself and Melodie to be captured. She shot a disgusted look at Elijah Christman, his bloody face now making him look more like a refugee from a disaster than a preacher. "Shoot the bastards first and ask questions later."

Daniel had been thinking about the aggressiveness of the gang they had run upon, wondering if it could possibly be that Mandel Crafton had released some of that drug he had heard about that would cause a mouse to rear up and attack a cat. He suspected that might be the cause of such violent aggressiveness, but as much as he disliked Crafton, he couldn't make himself believe that the man had sunk that low yet. Nevertheless, before the others left he called Tyrone over and relayed his suspicions, just in case he didn't live through the coming encounter.

Shortly, Daniel and Lisa were left alone.

* * * *

A dozen and a half of Chief Masters new deputies arrived just after Tyrone got his group back to Genetechnics. He sent Shirley with Marybeth and Melodie to his new home with instructions for them to call the plant nurse to treat their wounds, and for Shirley to go help Gina and Tim, who were trundling arms from his arsenal. He sent their captive over to Harry to be questioned, with word to be very careful with him. Periodically, he reported back to Chief Master's



command center, keeping him updated, and passing on the possibility of the drug that Daniel had told him about being used.

Tyrone still didn't have that many bodies to work with. Besides the deputies, which he sent directly up the mountain on foot to locate Daniel and Lisa, there were only about twenty other men and women he could lay hands on, almost the whole contingent of the Genetechnics plant at the time. A few left for the city to help their families, but the majority stuck, agreeing with Tyrone's assessment that if the gangs coming at them here weren't stopped, they would range on down into the city, causing even more havoc.

*** * * ***

Daniel heard the noise of the deputies and Genetechnics workers coming up the mountain. They were going to make it barely in time. From his vantage point he and Lisa had already spotted three separate gangs moving through the brush down below, just beginning to work their way up the long slope.

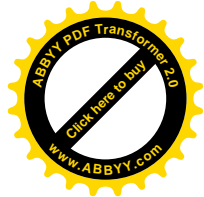
"Lisa, will you go tell them to spread out, but to send two of the deputies up to me that are capable of commanding our flanks?"

Lisa took a glance downhill to make sure she would be back before the fighting started, then left, almost running. She came back with two middle aged men, one of them overweight and puffing from the exertion or climbing uphill.

Daniel went a little ways back from the crest, to be out of sight from below before speaking to the new arrivals. "I'm Daniel Stenning and I've been put in charge of this area. There's several gangs of those so-called missionaries coming this way. Our job is to stop them before they get here, and that means shooting to kill. That also means not shooting until you can kill, so that we can get as many of them as possible before they know we're here. Can you do that, and can your men and women do that?"

The overweight deputy gulped and swallowed gore rising in his throat. "You mean no warning, just kill on sight? I don't know if we should do it that way."

"If you saw what they did to our friends, you wouldn't be arguing," Lisa piped up, going over and getting in the deputies face. "Listen to me: they captured two women here and were whipping imaginary demons out of their naked bodies when we rescued them. They attacked us, then, and did their damndest to kill us. And then when we went to see what was keeping another of us, we came back and



caught one of the wounded ones we had left. He was already back in action. He was raping and choking to death one of the women who had just been whipped like a horse. Now unless you want to see things like that right here, and if they overrun us, down in the city with your families, you'll fight. You hear?"

The overweight deputy started to protest but Daniel cut him off. "She's right. And I've just got word on my mobile that things like that are happening below, at the edge of the city where others just like them are beginning to filter into the suburbs. Is that what you want?"

"No, but—"

"Then you'll shoot. Or if you can't, I'll put Missus Berry in charge and you can go home."

"I—sorry, I reckon I didn't realize how bad it was. All right, you can depend on me."

Just to be certain, Daniel sent Lisa back far enough to hear him telling the story to the other deputies. When she came back, he nodded. Some people had to have facts pounded into their heads. Others, like Lisa, saw what needed to be done in a crisis immediately.

"They're getting closer," Lisa said, peeking over the edge of the crumbling old bunker that they had appropriated for a defensive nest. She checked her weapon again.

"Get back down, you hellion, before they see you," Daniel admonished. "If you have to fight, at least wait till they get close enough for a clean shot. I don't want you to get hurt."

"You should talk," Lisa said, looking at the bloody bandage on Daniel's leg.

Daniel didn't say anything.

*** * * ***

Eileen Tupper hung up the phone and touched Chief Masters on the shoulder to get his attention, almost causing him to spill the fresh cup of coffee someone had brought him. He didn't even know when it had arrived; it had seemed to appear magically on his desk amid the clutter of street maps and phone notes and printouts.

"What is it now?"



"President Williamson has just issued orders to the Army. They're to move in by tomorrow morning if the violence hasn't stopped by then."

"Good."

"No it's not good. They are, and I quote: 'to restore order and prevent violence against peaceful demonstrators'. Chief, they have orders from the President to disarm every soul in the valley. And if we let that happen, he'll stop at nothing to eliminate us completely."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Daniel felt a bit of sympathy toward the reluctant deputy as he brought a struggling fat man with a cheerful moon face into his sights. But the fat man had a hunting rifle slung over his shoulder and judging from what the other gang had been like, and what he was hearing from the city, he would be no less an adversary for looking like Santa Claus. He centered his sights on the man's left chest and pulled the trigger, the signal for his whole force to begin firing.

As soon as it started, Daniel realized that he had let their adversaries get almost too close before opening fire. The volume of shooting along the ridge by the deputies was ragged, betokening a reluctance to shoot before being shot at. That changed quickly, though, as the gangs below showed no such hesitation. In fact, they appeared to welcome the whizzing bullets and came charging uphill with little thought for cover or tactics, screaming blasphemies and epithets that were largely unintelligible through their rage.

Their very aggressiveness very nearly carried the day. Daniel used the rifle until his clip was empty, firing carefully on semi automatic and bringing down a man—or woman—with almost every shot. Still, the ones in front of him and Lisa came on, screaming and yelling curses and prayers. In their state, Daniel doubted if they knew which was which—or cared. He flipped over to the shotgun barrel, taking the time as he did so for a quick glance at Lisa. Her mouth was drawn into a tight line and her freckles stood out on her face but there was no slackening of her commitment, nor hesitation at pulling the trigger when a target was in sight.

The last of the gang was a screaming, long haired woman bearing nothing but a butcher knife, but she had mayhem in her eyes and murder in her stance. She got almost to them before Daniel blasted her in the chest with a shotgun round. She died with the words *damned mutants* on her lips.



Once Lisa was certain that it was over, at least for the time being, she at last let go of the emotion she had been holding so tightly in check. She began crying, with great heaving sobs that Daniel was powerless to stop. He simply held her, trying to be as much comfort as he could. When she finally was able to speak, her voice quavered with compassion. "Oh Dan, those poor people! Why, why do they want to hurt us so badly? They were like animals! It's like they were all just plain crazy!"

"Perhaps they were, sweetheart. In a sense anyway." Daniel told her about the drug he knew of but had never heard of being used.

"Oh, Dan, surely not. Who would..."

"You know who," Daniel said. "Listen, I told Tyrone about the drug when I saw how crazy that first group was, but the way all these people are acting pretty well proves it was given to them, or something very similar to it was. I doubt that religious fervor is enough to account for their actions. I have to report this to Tyrone so he can get the news down to the city. Knowing these people are doped up will help our cause—if we can get anyone to believe us."

*** * * ***

Daniel's report got to the command center just in time to warn the National Guard company before it moved out late that afternoon. Knowing that the Army of the Lord minions they were going to fight had probably been drugged into aggressiveness gave them more of an impetus to shoot first and ask questions afterwards, especially when several of them were killed or wounded after hesitating to fire at women. Once it was established that it had to be done, they went about it professionally, doing some damage with their heavy weapons but taking back that portion of the city that The Army of the Lord had previously overrun.

All the time, army helicopters from the unit stationed up near the pass hovered overhead, observing, but not attempting to stop the fighting. The Army had orders to wait until the next morning.

*** * * ***

Harry Sildon couldn't quiet the preacher down enough to question him. Finally he got suspicious and called Tyrone.

"Hey, this prisoner you sent over is foaming at the mouth practically. Do you know if they've been taking any kind of drugs?"



"Sorry, Harry, I should have warned you. Yes, there's a good possibility. Why don't you forget about questioning him. It's too dangerous there by yourself."

"I've got him restrained on a gurney. He won't get away. You know, I think I'm going to take a blood sample and see what I find. How's that?"

"Good idea. Sorry, Harry I've got to go. Too much else going on."

Harry got out a vacutainer and drew a blood sample, after threatening to take it with a carving knife if his prisoner didn't hold still. As he was finishing, he glanced over at the gear that had been removed from the man before tying him to the gurney. On an impulse he picked up the canteen, shook it to see if it had anything in it and when it gurgled, took it along with him.

*** * * ***

"Isn't it great? Are we going to win big or not? I tell you Mike, after this dust up, any candidate who's shown the least sympathy for those mutants will lose!" President Williamson was waxing exuberant to his Chief of Staff. He had been nipping at his flask before White came in. The day's appointments were finished and he wasn't scheduled to do any more campaigning for the party. It felt good to relax, especially with the political situation trending so heavily in his favor.

An aide to White knocked, then entered the room without being invited. The President frowned at the highly unusual behavior but said nothing as he came over to White. He handed the Chief of Staff a slip of paper and quietly departed.

"Listen, Mike, that interruption was uncalled for. Office hours are over and I want..." He broke off as he saw the expression on White's face.

"Mister President, I think we had better turn on the television," White said.

*** * * ***

Crafton and Senator Janter's news conference in the lobby of her condominium rocked the Washington political scene like a bombshell aimed at the very heart of President Williamson's administration and his intent to get a clear majority in congress. Reports of some deaths in the hills around Masterville and fighting in its suburbs between



residents and the Army of the Lord missionaries prompted Crafton and June to call the reporters sooner than they had intended, but both decided that they had to move now, before the situation got worse.

Every network except those controlled by the president's party gave the press conference national, prime time coverage. It was replayed and analyzed all evening. Even those networks that still supported the President finally began to provide continuous coverage for fear of audience loss to their competitors—and because it was such an astounding story.

Crafton broke a long string of secretive NSA directors by telling of the President's private little army of agents, and went even further by revealing that they had sent them out to infiltrate the AOL. He went on to tell of his recent discovery that NSA agents, controlled by the president, had been ordered by one of his deputies to begin clandestinely feeding the AOL missionaries drugs that motivated them to vicious aggressiveness. After that he said that he could provide dates and times of conversations by his Deputy, Martha Zimmerman, with the president, where he suspected that the order for the assassination of Nancy Primmerton had been given. He then announced his resignation and denounced the President and his staff in no uncertain terms. After that, he and Janter went to the elevator arm in arm, openly, as lovers will act. Crafton smiled brightly at the cameramen but ignored all the shouted questions. Once the doors shut behind them, he took June into his arms, grateful that she still appeared to want him. He began thinking of how he could begin making up for all the misery he had caused, and hoped his actions would put his mind at peace, eventually.

* * * *

Dan and Lisa had been relieved after the national Guard took some pressure off Chief Masters and he sent up some more deputies to supplement the ones there. Tyrone arranged for food and water from the Genetechnics cafeteria to go up with them, as well as more ammunition.

"I want a shower," Lisa said as Tyrone greeted them when she and Daniel arrived. "And where's Shirley? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. In fact, she's been back for a while. I called her to come down to report in person and brief the new troops as soon as I heard they were arriving."

"Well, where is she?"



"I don't know right off hand. She had the same desire for a shower that you two have, but that was some time ago. I'll tell her you're back, and that you're not hurt. Or not hurt any more than you were," he amended, glancing at Dan's leg. "Stop and see the nurse about that wound before you do anything."

"It will wait. I want to clean up a little first. Give me fifteen minutes, then send her to our place if she's free; otherwise I'll come back."

*** * * ***

Lisa very carefully washed around Daniel's bandaged leg, blanching when she saw the wound. "You just can't seem to stay out of the way of bullets, can you?" She said, blinking her suddenly wet eyelashes.

"Not when I'm around you," Daniel retorted. "Now how in hell am I going to shower with this thing?" He didn't want to mention that his leg was beginning to hurt.

"I'll show you," Lisa said.

It was much later than fifteen minutes, and the nurse still hadn't arrived when Shirley slid open the door of the shower and said "Hey, come watch! We got some good news for a change! Crafton..." She saw what they were doing and grinned. "That may be fun, but come see—this is a bombshell!" She closed the door and left them to decide.

"Fun is more important than news," Lisa said, her breath coming in short, heavy gasps.

Daniel kept on with what they were doing. Lisa's passion made him wonder again about the theory of being shot at and missed kicking up the biological urge. Apparently it applied to women as well as men. By the time they got to the den, another story was already breaking, keeping the bevy of watchers mesmerized.

*** * * ***

"The suicide of Martha Zimmerman, Deputy NSA Director, and the note she left implicating President Williamson appears to confirm that the startling disclosures made by Mandel Crafton at his press conference earlier in the evening are true. Martha Zimmerman was a career National Security Agency employee and had risen through the ranks to her present position before her suicide.

"President Williamson has just issued another statement, again



denying every event Mister Crafton accused him of, but after Zimmerman's death and the note she left behind, reporters will have a hard time believing him, especially as there is no chance that such a note was planted. Ms Zimmerman called the local police, and a local reporter first. According to reports, she opened the door, handed the note to the reporter, then stepped back and pulled a pistol from her pocket and shot herself in the head before anything could be done to prevent it.

"Local police spokespersons are neither confirming nor denying that these events took place as described, but the reporter who was present has stated emphatically that they did and provided a copy of Zimmerman's suicide note. The political implications of these double revelations are profound. Political analysts are already anticipating impeachment proceedings against the president, given the aura of discontent with his actions that has become noticeable lately on both sides of the aisle.

"To recap these amazing, back to back developments ... "The anchor reading the news abruptly touched his earpiece and stopped talking. He looked startled for an instant, then got his professional countenance back in place. He grinned wryly."It appears that there is no end to breaking news today. Before we hear a summary and analysis of the truly amazing events that have already happened today, we have just learned here in our studios that Michael White, President Williamson's Chief of Staff and long time political consultant has resigned, in his words, 'effective immediately'. He stated that he could no longer abide President Williamson's behavior, and while admitting that he is no constitutional expert, he said that he believed the President's actions, if proven true, warranted immediate impeachment proceedings. When asked if he thought all the actions attributed to him by Crafton and Zimmerman were true, he said that he absolutely believed they were.

"In related developments, we are hearing more and more about the fighting in and around Masterville, Arkansas, home of the people born or infected with the odd prions that seem to impart the propensity for an ordered and peaceful life. Peaceful, that is, until they were discovered more than two years ago. Besides the special political analysis this evening, we invite you to watch a special broadcast, beginning tomorrow night at nine, on the history and present status of Masterville and it's strange inhabitants. This special..."

Tyrone told the set to turn itself off. "Excuse me. I need to see if I can talk to the commander of the army unit here. Maybe I can get him to have his troops help us rather than disarm us now that all this has



come out."

"If he's any kind of man, he will," Lisa said.

"Don't count on it," Tyrone warned. "And don't any of you get complacent. The situation could change just as rapidly back to what it was—or worse—at any time. Daniel, here's your nurse."

Daniel preferred to be examined in private, although he invited Shirley to come along with him and Lisa. They were already on their way to their apartment before he realized that he hadn't even consulted with Lisa first, nor did she appear to be objecting in any way. He wondered what that might mean, but soon he wasn't thinking clearly enough to decide. He had to have an injection of Demerol before he could stand for his leg to be worked on. He also got a hefty dose of antibiotics, with orders to continue them for ten days.

As he watched groggily, the Genetechnics nurse cleaned up the wound then began sewing it up, as professionally as any doctor.

"Aren't you prac'cing with o't a liscense?" He asked, amused for no reason he could think of.

"Probably, but since Tyrone doesn't worry about it and since the little webcam attached to my chest that you've been staring at shows the doctor I work with everything I'm doing, I doubt that anyone will object."

"I do," Daniel said.

"What!"

"Yesh. You should leave one mor' butt'n undone on your blouse." He laughed, and then dozed off.

*** * * ***

Tyrone talked long and hard to the Brigade Commander of the army troops. Only one company and a headquarters detachment had been left in place after the clean up from the Dirty Bomb explosion of two years ago, but it was now rapidly being reinforced in preparation for carrying out President Williamson's orders.

"Colonel, you know full well that what you're being ordered to do is illegal. Rather than disarming us, you should be helping us disarm those poor souls the President roused up then fed full of dope so they would go into violent rages under the least bit of provocation. Now



he's ordering you to help them. Is that the kind of orders you are supposed to obey?"

Tyrone listened for a moment, then continued. "I can guarantee you that he is operating outside the bounds of the constitution, Colonel. Look, will you at least wait until Congress convenes in the morning and then decide after you hear what they have to say?"

Tyrone at last got the Commander's agreement to delay action until noon the next day, but that was all he could pry out of him. As soon as he finished talking to him, Tyrone called one of the Senators he knew well and who sympathized with them. He was just getting ready to call Senator Janter to thank her when Harry called him.

"Tyrone, I just finished a scan on that guy I've got tied up here. His blood shows traces of something that has a signature sort of like LSD but not exactly. And I tested his canteen water. Brother, it didn't show traces; it's loaded with the same stuff! I'll see how our mice react but wanted to let you know this much right away."

"Thanks, Harry. Send me the readings and I'll forward them to the appropriate individuals I know who can use them. Thanks. That was good work."

"No problem. Hey what do you want me to do with this guy? I know he's a nut, but I don't like seeing anyone suffer."

"I'll send someone over to take him down to the hospital pretty soon. In the meantime, give him a shot of something, although we shouldn't, not after what he did to Marybeth and her friend."

After he finished with Harry, Tyrone decided to go see how Marybeth was doing, feeling that he had accomplished all that he could for now.

Marybeth was missing from the room where he had left her after the nurse tended her whip wounds. He thought for a moment, then began running toward the Genetechnics plant. He burst through the main entrance and ran down the main corridor. Just as he skidded around the corner of the hallway leading to Harry's laboratory, he heard the gunshot. When he pushed the door open he saw Marybeth standing by the gurney where Christman was still tied. She held a pistol in her hand.

Tyrone glanced at the preacher. Now he had another wound. Tyrone looked at his bloody groin then back up at Marybeth. She wore a half smile, distorted from where one of the whip lashes had struck the side of her face.



"I got here just as he was trying to escape," she said simply.

Tyrone called for the nurse. He thought that Christman would live, but from the looks of his new wound, he doubted that he would ever again use a deep bass voice for preaching. It would probably sound more like a tenor from now on.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Lisa put Daniel to bed, then put her and Shirley to bed in the other room that was sometimes used for sleeping, but not often.

"Will Daniel be okay by himself?" Shirley asked, dodging Lisa's skirt as it came flying in her direction.

"He'd better be, because I want him to sleep until I'm finished talking to you."

Shirley stopped undressing with her blouse hanging from one hand. "Have I done something wrong?"

Lisa grinned. "No, you've done everything right. I was going to bring the subject up later, but since you ask, how would you feel about moving in with Daniel and I permanently?"

Shirley dropped the blouse and began sliding out of her skirt. As it puddled around her feet, Lisa's bra landed beside it. "Does Dan get a vote?"

"No, I've already voted for him."

"In that case, yes."

"Good," Lisa said as she rolled onto the bed. "What are you standing way over there for?"

*** * * ***

Daniel came out from under the influence of the Demerol several hours later. He wondered where Lisa was, and then found out when she and Shirley came into the room. Both were still naked.

He blinked sleepily at the two figures then opened his eyes wide. "Hey, remember, I'm a sick man, you two."



"Relax," Lisa said. "You have the night off. I just wanted to bring the newest member of our family back with me. Just look; she's already grown up and housebroken. And she's just like Acey. If you pet her, she purrs!"

*** * * ***

Tyrone had some friends of his call the army colonel with the results of Harry's analysis as soon as the House of Representatives was called to order—and immediately began impeachment proceedings. After that he waited anxiously while the noon hour approached, then passed. In the meantime, fighting continued on the city's outskirts, but it was very one-sided. With the National Guard company helping all the hundreds of deputies, even the Army of the Lord at last had enough—or more likely, Tyrone thought, the president's agents among them had deserted and the missionaries were no longer being drugged.

At one o'clock, the colonel got back in touch with Tyrone where he and his group were waiting anxiously in his den, watching the continuing developments on an all-news network.

"I've decided that you're right," he said simply. "I'm not going to interfere with either you or that Army of the Lord, as they call themselves, no matter what the President orders. I really wish I could take some action on my own to help you, but that's not how the military operates. I'm sorry about that. Good luck." He hung up abruptly.

Tyrone decided that no action was better than what had been planned, by far. He announced to the crowd in the den what the phone call had been about. There were sighs of relief and some expressions of disgust that the army was leaving it up to them to restore order. Daniel couldn't fault the Brigade Commander, not with what he knew of the military. He had gone out on a limb as it was. And as it turned out, that was enough.

*** * * ***

The morning after the election, very early as yet, Daniel and Lisa and Shirley were still up and in the den. Daniel was drinking coffee laced with Brandy, against his better judgment. He knew he would have a hangover once he ever went to bed and woke back up.

***But damn it, the results are worth it,* he thought. The former president's party had lost enough seats in congress to give the new**



president a clear majority to work with. Vice President Byerly had already assumed office following President Williamson's quick impeachment. He had ordered the army to stay away from Masterville except for helping to clean up the bodies. Daniel thought his would probably be more of a caretaker government than an active one, though the new congress might have something to say about that. All in all, Daniel thought, it was as good an outcome as could be expected.

He got to his feet, a little unsteadily. Lisa and Shirley quickly stood up on either side of him.

"Ready for bed?" Lisa asked.

Daniel smiled. He put an arm around each of them. "How could I not be?" He said.

* * * *

Later that morning, while Daniel and his family were still asleep, as were most people who had sat up to watch the election results, reports began filtering in to the national networks that a worker had been caught contaminating baby formula with a substance that he refused to identify. The news wasn't given much play until a few days later when the ingredient was identified as prions of the Masterville variety.

That story almost overrode the news that Israel had attacked Iran and Saudi Arabia with a massive air armada. They used only conventional weapons, but threatened to go nuclear if necessary. The air attack marked the beginning of yet another Middle Eastern war.

By the end of the same day that the prions were definitely identified, Tyrone Beamer was gone. He notified no one and left no note. He knew that he was leaving the valley in good hands. And besides, they would know that he was still out there, somewhere in the background, but always working to make humanity a better, saner species, so long as he lived.

* * * *

Lisa came awake to an incredibly sloppy kiss. She blinked sleepily. "Dan, what are you—eeek!" She sat up in bed to the roar of Daniel's laughter and cry of "Happy birthday!", while a short haired, reddish colored miniature dachshund puppy climbed happily up her chest, trying to get in even more doggie kisses. When she finally had the excited puppy corralled (after some more generous licks to her face) she held him up.



"Why what an adorable doggie. What's your name, little fellow?"

"Deucy," Daniel said.

"What?"

**"Deucy," Shirley said, coming into the room with Acey in her arms.
"Can't have an Acey around without a Deucy to go with him, can we?"**

"Meow!" Acey said, spotting the newcomer to the family. He jumped out of Shirley's grasp and down onto the floor, not sure what to make of a strange animal in the bed.

"Yep, it's a Doggie," Lisa said. "Come on over and meet the newest member of the family, Acey."

There was the sound of little claws hooking their way up the bed sheets and presently a little multicolored, whiskery face came into sight over the edge of the mattress.

Deucy jumped from Lisa's arms and ran to meet Acey. And vice versa.

THE END

Author's note: When I wrote the first Strange Valley novel I suspected that I might write another one eventually. I didn't know it would be this soon, but the overwhelmingly favorable response to the first book got me started on this one. And I see still another one in the future now, though I don't know how soon that will be. So many stories to tell, so little time...

As always, I thank all the people who have read my books and contributed to my success as an author. May you all enjoy a full lifetime of happy reading.

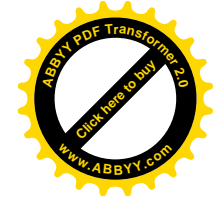
Darrell Bain

Shepherd, Texas

September 2004

APPENDIX: Proposed Weapon

Model:(*Multiple Role Assault Weapon*)



Code name:Wasteland

Caliber:10mm / 12 gauge / 20mm grenade

Sights:Variable Power 1x-10x Infrared Scope

**Capacity: 10mm/60 rounds, magazine fed12 gauge / 8 rounds
internal20mm**

Grenade/ 6 rounds internal

Description:

The H&K MRAW Multiple Role Assault Weapon is specifically designed for small insertion teams working in unsupported environments. The stock is formed primarily of a high strength polymer capable of withstanding temperatures ranging from minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit to 1400 degrees Fahrenheit. All metal components are made of tungsten or titanium alloys for high strength and light weight. The action is largely self-cleaning, requiring a minimum of field maintenance. The weapon can be field stripped in under ten seconds and fitted into it's own rear stock.

The primary barrel, located on top of the weapon, is chambered for the 10mm round. This weapon is automatic, capable of single shot, three round burst, 1200 round-per-minute full auto mode, selectable by a 3 position switch located on the left rear of the receiver. The weapon is fired by a dual purpose trigger in the standard position in the rear stock. This round is fed through removable 60 round magazines.

The MRAW is also equipped with an under-barrel semi-auto 20mm grenade launcher, which is fired by the same rear trigger, via a select switch on the rear right side of the receiver. Ammunition of this type is available in a wide variety of special-purpose designs, from explosive to incendiary. The MRAW can fire them all. This round is stored internally in a 6 round tube fitted below the barrel.

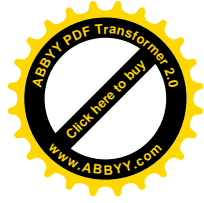
The secondary barrel is designed for the 12 gauge shotgun round. This barrel is triggered by a button switch, located on the fore stock. The action is semi-automatic. This arrangement allows the user to fire both the 10mm or 20mm grenade and the12 gauge round simultaneously. 8 12-gauge rounds are stored internally in a tube mounted inside the rear stock.

Accuracy in all conditions is assured by a variable power infrared



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scope. Magnification can be adjusted for 1x-10x. Infrared scoped are capable of detecting heat signatures through heavy foliage, in complete darkness, even through structure walls.

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