

The Focus Factor

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Twilight Times Books

Kingsport, Tennessee

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Twilight Times Books

POB 3340

Kingsport TN 37664

twilighttimesbooks.com/

Credits

Cover artwork--Kurt Ozinga

Managing Editor--Ardy M. Scott

Publisher: Lida E. Quillen

Published in the United States of America.

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

The Red Queen had it right--it did take all the running one could do just to keep in the same place.

The line from *Alice in Wonderland* brought a thin smile as Murray Blake hung up his lab coat and carefully shrugged an arm into his windbreaker. A week earlier he'd been lost in thought about his research project, in a restaurant no less, and the gun in his right jacket pocket almost conked a woman sitting at the adjacent table. The imaginary headline flashed across his mental screen: 'RESEARCH SCIENTIST K.O.s RESTAURANT PATRON.' He'd managed to catch the heavy bulge just in time and slap it back against his hip--still had the bruise--but it had been a close one.

Lost in thought--those three words certainly said it all. No matter how he stretched for that proverbial

carrot it was always the same distance away--just out of reach. Another hectic week at Barrington Research with nothing to show for it but fatigue that cut right through to the bone marrow. Come Monday he'd do it all over again. At the rate his life was flying by, his forty-fourth year might get there before the forty-third was half over. On the flip side, scientific breakthroughs were never part of anyone's timetable, happening when *they* were ready, not before.

He adjusted the gun handle for easy access, zipped the jacket and picked up his briefcase. One last check around the office showed all terminals secured and the server vault door properly sequenced. It would take a substantial amount of explosive to blow it, but just the past week an identical setup in Boulder had been compromised and data stolen. A steel door eight inches thick simply wasn't enough to guard company secrets any more. Even the smallish banks had gone to fourteen inches. The thought drew a tired sigh. It was all a crap shoot. It depended on what kind of secrets were being guarded--and who wanted them.

He pressed his thumb to the lockplate, holding it long enough for the analyzer to run its comparison. There was an audible *whirr* behind the door panel, the sound of powerful gear motors sliding heavy bolts into the steel panel, then a heavy *thud*. Done, at least until Monday. Then it would take a good half hour to get everything up and running again, including a full archive check to be sure nothing had happened over the weekend. So much for office security.

The whole protection thing had been one big charade for years because there'd been nothing much to conceal or protect where he was concerned. Basic research often turned out that way. The heavy bulge in his right pocket had to do with personal safety after he left the Barrington building, not while he was inside. Nobody'd want his scientific data anyway, at least not in its present state. It was one long, sad tale of promising threads that led nowhere. Only in the past few weeks had there been anything to crow about. The research had begun to get exciting--and promising. Definitely a source of renewed drive and personal energy, but still not worth the trouble of carrying a gun. Robbers weren't sophisticated enough to go after that kind of data, but the money he usually carried was another matter. Not that it was a lot, but still ... better to play it safe, as his wife Connie reminded him every so often.

He'd been thinking about the new investigative thread there in the restaurant, not caring to consider the odds against success while he fought down the natural tendency found in all research: push harder, go faster. Some of it couldn't be hurried, and there was the rub. Sit on a rocket, but stand on the brakes. Dreams were hard to deal with that way.

Dust was still being delivered horizontally outside the huge Barrington building, blowing into Oklahoma from Kansas. He ducked instinctively and held up a shielding hand to keep the grit from stinging his face or getting in his eyes, but it did anyway. Half of Kansas had to be covering Oklahoma these days, thanks to the wrong-way wind and constant drought. Or at least it seemed so on days like this. Clouds of the stuff whirled around the parking area floodlight poles, leaving cars with half an inch in a single workday. His own forty-acre spread, not that far from the labs, was no exception. Some of it remained green, but not for much longer if this kept up. Now only scrub oaks and gnarled cedar were hanging on, plus tumbleweeds, tough pasture grass and weeds of various kinds. Drifts of sand obscured the rest. It still rained further south, but who'd want to live there? They got hurricanes that far inland now, along with a spate of tornados every year. Big storms had already come within two hundred miles of the Oklahoma City suburbs, streaking up through Texas and eventually arching back through Kansas and points east as far as Chicago. Another hundred sixty miles north and the damn things would be crossing his front yard. Only the Rockies would stop them some day not that far in the future.

Some scientists thought the current Midwestern drought was part of a cycle rather than global warming. Who cared? Just have it all end, say tomorrow.

The parking lot was all but empty, just a few lonely cars plus his new Wankel Beehive. It suffered from the dust as much as its occupants did. The windshield was scratched and would need replacing soon. Air filters were good for about one week before they had to be changed. They were stacked fifty deep in his garage. There was modern technology for you--a flywheel that could power the car for up to ten miles, solar panels and fuel cells to supplement the gasoline engine, but no automatic air cleaner. The car had cost a bundle, but it got formidable mileage--a real consideration these days--and gasoline was still available because one of the new depolymerization plants outside the city furnished the oil for a small refinery. Not enough to guarantee anything outside the driving limitations of the Wankel, but who drove more than two hundred miles these days? And the way things were going, he couldn't be sure of proper servicing for the Beehive outside that range anyway. The old Lincoln Expedition was always there for a quick shopping trip downtown, or long distance driving if such a thing ever returned. And if the dust ever stopped.

His finger was alongside the gun's trigger as he punched in the access code on the Beehive's door and glanced quickly around to be sure he was alone. The unconscious act was the result of training and years of self-discipline. Even though the floodlights were adequate, hits were often made just as drivers were opening car doors or as they were settling in a moment later. This time there were no nearby cars to conceal criminals.

He relaxed further as the car door swung upward and a female voice--Connie's voice--welcomed him. "Hello, Mr. Blake. *Won't* you come in?" He'd originally programmed it with a much more seductive greeting. That hadn't gone over so well when he'd forgotten to kill the greeting before taking on a female passenger.

Once inside, with the door closed, he drew his first really long breath. One of the two most dangerous parts of the commute had been passed without incident. The other would be at the distant end. On the way out of the lot, he waved to the guard. What could be more comforting--and incongruous--than the sight of someone wearing composite body armor and carrying a short-barreled M16A5, especially on a Friday night after a mind-boggling week of work? It made the Barrington facility seem like the only safe place in the universe, except for the parking lot. Bandits on foot could still get through the cyclone fence if they had a mind. It hadn't been that way fifteen years back, when the country hadn't quite fallen into the mess it was in now.

His hair had been solid black then, not shot with gray, and his face wasn't covered with worry lines deep enough to conceal a memory chip. And glasses! He hated wearing them, but who had time for surgery? His eyes weren't really that bad, and the specs did help his eyestrain. Connie said they made him look distinguished. Ha! She'd have said that if he'd grown a Kris Kringle beard.

He was out at the main road before he really felt the pressure let go. A quick status check at the main road said the car's computer could do the driving. The five-mile route to home was well-programmed and the Beehive's reactive programming could handle anything unexpected, like a starving deer wandering onto the road or a snap I.D. check by the state police. That left him hands-free. He stuck one foot up on the dash, clasped both hands behind his head and asked for the digital news. The newsfeed had nothing new on it at all, in spite of what the word 'news' was supposed to mean. Some politician was blathering about ... well, what the heck *was* he blathering about? A minute later the question remained. A few thousand words, give or take, with time out for throat clearings and a slew of anecdotes, but not one clue as to the subject.

"Goddamned crooks, all of them." He'd muttered the same words a few thousand times before, but usually at home and never when he might be overheard. The Beehive had no audio link, as far as he knew, so he was free to say anything he wanted. His next word to the console was 'bioscience.' The

newscast switched before the word was finished, breaking in on a discussion of a new line of chicken corn that held great promise as a source of tasty, low fat protein. Then that topic devolved into politics as well. A debate between pundits of opposing ethical views got off to a lively start. One was based on religious objections to releasing plants imbued with animal genes into the environment, while the other so-called ethicist was no less adamant. She reasoned from an environmental basis, though God knows what she thought people would eat if every new agricultural product was banned, as she seemed to think they should be. Goddamn Luddites, both of 'em.

He switched off the news and took control of the car when it turned onto the gravel road going to his quarter-mile driveway and the 'golden gate.' That's what he and Connie called the thing. Not too many research scientists could afford security fences and gates like his, but in the long run the cost had been worth it. The security fence didn't actually surround his property, but it did go most of the way around. Better than most. Only a small portion was left to cyclone fence and barbed wire.

He stopped in the usual spot while the home computer once more made friends with the car. The telescopic retina scan and pattern recognition camera allowed him to stay put, relatively safe from any outlaws who might be hiding in the brush along the gravel road. Illegal immigrants were everywhere, and when work was scarce they formed roving gangs. Goodbye to anything valuable in vulnerable country cottages or estates when the immigangs came visiting. What a world! Couldn't even have a place in the country without spending a fortune on security. Cars like the Beehive even had so-called bulletproof windows that retracted no more than an arm's width. The laminate made driving almost too quiet at times, and ordinary conversation with someone outside was more sign language than anything else. In spite of all that, he could hear his Great Pyrenees dogs barking even now. When the Beehive was running on electricity, their acute hearing picked up its unique whine.

Sugar and Moose, the gentle giants, were as much a part of the security system as the rest. Friendly and lovable, they were instantly ferocious if any of the family were directly threatened. A new litter of pups was almost weaned. When the doggies got their weekly treat of chewies, which amounted to candy for dogs, they were more fun than the goats at feeding time. Sugar was even tending to a few baby chicks whose mother had fallen victim to a bobcat. What a sight when the chicks took to sitting on pups and mother, even sleeping with them. One photo won a prize in *Dog World*.

He parked the car and had no sooner raised the swing-up door than he was besieged by the monster dust mops. "Hello, Sugar. Howdy, Moose! Hey, you lummoxes, what have you been doing, loafing all day?" They bounced and rolled on the dusty driveway like it was a trampoline, waiting on him to clear the car so they could maul him. Then Connie called from the open door of the mud room. She was waggling the phone. Not even home, and he had a phone call waiting! What could that be about? He fended off the dusty dogs and hurried toward his wife.

He gave her a lingering, affectionate kiss before taking the phone. Age seemed to enhance Connie's subtle beauty. She still wore her reddish curly hair long, pulled casually back in a modified ponytail, and whenever she'd been out in the sun the freckles across the bridge of her nose were more pronounced--like now. She'd gotten home early and had been out trying to do something with the plants bordering the house. An hour in the sun was all it took.

He slipped his free arm around her waist and put the phone to his ear. It Jack Williams, his best friend and a colonel in the army.

"Hey, Murray, we're in town this weekend. What say we get together and you bring me up to date on your research?"

"Bribe me."

"Okay, how's ribs on the barbie sound? On Brenda and me this time. Big and juicy. Bones for the doggies."

"Fine, for openers. Now *if* you throw in everything the military's been up to since whenever it was we last talked, you got a deal."

"Boy, you strike a hard bargain! Okay, we'll bring some little ribs just for those Chihuahuas. What're their names again?"

"Bandit and Frito. And they're Pomeranians. That's where all the background noise is coming from." Murray held the phone out so his friend could hear the frantic yapping of the fuzzy little dogs as they vied for his attention.

"That's a relief. I thought maybe Connie was strangling a rooster for dinner."

"Matter of fact, we've been talking about you and Brenda staying here next time you get some leave. Not that we miss you, but you barbeque better than I do. This is a real army leave this time, right? You're not AWOL?"

"Last time I went AWOL they begged me never to come back. I didn't listen and look what happened ... made me a colonel. And Murray, when it comes to your cooking, that's not a Bunsen burner you've got out there on the patio. You're not heating something in a test tube. No wonder your dogs won't eat the leftovers. What day?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Sounds good. We'll see you about noon."

He flipped the phone shut. He and Jack had been captains together a long time back. The research position with Barrington had been too attractive to pass up, a chance for better pay and a more interesting job in abnormal genetic physiology, his specialty. He'd originally been drawn to that field of study because of autism that ran in the family, but a chance like that came once in a lifetime. He had resigned his commission and grabbed at it.

Connie's bright smile set off her freckles. "Are they coming?"

"Yep. Guess he wanted to check and make sure I wasn't going to be stuck at the lab before he said anything to you. He's bringing the ribs." He squeezed her, then aimed her inside, heading for the den where the liquor lived. "Where's Keith?"

"In his room. Checking to make sure everything's still there, I suppose."

He glanced at his watch. "Two hours?"

"Sometimes it takes him that long to make sure nothing's been disturbed. You know."

"Yeah." He held up a bottle of Haig & Haig, arched an eyebrow and she nodded. It was time for relaxation. Their autistic son always ran for his bedroom as soon as he got home, never reappearing until he was satisfied everything was undisturbed there. The van dropped him off only after calling to be sure Connie was home. It was an expensive service, but Keith seemed to find some kind of release at the learning center so they'd kept it up. And the costs kept rising.

Medical care was edging ever closer to the breaking point as new, more expensive technology emerged and the elderly population continued to grow. Added to all that was an entangled, incredibly convoluted

mix of government and private claims and payments that had evolved into a monster no one understood, not even administrators or the insurance companies paying for the care. Then there was the mandate to provide care for illegal immigrants and their children, bumping costs and complexities up even more. Patients rarely tried to comprehend the barrage of paperwork that followed any kind of medical care. The future? Even if one could afford the taxes and premiums, it looked terribly bleak.

He pulled two glasses from the shelf, added ice cubes and poured a liberal helping of liquor into each. They'd no sooner gotten comfy on the big couch in the den when Keith joined them.

Murray smiled. "Hi, son. How was your day?" He got no reply. The boy simply went to the mudroom door, just off the enclosed garage, and waited there. It was where he always stood when he figured he was going somewhere, but he always insisted on going with Connie. Both were compulsive actions typical of autistic children, but they evoked sadness in Murray every time he saw them. What was going through Keith's mind? He was bright, but related only spottily to the outside world.

"Connie, did you tell him we were going somewhere?"

"He must have heard you talking about barbeque, and he's right. I do have to run into town and get some shrimp and fixings. We're out."

"How did he know that?"

She shrugged. "Don't ask me, but he's on it now." She took a sip of her drink. "Here. Set this in the fridge for me. It won't take us long for what we need. I'll take the Lincoln."

Her purse was kept locked up in their bedroom because of Keith's fascination with it. She'd tried filling an identical purse with similar but useless items for him to play with, but he never once looked at them. He was hard to fool. She returned a moment later. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

So much for a quiet drink after a hectic week. As they left, he switched on the big screen in the den. There'd be some sort of special running. This one was about the latest famines in Africa and Brazil. He watched a few minutes then turned it off. Famines and starvation had been going on in Africa ever since he could remember. The continent ought to have been depleted of its inhabitants by now, what with rampant diseases outrunning cures, and corrupt governments not having the finances to cover the crying need for treatment. Census figures always showed population figures rising ever upward, though. Famine and disease didn't appear to stop the reproductive urge; more likely the struggle for survival increased it.

Murray stretched out, then crossed his ankles on the coffee table and thought about Keith. His son's condition had undoubtedly played a large part in the direction of the research he was doing now. Ever since the day Keith had been diagnosed as an autistic, he'd been a source of fascination for the way he and others like him could obsessively focus their attention on a single subject to the exclusion of everything else. Remarkable feats of discovery and achievement were fairly common with some forms of autism, particularly those afflicted with Asperger's syndrome--documented feats of prodigious memory, awesome mathematical talents and exceptional accomplishments in the arts and sciences. The question was 'why?'

Some psychologists thought the so called *idiot savants* weren't all that creative, but simply had their minds totally centered on their interests, so much so they were able to go far beyond any ordinary person's expectations. Baloney! There had to be something other than obsessive attention to detail behind it all.

Such as microproteins.

Everyone's genes produced them, and it had become apparent over the last decade how many of them, previously unknown, could be found circulating in the bloodstream. He'd begun cataloguing the tiny molecules of autistic individuals who displayed creative abilities, comparing them to those of other autistics as well as the ones found in normal persons of both average and super intelligence. The arduous task had begun to pay off in terms of recognizable progress that might lead to a stupendous discovery in the realm of creativity. Genetic physiology wasn't the primary causative mechanism, according to his research, but certainly appeared to play a major role in the process. Monday might bring a breakthrough. *Might*. Over the weekend his barrage of ultracentrifuges at the laboratory ought to yield enough material to reach some final conclusions. He didn't even have to be there. His lab technician would handle the infinitely painstaking task of isolating the fractions when the run was finished, sometime Sunday. Once he had the results his work would really begin. He might even drop in on Sunday, see how things were going. On second thought, probably not. He'd be recovering from Jack's barbecue and a long evening of chat and catching up. Then too, it was more important to spend quality time with Connie and Keith, come Sunday. Where were they, anyhow? Town was only a few minutes away and she wasn't going to buy out the store, just shrimp and fixings.

It had been over an hour.

Chapter Two

He finished his drink, had another, then paced. *She should have been home more than an hour ago, even if she got stuck at the railroad crossing. Where can she be? Twice on the comphone and no answer, but it could be the satellite reception. Maybe it's down for updates, repairs. Maybe it's ... maybe they're maneuvering it.* The possibilities were borderline ridiculous. *Come on, Murray. Cool it. She's a big girl. Look at the news or something.*

He did, but that was no good either. Back to pacing.

How about the comphone extension? Maybe it had failed and the damned thing was out of charge. Nope, it was okay. Where the hell was she? Almost by habit he started walking down the quarter mile graveled driveway toward the gate, something he'd always done when the newspaper had been delivered rather than coming by satellite. As long as he was going to pace, he might as well be out in the air. He was nearing the midpoint of the drive when his comphone spoke up: *Gate. Unknown visitor.*

He activated video. When the handscreen brightened, his heart missed a beat. That was a state patrol car at the gate, and behind it one belonging to the county sheriff's office. A quick pan to the insignia confirmed it. They looked real enough, even though there was a slim chance they weren't. Fake officials' cars and uniforms were occasionally used to gain entrance at security gates, a technique brought into the country from the murderous Gulf Wars.

He focused in on the driver of the county vehicle. Alfredo Gomez! Alfredo was one of the sheriff's deputies. With a sinking heart he told the gate to open, then stepped away from the ruts of the driveway and waited. Moments later the two cars pulled to a halt. Ignoring the state patrol car, he went to the passenger's side of the deputy's vehicle, one of the newer sedans sporting composite armor and bulletproof glass. You could tell at a glance--it was built like a Brink's truck with rounded corners.

The door clicked open and he slid inside. Al's hand was sweaty, just like the young man's dark brown face. "Hello Al. I take it you're not bringing good news, not with the state tagging along. What is it?"

"Murray, it's bad. Why don't we go on up to the house. We need to talk to you, and--"

"Just go ahead and tell me, Al. Was it Keith? Or Connie? What happened? How bad is it? Are they..." He couldn't go on.

Al glanced over to be sure he was seated, then started up the drive. He pulled into the circular turnaround before answering. "Murray, God knows I hate to have to tell you this, but it was a wreck on the interstate. Some stupid wetbacks hit them head-on in an old pickup. They were going the wrong way on that bad curve right before you get into town; you know the one. A couple of the bunch survived and I guess they'll be prosecuted, for all the good it'll do you now. I'm sorry, Murray."

Alfredo was a third generation immigrant, and talked like one. Hardly anyone in the area had much use for political correctness when it came to illegals, and a wetback would always be a wetback. Murray looked away and pounded his fist on his knee, saying nothing for a long moment. Finally he turned and let Alfredo continue.

"The trooper ... he ... well, he was going to notify you, but I said I'd do it since I knew you. Murray, I hate that you have to go through this, but he's going to ask you to come in and identify the bodies."

The words arrived as through a long tunnel, echoing over and over. *Bodies. Bodies. Bodies.*

Murray forced himself to concentrate. *Get a grip. You can't let down until it's over. You have to go through it. You've imagined such things a dozen times in your worst nightmares, but this time you can't switch your thoughts to something else. It's real. They're gone, Murray, gone.*

But the mention of bodies made getting a grip impossible. There was all that carnage he'd seen on the operation in Venezuela, from the time when the Marines and an army brigade had been sent in to rescue American citizens. For a lot of them, it had been too late. Dead bodies everywhere. Destroyed, eviscerated, burned--no longer people, just things--with expressions of pain or agony, if they still had faces. Would Connie look like ... like them? A head-on collision ... *ah, no, no!*

He shook his head, feeling his vision blur. "I can't do it ... Al ... not that. I can't do that. I can't--"

"You *have* to, Murray. They need the identification."

"It can't all end ... not like this. Damn ... damn ... oh, damn!"

A hand was placed on his arm. "Murray, I'm sorry. You can do it. Just take a look, that's all. Take a deep breath, calm yourself, say it's them and it's over. That's all you have to do. The trooper's waiting. Go talk to him."

"Not my own family, Al. Someone else can do it." He abruptly shouldered open the heavy door and staggered out. *There's no way in hell they can force me to view the ... they'll have to get someone else, someone from town, someone from the agency that cared for ... Keith. They've got the DNA on both of them, so let 'em use that.*

But when the trooper's window rolled down, nothing came together, no coherent argument, just protest. The trooper stared straight ahead all through the outburst. He finally looked up. "Sir," he said gently, "we recovered some personal identification. If you could just look at one of the victims, we'll take that as conclusive for both. Or if you have some other close family member, that would do as well."

"There's no one nearby. They're in ... I'll ... okay, I'll go in and look at ... at my son. Only him. Not ... not my wife. I can't ... not her." *I'll remember you as you were, Connie, my beautiful, vibrant, loving companion. I'll always remember your smile when you said you'd be back in a few minutes. Your freckles. They were you.*

It was the last thing he remembered clearly that day.

* * * *

Connie had named the farm one day when they examined a withered Leyland Cypress landscape tree, their third attempt to get one started. She'd laughed, not really serious as she complained. "Everything we do here dies, so far as plants go. We ought to name this the Do-Die farm. We should have settled in East Texas or Louisiana, where it's still green."

Murray stared at the spot where the tree had been, then wandered on, pausing here and there as memories flooded back. It was part of letting go, something he knew he had to do to wash away of the nightmare of these days since losing her. Part of it came from Connie's family in the form of outrage when they learned there'd be no 'viewing', not even a private one. There'd be no closed casket on a bier either, no masterpiece in walnut they could weep over and whisper about and drag out old memories over. If they wanted to see her casket, they could go to the graveyard where they'd cluster around an artfully concealed hole, hear words they'd heard at other burials and depart in the belief that somehow the casket would magically become a lovely grassy plot replete with headstone and flowers. He wouldn't be there. Even the burial was a concession, something he allowed, not something Connie would have wanted. She

hated spectacles of that sort, but there was so much rebellion over cremation that he yielded on that subject, nothing else. It might cause a permanent breach with her family, but he couldn't make himself give much of a damn just then.

Throughout it all they barely mentioned Keith. Her family had never really accepted him, letting their silent approbation say clearer than words that the autism was his fault, not Connie's. As if anyone could predict those things.

It had been a dark, depressing nightmare with no retreat possible, given his analytical mind. The phone calls were agony, first to Jack and Brenda to cancel their visit, then to the family members. He'd done it solo, in a state of shock without a soul to lean on, and shortly thereafter they'd descended on him. Myriads of quasi-strangers, most familiar--others not, arriving at his home in ragged sequences; mountains of food brought by some as a form of comfort; expressions of consolation and grief; four dogs going crazy; arrangements at the funeral home with one hand, orchestration of the memorial service with the other, phone calls and simultaneous comphone conversations, incessant explanations. The kaleidoscope of events played out over and over in his conscious mind, while a part of him screamed for quiet, for time to grieve. It had never happened when it should have happened.

He was grieving now as he wandered their Do-Die farm. The memory of her merry voice and that laughing, expressive face was there wherever he looked, but something else was forming in the background, tenuous, like a thin fog.

It was rage.

Rage, not so much for the specific truckload of illegals that cost him his family, but the fact of their very illegal existence in the country. Rage at the federal government's unwillingness to control the borders, at the craven politicians who feared taking effective action would lose the Hispanic vote. It gradually displaced grief, helping him take his mind somewhere else. He began documenting all the aspects of illegal immigration, concentrating on how it had gotten to the present morass and what it would take to cure it. He delved into government in general, into how cowardly and immoral politicians cast votes, not for what was best for the country, but for whatever would get them reelected. Or, for whatever legislation the biggest donors wanted passed or kept viable by congress.

One major roadblock to effective control, but by no means the only one, was the way elected officials reached out to ethnic voting blocs--such as Hispanics--and catered to their demands. Industry wanted wages kept low to compete with foreign markets. Farmers, unsatisfied with giant publicized subsidies of the past or the more hidden ones at present, supported more and more illegals because they'd harvest the crops at any wages. And the list went on.

That study initially occupied him, but it soon ballooned to include other aspects of government and society, bogging him down in a wealth of details. It would be hard for even one of those giant computers normally used for weather forecasting to untangle the mess government had become. Probably impossible. Computers were fast, not intelligent. At the end of the week he gave up. He had a mountain of data and assumptions and charts and projections, plus innumerable other paths he'd thought of but hadn't traveled. Too much, too much. Maybe later he could come back and concentrate on just the illegal immigration boondoggle and perhaps think of something to do about it, but for now it was time to go back to Barrington, and work. That would be a test of another sort. Perhaps he was ready, but he wouldn't know until he faced it.

He decided to go in late the first morning. That way he might postpone the inevitable a little longer, not the most courageous decision to be sure, but one anyone might expect. Ernesta Wiggins, administrative assistant for his department, would be the most likely to spot him as he entered the suite of offices.

Ernesta helped him and the other scientists avoid the welter of paperwork inherent in any project. Oh, for days of Edison or Mendel, when a single scientist could do all the labor and still make monumental discoveries, but that was mostly romanticizing. Modern science increasingly dealt with the ultra-micro world of atoms and molecules, areas of science the public was largely unaware of. Ernie made everything so much easier that he often wondered how they had ever managed without her.

She detoured in his direction the moment she saw him. "Sorry to hear about your family, Mister Blake. That was awful."

"Thanks, Ernie. I appreciate it." *Okay, I'm ready. You'll ask me about the accident now, and how it happened and if I'm okay and do I want some coffee.*

But she did nothing of the sort; she merely waited to see if he needed her assistance to get started again. He stood indecisively for a moment, then nodded and headed for his office to one side of her alcove. He'd just tucked the key card back in his wallet when Norman Wheelright called out his name. Norman carried a perpetually cheerful grin on his young face and it was hard not to be affected by his always-exuberant mood. He did nothing to temper his expression or smile this morning.

"Good Morning Norman. How'd the fractions turn out? Do we have enough material?"

"It went wonderful, Mister Blake, wonderful. I've got everything sorted out and aliquoted into the preservatives the way you wanted. All the analytical results are done, waiting for you on your desk. Say, I'm really sorry to hear about your family."

"Thanks, Norm. Let me take a look at the mail and I'll be back there in a little while."

Ernesta had been her usually efficient self while he was absent. Other than a couple of questions from other research scientists working in related fields, and the anticipated sympathy mail, there wasn't much there. He saved the sympathy stuff for later, answered the questions, then turned to the papers stacked in the inbox. Most of those just needed signing, and the others could wait. Nothing was more important than the protein fractions, but first things first. The centrifuged fractions needed to be the same ones he thought were 'coded for' by genes responsible for the areas of the brain he was pursuing. Were they? The report should tell. He scanned it, nodding when he saw the big spike in the comparison graphs. Definitely the right track. Time to go see Norman now.

The lab was divided into several work stations, depending on the techniques being used and the particular instruments involved. Lab coats were hanging just inside the door, ahead of the sticky antibiotic strip on the floor. There was no need for bunny suits with the type of work being done, but those hung there as well, including hair and over-shoe covers, just in case they had to render the lab area fairly sterile.

He grabbed his own coat and shrugged into it.

Norman was hunched over a bench. He was one of myriad technicians who either weren't quite smart enough to master a science at the doctorate level, or who'd stopped their education at the undergraduate level for other reasons, yet were totally indispensable nevertheless. The man gave meticulous attention to detail.

"Ready to push ahead, Norm?"

"Sure thing. I've got the fractions set up to go any direction you'd like."

"Show me what you've done."

Sporting his trademark grin, Norman opened one of the big coolers and pointed to dozens of tightly capped tubes labeled with numbers, as well as his own handwritten labels, designating each sample according to which group it had been derived from. There were samples taken from autistics of varying degree in severity and intelligence, as well as could be judged, plus normals of varying intelligence. Then both groups were represented by a further subdivision as to whether the microproteins had been derived from the individuals in either normal or focused modes of thought. "See here, Mr. Blake? I've got your samples ready for the next step, whichever way you decide to go. Just let me know and it won't take any time at all to parcel out the portions."

"Good. Now I think I know where we're going ... or let me say the conditions under which we want to collect more data ... but we don't want to draw conclusions in advance. I was thinking quite a bit during the week I was ... off work, and I think I'd like to speed this up a bit. Go ahead and run whatever you need of the samples through the antibody-suppressing solutions so we won't get misled by allergic reactions. Use only the fractions from the focused groups, but we want to test them all regardless of IQ levels. And just on a hunch, let's start some replication going on the proteins taken from the focused autistics. I'm thinking now that we'll need more of them than any of the others. Follow?"

"Yep. In fact, I'm ahead of you. I've already got replication runs going on all of them. Now how 'bout the mice? Want me to start with an NG line in the standard maze-solving protocol?"

"Correct. We'll give that two weeks, maximum, or until we see some deviation. Use the seven-per-batch plan and the usual algorithms for analysis. You've got everything in your files?"

Norman nodded.

"Good." I don't expect we'll be able to draw any meaningful conclusions from this study, but it should serve as the basis for the chimp trials we'll run next. You can get the chimp protocols lined up while the meeces are busy with their games, so we won't waste any time. I'll get the paperwork on them going."

"Just let me know the next day or two how you want it set up. Oh, and I'll need you to decide on the dosage per mouse and calculate the amount. I'll re-check everything right before we start."

"Norman, the day you don't re-check the re-checks you just re-checked is the day I'll know you need a long vacation." He'd almost smiled; it came out more a twist of his mouth. "Anyway ... well, thanks. I think we'll just go with low, medium and high doses since I hope this will be a fast and dirty run. It will save some of the little critters and we can always go back if we need more data. Is there anything else you need before you get started?"

"Just your signature on the order for the mice and some time with one of the certified animal handlers. Both requests are on your desk."

"And the microproteins? How much did we harvest from the focusers?"

"A lot more than you predicted, but still not all that much. Not to worry, though. I've got the sequencers and duplicators running on the ones I thought would interest you most, and I'll start any others you say. Take a look while I get the mice protocol going."

This time the smile managed to come through. "I can see I'm not needed around here, so I'll go crawl into the cave and read a journal or something while you do the real work." The 'cave' was a mini-office set into an alcove, not much more than a small desk with a computer and an equally small table to one side, where journals or printouts could be spread.

Norman grinned at the exchange. When it came to work or long hours, nobody outdid the boss. He

returned to his original work station and once again hunched-down over his papers.

Murray pulled up the standard chimp protocols and began setting up the next phase of the research, getting ahead of himself because the mice study might produce nothing. But there was something about this one, something ... untenable ... that had him thinking positively. He'd felt it coming.

The mice study would justify further testing.

* * * *

Jack Williams' phone call came during a walk with the Pomeranians just before dark. Of the four dogs, they were the most programmed for a walk each night, doubly so since Connie's death. Sugar and Moose were happy getting their daily walk with neighbor Gloria Stimson, who'd volunteered that service. Murray knew he'd have to find a caregiver for the dogs soon. They were too much for a single owner away all day, and he couldn't keep relying on Gloria, nice as she was. The Pomeranians, meanwhile, were bundles of energy and noise when it came time for their nightly outing. Murray had to cup the mike just to hear over their yapping.

"I thought it was about time to check on you, pal. You okay?"

"Still here. I went back to work last week. How's Brenda?"

"Fat and happy. Both the boys still overseas. Hey Murray, could you stand some company this weekend?"

"As a matter of fact, I could. There's something I've been playing with that I want to get your input on. Why don't you and Brenda come on over Saturday morning? Plan on spending the night if you can."

"We'll do that if you don't mind some extra company. Our niece is staying with us for a while."

"Sure, bring her along. Anything the kid can't eat?"

"She *loves* steak, hint, hint. And dogs ... the woofy kind."

"She's been hanging around you too much. Okay, I'll stock up. See you Saturday."

The call was timely, first because of Jack's recent assignment to the Infantry Light Weapons and Tactics Testing command. That was good news, Jack's original reason for inviting himself and Brenda down for the barbecue that never happened--he'd wanted to talk about it. The assignment was a fairly small army post devoted to evaluating new, multi-tasked exotic weapons in simulated company sized combat. Jack loved it as much as he'd hated his previous stint at the Pentagon, serving as aide to a political general he detested.

Another reason for the visit was that Jack and Brenda both felt responsible in some weird way for the accident, and it was important for them to see how he'd bounced back--if it could be called that. More like stumbling out of thick fog and trying to find one's bearings again.

What was it they said about life ... that it happened while you were making other plans?

Chapter Three

Ernie's stern look went with her warning. "You're going to go over your budget, Mr. Blake, *and* it's against company regs to start a follow-up research project before you get the chief's approval. *And* you know it."

Okay, so he'd ordered the chimp study to begin before the mice started their second run, even before their first injection wear-off period ended. There'd been an excellent reason. He, Norman and the animal handler all saw and noted the difference in the mice who'd been injected with microproteins derived from *focused* autistics. Their ability to solve mazes jumped to a surprising level over a period of several days, then tapered off in the normal way with no apparent after effects. Those receiving the middle dosage did the best. Higher doses appeared to affect them in some neurological way, making them tremble constantly and perform slightly worse than the middle dose mice, although they recovered from whatever it was. That was encouraging. Apparently the microproteins wouldn't permanently alter behavior, at least in mice. Now if only the trend would continue in the direction he hoped for, the tests might be quite useful. Even partial success would help, pointing the way toward more definitive investigations.

Rarely were scientific breakthroughs the result of single inspirations. They were the result of long, winding roads filled with tiny glimpses--often guesses--of which fork in the road to take, which path to follow. Each little guess had to be judged right before subsequent ones were even considered. Still, it helped to know where the path ought to lead. He had been working on the microproteins a long time now.

Ernie was the project's watchdog. Her warnings about the chief were as bad as being called 'doctor' just for staying in school longer than most. That's why he'd insisted on everyone calling him 'Mr. Blake,' not Dr. Blake. The chief insisted on the honorarium. He was Dr. Hiram Dean Craddock, not so affectionately called *El Jefe* behind his back.

"Tell El ... I mean H.D. I'll take it out of next quarter's budget if necessary."

"He won't like it."

"So what's new? Let him sue me. It's the latest fad."

Ernesta grinned and turned back to her terminal. She'd probably manipulate the quarterly budget figures so thoroughly Craddock would never suspect a thing. Just as with Norman in the lab, people like her were invaluable for handling administrative tasks, and she was one of the best.

Craddock was the lab director, in overall charge at the Okalahoma branch of Barrington Research. Nobody remembered when the *El Jefe* moniker came about, but that had always been one of his nicknames. The other was 'Machine Dean,' from days when he'd held a similar position at a local college. The 'machine' part referred to his habit of moving abruptly. The joke had been that Star Wars' C3PO moved smoothly compared to Dean. Somehow he even managed to eat using quick, jerky motions. There was nothing smooth about Hiram Dean Craddock, nothing at all.

The worst thing *anyone* could do was call him by his first name. He loathed it.

Craddock ran the facility as if the only thing that really mattered was a steady output of productive work, something never guaranteed in a basic research facility. Once he'd reached the executive level he seemed to forget the old science maxim: research produced far more negative than positive results. Those published studies, while not generating immediate revenue, nevertheless saved money in the long run by preventing scientists--and managers such as him--from traveling avenues already proven futile.

Ernie read Craddock like a book, so when she issued a warning it was rarely ignored. This time things were different; the results had suddenly turned promising and he wasn't about to slow down.

Murray realized he was smiling.

* * * *

The discovery was a bit unsettling.

Jack's niece was *not* eight years old as imagined, but an attractive woman in her early twenties. Petite and slim, a bit over five feet tall, Wilma Timms was Jack's *older* sister's daughter. She had a pleasantly pretty face framed by short, blonde hair. Jack made the introductions with his usual flair.

"As I said, Wilma, Murray's my best friend. Now you see what an idiot I am for even suggesting this."

"Don't be so silly, Uncle Jack." She laughed and held out her hand. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Blake, after hearing so much about you. My uncle's a one-man admiration society."

Her hand was soft and cool, but the moment was interrupted by the click of paws on hardwood. Moose had finished marking all four tires on Jack's car and was ready to perform his remaining duty--welcoming guests. He aimed directly for the first one he saw--Wilma.

"Oh, no you don't." A two-handed grab for the shaggy coat, and the front paws never quite touched her. "Down, Moose! Shake."

With a throaty whine that might have meant *but I wanted to do it my way*, the oversized ball of white fur took his time plunking his rear portion down, then raised the right paw while looking away as if resigned to the lesser challenge. Wilma held the paw and patted him on the head with her other hand.

"Moose, you're supposed to look *at* the lady when you shake hands. That's it."

She still had the paw in her hand. "What happens when I let go?"

"You'll be okay now. He always tries to jump up on a person when he first meets them. He won't do it again, though. I've taught him that after shaking with a person, it's not allowed. Of course you'll have to go through the same routine again if you ever come back."

"It's really pretty out here, even as dry as it's been this year."

"Connie took care of most of the yard."

"I'm ... really sorry about your family, Mister Blake. That must have been horrible."

"Thanks. Call me Murray. I know I have gray in my hair, but I'm not old enough for the 'mister' bit away from work."

She laughed again, then stooped to rub the little Pomeranians who'd been agitating for attention, suddenly kneeling and getting her face and hands kissed. Then it was Brenda's turn. As she delivered a brief hug, Jack held out his traditional bottle of brandy in a paper bag.

"This goes with the yarn swapping later, ol' buddy." He set it on the kitchen counter. "Now where's the beef, in the fridge?"

Brenda took over at that point, wagging her finger. "Murray, I know where everything is. You and Jack go get the grill ready so Wilma and I can cook before the wind comes up. You can both talk about

your projects."

"I thought Jack was the grillmeister of the family."

"He just thinks he is. Wait till you taste *my* cooking. Now you just shoo out of here. Take a couple beers outside, set up the grill and relax. You two have lots to talk about."

"Bottom line, Jack, I got really bogged down in what I'd describe as incredibly complex interwoven factors when I tried to dissect the whole problem of illegal immigration. What a rat's nest!"

"Interesting."

"But it's not *just* that. The whole damn country is on the skids and no one seems to give a damn."

"Plenty of us do, Murray, including me, but where in hell do you start? It's not as simple as just voting for the better man. No one can get elected today without racking up stacks of IOU's to a multitude of pressure groups and special interests. For that matter nobody seems to *want* to run for office without being beholden to some faction or other. Like it's a form of support group once they're in office. By the time they're at the level of party influence that gets them nominated, they're already corrupt."

"If they weren't crooks to begin with."

"Right. So what kind of research are you doing?"

"Actually, I'm into something really intriguing right now. I'll tell you about it, but keep it to yourself."

"Damn, that spoils it, Murray. If I can't tell someone the instant I leave here, I'll come unglued."

"I have a tube of stuff you can have to fix up the wreck. I'm on the trail of something really big, if it turns out the way I hope it will."

It was as far as he got. The women appeared with a platter of meat ready for burning. Brenda made shooing motions with one hand. "You two can leave now. The Marines have landed and the situation is well in hand." Wilma was giggling behind her. "Blasphemy will get you nowhere, Brenda. How many times have I told you that." Jack was on his feet, reaching for the barbecue fork.

"Ixnay. You're outta here, you and Murray. Take the doggies for a walk."

"She's hopeless when she's like this," Jack said, jabbing the fork back into its holster. "Looks like we'll have to throw ourselves on their mercy and hope for the best."

"Come on, we can check on the kittens and guinea hens. I'll tell you the rest on the way."

The six-week old kittens were tumbling over Bandit under the watchful eye of their mother. Murray picked one up. "I suppose I'll have to let this group go."

"Why do that?"

"The chickens and cats were all Connie's stuff and I really don't have the time or inclination now to keep it up. Or the horses, either. The four furry people will keep me occupied enough, and that's with my neighbor's help. Anyway, that's where my research stands. It could be really important if it turns out to not have any side effects on humans, but it'll take years before I'm allowed human trials no matter what results I get from the current research."

"I wouldn't get rid of your chickens just yet. You might be eating them before it's all over with, what with

the way inflation's running lately. Okay, I've listened to you and now I'll pass on a bit of information. Like yours, it's just between us. The government is so broke the military's liable to have to take a ten per cent pay cut. The troops are restive already, especially those with family. It's getting harder all the time for them to make ends meet on a soldier's salary. No telling what kind of military we'll have left if it does happen."

"Same for the research community, Jack. Hell, my own boss worries more about budgets than what we're actually doing, and it's a corporation he's running, not a government agency. Of course...."

"Yeah? You stopped talking."

"Just thinking. A whole bunch of corporate research is done at the behest of the government these days, and when that's the case we have to toe the government's line. Especially when it comes to human testing. Double what I just said about years before we get to them."

"How about using volunteers?"

"I wish." It was more a resignation than exclamation. "The lawyers would have us in bankruptcy from personal liability lawsuits within a year, providing the insurance lawyers didn't cancel our policies immediately. You know how that goes, everybody and their brother suing for one thing or another. If it's not personal liability, it's class action brought by those same goddamn sharks. That's what they are, sharks feeding off the vitals of the country like there's no tomorrow."

Jack looked more sad than disgusted. "I had a lawyer once tell me the difference between a good lawyer and a bad one was measured in the willingness to go for the jugular. Come on, let's get back and find out how overdone a hunk of beef can get."

* * * *

Jack and Brenda were always entertaining, but the big surprise for Murray was finding Wilma good company as well. Ah, the optimism of youth! She thought the direction society was going could be changed with nothing more than personal effort.

Once, while Jack and Brenda were napping, she joined him and Moose on the porch. It was a special occasion for Moose, who was banned from the porch whenever it was damp. He just loved to roll in red mud, transferring it to the floor and lawn chairs as if he were Rembrandt. Of course, it wasn't damp that often, but Moose hadn't made the connection. The porch was off limits--unless he was invited.

When Wilma brought out a pitcher of ice tea and glasses, Moose waited only long enough to see where she'd sit. She was barely in place before he had his huge head in her lap, making her laugh.

"Just shove him away if he bothers you, Wilma. It may take a couple of shoves. He's almost immovable when he sneaks his head into someone's lap like that."

"I like him, Murray. I haven't been able to afford the space for pets, and I don't believe in cooping them up in little apartments and leaving them alone all day."

"Good for you. Our furry friends do have minds and personalities, something a lot of people forget. I prefer them over quite a few humans I know. Moose looks formidable, but he's just a big, lovable lummo. On the other hand, Bandit would attack a cougar if he thought it was threatening anyone in the family. He's the real guard dog. What kind of work are you doing now, Wilma?"

"I'm between jobs, as they say. I took a government clerical position to help support mom. She died last year, and then a few weeks ago my agency got, you know, downsized. We heard the work was farmed

out to contractors who don't have to pay benefits. Supposedly that saves the government money, but nobody stops to think that low-wage people suddenly losing their benefits are going to be on government aid rolls before long, particularly for medical care. God, my mom's drug costs alone were horrendous before she died, despite those that were covered."

"Let me guess. She was on one of the newer drugs the insurance companies aren't covering yet?"

"Right. I didn't realize what a mess the medical care system in this country was in until I started taking care of her. Every single visit to a doctor or pharmacy generated a ton of paperwork, and not one damn bit of which was understandable. I don't care if you have an IQ of two hundred. I ... sorry, Mr. Blake ... Murray. I tend to get out my soapbox when I start talking about medical care. Mine will run out in another two months, unless I fork over the equivalent of half a year's pay I'm not getting any more. Isn't that nice? They gave us three months of benefits when they fired us, that is, *if* we could afford to keep paying our share." Her laugh was bitter. "Fortunately, Jack and Brenda offered to let me stay with them until I find a decent job."

"You were lucky. The whole thing is out of hand. It's the--"

"It's the lawyers!" Jack interrupted from the porch doorway. He'd heard the final exchange. "Blame the damn lawyers every time. *They're* behind everything that's wrong today. They're the ones who write up all the stuff that goes into laws. There are times I think it's done to purposely confuse us so we won't know what they're up to. What do you think, pal?"

"Yep. When they revised the pension laws, my dad lost damn near his entire savings. Yet the company he worked for is still in business, fat and happy. And the taxpayers get stuck with the bill."

"The same thing happened with my father," Wilma offered. "He thought he had it set up so him and mom would be comfortable after retirement, but...." She stopped, taking a deep breath. "I guess you both know the rest."

Jack and Brenda did know. Her father hadn't exactly retired; he'd committed suicide after losing his life savings from fraudulent accounting by an investment firm. The fully-paid-up house her mother lived in afterward was confiscated to pay for nursing home costs.

Jack slapped the porch post and made a face. "Well, now that we've all achieved that lighthearted, cheerful mood, let's have something to drink and enjoy the rest of the day. Murray, we'll have to be getting on back about dark. I've got a busy week in the field ahead of me and Brenda has to get back to work tomorrow."

"A drink suits me just fine. Who'd go for rum punch?"

Chapter Four

Thanks to Norman donating his weekend to get all the little details ready, the chimp research phase was progressing nicely. He'd also stayed late the first half of the week to be sure it was set up exactly the way the boss wanted it. Nobody asked him to put in the overtime, but that was Norman. It had to be done right if it were to be done at all, and nobody was smarter than Mr. Blake when it came to running protocols.

Little Big Rock, the animal handler, shared Norman's opinions. He was the graying Amerindian who'd worked the mice, gentle with the animals and meticulous about following directions. The chimps raised a ruckus every time he appeared, knowing he always had a kind word and some little tidbit or new toy for them.

Murray put in his own overtime from Thursday through Sunday, a period during which he slept poorly. All he could think of all night long was the chimp study, and what they were seeing. After the first run started, it was only chimps in the control group that reacted when their handler came near. The remainder, those receiving the microproteins from focused autistics, were so consumed with their new playthings they ate or drank as if the very acts were a burden. They were totally absorbed in assembling different creations from interlocking plastic tubing of varying lengths and angles, and some lengths of rope. None of the toys they'd been given were things they'd ever seen before in those combinations, yet they were turning out some very interesting creations at what could be considered a startling rate if judged by seasoned chimp watchers.

As each one added a piece or pieces, changed what they had built or subtracted some part, they made their creations better and more efficient, where normally a chimp would stop once accomplishing a goal, such as building a ladder to reach food pellets. That meant their accomplishment were something new, a fact Norman happily pointed out. He was hyped by it.

"It's amazing what they're doing, isn't it? We gave them the injections just two days ago, and already they're acting like human children ... almost." The question caught Murray in a yawn. Lack of sleep was catching up with him.

"Almost is the right word for it. Human children aren't really inventive until they're almost kindergarten age, and by then they have too many distractions to concentrate on creating with abstract forms. That comes later. The more tubing we give these chimps, the more elaborate the construction. And look, isn't that a load-bearing arch one of them built?"

"Damned if it's not. That's Tillie, Mr. Blake. Did the microproteins speed up her intelligence, you think?"

"I think not, Norm, although that *would* be a shocker, wouldn't it? Just imagine what something like that would mean. Sorry, but the proteins are produced by autistic-related genes only when a certain type of focused thinking stimulates those genes. It's just a matter of concentration and repetition, though I really didn't expect to see these chimps so *attentive* to what they're building. That's total concentration we're seeing, and it's a real surprise. When have you ever seen chimps stick to one task more than ten or twenty minutes? They've been at it for hours."

"I don't remember *ever* seeing anything like this."

"Right, and that should tell us we're breaking new ground here. You noticed it only took a few tries for Tillie to discover that an arch would let her attach the swing farther up from the ground. Even the arch was an accidental discovery on her part, but she somehow found how to place it, and then she saw there

was a more room under it than before. A few minutes later she tried hanging the swing from it. Incredible."

"You think she reasoned it out in the abstract sense?"

"Chimps aren't bright enough for that. Hell, humans didn't discover the arch for centuries after they entered the building phase of civilization, but hey, look over there! Thomas just imitated it. He just DUPLICATED IT! Now *that's* dynamite. I'd have expected him to pay attention only to what's going on in his own space, like autistics do, but apparently he tuned in somehow on what she was building and cribbed her idea while still focusing on his own construction. Whap, he up and copies her arch idea and goes right ahead like she'd handed him a piece to his puzzle." He waited for Norman to digest the significance, but the lab assistant just stared at the male chimp.

"Norm, what I'm saying is that Thomas appears to have tuned in to what Tillie accomplished, without the use of language. I remember an experiment we did in psychology class way back in my college days. Our goal was to explain to someone from the Australian outback the techniques of opening a can with a manual can opener. We couldn't use any sign language or drawings, or pick up the darn thing and show him how. It all had to be done with language he understood, and he'd never ever seen a can or an opener. He supposedly knew only the basics of his native language."

"It sounds hard."

"It was impossible. I know, 'cause I was the 'aborigine-elect' for awhile before I tried the other side of the problem. There were thousands of ways to play dumb, including lack of motivation and a desire to play with the two objects in all sorts of ways. Hundreds of ways to hold either one the wrong way, from the wrong end, plus not understanding what the whole thing was about. I remember how I began jabbing with the opener like it was a dagger. Then I started hammering with it. It was funny at the same time it was serious.

"Yet, here we just saw Thomas come up with Tillie's breakthrough invention. He discovered it almost before she had it done herself. The microproteins must be not only causing them to focus their efforts to the extreme, but stimulating them to integrate other knowledge into their efforts. Amazing."

"Research is all about discovering the unexpected, right Mr. Blake?"

"Well said. We might even say it's searching for the unexpected and being totally surprised when we actually find it. Some of the most astounding developments have come from serendipitous discoveries."

"Like Fleming with penicillin?"

"Yep, and X-Rays and a whole bunch of other stuff. These days, thankfully, report one little whiff of progress and the funds pour in. At least, that's the way it always has been. No telling what good things will happen to our budget when the chimp study is written up." Another yawn. "My lack of sleep's catching up with me, Norman. I'll be in early tomorrow, though. This is intriguing me no end."

"Me, too. This is fantastic. Boy, I could have used some of those proteins during my finals a few years ago!"

"You and every undergraduate in the world. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, g'night, doc."

"Doc?"

"Oh, sorry Mr. Blake."

* * * *

What *was* the physiological mechanism by which microproteins catalyzed the focusing process, and exactly how were genes stimulated to produce them? As a corollary to those questions, what additional mechanisms or processes took place in focused autistics during the process? Further, what active physiological pathways depended on microproteins for completion or operation? Those were some of the questions most likely to be emphasized by the bean counters of his peer review process, starting with Craddock, and there were no answers. They'd undoubtedly want him to spend another two or three years researching those aspects of microproteins, and any others that turned up before proceeding to animal testing, but he didn't give a damn. Let someone else do the grunt work of finding out how the little molecules worked. Results were what he wanted and the present results were more exciting than anything he'd seen in years. It was a brand new paradigm, something no one else had explored. He'd delved through journals suggested by a search algorithm, and nothing like it had turned up. He was in completely new territory, a rare event for a lone researcher these days.

By the end of the week, the microprotein effects had mostly worn off. The chimps were given the weekend and Monday to rest from their grueling ordeal before the second run. Grueling was a strange term when applied to normal chimps, whose tasks during an experiment were more like play, but it was apt for the run just finished. The animals needed rest.

There were to be three runs altogether, and although he was anxious to start the second one immediately he decided instead to work with Norman preparing integrated data and spread sheets for review. He wanted to see the results to date spread out in front of him. By Monday afternoon the task was finished, and the printouts were nothing short of fantastic. Norman wanted to know when to start the next run. Little Big Rock--the old animal handler's name was always pronounced in full just as it was listed on the payroll--rarely exhibited any kind of high emotion. He was clearly energized, but remained careful as usual. The run would start only when he thought the chimps were rested enough.

Norman's reaction was typically optimistic. "Great, Mr. Blake. I'll have the microproteins ready and make sure Little Big Rock is available to give the injections. The chimps trust him so we won't have to completely anesthetize or traumatize them. Just the same tranquilizer we used last time in their morning meal, and we'll be ready to roll by ten o'clock."

"That's good, Norm. You're invaluable here and everyone knows it. I'll do my best to get you that raise we talked about. No, maybe it's better to let Ernie work on it this time. She knows how to navigate the system better than I do, but there's no doubt in my mind *El Jefe* will be all sunshine and roses once he sees these printouts. These will represent the first real progress we'll have reported on this project."

"Thanks, Mr. Blake. See you tomorrow, bright 'n early." Norman left whistling. At the same time, Ernie came through the door at the other end of the lab.

"Mr. Blake, I just got a call from Dr. Craddock's office. He wants to see you at nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Ah, crap! Any idea what it's about?"

"Not a clue."

"Ernie, he does this every time. I planned to surprise him with some excellent results from our tests this week. No chance of that now. Whatever I take in there will be ignored until he's finished speling whatever it is on his mind. Probably wants my opinion on paint color for his den or something. Then he'll

tell me to leave whatever I brought and he'll read it when he has a chance. No time for discussion or presentation unless *he* calls for it first. He's so very busy you know."

She just stared, finally flaring her eyes. "Well, there's nothing you can do about it, so why not just take your presentation with you anyway? Maybe he'll be curious when you smile a lot."

He sighed. "All right, I'll go directly there first thing so don't expect me in till later. Please catch Norman as soon as he comes in tomorrow and tell him I'll be delayed and not to start without me."

* * * *

'Machine' Dean Craddock was a little man who used all sorts of ruses to make himself appear bigger. He combed his long, silvery hair up in a pompadour, then used hairspray to keep it in place. That, plus elevator shoes, added several inches to his stature. In order to give himself a sense of dominance over visitors, he'd installed a platform for his desk and chair so they'd be elevated above the visitor chairs, artfully blocking the platform from view by clever placement of his other furnishings--a lowboy credenza, two bookshelves and a pair of artificial potted palms. The seat of his desk chair was also raised to the point where his shoes barely touched the floor. Hoping to enhance his cleverness even further, he kept the vertical blinds behind him drawn, darkening the room except for his desk lamp and whatever light came from a computer screen.

In spite of it all, he still looked and acted small.

His huge desk was always stacked high with folders, various paper clips, stapler, several pens plus his pen and pencil set on a black onyx base. The squat, green-shaded desk lamp cast shadows on his face in the manner of one holding a candle below the chin, lending mystery to the stature he was trying so hard to convey. The joke was that the same stacks of folders had been there since the days of Genesis, rarely being moved or exchanged with others. He'd merely have one open in front of him, busily scribbling on a lined pad whenever he received a visitor.

For some reason he wasn't fully prepared for the very visitor he'd asked to be there at nine A.M., perhaps because he'd arrived late himself once again, one of his trademarks. He was just sitting down when he sensed someone standing in his doorway. An arm shot out and back--*zing! zip!*--with the top folder. Down it went on the desk blotter, his hand firmly shoving it down as if somehow it would rise, while he jerked his other hand toward a group of pencils and pounced on one. His head snapped in that direction, eyes flashing smartly down while he made certain he'd seized a suitable one, then both head and hand returned to desk center, fully synchronized, and addressed the folder together.

Too late he realized it wasn't open, frowned, then made an issue of looking in his top drawer. Finally he snapped his head up, 'noticing' Murray for the first time. Down went the head again, the drawer was shut with an exaggerated final shove and he once more leveled his gaze.

"Yes? You wanted to see me, *Doctor* Blake?" Somehow he always managed to overemphasize the term 'doctor' when applied to anyone other than himself.

Murray almost laughed, catching himself just in time. *Smile, Murray. Radiate sunshine.* "I thought it was the other way around, Dr. Craddock. You wanted to see *me*. I believe you told Ernesta I was to be here a nine A.M.?" He took the obligatory visitor's chair.

Craddock suddenly turned all his attention on the pencil in his hand, flipping it eraser end out with a snap of his wrist, then sharply to his right and as quickly down as if the visitation were a monumental interruption. That done, he forced his expression into what was supposed to be a stern look. "Yes. I'm sorry to inform you, but we're canceling your ongoing research." With the final word, he instantly

snapped his head back down, reached for the pencil and opened the folder, riffling through the pages as though returning to whatever he'd been working on.

When the impact of the pronouncement sank home, it was as if those two police cars were once again parked at the golden gate. *Cancel? How can he say that when we were assured?* ... "But ... sir, we're beginning to get some real results now. I have them with me, right here, and they will astonish you. If it's a budgetary consideration, I can rearrange some priorities and--"

Craddock snatched his faithful lined pad and began scribbling. He never raised his head. "Budgets are always a consideration, as you should know by now. That is one of the factors, but the primary reason is negative reaction I've received from our science ethics review committee, not to mention the Special Education Teacher's Association."

Special Education Teacher's Association? Who the hell are they? "I don't understand, sir. I don't think anyone knows much of anything about my present project, so how could either of them react at all?" He swallowed hard. "Could you make that plainer, please?"

Craddock paused, abruptly lifting his pencil and staring at his scribbles. "It's very simple, really. At the recent stockholder's meeting, we listed all types of research we were involved in and where we expected results. One of our stockholders publicized the fact that you're employing biological materials derived from autistic individuals." He added something to the scribbles.

"So he publicized it," Murray countered. "And then our over-zealous ethicists and some misguided Special Ed teachers got the wrong idea. We'll just have to *promote* the work, now that it's showing real promise, do a little PR. It's designed for the benefit of autistics, ultimately, so I don't know why anyone would complain. The more we know, the more likely we are to find a cure the disease and possibly reap tremendous side benefits from our findings. Who else criticized it?"

Craddock finally looked up as if the man across from him were so dense he didn't understand plain English. "The fact is ... *Doctor Blake* ... there are so many AHDD and autistic students today that many special education teachers would find themselves out of a job if you succeeded. They also dislike the idea of using autistic individuals' own blood constituents for research purposes. It's not only unethical but irreverent in their opinion, especially mixing that blood with non-human animals."

"But if I mix *my* blood with that of animals, that's okay, right? That's ethical? Besides, it's not even blood; it's very tiny protein fractions, and secondary to the replication process at that. I take it you think their opinion counts for something other than trying to preserve their own turf? Or kowtowing to fundamentalists?"

"I do, and I can assure you that the board thinks so as well. We don't want to involve the company in social or religious issues. Therefore we shall terminate your inquiries into the nature of certain aspects of autistic behavior. Please submit a detailed summary of the steps you've taken to permanently close your project down by the end of the week. I'll also expect a proposal from you on the direction your future research will take by the end of the following week so that I'll be able to make accurate projections of our quarterly budgets."

Craddock finished the final statement with a brief sidelong glance at the ceiling, then quickly dropped his eyes to the folder again. Clearly he'd finished his 'spiel.' Lessons of the past said it was futile to argue with him at such times. Murray stared for a moment, seething inside before his shoulders slumped. Whether it was Craddock's idea to close him down or an order from Barrington's CEO, it made little difference at this point.

"I do have this work to finish now, if you'll excuse me," the little man said. He picked up the folder

Murray had placed on his desk and held it out. "This is no longer relevant. Do you dispose of it, or shall I?"

"I'll take it. Good day, Mr. Craddock."

"And a good day to you, *Doctor* Blake."

Murray drove around randomly, considering alternatives, since there was no sense going back to the lab while he was agitated. The project couldn't be taken to another firm, thanks to his employment contract forbidding any work in the same area for anyone else for three years, nor was there any way to salvage what he'd done so far. Or was there? No, the research wasn't complete. He couldn't even write up what he had for a scientific paper because he'd skipped a couple of minor intermediate steps in his hurry and he hadn't used a sufficient number of test mice or enough trial runs to get a good statistical universe. Hell, given the politics of the thing, they'd probably even block any more basic research analyzing the physiology of how the microproteins worked. And even if he were allowed that privilege, what would it prove? Without the other steps, such knowledge would be nearly useless. It *would* be useless, so far as he was concerned.

Unethical to use autistic blood fractions in non-humans? What idiocy! The real reason was turf protection, just as Craddock admitted. Special Ed teachers were circling the wagons against any encroachment that might diminish their numbers, thus their political clout. Damn, damn, damn! Why hadn't he stayed in the army so he could take out his frustrations on a visible enemy? At least there the enemy was mostly defined, not something nebulous, as Jack would say.

What would he say about this, about all these bright hopes dashed? No chance for human trials now, maybe never. And what of the amazing chimp study already begun?

In the back of his mind there'd been hope that someday he'd be able to focus as tightly as the autistics did on specific problems. The chimps had already hinted such a possibility was just around the corner, but now all hope was gone. What should he do now, talk to Jack about it? Well, why not? Jack was a kindred soul, with the same eclectic interest in events concerning the country and the world, a friend who'd listen, but more than listen--understand. Maybe Jack would have some new slant. Possibly something obvious was being overlooked. There was only one way to find out, assuming his friend was free on the coming weekend.

Whoa! He suddenly swerved onto the road's dusty shoulder, skidding to a stop and sitting there for long moments with one foot on the brake. The idea that had just flashed across his mind was so powerful he couldn't concentrate on driving. It loomed like a huge fork in his personal life, a division that could either keep him plodding along or send him off into totally unknown territory. But did he dare? *Could* he do it even if he dared? It was physically possible, even if it would require a bit of chicanery. He'd need some help, someone to stay with him for a week or two or even longer, and he'd have to forego any income from the scientific community in the process. He had enough money to carry him for a couple of years, and even if inflation got totally out of hand he had gold and silver hidden away. Quite a bit of it, actually, thanks to Connie. She'd been a very astute money manager, taking care of their finances almost from the day they'd married.

What else? He could handle everything except finding someone to trust who'd stay with him during the process. Jack was the only person he could really rely on, but unless the busy man could take some leave after coming in from the field this week ... well, no sense guessing. That's what comphones were for. He flipped it open and recited Jack's code number. In short order the call was answered, bringing a smile. Talk about being abrupt and to the point, it was vintage Jack Williams.

"Colonel Williams, sir. What is it?"

The left foot finally came off the brake pedal. "It's Murray, you idiot. Got a minute or two to talk?"

"What's on your mind, mad scientist?"

"Main item--my research project just got cancelled, ostensibly because of protests by the Special Education Teachers Association."

"Huh? That's crazy! Who the hell are *they*?"

"Right. And crazy is too tame a word for it. Jack, is there any way you can take some leave and come out and stay with me? There's something I have to do pretty quick."

There was a moment of silence. "Murray, old buddy, you're not going to do anything off the wall, right? No, hell, that's *not* right. If you feel strongly enough, go for it. Only thing, this is a real bad period for me to get away, other than on weekends, and not every weekend at that."

"Crap! Well, hell ... guess I'll have to ask someone else, though I'll be damned if I know anyone besides you. This'll take trust, and lots of it."

"I ... think I know what you're up to, pal, knowing you like I do. Are you sure you want to try it?"

"I've spent the last hour just driving around and thinking, Jack. I'm going to quit Barrington and do a little research on my own."

"Can't it wait for a while? I'll have some room for a leave pretty soon."

"It might wait, but I'd rather do it now if I can. Damn, I wish you could be here."

"Okay, then what would you think of Wilma coming out and staying with you? I realize you don't know her well, but I do. She's absolutely trustworthy and still hasn't gone to work. She'd be free, and I could still come out some weekends."

"Well ... how certain are you? Not only about her being trustworthy, but ... well, how about any hang-ups, strong feelings about ... I'd rather not go into it over the phone."

"Trust me on this one. Look, Brenda's at a convention, but I can get away. Why don't I bring Wilma back out Saturday? You can talk to her and decide then."

"I don't know. I'd be trusting your judgment, but then I guess you didn't make colonel at the age of three by being wrong about people. I'd have to think about it."

"What's to think? You got along with her just fine a few days ago. Does it have to be a man before you're comfortable?"

"Made your point. Okay, come on out Saturday morning and we'll see. Maybe you'd better talk to her in advance about staying in a home with a relative stranger, though. *She* might be uncomfortable with it."

"I will, but I'll bet you a steak she's willing. She may have just a high school education, but she's one sharp girl. Reads all the damn time. Hell, she's read everything I have in the house, including my army physical conditioning manual."

"What a recommendation. Okay, see you bright and early Saturday morning."

As he closed the comphone cover, the thought of his own overloaded floor-to-ceiling bookshelves produced a chuckle. At least she wouldn't be reduced to reading about the army daily dozen.

The decision had been made. Self testing was the only option open, dangerous or not. He wasn't about to let his findings at Barrington be completely lost, even though there were worrisome memories lurking in the back of his mind. John Hunter, for one. A surgeon, compulsive researcher and anatomist from hundreds of years ago, Hunter had been so firmly convinced that syphilis and gonorrhea were the same disease that he had injected himself with exudates from both. He'd ultimately died from tertiary stage syphilis. The microproteins weren't in the same category as syphilis, but no long range observations had been made on the chimps or mice to see if they'd suffered any damage from their experiences. Chimps weren't humans. Besides, true testing for contra-indications would take years.

The next step was to get back to the lab for a little 'midnight requisition,' except it wouldn't be midnight. He needed a good supply of the microproteins he'd use on himself. Fortunately, Norman had replicated and removed the antibody receptors of several large batches of the material he'd thought would be used. There was more than enough of the focused autistics' microproteins on hand, enough to last a good long while if the self-experiments proved successful and were to be repeated.

He stopped only long enough to tell Ernie he'd be very busy in the lab. While there in her office he picked up the project termination forms and stuffed them into his briefcase. Norman, as usual, was hunched down over a workstation. His perpetual smile turned sour with news of the project's cancellation, especially when he heard the reason behind it.

"That's a goddamned shame, Mr. Blake. This country is going to hell, you ask me, when crap like that can stop research as exciting as what you were doing."

It was exactly the reaction Murray had sought. "I have these project termination forms to fill out, Norm. Might as well do it together ... there may be questions you can help answer."

Norman wasn't really needed for the forms, only for what followed. Once it was all spread out on a counter top and the information filled in, Murray pointed to a line. "See what this says, Norm? 'All associated biological material is to be removed and stored in appropriate secure facility for a six month period, pending appeal by the parties involved. At the end of that period, said material shall be destroyed. I suppose I could take care of that while you take your break, am I right?'" He winked, and Norman caught on.

"Ummm ... yes, sir, that's what it says all right. You know where I keep samples for storage in the big cooler. Maybe you'll get a break and the big boss will reverse the decision. But right now, it's time for my break, so I'll leave you to remove the biological materials from the lab to storage in peace." Very solemnly he returned the wink, then shrugged off his lab coat and left. It was the first time in memory Norman had taken a coffee break outside the lab.

Once he was gone, tubes of the microprotein solution wrapped with insulation were tucked into the briefcase, syringes and needles added, then covered with bric-a-brac from his desk, accumulated over a period of years. There was plenty to cover the booty, even though a lot of stuff found its way to the wastebasket. He took the remainder to the big cooler and placed them on the front shelf for Norman to sort and put in the proper place.

Unless Norman were specifically directed to destroy all the samples now, he needn't do a thing with the materials remaining except move them to another shelf and re-label them properly. They'd stay right where they were, alongside hundreds of other specimens for awhile. Minus what was taken for another purpose. He moved all results of his research--except his own notes from the central lab computer to the

special research backup file, with a notation of its contents. All that remained was to fill out the termination forms and send them to Ernie for routing to the proper departments.

When he left later that day, briefcase in hand, the security guard simply waved him through.

Chapter Five

There was no telling whether Wilma's expression and steadfast gaze were concern or merely interest. She listened attentively as he explained how he intended to test the autistic microproteins on himself, while Jack paced in the background. Finally she voiced her concerns.

"As I understand it, you had to sneak those microproteins out of your lab. Are you likely to get into trouble if you're caught? Will *I* get into trouble if you're caught? As little as it is, I don't want to lose my unemployment income because I got arrested. I don't want a record as a felon, either."

"The paperwork states that biological material has been removed to storage, Wilma. It's a technical point, I admit, but I won't worry about it if you don't. Also, I trust my technician absolutely. He'll never say a word, and he's as mad about this as I am. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"You can trust Wilma just as much as your tech," Jack commented. He turned to her. "Considering your opinion of corporate bottom-line bastards, Wilma, this shouldn't be that hard a decision. It would serve 'em right."

She let out a long breath, then nodded. "All right. When do you want to get started?"

"Well, not knowing exactly how I'll react or how long the effect will last even if it's successful, I guess we'd better wait and let you go back and pack. I'd say enough clothes and other things you think you might need for at least a week."

She smiled, giving an elfin cast to her face. "I brought my suitcase with me. I trust Jack, too, you see. When he said it would be an interesting assignment, I took his word for it. And the salary you mentioned is fine. If I didn't need the money, I'd do it for nothing."

They decided to start early Sunday morning, right after breakfast. With that decision behind them, the rest of a pleasant Saturday was spent relaxing. That afternoon Jack grilled hamburgers, unhindered by the omnipresent dust for a change. They sat on the porch enjoying pitchers of rum punch--Murray allowed himself a single glass--and later they all took a walk. Wilma needed to learn about the property and how to care for the animals. She never batted an eyelash or asked why when he strapped on his Glock 45, but he explained it was mostly for the occasional roaming cougar. Cougars weren't the only things prowling out there, but that was left unsaid. She seemed to understand that aspect without comment.

"How long do you expect to be under the influence of your microproteins, Murray?"

He rubbed his chin. How long, indeed? "Can't say for sure, but judging from the one run we did with the chimps I'd expect anywhere from three to five days. I think you'd better to try to get me to eat and drink more than the chimps did. We couldn't get them interested in food or water until their survival instincts kicked in, but a human brain doesn't do very well on restricted nourishment. I've got some liquid stuff Connie bought right before ... well, she bought it to try losing a few pounds. It's not the best tasting junk in the world, but it'll work. If I won't stop for regular food, try me with that."

They traipsed along trails where he'd gotten exercise while whacking the brush back with a machete, then down to the small lake stocked for fishing. Its receding waterline testified to the drought, but a small spring-fed stream was mostly managing to keep up with the loss. A number of turtles were sunning themselves on a half-submerged tree trunk that once had been totally under water.

Murray pointed them out. "I have to kill a few every so often, otherwise they'd wipe out the fish. Damned

things multiply faster than rabbits."

The path back wound past the heavy cyclone property fence, with a final stop at the barn. There Wilma learned how to feed the guineas and chickens, which food to give the cats and kittens, what to feed the goats when and if they came to the barn, where all the water bowls and faucets were and how to take care of four horses each day. Connie'd wanted to turn the place into a small horse farm where she'd give riding lessons and teach new horse owners how to train them. Now the four would have to be sold, especially since he'd decided on his new path. There just wouldn't be time for all these animals, assuming he survived.

But then, he *had* to survive. There was a particular problem involving illegals he wanted to solve.

Wilma insisted on cooking for the three of them the next morning. He'd gotten up early and put out the ingredients for a big breakfast--it might be his last good-sized meal for awhile--but he no more than started the frying pan when she marched in and took over. Shades of Brenda! If she were going to be taking care of him she might as well start, so he sat at the kitchen table with his coffee and watched.

Why hadn't such an attractive young woman married, or at least found some lucky guy to spend time with? Apparently she'd found no one she felt close to, or else she was as reticent as he was. It wasn't a case of shyness, just the old Greta Garbo line 'I want to be alone.' Alone was good, until you needed company. Then alone wasn't that good. His own list of really close friends numbered ... well, one--Jack. After him, they were just ordinary acquaintances. Perhaps that was Wilma's situation, too.

Occasionally she glanced in his direction and smiled, a simple little tilting of her head that nevertheless conveyed a person at ease with herself and her surroundings.

"I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be," he announced, an hour later. He'd already calculated the dosage according to his weight relative to the average chimp, then inserted a syringe needle into the vial, withdrawing the right volume. It was carefully set aside on a section of countertop he'd already washed with alcohol. Next came the tourniquet, fashioned from a roll of Connie's elastic waistband insert. He'd doubled a length of it, forming a reasonable resemblance to the real thing, then laughed nervously.

"I'll need one of you to put this on me. I guess a dope addict could do it without help, but I can't. On second thought, dope addicts aren't this careful of themselves. They'd use a belt or a piece of rope."

"I've done injections before," Wilma said. She again took over, tugging his sleeve higher, then giving the elastic a simple overhand and one good tug. His veins stood out nicely. Even so, he winced with her jab.

"Nothing to it," he lied. "Okay, let the tourniquet loose." He emptied the plunger himself, watching with a certain detachment. Now he was committed. "No turning back now."

She applied the small ball of cotton and a band-aid. "How do you feel?"

"Well, excited, of course, but a little apprehensive. The chimps gave us no indication of discomfort, and their vital functions were all unchanged except for pulse rate. Mine is fast right now, I think more from anticipation than anything else." He checked it at his radial artery. "About one twenty-five. A little high, but that's okay."

"What's next?" Jack asked.

"Next I retire to the den where I wait for any effects to take hold. If this works, I'll be concentrating like someone in a trance, so don't worry. If it doesn't work, you'll either see something that alarms you, or no change at all."

When nothing unusual occurred after several moments in the den, he relaxed and his pulse slowed. Only then did he remember he was supposed to be focusing on the illegal immigrant problem and its convoluted involvement with government bureaucracy and corruption. He brought it to the forefront of his mind, planting it in a spot centered between his eyes and an inch above, remembering all the points he had written so assiduously and all the different reasons the problem had grown to such insoluble proportions. Overlying all that was what he'd thought might help solve it.

Even though he was prepared for anything that might happen, he couldn't have anticipated the change. A few minutes later it felt as if his mind had begun to swell. He immediately gripped the arms of his chair, almost crying out with his surprise, yet able to hold on like someone on a crazy carnival ride. It went on until it seemed his mind was too big to fit inside his head, and there in front, as if on a wide movie screen, was the focal point--his study of the illegal problem. Avenues he'd explored stood out in bright lines, then gradually dissipated into strings and the strings into dots. He was moving along, dot by dot, only to have them begin exploding into pinpoints that grew, slowly at first before burgeoning into balls of thought that enveloped him like so much bright fog. Each one buried him again and again, fading as another took its place. Not just one ball of thought at a time, but many. Dozens, each crystal clear without detracting from each other. And they were ... organizing!

He'd often been fascinated watching his home computer tackle the organization of billions and billions of memory locations, each with some small chunk of information that belonged with others like it, but which had been separated like so many thousands of mailboxes in different places. Somehow, when the computer finished, every little chunk was repositioned right next to all the rest of its 'family' of chunks. What started out as a complete universe of individual points became unbroken groups, all in colors.

That's what was happening in his brain. The problem with its billions of facets was organizing itself as he watched. He was an observer, but at a higher level it was his brain working beyond the capacity of any mere computer, for no computer could ever employ the nuances of human emotion, morals, right versus wrong or attitudes. No computer could think outside the box, so to speak, or project the future based upon a fuzzy past. Only the human mind could do that. And his mind was handling dozens of avenues of thought without losing focus on any of them. No tangents, no distractions, not one extraneous thought.

He was a whole department of analysts wrapped up in a single person, all working at express-train speed. The whole process was so fascinating he couldn't imagine doing anything beyond concentrating on the problem until he had every iota in its proper place. Complexity no longer mattered, nor how many avenues of thought were involved.

He didn't remember how he got to his office in the back room, or when he began exploring the Internet in one monitor window while typing furiously in another. It was all happening in extreme slow motion, yet with blistering speed. Blind to the outside world, a wooden being where discomforts were concerned, he precisely pinpointed various aspects of difficulties with illegals even when they led into other areas of government. He was vaguely aware of Wilma hovering in the background like a solicitous butterfly, refilling the coffee cup or water glass on the stand at his elbow and taking away the empties. Sometimes he drank before the coffee cooled. Other times it went untouched.

He'd taken amphetamines a couple of times in college, but this far surpassed the kind of monomania amphetamines could produce. It was all valid, not some wild product derived from his brain being over-stimulated, as often happened with amphetamines--when thoughts that seemed so profound would prove idiotic when the high wore off. That's why he'd quickly abandoned drugs as an aid to study.

This was nothing like an amphetamine euphoria. His mind was on afterburners, yes, but it was working *right*. What he was doing would prove valid, regardless of how atypical the results might be, but his thought processes came and went so fast he had trouble getting the essence of them into words for later

reference. He typed like a mad man.

It was well into the afternoon before he ran for the bathroom. Even that natural function operated at high speed, and was back at his desk immediately, intent on capturing thoughts that continued even as he was relieving himself. As the evening wore on, he found it easier to concentrate and focus his efforts on what was important. Not that there were any false trails--there weren't--but some were convoluted enough to double back to a previous premise. He explored fewer and fewer of those, learning their signatures from experience, and was able to root out and integrate more pertinent data into what he'd already gathered.

And then there was the self-correcting aspect. New data and hypotheses, taken to their conclusions, often invalidated older points. Without any conscious thought on his part, the earlier strings were eliminated, shrinking the universe of possibilities.

He didn't sleep at all the first night, or eat anything solid, just Connie's liquid diet food. Even that was the result of a momentary notion that he needed new proteins and carbohydrates to keep his brain cells at their most active. He'd type with one hand while gulping the drink, toss the empty can and resume two-handed typing. Time was of the essence. Resolving all the issues to his self-assigned task was paramount. He needed desperately to discover the arch and hang the swing, just as Tillie had done, only several orders of magnitude higher on the development scale.

Tiring by the end of the second day, his mind was still functioning at the same express speed clip, and by then he had narrowed down the principal roadblocks and was eliminating them one by one in the drive toward a solution.

Midnight came and went.

How had he come to be lying on one of the big lawn chairs? There'd been no lawn chairs in the office, but there he was, stretched out on one with pillows propped beneath his head and a ringed notebook on his chest. Words were handwritten on the open pages.

Was that his writing? It was almost illegible. He vaguely recalled his fingers and wrists becoming tired and strained from typing. Clenching and unclenching his hands, he'd begun yawning. That was it! That's when Wilma brought in the lawn chair and prepared it for sleeping, or working if he felt like it. He'd continued for several more hours, but sleep claimed him at last.

There was still work to do! He plunged back into it, never noticing Wilma asleep on the other chair. She'd plugged an alarm clock in beside her. It went off, but he didn't hear it. She left the room, but he never noticed. Only when the aroma of freshly brewed coffee carved its way through his intellectual wall was he peripherally aware of her. He drank the first cup as though the last train was leaving the station, almost burning his tongue for not letting it cool first.

The day wore on without his knowledge. He was nearing the end of his quest and was even more focused than before, but a complete solution wouldn't be possible. Parts would be missing, but they'd be specified so that someone with more knowledge in those specialized fields could fill in the blanks.

He slept one hour before continuing.

Sometime early the next morning, right after Wilma again brought in freshly brewed coffee, he began tying loose ends together into a thesis he'd understand after the focus effect wore off. It took the rest of the day. Just before dark he stood, blinked in surprise when he realized he was done, and stumbled off to his bedroom. He collapsed on the bed, fully clothed, never moving when Wilma removed the slippers he'd been wearing.

No dreams visited him.

Chapter Six

His awakening was a combination of every hurt he'd ever experienced, pain far worse than anything those first few days in the army produced, plus all the mornings-after of his life rolled into one. The taste in his mouth was that of old, burned coffee at decrepit truck stops, piled on top of Limburger cheese--or was it musty cellar on top of rancid socks? Maybe actual sewer? Even his clothes smelled. He shed them on the way to the bathroom, staring at the three-day growth covering his face when he finally stood facing the mirror. Was that him?

He tried splashing cold water in his face, then brushed his teeth. It helped with the sewer mouth, but only a shower would work on his aches. While luxuriating under the stinging hot water, he reconstructed the whole experience--sort of. He had a clear memory of everything, even the fact of it being three days, but the tremendous piles of data he'd integrated into the final product recalled one of those college courses where he'd crammed hard for the final, only to have it recede into the depths immediately after.

It could be brought back, with a little stimulation.

And then he remembered his final conclusion!

The washcloth dangled from one hand. Christ, did the solution really need to be that draconian? He ran swiftly through those final few hours, considering how he'd derived the answer. It was correct; all the avenues led to that one resolution, but he'd look once more at his final notes. The first results of focusing a human brain, and it turned out something like this?

What would Jack think? Where was Jack? Oh--he must have gone back to his post. This was what ... Tuesday? Wednesday? He wasn't sure.

Wilma wasn't in sight, but he heard water running in the other bathroom so she was up. He got coffee going, then went back to his office. What a mess! The lawn chairs were covered with a disorganized jumble of pillows. Coffee cups and disposable drink glasses cluttered the trash cans. He started to clean up, abruptly stopping. The last printout! He swept it up and headed for the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee before he sat down. *Holy crap, did I type all this? Skip the preliminaries, it's there in the last pages.*

The conclusions were there along with the problem-solving formula, insofar as it could be solved. It was there all right. The word was written in capital letters and big bold type. It stared back at him like a challenge, or a call to action.

REVOLUTION.

He'd written it out three times in the ecstasy of his final and irrefutable conclusion.

REVOLUTION.

REVOLUTION.

REVOLUTION.

Revolution--an overthrow or repudiation and replacement of an established government or political system, by those governed. While he knew the definition, he'd never entertained such thoughts, or even considered the word itself since those courses in political science. Yet he'd arrived at the conclusion using logic borne of his own research and his own mind.

He was still staring at the repeated word when Wilma came up behind him. "I couldn't help seeing that after you finished, Murray. You were in such a hurry you didn't tell the printer to reverse the pages, so your conclusions printed out first. I arranged the pages before I collapsed." She filled a coffee cup and sat opposite him.

She'd just come from taking a shower. Her short blond hair appeared darker when damp, and her makeup was minimal. Altogether, she looked much fresher than he did, but then she was twenty years younger.

"I'd have shown you anyway," he said, remembering her stretched out on the lawn chair, features tired from worry and lack of sleep. "Thanks for taking care of me. I was so focused I don't remember much beyond what I was doing, but from what I *do* recall you earned every bit of your pay and then some."

"It was interesting, to say the least, but I don't know how much longer either of us could have gone on like that."

"Probably quite a while longer, judging from some of the amphetamine binges I've seen in college students around finals week, but I doubt the work would have been very effective."

"So you think that's it? We have to have a revolution to make any real difference in where the country is going?"

"Not that simple. I was focusing on the illegal immigrant problem, but it morphed into the whole screwed up government apparatus. And revolution isn't all that simple, even if one person could pull it off ... an impossible proposition. But if that's really the solution, I want to follow wherever it leads."

She looked startled. "With revolution? In America?"

"I know that must sound crazy, but I'm not done yet. I need to bring in some others. There's more research and focused thinking needed, particularly with the military and government."

"Uncle Jack?"

"Should I even mention this to him? A military man getting involved in talk about a revolution could find himself in a helluva lot of trouble."

"It'll take division of Marines to keep him out of it, is my guess." She sipped at her coffee. "You said military *and* government. What part of government?"

"Good question. All of it, probably. Problem is, I don't know anyone in government I'd trust with this. Not a soul. You'd think *someone* would stand out as an honest dissenter, but where? Where does the rot stop?"

"Jack might be able to help you, but it ... well, the whole thing sounds so surreal, us sitting here talking blithely about a revolution this way. I did read a lot of what you put in that printout, and I suppose some of it makes sense, but are you really serious? I mean, Uncle Jack says you're one of the best thinkers he knows, but this is completely different from actual thinking, isn't it?"

"It's thinking with absolutely no distractions, Wilma, and something else, something I never imagined. Like amphetamines, everything speeds up, but in countless directions all at once. My brain was actually organizing zillions of pieces of data from whatever it's been absorbing all these years, and focusing it all on my illegals problem. Am I serious, you ask? If it looks like it can be accomplished, I sure as hell am. My family was wiped out by goddamned government incompetence and immoral, corrupt politicians, not those poor Mexicans looking for work. Same reasoning behind the other foul-ups we see day in and day

out. If the Mexican dictators and politicians hadn't screwed up that country even worse than ours, their people and all the others wouldn't have to sneak across the border. Our country is going to hell in a hand basket, sure, but theirs has already made it there." He paused to reflect a moment. "I just don't see any other way out."

She took a deep breath, then puffed it out between pouted lips. "Whew! Nobody'd ever accuse you of thinking small!" The little elfin smile appeared, needing only pointed ears for completion. "I'd almost hate to find another job now and miss the rest of whatever you're going to do, but I guess my part is finished, huh?"

"Only if you want it to be. I plan to have another session myself, and I guess if Jack wants to participate in the planning, one for him. He may opt out, though." He tapped the printout. "But even if he does, I'll still need someone well-versed in how our government works, or rather how it functions. Hardly anyone thinks it works any more; they just don't know how to change it. I haven't a clue who that someone will be, but probably not anyone within government. Or hell, maybe there are a couple of honest politicians I could contact, but damned if I know who they might be. I just hope to hell Jack feels strongly enough about things to stick with me for now."

"So you want me to stay?"

"Sure. That's if you want to, though I wouldn't like to see you pass up a real job just to help take care of me and any others that go through what I did."

Her smile widened to a grin. "Murray Blake, I wouldn't miss this for the best job in the world. I'm not sure I agree with your motives ... yet ... but I sure do understand the problem. If everything I've read and heard is only partly right, we're on the road to becoming a third world nation, one with no money and its natural resources depleted. Are you hungry?"

"Talk about depleted resources, my stomach gave out two days ago. Let's see what we have in the fridge, then after I've seen all the critters and let them know I'm still alive we'll probably need to go grocery shopping. By the way, did you have any problems with the animals?"

"Just Moose wanting attention and Frito barking at boogers. You already had plenty of hay out for the horses, and the goats never came to the barn that I noticed."

"Good. Let's get busy. I could eat a pound of bacon and a dozen eggs, all by myself."

* * * *

Jack stood with hands on hips, examining his friend with a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "Well, I don't see any purple tentacles growing out your ears, so you survived. Wilma take good care of you?"

"Outstanding. In fact, she's reenlisted for another hitch, maybe two or three."

"If she's *that* good maybe I'd better hire her myself."

"Day late and a dollar short. She's already on my payroll. Come on in and get comfortable. I mixed us a pitcher of jungle juice soon as Moose started yahooing at the gate, and you look like you could use a picker-upper. I see you're still in fatigues. Tough getting away?"

"I did manage breakfast during the debriefing, but the paperwork and getting the troops ready to come in from the field took me a while. Sorry I'm so late. Now about that jungle juice...."

Murray smiled to himself as Jack stripped off the fatigue shirt off as he came in, hanging it in the mud

room as they passed. He looked no less commanding in the tee shirt, having what was called 'command presence.' He *looked* like a high-ranking officer. If he were a few years older he'd look like a general.

Wilma got a brief hug before she handed over a tall glass of light-colored liquid. Clearly, Jack was anxious to get down to business. He sat at the kitchen table, that place where Murray's unwritten rules said serious matters were discussed. The printouts were neatly stacked in the center, each with a cover sheet, but he ignored them until he got on the outside of about half of his drink. Finally he leaned away from the table and eyed the pair sitting opposite. "Okay, let's hear it, kiddies. What did our esteemed scientist turn up, if anything?"

Wilma shrugged "Oh, not much of anything, really. He only wants to start a revolution so we can do it all over and get it right this time."

"I see. And I see Murray laughing with a serious face. What about this, pal?"

"She said it all in a nutshell, Jack. That's what it will take. Problem is I need more input, particularly from a military man as well as someone involved with politics and the government bureaucratic system."

Jack made little circles on the table with his glass. "You're serious, of course." He waited, eyeing Wilma without finding the answer there. "Yeah, I can see you are. But goddamn, Murray, do you know what you're--"

"That stack of paper tells the whole story. And yes, I know what I'm doing. Read it before you comment, okay? Then I'll answer any question you have."

"This ... this *pile* tells me why you want to start a revolution? This I want to see." He tapped the nearest stack of papers, gauging its thickness. "You typed all this after you came out of it?"

"Not after, during. Good thing I took touch typing in high school. It sure came in handy, but there were times I swear the keyboard smoked."

"Wouldn't wonder. This must be a couple hundred pages ... in how many days?"

"Three days, give or take. And there are 312 pages."

"Hmmm. I can read fast, but not while you're hanging around here. Go get lost, both of you. Come back in two, three hours and we'll talk."

By the time Jack stuck his head into the den, the world had deteriorated further. The guerilla war in Puerto Rico was showing little signs of easing, ethnic riots in Canada had spread as far west as Calgary, Turkey was the latest member of the nuclear club, the Middle East was on the brink of another shooting war between Israel and Syria, currency problems were hampering trade and the starving population in Africa was larger than before. The anchor made no mention of corruption and bad harvests, pointing the finger at the World Trade Organization and Red Cross instead. France and Germany were feuding again. So were Pakistan and India, but so far both were wars of words with only sporadic violence. The unified Mars mission was behind schedule. The privately financed Mars mission was ahead of schedule. The world court had postponed a ruling on the suit to limit satellite launchings and space missions because of so much debris accumulating in orbit. Environmentalist fanatics once more slammed the door on drilling in a new promising part of Alaska and off the coasts of California and Florida where tremendous amounts of oil and gas were known to be available, and the congressional flap was still going on over the Mobile Porta-a-Potty mess. That major pork-barrel scandal would never die, it seemed.

The MPP was a portable, self-powered latrine on caterpillar tracks that could be steered to any desired

location. It was one more fanatic conservationist complaint being answered, but this time for deep-woods loggers. The State of Washington's Russell Burke introduced the special interest project *without* divulging his vested interests in the company which manufactured the devices. All those loggers out there with no bathroom facilities! Why, the very idea was revolting. Surely there had to be a better way!

His argument in behalf of the handful of conservationists and Greenspace activists who hadn't laughed behind their hands was that if loggers and others in out of the way places were afforded sanitary facilities, they'd use them. When his bill didn't fly, he managed to get it attached to a national funding bill in congress, where it sailed through along with six dozen other appendages buried in the legislation, Not only Washington State, but *all* instances of logging in the country would henceforth be supplied with MPPs. Eighty-four million dollars' worth! Half that value had already been delivered.

"Speaking of crap, why are you listening to it?"

Murray glanced around. It was Jack, appearing with a pitcher of rum punch and a stack of disposable glasses. "Turn off the idiot box and let's talk."

"Wait," Wilma protested, "I wanted to hear the end of that MPP thing."

"MPP?"

Murray nodded. "The Mobile Port-a-Potty thing, Jack. They're still trying to justify it."

Wilma grinned. "My question is ... if all those contraptions are way out there in the woods, who'd go out and, you know, service them?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Who'd use 'em in the first place? Next thing I'd expect out of the beltway crowd is for the army to be told to use the things ... unless we're fighting on foreign soil. Now let's get serious. After what I just finished reading I suspect we're going to be at it for a good long while." He made a throat-slitting motion with his hand, pointed at the TV, then ducked back into the kitchen and reappeared with an ice bucket and the stack of printouts.

His words were prophetic. Two hours later the floor was strewn with sheets of paper and the atmosphere was a cross between the Sunday morning 'Fireline' and someone reading Revelations. Jack's questions were as much about the potential contra-indications and long term residual effects of the microprotein injections as they were about the printouts. Somewhere he'd cultured the idea the original blood samples had come from the chimps, not from human autistics under controlled circumstances. Murray had to explain to him again that the fractions were just that--constituents of human blood taken from autistics while in their *idiot-savant* focused state and separated so as to isolate certain factors. Aside from possible contamination--highly improbable in the Barrington lab--they were no more than messengers. Their messages in this case were as yet indefinable characteristics of autistics in a highly focused state. What he'd done was to demonstrate that the microproteins derived from the autistics during their highly focused episodes could be injected into other animals, and now humans, and produce the same state. The mechanism of how the microproteins brought this about was as yet unknown, but the results were clearly positive.

Jack felt better once that point was made. "As I see it," he concluded, "I'm going to have to take some time off and come out here and have a session with your little microproteins myself. Lucky for us the testing exercises ran into equipment problems early at the base. The rest were cancelled yesterday, for the third time in a row, so I'm free to take some leave if--"

"How about Brenda?" It was Wilma interrupting. "Won't she worry about you doing this?"

"She'll go along, I think. She's always been a good troop." That got a laugh, though Jack was perfectly serious. "Thing is, there's a woman I have in mind for the governmental input you mentioned. If she can shake Washington off her back for a couple of weeks and get herself out here, I'd like my leave to coincide with that. We'll all do this together, Murray, including you."

"Whoa! Here Wilma just finished saying nobody'd ever accuse *me* of thinking small, and along you come trying to steal my crown. You'd better bring your own computer equipment then, and have this ... congressperson ... do the same. Judging from my own experience, I don't guess there'll be a lot of cooperation between focused individuals doing it at the same time. I barely knew Wilma existed until it was over and after I'd slept a few hundred hours."

"Nice try at political correctness with the congress*person* bit, but she ain't in congress any more. Even so, I'll guarantee she knows the inside of Washington as well as you know how many pups Sugar has. She makes a high six-figure income using her brains and knowledge and nothing else."

"Is she a lobbyist?"

"Good, god, no! She hates lobbyists and everything they represent."

"That's sure a good starting position. How long do we wait to hear if she has a name."

"Mary Henderson," Jack grinned, waiting for the name to register. It didn't, getting a shrug instead.

"Should I have heard of her?"

"Not as a household name, no. She doesn't want to be heard of the way you're thinking. Right now she works behind the scenes as consultant to anyone wanting political advice. She's so sharp that everyone from the president right down to shoestring lobbyists grubbing around like bottom feeders would give their first born child just to have a few words of advice from her."

"How do you happen to know someone like that, Uncle Jack? I've never heard you talk about her."

"Because I don't choose to. This is one of those 'small world' things, Wilma. We went to high school together, even dated awhile and always got along good. I kept in touch over the years. We think alike, even now. She found she couldn't play the Washington games, once she got there, so she--"

"Games? You mean rules?"

"Games, like besieging every damn person who walked into her office for a campaign contribution, then voting the way they asked her to. Like letting minorities and pressure groups walk all over her for fear of offending and losing votes. She said it was beneath the dignity of anyone with the brains of a doorknob, and a damn stupid way to run a country. She's still in town there because she likes making money the honest way, and she earns every penny of it. She never sugarcoats advice for a chance at return business. With her clients it's straight from the shoulder, and *caveat emptor*. She tells someone the way she sees things, and if they don't like it they go somewhere else next time. That's my kind of honesty. Too bad she can't teach a few politicians how that approach can really pay off in the long run."

"Honesty doesn't win elections, Jack. That's the problem. Too damn many people with their hands out, or already benefiting from one program or another, or scared their race or group or union or whatever'll get lost in the shuffle if they don't hear a candidate specifically come out in favor of what they want. The honest politician is an oxymoron, as well as a figment of someone's dreams."

"It's a broken system all right. Wilma wonders why they can't just all be straight shooters, right Wilma? The answer is not one of them knows how. Throw one honest man in the middle of the mess, and he's

dead before he hits. You diagnosed it perfectly, pal, and your solution hit the bull's eye. Revolution's pretty radical, but then look what we're dealing with. Sometimes you *do* have to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

"So what makes you think this Mary Henderson would go along with us?"

"Don't know she will. I don't even know if I will yet, and for that matter we still don't know whether it's even feasible, *it* meaning revolution. I can tell you, though, it's going to have to have fairly good odds of success to get me to go along with it, and that means loads of planning and thinking. I could get shot if it failed."

"Life, fortune and sacred honor, Colonel Williams."

Jack nodded solemnly. "Those guys who launched our first revolution put it all on the line, didn't they? And damned near bought the farm in the process. If it hadn't been for incompetent British generals and George Washington in charge of our army, it would have failed. And even as it was, Congress came damn near to killing the revolution from politicians not having the guts to tell their constituents they had to come up with money to run the army after it was formed." He came across with one of his direct, command type looks. "Sorry for the history review, but it took a lot of guts for our founding fathers to go against the British crown and the largest empire on earth. Those soldiers who stuck it out through all the hard years deserve tremendous credit, too. They were the real heroes."

Murray got to his feet and stretched. "Today it's all gimmegimmegimme, everywhere you look. Reminds me of some out-of-control kid in a toy store, grabbing everything he can reach no matter what his mother's told him, except they're all adults doing it. I do know it doesn't take many stout hearts to foment a revolution when it's the only answer. All it really takes is leadership ... the people do the rest. Look, it's getting time to feed the critters. I'd better take care of that and then we can think of something to eat. Are you staying, Jack?"

"Yeah, and I think I'd better make my phone calls from out here rather than my place. We never know when the spooks are listening. In fact, I can call Mary now. If she's not putting out a fire at the moment, she'll talk to me."

"Okay, you do that and I'll take care of the animals. I don't think any of us want to fool with cooking tonight, so what kind of pizza do you like?"

"Hot."

Chapter Seven

"Nothing personal, Senator, but I couldn't care less about you, your liaisons with redheads or your speeding ticket yesterday on the beltway or--more to the point--whether you take my advice or not." Mary Henderson uncrossed her legs for the fifth time, then stood, deliberately showing a flash of thighs in the process. It was a well-practiced maneuver, delivered as if she were completely unaware of whatever she might be revealing.

The man behind the pretentious desk couldn't help but drop his eyes to the brief display, even though she was gazing directly at him. Allan Merlson craved anything he didn't possess, including attractive women who teased and especially those he imagined in certain scenes of dominance and obedience. She fit that image perfectly. He'd paid plenty just to have these minutes with her in private, in part because she had a damn good rep for accurate political analyses and an uncanny knack for cutting through the crud. The rest was physical. She seemed immune to his sly hints and senior senatorial status, which made her even more of a prize to be added to his list of conquests over the years. He'd paid for her advice before, but this time her input stunk.

She continued in firm, even tones. "You sought my opinion, Senator, as you've done in the past ... like so many others doing business in Washington. You wanted my advice on how to respond to the president's proposal to increase taxes on the energy sector industries, meaning you were uncertain about the bill, and I gave you my recommendation. That concludes our business this time around. I'll send you my invoice."

"But ... look ... Mary ... I can't *do* that! How the hell do I get re-elected if I take that kind of stand? It'd dry up ninety percent of my contributions from those people."

How in hell did she find out about the redhead? And the ticket....

"Pffh! I know what you have socked away for your upcoming campaign, and precisely how much you have in banks and all those IOUs in your back pocket, but you can forget having any more than a quarter of that for the *next* election if you don't take my advice. You do want to stay in this business, don't you? Or are you planning retirement at age fifty-one?"

Merlson ran his fingers through the politically long mane of gray hair. "Mary, listen to me--"

"I have other appointments, Senator. Time's up. Have a nice day." She abruptly turned and strode from his office, making a point to glance at her watch on the way through the door.

Merlson bit his lower lip, staring at the curves and shapely calves disappearing all too soon. For the amount he'd paid, she could have at least stayed a half hour or so, damn her to hell! Who cared about long term? That money had to come in *now* if it was going to do his personal finances any good. How'd she know how much he'd set aside in the first place, and how could she possibly know who he had in his back pocket? When it came to skimming, neither of those counted anyway. There was no way to skim IOUs or money on record. The only way was to do it when the money was on its way *to* the bank, or with cash that'd never find its way there in the first place. And, come to think of it, how on earth *did* she know about that speeding ticket? It was just yesterday, and he'd paid off the trooper on the spot. Slipped a hundred dollar bill under the license and registration. He'd been in too much of a hurry to note the trooper's name, or that man would be looking for another job right about now.

Mary was a smart bitch, but too damn abrupt, a loose cannon without a trace of the finesse needed for really getting along in D.C., dashing around like some circus juggler keeping six balls in the air at one time. That wasn't how it was done, not at all. You took your time and applied the niceties of political give

and take if you were going to survive and get anything out of it. Like horse trading, in a way. The spoils went to whoever knew best how to work things to his advantage. Even Abe Lincoln knew how to get the best in a horse trade, or so it was said--that time when some crafty dude tried to put one over on ol' Abe by goading him to trade horses blind. Neither man would see the other's horse up front. Well, as the story went, the dude brought in the boniest old swayback nag anyone could imagine. Abe brought in a sawhorse! That was the kind of understanding needed anywhere in government to make things come out right. That was what constituents and special interests expected of their man--or woman. You had to deliver for them, all the time.

Mary didn't operate that way. Everything was black or white, never gray. Her latest pearl of wisdom wasn't worth a nickel. Throw support to an energy tax that would hit the petroleum giants hard? Why, it would be political suicide! He'd sit on her fee, that's what he'd do. On second thought, that would backfire for sure. She had far too much influence in Washington to try that. Whenever she got aggravated at someone she took no prisoners, and everyone knew it.

How had she ever get so much power and influence in the first place? And where was she getting her information? She couldn't have done it by herself, a woman in her early forties, even if she did get a few male pulse rates doing double time, his included. She had to be sleeping with someone influential, someone on the inside, but who? And how was she keeping whoever it was under wraps? Hell, she was well worth anyone's attentions, that much he'd give her. That wavy dark hair of hers with the white streak running front to back ... mmm-mm! ... so different ... and a compelling face to go with it. Not beautiful so much as striking, with brown eyes as pretty as they were penetrating. A trusting face, the press called it. And a really great body to boot. Change those business duds to something really sexy ... tight fitting with strappy heels and lots of cleavage. Yes! Her bossy attitude would fit that kind of scene perfectly.

But ... even though she was sexy and smart, *something* about her wasn't kosher. Nobody could know that much about Washington affairs, especially a woman. Maybe ... maybe it was time to find out more about her ... who she was friendly with, or went to lunch with or met. Maybe even who she was screwing ... now wouldn't *that* be nice! Her type woman would always be on the lookout for variety, he thought smugly, unconsciously attributing his own predilections to her, so she might even be receptive to changing beds every so often. Maybe Sam would have some ideas about that. He had his ear to the ground most of the time, and he could be trusted in such things.

As assistant and right hand man to the senior senator from Illinois, it was part of Sam Mecabrost's job to know where just about anybody's skeletons were hidden, the way Jim Farley did for FDR. Farley was Sam's idol, especially when it came to managing thousands upon thousands of details and being the source of just about any information his boss needed ... all from memory. He wasn't above arranging a few liaisons, either, like the redhead. Or taking care of 'business' when there was money changing hands.

Everyone had skeletons in their closets. The trick was to ferret them out and hold them in reserve, in case they were ever needed. Blackmail? Not really, just playing the game, like everyone else did. But nobody seemed to know that much about Mary. That didn't mean she was clean--*nobody* was clean in D.C.--but it did mean a little digging was needed. There'd be something that could be used against her. Always was.

That aside, she'd make a great dominatrix. He'd have Sam check out that possibility, too. It was one thing to protect one's own backside and an altogether different thing when it came to personal pleasures, the bedroom kind.

* * * *

Mary chuckled as she took the elevator down. It was almost fun the way they were flocking to her, like

birds to a feeding station. Her batting average was no better than .800, or eight out of ten opinions on the money, but nobody seemed to care in a world where the normal was more like one out of ten, or less. Merlson was *so* typical. It was a toss-up as to whether he was more willing to spend his money hearing advice he wouldn't take or trying to get a glimpse of where her pantyhose ended. He could visit any beach in the world and see ten square inches of wet cloth clinging to something twenty-or-under, but let a wool skirt ride up a few inches and he was pig-in-slop ecstatic. What she'd given him was the truth, in her view. He'd definitely do better in the long term--financially speaking--by backing that bill this time around, but what he really wanted to hear was his own opinion about the thing in the first place. He was merely shopping, looking for ways to cover his fanny if his votes went the wrong way. The more he paid for her advice, the more he imagined he was buying some whore. Maybe he had that in mind as well. Probably, in fact. She knew much more about him than he imagined. *Too bad, buddy, not for sale.*

Damn it all, now if only someone *interesting* had taken a look at her lately, someone vibrant and hopefully intelligent outside of the usual government thought channels ... but then that kind was a dying breed in the nation's capital. It might even be totally dead. Take away the rapacious politicians and even greedier lawyers and lobbyists and D.C. would be a ghost town.

And I'm not much better, but at least I'm telling it like it is and I earn every cent I'm paid. Not for much longer, though. Time to get out of the rat race, because the damn country's on a downhill toboggan ride with nobody steering. The whole thing's held together with spit and bailing wire, a house of cards that can't stand up to the winds of change sweeping the world. But ... am I ready? If my nights are lonely here in a city filled with Lotharios, what will they be like in the boonies?

The thought struck her as she left the elevator at the ground floor. It was a question she'd asked herself almost daily in recent weeks. She'd converted a quarter of her earnings into gold and silver coins and bullion over the past few years, and had bought a retirement home in the hills fifty miles from Oklahoma City, out in the deep woods that still existed in places there. That equated to roughly four million in real worth, plus a roof over her head. When the economic crash or deep depression arrived, as it most definitely would, she'd be set up well enough to spend some time writing. It was a love she'd abandoned in her twenties, but still....

You're wool-gathering. Why not skip the office and head for the apartment right now? Merlson swallowed that bit about appointments, and you could use a little relaxation. Nothing big until tomorrow.

The thought was appealing enough, but it wouldn't hurt to swing by the office for a moment anyway and check on any developments she might think about while she was relaxing. She hoped there'd be nothing urgent waiting for her there or she wouldn't run into some eager beaver lawyer in the lobby.

Modest by Washington standards, her office was in an older, five-story building mostly used by fledgling attorneys clawing their way up the slag heap, hoping some day to find gold. Most would fall by the wayside or be mentally unable to switch philosophies if the present party lost power. They were simply 'suits' in a sea of other suits. None of them were her worry, but a few had the unfortunate habit of chatting whenever they ran into her.

This time she was lucky, making it without meeting a soul. Her assistant, Alice Sheffire, was at her usual post behind a low-railed barrier. It was set sideways to the entrance and facing a large multi-screened monitor so that she could concentrate on her work and still notice when a visitor appeared.

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Henderson. I'm glad you stopped by. Otherwise I'd have had to bother you at home."

Mary arched an eyebrow. "Oh? What couldn't wait until tomorrow?" *Here goes my relaxation time.*

"Well, someone by the name of Jack said it's urgent you contact him. What's funny is he asked you to call from the plane." She frowned. "I didn't know you were going out of town. Do I need to make reservations for you?"

Jack Williams? "It's something that just came up. I'll let you know."

"He didn't leave a number." She handed over the pink 'While You Were Out' message slip.

"All right, Alice. Thanks, but I'm on my way home now for a personal battery charge. I'll give you a buzz before you lock up if this is anything that might interrupt tomorrow's schedule."

It was only 3:30 in the afternoon. Alice glanced at her watch, nodded and went back to work.

'Call from the plane' was a code her old friend Jack used over the years. He had something he didn't want overheard, either end, and she should use the number of his current prepaid phone. He always kept several. They weren't foolproof, but at least the calls weren't billed through the system--therefore leaving no record. Nothing short of a spread-spectrum system on both ends would guarantee total privacy, though, and even that could be tracked if only tracking were to be the goal. Jack hated having anyone listen to his private conversations. He said it was almost as bad as making love on a stage, with a crowd watching. She wasn't sure about the comparison, but the stage and crowd thing had always intrigued her.

What could it be this time? He often talked about the entangled affairs of the military and all the politics of procurement and damn near every other phase of military life, though he had too much integrity to ask her for advice. Jack was his own man, one of the best she knew. The calls were more his way of keeping in touch, but what could be so urgent? When had he ever put an urgent tag on a message? It had to be something to do with the military, knowing him.

There were several convenience stores on the way home. The first had a phone right inside the door--no good. The next had a phone more suitably located near the inside door labeled 'Employees Only,' so there was less foot traffic there. One never knew when the intelligence agencies might be listening these days, and there were damn few public phones left when you wanted one. The so-called 'war on terror' had been used--no, the term was abused--as an excuse for the government's vast expansion of its powers to root around in the affairs of private citizens. J. Edgar Hoover tactics, but with congressional sanction. A much more effective approach would be to sweep all except a meager few of the politicians out of office and start over, but nobody had offered to pay her for that particular opinion.

She smiled as she thought of the ways Jack always answered his calls. Typical would be something like, "Your nickel, start talking." She'd get the jump on him soon as she heard his voice.

"So it's urgent. Your nickel, soldier."

Jack didn't rise to the bait. He was entirely serious. "It's a personal matter, Mary. I was wondering ... could you fly out tomorrow and come see me? Brenda's not busy for a change."

"You don't want to talk about it."

"Face to face only."

"It better be good. I'm booked solid, and missing tomorrow's appointment will cost me some real bucks. Why not on the weekend?"

"Mary, you've got money you haven't even *counted* yet. It'll cost you even more if you don't come. Besides, there's a steak in it ... two inches thick, crusty on the outside, juicy and pink on the in--"

"Boy, you sure know how to reach my soft spot. All right, you've got me hooked. Alice will call you with the flight number. Be practicing up on your reasons, 'cause my return ticket will be open. If it's not good, I'll be on the next flight back, assuming I've finished my steak, that is. See ya."

To hell with the money. Regardless of what Jack wanted, it would be nice to talk to someone with a modicum of sense for a change. She rang Alice from her car to set up her flight.

* * * *

Mary laughed. "Jack, where the hell are you taking me? If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were heading for my little place out here, where you'd try to seduce me. Especially since you didn't bring Brenda along."

"Would I succeed?"

"Didn't you always?"

Jack chuckled, though he retained his serious tone. "We're going to see an old friend of mine. And Brenda isn't in on this little matter yet, though I'm sure she will be soon. In fact, I'll have to tell her before *she* starts thinking I'm up to no good."

"Why does all this sound like some kind of conspiracy?"

"Don't let anyone else hear you say that."

"Now I *am* intrigued."

"Well, you might just be more so very shortly. His name is Murray, and frankly he's just as intrigued as you are. I prepared him for someone bluntly honest, with penetrating insights into the complex machinations of the power brokers and money men who really run the country. Somebody who might be considered a dangerous liability if it weren't for her most valuable consultations and advice. Add to that she's a knockout. Know what he said?"

"I will in a minute."

"He said ... okay, just for that I won't tell you."

"What did he say?"

"That there was no such person. You'll be a bit of a shocker for him."

"You didn't really tell him I was a knockout, did you?"

"Did too."

"Did not."

Moose was roaming around, most likely looking for another weak spot in the fence, when Jack pulled up at the gate. He barked twice while his shaggy tail wagged in sweeps furious enough to raise dust.

"Jack, what a beautiful white dog! Is that one of those ... those--"

"Great Pyrenees. When the gate opens, it turns on an electric barrier tuned to his collar so he won't run out when visitors come through. When we get out at the house, I'll tell him to shake and you just take his paw and say hello. Otherwise he'll be all over you."

"Look, he's leading us up the drive. What a goofball! He must be something if he ever rolls in the mud."

"Mud? Mary, this area's getting closer to the Sahara every day."

"Okay, then dust. These are old clothes and it won't hurt either them or me if he rubs a little off on me."

"He will, given the chance. But he won't. There's Murray at the back door and he's got Moose corralled."

"He looks harmless enough," she said, getting out.

"Moose? He's a big--"

She laughed. "No, I meant Murray." *So this is the man behind the mystery?* She waved. "Hi, I'm Mary. You can let him go."

"Shake his hand, then he won't jump up on you."

She laughed and took Moose's outstretched paw. It was bigger than her hand. After giving him an affectionate patting she straightened. Jack was ready with the intros.

"Mary, this is Murray Blake, and with him is my niece, Wilma."

Murray smiled and met the proffered hand. "Wilma's been helping me with a special project."

"So I hear." *Nice, direct gaze and an honest face, but where does the youngster fit into Jack's little matter? I'd better establish myself with her.*

Murray turned to Jack. "What'll it be, old buddy? It's late enough for a drink, or I can make coffee if the lady prefers."

"Coffee's for mornings. We both just finished running the gauntlet of our airport Nazis. Damned if I know why they started screening passengers as they *deplane*. What were we supposed to do during the flight, morph into fully armed terrorists? Probably some twisty little bureaucrat in the security business with not enough to do."

"Scotch if you have it, over ice," Mary said. "I don't drink on planes because it gives me a headache, but I sure as hell need one once I get off." She turned to Wilma. "Jack didn't mention you all the way out here, so let's get acquainted while he checks his bar guide to see how to make Scotch on the rocks."

They left the men to the kitchen. Once in the den, Mary cleared the air immediately. "Wilma, I don't know what Jack's told you about me, but you probably expected someone stuffy in a suit. Sorry to disappoint you if that's the case. Fact is, I'm a lot more at ease out here wearing comfy clothes and putting my feet up whenever I can. I'm building my retirement home about ten miles farther west, but it's prettier here."

"Boy, did you hit it on the head. I like it out here, too, and Murray is a good man to work for. Actually, Jack didn't build you up beyond saying you were unbelievably good at what you do."

"Let me get down off this pedestal before I get a nosebleed. What is it you do for him, if you don't mind me asking."

"I ... well, I think he's the one to tell you that. I'm not supposed to talk about his business to anyone unless he okays it."

"Good for you. Leaks are for faucets and water buckets, not people. Well, here come the guys. I hope Jack made mine a double cause it's been a long day."

Politicians and verbiage were synonymous terms. Mention one, and the other came to mind. An oft-repeated gem in the nation's capital was that a seasoned politician should take at least a half hour saying 'no' to anything. Simple statements could stretch into hours, even days, as qualifications were meticulously set forth for the Congressional Record. When it came to pork-barrel legislation, the goal was to overwhelm any reader, thereby sliding through whatever might otherwise bear close scrutiny.

Mary had learned to read such volumes at a clip that would have made Evelyn Wood envious. While she devoured Murray's analysis and conclusions, the others chatted around her without making a dent in her concentration. She could read anywhere, even standing in line at a grocery store. She used her comphone more often than not because it could carry so much data. She kept it full of business related documents as well as novels and magazines. Why put one's mind in park? Keep it busy, whether it be sitting in some doctor's office, or waiting for this attorney or that, or sitting around waiting for flights that were usually late going or coming.

She was through in less than an hour, then put the documents down and finished off her drink. "Murray, may I have another of these, please?"

That was a signal for refills all around, and when the dust cleared once again, she caught Murray's eye and held her gaze. "Is this your work, Murray? If so, I'd like to hire you."

"I be the culprit, but before you make any further comment I should tell you how it came about. Unless Jack's already--"

"She hasn't heard a word from me, not that she didn't ask."

"Okay, here's the story." And he started at the beginning, with Keith's autism. When he finished, there was genuine respect in Mary's reaction. "That's the damndest thing I've ever heard, Murray Blake, and Jack's being in on it with you speaks volumes about your character. Goes for Wilma, too, since I see she's her own person. People trust you."

Murray shrugged. "I try to be honest."

"Good, but be careful anywhere but here. Honesty can be a dangerous thing these days. Now ... you're wanting me to enter this little conspiracy, right?"

"Jack promoted you as the most knowledgeable expert in Washington affairs, government and business, bar none. So yes to your question, at least to the extent of putting you through a focusing session with the microproteins. The conspiracy, as you put it, needs someone like you--and Jack for that matter--to finish the analysis. Let me stress that it's an analysis only, not any commitment from anyone. After that ... well, if it's anywhere close to feasible, I'm forging ahead with it."

"Same here," Jack said. "Wilma?"

"Count me in."

"Well, it's a startling proposal in my view, and it's so germane to my area of knowledge that I can't let you go ahead with it..." She waited for the reaction. Murray was in the process of drawing a deep breath when she added the punch line, "...without me. Okay, since you two guinea pigs seem alive and healthy, I'll take my turn with the microproteins as soon as you can arrange a session. No promises, though. First I'll see what it produces from my own viewpoint. We'll take it from there. Of course, you wouldn't have

dragged me out here if you thought I'd have said anything different, so when do we do it?"

Murray grinned. "Jack?"

Jack slapped his knee and started to get up. "You haven't changed a bit, Mary. My leave started today, and I brought my bag."

"Then how about tomorrow? 'If it were done, t'were best done quickly,' to quote the Bard. My bag's still in Jack's car. I'll go get it. And Jack, you're wrong. I have changed. I was never much of a Shakespeare fan before I read Macbeth. A lot of what I do these days is right up his alley, and this adventure of yours seems to fit."

"Well, along the line of quotations let's not forget Burke," Murray said, giving his mouth a twist.

Wilma seemed startled. "Who's Burke?"

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. That Burke."

"Oh, *him*? I knew that!"

Chapter Eight

The Blake bar was closed once the decision had been made. If they started in the morning, as Murray had done the first time, cutting off liquor immediately would give them all roughly fourteen hours to burn off the alcohol they'd already consumed. Nobody argued. Jack's inclination was to call Brenda right then, tell her he was staying and have her come down and join him in three days.

"Whaddya think, pal?"

"Fine by me, Jack, but won't she get suspicious about what you're doing?"

Jack twisted his lips in a sardonic grin. "She already is, but military wives know we don't talk about what we're doing unless the person's cleared. I'll just tell her it's a scientific project derived from your research, and she'll let it go. She's great that way. Once Mary and I are back from the depths, though, I'm going to spill it all. I owe her that much, and she's as trustworthy as any of us."

"So," Mary said, "who cares for who during this wingding, Murray?"

"How about I take care of Jack and Wilma watches you?"

"If you say so, but I'd like to know a bit more about what I'm going to be going through ... the nitty-gritty, so to speak. And what about this three day time thing? Why won't I be able to come out of it whenever I want, since I'm supposed to be focused to beat the band? I can focus on the time element, too, can't I?"

"Wilma can answer that. I remember most of it ... vaguely ... but I couldn't tell you what she was doing the whole time. I had no concept of time at all. As for three days, that's based on my one experience. You come out of it when you come out of it, I guess. Or when the micropoteins have done their job and dissipate. Same thing. Wilma, you're on."

Two heads swung in Wilma's direction. She shrugged. "There's really not much to the care part. I just made sure there was always fresh coffee at your elbow, kept your water glass full, made sure the bathroom door was open all the time and covered you up when you finally fell asleep. You drank some of that diet concoction, and we've already stocked up on plenty more. It's a ready source of nourishment and doesn't make you waste time eating. Mary, if there's anything you might need that's different we can discuss it before you go under."

"My kind of answer, Wilma, direct and to the point. I might hire you when this is over." She smiled, running her fingers through her hair. "Well, I'm satisfied. Let's set up."

Mary took Murray's office as a work center while Jack got the bedroom he always used when he visited. There were four lawn chairs--chaises, actually--so three were brought in and set up. Jack's laptop was plugged in to house power--there'd be no stopping for battery charging. After he was up and online, and all was a GO, Murray headed for Mary's station. Since she'd be using his computer, he wanted to be sure she understood the setup backwards and forwards. She was already sitting at his desk, with three monitor windows open. Her fingers flowed smoothly across the keyboard even as she spoke occasionally to his wireless throat mike dangling from her blouse.

He coughed to get her attention, then pointed. "Mary, it would be a good idea to secure the mike to something other than your person before you get started tomorrow, because if for some reason it comes loose from whatever you're wearing you might not even realize it's missing. And wear real comfortable clothes. You'll be in them for awhile."

She smiled warmly, making her look much younger. "So Wilma said. She seems to be very efficient. By the way, I hope you don't mind that I got things started here without you. I don't like to waste time, and I do want to set up some folders."

"So Jack's told me. Is there anything you've found yet that needs explaining?"

"Not so far. You have your data flow well organized. I set up a secure block of memory for myself in case I want to download any voluminous stuff from my list of favorites. The password is written down and in the top envelope, middle drawer of your desk, but you don't have to worry even if I keel over dead and you lose it."

"All right. Now don't laugh, but I'm fixing up an index card for you as a reminder of what you're to concentrate on after I inject your microproteins. Believe me, you'll need it once your mind takes off on its own. I almost lost direction before the injection took hold, when my mind started to wander. You wouldn't want to spend three days focusing on some project a congressman wants to hire you for, or what you're going to have as your first real meal when you emerge. Or would you?"

"Umm, I see what you mean. Okay, since you know more about this than any other person at the moment, I'll try my best to follow your instructions exactly."

"Great. I'm going to see Jack now. Call on me if you think of anything here you need."

But she was already busy at the keyboard again.

They got started an hour after breakfast. Once the injections were finished and both volunteers sat staring at their index cards, there was nothing to do but stand by and wait.

* * * *

Merlson glanced at his watch. Judd Questin was next, that lobbyist for Illinois Wind Farms,, but he wasn't due for a few more minutes and Sam Mecabrost had just returned to the office building. It was time for another little session with Sam. Maybe he'd found something out about Mary.

Mental images of her in somewhat more revealing attire had dominated most of Merlson's thoughts ever since she'd swept out of his office. No question about it, she'd make a fantastic dominatrix, say in black latex and platform heels, with one of those little riding crops. The more he thought about it, the more probable it was that she *was* into that kind of thing ... which meant she might have a whole stable of willing slaves in town. *That* would explain where she was getting her power and information. It was always the bigwigs, the CEOs and congressmen and financiers--people who controlled others--who sought out women to dominate them in private. It was their release from pressures of their offices. It might also explain why Mary Henderson was suddenly unavailable for a second conference with him. 'Out of town,' according to her snippy secretary. More than likely she was taking a little 'personal time' with one or more of her sources.

It shouldn't be that hard to find some dirt on her if that was where she was spending her private moments. Come up with the right kind, and maybe she'd be interested in adding one senator from Illinois to her list of after-hours clients. That, or have her reputation squashed like a bean beetle on a leaf. Her reputation was her meal ticket and she'd undoubtedly do anything to protect it. She'd be quick to weigh the consequences of brushing him off next time around, once she knew what he had on her.

Merlson drummed his fingers on the desk blotter, unaware of how self-centered his thoughts were, how much he assumed about a person he knew nothing of outside the political spectrum. It continued as he thought there was always the possibility she was waiting for him to approach her about that same

extra-curricular scene. A little test, so to speak, to see if he was the kind of man she'd want to conquer, the kind she'd like groveling at her feet. It would be a real coup to have an influential senior senator in that position, doing whatever humiliating acts she commanded. She'd even *acted* like a mistress there in his office, brusque and short. And that sly smile of hers!

His fingers drummed once more.

Still another possibility was in trading off what he found out about her to someone else, for a consideration. President Robinson, for instance. Wouldn't The Man just love to hold a hammer over that bitch's head? No telling what a favor like that would be worth. Of course, if it were the president or one of his staff bedding her down, then....

He pressed Sam's buzzer and a moment later the head of wavy black hair poked through the open doorway. Sam was impeccably dressed, as always. He had a bit of Spanish blood that made him look perpetually tanned and healthy, like he'd come back from two weeks in the Caribbean, helping him blend well in any crowd except maybe a bunch of naked Minnesotans in the dead of winter. It also helped when it came to interfacing with Hispanics that he spoke pretty damn good Spanish.

Add to all that a canny understanding of politics and the workings of Washington, and Sam Mecabrost was a real asset. His income reflected as much--his *real* take, not his official salary.

"Yes, Senator?"

"Learned anything yet about Mary? I've been thinking, and it's just not like her to drop out of sight so suddenly. That ball-busting bitch must be up to something. My guess is she's still here in town. I'd *love* to know who she's with, Sam, if you get my drift. I'd really ... *really* ... love to know that. It would be worth quite a bit to know, capice?"

Sam stared at the floor for a moment. "Afraid she did leave town, sir, which was your original guess. I had her traced to Oklahoma City, but the damn fool there failed to get me an image of the man who picked her up."

Merlson sighed. "Sam, damn it, you let her get away from you?"

"Not totally. He got a license plate number. I can have that traced, if you like."

"I damn sure *do* like. Who's the guy, and what's she doing in Oklahoma, for God's sake? That's the pit of the fucking universe."

"I'd have to guess."

"Jim Farley never guessed, Sam. He knew. I thought you wanted to be like him. The guy had a prodigious memory for such things. He never *ever* guessed."

"Well, I do seem to recall she owns some sort of residence out there somewhere. I can get the exact location if you like."

"Do that. Now, was this man she drove away with ... was he on the same plane? That's the kind of thing we want to know about her. Y'know, Sam, I have a theory about Mary Henderson. She's getting her information from more than just one source. I say her sources are people we both know and all of them are right here in D.C. I'd give anything to find out who she's banging. I think she might even be the dominatrix type, you know, the mistress type with black latex and whips and things, the way she bullies everyone. Maybe it'd be worth my while to play up to her, assuming I'm right. Hell, I paid her good money for her advice, and she practically shoved it down my throat. It was crap advice on top of that.

Whaddya think? Should I try to make her? Play the willing submissive and find out what games she plays behind the scenes, and maybe where she's getting all this stuff?"

"Hard to tell about that kind, sir. I know what you mean about the mistress bit, though. I remember thinking pretty much the same thing when I first saw her. I can start asking around."

"Sam, this is too important for you to just ask around. Put on your thinking cap, man. If she's screwing government types, there's no telling what's behind it. She could even be a goddamn spy for some industrial cartel. That's how they work. They're worse than the friggin' lobbyists. Find out who that guy was she was with, and whether she went with him to that place of hers. If she didn't, find out where he took her. If it's the same one who picked her up at the airport, I want a photo and some background on him. Get on it, will you, and next time pay the buggers more. I don't like failures."

"Yes sir, I will. Uh, Mr. Questin is waiting, by the way. The lobbyist for the wind farm industry?"

"Looking for more subsidies, no doubt. He isn't here to play bridge. How much is he good for?"

"I'd say a couple hundred thou from the looks of things. He's got a big briefcase, if that means anything. Last time he brought cash in one."

"Okay, send him in, and get Marvin Chun ready next. This won't take long."

* * * *

By day two Murray realized just what Wilma had gone through with him. It wasn't easy to sit in a lawn chair for hours--or slouch or drape or try to lie back--while Jack worked away with no apparent discomfort at all. If there'd been some way to take breaks--a walk or even a nap--it might have been tolerable, but he had to keep watch all that day and into the night. He appreciated what Wilma had done all the more as he rushed through caring for the animals. A buyer had come for the horses so they were no longer a problem. He sat down when he got back and wondered why he hadn't bought an extra air mattress. He'd thought about it, but put it off too long. Wilma was using the one he kept around for overflow guests, not that it had happened very often. He'd pulled out several quilts and some blankets, but the whole thing resembled a thin futon that kept sliding into bunches.

Wilma protested once when she passed his office. She glanced inside, waved at him and started on her way back to Mary when she noticed the disarrayed bedclothes.

"Murray, where's your air mattress?"

"I forgot to get another when we were shopping. Don't worry about it; I'm doing fine."

"Couldn't prove it by the way you look right now. You're beat, and it hasn't even been a whole day yet. I can stand this regime better than you. I'm younger."

He forced a smile. "You could have gone all day without saying that. Even longer."

"Sorry, but it's true. You're a really good looking man, but your lack of sleep is showing. Go look at the bags under your eyes in the mirror."

"Well, thanks for the compliment, but I'm doing just fine."

"You're not, either. I'm giving you the air mattress."

"Nothing doing." He saw her flush. "Wilma, now look. I imagine we'll be having more of these little

sessions as time goes on. As soon as we finish with Jack and Mary, I'll use a few brain cells and go buy some proper supplies. Okay? Is that a deal?"

The exchange had him totally awake for the moment. He made more coffee and brought another glass of diet drink. Jack still hadn't touched the first one, but this time he did, gulping it down quickly without so much as a glance sideways. He was totally immersed in what he was doing, ignoring everything around him. His computer screen showed a compilation of historical emperors and dictators who'd wrested power by unorthodox means from various types of governments. Stalin was on the list, and Hitler, but why were Charles de Gaulle and some others there? Some looked absolutely ancient. Earlier he'd glimpsed other lists and tables and graphs, none of which held any meaning, but Jack was still focused on the main question--how and under what circumstances the military would support, participate-in or become actively involved in a non-elective change of government? In other words, a coup. Did revolutions always involve coups? Yes, in one fashion or another, they did. Could a revolution involve simply a paradigm shift in voter attitudes? He thought it could, but he was too tired at the moment to follow the thought.

The session managed to stretch into three days after all. Mary showed no early signs of folding her tent, in spite of her promise to re-emerge sooner. Jack was actually hyperventilating at times due to his emotional tug of war with whatever he was hatching. Neither showed any awareness of someone coming and going, so it was fairly easy to glance on occasion at whatever was on their monitors. A cross-fertilization of ideas had apparently taken place, probably from the fact that both of them had read the first analysis in detail.

Mary had nothing at all to do with the military, other than her association with Jack over the years, and yet the organization chart she'd created in one of her windows was sprinkled with military terms. Jack was working financials and government-industrial relationships into his lists and tables, yet those weren't areas where he'd ever spent much effort. The focusing was obviously drawing on the archives of memories from childhood on.

Wilma came into the kitchen and they compared notes. It seemed Mary had slept only once for about three hours and Jack hadn't logged that much time even with his eyes closed, unless he'd dozed with them open. Yet they'd both been up almost three days, double the time any normal human adult could remain cogent. He wondered if it was because they had his initial analysis to draw on, but there was no way of knowing. Also, both participants were hitting on the diet drink much more than earlier, foregoing coffee. That was logically backward for any person with the coffee habit. What did it all mean?

It was in the wee small hours when the sound of printer brought Murray out of a restless nap. Jack's chair was empty. Had he gone to relieve himself? The printer had stopped and the output tray was loaded. It wouldn't hurt to take a look, even if the top page was the final in the series. There were similar stacks piled on the desk from previous printouts, and they were all in the proper order, which meant Jack had been printing in reverse order, last page first. The top page would be the title page for the group.

It read: **MILITARY PARTICIPATION IN PROPOSED REVOLUTION**

Jack was finished. He was asleep in his bedroom, fully clothed with just his shoes off. He wasn't the only one. Both Mary and Wilma were asleep, as well. The ordeal was over.

* * * *

"We finally tracked her down, Senator. The license plate at the airport belonged to some army colonel assigned to one of those weapons evaluation commands that test new weaponry, gadgets, that kind of thing. He's stationed near where the Henderson woman has that home I mentioned. When Henderson's

place turned up empty, we checked with the army. They say the colonel's on unscheduled leave for undisclosed reasons, but off the record he'd mentioned helping his niece find work. We got his home phone number and checked with his wife, who said he was away on personal business she wouldn't discuss. No mention of a niece, and no further input from her even when I--"

"Your inquiries didn't identify me in any way, did they, Sam?"

"Of course not, sir, nor myself, but I did use your trick of referencing the Pentagon's review system. That helped a little. She--"

"Cut to the chase, Sam. Did you find Mary?"

"She's holed up with the colonel and most likely that so-called niece at some scientist's house south of Oklahoma City. I think we can refer to the niece by some other term at this point."

"Like mistress, the usual kind? Now *that* sounds juicy, doesn't it, based on how we already figure she spends her spare moments here in D.C.? You're probably right about the niece thing. Colonel's got a honey on the side. You say the wife didn't mention a niece?"

"No, sir, she--"

"Bingo! She may know about her competition, she may not. It's the kind of thing army wives put up with a lot. Now what can the four of them be up to out there in the boonies, if it's not sex? What's that scientist do, anyway? Is he in with the weaponry crowd? Some sort of psychologist, maybe?"

"I can find out, but it will take some more of the slush fund. I sort of used up what you gave me to work with."

"Do you even have a name for this ... this scientist?"

"Blake. He's a nobody, far as I can tell. We'll have to go through the usual routes, dig up his records and all that."

"Well, Sam, it just might be worth a few shekels more to run this thing down. I just learned President Robinson isn't getting along too well with his veep and might dump him when convention time comes around. That would put me in position for at least a crack at the job, and you know what that would do for *your* career."

Sam grinned.

"What that means is we--you and I, Sam--have to be doubly careful to cover anything that might turn up later to blot my record. At the same time, we have to keep gathering anything we can use on Carl Crosley, just in case the Robinson possibility doesn't make the grade. Crosley's my only competition for the senate seat. If Robinson decides *not* to run for the Oval Office again, a certain senior senator from Illinois comes to mind for the top job, right? Name of Merlson? All kinds of possibilities. We won't have to worry about the size of any slush fund then, by God!"

"So spend the money?"

"Whatever you need to, yeah. You know how to draw on the fund without leaving any flags, but listen ... I want that mistress or whatever she is investigated, too. Two'll get you five she's the colonel's honey on the side. What's his name, anyway? Did you get it?"

"Jack Williams, sir. His army file is full of commendations."

"Doesn't mean shit. So Mary Henderson and this scientist are getting it on, Williams and his sweetie have a thing going, and they all get together for a swingding at the ranch. Nice! Sounds like I was right about her."

"Knowing that, it might be a bit risky, Senator, if you were to try and ... if you were to--"

"If I were to try to *make* her, Sam? That what you're saying? Well, you're right, dammit, you're right! Not until I know for sure what our boy Robinson has in mind. Who knows, she might even come into my parlor on her own if Robinson gives me the nod. Look, find out what kind of work the scientist is doing."

"Why would that matter?"

"It'd tell me what kind of man she'd likely go after here in D.C. Just a hunch. I'll betcha he's a wimp, the kind who like dominant women, and he's got money. Leave Edelson to run my appointments and you stay on this case. Mary Henderson hasn't been out of Washington more than two days at a time for years and now she runs off to Okalahoma and hooks up with a scientist. Know where I'm heading, don't you?"

Sam Mecabrost's grin was his answer. Sometimes it was fun working for Allan Merlson. He honestly believed, or had fooled himself into believing, that his presence in office was a boon to the country, and that all the financial wheeling and dealing, with a hefty cut for himself, was simply the way things done. And he was such a such a lascivious old bastard, completely shameless; he considered extracurricular sex as just one more of the perks of office, the same as money.

* * * *

The well-dressed man flashed what he thought was a winning smile. The problem was that he used it just a tad too often, as if he couldn't finish even a short sentence without interspersing smiles between the words. Mr. Alberto Marcos from the National Science Foundation had one other little problem, Ernesta thought, even though his I.D. seemed authentic enough. He was missing something no self-respecting Hispanic would ever do without ... a little moustache. She wouldn't have realized it quite so quickly had he quit showing his pearly whites. That, more than anything, put her on her guard, but not until later.

"No, Ms. Wiggins, this isn't an--he smiled--official investigation. I'm merely a messenger boy for the assistant secretary of the--another smile--Foundation. We're in the process of evaluating next year's budget and Dr. Blake's name--this one was even broader than the others--came up as a possible recipient for one or more of our grants. All I need do is verify the nature and duration of his current projects, then I'll get out of your hair." He smiled once more, but only his mouth. The rest of him seemed made of cardboard.

How weird! And since when has the NSF been operating this way? "Sir, I'm not at liberty to disclose that sort of information. I can make you an appointment with Dr. Craddock, our director, if you like."

The smile vanished. "All right, if that's the best you can do, I'll just have to accept it. However, I have a breakfast flight back to Washington first thing in the morning that I *must* make. Could you get me in to see ... what was his name?"

"Craddock." It was her turn to smile. "Dr. Hiram Craddock." *You know all about Dr. Blake, but you don't know his boss's name?*

"Oh, yes. Could you get me in to see Dr. Criddick today?"

"Please have a seat and I'll see what I can do. He's in conference, but I may be able to interrupt. May I take your identification card with me? He'll ask for it."

She waited until he'd chosen one of the inviting chairs outside the rail, then left him browsing a National Geographic. When she returned a few minutes later he was checking his airline ticket.

"Dr. Craddock can see you at four o'clock today, Mr. Marcos. Here's a diagram of how to get to his office." She handed him a detailed map of the research facility, along with his I.D. If Craddock had any misgivings about the NSF changing their methods, he hadn't indicated as much.

As soon as Marcos was gone, she called the airport. Not only were there no early morning 'breakfast' flights to Washington, there was no one by the name of Alberto Marcos with reservations for the two actual flights that day.

Or the following day!

Something sinister was going on, even if Marcos was who he said he was, and that something was all about Murray. Craddock's accommodation was a shock, since she'd expected him to glare, hand the card back and wave her away without a word. He'd already advertised the fact that he was 'tied up for two weeks' and would see nobody, but no sooner had she mentioned the magic words 'National Science Foundation' than he folded like wet cardboard.

Murray needed to know what was going on. She dialed his number, but several moments later lowered the telephone handset and hung up without saying a word.

She'd gotten his answering machine.

Chapter Nine

Other than staggering, bleary-eyed, to either of the two bathrooms on occasion, they'd all slept halfway around the clock by Murray's reckoning. He managed to beat the rush to erase the obvious growth on his face and make himself almost presentable before Jack slouched against the outside of the closed door, scratching the wood with his fingernails and grousing under his breath.

"Better let me in there before I get any older."

"Use the other one."

"Mary's in it. Okay, pal, it's your carpet, not mine!"

That put an end to toweling off the shaving cream. "Oh, come on in, tiny bladder. I'm all done."

"Where's your toothpaste? I'm starved."

"Remember to take off the cap before you bite down."

"Who's got time for that? I'll just rip off the bottom end and squeeze!"

The conversation at the breakfast table was almost as goofy as the tensions of the session wore off and Murray's lumberjack-proportioned breakfast worked its magic. Then they got down to serious discussion. The big surprise was in how enthusiastically Jack and Mary greeted their results, even though neither of them could believe they'd been under for three days.

Mary led the session over second cups of coffee while they were still sitting at the kitchen table. "As I see things, it'll have to be a combination of the military and an old standby you've all heard before. It's a cliché, I know, but the proverbial 'Man On A White Horse' is what it will take, a knight in golden armor who charges all the way up the glass mountain. That's from a fairy tale, in case you don't recognize it. This man would have to have the military backing him, of course." She paused, smiling at Jack before adding, "It wouldn't work if the military tried it directly."

Jack nodded. "Absolutely right on that score. Damned if I ever thought it would come to this, or that I'd even *think* about involving myself in a revolution, but ... well, I keep going back to Murray's words ... 'lives, fortunes and sacred honor'. Y'know, when this country was no more than settlers from the other side of the pond, our forefathers went after freedom tooth and nail until they got it. They had lots fewer reasons than we have today, and their main antagonist was many weeks away by slow boat and a treacherous ocean crossing.

"*Our* antagonists are right here in our midst, in the form of a government we ignored too long, filled with crooks and those happy to have them, on its way to hell in a handcar and taking us down with it. No ocean to cross here, nothing to stop it. Damn government is into everything we do, looking in every window, squeezing every thin dime it can lay its hands on and making sure none of it gets back to us in any beneficial way. It reads our mail, taps our phones, spies on us from satellites--of course, the military does that too, but for completely different reasons--and creates more instant millionaires per year than we had in the first three hundred years of our existence." He sipped at his coffee. "We had real freedom once, long ago. Then we gave the politicians and lawyers our permission to steal it back while they wasted the nation's riches in the process. It's like the Roman Empire has come to America to die all over again, complete with bread and circuses, while our wealth drains away at the hands of goons wearing Armani suits."

Wilma got into it. "I'm not as educated as the rest of you, but it doesn't take rocket science to see where we're headed. According to the morning newscast, we're entering a currency crisis."

"That's going to be one of our biggest hurdles," Mary said. "Guaranteed our fearless leader will ask his loyal congressional servants to enact even more duties on imported goods to, quote--save jobs--end quote, which will make things even worse. Apparently none of them have ever read a thing about the great depression or any of the other financial crises in the past, or the underlying causes of them." She paused reflectively for a moment. "Any of you ever heard of the South Sea Bubble, back a couple of centuries ago when an investment craze had everyone with a dime or a shilling investing in a financial empire that was mostly smoke, then lost their fortunes when it collapsed? Murray, you have? Wilma, no. Jack? Okay, the dollar is the bubble today. It's in sad shape. It's in *terrible* shape, and the only thing keeping it from vaporizing in front of us is our belief in it and our debtors having no where else to go. It's nothing but a tree that's completely rotten inside the bark, ready to fall down with the slightest wind, but it looks just fine on the outside. The government has borrowed more money than can ever be repaid, and it will finally end in either a crash or a gradual sinking that's no better for being the slower of the two. Nothing short of mass infusions of something universally recognized as wealth will save it."

"Gold?" Wilma asked.

"Gold's merely a standard against which any economy is measured. It could be anything considered valuable by all, but perception is the only thing that makes currency valuable, and perception depends on trust. You can't find trust in a hole in the ground called a mine. It's earned with fiscal responsibility, namely keeping the amount of money in the economy *constant* and flowing evenly, not pointing to the illusion of gross national product. GNP tells us only how much money flowed for goods and services in a year. It doesn't address the nation's real wealth or lack thereof."

Wilma looked puzzled. "I guess I don't understand money."

"Money ... or gold or wampum or anything at all used to express the value of something ... is only as good as the perception by both sides that the same 'money' can be used the same way to acquire or trade away that same something to others. That's where trust comes in. Right now the dollar is perceived by the rest of the world as really shaky, meaning that at any time it could be considered a hundred-percent risk. Let me ask you something, Wilma. If you knew of a corporation whose executives had embezzled its total worth, run it into impossible debt compared to anything it could produce in the dim distant future, and where it had already been declared bankrupt and was being sold off at a nickel on the dollar, would you buy the stock at any price?"

"No."

"And if the same corporation hadn't yet *declared* bankruptcy, but everyone suspected it was in deep trouble, knew about the debt and knew it could collapse at any moment with tremendous losses? What then?"

"I still wouldn't. No, of course not, but I see where you're heading. What *is* our national wealth, then? How do we even know what it is?"

"We're between sixty and a hundred trillion dollars in the red right now, depending on who's counting. The national debt is that slow sinking thing I mentioned, but it can and probably will lead to a run on the big bank by American citizens and foreign debt holders eventually--if not sooner."

"Wilma, just to give you an idea of what a trillion of anything is," Murray broke in, "here are two dimes." He put the pair down on the table, touching. "These together are about an inch across, about the same as a silver dollar, okay? Now a trillion is a thousand thousand million, or twelve zeroes after the one. One

trillion inches would stretch two thirds of the way around the world."

"That's a lot."

"Times sixty, and you have thirty-six times around the world, in silver dollars," Mary added. "That's what this country owes, looking ahead. And that's only one problem we'll have to solve, once we make our very first decision, which is--"

"Who rides the white horse," Jack finished, more a statement than a question.

"Right." She picked up her printout and fanned the pages. "It's all in here and we've all gone over it, at least briefly. I don't know how closely you followed my reasoning, but you must have seen my conclusion that the person we pick has to be an unknown, politically speaking, hopefully without any sort of a public image. He has to sell the nation on their perception that he has no hand in anyone's pocket, has a sterling background and has all kinds of smarts as well as buckets of common sense."

It was Murray's turn to look puzzled. "I saw that part, but didn't understand exactly why."

"It derives from the peculiar way our government functions. I should have said *governments*. Remember that old adage, 'All politics is local'? This won't go over unless we have someone who's never dabbled in politics, but who's intelligent and personable enough to have the majority of people believe in him. He must be *their* spokesman, saying things their way, using their words. His charisma has to come from within, not be painted on."

"Why do you keep saying 'him'?"

A mischievous grin crinkled her face. "Well, you *are* a male aren't you?"

"Yes, but ... but ... hey, hold on a doggone minute here! Mary, what the hell are you saying? Omigod, not me. Never!"

The impact of her statement was registered on the remaining two faces at the table. He searched both, finding no answers there.

Jack, whose mouth was twisted in an almost-grin, finally nodded. "Intelligent and personable enough to have the majority of people believe in him, never having dabbled in politics, whose only passion until a recent tragedy was scientific pursuits in the field of abnormal genetic physiology. You do ride, don't you, Murray, even though you say you don't like horses? I hear the white ones are best."

"Yes, and they can climb the steepest glass mountains," Mary added.

Murray swung desperately back to the woman whose soft but implacable smile hadn't changed one whit. "You can't possibly be serious ... Mary ... can you?"

Once the shock wore off, Mary outlined her reasons. "This can't be done all at once, any more than Jack can induce the military to join a revolt just out of the blue. There's a lot of groundwork we have to lay first in order to sway public opinion, and that's where we may run into the major obstacle: time."

Wilma, who'd become the group's reality check, asked another of her pointed questions. "Why does it have to be done right away, Mary? I mean, if it can be done at all, why is it so important to start now? Things aren't getting worse like an ... an--"

"Avalanche?"

"Yeah, like an avalanche."

"Good question. Short and sweet, it has to be launched before the upcoming election gets close, at least well before the conventions. After conventions the voting public becomes fixated on one candidate or another, regardless of the candidates' party affiliations. It'll be too late for us then. The election is a little more than a year from now, so we need to set a target date of roughly six to eight months from today. That'll give us some leeway either side if we need it." She paused. "Speak up, Murray. Why the long face? I know a hundred politicians in Washington who would love to run the country, not to mention a thousand I probably don't know of."

"What do I know about running a country? Why does it have to be me?" His voice was almost plaintive. "Couldn't you find someone else?"

"We could, but you want to know what your prime qualification is?"

"It sure couldn't be good sense or I wouldn't be sitting here talking about it."

Everyone laughed, even Mary, but then she sobered. "Look, Murray, your very reluctance to take on the job makes you a great candidate. If it were someone who craved power we might as well leave things as they are. Just as a side note, you'll be in on the game right from the start. That gives you a leg up."

"I still don't feel like you're picking the right man."

"A few others in history said the same thing," Jack contended, "like Alexander of Macedon, for one. He got over it."

"He was a lot younger than ... oh, what's the use? You both spent the same time under the microproteins I did, and you're agreeing with each other. I'm just having an anxiety fit, I suppose."

Mary patted his hand. "Don't worry, we'll all help, but you're going to be Da Man, so get used to it."

* * * *

Craddock knew his face was beet red, but there was nothing he could do about it. Marcos was an imposing man, well over six feet tall. He'd refused the invitation to sit for his visit, and now he was actually up on the desk platform, glaring down while he waited for an answer to his question. Making things even more embarrassing, a corner of the most recent issue of LEWD magazine was peeking out beneath the files deliberately stacked on top to hide it. A second pile of folders occupied the other side of the desk. Craddock quickly picked the top one up, whooshed it front and center, then examined the label on the tab as if the answer were somewhere inside. Finally he nonchalantly dropped the folder over the partial display of female anatomy, straightened it to align with the desk, then banged a hastily snatched pencil down on top. It rolled off.

He whisked his hand back to blotter center ... *Zip!* ... then jabbed it forward ten precise inches to pick up the visitor's I.D. lying there, making an issue of peering at it, then put it back using the same motions. Finally he glanced up at his visitor.

"I'm sorry Mr.... "He glanced once more at the I.D. " ...Mr. Marcos ... but we've been barraged by such countless protests and threats of such import that I had no choice but to order Mr. Blake's research terminated and the records destroyed, pending reviews and appeals, of course. He was a bit of a wild maverick, you see, and we can't afford to have the community view our corporation in any kind of negative light. I'm certain you're sensitive to such things."

He glanced quickly at the offending magazine to be sure it was still covered. Just then, to his horror,

Marcos leaned forward and placed both hands on the desk, one smack on the pile of folders! When the pile shifted, he moved his palm to the wood surface, but there--another little portion of the cover girl was showing again.

Fortunately, Marcos was directing his gaze at the occupant of the elevated chair, not at the pile of folders. Unfortunately, he wasn't buying the story.

"Doesn't your company keep backups, Dr. Cruddick? Certainly you're aware that NSF guidelines mandate duplication of all records, even though the research may not be under our auspices ... that's ALL records, not just those that happen to suit some particular organization such as yours. Are you saying I have to report significant non-compliance to my superiors?"

"Oh, well, yes. I mean, no! However, they may not include Mr. Blake's personal laboratory notes. Notes, as you must know, are not considered records, at least not here at Barrington. In fact, I dare say--"

"I'll take copies of the backup reports with me," the visitor said. "Please have them prepared immediately. Also, there must be other information you can give me. This matter could be of great importance to Barrington and to Dr. Blake also, don't you agree? Or, perhaps you don't agree, since you've labeled him a wild maverick." He reached down and retrieved his I.D. from the desk, sliding it into his inside jacket pocket. Craddock held his breath, but nothing in Marcos' manner suggested he'd seen the embarrassing cover. Even so, it had to be concealed one way or another. He swiveled abruptly to his right, facing Marcos, and nonchalantly draped his open palm across the offending portion. There.

"Mr. Marcos, I can tell you only that Blake's research had to do with autism and a few microproteins he isolated, but that's about all. Nothing outstanding, not at all, not at all. I reviewed his work and decided it was unusually mundane and pointless for a man of his letters. Basic research at best, you understand, much to my disappointment. Perhaps the backup files will have more information, but I seriously doubt it. If you can tell me more specifically what you're after, I'll have his co-workers and technicians try to reconstruct what he was doing. Or better yet, allow me to me try rehiring him and he can tell you himself. I'd insist, however, that the cost of his rehiring *not* be loaded onto our meager operating budget. There are certain overhead burdens we must bear in hiring anyone, even though Mr. Blake once worked here."

That said, he sat unmoving until Marcos decided the interview was finished.

Macabrost pursed his lips, turning away from the pathetic man with the high pompadour. He knew someone who'd gotten where he was through politics instead of talent when he saw it. There'd be a limit to how long the creep might delay before checking on his Marcos alias, but more importantly the little man wasn't telling the whole story. Why on earth would there be a community hue and cry over something so mundane Blake's own supervisor would discount it as such? And autism, yet. What could autism and micro-whatevers have to do with politics, and why should they interest Mary Henderson enough that she was--as Merlson put it--a bitch in heat over the guy? He needed more information.

"Dr. Cruddeck, perhaps rehiring your scientist would be a good idea, even though the NSF can't in *any* way reimburse your costs. You understand our position, of course, though there are perhaps other ways we can help if budget constraints are your main worry. I can possibly arrange a general grant of some sort, something I will look into upon my return to Washington, but I'd like to hear what your Dr. Blake has to say before I go. How quickly can you arrange a face-to-face?"

Craddock's head snapped down as though he might have seen something crawling on his desk blotter. He shot his remaining hand forward, twisting slightly as he gripped the edge of the desk, then stared at the far wall for a moment, appearing to grapple with some momentous decision as he turned his head this

way and that. Finally he drew a deep breath and turned back, managing to drag the top folder once more over the girl.

"I'll have his former assistant contact him and ask him to come back to work, with a hefty increase in salary, Mr. Marcos. I'm sure he'll accept when he hears I personally rescinded my ... my decision to terminate his research. If you'll just leave me a way to contact you, I'll let you know for certain." His hand now rocketed toward the original wayward pencil, zipping it back and poising it over his small yellow pad.

"I'm registered at the Waybrook Hotel out by the airport, room 442. Call me there *today* if Blake accepts your offer, otherwise I'm afraid our interest in him must shift to someone else. It would be a shame for Barrington to lose out in all this, am I correct?"

"No, no, we *can't* let that happen! That is, we do want to cooperate in any way we can, Mr. Marcos. I shall indeed call you immediately, sir, and I thank you for choosing Barrington for consideration." With that he sprang to his feet and, bending forward robot fashion, thrust a hand across the desk. Marcos would have to reach across the credenza to meet it; he showed no inclination to do so. Finally Craddock withdrew, groping for something else to say. "We do appreciate being chosen by NSF for--"

"I believe you already said that, Dr. Cruddeck. Actually, it's primarily Dr. Blake we're taking a look at, not Barrington. Now, if you'll excuse me...."

"Yes, yes. Of course." And you will hear from me, Mr. Marcos."

When his visitor was safely gone, Craddock immediately hid the LEWD magazine at the bottom of his big drawer before stabbing the intercom button. "Ernesta, I need to see you in here this minute. We have to re-hire Mr. Blake back immediately ... with a fifty percent raise."

* * * *

Ernesta stared at the intercom. What was going on? Murray hadn't returned the phone message she'd finally decided to leave, which wasn't like *him* at all, and now Dr. Craddock was asking her to inform--not ask, *inform*--Dr. Blake that he was re-hired at a fifty per cent increase in salary? As if the man could be bought!

This time Murray did answer the phone. "Sorry for not returning your call, Ernie, but I've been very involved with something I didn't want to interrupt."

She kept her voice low. "Quite all right, Mr. Blake. Can you hear me okay?"

"You're talking low, but yes, go ahead."

"I just wanted to let you know that someone under an assumed identity was in here asking about your research. He used the name Marcos."

"Marcos?"

"Yes. Then he came back and talked to Dr. Craddock, who now insists that you come back to work immediately. Your salary is to go up fifty per cent."

"Hmm. 'Curiouser and curiouser!' Assumed identity, you say? How did you spot him?"

"His identification made him out to be a staff consultant to the National Science Foundation, here checking up on you as potential recipient for one or more grants. But earlier he said he was just a

messenger boy for the assistant secretary, Mr. Blake. Something about that didn't compute. Dr. Craddock had me make copies of all your backup files, and this man took them with him."

"Ernie, the NSF doesn't operate that way."

"I know."

""What else tipped you off?"

"He had a definite Spanish accent."

"So?"

"So, how many Hispanic men have you ever met without a trace of mustache? At least a little line."

"Ah, the symbol of Spanish manhood. Good for you, Ernie. Put the two observations together, and it spells 'fishy.' You'd make a good detective."

"Thanks. I went a step further ... I hope you think I did the right thing ... I called the National Science Foundation and asked to speak to Mr. Marcos."

"And?"

"I got a woman named Yolanda Marcos. There was no Alberto Marcos working there."

"So ... your hunch paid off. Good girl. Now please tell Mr. Craddock I'm not interested in returning to Barrington under any conditions. I'm not taking any job right now. Thanks for letting me know about the snooper, though. That was good of you. And very clever."

"I was glad to do it, Mr. Blake."

"I'd appreciate knowing if you hear of anyone else asking about me. Next time I won't wait so long to answer my voice mail."

Murray stared at the phone, mulling the possibilities. It was Jack who broke the silence. He, Mary and Wilma had all heard Murray's end of the conversation. "Any ideas who Marcos might be?"

"None. The whole thing's crazy. Craddock's never submitted any of my current work to the NSF for peer review, and I sure haven't. I never had anything substantial to submit until now, and *El Jefe* handed my report back unread at the same time he instructed me to purge all records from the research lab computers. There's no reason they'd send someone out here to check on me when a phone call would do the same thing. Whoever chose to use the NSF as a cover for snooping sure picked a loser. Ernie's sharp. She'd make a great assistant for anyone, anywhere."

Mary smiled. "Keep her in mind, then. We may need someone like her."

"So Craddock wants you back," Jack stated. "What's that tell you?"

"That suddenly I have something he wants, or thinks he does. I can't imagine ... unless he got all excited when the NSF came calling. He'd be the last one to smell a rat."

"To use Ernie's words, it don't compute. Who's Marcos, and who does he work for? He no sooner leaves than you get hired back at a fifty percent increase by a guy who cries over pennies and dumps you over nothing. Why? My gut tells me someone's found out what you were doing there at Barrington, recognizes it for what it could be and comes looking to get his hands on the goodies."

"Which aren't there any more, except in storage. Most of what I needed besides the microproteins I took with me up here." He tapped his forehead.

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Could it be any of your peers, you think? Someone you talked to about your progress, or maybe your hopes for it?"

"I haven't a clue. Like I said, the whole things crazy from the git-go. Okay, I vote we all go into the den and get back to our main topic. I'm still having trouble reconciling myself as the chief high muckety-muck of this whole shooting match."

But Jack didn't want to change the subject that quickly. "This Marcos thing is no coincidence, Murray. Keep thinking. Maybe you'll come up with a clue after all."

Mary's announcement brought the discussions to a temporary close several hours later. "Jack, I can't do much more here and there's a flight I can still catch to Atlanta if you can run me to the airport. I have a bit of business there before going on to D.C., where I'll start laying the groundwork for my end of our little scheme. In the meantime you can start thinking how to prepare the military for our main man Murray. Your end's going to be tough because it has to be *all* the military, not just the army, and my guess would be there's a limit to your list of trustworthy contacts in the other service branches. Am I right?"

"It'll be a challenge, yes, but my analysis addressed that in the main premise, namely that anyone in uniform has had it up the kazoo with military *status quo*, with our present commander-in-chief Robinson and all the politicians running the Pentagon through their politically appointed generals. The generals, in turn, repay their promotions by advancing weapons systems and suppliers recommended by the politicians, who in their turn collect big kickbacks and donations from the corporations involved through their lobbyists. It's a closed circle, a venial and lucrative one for the power elite, regardless of which party is in favor at the time. Career professionals know how the damn thing should be run, know the priorities, know how the money should be spent. Operative words here are ... everyone together, now ... *career*--"

"*Professionals*," came the chorus.

"Excellent. You were all paying attention. The very minute a viable alternative to the present mess shows on the horizon, it'll be like a lightning bolt spreading out and engulfing anything it can reach. The media will actually help us more than anything else, along with the obvious political hacks, by attacking Murray every way they can. First we fix it so the American people are clamoring for someone *like* Murray. Then I'll make sure some very key people in the military know he's the very one they're all looking for--a combat veteran, an intellectual with honest-to-God integrity *and* someone who takes no horseshit from the politicians and special interests, all wrapped up in one man. And from now on, when you hear me speak of the military, exclude all the political generals and admirals. We're talking about the real leaders, men who worked their way to the top. They're the only ones who can sway the rank and file below. Mary, if you can get the Washington crowd to go with Murray, I predict the military will follow. By Washington crowd, I mean the movers and shakers, not politicians as a whole."

"Even so, Jack, there may be a few politicians we can turn. I can think of several dozen who'd be quick to jump on any bandwagon, forget party affiliations. We won't promote Murray's candidacy for the office at first. What we *will* promote is the need to draft someone completely outside the established circle of mutual back-scratchers and bottom feeders, setting up our own definition of the ideal candidate. My premise supports a candidate who's extremely reluctant to wear the mantle of high office, yet is a courageous, born leader."

Murray looked to the heavens. "Who'd you have in mind, Mary? My born leadership qualities were tested to the utmost while I was training Moose and Sugar, and even then they more or less trained *me*."

"Mary, you forgot to add modest and unassuming," Jack quipped. "As for my part, I'm not sure yet exactly how I'll go about it. I was more concerned with whether it was possible at all, but now that I know it is I can get into the nitty-gritty details. If you think the politicians have screwed up the government, you ought to see what they've done to the military. With the help of a bunch of those political generals, I might add."

"I'm more aware than you might think, Jack. Now there's one thing more, and that's how we're going to communicate without the busybodies getting wind of it. This Marcos business over at Barrington worries me, too. Phones are no better than the old-time party lines. Email is out. Even your prepaid phones are risky, Jack. Can you get crypto-phones?"

"We need pseudo-random code stuff. We can get those units, yes. They're un-tappable as far as content, but remember, they can still attract attention electronically speaking. They can be traced as far as locating the two ends talking, so we--"

"Uncle Jack, what are you two talking about?"

"Oh, sorry Wilma. Okay, back in the early sixties we were using something called spread spectrum along with a way of encoding data called a Barker code that made it look like so much junk static. The receiving end looked for a unique pattern that started its own decoder, the exact image of the encoder at the transmitting end, and recomposed the original data. It was big and expensive. Now it's small and expensive, with even better encryption. If we all have those, we can pretty well talk without anyone listening. They can still figure out where the two ends are, though, if we talk long enough. The trick will be to keep anyone from suspecting we're all connected in any way, particularly Mary."

"He's right," she added. "Even though I have my little place out here, anyone who might suspect something could easily latch onto my taking an airline flight out and back. I'll need to establish some sort of presence at my place next time, maybe talk to a neighbor or two, or my original realtor. It's too late to do that this trip." She stood. "Murray ... Wilma ... regardless of how this all works out I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Now don't be surprised at some of the odd things politicians do and say the next few months. I've got such a reputation for being right they'll follow me blindly--for awhile. My job will be to make sure they don't get together and compare notes when my words of wisdom begin to backfire. Should be interesting."

"I don't see how you're going to do it," Murray said.

She grinned. "What we have in Washington, Murray, is a huge amorphous mass of liars and self-seekers who play by unspoken rules. They conspire wordlessly in the ways they cover each other, each with his own personal agenda. Nobody points fingers at anyone else, because everyone has both hands in the cookie jar at all times. Sure they're elected, but elections are no more than a contest to see which candidate can get the electorate to believe his promises more so than his opponent's; that plus money. Those in office keep the boat from rocking by being predictable to their peers, also in office, and especially to those who *put* them into office, namely big money or big organizations."

"And along comes Mary," Jack interjected.

"And along I come, convincing certain of our key game players to do or say something totally unpredictable, even outrageous. They step in a big pile of it, so to speak, which they'll do based on my reputation ... until they catch on to me. By that time we should be seeing massive public reaction, which is when we introduce Murray as a cure for the mess. Jack, you have that pregnant thought look on your face. Speak up."

"Remember to tell Murray once again how you wouldn't have missed it, say some day in the future when

we're all tied to that post and asking for a last cigarette. Me a revolutionist! Damned if I'd ever have figured it." He grinned wryly. "Come on, let's get going before I change my mind.

* * * *

One of Ernesta's favorite old-time characters was Audrey Meadows, the woman who played Alice Kramden opposite Jackie Gleason in the *Honeymooners* TV series way back in the Stone Age. Not only was there a physical resemblance, there was a bizarre similarity between Ralph Kramden and H. D. Craddock when it came to vocal tirades. Alice would always stand there stone-faced while Kramden made an ass of himself, ranting about whatever only to crumble and apologize when he realized how foolish he sounded. During her time at Barrington, Ernesta had perfected the same approach when it came to dealing with the boss, but Craddock never realized how inane he was. He'd never crumbled in her presence, never apologized.

"Ernesta, I can't understand why you *FAILED* to tell him his salary was to be boosted by a whopping FIFTY PERCENT! You must never have mentioned it, otherwise he'd NEVER have turned down an offer like that. Dr. Blake was highly paid in the first place, compared to others I might have hired to do his level of work, something you undoubtedly knew since you processed his pay, yet you chose to ignore my instructions even though I made them extremely clear. How could you have missed the importance of this ... this ... I want you to get right back on that phone and--"

"I did tell him, sir. The salary raise was the first thing out of my mouth." She delivered the words in monotone *a la* Audrey.

Craddock stopped his pacing and whirled quite suddenly, nearly knocking a small, nearly dead African violet from the corner of his desk.

"You couldn't have."

She wore her best Alice Kramden look and crossed her arms. "He wasn't interested."

"And he won't come back? Damn his soul, why NOT? Did he say?"

'Audrey' shrugged, looking bored. "Perhaps he just wants some time off."

"But this isn't just anybody wanting to talk to him, Ernesta, it's *Washington!* It's the National Science Foundation! I'll have to give them something, or that Marcos will put us out to pasture permanently. I didn't like him one bit--not that we ever got any attention from NSF--but his whole attitude gave me shivers. Shivers, you hear me? We'll be missing out on some substantial grants if he has his way." He straightened the potted plant that had gone from robust health to pasty yellow in just two weeks under his care, then neatened his pile of folders and placed a stapler on top. From her lower vantage point, she could still see the edges of several of his secret girly magazines midway down the stack. "Send Blake's assistant up to see me immediately. Surely *he* must know some of the details of what Blake was working on, enough for us to reconstruct some of the work. I want him here in ten minutes, no more, and tell him to bring along everything he has in the way of records."

"Our procedures stipulated they were all to be secured in the main computer, Dr. Craddock."

"Those same procedures--well, we need the input of the assistant. He must--"

"His name is Norman Wheelright."

"Then tell Wheelright what I just told you. I'll be waiting."

Norman was pale, almost sick. "Do I have to tell him *everything* Dr. Blake was thinking? He didn't transfer all his notes."

"You're going to have to decide that yourself, Norman."

"Right now?"

"Right now. What's wrong? You're looking as if he were asking for your first born son."

"Nothing's wrong. Nothing you want to know about, anyway."

Any other time, that reply might have generated instant curiosity. This was different. Norman was speaking as a person in his own right, not as an appendage of Dr. Blake, yet there had to be a way to put him on guard. "Maybe I *would* want to know, Norman, and maybe you ought to share your concerns with me. Dr. Blake is a fine man. I'd hate to see him hurt."

She smiled and patted him on the arm. Norman was handsome enough to win some woman's heart if only he were more forceful and self-assured. The scene about to unfold in *El Jefe's* office would not be pretty, especially since it was Craddock himself who'd insisted that the official set of records was all any organization needed to keep. Lab notes were too prone to speculation.

When Ernesta left to return to her office, Norman felt a sudden rush of sentiment. Had that really been her? The patting of his arm was almost a wakeup call, that and her concerned smile. Ever since his first day at Barrington she'd seemed so cool and efficient, so very ... unapproachable--yes, that was the word--that he'd actually felt more comfortable avoiding her. But that quivery feeling when she touched him, and her deep concern for Mr. Blake ... maybe she wasn't that way at all. She seemed so ... so different, someone he'd want to talk to about, well, things. Maybe when he was safely back from Craddock's office he'd ask her to meet him somewhere after work for a drink.

The thought made his heart thump even more than it did when he learned he'd have to face the big boss all alone.

Dr. Craddock wouldn't like it much, but he'd get the bare minimum for all his questions. After all, things Mister Blake said in the lab weren't official.

* * * *

"I'm sorry, Mr. Marcos, but Dr. Blake definitely did destroy all his personal notes and his chief assistant really doesn't appear bright enough to have retained much. It was all part of our internal procedures, you see, and--"

"Ridiculous! What kind of research outfit destroys personal records? It sounds to me like you were running some sort of illegal project out there, something you deliberately set out to cover up. According to you, the local community came down on you real hard, so what does that tell us here at NSF? That you were doing gene transplants against federal regulations? Perhaps using human volunteers? Either one could close you down for good."

At his end of the phone, Craddock was sweating. "No, no, Mr. Marcos, that's not it at all. Blake's work was nothing of the sort, not what you're saying. He merely thought he'd discovered some new sort of microprotein peculiar to certain types of autistics called *idiot savants*, if that helps you, though I don't see how it can apply to real life situations. Not at all, not at all. His son was autistic, you see, though not in any special way. I was unhappy from the very start with his choice of program goals, and as I said, his work was hardly up to our standards."

"Well, Dr. Cruddeck, at least I can agree with your opinion that such work would have no practical use. Idiot savants are medical oddities." *But not really, Craddock, not really. Retarded individuals with one special talent to the exclusion of all others? Was that what Mary was after in this Blake fellow? What kind of craziness was that? Idiot savants were usually incapable of brushing their teeth or tying shoe laces, let alone functioning in society. Maybe she was looking to enhance her already formidable political talents, though that seemed as unlikely as it was stupid. She already stood almost alone in her field. Time to smooth Craddock's ruffled feathers a bit.*

"Perhaps you can shed some light for us in another rather dark corner, Dr. Cruddeck, since as you say there are none of Dr. Blake's personal notations available. You are not by chance recording this conversation, are you?"

"What? Oh ... no, not at all."

"I do hope not, for your sake. As you know, we rarely reveal details surrounding our interest in any one candidate under consideration, but you've been so cooperative in this that I'm tempted to bend the rules a bit. You understand, this must remain off the record. I need your guarantee on that point."

"Quite understandable, sir. As I said, if there is anything I can do to help--"

"This has to do with one of Dr. Blake's recent confidantes, an ... unscrupulous woman known to be involved in the practice of scooping ... I think that's the word for it ... scooping recent medical developments. It's highly unethical on her part, but that aside, it also ruins any chances our chosen candidates might have for grants. We insist on exclusivity, as you know. On the other hand, this woman could have some romantic inclination for Dr. Blake, and that could explain her interest. What can you tell me about him and any liaisons with our fair sex? If there is something like that, it could help Blake immensely from our point of view."

"Ah, I think I see exactly what you mean, yes, except ... well, I'm afraid in this case there could be no romantic involvement, or even a sexual one." He glanced down into his open desk drawer where an overly airbrushed blonde gazed with doe eyes from the page. "Actually, Dr. Blake's a widower. He recently lost both his wife and son in a car accident, the reason for his unwillingness to return to work in my opinion. A man like that, you know, well, he was quite destroyed over the loss."

"Being a widower doesn't necessarily mean anything. All right, we'll take that all into consideration. Thanks for your help. I'll get back to you when I need anything else."

"Thank *you*, sir. If I may ask, when will the NSF be making their decision on--"

The *click* of a hang up was his answer.

Chapter Ten

The flight time to Atlanta and the one that followed to Washington hours later were times in which to think and plan. Mary maintained a lengthy list of politicians, lobbyists and even industrialists seeking consultations with her, ten times as many as any one person could handle. Now it was time to 'allow' a few more onto her client list, dropping others. In each case, her choice would have to bear totally on the maximum impact possible in the shortest time. Move quickly, stay focused and at all times be believable. Anything she said from this point on would be designed entirely to further her ends, not theirs.

Even the word 'ends' had to change now. It was revolution, plain and simple, and such a radical step that it was startling to realize how quickly it had happened. The remark Jack had made as they parted, the one about being tied to a post and asking for a cigarette before the firing squad got busy ... well, that could easily happen, even in America.

On the plus side, not even blatant treason was considered grounds for punishment any more. If it were looked upon as it had been two hundred years earlier, a majority of the congress would have to be executed for acts of disloyalty against the state. On their way to the firing squad or hangman, they'd drag along thousands of conspirators.

Revolutions could go wrong in other ways, too. The military could well go it on their own, trying for a coup once they got stirred up. Jack was completely right about all military service branches being totally politicized, a fact obvious even to the most myopic of Washington observers. There were too many armchair generals and political lackeys running the show. In another scenario, other politicians might try a little rabble rousing of their own after the revolution succeeded, hoping to muscle in and take control from those they'd deem crooks no different from themselves. All these possibilities would have to be taken into account, but that could be done later. The most pressing part for now was the groundwork.

By the time she reached the nation's capital, she knew how she'd go about it. There were a few rumors about herself she'd need to plant.

* * * *

Mary took the proffered seat on the overstuffed couch opposite the president, who opted for his usual straight chair facing her. It placed him higher than most visitors. For her, the setting played right into her scheme. President Emanuel Robinson was well known as a Lothario. What the bachelor president did in private was, in his view, nobody's business but his own and so far none of the women had done more than start their own rumors, seeking notoriety for themselves. Unfortunately, Robinson was seventy pounds overweight so his paramours were seen more as opportunists than trophies.

"Mr. President, I know it sounds insane, but you'll just have to trust me on this one. My advice is often controversial, but these are controversial times and my record to date is--to quote the Washington Post--phenomenal. They said that, I didn't. You can choose to ignore what I tell you if you want. It's your call."

Okay, Mr. President, time to sneak a peek! She'd chosen a short, apricot-colored satin skirt for the interview, topped with a white ruffled blouse and a black, fitted jacket. The sheer pantyhose were deliberately selected because of their propensity for appearing to make a woman's legs fairly glisten. It was time to uncross and re-cross them while she made a point of checking her notepad. He'd have had to be blind not get a good look at their full length. She made a feeble attempt to tug the skirt back down, demurely slanting both legs while she noted the twist of his mouth.

"Mary, I wouldn't have brought you into my private quarters if I had any doubts at all about your advice. I definitely do want to hear it, without the problem of ... as you know ... the recorders running. There's not much we can discuss in the Oval Office unless we pass notes."

"Which you haven't done since you chased skirts in high school, right Manny?" She made her grin beguiling.

He chuckled. "Yes, I guess I was a bit of a chaser."

"And you still are."

This time he laughed, letting his eyes linger a bit. "Not unusual for a kid with a bit of Spanish blood in his veins. Oh, well...." He ran his hand across dark brown hair that had a habit of popping up in the back. "Now, on to the reason you're here. What is this good advice?"

"As I said, you may think it insane, but in my opinion it won't hurt you one bit to accidentally use the 'N' word in your upcoming speech on entitlements."

"N word? You don't mean nigger, do you?"

"Absolutely. It's a question of numbers. My research suggest you're going to need all the white vote you can get, and slipping that way will gain you more than you'll lose of the black. Not only that, by election time, blacks will be more interested in housing allowances than anything you may have said in the past. You've already hinted strongly about that being one of your favorite campaign themes. It will also swing a lot of the Hispanic vote your way. The numbers support me."

"Well, if you say so, Mary. You do have a propensity for being right, but my pollsters haven't said anything like that."

"You're paying them to tell you what you want to hear, Manny, so what did you expect? If you actually went out and commissioned a really fair poll you'd see a completely different picture, and you know it. Don't worry about the uproar this will cause, because it'll be no more than a tempest in a teapot. Just throw off a halfway decent apology and answer no further questions about it. If reporters persist, tell them you stand on your record with blacks. That's when you mention how you're planning on introducing housing allowances for lower income families. That's a good, stock answer for anything you don't want to talk about, by the way."

She uncrossed her legs for a second time, not bothering to tug the skirt. *The poor baby! He's certainly struggling with his natural instincts.*

"All right, I'll do it, by golly. I'd rather trust you than those pollsters, anyway. And Mary ... I *would* like more of your inputs, only my preference is for your first thoughts on any topic as opposed to something you might have thought long and hard about. I find that better than the other way. Perhaps we could spend some time here together, say after hours when neither of us are quite so busy? I find it easier to focus on important things when I'm relaxed. I could pop off a few questions and you could just relax and say whatever you think. I think we could both have a really good time, and of course, I'd pay you."

She beamed as she leaned forward on the couch cushion, managing to expose considerable cleavage while getting to her feet. Another little tug to smooth her skirt, and it was time for her parting line.

"Why Manny, I do believe you're propositioning me. Well, I must say I find the idea extremely ... appealing. Shall we say I'll look forward to considering that sort of thing just as soon as my own schedule slacks up a bit?"

* * * *

"Ms. Senario, I know it doesn't sound right, but that's the best advice I can give you. As one representing a district almost totally composed of minorities, it's no wonder you're recognized as an advocate for *all* minorities, but you are definitely sitting on a time bomb in terms of losing control. Are you aware of how many of your constituents are planning to take disproportionate advantage of your patronage? How many cells of discontent there are in your own district? My advice has to do with keeping them in line while you make them think you're on their side. You'll be able to garner not only the added votes you'll need to crush your opposition, but the move will bring you a lot more influence when it comes to appropriations next term. You risk nothing. Before they realize what's happened, you'll be safely in position for another two years. Plenty of time to mend fences then."

Congresswoman Gina Senario looked startled. Such a remark was the last thing she'd expected. Conversations in her presence always tiptoed around subjects like that, with politically correct wording saying exactly the same thing while avoiding precise language. She chose her words carefully.

"Ms. Henderson, I was told you're the most ... astute ... political analyst in Washington, but I never imagined that kind of advice. Why, it seems to me like political suicide, promising things I can't possibly deliver. It's too transparent."

"Absolutely right, but the only way to keep ahead of the other parties these days. They promise everyone the stars and moon, and you know it. The problem with being openly honest is that your constituents automatically assign the same degree of disbelief to everything you say, honest or not, so you come out with a net negative while your opponents can still point to a pile of goodies nobody might believe, but everyone hopes will somehow be delivered. It's all hoopla. I'm laying it on the line."

She eyed the representative directly and purposely, after that meaningless garble, letting her eyes shift to the other's bare arms and linger there before returning. Gina Senario was a lesbian. If there'd been a sudden flicker of interest, perhaps of another kind, it didn't matter. The desired effect was best created subconsciously, and Ms. Senario was visibly warmer a few moments later, sighing heavily.

"I wish the game didn't have to be played like this, Mary. We're really not accomplishing a thing here in Washington any more."

"Gina, Gina..." The words were accompanied by a soft pat on the arm. "If you want to stay in office, you *must* play the same game everyone else does. Your contributions will dry up otherwise, and I'm sure you're aware that the political process runs on money. Only on money."

"All too well. All right, God knows I've paid you enough for this consultation, I may as well listen to what you say."

Mary put on her brightest smile. "The ones who listen to me get re-elected. It'll be great to see you retain your position. You are doing *such* a great job."

* * * *

Senator John Swenson was obviously still getting over the shock of finding he'd suddenly gained access to Washington's top political analyst. Considered a shoo-in for a second term, thanks to support from billionaire George Sokos and separately from organized labor, he was nervous about his election chances nevertheless. His challenger for the office had caused alarm with innuendos about improper campaign contributions, and now the extent of Swenson's behind-the-scenes ties to organized labor were also in danger of being exposed. He'd already started his own smear campaign in retaliation, but he'd also sought counsel from the one person others considered 'top drawer' when it came to honest straight talk

and secrecy. On top of that, she was a damn good looking broad! Rumor had it that, despite her sometimes-brittle demeanor, the woman from Oklahoma was 'available' for certain private extracurricular events if the inducement were high enough, and particularly went for tanned, blond men. That wasn't the only rumor, but it certainly applied to him. If he played his cards right....

Despite various accumulated photographs of her, he was quite stunned by Mary's mid-thigh length "little black dress." Mary Henderson was more than good looking. She was a knockout! He smiled his warmest when she arrived.

"Ms. Henderson, I'm truly honored and humbled by your very presence here in my office. You're the most sought-after woman in Washington."

"Probably true, Senator Swenson, but I made a special accommodation in your case. Shall we get right down to business? I haven't much time today." Her lack of smile suggested she might not have dressed for his particular appointment, but for something to follow. Like perhaps a formal *soirée*? Or something more private?

"And *also* one of the most attractive anywhere, I must say. Much more glamorous than your pictures."

"Why, thank you, Senator. They warned me you were a charmer, but you may think differently when you hear my advice. As you know, that's my stock in trade these days. Sadly, my only one, as it turns out." She paused, casting glances around the room as if judging the decor. Her gaze came to rest on a pair of straight-back chairs.

"Oh, please let's use the comfy ones over here, Ms. Henderson. I didn't intend to charm you, really, just blurted out some honest thoughts."

"Quite all right. I took it as a rare compliment." She deposited her slim briefcase alongside the upholstered chair and sat with a model's precision, knees together. "Now then, Senator, we both know that you owe your phenomenal political rise to two factors. One is the backing of George Sokos, who funded your campaign most cleverly through the many various groups he controls, plus the lavish attention he devoted to you on his website."

"Well, I ... Ms. Henderson ... I can't--"

"The other is organized labor, not to be confused with the mob. Or perhaps ... well, take it either way." She slowly lifted one leg and crossed it over the other, smiling directly at him. Mary noted that it was all he could do to keep his gaze locked on hers during the process. "While there is nothing wrong with either, Senator--we do take support from any quarter these days, do we not?--you anticipate continued backing from both corners in your re-election bid and have as much as said so publicly. Naturally, both factions applaud your every word. The problem is that they are both planning to swing their support to your competition."

"What! I can't believe that, Ms. Hender--"

"My advice, John--which you are free to ignore if you wish--is to beat them to the punch and in the process bring one or both back to your camp."

"I don't quite understand."

"By *attacking* both sponsors now and not after they've made their new positions known, you stymie their initiative and put them in a defensive position. God knows there's enough dirt on both of them. Do it quickly and forcefully. Timing is everything in this business, as you know, and you can't afford to wait if

you want maximum impact. However, in the closing weeks prior to the election you come roaring back in *support* of both. You certainly don't need me to tell you how to do that, either, but do you realize what an impact *that* would have? You admit you were wrong, your constituents admire you for doing so and automatically forgive human error as they always do, your two sponsors are forced to publicly acknowledge a lamb returned to the fold, and you're in a stronger position than ever." She uncrossed and re-crossed her legs with her final three words. This time he couldn't help but drop his eyes while she stretched the skirt back into place. For a moment her startling advice took a back seat to his elevated pulse rate. Maybe the rumors really *were* true. If so, she'd already given him a real come-on. She might have worn a longer dress!

She smiled with a little lift of one eyebrow. "A penny for your thoughts at this very moment, Senator. Your rapt expression makes me suspect we're both thinking the same thing, am I right?"

My God, we sure are! "I'd need ... uh ... to consider your proposition at length, Ms. Henderson. You come across as a bit of a surprise, as I'm sure you know, but one I think I could warm up to fairly quickly. I'd need ... uh ... a bit more information, though. By any chance could I interest you in sharing a bit more of your insights with me, say over drinks after hours? I'd certainly enjoy that."

"I'd prefer just Mary behind closed doors, Senator. After all, you paid a small fortune for my advice just now, so why not? As to casual conversation over drinks, as appealing as that does sound in *your* case, John, I'm afraid my evenings are quite booked for the immediate future. I'll keep it in mind, though. You do understand that such liaisons have to be extremely covert, else both of us could find our reputations tarnished. I've managed to keep mine intact and very private ... so far."

"Oh, well, when it comes to privacy ... Mary ... I can guarantee no one will be the wiser."

"Good! Now I must go. Busy, busy! Keep in touch."

* * * *

It was liar's poker on a huge scale, with players lining up to toss their money into the kitty in a sky's-the-limit game. Mary's advice over the next month or two always fit the ambiguous category, leaving room for reinterpretation as events themselves changed. Her goal was to pit the players against each other, leaving room for Murray to step into the ensuing vacuum. Most of her chosen targets were men, but her clothes and demeanor were assessed by their female staff nevertheless. Rumors she herself instigated flew and demands for her advice flourished. Her list of clients expanded to include more than forty of the newly chosen targets, those who'd be most disruptive with their surprising actions as election time drew nearer.

Beyond the deliberate teasing, underlings and others might wonder about her contradictory advice once they saw it being put into play, but her clients themselves wouldn't listen. Once they'd shelled out their money for the tremendous fees she charged, it was hard not to use her advice. The world of politics was rife with turnabouts, double-dealings, surprises and slander anyway. There were no longer such things as loyalties, party-wise or personal, only tacit understanding among the players that certain rules of the game were to be followed if all were to benefit. Money was the name of that game, most of it going into personal pockets and the rest so much smoke and mirrors. No elections were won these days without piles of cash, and most often the candidates raising the most were the loudest, boldest, most outlandish and hypocritical. A proven fund raiser stayed in the party's good graces regardless of political errors or misjudgments. Major miscalculations could always be softened by promises, public and private, especially if the media were on one's side--and these days that could be arranged with enough money and influence behind the scenes. Washington political reporters were as cynical as street prostitutes. At the same time, candidates were always on the alert for ripples on the pond, omens and portents that

could mean defeat at the polls. They were hungry for advice. Her advice. After all, who else batted .800 in a game where guesses were wrong most of the time?

If the ultimate goal of the game she was playing now wasn't so serious, it would almost be fun, watching the rumors she encouraged about her indiscretions percolate through the political byways of the Washington elite. Those people were always ready to believe the worst of their fellows even while working with them and Mary used that to the full extent of her ability.

* * * *

Brenda gently poked Murray's face, finally deciding it was genuine. "Well, you seem real enough. After what Jack told me, I wondered whether some alien or wild eyed militiaman hadn't taken you over."

"I'm still me." He wanted to laugh, but she looked far too serious. Instead, he gave her an extra tight hug before shaking hands with Jack. Then, surprising himself, he gave Wilma a big hug, too. She appeared startled for a moment, but a little smile said it was okay. On their way inside, he mentioned his re-stocked liquor cabinet and the seven-course dinner he'd prepared, ready whenever they were.

Brenda rolled her eyes. "What are we having, if I may ask?" She tugged Wilma's arm. "Sometimes he does okay, but you take your chances, know what I mean?"

"Just for that, Brenda, I'm going to water your drinks," Murray retorted. "I made my specialty--roast beef sandwiches and potato salad."

"That settles it! You're real, much as I hate to admit it."

Wilma was into it by then. "Is it that bad?"

"It's his special meal, but he never puts enough seasoning in the potato salad."

"The last time I seasoned it your way, you wouldn't eat it. Okay, I changed my mind about the drinks. Yours I'll make twice as strong. Enough alcohol and it all tastes alike."

That got a laugh, but she sniffed her drink nevertheless. Her surreptitious wink at Wilma wasn't quite a sneaky as she thought, but Murray decided against another round of one-liners. Instead he brought out bottles of scotch and bourbon, with the ice cooler hooked over his finger, setting the works on his big coffee table cut from a section of a huge misshapen tree. He poured three fingers of bourbon, raised his glass and nodded. "You can have at me now, Brenda. I have my defenses ready."

"I will. Jack thinks what you've done is just short of Moses accepting the ten commandments from God. I'm not that sure, but I'm willing to be convinced, so convince me. Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

"You, too? That was one of Connie's favorites from *Alice in Wonderland*."

"I think the king said it."

Jack just rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Murray, quit with the Alice stuff, drink your defenses and start talking."

If Brenda refused to go along, no doubt Jack would reluctantly bow out, so it was important not to skip anything. First, the idea for research--the focusing phenomena shown by some autistics--then continuation into the process of recovering the microproteins apparently inherent to the state. Or, conversely, the focusing that stimulated genes in those particular microproteins to code for more than the

normal amount in the autistic person's body. He admitted being unsure of exactly what took place, but emphasized how the recovered microproteins, desensitized and replicated, apparently worked perfectly in another person's bloodstream.

"But how do you know the results you get are correct, Murray? It sounds like something from a dope dream to me."

"No answer other than deep conviction, and that's the crux of it. We found not one shred of faulty logic, no false assumptions, no factual errors, no numerical inconsistencies, no dead ends. I could go on, but remember, Brenda, we all approached this with initial doubts. They evaporated early on and never returned. I guess the only way to really convince you is to let you try a small sample yourself."

Jack leaned forward as if he were going to protest, then settled back in his chair. Wilma saved him from whatever objection he might have raised. "I want to try it, too."

"What would each of you focus on?"

Wilma was ready with her answer. "I think I'd like to discover how people in my age group would react to a real revolution. After all, if it turns into fighting, it's the young people who do the bulk of combat."

"I hope it doesn't involve much fighting, but you've got a good point there. And you, Brenda?"

"How about if I carry Wilma's idea a little further and concentrate on how women would react? Wouldn't you like to know something like that?"

Jack spoke almost before she finished. "Absolutely. In fact, it's probably a prime consideration. High five, sweetheart!"

For a long moment, Murray could think of nothing to say. How could something that important have waited this long to come to the surface? And how many others like it were lurking, waiting to be put on the table? Nothing is ever perfect, he reminded himself, but he suddenly felt a little queasy.

* * * *

The microprotein supply taken from the lab was anything but inexhaustible, and two weeks later it was almost gone even though none had been wasted. Even though involving Norman further was distasteful, Murray called and asked him if he'd do another replication run after hours and send the new supply of microproteins to the ranch by courier.

"Sure, Mister Blake. The replication is easy once you have the parameters plugged into the software, and supplies are no problem. I'll do it this evening and get them off to you in the morning, even if I have to call in sick."

"Norman, thank you. This means a lot to me. And in case you're wondering, it does work on humans. Also in case you're wondering, the microproteins are being put to very good use."

"So long as it's you, I won't worry about it, Mister Blake."

"Well, thanks again. I'll tell you more about what I'm doing when I think it's safe."

"No problem. I better get going so I can set this up."

What a relief! Once this whole thing was over, Norman would be repaid for his trust. Maybe a little shove toward furthering his education, or even some financial backing. He'd like that.

On balance, with a little more than five months until the election, their plans were beginning to assume final shape. One major factor still lacking was for Mary to return from Washington and integrate everything she'd been doing. The other was for Jack to find some way to increase his available free time. The solution to that problem came by surprise. He'd gone back to base, only to show up two days later. As soon as he was inside and settled down, he dropped his bomb.

"I resigned my commission today, and put in my retirement papers. And I have a lot of accumulated leave saved up so I'm taking it rather than getting paid for the time."

"In for a penny..."

"Right. Our last session pointed me that way. I can do more from retirement than I could by remaining on active duty."

"How long will it take"

"Considering how many of the political generals I've offended one way or another, it shouldn't be long. In fact, I doubt I'll have to go back except for a day or two of processing out. Now I can really get the ball rolling by speaking my mind. I couldn't do that while on active duty."

"Don't go overboard until Mary gets back here and updates us."

"A lot of what she's doing is already apparent, if you read between the lines in the political news. No one I know can remember a time when there's been such a sudden spate of reversals, upsets, surprises and anger coming out of Washington. It seems like certain of the favorites are all in disarray and some complete unknowns are suddenly being shoved onstage. That's Mary's work, pal. I told you she's good. The media's going crazy. They love this stuff."

"I haven't seen my name come up yet."

"The time's not right. Now it's all about preparing the moment to meet the man, so to speak."

"Well, I still don't feel like the man."

"All the better. By the way, I've started contributing to a payroll for Wilma. She's too important to us for her to be out looking for a job, and we have plenty of money for the time being."

"So do I ... for the time being ... but the way inflation's going, it'll be down by a third this time next year."

"Just so it lasts until we take over. Hey, here's something new. I think Wilma's a little sweet on you."

"What?"

"Yeah. Brenda thinks Mary might be, too. What're you using for aftershave? I've got to get me some."

"Sorry, Jack, it's too soon after ... you know ... after Connie."

"I know, and so do they. Don't worry about it for now. We need to get to work. Mary is going to decide which well-known politician we'll need, as well as a good reporter we can recruit for our side. I say the reporter may be more important than the politico, but we'll see."

"How about the military? Picked your man yet?"

Jack leaned back in his chair. "Murray, unless I'm awfully surprised, the man I want will be getting in touch with *me* soon as he hears I've put in my retirement papers. Whether he'll go along with us ... well,

I'm not so sure of that. I have alternate names if he won't, but he's the man I'm really going after. None of that concerns us right now. A revolution is all well and good, but we have to start thinking about what we're going to do with it once it happens."

"I've already done some thinking."

"So have I. Let's have a drink and compare notes."

"What could you possibly know about being adrift alone in outer space?"

* * * *

General Nathaniel Foreman ordinarily did little more than scan the names of officers requesting retirement, after receiving recommendations from his staff. Barring some factor he knew that they didn't, he routinely approved the applications, but ... there couldn't be more than one Colonel Jack Williams of that age and specialty in the army. Foreman pressed the button to summon his aide, Major Thomas Glenleir, who stuck his head through the door a few seconds later. Foreman held out the list with Jack's name underlined in red ink.

"Tom, get this officer on the phone as soon as you can, even if he's off duty. I want to talk to him."

"Yessir." Glenleir departed faster than usual. When the general put that preemptory tone in his voice, he expected action.

* * * *

Murray held out the receiver. "It's for you, Jack."

"Probably Brenda, wondering if I'm surviving your peanut butter and jelly baked potatoes." His smile faded once he took the phone. "Yes, sir, it's me all right. No, sir, it's nothing I want to go into over the phone. I'm afraid you'll have to come see me. No sir, you'll have to come here." There was a pregnant pause. "No, wait--let me give you the address where I'm staying. You won't find me at home." After another pause, his smile came back, wider than before. "Yes, sir, tomorrow at the ... no, wait, if it would be quicker there's a private airport half a mile from here, Brant Brothers' Airfield and Hangar, that'll take any small plane. Your pilot will find it. Also, it might be best if you both come in civilian clothes. You'll understand when you get here."

When the call ended, Jack looked thoughtful. "What did I tell you, Murray? That's my man, and he *did* get in contact with me just like I said. He'll be here too, if for no other reason than curiosity. You don't tell a four-star general to come see you if he wants information; it's the other way around."

"Maybe you'd better tell me a little more about your four-star, seeing as how I'm scheduled to be working with him."

"Okay, he's in command of--"

"Does he have a name, for openers? I'd guess it, but--"

"Nathaniel Foreman. Sort of revolution-ish sounding, don't you think?"

Chapter Eleven

Jack put his feet up on the coffee table. "Nat Foreman was my first company commander back when I was a smart-ass second lieutenant right out of West Point. I thought I knew it all back then, just like a lot of young bucks do. You know the first thing he said to me?"

"I will in a moment. You're gonna tell me, right?"

"He said I should ... yeah, yeah, I know--you weren't there ... he said I should listen to my platoon sergeant, a guy named Mooney. Can you beat that? I mean, a *platoon sergeant*? Here I was all fired up by the cadre up there on the Hudson, and I end up with a noncom schooling me on the facts of life, army style. Nat kept drumming other things like that into me for half a year, the best advice I've ever gotten.

"Then, when we deployed to the Gulf, I was to listen to *him*--Nat--the first couple of months we were in combat. In both cases I knew if I didn't follow his orders he'd damn well pound some sense into my head." Jack laughed at the memory. "Nat's the smartest man in the army, bar none, maybe the smartest guy I've ever run across for that matter. His advice saved my life at least once, and kept some of my troops from getting killed had I done things the way the academy taught me. All the book knowledge in the world doesn't substitute for practical experience. I served under him again later on, when he was commander of the assault forces in Venezuela. He's a great combat commander, but then he's good at everything he takes on. The only reason he isn't chairman of the Joint Chiefs is that he pays no attention at all to political correctness. He says what he means and half the army knows it. The other half respects him but thinks he should have toned it down to get the promotions. If he comes over to us, the rest will follow, and the good thing is that his reputation transcends the army. He used his battalion once to keep a Marine unit from getting chewed up, and they made him an honorary Marine."

"I didn't think the Marines respected anyone but other Marines."

"See what I mean? If Mary can find us a decent reporter and a politician just half as good as Nat Foreman, we won't have to worry."

"Why's a four-star so hot to see a low-life colonel?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Low-life, the man says! Well, since I probably won't get another drink unless I 'fess up, Nat had me slated for brigadier general and was setting about to see that I had good postings that might eventually get me there. Not where I've been these last months, but something substantial. That's how he operates. He never pushes for promotions on his say so, but he will put people he views as competent in positions where they have a chance to earn their rank. Even renegades like me. Makes no difference who you are or where you came from, rich man, poor man, white, yellow, red or black. He looks for competence, plain and simple, damn the affirmative action crap. See the difference?"

"I like him already, which tells me the politicians and political generals hate his guts."

"With a passion, pal, with a passion. Some say he's so out of date he belongs to the WWII army. They're the same ones who don't stop and examine his record."

"Think we can get him?"

"Yeah. Yeah, Murray, I do. Something tells me he'll see our plans the same way he sees any big picture, including his own role. I predict he'll be way out in front of us before we know it."

* * * *

Foreman's almost visible aura commanded attention even from a distance. Tall and athletic, he literally bounded from the car when Jack returned with him from the airport.

There was a spring in his step, and his face and stance retained a youthful vitality that made him appear years younger than his actual age. Even so, his short-cut hair was almost completely white, a genetic trait he'd had as long as Jack had known him.

Murray figured Foreman's pilot would come along, too, but the man elected to stay with the plane and have it ready for the return run. That didn't sound as though the general was planning on any kind of extended stay, but Jack didn't look worried. He'd already predicted that kind of brusqueness.

Once inside, Foreman insisted on making his own drink, a mild scotch and water. He wasted no time getting right to business. What was it all about? Jack did the talking, keeping his sentences even more short and succinct than usual. When he got to the part where Murray's self-inoculation got them started down the path toward a second American revolution, he paused. Foreman seized the moment to swing his gaze, narrow-eyed, toward Murray. Finally he turned back to Jack with a nod that said it all. He'd made his judgment in a matter of seconds, and it was positive.

"That's when Murray contacted me," Jack continued. "Soon as he brought me up to date on what he'd done, I knew we needed an old friend of mine, Mary Henderson. She's a private political analyst with a high-priced consulting service, seldom wrong. She--"

"I know of her. Good reputation. Go on."

"She flew out here at my urging. We both agreed the only way to relate to what we were hearing was to go through it ourselves, so we did. As for myself, I didn't waste a moment wondering if it was wise or not. Murray's had my trust for years. Mary was just being Mary. She wouldn't advise someone to jump off a cliff unless she'd done it first."

"I assume you all prepared complete analyses following your experiences, something I can sink my teeth into."

"Yes, sir. Taken together, nearly six hundred pages worth, double spaced."

"My God. That would take a typical two-fingered army clerk three months! What's in them?"

"Oh, just common everyday political-socioeconomic-legal-governmental-scientific-military-international-historical-psychological-demographical stuff. Murray and I came up with pretty much the same things, with different emphases and priorities, of course. Mary's conclusions were close to ours, again with a different emphasis. The big point is that beside our special areas of expertise, all three of us were operating in areas we didn't think we knew a whit about, when in fact our brains knew infinitely more. I had total recall of things I might have read or heard twenty years ago, all the while factoring in new stuff from the net and having it all come together like some huge jigsaw puzzle. Bang, in went a piece from the day before, and then one from an hour before, all in 3-D and color. One after another, each piece intact, no fuzz, no assumptions, no ifs. It's no wonder normal people can't break into certain autistic people's trances. I never realized how little I use my mind in the normal sense."

"And Mary? What about her?"

"Same thing. She's already one damn smart cookie, but when she came out of it she was amazed. Once again, she was tackling two dozen simultaneous trains of thought while typing out completely organized summaries. Murray said she had a good ten windows open and running all at the same time. Right now

she's busy laying our groundwork in Washington. At the same time she's feeling out a good reporter and a decent politician to work with us."

Foreman snorted. "Where do you find a decent politician?"

"There are a few, according to her, but think again if you're looking for a decent corporate lawyer or decent legal anything. She says that profession has just about sold its soul to the boys in Washington, the corporations and the moneyed elite. We can get back to that later."

"You're assuming I'm going to come in with you." It was a statement.

Jack kept his voice level. "Yes, sir."

Foreman stood and eyed his glass before heading for the bar. "I don't normally have a second drink this early in the day, but this day ain't normal by a long shot. The whole thing's such a bombshell that if Jack weren't the one telling me about it I'd be calling the FBI or military intelligence right about now. As it is ... Mr. Blake ... no way am I going to be able to share your insight, or Jack's or Mary's, even if I read every word you three revolutionaries wrote."

For a long moment, the only sound was the clinking of ice cubes. Finally he spun about, chin thrust forward, swirling the scotch and water while he addressed Jack.

"I expected something like this, Jack. I knew you'd never call it quits without moving on to something higher, steeper and more dangerous. I just didn't know what it might be, but now that I do know, I'm afraid I have to see for my self what it's all about, same as you. Any of those proteins left, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes, sir, though I'm running low. However, I have a new supply coming. By the way, call me Murray, if you will, General. I feel more comfortable with that."

"Okay, Murray. Now you all just stand by while I set up a little time for this." He spoke a number into his comphone and shortly was instructing his adjutant on how to rearrange his schedule. "Get me a week of emergency leave, Major, and notify the Joint Chiefs before you do anything else. Aside from that, just follow our standing orders."

The conversation was distinctly one-sided, short and sweet. When it was over, he made a second call to his pilot, who'd already found his own way into town. He was to buy a few personal items, deliver them to the ranch and then head back alone with the plane. He'd return to the same airfield in six days. Foreman gave a single, affirmative nod as he flipped the phone shut.

"He's a good man. Knows what I need better'n I do. When do we get started, ah ... Murray? I'll need to read through your summaries first and get the gist of your major themes, but after that?"

"We can start tomorrow morning, sir, right after breakfast. How do you like your eggs?"

"Cooked."

* * * *

Nothing was more aggravating than missing a basket shot at four feet!

Merlson swore, sweeping up the crumpled ball of scrap paper and slamming it into the wastebasket. Then he repositioned the receptacle so it was snug up against the corner. No way could he miss it now, not with a corner backboard. On second thought, he picked the wadded paper out of the basket and stuffed it underneath the wastebasket's bottom edge to provide a forward tilt to the opening. It was

something he'd learned early in life--rig the game any way you can if you really want to win. The rule had served him well.

Back at his desk, he wadded up another dozen fresh sheets and took aim. The first lob missed by several feet. Wad number two hit the backboard corner just right, but bounced sideways. Shit! Even when he cheated, he couldn't pull it off. Nothing else was going right, either. Everything that should have been a slam dunk was coming unglued. He sank his head in his hands.

Mary Henderson! It all started with that bitch and her ridiculous advice. How could he have voted against his main money sources and not expect to be hung at sundown? Why hadn't he used his own impeccable political sense? She'd seen something coming, she said, but she'd kept that part to herself. No trouble this election, according to her, but big trouble *next* election unless he did what she'd suggested. Hell, that was six years away, so how could she know unless she was suckering him for a second fee just to find out?

But there'd been that nagging thought that she was right most of the time, so he'd gone against his own instincts, voted her way and now they were readying the hangman's noose. On top of that, *someone* had started beating the drum over his misuse of funds appropriated for Illinois beet farmers to expand production. Was someone out there counting, for crissakes? Who ever counted? The farmers got more than any of them deserved, and besides, the skimming had been swung through a maze of shadow corporations. *Someone* out there wanted his fifteen minutes of fame and decided to blow the whistle at this ungodly time. Probably one of the stupid farmers unhappy with his share. Bunch of hicks!

President Robinson was in political hot water, too, after that nigger speech of his. And it was deliberate, too; that was no slip of the tongue! What a stupid, *stupid* thing to say on national television! There went any beneficial coattail effects down the drain. If Robinson lost come November, chances were he'd take a bunch of the most vulnerable in the party down with him. Nobody'd be riding his coattails unless it was in the wrong direction.

The media were enjoying a feeding frenzy, what with all the weird things popping up around town. John Swenson was a perfect example. There was a guy who had it made, who knew how to play the game. Nobody'd ever questioned his four million dollar mansion or his phenomenal rise in the senate. With labor and Sokos in his corner, he was a shoo-in for reelection. Then the boob goes and blows all his chances by biting the hand feeding him. Maybe *he* should have bought a little advice from Mary. Then again, he was probably on her long waiting list, same as a hundred others. Getting time out of her was worse than trying to find a doctor in a new town.

Why in hell hadn't Sam found out what she was up to out there in Soonerville? Those trips had cost a bundle, but all Sam had gotten for his efforts were those lousy printouts he finagled from Barrington's backup files. Crap, all of it. They said diddlysquat about the real details of Blake's research and nothing beyond outlines of his use of so-called microroteins derived from autistics. Goals, personnel, expenditures sure, but nothing else. Blake was one of those 'also-rans' who'd spend his whole life chasing down some microbe or other. It was all about protein injections aimed at focusing one's attention on a single subject, but so what? How many taxpayer dollars were already wasted on that kind of research? Too many, for sure, but a project like that couldn't be the reason Mary'd gone racing out there. No, it was something else, something Sam should have found by now. If it wasn't sex, what was it?

He lobbed another paper wad at the basket, and this time it went in. He stared at the inviting target, preparing another wad while his brain revisited the previous thought. What if that egghead Blake had somehow duped Mary into thinking she could be more of a power in Washington than she already was? Those printouts didn't point to any kind of success, and yet she'd gone directly to his ranch from the airport. Did she know he'd already left Barrington? How could she know that unless he'd told her?

According to Sam, Blake's research had caused all sorts of ruckus with the locals and a segment of the teacher's union who thought they knew everything already. That's really why his program was cancelled, even though the dunce who killed it said it was unsuccessful. So what kind of ruckus would unsuccessful research produce, unless it was cruelty to animals--which it wasn't? Could it be he'd discovered something after all, or was she really just out there for fun between the sheets? There was plenty of that on her D.C. doorstep, all of it a lot more beneficial than some fling out there.

And where did the mystery colonel and his honey come in? Why was he the one picking Mary up at the airport, and not Blake? Whatever the answers, a caper like this one screamed all sorts of warnings.

In fact, it was on a par with his other main problem--squeezing a bunch more campaign funds from the National Party. With watchdog groups suddenly taking a closer look at his affairs, he couldn't call in half of his usual off-the-record resources and he damn well couldn't show sudden surges in any of his bank accounts. The funds had to come in the legitimate way. Damn!

His shots missed the basket twice in a row with that thought.

Sure, he could spend his coffers dry, but the way things started looking he'd need twice that to shift the heat away from him and over to Crosley. Find out where *that* dude hid his skeletons, put them on public display. It would take a few private eyes, and they cost plenty what with bribe money and all, but it was the only way to mount a decent smear campaign. Everyone had skeletons in some closet somewhere, be it something all the way back to their high school years. Crosley had them, guaranteed--cheating, sexcapades, drunk driving, maybe even some financial hanky-panky. The problem was that, despite the party's charter, Robinson had finagled the rules to where *he*, not the party chairman, decided who got party funds. That way, *El-Exigente* got to line up whomever he favored for the lion's share, squeezing out the rest. Robinson was okay when it came to playing the game just like the rest of them, but not okay when it came to being a dog in the manger. Even so, favors could be bought with the right kinds of goodies. Some dirt on Robinson's opponent, for example. That would be worth a few shekels to The Man, yeah, with lots of zeroes following the number.

And who knew more about secrets and scoundrels on the Washington scene than Mary Henderson? The pols and hangers-on talked to her as easily as they would to their lawyer or pastor when she got them alone, and she *never* gossiped. That was good and it was bad. A woman who didn't gossip was going to be a tough cookie when it came to coughing up information. There had to be a way to get her solidly in his back pocket, even if it meant digging out some of her own dirty secrets. What was the old adage? To make money, you had to spend money? In this case, to get the goods, you had to spend the goods. Mary Henderson couldn't be that clean.

Mecabrost hadn't exactly dropped the ball, but he hadn't come up with anything useful either, and he knew it. Maybe it was time to have another little talk with him.

His head was poking around the doorframe almost before Merlson's finger was off the final intercom digit. Sam's first act upon entering the room was to scoop up five of the errant paper wads and drop them into the basket. The service was automatic. He'd been cleaning up after the boss for years. "You wanted me for something, Senator?"

"Yeah. Sit down. Sam, you know I'm not happy with what we have on Mary Henderson." He ticked it off on his fingers. "No personal data so far, and practically nothing interesting or useful on the Barrington research that Blake guy was doing. Recapping, she drops everything and races out there. We know it was a rush trip because she paid top dollar for the air fare and flew under her initial, M, instead of using her full name. She didn't want it known she was going anywhere. A few days later she shows up back here for business as usual. We know she has no family ties out there and she didn't go to that home she

bought in Oklahoma, so she definitely went out to hobnob with this Blake and company. I know you tried, and you did bring something back we can use, but we need something I can take to Robinson in exchange for some goddamned money from the party treasury. If we don't get that, we're in big trouble come election day, you included."

"I know, sir. It's been ... we're starting to get some pretty angry calls."

"The voters are edgy, Sam. They're unhappy, and when they're unhappy they start asking questions. Not only that, the whole goddamned House is starting to listen to that Westfelt these days, the bastard. Who gives a damn about the national debt? We've got Illinois voters out of jobs, or getting by on minimum wages and handouts. If that sonofabitch hadn't blocked our last bill we could have delivered some sweet housing allowances to our constituents. It's a race to see who can promise the most these days."

Mecabrost's lack of expression showed he recognized another ranting session when he heard it. He simply nodded. "That bill would have been wonderful, sir. Yes indeed."

"Too bad Westfelt doesn't feel for the voters the way I do, Sam. I work my ass off for those people, while he spends his time harping on problems in New Guinea and ... oh, well. If it wasn't him, it'd be someone else. Now listen, Sam, I want you to *really* get down in the trenches and find out what the Henderson broad is up to. She convinced me to vote against that energy bill and I could wring her neck over it. Now we can kiss a few million bucks goodbye, and now's when we need that money, not six years from now. I didn't think the beet farmer thing was going to blow up in my face."

"I guess that sort of kills any *private* interest you had in Mary, right, Senator? Should I stop trying to find out who she sleeps or plays with?"

"Hell, no. We can use that information if you get it. My private interests in her are one thing. She still makes me horny, but politics is something else. Maybe wringing her neck was the wrong term, but you know what I mean. I'd still go a few rounds with her in private, yeah, but right now she's rubbed me the wrong way and I'm pissed."

"Open to an idea?"

"About her? Let's hear it."

"Not exactly her. That wimpy Craddock coughed up all he had on what Blake was working on, but I was just playing over the recordings I made when I talked to Craddock's secretary and later to Blake's assistant. I think they were both stonewalling me. Blake is up to something shady, if you ask me. What say we sic Internal Security on them? Threaten them with some detention ... indeterminate time limit, of course ... and see what we can get out of them? They might loosen up. Everyone knows once the security boys get their hands on you there's damn little chance of getting loose any time soon. Not unless you have some political pull. You could be their salvation, manner of speaking, even if they didn't know it."

"I *do* admire your thinking, Sam! That's why we get along so well. All right, go ahead. Damned if I wouldn't like to see Henderson get a going over, too, but she has too many Washington friends, and they're too well connected." He paused for a moment and shook his head. "Do you know, she could make a goddamn fortune if she got off her fucking high horse and played ball with the rest of us."

Sam nodded agreement. "There's also that colonel's mistress. She's young enough to cave in with no more than a whimper if we can isolate her. I'll get security to lean on her a bit too, if the opportunity presents itself. How's that sound?"

"Couldn't hurt. Do it." Merlson clapped his hands, wringing them a bit with renewed energy. He picked up a paper wad from the three remaining on his desk top and lobbed it almost without thinking.

It was a swisher!

* * * *

Why had it taken Norman so long to ask her out? Ernesta learned the answer on their first date. Murray Blake awed the young technician, who'd been all too aware that she'd naturally compare Murray to him, and he'd lose. He couldn't have known she was toying with the idea of approaching him if he waited much longer.

The second date was to be at her apartment, for dinner. Depending on how it went, she might well invite him to stay the night this time. It really didn't surprise her later when his first kiss was followed by several more, or that he was the one to suggest moving to her bedroom, but they'd no sooner headed that way when the doorbell rang. It never rang at night, so her first reaction was one of shock, then annoyance. It couldn't be her upstairs neighbor--Judy would have called first--so it was probably someone pushing the wrong doorbell button.

"Damn, who could that be this time of night?" she muttered, quickly buttoning her blouse back up. "Hold that mood, sweetie, I'll be right back."

She turned on the entrance light and peeked through the view port before opening the front door against its chain. A man and a woman stood there, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, both in suits. She got the instant impression of a bulldog and its trainer. He needed a spiked collar; she needed only a whip and chair.

"Ms. Wiggins?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Internal Security. We have some questions for you." As if choreographed, they both thrust impressive-looking badge holders out and flipped them open, giving her all of two seconds to react before flipping them shut.

"At this time of night? What on earth for? I'm sorry, but I have company and anything you want to ask can wait until tomorrow. What's it about, anyway?"

"That's our business. May we come in."

"No. I told you, I have company. You can contact me tomorrow at Barrington Labs, since it must have something to do with them." She started to push the door shut, but a size-twelve foot intervened.

"Ms. Wiggins, you can answer our questions now or we can arrest you and take you to Oklahoma City and you can answer them there."

"What's going on here? Who're you threatening with arrest?" It was Norman, coming up behind her.

"That's the other one, John. Talk about luck!"

The woman's comment drew Norman's wrath. "What the hell are you people up to? You can't just arrest someone without a warrant, and you have your foot in her door. Are you nuts or something?" He drew Ernie away, unchained the door and stepped forward, only to stop cold when the bulldog tensed and reached inside his suit jacket.

"Son, we can do anything we want once we invoke the Internal Security Act." Instead of a gun, the man pulled out a comphone, touched the screen and compared images. "You're Norman Wheelright. You were next on our list, so how about sitting down and getting this over with?"

"Why do you want *me*? Why do you want either of us? What have we done?"

Their resistance collapsed once provisions of the recently amended National Security Act were read to them. Failure to cooperate could mean instant imprisonment, even if they were guilty of nothing at all. There it was, in black and white--a written order, signed by a judge, giving the agents authority to question, arrest and imprison them 'for an indefinite period' if necessary. There were no stipulations and the agents had leeway to determine necessity.

Ernie wasn't all that surprised, since her job involved politics more than Norman's. She counseled him to tell everything, since Dr. Blake wasn't doing anything wrong. They both missed the equivalent of a 'high five' concealed in the quick glance between bulldog and trainer.

The woman agent's questions were first. They were exhaustive and surprising. Who'd have thought a security agent would be so well versed in scientific method or in Mr. Blake's general area of research? Norman answered carefully, almost certain she'd know if he was concealing or altering anything. Eventually she appeared satisfied, but then the bulldog started in.

"Now, let's see what you two fine young people know about Mary Henderson and Colonel Jack Williams."

"Who?" Ernie's look was as empty as her question. Norman just shook his head.

"Playing dumb, are we?"

"Those aren't names I've ever heard Mr. Blake mention," Norman said. "Are those people the reason you're here questioning us?"

The woman interrupted her pacing in the background. "John, I've detected just a wee bit of hesitation a couple of times with Mr. Wheelright. I think he's holding back something about Blake. Shall we take him in?"

The bulldog rubbed his chin where a heavy beard was beginning to show. "Better we take Ms. Wiggins along with us. Maybe that'll induce him to think it over." He pulled out a pair of plastic restraints.

"Wait!" Norman drew a deep breath.

"What is it, son? Best you come clean about this. It would be a shame to have to put Ms. Wiggins behind bars now, wouldn't it? Just because you're trying to protect Blake?"

"No, that's not it at all. Mr. Blake's a fine person. It's just that he ... he ... well, he had leeway with the biological materials from his research, you see. It had to be removed from his lab and a substantial portion of each item placed in storage for a certain length of time. That doesn't mean he had to put them *all* there."

"So he took something with him? Something that didn't belong to him."

"Not exactly, sir. You see, about the microproteins. He did as instructed for termination of his project. There's plenty in storage, but he probably disposed of the rest himself. If he took any ... well, it didn't really belong to anybody, you see. He might have wanted to try some on himself. He's a really courageous researcher."

"And did he?"

"I honestly don't know. We haven't talked since the day he left." He mentally crossed his fingers. It was supposed to sound nonchalant, but somehow it didn't come out that way.

"What about you, Ms. Wiggins? Have you talked to him?"

"Yes, but only about coming back to work at Barrington. I'm afraid he wasn't much in the mood for talking that day."

"His mood will no longer be of any interest to either of you, as of tonight. Neither of you is to talk again to Blake about anything, since he's under investigation. If you do, you'll be subject to immediate arrest. Is that clear?"

They both nodded and the bulldog smiled, turning to Norman. "Well, now, that wasn't so hard, was it, son? You could both have saved yourselves some agony by telling us what you've told us right up front. Anything else?"

"Yes. We ... can you give us your names ... in case we need to refer to this in the future?"

"Any name either of us gave you would be a working alias. You don't want to know our real names, son. Not even a little bit. Savvy?"

It had been a nightmare. Norman sat with his hands between his knees and his head bowed. Finally, he turned. "Damn it to hell, I feel like a traitor and a snitch and every other kind of low-life scum for telling them about Mr. Blake. But..."

"It doesn't matter, Norman. *Those* people are the real low-life scum. Thanks for trying to protect me, though."

"I still feel just awful. How can such a thing happen in America? How can they throw people in jail for not answering questions? What happened to having your lawyer there and all that?"

"It's been going on for a number of years. I just never thought it could happen to people like us."

"I guess I better go home."

"Yeah." It was the only answer she could muster without breaking down.

* * * *

When Elaine Yeager put the information together, she knew it would please the senator from Illinois no end. It had been her assignment, so she'd get all the credit, no doubt the kind she could parlay into a second promotion in as many months. Murray Blake's research, Mary Henderson's abrupt change of habits and Col. Jack Williams' sudden decision to retire all pointed to a single, irrefutable conclusion: something really big was going on out there at the Murray ranch, and it wasn't kinky sex. It had something to do with those microproteins, and it was important enough to have Wheelright and Wiggins sweating about the information they'd coughed up.

John Stonebrook, her companion investigator, had been there only for effect. She really didn't like Stonebrook, not one bit, but he'd done a real number on that technician. Stonebrook wasn't nicknamed 'Bulldog' for nothing. Wheelright had been *most* cooperative after feeling the bulldog's bite, revealing even more than she'd dreamt she'd get out of him. He shed light on something very interesting indeed, something the Agency might well want to share with certain interested parties rather than delivering it all

to just one individual. Politicians were their masters, yes, but Senator Merlson was only one of them. Not only that, rumor had it he was in trouble come election time. His interest in the doings out there could well be connected to his reelection in some way, which meant his opponent, Carl Crosley, might be even *more* interested. Hush money was never small change.

Yes, very interesting, indeed!

Ernesta Wiggins had been suspiciously hostile for someone who owed her loyalty to her employer. She and Wheelright had been warned not to contact Murray Blake, and they'd both agreed, but Wiggins was not to be trusted. If she made any calls to Blake--which she'd likely do when the shock of the interrogations wore off--she'd better not do it from Barrington Labs or from her home. The walls in both places had ears--now.

Chapter Twelve

Sam Mecabrost knew exactly how to prepare a report for his boss. The summary was there at the top, with all the details following. Merlson barely finished the single paragraph before he broke into a broad grin. "So *that's* what they're up to. I'll be damned."

"My idea paid off, Senator."

"Big time, Sam, big time. You did well. So we think this Blake stole material he was using on chimps, and tried it on himself? He must've thought the risk was worth taking, and that means he knew he was onto something. Can we *prove* he took it in the first place? Can we conclude he was using it on Mary Henderson and that colonel?"

"The report we got from Internal Intelligence says the lab tech was just guessing about Blake's actual use of those microprotein thingys. Blake signed off on forms stating all the material had been properly secured, which is bullshit, of course. Who was there looking over his shoulder? As for the rest of it, there's no proof."

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck, right? I wonder just what Blake thinks he's going to accomplish with the stuff, not that I give a damn about him personally. Mary Henderson's a different matter. Why would she be running out there within a couple days of him leaving Barrington? And how did she come to know him in the first place, answer me that? We both know she hasn't set foot outside Washington in years, other than to buy that place of hers out there."

"Haven't a clue, sir. You think she's trying to make herself the only political sage here worth the name?"

"Why else would she dash out there and go directly to Blake's home instead of her own? It makes sense to me. However ... you don't suppose she's into that computer dating stuff, do you? They say there are some weird match-ups come out of those chat rooms."

"But *Oklahoma*? If she was looking for sex, why not right here?"

"Got a point."

"What's your take on the Colonel Williams thing?"

"Now there we have a problem, Sam. He takes his young little sweetie there--you did say she was barely into her twenties, right?--which supports my first suspicion they were all into something kinky. I don't know if that makes sense now. You suppose it's something to do with the military?"

"His base said he was on personal leave, that he needed to help his niece find--"

Merlson laughed. "That's just official army baloney. His people are covering for him, which is why his wife never mentioned the niece. She didn't know what the official line was, so she put out her own version of cover. Army wives learn to do that pretty quick. My guess is he's there seeing what that stuff Blake was giving to his chimps can do, same as Mary. Maybe he thinks he'll discover some new weapon or tactics, or maybe he just wants to advance his rank to general real quick." He shook his head admiringly. "It could really be that simple, Sam. According to that tech, Blake got astounding results out of the chimps there at Barrington. What if he did take the stuff himself, got some sort of whiz out of it and knew the colonel would be interested? The young chick could still be the colonel's sweetie on the side."

"And the colonel could have had Washington connections like Mary Henderson?"

"Maybe, but that doesn't explain the young girl to suit me. Your snoops never got to question her separately because they couldn't go out to the Blake place without tipping our hand, and you implied she never left on her own."

"Not necessarily, sir. The Intelligence snoops had that tech so rattled he was sure he'd sold his old boss down the river, and the secretary didn't seem too bright either when I was posing as Alberto Marcos. I got the impression she and Blake weren't exactly on the best of terms. It might even have been her who blabbed to the local community about his research. She struck me as the type. Anyway, they've been given instructions not to talk to anyone, so Blake and Mary and the colonel don't necessarily know we're on to them yet."

"Hmmm. Well, thanks to your snoops, we know there's something important about those microproteins. We know Blake was shut down over the research he was doing, so we can guess it was controversial in some way, and we know Mary Henderson went running out there like a bitch in heat. That stuff must really be wild. I'd like to try it myself ... after I saw someone else do it ahead of me. Can we get ourselves some? The process looks pretty simple, according to these notes."

"You mean make some?"

Merlson picked up a pad and began scribbling. "Tell you what, Sam. Get me a couple of those tame scientists of ours from the NSF over here tomorrow, and make sure they're both people needing a new grant. Then put me in touch with Senator Cameron from the appropriations committee. I'm sure he and I can trade a couple of favors. Find out what he needs first, and work out a swap. Also touch base with that wimp from Barrington Research, uh ... what's his name again?"

"Craddock."

"Yeah. Tell Craddock to have that lab tech start setting up Blake's apparatus and round up the proper type of autistic volunteers for--"

"Senator?"

"What?" Merlson didn't like being interrupted.

"That lab tech--Wheelright's his name--said they still had a lot of the microproteins they collected from those autistic people. After lots of squirming, he also admitted the proteins could be replicated, so if they still have some on hand ... well, that would save some time and I'm assuming you're in a hurry."

Merlson grinned. "You're a gem, Sam. If that's true, all we need are a couple of volunteers, but I still want the collection procedure to be set up anyway, just in case. If this stuff is worth all the excitement--and the way Mary's acting makes me think it is--we might be wanting a lot of it, and in a hurry."

"What do you think the stuff actually does, sir? In case you actually tried it, I mean."

"Who knows? Maybe it'll help me take out Crosley come November. Maybe I'll start spouting Shakespeare or figuring a way to cancel the national debt. It's like the lottery, Sam. You can't win if you don't play. Mary Henderson's in the game already, or so I believe. By God, I bet there'd be money in it, too!"

"Yes, sir. I'm thinking...."

"Well?"

"If there's money in it, we need to be thinking along the lines of who can use it, what they'll give us in return for data on it, all those avenues."

"Hmm. What company's board of directors do I sit on? I'm on Goriana aren't I?"

"Yes, sir, but do you think Goriana would--"

"I do. I can talk Goldman into using his own industrial snoops to get into Barrington or find out exactly what Blake's doing and why, then sharing the information with us and then maybe turning it into a new product if it proves out. Can't you just see it, Sam? 'Boost your IQ overnight with BRAINWHIZ,' bla bla. Goldman would clean up on something like that. He'd see to it we got a hefty boost in our little Cayman retirement accounts too, and contribute heavily to the old war chest in the process. By God, that by itself could put Crosley away. Find a time for me to talk with Goldman, Sam, and no slipups. This is getting more important by the minute."

"I'll get started on everything right away."

* * * *

Nat Foreman discussed his chosen questions for focus before he went under. The first was whether a revolution fomented by very few people could succeed in the present political climate. The second had to do with long range implications if autistic microproteins came into general use. That sprouted when he learned the microproteins could be easily duplicated. Neither topic was an area where Foreman had any unique experience or training, so the experiment would be a litmus test of sorts. How much did his mind really hold in terms of information or knowledge in these areas, and how would it direct his efforts at the computer? He brought with him assets the others didn't have in the form of military passwords he'd memorized. With them to get into the military intelligence computers, and his encyclopedic understanding of how the military worked, he thought he could chase down some interesting lines of thought.

During his immersion period he sat ramrod straight, looking for all the world like a man in trance while his fingers fairly flew at times over the keyboard. Everyone stayed distant for fear of disturbing him, but the impression he gave was almost that of a robot sitting there. It was eerie watching him.

He stayed focused until the morning of the third day, then fell into bed. Fourteen hours and one hot shower later he was back among the living, organizing everything before he allowed himself to eat. A summary sheet finally spewed from the printer, taking its place on top of the stack of printouts.

His summaries reflected the fact that Blake was a scientist with a new discovery, not a man skilled in considering long-term implications of new technology dropped into society like some bomb. It wouldn't be long before the discovery became common knowledge, and results like these would make it irresistible. What if the underworld got their hands on manufacturing methods, as they inevitably would? How could specific types of illegal activity be stopped if perpetrators were able to consider every factor leading to failure? What if some warlike nation or entity used it to engineer the perfect blitzkrieg, the overnight coup or development of new weapons? In the event of any armed conflict, what would prevent the enemy from being every bit as smart as allied forces when it came to strategy and logistics?

And politicians--what about them? There the question was closer to home, since they'd be part of the target group when it came to revolution inside American shores. If select politicians, including presidents, had access to the microproteins, they could stay in office forever. They'd be able to consider and manipulate every factor in their favor. They'd squash their competition like bugs, assuming their competitors didn't also have the stuff. They might also defeat the revolt. They *must not* gain access to the secret until it was too late for them to use it for that purpose.

The intelligence agencies? They'd *love* the stuff. HUMINT would become a snap and high tech snooping could become almost foolproof when it came to knowing who and what to go after. Given the power Internal Security enjoyed over society already, personal privacy would be a relic of the past. The only way for common citizens to avoid entrapment would be to return to the days of the catacombs, back there in Rome. No phone calls, nothing electronic, nothing written, no bank or medical records, not even personal names of record. Code names would be the order of the day. In other words, the only facet of society able to withstand Big Brother in that case would have to be totally secret, operating underground. Hardly possible with the advent of monitors, electronics and spies. New cars were even being equipped with homing devices, and over-the-counter comphones had to be de-bugged by the 'night crew' if they were to be immune to the listening networks.

These and several dozen other worries were outlined in the summary pages, along with positive aspects. It all pointed to the immensely important conclusion that the secret of the microproteins had to be protected at all cost, at least until the revolution succeeded. The corollary was that, in the event the secret did slip out, misinformation on its benefits had to be spread immediately.

Politicians, corporations and lawyers controlled the country, stacking so many rules, regulations and piecemeal programs one on the next that it was impossible to sort out. The country ran by whimsy, like a small town choosing to enforce or not enforce certain ordinances. Medical care and the tax system were two of the primary examples, both driven by the legal profession, politicians, insurance companies and other giant corporations, all of which had a vested interest in keeping the programs incomprehensible even to trained analysts. The more numerous, obtuse and complicated the regulations needed to administer a program, the more room for abuse, graft and favoritism. Those examples were closely followed by a myriad of others: drugs, income disparity, illegal immigration that had passed ridiculous and arrived at the idiotic, as well as the financial structure of the country, the stock market, overlapping and entanglement of government programs which complicated and actually contradicted others. Subsidies and trade. The list was long and discouraging. Add increasingly hard to control inflation, and the adjective 'disgusting' was the best of all choices to describe the United States of Disarray.

Military service had evolved into a form of escape for most who commanded in the service branches, no matter the color of uniform. The military had the capability of running itself, with its own long-established rules and procedures. While orders came from Washington, day-to-day functioning was still able somehow to unsnarl a lot of the mess. Politicos and certain turncoat officers, including generals and an admiral or two, had totally screwed up planning, procurement and long-range prospects for continued efficiency, and yet the military as a whole was intact--and totally sickened. Many a career professional had entertained the idea of taking over the country and straightening out the mess, but each was too thoroughly disciplined to act. Any estimate of the situation failed to foresee the all-important phase *following* military success. That missing element had to hold water. Nothing less than total guarantees would move any of them past the 'what-if' stage.

Murray Blake was to be the leader of that phase, but *was* he the right man to run a nation after such a takeover, military or otherwise? No doubt he could do it intellectually, given overwhelming popular support and the right props, but could he ever manage half a thousand political renegades plus state officials and the inevitable troublemakers behind all those so-called elected officials? All in an atmosphere of giant uncertainty following a revolution, whether it be merely a giant political upheaval or the classical rebellion? Ninety-five percent of elected politicians got into office or stayed there by hoodwinking their electorate and providing legislation favorable to interest groups. One hundred percent of that bunch were on the take in one or more ways. Some were replaced by others more slanderous or clever, using funds disguised so well their sources could never be traced to China, Iran, Russia or Zimbabwe. All had overly-large pockets, and bank accounts in the Cayman Islands or Switzerland.

Murray Blake would have to cope with all that, and it would be far from easy. In some ways George Washington had the easier task: he started from scratch, with no prior mess to untangle.

He checked his watch. It was time to go find some breakfast. One thing they all had to consider, and immediately, was the one thing they'd missed to date. The very nature of Murray's research was controversial, therefore intriguing. It would be a magnet for the curious, sparking desire and demand, because it turned common minds into mega-computers. Mary Henderson's abrupt departure from her Washington haunts could already have provoked someone into taking an uncommon interest in what was going on--providing that same someone had been looking in her direction in the first place or keeping tabs on Murray. Such things had to be assumed. Plans and their contingencies always assumed the enemy knew more than anyone wanted him to know. Even D-Day was no total surprise to the Germans in WWII. They knew what was going to happen, even if they didn't know where or when.

It was already early June. Five months of preparation to take over a nation was little enough time. He'd have to make that case if he were to convince Jack and Murray it should be longer. On the other hand they'd need to move swiftly if ever the microprotein secrets became known.

It was a classic military problem.

* * * *

It took two days of agonizing over their betrayals before Norman and Ernie decided to disregard the orders from security to remain silent. Their calls to Murray were hardly an hour apart, though they'd not coordinated with each other beforehand. Norman's almost-tearful confession came first. Then, while Nat Foreman was in the shower, it was Ernie's turn.

Murray consoled her. "You and Norman did what you had to, so don't blame yourself for anything. I'll be okay, I promise."

"Yes, Mr. Blake, but--"

"Ernie, I'm the culprit if anyone is. I shouldn't have put Norman at risk, which in turn did the same for you. Now you just take it easy, and I have to say I'm rather pleased to hear you and Norman are hitting it off. I wondered why he was so slow."

That drew a chuckle at the other end. "I guess we both were. Anyway, I just wanted to warn you and I don't care what those security people said. I don't see what it can matter telling you, since they know already. Isn't that right?"

"It sounds fine to me. Now you said there was something else you wanted to talk about?"

"What ... oh! Oh, yes. When we got to work yesterday, *El Jefe* told Norman to start setting up the very same research you had been doing. He said instructions would follow. How could that have happened so quickly?"

"Good question. You know, that's the first time you've ever called Craddock that."

"He deserves it. He's nothing but a little Napoleon, him and those porny magazines he thinks I don't know about. He's in with those Internal Security people, I just know he is."

"Craddock's a little man, Ernie, not someone others admire. No doubt the I.S. people pressured him in some way, but you just relax and go with the flow. They won't get very far. And don't you say anything to anyone yet, but I may have a better job for you six months from now. Okay?"

"Oh, yes! That would be wonderful. I won't say a word."

It was time to end the conversation with a quick good-bye. Nat was coming down the hallway, and he'd be ravenous. After breakfast he'd hear about how Internal Security not only called on Ernie and Norman, but on Craddock as well. They were going to try to replicate the microproteins.

They'd succeed, of course. It wouldn't be that hard, not with the backup data and the microproteins already in storage. The secret would be out.

* * * *

Elaine finished reading the transcript of Ernesta's phone call. "Should we arrest both of them, John? This is all we need to throw away the key. Wiggins implicated Wheelright by name in her phone call, and now Blake's aware we're onto him."

Stonebrook finished bending his paperclip and tossed the mangled mess into the basket. He didn't like Elaine Yeager one bit, but at least she didn't get to make strategy decisions. Her job was analysis. Young Wheelright had dodged the bullet by making his call outside the Barrington building, so at least he was following a familiar pattern. Wiggins was essentially flipping the bird at authority. She was dumb enough to think there'd be no one listening to her call. Probably made it when her boss Craddock was somewhere else. Still, neither one would be of much value in jail, whereas any further calls could be important sources of information.

"We oughta throw the book at 'em, Elaine, but the Wiggins woman could be a continuing source of information so we let it go this time. We report the incident, though--the boss was *very* interested in that stuff--and we should let Merlson know, too. That way our asses are covered. Let the senator sweat out the secrecy stuff. It's his ball game and his money. If we play your cards right, there may be some more where that came from."

Elaine nodded as he continued.

"Wiggins and Wheelright aren't doing anything even hinting at harmful intent toward the nation, so we don't really want to arrest them in the first place. Besides, sounds like the information is already being spread around. Let someone else decide what to do with them."

* * * *

Foreman's reaction to the pair of phone calls was surprisingly sharp. "Damn. How did the I.S. boys get onto it so soon? Something you forgot to tell me about, Murray?"

"I'm afraid so, General. It was my error, but only in postponing it. Somehow I didn't think Internal Security was or would be connected." He replayed the Alberto Marcos incident as he knew it, ending with Craddock's offer of a whopping salary increase and a call to return to work immediately.

Foreman cut him off. "Okay, I can accept for now that you didn't think it was important, but it turns out that from now on *everything* is important. We're going to have to move the timetable up as fast as we can do it safely. This focusing thing is already loose in Washington, and it's going to spread fast as soon as a few people get up the nerve to try it. How long will it take your tech at Barrington to turn out a new batch of the stuff? That'll tell us how long we have."

"Not long. Days, maybe. I left a big batch in storage, and more can be duplicated fairly easily if someone who knows what they're doing gets hold of it. Or they may force Norman to begin another full-scale process. He can do that easily, say in a week or two."

"That being the case, I want Mary Henderson back here. I want to hear how she plans to pull off her end of this, beyond what she's already written down." He chuckled. "And now I know the reason behind all the turmoil in Washington I couldn't figure out. She's obviously already been at work. In the meantime, I've got to clear some matters from my desk, then take some long-overdue leave."

Jack's gave a thumbs-up sign. "Then you're definitely joining us, General?"

"Sorry I hurried that part of it. The answer's yes, and I agree up front with you and Mary on Blake here being the man." He faced Murray. "You'll need plenty of help and we'll be part of that, but in the end you'll be targeted by everyone in the country who disagrees with us--including your being at the receiving end of a bomb or rifle bullet. I hope you realize that. There are going to be some mighty unhappy people when this starts to come together."

"I'll confess I hadn't thought much about it, General, but I *have* been in combat."

"You can shoot back in combat, but not from a podium. Just keep it in mind, but don't obsess over it. Now I need to get on my horse. If you start being bothered by *any* of the security agencies--Internal Security, FBI or anyone you suspect of being fake, even local police--let me know. I have some pull here and there. As a matter of fact, if you see more than the usual Mexican day laborers around looking for work, they'll be my men. When I call, it'll sound a bit funny because it's encrypted. Don't answer in specifics, and from now on assume that anything you say on any kind of electronic com gear will be intercepted." He pulled out a cell phone. His pilot was in Oklahoma City, waiting for the summons to return.

"I'm getting us encryption units, General," Jack said. "Undocumented."

"Careful, Jack. Those are secure enough all right, but the bad thing about secure communication is you can't see the other end. If you can't see it, you can't know whether the talker's got a gun to his head ... or her head. Sounds melodramatic, but that's the way we all have to start thinking. I can get my hands on a few of our latest gizmos."

"The latest M.I.?"

"Yeah. Totally encrypted. They're still not totally safe, but at least no one can use 'em except the one whose voice signature is inside. Wrong voice up close and out comes smoke. End of story."

Murray scratched his chin. "What's the M.I. stand for?"

"Mission Impossible. The old 'this tape will self-destruct' bit. Right now they're Top Secret, but only after the army gets 'em. There's an official military number, but the ones I'll get will come straight from the boys who make the things, before the serial numbers or anything else goes on the outsides. And by the way, we're going to need at least two more players in this game. One will have to be what I'll call a financial and actuarial wizard. We'll want to have ready answers to every single question about national debt, trade deficit, Social Security and other entitlements our beloved politicians have fouled up over the years. The second person should be someone who can handle the medical care mess and stop legal beagles dead in their tracks ... even if it means capping lawsuits to a bare minimum in return for complete coverage. Not many lawyers will chase that kind of money. If you want a third body for the group, I'd suggest a media whiz kid who can convince our people they have to make some sacrifices if they want to see a light at the end of the tunnel--daylight, that is, not another train coming at them. One of our major problems in this country is greed. I suspect the majority of Americans have had it with things the way they are, though. Mad as hell and won't take it any more, just like that old movie Network. Remember?"

Foreman's warnings sobered Mary, but for good reason. One, developments at Barrington wouldn't have

been restarted without someone wielding a big hammer, and Craddock was just the type to knuckle under when threatened. Two, Murray's ranch was being watched, along with the airport at Oklahoma City. Three, her second absence from Washington in as many weeks couldn't help but make more than a few people curious.

Foreman's sense of urgency was tempered with one of caution. Even so, Mary was as anxious as he was to talk. She was set to introduce her choices of reporter and politician this trip, by bringing them along with her. She'd already bought the airline tickets, but Nat nixed the move. It would show her cards way too soon. Her choices should remain just names for the time being. Denied, but still anxious to meet him, she decided to fly out and see Murray and Jack anyway. This time she made phone calls to the woman keeping tabs on her retirement place, setting up a possible meeting at the house and at the same time stressing the changeable nature of her itinerary. That part was prophetic, because as it turned out she only stayed long enough to deliver a message--right there in the airport parking lot. It wasn't planned that way.

A pair of unforeseeable glitches had turned up while she was airborne. Jack Williams had been called back to the post for a consultation--he'd be back at ten that night--and the general was still trying to wrap things up so he could get free. He'd need two more days. Mary's sigh was one of frustration as she talked to Murray, who had come to the airport to meet her and to bring her a supply of the microproteins.

"I can't wait around to see the general, Murray. You can brief Jack as well as I can, so I might as well catch the six o'clock flight back. General Foreman sent a messenger to my office yesterday. We've been seriously compromised and the secret of the microproteins is out, according to him, so we all need to be extremely careful. I'll see him in Washington rather than here, and then he'll get back to you. I just wanted to touch base and identify my choices for our politician and reporter. Also to pick up enough of our little proteins for both of them. I want them to focus in on why we think this will work, and they're ready to do just that."

"Yes, we heard you were advised not to bring your people out this trip. Jack wasn't surprised at all. He claims Nat Foreman's pretty savvy when it comes to timing and such. So who are your choices?"

"Our reporter will be Lance Jergins. He's eager, and you already know *his* reputation. As for the politician, I hate to even use the word. It's Ms. Integrity, Senator Worthington."

"Isn't she the one who thought she'd serve only one term because she'd alienate so many of her fellow senators and congressmen?"

"That's her. I can't find a single skeleton in her closet. She's very persuasive, Murray, a rising star we definitely want in our camp. Fortunately, she's not up for reelection this time."

"Well, both have great reputations, especially Jergins, but they don't know me from Adam. What will they think?"

"Don't worry about your scientist profile. They'll listen to what you say and how you say it, and they'll judge you by your passion for the cause as much as anything else. You'll meet them both in person, but not now. Look, Murray, I have time to take a run out to my place and show my face there, even though it's on the other side of the city. If anyone's keeping tabs on my flights, they'll think I may really be planning to furnish the place and spend some time there. They may also think I know you from the dim distant past or something." She reached for her purse. "As it is, I doubt they're here in the airport or even out in the parking area. More likely, they'll have someone at the airport exit, watching for your car, so I'll just rent one of my own. There's no need to go back to the terminal with me. Just watch your step. Things are likely to start getting rough from here on out."

"I can see that." He handed her the little package of insulated microproteins, disguised as medicine.

With that she reached up, drew him forward and planted a kiss quickly but firmly on his mouth before she strode away.

BOOK TWO

Chapter Thirteen

Norman was just about to step inside the walk-in cooler when Craddock came through the door at the far end of the lab. He was easy to spot even from a distance, the way he spun about to close the door behind him, then swiveled precisely back to his original direction. Even his walk was almost mechanical, like that robot in Star Wars--C3PO. Not quite that bad, but almost. Those stupid shoes of his looked three inches thick. What was *he* doing here, especially so early? He'd never come into the lab before, not in recent memory anyway, and it was barely seven o'clock. Was he after something, or did it mean more trouble? Whatever the reason, it couldn't be anything good.

And he was headed that way!

The cooler door closed with a *thud*. Norman clasped his hands together to conceal their trembling and tried hard not to blush. "Uh, good morning, sir. May I help you with something?"

Craddock eyed him suspiciously, like an old woman examining a cheap cut of mutton. "I decided to come down and *personally* check to see if you have everything you need to duplicate Dr. Blake's research. Norbert, isn't it? You're here very early, I see. Some reason?"

"Norman Wheelright's my name, yes sir. I came in early to make sure the setup was ready to go. I'm ... uh ... always here early, sir. I didn't clock in yet. This is my own time."

The smile was patronizingly fake. "That shows a great company spirit, young man. We could use more people of your caliber, setting a good example like this. Your former supervisor, Mr. Blake, never once spoke to me of your remarkable work ethic. Perhaps he was too preoccupied with his imagined importance. People like him are unusually self-centered, you know, trying to convince the world they are something they're not. I'm afraid I don't quite share Blake's opinion of himself. At any rate, there'll be some competent gentlemen arriving later today to get everything underway. Give them all the assistance they need, Mr. Wheeling. We want results as quickly as possible. The project should never have been conducted as it was, but your attitude assures me that our visitors will be pleased."

It's Wheelright, jerk! No wonder Mr. Blake never liked you. "Yes sir,"

"Fine. And notify your present supervisor that I'll approve one extra hour added your paycheck this period to make up for you coming in early."

As soon as Craddock was out of sight, Norman let out a sigh of relief and quickly replaced the original vial of microproteins he had used to replicate a new supply.

* * * *

As the weeks passed, unease drifted over the Washington establishment like fog in a valley, almost an acknowledgement of public discontent beyond anything normal, election year or not. Not that there was any official surprise or concern--why should there be? It was the same old same old, only more so. Workers took home less pay, executives more, and the poor got poorer while the rich got richer. So what else was new, other than added taxes?

Nobody understood the horrendously complicated tax codes--not even the IRS--and the accountants and lawyers who could do something about both preferred the status quo. How else could they move up from their 'just scraping by' million-dollar homes to their multi-million dollar estates? Who else would pay

for their sons and daughters to attend Ivy League schools? The average voter had no hope of comprehending the myriad loopholes available only to well-heeled individuals and corporations who retained those accountants and lawyers.

Then there was the immense tax burden of illegal immigration and the required medical care as well as the education of the children born in the U.S., a bizarre situation only politicians could have created in their vote seeking. The most recent studies reported an exorbitant annual cost to the average household for just for those two items alone. Add in the nation's convoluted and out-of-control health care system that cost fully twice what it should because of its irrational and piecemeal structure, then pile on inflation and energy costs always rising because of inertia and special interests refusing to consider real structural change and blocking new technology for fear *they* wouldn't wind up controlling it, and it was easy to see how the nation was faltering under the ludicrous irrationality of the systems. When assisted living for the elderly, welfare, interest on the national debt, guaranteed loans amounting to trillions of dollars and Social Security were added to the consideration, the problem was so gargantuan it wasn't worth the effort to try digesting it.

Better just to handle it in the usual way, the politicians thought, with rhetorical promises benefiting those least affected by the problems in the first place. Secure that congressional or senatorial seat for another term, and who knew what might happen in the future? Constituents were naïve, some would even say stupid. They were more apt to think of how their next cheeseburger would taste, not about what it might do to them years down the road, medically speaking. It really didn't even matter much which political party gained power. Those voted out of office would continue with what they knew best, hiring out as consultants and lobbyists and being appointed to state jobs reserved for politicians. The corruption wasn't all in Washington by any means.

But something was *different*, and it was growing. There were new rumblings on the horizon, an undercurrent that had no voice, only a feeling. Incumbents of all types and callings were collectively nervous about reelections, none knowing why, and Mary Henderson's calendar was filled with office-holders she'd never advised before. For the first time ever she consulted on weekends, working seven-day weeks. She rarely returned to her office except to pick up new dossiers from Alice and do quick studies on someone new.

The sudden increase in demand for her services had her long-term clients edgy, clamoring for more time with her, upset and frustrated by being put off. Once she did get around to meeting with them, they came away with greater uneasiness. Things they didn't expect to hear increased unspoken fears, especially when the tidbits involved unsettling trends among their constituents, threats to sources of funding or rumors about those they trusted most. She was always careful to assure each client that she was making a special exception to repeating hearsay 'in his or her case,' not so much as a favor but as part of her personal desire to level the playing field for everyone. In a game where the players all had something they needed to keep hidden at all costs, decoding an opponent's secrets was better than gold in the war chest. Egotism shielded each player from thinking the technique might be applied in the opposite direction.

Her formula was working very well indeed: A--unnerve the client with advice sounding good on the surface, but causing damage that wouldn't be apparent until too late; B--instill a sense of urgency and suggest some sort of publicly visible change in direction the constituency couldn't miss; C--instill rumors about the client's competition, designed to emphasize the importance of action 'before it was too late;' D--predict immediate backlash that would self-correct prior to the final countdown to election day.

Apprehension and dissention spread among the voting public almost immediately, but then she'd predicted that in virtually every case, hadn't she? It would all straighten out when the voters understood how each disturbing change in their favorite politician's public face might benefit them directly when the

smoke cleared. Campaign promises would resonate much louder, enthusiasm would replace doubt and the election might even be a sweep. For all.

Ha!

It was almost fun, thanks to just one session with microproteins derived from autistic individuals totally engrossed in concentration when their blood was drawn.

Microproteins, the key to contemplating any complex situation with thousands of variables. Her own astute knowledge of the political bent of the nation was multiplied dozens of times over, bringing in things she might have overheard in passing, or read in brief snatches, or seen briefly on TV ten years earlier. All the political history she'd ever tried to absorb was suddenly there in startling detail. She could even remember her early American history, a subject she'd struggled through as a high school freshman. What a difference when her advice and suggestions were salted with choice snippets from a hundred or two years back. Most politicians couldn't name the first six American presidents, let alone events leading up to the revolution, and history had a way of repeating itself in the most interesting ways.

Of particular interest was a groundswell of irritation and unhappiness among minorities. How many times had that happened before? Politicians were discussing the phenomenon in interviews, on talk shows, in the print media and on TV. *Something* was turning blacks, Hispanics, women and virtually every other minority group away from their traditional spokespersons and causes, but what was it? It had always been 'us against them' in terms of getting more than their fair share of handouts and advantages. Suddenly the same groups were clamoring for fairness and honesty, and hang the occasional miniscule pacifiers that might come their way in return for votes. 'Show us, don't tell us' was the new line of thought. They wanted proof of intent and validation of method, not hollow campaign promises, even though *some* had benefited by a few programs here and there over the years. The problem seemed to be that there were more minorities than ever down there at the bottom.

Instead of playing the political parties off against each other for more, they were singling out individuals to support or organize against, beginning with the president. His accidental use of 'nigger' in a nationally broadcast speech launched a fury not seen in three decades, and it hadn't died down one bit. Those who rallied in defense of what the nation's chief executive might have meant were castigated along with him. The incident sparked deep rifts on the Hill.

Making things even worse, the opposition--intensely vocal in their derision of Robinson--created their own monster when Maine's Senator Richard McHugh read off a long list of derogatory terms *those in power* would undoubtedly draw upon for ethnic tags, if they thought they could get away with it. He'd have been better off saying nothing. The media, doing what they did best, lifted the terms out of context and pasted them next to McHugh's picture. McHUGH LEXICON OF ETHNIC SLURS was the headline, followed by the list itself.

McHugh wasn't the last to flop, as more unsuspecting candidates stepped into a pile of their own making. It was hilarious in a way, watching them go from bad to worse, but no one came back at the person who'd started it all because Mary Henderson never actually told them to say or do any of those things. Her suggestions were formulated on the political situation existing when she offered them, not after sweeping changes in the public mood made them risky or explosive. No politician wanted to suggest that his actions were fueled solely by a consultant. It went against the ego and was rationalized away.

As a direct result of misstatements and departures from everything expected of them, both parties were in deep trouble. Minorities distrusted their own political leaders as stories circulated showing they were every bit as corrupt as the ruling whites. That made those voters angry and ready for change, just as similar manipulations had the middle class looking around at the state of the union and voicing their

discontent more stridently than usual.

Franklin Hedgeworth, chairman of the relatively obscure Freedom Party, had never met Mary Henderson, nor did he even know where her office was. He had to call twice to ask directions. Mary met him at the door, smiling brightly as though he were an old friend and making him feel immediately welcome. Her hand was out in greeting.

"Hello, Franklin. Thanks for coming by."

"Thank *you* for seeing me, Ms. Henderson. I really do appreciate it. I think you should know right up front, though, that our finances--"

"We'll work something out." She waved him to a comfortable chair in her office and took the opposite one herself. "If you know my reputation for thoroughness, you also should know I'm well aware of your finances and everything else pertinent about the Freedom Party."

"Uh, that's great, Ms. Henderson. I do appreciate your interest in us, but frankly I'm puzzled as to why." The homely face showed his befuddlement as plainly as words.

Poor man! He may be an economic theorist, but he sure isn't a politician. She crossed her legs and pretended to examine a sheaf of printouts for a moment, then drilled him with one of her famous piercing stares. She let it linger for a moment to get his full attention, then flashed a combined smile and raised eyebrow.

"Frank ... may I call you Frank? ... I want us to get on a first name basis, so call me Mary, please. My reason is that I have this feeling we're going to be working very closely together in the coming months. Does that suit you?"

"Uh, yes that's fine ... Mary. It's ... I'm grateful."

"Good. Now then, whether you're aware of it or not, the American electorate, including those who don't bother to vote, are clamoring for some sweeping changes. I've decided to throw all my support to your party in accomplishing that, with the help of a few friends."

Hedgeworth gaped for all of two seconds, then beamed beatifically. "Why, that's wonderful! Our little convention already has a good candidate picked to run, although we have to go through the formalities, of course, but--"

"Frank, Ainsley Canton's not a strong candidate, which you already know. He can't win the presidency, but there's another who can."

At the mention of the presidency, Hedgeworth started visibly. This time his mouth hung open three times longer than earlier. He finally closed it, licking his lips while he thought of some reply to the bombshell. It was time for another of her patented smiles.

"Now, Frank, grant me my expertise in such matters. I'm not going to reveal who I have in mind yet, simply because I don't want him to be in the public eye long enough to get savaged by the attack ads and the media. You know that will happen as well as I do." *You'd better.* "On the other hand, he won't be a dark horse in the traditional sense, because we'll *announce* him as our candidate. The difference is in the timing. We want our public to know him only *after* the other parties present their platforms. He's going to get it from both sides eventually, but I'll handle that. Your role is going to be to make sure the Freedom Party officials do exactly as I say, and say the things I tell them to say, and that includes postponing any activities until then. You won't need any convention, so save your money. I promise you, the results will

simply astound you." *Not quite the way you're envisioning them, though.*

The ploy would gain undivided support and trust, only to abuse it at the last moment--while making everyone in the Freedom Party like it. Ascension to prominent roles in the new order, by some of their truly competent members, would quickly dispel their sense of betrayal. Her pause was dramatic, with one palm raised as she again perused her sheaf of papers.

"I have our slogan already picked out, Frank, and I have instructions here on exactly how and when and with what groups we'll use it, along with some other things our people will do at your direction. I intend that we win all the marbles. *All* the marbles, Frank."

"You're *donating* your time and ... and your astounding expertise ... to my party?"

"Our party, Frank, and the answer is wholeheartedly yes! Our slogan is going to be *THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION!* All capital letters, by the way, on all placards, press releases and so forth. There'll be an exclamation point after 'revolution,' a little trick used by the Madison Avenue types and Hollywood as emphasis along with the capitals. No matter what the other parties come up with, our slogan will drive a point home every time it's presented. People will even *see* the capitals and exclamation point in their minds when someone voices the words.

"All right, but the money--"

"That'll be far, far more than you've ever handled, so best start planning where to use it right now and get yourself some able accountants. Everything must be aboveboard and legal, *nothing* from lobbyists, *nothing* from overseas, *nothing* from the likes of Sokos and his ilk. Contributions will literally pour in soon as word gets out that I'm working with you, but listen closely now. I want you--only you--to be in charge of how that money is spent, and I'll write it all out for you, but you must let no one else see that planning, not even those in our top echelon, not yet. And you must make absolutely no commitment to any donor, no matter how much they want to give you. Honesty, remember? A whole lot is going to depend on keeping everything in general terms as long as possible. Specifics come later."

"But ... but Mary, specific goals equate to our platform. It's all about how we want to change ... and....

"He stopped at her expression

"Frank, has your party been marginal in the past? Has it garnered more attention than the bottom two hundred nobodies added together? What did you get last election, less than one percent of the popular vote prior to the recount? We're going to put an end to all that, because our candidate will be big league, make no mistake about it. Our slogan says it all: The Second American Revolution! That's all the voters need to know for now, other than what I've got ready for you."

"That ... well, it...."

"The slogan seems a little harsh, does it?"

"Well, yes, now that you mention it."

"But deep in their hearts, that's what most people want, Frank. I'd go so far as to say even some of those profiting so much by our present corrupt system want it. You know that I make my living consulting to our folks on the Hill, and I can tell you there are many times I sense that what you and I are seeing is the direct result of staying in the game by playing rules made by others. Plain and simple. Play their way, or leave the game. So believe me, the slogan will strike a chord with our electorate."

"I guess you're right, Mary. They say you usually are."

"We're going to put *our* man in the White House, Frank. Mark my words. Our slogan is the first step on that road."

Except that our man won't be a president the way you're thinking, Frank. Not at all.

* * * *

"I still don't see how contributing to the Freedom Party is going to help us, Mary. Sounds like a waste if you ask me."

The comment came from Marty Granger, a short and corpulent Texan who'd convened the group of oil lobbyists to hear what she had to say. They represented most of the oil industries from Oklahoma to Louisiana, and of course Texas and the offshore drilling, but their interests boiled down to one: where to put their money, which in past elections had measured in the tens of millions legally and uncounted millions more under the table.

Granger's comment wasn't exactly unexpected. Mary made her answer blunt.

"You all know my reputation, gentlemen, so trust me when I say I'll be a *very* influential player in the next administration, regardless of who controls it. And also trust me when I tell *you* that you're all going to be busier than one-armed paper hangers when the time comes. I don't have to be schooled in your end of the economy, the way your people operate or what's most important to them to make that statement." *Damn right I don't. You'll all be looking for jobs, that's how busy you'll be.*

There were grins all around. The assumption was almost automatic that heretofore off limits areas would be opened to drilling, but Granger didn't exactly buy it. He blew out a cloud of cigar smoke, then flicked the cigar. An inch of hot ash fell to the meeting room carpet, unnoticed.

"Better elaborate on that, Ms. Henderson. We don't exactly operate on generalities in this business."

"Call it a reverse psychology kind of thing, Marty. As soon as the major parties *see* where your money is going--and of course you'll make sure they do--they'll fall all over themselves trying to head you off. They won't want to see your contributions wasted on a minor political party any more than you do. I'll leave it to all of you to imagine how much leverage you'll enjoy once that happens. However, you *do* want to be certain the hook is set before you try to land your fish, so get each of your member organizations to make their total initial contribution to the Freedom Party large enough to cause a little panic. The present legal limit is all we'd expect from each of your members, but with 680 of them kicking in we should get enough to make it look reasonable, and your message to the big boys should be crystal clear. Think of it as seed money that will return plenty of dividends later." *To us, not to you. You'll be one of the first to be out of a job, and we'll be ahead several million bucks.*

Granger waved the cigar at his eight cohorts. "Damn, she's good, isn't she? I couldn't for the life of me figure out where she was going, and here she was thinking just like the rest of us." There were some chuckles and a grin or two. He turned back. "Little lady, you made a damn good point, 'cause that's just the way those Washington yokels think." He screwed up his face and went falsetto. "Oooh, oooh, don't let any of that money get away from us!" Once more a billow of cigar smoke perfumed the room. "Why, I bet we'll get twice our normal mileage once this trick settles in!"

"And remember, gentlemen, our meeting here came at no real cost to you. I don't usually give away advice, but in this case and this political climate it would be disruptive to foment any kind of negative change to our energy program, am I right? I'm for seeing only the positives. You'll be happy to know that I spell growth a little differently than some in Washington."

"And how do you spell it?" Again, it was Granger.

"I always use a capital G, Marty." With that she closed and zipped her leather briefcase. "Others don't."

There was a cough from one of the group. "Granger...."

"What?"

"Why don't you get yourself some decent cigars for a change?"

Energy self-sufficiency would mean heaving the old guard out, especially those most corrupt--like Granger. He'd been bribing members of congress for years in return for votes favoring tax breaks for oil companies and suppressing opportunities for alternative energy companies.

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The microprotein experience could be expected to take somewhere between forty-eight and seventy-two hours, according to past experience. Mary set up in a small motel outside Baltimore, one room for each of the two new nominees, one for herself and another for Wilma. The 'experience rooms' were completely stocked with protein drink, coffeemaker, computers and other amenities. Maid service was canceled until further notice.

Mary was Lance's monitor; Wilma was Henrietta Worthington's. Although there had been no side effects or mishaps so far, there were still precautions to be taken. This wasn't the Blake ranch, and Murray--who knew the microproteins inside out--was a couple thousand miles away. Mary brought in precautions--a well-equipped first aid kit, several types of headache remedies and a blood pressure monitor. She and Wilma already knew how to give injections.

Neither nominee raised the question of possible side effects, so the standby precautions weren't mentioned, but they were in a valise brought from Mary's car nevertheless. That's where they stayed, as nothing went awry at all. Aside from the usual haggard aftermath and sleep lasting more than twelve hours, both newcomers were awed by the whole thing. There were just so many ways to say 'Wow.' Once that part ran its course, they were ready and eager to jump aboard.

They were both shown M.I. phones right there, dark brown devices more the size and shape of a deck of cards than the typical comphone. There was no dialer, as M.I.'s operated only on voice recognition.

The front of each device was a screen that showed the number spoken, several graphic symbols partitioned into meaningful icons, and a monitor showing the user whether the transmission was being properly received and decoded at the other end. That same indication was presented as a tiny red light that was steady when things were okay, but blinked when they were not. At that point, the sender was to close the channel immediately.

There was no microphone or speaker. The screen doubled as both.

Mary finished her descriptions. "These are what you'll use to communicate with me and the others. Right now they're only good for myself and General Foreman, but we'll have others shortly. When we get them, you'll have your own. Each of you will speak your keyword once. After that, it's yours only. Your voice signature plus the keyword becomes your password each time you use the phone, but if anyone else tries to use it one of two things will happen and either will cause the unit to self-destruct. If they say the keyword, instead of you saying it, goodbye phone. If you say the keyword, and they take the M.I. and start talking, also goodbye, so *don't* give it to anyone else to talk on, even one of us. We each have to use our own. Be real careful about that when you get yours. These things weren't easy to come by."

Jergins' grin was serious. "Nothing good ever is."

Look at him. Still a boy, but oh, such a boy! It was true. Lance was relatively young to be so prominent in news broadcasting. He'd walked the walk of correspondents such as Ernie Pyle and Martha Gellhorn, covering breaking stories from the field while ignoring danger to his person. It was often said he courted physical harm to himself, and dared it to do battle with him. He was never content with the kind of work other reporters did, nor would he accept the dictates of news directors who routinely reduced hours of danger to thirty-second sound bites conveying little of the disasters they represented.

He provided follow up and deeply analytical pieces that were truly interesting and informative. At first, few got by news directors, all of whom considered viewers to have the attention span of a third grader suffering from ADHD. It was highly favorable viewer response that convinced managers to grant him longer and longer 'face' time, something almost every reporter craved.

Becoming a household name was important, Jergins knew, but only if his reports were built on substance, not 'froth for the mindless masses.' His persistence paid off when he was chosen one of the leading co-hosts of the number one primetime news spot. Public opinion rated him most trusted among newscasters.

That trust had suddenly become pivotal, as he'd expressed it. The revolution might succeed without him, but he could improve its chances. He'd immediately have to start browbeating his news director to let him broadcast stories he wanted in the way he wanted, but by now he had the clout to do it.

Sen. Henrietta Worthington was the final player in the game of taking the country with a handful of conspirators. She hailed from Tennessee, where she'd won her seat after a corruption scandal so bad it sent the former occupant packing. One of the few in the country who shot her arrows straight, she'd managed to swing Tennessee voters' trust in the first third of her first term because she saw the 'king's new clothes' as nothing but air, most of it hot.

But she was no child at age forty-eight. Her credentials for public office, beyond her sparkling integrity, were summed up in two words: too good. She was smarter, worked harder, was right more often and gracious in being so, knew more about the senate than those who'd been there several terms, and exuded so much charm it left a trail of glitter wherever she went.

And she was hated by those who had none of her values.

Her trademark was hair that reached nearly to the small of her back. She brushed at a tress as she examined Mary's M.I., then grinned at Lance. "Did you imagine it could be done before you took that focusing protein?"

Her question drew a laugh, crinkling Lance's face into interesting patterns. "Hell, no. I thought Mary had gone bonkers. It took a call from Nat--General Foreman--before I was persuaded to take the stuff, but now everything's changed."

"Which reminds me," Mary said. "Nat wants us to speed things up as much as possible." Her words drew frowns. "You have reservations about that?"

Henrietta answered first. "I certainly do. Our groundwork for this thing has to be solidly laid and foolproof before we do anything. I see where it's possible for us to take power. That part's not as hard as it sounds, with the public mood and everything else going on in government these days. It's how we're going to *keep* it once we get it that's the problem. We'll be throwing thousands of people out of their jobs ... heck, tens of thousands if you count all the staffers and secretaries and aides and interns and pages. They'll raise hell. They'll call for a counter revolt."

"Maybe not," Lance countered. "Maybe that's where I come in. Congress has gotten so goddamned corrupt and venial they've gotten sloppy, not to mention state and local politicians. Over the past four years I've filled a few gigabytes with little goodies on one hell of a lot of them, stuff the public had to swallow but couldn't do anything about. Legal challenges, kickbacks, planned cost overruns into the billions and billions on pork barrel projects and public works, public lies, distortions, slander, graft, you name it. And as you both know, news ain't news unless it's fresh and current, so today's bad stuff just overwrites yesterday's. It's to the point where our public needs a daily fix or they get upset. All I have to do is drag out the worst of the worst and give the public their fix in one huge dose. They'll choke."

"He's right," Mary agreed. "In the days before it happens, Lance will broadcast all the dirt that's fit to hear. He'll hint that the whole government is corrupt from top to bottom, that one or both parties are faking polls to hoodwink voters, and that both are plotting to steal the election from the Freedom Party--the only party with integrity and the public interest at heart. He'll also aim quite a bit at the under thirty crowd and minorities. They'll get an earful about where their interests rank in the scheme of things--right at the bottom."

Lance shook his head. "Hinting, hell. I'm going to say it outright. We've *all* been hoodwinked. Our government is run by lawyers, lobbyists, special money interests and big corporations, not elected representatives, and if the Freedom Party looks like it's going to win they *will* try their damndest to steal the election. My listeners have faith in me. My task will be to turn their disgust into victory for our side."

"You're hired! Again. Now let's go over my own schedule of events so we can coordinate everything." She handed them both one of the little keychain drives, then pulled out a sheaf of printouts. "All the data you'll need for now is on those drives. Be sure to make your password a good one in case you lose them. I'll shred these printouts as soon as we finish."

It was the first of August and the time for conjecture had passed. It was the moment for action.

Chapter Fourteen

The dream was the kind where his mind was half awake and cranking away, even though he was technically asleep. Whenever he was deeply involved in something during daylight hours, Norman anticipated endless strings of craziness in his sleep. He knew he could take over-the-counter remedies to control it, but sometimes the dreams were interesting. Not this time! The intruder was turning the knob to the bedroom door ever so softly. Then there was the creak of a board under the carpet. He was in the bedroom!

Norman twisted from his right side to his left and pulled the covers up higher. His leg brushed against Ernie's thigh in the process. It was a wonderful sensation. He came awake a bit and snuggled closer, but something wasn't right. She was as unresponsive as a piece of wood, almost rigid.

He twisted back the way he'd been, and nearly cried out. A masked man was standing over him, eyes gleaming through a black ski mask. There was enough light from the bathroom to see that much, and it was no dream. He'd started to sit up but was shoved back even as he saw the gun. It was pointed at his head!

Pulse pounding, he glanced quickly at Ernie's side of the bed. She had someone standing over her, too, wearing the same type of mask. A flash of anger emboldened him, but there was no steadying his voice; it betrayed his fear. "Who the hell are you? I don't have any money here."

"We're not after money. Now be a good boy and don't move a muscle." The intruder waved the gun again.

The other one doesn't have a gun, and I've got my own 45 right here in the top drawer of the nightstand. I can almost reach it without moving. If he turns away for even a moment....

But the thought was only that. The intruder's next move was to check the nightstand drawer. There was no exclamation of surprise, not even a grunt. He merely lifted out the weapon and shut the drawer. "We'll put this back before we leave," he said genially. "You might need it in case some burglar happens by." There was the sound of the magazine being ejected. "This will be right outside the door. You'll find it in the morning."

At that point a second pair of hooded forms walked in as if they owned the house. One, a woman, flicked on the light and opened a black zippered case on the bureau top. Out came a number of syringes in sterile packages, plus the usual rubber strap.

Ernie hadn't made a sound.

The gunman stepped aside. "In case you two are wondering, we're going to insert a needle into the veins of both your hands. And young man, if you struggle, one of the other gentlemen here will be forced to hurt your girlfriend. I know you wouldn't want her to have any permanent disfigurement or expensive dental reconstruction, so it's best you cooperate. And ma'am, you'd be advised to take the same advice. We'd rather not hurt either of you, but if we must, we do know exactly how to do it. Just take it easy."

The woman took out a small recorder and set it up. There'd be no escape, no cavalry to the rescue. Anger turned to torment. "I'm sorry I got you involved, Ernie."

"We'd have gone after her anyway," the gunman soothed. "Having you together here just made it more convenient. All right, here we go with the needle. Remember, hold still or we'll just have to do it again."

There was a sting in the back of his hand, then the feeling of tape securing the needle in place. Swallowing hard, he turned away, only to see tears streaking Ernie's face. While the injection was taking hold, the woman checked the recorder and said it was working. The drug produced no sensation other than a sleepy feeling of floating. Then, as if from a distance, he heard himself talking.

His questioner was right--he really *should* try his best to answer all the questions. It seemed reasonable, the right thing to do, and he felt happy helping them. They wanted to know about his job and what he did at Barrington Labs, particularly about his work with the microproteins. How wonderful! It was something he loved talking about.

He'd changed the labels on the microproteins left in the lab, labeling part of the autistic microproteins as having been derived from normals and labeling some as part from autistics and part as something else entirely. That was so no one could figure out which was which. He laughed at that part. Oh, yes, they were stored in the big reserve cooler, inside a white case. Then he got to the part he liked best, telling how they worked and the kinds of effect they'd produced in the chimpanzees. Of course they could be duplicated. It was very simple....

As one part of him was talking, another part heard someone describing where the proteins were located in the lab. The man seemed to be talking into space, because there were gaps when no one was speaking. Then he heard Ernie's voice. She was explaining the research program and how Dr. Blake had been so excited about the chimps. Yes, there were backup records of the program and all sorts of correspondence in the main computer. The codes to access them were right there in the locked file cabinet next to her desk. She named the folder titles.

Suddenly he was being shaken and peppered with more questions. Someone there inside the lab at Barrington needed even more directions. Perhaps it was someone like Craddock, who wouldn't know one end of a test tube from the other. The very thought brought giggles, but more shaking stopped his laughter. He was asked to repeat the directions, and when he'd finished he heard the same voice talking into space again. This time it sounded like the man was talking on a phone.

"You're sure you're clear? The night watchman never twigged? Okay, great, good job. Craddock came through. I'll give these two a shot of happy juice and we'll be out of here." There was a pause, then "Yeah, I've got their phones and their passwords for the computer files on them. We got every damn thing the senator could want ... drained them dry ... and you're setting it up exactly the way he wanted things there when you leave half of everything. Great. Signing off."

It was all so interesting, just like listening in his dreams. Soon he'd wake up and would barely remember what happened. That would be just like his dreams, too. He giggled again. This time nobody shook him.

* * * *

Ernie was sitting up in bed with her head resting on her drawn-up knees when he came blearily awake. He tensed, suddenly angry and ready to leap up, but she put a hand on his chest, speaking softly. "Take it easy, Norm. If you move quickly you'll get a blinding headache. I sure did."

"They're gone?" His voice was husky.

"Yes, but they could be outside yet, waiting to see what we do. I don't think they planned to hurt us. That was just a threat so we'd cooperate."

"Never can tell, Ernie. I didn't want you hurt." He waited, then moved slowly. The headache was bearable enough. He reached for the desk phone, but there was no dial tone. "Dead. They cut the cord." He pulled the loose end into view.

"We still have our comphones. Call the sheriff first, then we have to call Mr. Blake right away. These people are after whatever it was he discovered after leaving Barrington. Maybe--"

"I'll get it ... ohhhhh!" The sudden movement took the top of his head clear off. He stopped, drew a pair of long breaths and slid out of bed onto the floor, with both hands against his temples, finally crawling on hands and knees to the bureau. His comphone was there in the top drawer. He pulled himself to his feet, drawer by drawer. Moments later, he knew the harsh truth. They'd taken his phone ... and hers, as well.

* * * *

Murray waved at Jack to turn down the TV, pointing at his phone with an index finger, then slicing across his throat in pantomime. Something important was coming through. The caller was Norman Wheelright, and he sounded terrible, almost ready to cry as he blurted out his story.

It was a long and somewhat disjointed tale, but the upshot was the intruders knew exactly what they were after, and they had someone there inside Barrington Labs in the middle of the night. That meant they'd somehow compromised the guards, one outside and another inside. These were professionals, not idiots posing as an NSF representatives. The incident smacked of industrial espionage agents, but not the kind used by the typical biomedical giants or industrial cartels. That kind specialized in stealing without leaving traces. These intruders didn't care about discovery, again not typical of the giants. It took those firms months to decide anything new was worth their attention, and more months before they decided to pursue it in some way. There hadn't been enough time since Craddock's rejection of the microprotein report, even if he'd taken it when it had been offered and waved it under their noses.

Unless they'd been told of its value.

It had to be tied into something or someone in the political scene. The word 'senator' was mentioned during those final moments before the raid was over. If Norman's recollection was accurate, that would mean some Washington politicians were after the microproteins. While that could mean just about anyone in the power elite of the city, the battle had been joined. The enemy wanted the microproteins because he realized their significance, or thought he did.

Whatever the connection, someone had been extremely serious as well as efficient. The raiders now had a portion of the microprotein supply and the research parameters, plus Norman's descriptions of the whole process, including all the selection criteria for the original autistic donors. On top of it, they'd likely copied the master files containing all the histories of those donors. Then there was the part where the intruder on the phone left instructions that could only mean others were expected to come after the microproteins as well. The inside man or men at Barrington had been told to leave half of each fraction sample behind, not to take it all.

Of course! Since Norman had already told them he'd changed the labels, anyone else coming to pinch whatever was left would be totally confused. Worse yet, Norman's story was the best of his recollection, but he'd been doped up the whole time. So had Ernie. What else had they disclosed? Was Machine Dean Craddock in cahoots with the raid? Had he been paid off or threatened, or even promised something that suited his 'little man' ego?

Jack's assessment was grim. His new M.I. phone was already programmed to his voice pattern, and he'd learned how to use it. Now was the time. He needed to talk to Nat Foreman.

"Yes, sir. That's all we know right now. I advised against Murray contacting Norman and Ernesta in person, but they should certainly be rewarded for their loyalty."

"Agreed," Foreman replied. "My estimate of the situation is pretty much the same as yours, Jack. One,

that reference to a *senator* is our most significant clue to all this. Two, he--or she, I suppose ... we can't assume it's a he even if it was given out that way--directs the hit team to confuse any others who might raid the labs the same way. That says he suspects others might already know about the stuff and he's beating them to the punch. Three, we assume an inside man at Barrington, probably Craddock since the raid team got by two guards. Who's in charge of guards there, if it's not the lab director? Four, lots of money's obviously involved here, so it's probably a big corporation or conglomerate."

"How do we find out?"

"Let's analyze it. First we see the I.S. agents. Their visit couldn't have been official--Internal Security these days is totally corrupt--so the information they got went to our senator behind all this. He's intrigued by what he gets, but naturally suspects the I.S. boys'll try to double-dip and sell the same information to others like him. Next, he sends in his own team right into Barrington, big as life, for a second pass. Craddock's involved a second time. These boys spend time working with technician Wheelright, and that should have been the end of it, but now we have a third, uglier visit. Can't be the second group, unless they were incompetents, so we have a new player ... call it ABC corporation, perhaps a pharmaceutical. They like what they've been told, but they have to have *all* the marbles. They send in their own team for a really thorough scouring, and these are real pros. Conclusion: whoever this senator is, he's got to be thinking Murray Blake's very existence could be his undoing. He's made a commitment to this thing, Jack, a big one. He may have connections to some really big money."

"He'll try to eliminate Murray, you think?"

"Fits the pattern you and I know so well. Why else try to confuse whoever follows his special team into Barrington? We have to know who this mystery senator might be and pull his plug. I'll make some inquiries and start Mary doing the same. She might be able to finger the bastard for us."

"This wasn't I.S. agents, then? I didn't think so, either. Internal Security would have taken them off for questioning."

Foreman paused. "Jack, it probably was internal security the first time, but this latest doesn't have their signature. I.S. agents would definitely have taken them away for questioning. It smacks of CIA or even our own military special forces. There are lots of ex-CIA and former military out there, selling their services. Let me see what I can find out. In the meantime, I'm going to send a larger detachment out to watch Murray's place, on top of what I have out there now. And it wouldn't hurt for you and Wilma and Murray to take turns sitting up at night. Armed, I might add."

"That bad, huh?"

"Could be, and I'd rather not take chances."

"Okay. Murray wants to talk to you. He'll call next. Out."

Murray rang through just moments later. "General, can you get someone into Barrington Labs under some pretense, to contact Norman and Ernie and let them know we're not sitting still? They're probably both scared to death. Needless to say, I'm a bit spooked by what happened last night, myself."

"Stay that way. I like seeing you paranoid until we get this over with. Sure, I can get someone in there. Tell me of some incident involving you and Norman that he'll be certain to remember."

"Hmmm. Okay, have your man mention the time I lost the instruction manual and thought I could do the replication procedure on a DNA segment of an X chromosome from memory. That ought to do it."

The general laughed. "Will do. Replication procedure on a DNA segment of an X chromosome. Got it. What is it you're needing to focus on next?"

"Well, given our utopian viewpoint, it looks as if everything is on schedule and moving as planned. Our problem here is we can't tell how much of the daily mess in D.C. is Mary's doing and how much is business as usual. Things are a lot more confused than normal, though, and this new flap over taxing lawyer's medical malpractice lawsuit awards and penalties might be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back ... in this case President Robinson's back. The primaries are all done and there's no clear front runner for the Oval Office in either party. Mary has done a hell of a good job. In any case, we need to have as many of our programs and solutions researched and ready to be put into place almost immediately. Others we'll announce with a time of initiation, like a new tax plan. Probably the worst backlash will come from dropping the subsidies and special favors to industry and agriculture, particularly the farmers. That's where the politicians and lawyers make their money. We can't be too draconian about it, changing everything at once, but at the same time it'll be best to take advantage of all the disorganization that's going to occur. I'll have to plan all these moves out. The better the first ones go, the better all of what follows. What I'm planning on is a groundswell of public support when we abolish a few of the most hateful programs disguised as sacred cows . It'll be a tremendous upheaval."

"Don't I know it!"

"Another session with the microproteins and I think we can give the American public a shot of adrenaline they haven't seen since my great grandpappy's days. But we've got to be absolutely certain about what we're doing before we act."

"You're going to make a good dictator, benevolent or not, Murray."

Murray frowned. "It may not come down to that. Right now I'm getting the feeling we could cause an upheaval that puts us in power but leaves the structure of government intact enough so we just put it through a drastic re-organization rather than tossing it out completely. I'll probably have to have the military help, though, with martial law and so forth. However it turns out, we're going to have to be ready."

* * * *

The senator behind the raids was Allan Merlson!

Mary supplied the answer after sifting through a dozen or more possibilities. It seemed that, aside from his known long list of contributors in the petroleum and alternate energy camps, Merlson's next highest contributions came from pharmaceutical firms, more so than any other senator she could finger. Among them were a few mavericks who'd managed to get their products through the FDA in miraculous time, and at least one who'd been accused of falsifying records and gotten no more than a rap on the knuckles from the authorities.

Merlson was listed as a director for one of the corporations. He'd have been in a perfect position to know who they used for their clandestine snooping or sabotage and then use that knowledge to arrange a midnight visit to the Wheelright residence. His close association with the National Science Foundation made the first visit to Craddock's office most likely his doing as well, and his position as a senior senator would get him clout with Internal Security. No reason needed, none given. Just go 'find out what they were up to.'

Foreman put Mary's findings together with the intruders' *modus operandus*. That was the combination behind the two visits all right, but the value in knowing lay in understanding who the enemy was and what he was after. No doubt their lobbyists were in tight with Sam Mecabrost, Senator Merlson's chief

assistant, since it would be Mecabrost who found ways to hide donations. Until Merlson's recent rather startling vote against his major benefactors, the standing joke was that his legitimate contributions were the tip of the petroleum iceberg.

Furthermore, Merlson was a lech. Mary likened him to a St. Bernard drooling over a chunk of meat when she set foot in his office. That made it more than likely she was being watched. Even more likely, Merlson or Mecabrost would know about her sudden trips out of town. Jealousy might have prompted Merlson to order the Marcos visit. It might even have been Mecabrost himself posing as Marcos.

The facts fell into place, one by one. Merlson would now have the microproteins under his control. What would that mean, considering he was one of the senate's most corrupt and hypocritical members? Was it safe to relax a bit about the night watch around the Blake property?

General Foreman didn't think so. He sounded worried.

* * * *

When Moose and Sugar let loose with another of their nighttime barking sessions, it could have meant anything. The usual cause was some distant dog barking, and of course no bark could go unanswered. That would set them off and the chorus would begin, but this time Wilma felt something was different.

She was on night watch because Jack was checking in back home and would return in the morning, while Murray was recovering from his second focusing session. She'd set herself up in the kitchen, doing a little in-place running every hour or so to pump her oxygen level back up. It was Jack's trick and it worked. Never exercise just before you try to sleep, he'd said, because you'd be up, with a capital 'U.' So she did, in order to stay awake and alert.

Murray was off snoring in his bedroom. She was on her own until dawn, when there'd be enough light to discourage casual raids by gangs looking for an easy mark--an unlit house or maybe a car to steal.

The two giant Pyrenees weren't waiting for answers from afar this time. Their barks were deep-throated and constant, which might mean some coyote or fox, or even a rare cougar upwind of the pair. Or, it could be intruders. The problem with two weeks' worth of night watches was that at first every little disturbance was automatically viewed as a major attack in the making. Now it was the opposite, where all but the most unusual noises and accompanying barking were thought to be normal.

Then she heard two yelps in succession, followed by more barking, but different. Almost like an old phonograph slowing to a stop, the barking became muffled, then quiet.

She cocked her head, listening intently, but there was only silence. Why would either dog yelp like that? And why would they quiet down?

She went through the mud room to the back entrance, where she could see the big doghouse the Pyrs used during ultra cold weather or storms. Whenever they chased off after anything, they always returned there, but neither dog was anywhere in sight.

Something was wrong, really wrong.

She hated to wake Murray, but it was already two thirty in the morning. Besides, he could always go back to bed if whatever it was turned out to be nothing. She knocked on his door, heard him still snoring and went in without waiting. She had to shake him awake.

"What? Wilma? What's wrong?"

"Moose and Sugar. They were barking, then they yelped and a couple of minutes later they stopped barking but not all at once. It was so odd, and they never came back here."

He'd been asleep not more than four hours after being awake for nearly three days, yet the adrenaline released by her words was enough. He was fully awake, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. "It sounds like intruders. Make sure your gun is loaded and a round chambered. I'll be there in a minute."

As if his words were electric, she shot out of the room and raced back to the kitchen, snatched up her Glock and checked it, all in a single motion. Round chambered, ready. Then she doused the kitchen light and crouched by the door.

Wilma was nowhere in sight when Murray emerged from the bedroom. He was heading toward the back entrance when the front door was almost wrenched from its hinges with an explosive *whump*, swinging wide and shattering one of the two lamps lighting the room. He whirled automatically and fired a salvo from his Glock. One attacker at the entrance fell and the one behind him took a bullet in the eye, falling backward. Two down, he thought wildly. There'd be others.

A slug from a 45 would penetrate the paneling either side of the doorframe. He sent a pair each side, and the last one produced a scream. Three attackers down. Almost sounding like an echo, there was another scream from the back of the house. It was cut off abruptly like a book being slammed shut.

Wilma!

She didn't fire her gun. How many rounds do I have left? No time to get a spare clip, no time!

ALIVE, GODDAMMIT, WE WANT THEM ALIVE, YOU IDIOTS! The male voice came from the vicinity of the mud room.

He spun the other way, charging back only to alter course. Grabbing at a molding to check his forward motion, he dropped into a crouch and moved fast along the alternate hallway, so as to come in from the storeroom. There'd be only a single night light there, located knee-high at the outside door, which would put the storeroom door in deep shadows.

Once there he peered through the dirty oval, fighting down the absurd thought that he really ought to wash the windows more often, then froze. Wilma was there, struggling with a figure not much larger than she was. Another form sprawled on the floor in a dark puddle, but there'd been no shot, not one he'd heard at least. She must have shot her man during the front door fracas.

There was no chance to fire; they were too entangled to risk it. At that moment the struggling pair turned so the intruder was facing away. Now! Just as he flung the door open, Wilma fell backward, going down hard. Her gun went skittering across the floor, but he now had a clear shot. He fired at the intruder's chest as the man turned, hitting the target. He didn't go down. No, not a man--that grunt came from a woman! She was knocked back, but managed to keep her feet. Even so, the impact made her lower her gun ever so briefly before she brought it up again. He saw the flash as he fired, but the sound of her bullet striking behind him came almost as an exclamation point. He even felt the rush of air past his ear. Once more she staggered back, but wasn't down.

Body armor!

Almost instinctively he crouched, two-fisted his Glock and aimed for her head. She raised her weapon again, but didn't get her shot off. He pulled the trigger twice--getting one last shot from the expended clip--coupled with a bright flash from a spot behind her. Wilma had retrieved her weapon and aimed at the same target. The explosion above the assailant's shoulders resembled a small watermelon thrown

hard against a concrete wall, with pieces flying everywhere. The nearly headless torso thudded on the floor, falling across the body already there.

Shaking his head to clear ringing from the fusillade of gunshots, he scrambled to help Wilma to her feet, but before he could say a word there were sounds of another gun battle from the front.

"Goddammit, they're everywhere! Wilma, are you hit?"

She was barely able to get her words out. "No, I don't ... don't think so."

"Then watch out back." His ammo was stashed in his top bureau drawer. The empty clip tumbled along the hallway as he darted into the room, yanked open the drawer and grabbed two fresh ones. Click home, ready, check--GO!

But in those same few seconds the firing outside had stopped, and now there were voices. He dropped into a crouch once more, sidled around the bedroom door frame and advanced guerilla-style toward the front room. Somehow the remaining lamp in the room had gone out--everything was dark, especially the front door opening.

A voice came from that direction, well away from the door. "Don't shoot, Mr. Blake. We're Foreman's men."

The words spelled relief, but his adrenaline had him pumped. This was no time to get reckless. He braced the Glock on the back of an easy chair in the den, just off the front room, and shouted his answer. "One of you remove any headwear, drop your weapon, then your belt and everything on it, then come inside with hands over your head. I want to see your face, two empty hands and not one bulge on your person. If you're more than one, the rest of you wait until I ask you to advance."

Moments later a voice called out. "I'm coming in, Mr. Blake, as you requested. There are six of us. I'm still wearing body armor so you may see some bulges."

"Move forward. You're doing fine so far."

The form in the doorway paused there, hands above his head. "That was superbly done, Major Blake. I'm Sergeant First Class Mendes. We got all of them--"

"The back door, Mendes!"

"Secured, sir. I'll bring in my people now, if you say."

At that moment Wilma appeared in the hallway. "It's okay, Murray. They're from General Foreman. They got the others."

There were six in Foreman's group, two of them women, none in actual uniforms unless you counted body armor, a rather bulky, pocketed utility belt and combat boots. Murray was still upset, even though they'd saved the day.

"Well, all I can say, other than thank you, is that you cut it too damn close! Who were those people, anyway?"

Mendes answered for his team. "Sorry about the timing, sir, and you'll have to ask your boss who they were. We're actually the backup team. One of our main group was killed with a silenced weapon minutes before we rotated, and they got through the perimeter at his station without the rest of his team knowing. He managed to report in before he died, though, and I took the call. We were within two minutes of

intercepting them. Actually, sir, you two did pretty well by yourself. There was only one left in front and one in back and they were getting ready to abort the mission. Go wash your hands thoroughly and put everything you're wearing through the washer, both of you. Do it now. Everything."

Wilma started to protest until the leader of the group told her what was to follow. The cleanup began minutes later, when a second of Foreman's teams showed up. It was only three thirty a.m.! When did these people sleep? They gathered the bodies and sanitized the areas where the gunfights had taken place, then left as mysteriously as they'd arrived. The 'golden gate' had remained closed all that time, so they couldn't have driven up to the house. How did they get there? They must have come the back way, the same as the intruders, where the farm abutted a thousand acre exotic game preserve owned by some eccentric zillionaire. But how did any of it happen without an astounding amount of preparation, authority and influence? Was General Foreman that powerful a figure, that he could literally snap his fingers and have the resources he needed for this kind of covert operation?

The answer, obviously, was that he was precisely that powerful and possibly more so. He was proving to be exactly the kind of leader who could block any political attempt to 'run the military' in anything less than a declared war or national emergency.

Wilma had been holding herself together and appearing to do it well, but the minute the last of them left she collapsed. He held her until the shaking finally stopped, acutely aware of her slim, young body. It had been an emotional roller coaster--relief just in being alive, plus the psychological high of besting their antagonists, tempered by revulsion at having to kill.

She drew away a bit, finally, and gazed up. "Murray, I.... "But she didn't need to continue. Her invitation was as unmistakable as a grand jury summons. At first her lips were soft and enticing, almost shy, like a young girl's.

Then they were demanding.

Chapter Fifteen

"I had no idea you'd never ... been...." Murray murmured.

Her grin was impish, set off by the subdued lighting from the nightlight. She lay on her side with her head resting against his shoulder, her eyes mere inches from his. "I'd never met a man I really wanted to do it with ... until now."

How had she lasted so long? She had a beautiful body, with firm breasts and nicely tapered legs. High school boys and then grown men must have chased her constantly. "I'm still surprised. These days--"

"Murray ... dear ... you'd be surprised how few boys and men are actually mature enough for a relationship above and beyond interests in their jobs and sports--sports first, jobs second. Guys my age don't want to read or learn new things, not enough to satisfy me, anyway. I want someone I can talk to and read in bed with and talk about where our space program went wrong and ... well, you get the idea. Guys with muscles I can find anywhere, usually with most of it between their ears."

He laughed and pulled her to him. How different it was to be in bed with a woman other than Connie, and one almost young enough to be his daughter on top of that.

She did her best to dispel his reservations.

* * * *

"Jack, who the hell were those bastards who tried to break in here and kidnap us? We were told to ask the general, but he's been too busy to take my calls."

"Tell you in a minute. Got coffee?"

"Just made a pot. I suppose I should ask about Brenda, but--"

"Understandable, pal, with what just happened. She's fine, sends her love ... to the dogs. How're the Bobsey twins, anyway?"

"Both recovered. It was the stuff vets use to put animals under for examinations and such. Fortunately for us the doses were a little on the small side, so Moose and Sugar barked on their way to la-la land and Wilma heard the difference."

He poured coffee as he talked, and they sat at the kitchen table.

"One of the captured guys talked," Jack began. "They were specialists from the eastern crime families, call 'em Mafia if you like even if they're not, hired to kidnap one Murray Blake and anyone hanging around with him. If we can believe that's what it was, then someone might have been out to squeeze you dry for the full microprotein story."

"Frankly, I doubt it would have stopped there. Sounds to me like someone wanted you erased to tie up loose ends, since they'd already gotten your secrets. The kidnapper thought some drug cartel might also be onto it, some outfit starting with 'G.' There was a real sense of urgency behind the raid, like you were supposed to be out of the picture before someone else--read that as a pharmaceutical conglomerate--made any sense out of the product."

"Wasn't Merlson a director on a company called Gloriana, or something like it?"

"You're close. It's Goriana. Is Wilma up?"

"I heard her in the shower a while ago. She should be in shortly."

She came in a few minutes later, but from the master bedroom, not the room she normally used. No comment from Jack, but a few seconds later she gave Murray a far-from-sisterly kiss. Still no comment, but now there was a faint smile flickering on and off his face like a barely lit candle.

Murray tried unsuccessfully not to blush.

* * * *

It was September and Mary's sixth trip to Oklahoma. She immediately picked up on the change between Murray and Wilma, and just as quickly put her own jolt of displeasure to bed. *Que sera, serÃ¡!* Best to accept the situation for now. After all, Wilma was there constantly while *she* flitted about the Washington landscape, hardly slowing down for sleep. On top of that, Murray needed a woman's steadying influence in his life. It probably would have happened sooner, if not for the recent loss of his wife. Considering the months that had passed since that tragedy, who could be surprised?

If anyone noticed her brief contemplative moment, it wasn't mentioned. Everyone was seated in the den, anxious to hear her Washington report. She elected to stand.

"General Foreman and I talked a few days ago. It seems Senator Merlson was very upset with the NSF scientists he virtually commandeered, and sent for another team to isolate a second set of microproteins, using techniques from the Barrington backup files of Murray's research. Don't ask me how the general learned this when I couldn't, but he's been no end of surprises. He really has his fingers into every aspect of the intelligence community except Internal Security. Too much corruption there.

"Anyway, I'm sorry to report they duplicated every part of Murray's work perfectly and Merlson immediately rounded up some volunteers to try it. We're dealing here with one of the worst in Washington when it comes to duplicity and graft. He's taken millions from big oil, drug cartels, agricultural lobbyists and legal firms and rumor has him with several accounts in the Cayman Islands. We're pretty sure he was behind the Marcos visit, the I.S. raid and the follow-up raid in Norman's house and inside Barrington. Prior to my coming aboard, I steered him into voting for the energy bill, which I now regret. He's so angry at me he won't buy any more advice, even though I *did* warn him he'd lose his oil support in the short term. My point is that I can't influence him in the usual way and I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't try the microproteins himself pretty soon, or compel Mecabrost into doing it. He's seen how well they work. Murray, why are you chuckling?"

"Well, if he's taking them, I'd rather he *hadn't* discovered why he wasn't getting results at first, but I don't think it'll matter much. He doesn't know what results to expect, you see. Without some specific focal points at the onset, anyone experimenting will have the equivalent of a long trip on LSD. It'll be mass confusion when they come out of it, like a small child chasing fireflies. The next one to light is the one to chase, and so on, never stopping to examine the one just caught. The drug companies are undoubtedly focused already on their products and markets, so it might not have fooled them for long. Merlson is the opposite. He might get better at what he's already good at, his treachery, but nothing new will come out of it."

"Will he, or someone else, maybe, decipher our intentions, though?"

"I doubt it. For one thing, both conventions are deadlocked on their candidates and he's busy trying to get his name into the pot. But mainly, it's just too wild to consider a handful of people carrying out a successful revolution in the first place, and where would he even get the operative term revolution?"

They've been fat cats for so long they can't imagine the country functioning any other way, though I suppose they'll try using the focus factor to make their graft and thieving more efficient and better concealed. They're all little Merlsons. Then again, say he takes a new kind of mind journey ending in total confusion when he emerges. That wouldn't spell revolution, but from what you tell us of his drug cartel connections it could mean something like LSD without as many dangerous side effects. Two or three days in the tank without someone around might even convince him he has the wrong formula. Look at the way we were coming out of it--zombies with nothing more on our minds than crashing forever." His little smile morphed into a grimace as he pictured his research being used that way.

Mary nodded. "Someone must have been taking notes, though. Several of the big pharma-corporations have already started changing their methods of advertising and lobbying, and the way they go after doctors and relations with the FDA and so forth, so it may be they're all sharing their discoveries. When haven't they? They have Merlson way deep in their pockets. If they focus and find a way to let other industries in on the secret without hurting their own income, they'll probably try selling the microproteins to other conglomerates. In fact, they've probably done it already, because I'm sure Merlson passed it on to some other industrial cartels, too, damn his thieving soul. I know for sure the drug companies have been buying heavily into oil and autos, and I know for a fact they've begun using some extremely devious methods of making the government regulations and laws work in their favor. That's one thing I wanted to discuss with you. How are your proposed changes in government departments like Labor, HHS, Defense and so forth coming along?"

Murray yawned. "Real good, Mary, but I'm having problems getting enough sleep." He paused. "What I mean is--

Mary held up a hand. "Enough said, Murray. Congratulations to both of you. Just don't let it distract you from our primary mission." She raised her brows, glancing at each in turn.

Wilma blushed, but said firmly "It won't. I won't let it. In fact, Murray was under a lot of strain. I hope you've all noticed he's more relaxed now." She directed her words at Mary, even though they were meant as all-encompassing.

"She's right," Murray said, exaggerating his sigh and bringing the back of his hand to his mouth as he feigned another yawn. "I'm really ... relaxed." That got him a bop on the shoulder from Wilma's fist.

"Well, I'm happy for you." She drew a breath and held it, like someone savoring incense, or accepting resignation. "I think I need a quick drink before we continue."

Wilma jumped up. "Go ahead, Mary. I'll make it."

"Yes. Well okay, then, Murray, what have you come up with so far?"

"Where do I start? I've been trying to keep it simple. The more complicated a program is, the easier it is to manipulate in the wrong direction."

"Right. How about starting with the IRS?"

"National sales tax, with a rebate of a certain amount to every one holding a Social Security number. No personal income tax, no corporation taxes. Real simple, huh?"

"You can't be ... are you *serious*? Jack, are you listening?"

"Yep. I'm all ears."

"Now I really do need that drink! Better explain this, Mr. Blake, and go slow for my sake."

"It's simple, as I said. Everyone pays somewhere around a twenty percent sales tax on every single item or service bought, including investments--that's over and above any state sales tax--and every single citizen gets *back* an amount we'll determine later. If you hold a Social Security card, you get one-twelfth of your annual rebate in the mail every month, and it matters not whether you're working. Of course, if you *have* no Social Security card, i.e. you're an illegal, forget any rebate, but you'll still pay the sales tax on everything you buy. Basically that's the end of immigration problems right there. Illegals may get paid under the table, but they can't spend a dime of it without paying their twenty percent, and they won't get one penny back. Furthermore, their employers will have to call those illegal wages *something*, and there goes that easy cover. If not wages, then the expenses are purchases of some sort. Bingo, fork over the twenty percent on all those payments to illegals you called miscellaneous maintenance, trash-and-carry and lawn care, Mr. Employer. We have fifteen, maybe twenty million illegals in the country right now, paying nothing into the system and taking all they can out of welfare, Medicare and any other social support system the rest of us all pay for. Run the numbers; they're good. It's not even my idea; it's been around a long time but it was always too simple for Congress. Or rather, the powers Congress is beholden to would never stand for it."

"Well, if you say so. Now what about corporate taxes? You mentioned them."

"Certainly. Corporations pay the sales taxes same as individuals. It's all wrapped up in one system. Payrolls will have *No* federal withholdings other than social security. Won't that be nice? Won't their employees rave about taking home a much bigger chunk of what they earn? I predict the move will result in *lower* overall manufacturing costs, tighter controls on inventory, lower prices and improved foreign market advantages."

The expressions were priceless! "Hey, it'll work, even if it will turn out to be much more complicated than I'm making it out to be."

"And if they decide to raise prices instead?" It was Jack.

"*Someone* has to buy what they make, and raising prices shuts doors to foreign markets so everything stays on the mainland. They'll suffer loss of business by raising prices, since now competing foreign goods or services will have a big advantage. Believe me, their bean counters will know which way to turn this to their advantage."

"Murray, some states already charge sales taxes," Jack objected. "Another twenty percent on top of, say seven percent, would be way too much burden for the average family."

"The lower income will get part of that back, remember? So will the rich, but they'll hardly notice. Heck, even crooks will get it. Maybe if some of the minorities where most of the crime occurs get checks every month, they might not do so many illegal things. Especially once we reform the drug laws."

"And listen to this: we're also going to use our power to revoke all the special tax breaks and other privileges churches get--Poof! They'll pay sales taxes just like any other business and they can forget about exemptions for real estate taxes that states and cities have been giving them. Just think: the billionaire crooks and televangelists, the religion power-bloc and any cult that isn't honestly motivated is gone. That's something I've never understood anyway. Church and State are supposed to be separated so how did churches wind up tax-free, for Christ's sake?"

"You're going kind of fast here, Murray" Mary said.

"You of all people should know we have to go fast. Mary, a revolution is all very well, and we're all sure we can pull it off or we wouldn't be here, but we have to have a system to put in its place almost immediately or there'll be a real revolution, complete with blood in the streets and fire in the city. I don't

say everything will turn out like I'm saying here. What *will* turn out as predicted is an abrupt drop in the cost of running the IRS, what with not having to watch for anything but cheating on the sales tax. No 10,000 page tax code to interpret."

"No exceptions for food or drugs? No exemptions?"

"Zero, capital 'Z.' We can't start making exceptions or using taxes to make social policy, particularly not bowing to a single special interest. If you allow one exception, you open the flood gates. I might also point out the psychological impact of getting a check every month. Think what that will do for us."

Mary's look was a mix of frown and smile. "But Murray, where does the government come out ahead? Nearly every economist going is clamoring either for tax increases or program cutbacks, and then there's still the Social Security mess? Are you saying we cut the Social Security payouts?"

"Of course not. That's one program that's been run fairly and with reasonable efficiency, barring all the added benefits politicians have been tacking on for years. We'll have to do some reform, though. And of course, we quit all the talk about a social security trust fund since it amounts to nothing but a bucketful of IOUs anyway." He laughed.

"I've got a question," Jack said. "You haven't mentioned investments. How will they work?"

"Same as the rest. No more free rides. Those who play the stock market will pay tax on their stock *purchases* on the way in, but no tax on their earnings coming back out, so they can make a killing and keep it all. It just costs them more to get into the game, and that will put a real damper on stock churning. Every single transaction involving a purchase will cost the purchaser twenty percent. We exempt stock swaps so stockholders can barter what they have for what they want. That keeps the blue chips going and it returns the market to the basics of money in the first place."

"Okay, but back to Mary's question about tax revenues, pal. Where do we get what we need to run this country? It still doesn't seem like enough." He wagged his empty glass and made for the bar.

"I haven't even gotten to all the programs we'll cut. And everyone, in case you're wondering how I suddenly got to be a financial genius, this isn't all my doing. In fact, not much of it is. General Foreman provided the facts and figures from a financial genius he knows. Pretty soon we'll bring him in and put him through a focusing session so he can round off the rough edges."

His concluding words were met with silence. Finally Mary smiled. "I like it, Murray. I like it a lot! Jack? Wilma?"

Wilma nodded and headed for the kitchen. Jack tipped his glass in respect. Mary finished her drink and set the glass down.

"Care to expound on the rest of our goals, Murray?"

"I'll do one more, and then we have to eat. I'm starving and that dinner Wilma's making isn't helping one bit with its aroma."

But Mary kept him talking. At the end of thirty minutes of nearly uninterrupted debate, he'd outlined most of their major programs: international entanglements, energy dependency, homeland security, more on immigration, subsidies and entitlements, soaring medical costs, the drug problem, minority treatment, the judicial system and numerous others. All had been areas of focus during his second microprotein session.

Mary was more than pleased. "This has all been absolutely astounding, Murray. I'd ask where you got all these fantastic and original ideas, but then we all know, don't we? I'll fold all this into the political

calculations and General Foreman will do the same for the military. After that, it's time to make you an overnight phenomenon. Your name is going to become a household word in a very short time--you'll have to give a few interviews--and I've got the ground pretty well prepared for someone exactly like you to appeal to the electorate. Just about the time the major parties finish holding their conventions you're going to overshadow their nominees. I'll stay here a couple of days, by the way, and run you through how to hold your press conferences. It's going to startle hell out of viewers and reporters alike. I'll make sure the media covers it live, and it'll be totally unlike anything the regular politicians do." She grinned like a little girl just given a robot doll, a functional computer and a set of spaceship and engineering games, all at once. "You're going to have to do a lot of name-and-face memorization. I want you to be able to identify every single reporter you'll run into, and do it in your sleep. It'll amaze everyone."

Wilma came back in with a fresh cup of coffee for Murray and one for herself. "What about our 'precipitating incident'? Did I miss that part?"

Mary gazed at the ceiling for a moment. "Oh, yes, the incident thing. That's our last major problem. Jack and I and General Foreman have been tossing around three or four concepts without coming up with a winner. We need some major incident we can turn to our advantage, an issue where the whole country would rise up and demand a change we don't engineer ourselves. Spontaneity is the keyword. We thought maybe something that would really alarm the elderly, for example. Ideas? It would--"

Wilma broke in. "Go the opposite direction."

"What? Oh, yes ... Wilma ... you have a suggestion? Then let's hear it."

"I don't have the credentials the rest of you have, but I think there's one thing maybe none of you thought enough about, despite the focus factor, and that's people under thirty, the college crowd, and even high schools. They're very ... well...."

Mary motioned with both hands. "Keep it coming, Wilma. I think I'm getting a glimmer here."

"Well, they're *truly* the disenfranchised of our nation, right? And there are millions of them, not yet in control, but worried sick about what's happening to the world they're about to inherit. Why not let the college crowd think both major parties are out to rig the election in such a way they'll be the losers. Let them believe it will mean the end of student loans, freedom of expression and a few other emotional issues. It shouldn't take much to ignite a whole uprising, the kind you want. And something else...." She paused.

"Oh, don't stop, Wilma. This is good stuff."

"Well, I was thinking. Blacks and minorities have this awful sense of having no power, and the rest of our citizens haven't a clue as to how hard it is for these people. I say we need to level the playing field, get rid of all that affirmative action stuff and turn all the educational system back to the states. It would be a whole lot better if everyone knew it was all up to them whether they succeeded or failed. I ... well, I guess I sort of got on a soap box there."

"Not at all. Get back up on it and keep talking."

"Well, I was going to say average citizens don't realize how few of the minorities are finishing high school. Or how many are unemployed. How many wind up in prison, or have records. And the drug part ... was I ever glad to hear you have ideas about that! We need to let all these people know we have solutions, that we have a better way."

Mary stared for a long moment before breaking into a grin. Then she laughed. "Oh, Wilma, that's

wonderful, absolutely on the mark! I'll do a focus session on the ideas and see what we can come up with. Personally, I think once everyone, minorities included, realize we're not kidding, we mean what we say and we intend to carry out our programs fairly, they'll start to come aboard." She paused for a moment. "We're going to have to find a place for you in government after we take control."

"We already have," Murray said quietly.

"Tell me."

"Wilma and Ernie will be my chief administrative assistants, also functioning as advisers, same as Jack. I'll want people who look at things outside the box and come at a problem from a different angle."

"Just as Wilma did now. Take a bow, lady, and don't ever let me hear you apologize for your credentials again. I've been on campuses during some pretty violent uprisings, and you are *so* right. You and Jack and Ernie--who I haven't met but want to--will whisper in Murray's ear. I'll be his political adviser, and the general will handle the military side. Murray, you're going to have a better team than any president ever did. By the way, did you know there's no mandate for a president to name a cabinet? That's purely up to him, and it's mostly a matter of necessity. I'll help you with names of men and women you'll want close to you, and those you don't."

"I don't think I'll be able to handle the job without an awful lot of help."

Wilma bopped him playfully on the shoulder for the second time. "Of course you will. Look at the things you've already come up with."

"Well, maybe, but you'll all make it less difficult." He suddenly brightened. "At least I won't have to worry about dissent. Once we're in we can tell any of the pressure groups and special interest groups to get lost."

Mary was amused. "Man is a political animal, Murray. Honesty goes a long way, but you have a lot to learn about political matters. The general and I will be your teachers. You'll have to work with groups, or representatives of groups, because you can't possibly deal with every single problem down there at the local level." She suddenly stopped, staring at nothing as though her mind was a thousand miles away.

Wilma took the opportunity to give Murray a quick kiss, then went back to the kitchen to check on dinner in the making. Jack, who'd been unusually silent all through the presentation, stood and stretched. "As far as I'm concerned, Murray, you've been in the wrong business all these years. These ideas of yours are dynamite, especially the illegal immigration fix. Who better than already-naturalized Mexicans to flesh out the INS? Hell, they'll talk to their countrymen in ways no one else can. And I like that part about learning English well enough to read *any* three pages of some work like Robinson Crusoe aloud, and then summarize it in English, *ad lib*. This crap about memorizing a hundred words is crazy. That's not English. Hell, I don't speak a word of ... say, Greek ... but I can memorize sounds well enough to recite something that short. Movie actors do it all the time. The prize'll be worth more when illegals have to work for it. And by God, if you don't cut out that second language business in school, I'll kill you." He grinned. "The country became great by plunging the immigrants into the school system and forcing them to learn English in a hurry."

Mary took several more minutes before continuing her discourse. "Murray, I just had a thought and I've been analyzing it. One of the things I think you'll be doing is seeing three or four average citizens a day, live and unscripted, right in the Oval Office. They'll be chosen randomly and their questions won't be known in advance."

Once more, Wilma returned in time to hear the pronouncement. "Didn't Lincoln do that?"

"There you go surprising me again, Wilma. How many people know that? You'll never convince me you're not as well equipped as the rest of us if you keep spouting off truths like that. Yes, Lincoln was the last president to see anyone who wanted to talk to him. After that, and after he was assassinated, it became both too dangerous and too cumbersome and time-consuming. But we'll do it on a lottery basis, and I'll guarantee it will help you with the people immensely."

Wilma scarcely hid her pleasure. "Dinner's ready," she announced, aiming the words at Murray. "Mary and I can talk about this idea after we eat, while you're doing the dishes."

Then she dimpled sweetly.

Chapter Sixteen

September saw Murray in the news.

"FREEDOM PARTY FIELDS MYSTERY CANDIDATE" *Washington Post*

"BLAKE'S CANDIDACY A JOKE?" *Chicago Tribune*

"OKLAHOMA SCIENTIST JOINS THE FIELD" *Christian Science Monitor*

"WHO IS MURRAY BLAKE?" *New York Times*

"NO INTERVIEWS: BLAKE" *Daily News*

"FREEDOM PARTY FIELDS ANOTHER LOSER" *Los Angeles Times*

"BLAKE MAKES IT 266 WANNABES" *Philadelphia Enquirer*

Mary had her shoes off and her feet propped up on one of the picnic tables in Great Falls Park. There were others in the park, mostly families, but they were down closer to the river. The location was safer than her own apartment as far as anyone overhearing her words.

"I was wrong about starting things a few weeks ahead of their conventions, Jack. This works out much better. Our candidate's lighting up the scene about the same as one of those white phosphorous starbursts on the fourth of July. The media are so desperate to have something or someone new to idolize or smear after the regular conventions they've actually poured gasoline on our fire. You've seen the headlines of course, and all the fluff that goes with them, but have you sampled the Internet in the past two days? It's worth millions."

"Murray's here listening with me," Jack answered. "He can't talk because my M.I. will go belly up. Where are you?"

"Outdoors, away from my apartment, in a park along the Potomac. No one's near me. I can talk."

"Your report's sounding fine so far, so keep talking."

"I started everything three days ago by dropping Murray's name to a few of my journalist friends. They heard what a wonderful president he'd make if only he'd gone into politics, but he hadn't and that was that. End of story; the country's loss, yada yada. These particular contacts are the kind who know I don't say such things unless I'm sitting on a big, dark secret, so they pressed me just as I knew they would. Could he be coaxed into running, etcetera? You know the drill. Anyway, I said I'd approached him, but he wasn't ready to face reporters, let alone make that kind of decision yet. He might do really well as a Freedom Party candidate, though, since the two majors were such a mess. They took the bait. Of course, I just *happened* to mention I had a few articles and a fact sheet I'd collected, but I couldn't share them unless they guaranteed *not to tell a soul*."

Jack was laughing. "You're devious, Mary. Always were."

"Of course! Anyway, here it is three days later and the Internet's going wild. Murray Blake's nothing but a big mystery, but you wouldn't know it from what they're posting. They're making stuff up and plagiarizing each other, most of it good even if it's fiction. Murray's a candidate with heroic proportions already, and we haven't even announced him yet. And of course Lance Jergins is champing at the bit, but

it's not time for him yet.

"Yesterday I went one better. I took one of the photos we have of Murray and emailed it anonymously to one of the bloggers from a public terminal. Sure enough, it's been posted already. Watch the rumors fly now! Nobody dreamt the Freedom Party even *had* a candidate aside from their guaranteed loser, Ainsley Canton. Canton's never quite gotten one percent of the popular vote. He's a joke, and always has been."

"Your reputation's working for us, Mary."

"Plus backlash, Jack, plain and simple backlash. The electorate is mad as hell. They're in a nasty mood and both major parties are self-destructing. Robinson's in quicksand, dragging a dozen others down with him. He'd be guaranteed to lose, except that his challengers are stuck on stupid, all six of them. The idea of a politician who might be completely *different* from anything seen before will hit our citizenry slowly at first, but just watch it take off. Remember your chemistry? The electorate is like a supersaturated solution. One tiny disturbance and it abruptly forms a crystal. Our citizenry are longing for someone who can manage the government and steer congress toward meaningful goals, rather than doing everything with one eye on the polls and another on chances of reelection.

"And that brings up another subject. We need to have a meeting and see just where our revolution is going. Even with our focusing, there's so many factors working now that the outcome of the events we've set in motion is subject to constant change. We'll have to stay on top of them, but I'm beginning to believe now that we can pull this off and still keep part of our system in place, a better result than outright revolution."

"Murray thinks you've been *helping* the majors self-destruct a bit. You wouldn't want to confess, would you?"

"Who, *me*? You think *I* would stoop so low as to use my knowledge of various corruption scandals in some nefarious way? Or maybe send anonymous emails to various politicians *denying* various rumors about their opponents? Would *I* find ways to inform lobbyists that their Washington darlings are double-crossing them? Oh, you can't believe that I had anything to do with those rumors about Robinson's secret mistress, or Bryant's cocaine habits. I would never do such things."

"Shame on us, Mary. How could we have thought otherwise? You had nothing to do with at least eight corruption scandals last count, either, or the anonymous Homeland Security whistle-blower story, or the sour economic outlook, and I *never* thought you were behind those rumors about foreigners dumping their U.S. debt holdings."

"Really, Jack? You don't say. Are they doing that?"

"I just *knew* that would be news to you, but yeah, they are."

"You're saying they own gobs of U.S. debts and they're selling them off so they can shift to other currencies? That the dollar's been on its way out on the international value scene, but in just a few weeks the trend has gone into warp drive? Is that what you're saying?"

"About the same length of time a certain political consultant has been busy, I might add."

She chuckled, checking her surroundings out of habit. A family with two young children was moving too close for comfort. "Hey, gang, I have to sign off. A family with two kids is coming this way. I'll call again tonight and we'll set up a meet. Murray, keep boning up for that news conference. We'll have it within a week. Ta."

Jack was right, of course. The rot was filtering down to the state and local governments, right onto the heads of any politicians not wearing Teflon. Citizens were finally waking up to the financial mess the country was in, now that the downturn was hitting them hard. They were irate about trillions the government had signed IOUs for with no means of repayment--like some alcoholic unable to refuse a drink--but the problem had become a national catastrophe almost overnight. It was rather like a see-saw. As long as the two sides were balanced, any amount of weight could be loaded on, but let one side become lighter by the weight of one thin dime and *zing!* In the political sense of things, public tolerance was loading one side, government corruption the other.

Tolerance was fast disappearing. The electorate was mad as a wounded wolverine, demanding something be done, but what had started it all? What, indeed. Might its name be 'Mary?' She laughed all the way back to her car. Before she left the park she sat in her car for a few minutes, musing over Jack's discourse. It was more or less true, but she knew it wouldn't have been possible had the nation's troubles not already been near the point of boiling over, and had she not had the focus factor to call upon. She had simply applied a bit of extra flame, and it had worked better than even she thought it would. So much so that now they were all beginning to consider the possibility of "President Blake" rather than "King Blake". Which reminded her. She needed to get some research going on the subject of Executive Orders. It seemed as if it might be needed.

* * * *

Allan Merlson was livid. There was always a risk in working these things under the table, but the Goriana deal had exploded in his face without warning. The company's re-election campaign pledge was barely in his calculations when his private comphone vibrated. It was none other than Goriana's CEO, Abe Goldman. The message was short--and sour.

Someone had riled up the stockholders with a rumor that the company was engaging in illicit research, that it had stolen the intellectual property behind its prospective new product, BrainWave. Even though that was true, who'd have known enough to start the rumor? Receiving stolen goods was almost as bad as having pilfered them, but no one should have learned about Goriana having the microproteins in the first place, let alone discovered the eventual product name, so *someone*--Goldman emphasized the word with almost a roar--had broken *his* pact of secrecy. The damage was done, and heads would roll. Furthermore, BrainWave might never come out under any name now.

There'd be no excuse or explanation accepted, the campaign pledge was being recalled and there'd no longer be a director's board seat for the senator from Illinois. Nobody screwed Abe Goldman and got away with it, nobody!

Then Goldman had hung up, the asshole!

The trouble with idiots like him was that they just didn't trust anyone. Now the campaign fund was in serious financial trouble, unless that stuff Mecabrost dug up on Carl Crosley took *him* out of the race first. Crosley was staggering, but he wasn't down yet, and he had his own sources of dirty money. Only a couple of weeks to go now, the first of October, until the campaigns were in the last full swing, so something had to happen, and soon. There was still the Robinson possibility, of course. The incumbent president was as good as gone, but he could nominate his own successor if he decided to drop out. 'One-term Robinson' had a hefty war chest! Part of it would go to whomever got the nod.

The corner wastebasket was surrounded by crumpled paper wads, as usual. One more missed the target and bounced over against the office door. Who could have known about the Goriana deal? Certainly not the Blake bunch, so that left only the two sets of raiders, starting with Internal Security. Elaine Yeager? She was a crafty one all right. She might have sold the information to someone, but how would she have

known about Goriana? And how would she know how to approach the major stockholders without having the complete list?

Goriana's own espionage team had been inside Barrington, swiping the stuff. They'd be much more likely, since they might have access to stockholder records, but why undermine their own people? Was someone else paying them a cool fortune for sabotage? You couldn't trust anyone these days, not a single soul. Well, maybe one.

Mary Henderson was still a person of her word. Her advice about the energy vote hadn't really been that bad when she gave it, but things changed fast in the political scene. That was a given. She'd warned him the vote would cause a near-term reaction, and she'd been right. He shouldn't have let anger be his judge. In fact, he might even give her a call one of these days, especially if Robinson dropped out and named him as the nominee for president. She'd realize then she'd made a big mistake hanging around with that Blake bunch. She'd come to her senses.

He visualized her sitting there across from him. Mmmmm! Good thing his office door was closed.

Several minutes later, he lobbed another paper wad at the basket. It went in.

* * * *

One day in late September before the first press conference the revolutionary cabal managed--just barely--to squeeze in a meeting of the whole gang at the ranch. General Foreman participated via a teleconference apparatus set up by one of his enlisted technical experts, and the whole thing came together perfectly.

Mary opened the meeting. "This might be the last time we have a chance to discuss the direction we're going and where we think we'll wind up before events overwhelm us. Basically, we need to have options ready for three versions of our revolution: a real one, complete with guns and blood; a quiet one where we simply take over with military backing and begin issuing edicts, and a partial--where we take over the reins of government and force Congress to do what we want with a threat of a military takeover if they don't. Does that sum it up?"

"Succinctly," Nat Foreman answered. "At this moment the military is to the point of quiet discussions over their role after the elections. We've come a long way, because hardly anyone is bothering to try keeping the discussions secret and the political generals are afraid to take action for fear they won't be obeyed. So wherever we wind up, the military will be with us so long as we don't try making big, hairy things of ourselves and actually do make major change in the present corrupt setup."

"That's great, General," Murray said. "Frankly, I'd rather be president than dictator if I have to be anything, although a dictatorship might be simpler."

"Only in the short term, Murray," Mary corrected. "As dictator, you'd have resistance. As president, even with current restrictions on presidential power removed, you'd be much better off for the long term."

"What do you mean, removed?" Jack asked.

"Oh. Perhaps I should have begun by telling you about my latest project. I've been having some bright boys quietly research the limits of executive orders by the president. Know what? There are *no* constitutional limit to what a president can do with executive orders. He doesn't even have to declare martial law or a state of emergency, as we thought, and Congress *isn't* required to ratify anything he signs before it can be put into effect. Only the courts can declare his orders unconstitutional, and in the event he does declare martial law, even they are powerless for ninety days. He can do a lot in three months."

Murray gave her a thumbs-up sign. "That sounds, good, Mary. You know I'm not a real social type person, the kind who mixes well with other people. This is going to be hard enough for me as is without trying to do a lot of persuading if it turns out we still have a Congress."

"I suspect we'll have one of sorts, regardless, if for no other reason than to put a façade on your actions as Mister America. You know, I thought at first the Focus Factor would allow us to know exactly where we were going and exactly what we had to do to get there, but it's not working in quite that linear a fashion. I think what we all forgot is human nature and how a groundswell of opinion works once it gets rolling."

"Will it mess up any of our plans?" Wilma asked in her quiet voice.

"Probably not, at least not to an extent we need to worry about it. I'm about to get a handle on how the professional pols are reacting--or overreacting, I should say--to events. We'll do fine even if we don't know yet exactly how events will shape our final situation. What we need to agree on today is our solutions for the nation's ills. I know we've hashed a lot of it out already, but Murray's first news conference is tomorrow. We don't want any backtracking after that. Our goal is to show complete confidence in our programs and in the judgment of the American people to let us run things since the old crowd has screwed it up so badly."

Murray ran his fingers through his hair, noticing how shaggy it was getting. He didn't care. He smiled to himself. Let the people take him as he was; they were going to have to anyhow. "Why don't we run over our major programs one more, then relax. We've done all we can to this point except decide on a precipitating incident."

"Unless I miss my guess, we don't have to decide. A precipitating incident will happen all by itself," General Foreman said.

* * * *

The first news conference took place at the ranch. It was to be the defining moment, an event that would be replayed and analyzed to exhaustion if things went well. If not, the rest of the path would be uphill. Murray had flinched at the amount the security firm was charging, first to keep anyone from coming onto his property prematurely and later for providing guards to keep order and direct traffic for the actual event. Any other time the same protection might have cost a quarter as much, but everything had doubled and doubled again because this was a political event.

It was thought prudent for Jack and Wilma both to be absent from the scene, along with the two Pyrenees. The Pomeranians were living with Gloria Stimson, the neighbor who'd been so helpful after Connie's death. Murray didn't feel bad about that; the little dogs loved her. Franklin Hedgeworth would be the only other participant, since he'd use the occasion to announce Murray as the official Freedom Party presidential candidate. There'd be no actual Freedom Party convention. Ainsley Canton had very wisely withdrawn his name. He seemed greatly relieved, though as feisty as ever.

A lectern had been set up on Murray's patio right outside the front door, mostly for Hedgeworth's convenience since he'd read from a prepared text. Murray had no notes, nor had he allowed makeup for the cameras. The voters would see the man, not a clown. After two minutes for photographers, he motioned for Franklin to lead off. Hedgeworth used Mary's script. He'd practiced with her, and it showed. His sober, halting mannerisms were gone and in their place was a confident, upbeat and polished speaker with just the right gestures. His introduction was deliberately short, forty words ending with 'I give you Murray Blake.'

The patter of obligatory but subdued applause lasted only a few seconds, during which Hedgeworth sat

and took out a pad. His chair was well to one side, so he could see every face. Most of the twenty reporters were there simply to make sure they weren't scooped by their own rivals, however good or bad the new candidate turned out to be. It was just as important for them to tag Blake a loser as it was to discover someone newsworthy for a change, especially since the two major parties had become such a circus. However, no third party candidate was worth more than this one event, given the Freedom Party's paltry performances in the past.

Murray smiled, moved the lectern aside and stood in its place. Lecterns were just something to hide behind, and he didn't intend to hide. The journalists, all seated on padded folding chairs, had their comphones in 'cam mode' to record every sentence, gesture and nuance. A second array of microphones was up front, each running to its separate recorder.

"Thank you all for coming. I see nobody here is physically impaired in any way, so let's begin by standing up for our country, America." He waited; nobody moved. One woman hesitantly looked around her, finally getting to her feet after several awkward seconds of silence. "Thank you, Amy. Please be seated again. Folks, Mrs. Greer heard me say something just now that we all should take to heart. Think about it. Think about our country, what it once meant and what it can mean again. As for myself, I'm flattered that so many of our people think I might do a fair job of running the country if given the opportunity. I promise them two things. First, honesty. That word means more to me than any dictionary definition. I've lived by it all my life. My second promise is an opportunity for ordinary citizens to talk with me--hopefully every day--in a completely unscripted but televised setting. They'll be selected by lottery from those wishing consideration. I won't beat around the bush to avoid offending some particular group, nor will I phrase my thoughts to pander to anyone. Our citizens have had enough of that. If it needs saying, you'll hear my honest thoughts. If I can't or shouldn't say it for any reason, you'll hear me say 'no comment,' most likely with an apology. Further, there will be no 'town meeting' theatrics, no screening in advance to be sure the lottery choices are compatible with me or those around me. I'll leave that kind of dishonest shenanigans to my opponents."

Stark disbelief marked every face. They'd come to cast a mental ballot, yes or no, as they'd always done, by judging the first few words spoken. Those words had been a complete surprise. Stand up for America? It was a challenge, and it forced them to think for just a split second about the very nature of elections and what they meant. So *this* was the man latest polls showed as surging in popularity, one who was gaining on the other candidates at a ground-eating pace. Murray Blake had been completely unknown mere weeks earlier.

Murray continued. "Before beginning, I'd like to make a short statement. Everyone knows what a mess our country is in. Put quite simply, the United States is broke. Busted." Seeing signs of bewilderment at such a stark statement, he reiterated. "Do you understand? We don't have any money left. We've allowed our corrupt politicians to squander the wealth of America. There's no way to get it back, but we can put a stop to the way it happened and try to rebuild. I have no easy answers. Put simply, the only way to reverse course is to scrap most of the laws on our books and start over. Given a chance, that's what I intend to see happen and I will not compromise. Hear me? *I will not compromise!*"

He paused to let his words sink in. He could see he wasn't believed, but he would be soon. "Here are my ground rules, people. I've listed them in the handout you received, so if anyone gets out of line I won't accept excuses that you didn't know. I'm not here to tell you how wonderful I am. My opponents are very good at that sort of thing, thanks to years of practice, so I'll let them provide the entertainment while we talk about more serious business."

He paused for the ripple of chuckles and laughter. What had started as a tense moment gave way to mirth.

"Now, I'll accept no compound questions of the if-then or if-so type. Keep your questions simple, short and one dimensional so everyone in America who's listening can make sense of them. If I consider your question complicated to the point of being meaningless to the average person I'll reject it and go on to the next. There'll be no shouted or out of turn questions. If you start that, out you go." He pointed at a pair of burly, uniformed security guards standing on the sidelines.

"I picked you at random from all the applicants for this news conference, then had a computer program randomize the order in which I'll call on you. Please stand when you're called. Since I've never spoken to any of you, therefore can't possibly know you other than names and faces, I doubt anyone can accuse me of showing favoritism." He took a deep breath. "Okay, let's start." He leveled a finger at a young woman. "Ms. Crenleigh."

She stood, displaying a good figure and very carefully coiffed hair designed to get that windblown look, even though the air was still. "Mr. Blake, what do you attribute your sudden and rather astonishing popularity to? Was it--"

"Stop. Now Jenny, you heard me say no compound questions. Think about our typical American citizen watching this. We both want them to know exactly what was asked and what I answered, do we not? Try again."

Jennifer Crenleigh's eyes flared. Not only was she unaccustomed to being cut short, she'd been thrown off balance by a man she'd never met or seen somehow knowing her by sight. "All right, then, what factors do you think account for your sudden popularity?"

"One of my friends put my name out to the public as someone capable of running the country. The public took it from there, aided by you ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all." He pointed again. "Mr. Burk?"

"Who was that friend, Mr. Blake? Do we--"

"Stop. That, David, is what is meant by a compound question. The next journalist who does that will be passed over next time round. Now start over, please."

David Burk looked even more annoyed than his predecessor. "Can you tell me the name of the friend who generated all this publicity for you?"

"Certainly, but not at the present time." He perused his list, looked back up and pointed once more. "Janice Smitherman."

A tall, rangy woman rose. She glanced at a small notepad, evidently the question she had been going to ask. When she looked back up, it was with an air of uncertainty. "Was the decision to be the Freedom Party Candidate your own?"

"Mr. Hedgeworth invited me. I accepted." Next on the list was Stanley Jones, a short, tubby man known for his acerbic questions. This time Murray nodded, making eye contact. "How about you, Mr. Jones?"

"Mr. Blake ... ahhhh ... if by some remote chance you managed to be elected president ... ahhhh ... what's the first thing you'd do?"

"Take the oath of office."

The laughter was spontaneous. Murray joined with a chuckle of his own, then waited for quiet. "My apologies, Stanley. I'm prepared to answer specific questions, not generalities. However, I know what you meant. The first thing I'd do after taking office is fire a bunch of political appointees who don't know what in hell they're doing." He looked to the back row, pointing at a red-haired woman. "Ms. Ward?"

"Do you think you could balance the budget during your first term?"

"Emily, I can do it in the first year. I'll even tell you how. I won't allow the government to spend more money than it earns in taxes. That's going to mean eliminating a lot of government programs, which frankly we don't need, and certainly can't afford. The days of borrowing from our kids will be over. Mr. Johnson?"

"Sir, could you name a couple of government programs you would eliminate?"

"Certainly, Morris. The department of education will be one of the first to go. The federal government should never have been involved to begin with. If you don't believe me, just look at all the money poured into education over the years and we still haven't seen any improvement. In fact, I dare say government involvement has made it worse."

That answer created hubbub that lasted two minutes, with all sorts of cross conversations. Finally, things quieted. "Mr. Roberts?"

Charles Roberts was a correspondent for the New York Times. "What will be your policy for the Middle East?"

"The same as for any other area of the world. The Middle East will no longer get any special treatment. In short, we'll do business where America and her citizens are shown respect. Otherwise, they can go to hell in their own fashion." Mrs. Treffield?"

"What about our oil supplies if we do that?"

"America would have been self-sufficient in energy three decades ago if we'd kept politics out of our energy program. The technology has been there, but not the will. My policy will get us there within five years, and when we do we'll save enormous amounts of money. No more spending trillions of dollars fighting wars to secure our oil supplies. That era is over. We can spend one tenth as much to develop energy sources at home. Mr. Simmons?"

Simmons was apparently flustered by the answer. "Are you making that one of the planks in your party platform?"

"Planks, hell. That's a promise. Mr. Longman?"

Kenneth Longman was very black, with a short afro and thin goatee. "Mr. Blake, what do you think of affirmative action?"

"Not much. It's unfair to everyone. I'll assure any citizen an equal opportunity to succeed, nothing more, nothing less. Ms. Serense?"

The answer to Longman's question left him with mouth agape. Finally he snapped it closed, brow wrinkled. Perhaps he'd never heard so blunt a response, but then it was time to take off the kid gloves.

Gladys Serense seemed almost defensive when she stood, clamping her elbows in tight against her sides while she read a one-liner. "Mr. Blake, what's your opinion on abortion?"

"Abortion should not be an issue for the Federal Government. Personally, since I've never been pregnant and don't expect to be soon, I'll leave *opinions* on abortion to the ladies." Again, he got a laugh. "Ms. Passworth?"

"That wasn't much of an answer, Mr. Blake. Are you pro-choice or pro-life?"

"I answered that question concisely. If you don't understand plain English, I can't help you. Mr. Shopper?"

"Sir, your bio states that you lost your family to a drunken illegal immigrant. What is your policy on illegal immigration now?"

Murray drew a deep breath. It was a question bound to be asked. "Mr. Shopper, my policy on illegal immigration is the same as my policy on any other form of illegal activity. Stop the activity and punish the miscreants. In this case, send them back where they belong and if they do it again, they might find themselves drafted into a cadre whose task is to construct a barrier along the border that can't be casually crossed. And in case you're wondering, I do intend to make citizens of many of the ones who want to work in this country. They'll earn it, though, believe me." Ms. Hedron?"

"Mr. Blake, the Freedom Party has no representatives in congress. How will you manage to gain support for any new programs you introduce?"

"If every elected representative were performing his or her sworn duties honestly and sincerely, Francine, we might not need new programs. The American people have a constitutional right to recall whomever they wish, including me, and vote someone else into the post any time they wish. Nothing says they must wait until the next scheduled elections. It would be incongruous to think I could be elected president because of my values and vision, only to witness our electorate remaining totally blind to those in office who don't hold *any* values or vision. I will urge the American people to exercise their right of recall for any elected representative, senators, state governors and myself included. You may list that as a Freedom Party objective, ladies and gentlemen."

* * * *

Merlson stared at the television screen, shaking his head. He'd been invited to watch the Sunday afternoon press conference in Robinson's private White House quarters. The President had been pacing, sometimes stopping to glare. Merlson finally broke the silence.

"He's good, isn't he, Manny? Look at those fool reporters, grinning like baboons."

Blake had just finished describing the typical nationally-elected representative as one who spent ten minutes a day on the country's business and the remainder trading favors and lining his pockets any way he could. Did that include the president, one in the audience of reporters asked? Blake's reply: why don't you ask him?

The exchange extracted an oath from Robinson. He owed his soul to his political party, in turn owned by pressure groups. He'd given and taken so many favors in so many ways that everything he did had to take them all into consideration, no matter the fallout.

"Allan, he needn't worry about what he says, the way we do. With things as bad as they are we can't afford a maverick like him on the scene." Robinson turned amid his pacing. "This affects you as much as it does me. If you want to stay in office, find us a way to stop that bastard. And yes, he's damn good, the best I've ever seen for an amateur. Hell, he talks like he doesn't have his hand in a few pockets. What do you know about him?"

"We've been digging and still haven't found anything to use. Believe it or not, he's clean."

Robinson came over and leaned close, speaking low. "If we can't make something up, we'll have to hit him. You know it as well as I do. Find out who he's sleeping with and borrow her until after the elections. That'll quiet him down. Take her somewhere offshore, maybe to one of those abandoned oil platforms.

You're in with the oil boys."

"Not any more. Not for awhile, anyway. I voted for your energy bill, remember?"

"A shame. Then we'll just have to play hardball. Get in touch with the Tzellas and set something up. Let them decide what to do with her, and don't *you* suggest a thing. Maybe they'll send him back a hand or a finger or something. Those bumbling fools from the Garzo family blew it entirely. I *knew* they'd screw us, I just knew it. They vanished without a clue, and right now they're laughing their heads off. Who do we complain to?

"We never should have paid cash up front, Allan, but I thought they'd do the job without any problem. Get Blake off the radar screen until the elections, maybe one or two of his friends as well. I take the blame. It was my decision to use them instead of the more expensive route, and it got us nothing. We can trust the Tzella brothers to do whatever it takes with the girl, and they know they can trust us to look the other way. We've used them other times."

"You know what you're saying, of course. They might decide to kill her."

"Politics is dirty business, Allan. You know it as well as I do, and neither of us stands a chance of staying in the game the way things are going. I can *beat* Baldwin. I can't if Blake's in the picture. We take her out, and he'll crumble like wet toilet paper."

"Could Blake beat you otherwise, one on one?"

"Who knows? If this news conference is any indication, he just might. Like you said, Allan, he's clean. Too clean! And you know damn well he's not about to play by our rule book. That makes him dangerous as hell."

On the way to the redhead's apartment--elegantly furnished, thanks to Sam's bookkeeping wizardry--Merlson mused at how the underworld with its huge earnings in drugs and gambling had infiltrated government at every level, including the presidency. Everyone had been corrupted one way or another, or so it seemed. When someone like Blake came along, he didn't need to remember who he owed what, or what lies he'd told along the way. And then there was Mary Henderson, whose memory was phenomenal no matter who she was talking to. How much did she know? Good thing *she* was neutral. She might bring down three quarters of the politicians in D.C. if ... wait a minute! Who said she was *still* neutral? What if?...

The question grabbed him so intently he had to stop on the highway shoulder to think. He'd never questioned her integrity, but maybe he should have. How else would that bumpkin scientist have suddenly gotten so prominent in the political arena this close to the election? And that goddamned Freedom Party, never more than a very minor player on the national scene. How had it grown so fast? It had all started with that lightning trip of hers to Oklahoma months back. What if ... what if she was getting her information from ... from the underworld? From the very foundation of politics? What if *they* were behind Murray Blake, pulling strings to boost the guy everywhere they had clout? They could put someone brand new into power overnight, someone they'd already own, without paying a tenth the freight they were coughing up for the known players on both sides of the political coin. Who'd know? It would certainly explain the Garzo no-show, since that gang was as underworld as anyone could get, and it would explain the sudden Blake popularity. Everyone knew polls were rigged, and most knew who rigged them. Hey out there, if you like Murray Blake, raise a hand. Yeah, and who's counting how many of you are raising both hands? Or fake hands? In fact, who's counting in the first place? Who's supervising the counters?

* * * *

Murray smiled and raised both hands. "All right, everyone's had three questions so let's call it a day. Before you go, I'll make a prediction. There'll suddenly be a bunch of sleazy, untrue stories about me in the news as a direct result of this conference, despite the fact that each of you has already dug through my personal life trying to find some unworthy act I've committed. Before you publish trash you get from others or the Internet, I suggest you thoroughly check it out first. It won't be true; it will have been planted. Thank you for coming."

With that, he and Hedgeworth entered the house and closed the front door behind them.

* * * *

Merlson's departure from the White House had been made halfway through the news conference, mostly because of his planned evening with one of his interns, a nice little redhead he fancied. In the midst of his disturbing thoughts about Mary, he switched gears and pulled back onto the road, suddenly thinking of the redhead again. She'd be impatiently waiting for him, wearing the new playthings he'd bought her and hungry for a little wild fun. Couldn't keep a girl like that waiting for long, even if he *had* been with the President of the United States.

Jessica wasn't much into politics, just into politicians. She was expensive, but worth every penny.

Chapter Seventeen

A week after Murray's news conference, the Freedom Party published its goals for "The Second American Revolution" in major newspapers and on the internet. The delay was intentional for two reasons. First, it gave both major parties a chance to trash their new challenger all they wished, only to wipe egg off their faces later. Second, they could only imagine how Blake would run his campaign, since he'd already turned away two invitations to debate the major contenders and had held only that one news conference. His reticence was interpreted by both major party machines as timidity, weakness, lack of vision and poor organization, but that all changed in a single day.

He named his vice president and running mate, Col. Jack Williams (ret.) on that day, as well as his campaign chairman, who was in fact a woman, the extremely high profile political analyst and consultant Mary Henderson. And he outlined every one of his solutions to the country's major problems: immigration, taxes, energy, healthcare, Social Security, Middle East affairs, global power balance, homeland security, the national debt and domestic crime.

The published size of the Freedom Party's funding was already over thirty million and climbing at an unbelievable rate of millions a day. American school children were sending in donations, and organizations everywhere were taking up collections. American small businesses, quick to recognize the tremendous advantages of the new Blake tax program, were sending the maximum amounts allowable under the new campaign finance laws--the same laws so fundamentally flawed they actually boosted soft money contributions to the major party candidates. But the bulk of the contributions was coming from average citizens. The number of office staffers hired just to process mail and record donations shot from five at the beginning to hundreds within days and they still couldn't keep up.

And because Murray didn't intend to use anywhere near that amount in the closing days, it became available for anyone else. Mary supplied a startling new strategy. The latest changes in the campaign finance law didn't cover how donations could be used *after* they were legally accepted. They needn't be used for the party originally intended, or used at all, but they could be freely moved from party to party. Who'd have thought such a thing would ever happen?

The Freedom Party began shifting funds to *any* reasonable candidate running against incumbents in either major party, providing there was no Freedom Party candidate in that race. It made little difference who the incumbents were, or their party affiliations, because the electorate was clamoring for change. Throw the rascals out! Each gift was advertised openly, resulting in another huge wave of talk, attention and internet focus. Look at what the Freedom Party's doing! Now there's real patriotism, real belief in the election process. Who they're giving their money to? Take notice. And look! Plans to consolidate the whole medical care system under one umbrella, using the very efficient VA system as a guide. No more worry about insurance, coinsurance, drugs, inability to see a doctor; no more stack of forms ten feet high for having a cough treated. And taxes? Fair to everyone, and a promise to do it. Period. In fact, Blake doesn't play games. He'll do what he says. Neither of the major parties could compete with what he said he would absolutely do if elected, Congress or no Congress. The Second American Revolution! It played well to the electorate.

A day after the Blake announcements, the price of crude tumbled. Were the oil sheiks finally realizing they might be waking a giant with their endless price hikes, and that he'd turn their black gold into equally black muck? Energy independence, was that what the American candidate was saying? Oil would be worth nothing if he did that, and where would the Arab nations be then? This Blake didn't seem to realize he'd completely upset the status quo. He'd wreck everything.

The American people were getting the same message. Within twenty-four hours, Murray's popularity shot above the seventy percent mark as measured by the three leading polls. The most frenetic reaction was seen on the internet, where literally every newsgroup and all the major news outlets had one name in the forefront--Murray Blake. Those foolish enough to have accused Blake of timidity, weakness and lack of vision were ducking boomerangs while they ate cold, raw crow.

If that weren't enough, Freedom Party candidates were moving out of darkness into daylight faster than you could say ex-president Robinson! Governorships in the states of Connecticut and New York, Missouri, Oklahoma, California and Hawaii were no longer the one-horse races they'd been, as fully-qualified Freedom Party challengers were on the scene and riding the Murray Blake bandwagon. Where laws written by the major parties to prevent competition kept them from the ballot, huge write-in campaigns began. The challengers had always been there, election after election, but only as nobodies. After all, they had no hands in anyone's pockets.

The Second American Revolution was in the making, fueled by the voters who had at last had enough, and surprisingly, it was Blake's promise to accomplish his goals with or without Congress that had the most appeal. The people had finally tired of endless "solutions" propagated by congress which only made matters worse. Hucksters were appearing on street corners selling coffee mugs and T-shirts, pennant flags, patriotically colored Uncle Sam hats emblazoned with the slogan, umbrellas, bumper stickers and party horns. The internet was loaded with stuff, and not only the American sites--international ones! The Chinese, particularly, liked what they were hearing. Their energy needs were huge, and growing. Let the Americans solve the energy crisis and it would help them, too. All Europe was rooting for the new American champion and his world-class solutions as well, for American problems were world problems and energy was the foremost. When the first foreign campaign donations began showing up at the Freedom Party door, Murray issued a statement that was picked up by the news services and Internet: Foreign nations wishing to aid the Second American Revolution could do so by sending encouragement and praise in any form, but not money. Simply *stop* supporting the opposition. That was just as good.

The Robinson camp immediately called the statement an invitation to foreigners to meddle in American politics, yelling foul, only to have their electorate shrink by another two percent along with their coffers. China, particularly, understood that she could help elect Blake by not helping the opposition in any way. The Chinese canceled several million dollars in previously-promised illicit donations.

In early October, Mary breezed into party headquarters waving the latest poll results above her head. If voters held to their views, the elections would not only be an historical landslide, but a mandate. And not a fake 51% 'mandate,' either, but a real one. "This means we'll pretty much get our programs launched in our first hundred days without major problems," she crowed to the smiling staff. "Not only that, Treasury Secretary Ryder finally decided Murray Blake was a real candidate worth protecting, now that we're down to just a few weeks till election day. It should have been three months ago, but better late than never. Murray now travels with Secret Service escorts, flies a chartered jet if he decides to go anywhere, and has all security matters coordinated with law enforcement everywhere. The best part is that Ryder was pressured *not* to do it, by both parties, but he did it anyway. That's more than significant, it's dynamite! Meanwhile, we're on track and we stick to our game plan. One more news conference just two weeks prior to election day, one prime-time speech, no debates and no talk show appearances. We don't want to give the opposition a forum where they can bash us while millions are watching, and we certainly don't want to let them control the show. Right now they're doing just fine at playing 'Let's you and him fight.'"

An exuberant Franklin Hedgeworth shot his fist high in the air with her announcements. Sixty-five on his last birthday, he'd been energized by his party's success, putting in eighteen-hour days seven days a week. As Mary poured a cup of coffee, he made his own announcement while shaking a fistful of papers.

"We just got the flyers, Mary," he gloated, "thirty thousand of them. THE LAYMAN'S PROCESS FOR RECALL, step by step instructions for removing public officials from office before the expiration of their term. With our standings in the electorate right now, we can--"

"Hold it, Frank. We're riding high in the saddle, yes, but we don't *command* anything yet, and we haven't even removed Lance Jergins's muzzle. First we see what he can do to flush out the quail. He starts Monday."

"Oh, I know that, Mary. I was just saying we can start getting them ready to mail to major precincts on our list. California's gubernatorial recall is our model, but most folks in the flyover states don't really understand the process. This will help them, and we *do* want to be ready once Jergins starts his assault on the entrenched icons. He showed me his lists and at first I thought he was off the wall, but no! He's got the goods on national and state representatives and senators by the scores, governors and lieutenant governors, a few secretaries of state, six state attorneys general, at least forty state Supreme Court judges and so forth. When he starts spouting facts and figures, our public is going to assume there's not an honest one in the bunch. Where on earth did he get all that information, I wonder?"

"Don't ask, Franklin, don't ask. Let me assure you, it's all right there under everyone's nose, but they have to want to see it. Lance is good, and he's sharp. I just love the way he says something *might* be happening, or *might* have already happened. You have to know it did, just by the way he says it, but nobody can take him to court for airing an opinion. Reminds me of a Hollywood gossip columnist, only male. Our electorate has been too blind and forgiving for too long. My estimate is that it will take at least three months into Murray's first term before all the worms have crawled out of the woodwork. *That's* when we'll really want to stir the hornet's nest. Until then, Lance will concentrate only on the national office holders."

"Yes."

"Starting with the president."

"Yes, yes, yes." Hedgeworth was wringing his hands and chuckling fiendishly.

"I tell you, Frank, I smell the biggest landslide in American history around the corner. If we get that, Murray will be able to work wonders. We'll have millions of our citizens *demanding* his programs be enacted overnight. Nothing can happen that quickly, of course, and Congress will block him, but it'll be exactly that very public mania that plays into our hands. Did I tell you we just got endorsements from the American Medical Association and several of the biggest insurance companies?"

"No! Are you kidding?"

"That's only the start, Frank, just the start, but it means there's now half a million attorneys out to get us. Let's all be sure none of us will need one of that crowd soon."

* * * *

Merlson threw the TV remote with such force it shattered. How could this bunch of Oklahoma hicks be dominating the national scene, especially when their flaky scientist candidate for president wouldn't even appear on the same stage with people who'd dedicated their *lives* to public service? Professionals who knew the ways government worked, knew how to squeeze the most from the system for the benefit of the American people. The whole thing was a farce, a travesty of public trust. The Second American Revolution was nothing but hype and bullshit, but the public was buying it. What a stupid bunch of sheep!

Robinson was on his way out now, for sure. His performance rating was less than twenty percent in the

polls, slipping by the hour, and the boob had insisted on changing vice presidential candidates at such a time. *Don't you see, Allan, I had to do it. The people who count wanted to see something different. They wanted to know I was looking out for their interests, and you're rock solid. You can take his place and maybe it'll shake up the race. There's only three weeks to go and we had to do something drastic.* What had he been smoking? What made him think he could make such an announcement without at least asking for consent? Sure, he'd mentioned it a few times, but now he'd gone and done it, putting *him* in the same loser's seat. He'd finally made the opposition's choice of candidate look like a man of inspiration, not desperation. Hell, six months ago Lewis Baldwin was no more than a back seat senator, a bumbling public speaker who couldn't say three words in a row without inserting a long 'ahhhh' or 'errr' that made listeners cringe. He had *nothing* going for him, even if he was the best of the half-dozen contenders, but now the last of Robinson's behind-the-scenes support might disappear. They liked his current vice president. In fact, they owned him. It was crazy!

If that weren't bad enough, that muckraking reporter Lance Jergins was dropping bombshells all over the place. Several had landed dead center on the senior senator from Illinois--on *him*! Not only accurate details of his beet farmer subsidy misappropriations, but a long list of hidden 'transactions' with oil giants, pharmaceuticals, two unions, an association of Illinois nursing homes and two of the biggest hospital chains. Jergins was a snake. *Might* all these allegations be true? He never came out and said they were, just suggested they were, and the idiotic public was buying that, too! Where had he gotten that information? So far, he'd called down dozens of members of Congress, evenly divided between the two majors, each with a laundry list--he called it a Jergins list--of serious misuses of public trust, most of them serious enough for legal action if anyone had the balls. Malfeasance, nonfeasance, misdemeanors or felonies--it made no difference. The way he presented them, the average listener simply *knew* he had facts to support his accusations. The Freedom Party didn't have anyone in office anywhere, so naturally *they* were clean, but it wasn't going to stop there. Jergins claimed his list included over two hundred nationally elected officials and at least a thousand at state levels. He was promising to name them all over the next two weeks. No wonder he never went anywhere without a swarm of bodyguards.

At this rate, the Freedom Party would pull off a monstrous coup. Robinson had been right about one thing--they had to stop the Blake Express. This was serious; it meant the end of everything gained so far, plus possible criminal charges. The only way to stop Blake's momentum was to stop Blake himself--take him out of the picture for good--but the Tzellas were too damn expensive in spite of what Manny thought. Twenty million bucks for a rubout, and no way to hide a tenth of that amount even if the hit were made in lower Mesopotamia. And way too risky! Maybe with enough time and patience an 'accident' could be arranged, but there was no longer time for that. Ryder's Secret Service boys were already on the job protecting Blake almost as if the idiot was going to take all the marbles. What did that do? It told people he *was* a real contender. And ... oh Goddamnit, he *was*. More than that--he was a steamroller, an avalanche like nothing ever seen in American politics. Might as well admit it and quit living in the fool's paradise like he and every other incumbent had been doing for weeks and weeks. Shit!

The only way out of the mess now was to take the wind out of Blake's sails, just as Robinson said. Blake's new girlfriend, Wilma Timms, that so-called teen he'd thought was hooked up with the colonel, was out there at the Blake ranch, last report. He'd already lost a wife and son, so how would he cope with losing his new sweetie, too? Getting rid of her might chop him off at the knees. What if she were to suddenly disappear? What if her ransom were to be Blake's dropping out of the race? Kidnapping was another of the Tzella specialties--leave it to the Bulgarians to know such things--but they'd have to be *really* careful. Todor Tzella and his brothers knew how to turn the screws. They might even send Blake a body part or two as a special inducement. Manny was right about that, too. If Blake wanted the rest of his sweetie in one piece, he'd cave in. Now was the time, while Blake was in Washington for once and she was out there. Never could tell when he might fly her back to D.C., where snatching her would be a lot harder. But better move fast.

Merlson sat at his computer, opened an encrypted file and jotted down a phone number on a small pad. He made his phone conversation one-sided, slowly spelling out precisely what was to be done, then adding a note of urgency. The man on the other end knew exactly what was wanted, occasionally grunting 'da' under his breath. In his business it was best to listen, not talk.

"Call me at this number as soon as you have the girl. Your money will be deposited in the usual way. Memorize the number." The number was read off slowly and distinctly. "*Don't* have it on you, understand?" That produced the final 'da.'

Merlson flushed the small note paper with the number on it down the toilet. It was as much as done now. Another twenty-four hours and the nightmare might be over. Five million dollars down might be exorbitant, but hell, it was coming out of Robinson's war chest and it was a helluva lot better than twenty million. Another thing--there was something gut wrenching about a kidnap. It tore up the insides of whoever cared about the victim.

It would really rip Blake into shreds, and there wasn't one thing the Secret Service could do to stop it. He hoped.

* * * *

Murray greeted the four Secret Service agents with handshakes all around. Each man had already introduced himself when his protection began, but a few minutes were spent putting each name with the right face before they headed for the plane that waited on the tarmac. It was a habit ingrained from army days. He had had all four shift their positions while they were instructing him on various procedures, until he could unerringly match name and face without thinking about it.

He remembered the first introduction to his guardians. "We'll be your shadows, Mr. Blake," team leader Timothy Stone had explained. "Try to forget we're here, but be aware that at any time and for any reason we might shove you, get in front of you, even tackle you to knock you down. When you're a presidential contender, you're also a target for any kook who has some gripe or other. We're restrained from any political activity, or in giving you any advice or commentary in a political sense as long as we're assigned to you, but I speak for all of us, sir, in saying this is a welcome assignment." Three other heads had nodded with the words.

"It's about over with now, Mister Blake," Timothy said as they got themselves seated in the plane, "but all of us would be glad to continue this assignment."

"Thanks, guys, I appreciate that. At least the next two days should be a breeze where you're concerned. It'll be my only, and short, hiatus before the elections. Uh ... where will you hole up when I go back to the ranch?"

"We'll take care of ourselves, but several of us will be there on the premises at all times. It wouldn't hurt to go over the layout at the ranch again and whatever protection you might have there."

Murray chuckled but did so. It was something to pass the time on the plane. The descriptions included the possibility of several to a dozen apparent Mexican day laborers who might be seen from time to time, something he hadn't mentioned before. Stone nodded. "From your description and the word 'apparent', these are covert guards, am I right? I suggest you contact their authority and explain our attachment while we check the plane. Do you have a phone on you?"

"Right here, Tim." He patted the M.I. in his jacket as Stone and the other three headed for the back of the aircraft. No sense showing it and raising questions. Not yet, anyway.

* * * *

Ernie was surprised and delighted by Wilma's call. Not only was she relieved to hear that Murray had someone in his life again, but thrilled at Wilma's invitation for her and Norm to spend the weekend at the ranch while Murray was in Washington. It wasn't that far a drive, and the events surrounding Murray's candidacy had excited just about everyone at Barrington except Craddock. After the terrible, threatening visits from those people wanting to know all Murray's secrets, she and Norman had almost become hermits. This would be a breath of fresh air, providing the wind wasn't blowing dust again.

Neither of them had ever been to the Blake ranch, but they'd watched Murray's news conference from there on TV. The buildup to the conference itself showed the gate Murray called his 'golden gate', and the drive to the house. Then, of course, the front of the house and even an aerial view.

They'd drive out in Norman's car Friday night after work, have a candlelight dinner on the patio with Wilma and a neighbor, then stay over until the next day. There was plenty to see and talk about, and Wilma had something interesting she wanted to convey face to face--plus a big surprise she wouldn't go into over the phone.

Norman was elated, too. The invitation made him feel almost forgiven, even if Mr. Blake had already said as much several different ways. That awful midnight intrusion by those people in ski masks had changed him, although for the better. Never would he let anything like that happen to him again, never! He began carrying his gun wherever he went, something he knew Mr. Blake always did, and convinced Ernie to get one for herself. She agreed it was time, and now carried a Glock in her purse. They'd enrolled in courses at a local shooting range, where she'd discovered that she felt altogether different once she'd gotten over her timidity. She was not only a quick learner, but a pretty good shot.

The wind wasn't as cooperative as it might have been, once more blowing out of Kansas, but then the weather had been crazy anyway. It did mean there'd be no patio dinner outside, but who cared? They both wanted to hear all the news about Murray.

* * * *

Wilma met them at the same front door they'd seen in the TV broadcast. She introduced Gloria Stimson, and in no time conversation was flowing right along with the wine. Wilma was brimming with details about Murray's phenomenal climb in the polls and his plans for a major television speech. Now that he'd been given Secret Service protection he qualified for one free half-hour of airtime on his choice of network. He'd chosen a network that tried not to slant the news, given that the owners were in bed with a number of powerful Washington figures, and it had already been estimated that more than one hundred million viewers would be watching. That was almost as good as the Super Bowl.

Dessert was strawberry shortcake. Just as Wilma was carrying the dessert tray in from the kitchen, the Pyrenees let loose with ferocious barking out back. She smiled at the sound. Moose and Sugar must have heard Murray's car at the front gate, and now she could unveil her big surprise. Murray had decided to return early to be there with them.

She was about to start her 'Ta Daaaa' routine, when the barking abruptly stopped. It was like turning off the TV in the middle of a word.

And then there was silence.

"Oh, no!" She nearly dropped the shortcake tray on the table. All three guests chopped their chatter short as she raised a hand, listening. This time there'd been no yelps. General Foreman's men were never close enough to the house to rouse the two dogs, and with the wind blowing like stink ... well, as Jack

would say, something didn't compute. There was no sound other than the wind.

Norman half rose from his chair. "Wilma, what is it?"

"I ... don't ... know." Suddenly, she leaned forward and blew out the nearest candle. Norman and Gloria got the others, plunging the house into darkness. "We were attacked awhile back," Wilma whispered into the dark. "Moose and Sugar sounded the same way then, except--"

Norman cut her off. "Ernie, I'm getting our guns." He dropped to a crouch and scampered into the living room, where he'd tossed his light jacket earlier. Ernie's purse was there with the jacket. Gloria's was on the floor next to her chair.

In a moment Gloria was holding a silver Colt 45 that glinted even in the darkness. The sharp, metallic sound of a slide being pulled back and let go testified to her experience. "Too many of these damn illegals out here," she growled. "I never go out without my protection."

Wilma was already around the table and heading for the bedroom. "It may be nothing, but ... I'll be back in a second."

"I'll watch the kitchen," Gloria announced. "Ernie, you and Norman take the front room and guard the door. Stay low and hug the wall, left and right, but stagger your positions so you won't hit each other. You know how to use your guns, don't you?"

* * * *

Wilma didn't hear the reply. Her Glock, with a round already chambered, was in the top drawer of the bureau along with her comphone. The first attack at the ranch had been a close call. Murray, Jack and Nat Foreman agreed that from that day forward she'd call General Foreman's private number any time she sensed something was amiss. He'd immediately contact his security force and have them close in on the house from wherever they were. It was the only way Murray felt comfortable leaving her there alone, even with a couple of Secret Service agents in the background; otherwise she'd have to stay somewhere safer. Still, it had been Murray they were after that first time, not her. She was probably safer with him not there, but then the dogs would *never* have gone quiet after creating a ruckus. Something was up, and it wasn't good. Nobody was supposed to know he was coming for a visit, either, so it couldn't be that. She sensed motion behind her, probably Norman scurrying past the doorway on his way back to the dining room. At least *he'd* know how to handle himself.

Although the room was pitch black, she went directly to the bureau and retrieved the phone, switching it on and speaking Foreman's private number from memory. There was no need to actually talk to him, since his phone would announce the caller, but she waited anyway. If he answered, she'd tell him about the dogs.

Then she remembered the sliding doors. They opened onto the patio outside the master bedroom. Normally they were locked and the drapes drawn after dark, but the distraction of having company and changing outside dining plans at the last moment had made her forget. She turned, saw the distinct outline of both doors even in the inky darkness, and a shiver ran down her back!

She laid the Glock on the bed, shifted the phone to her left hand and reached for the locking bar leaning against the wall in the corner. It was gone! Puzzled, she turned back to the bed.

It was the wrong thing to do.

* * * *

The trio of cars approached the golden gate slowly, two agents in the lead car, two in the one trailing Murray's Beehive. Fifty feet from the gate, the lead car stopped so he could pull around it. He'd already contacted the gate with the code number sequence that shut off its announcement of visitors back at the house. That option was another of the gate's safety features, allowing a return to the dwelling unannounced in the event everyone was away from the property. He'd used it just once when he gave Connie a surprise birthday party, arriving with her friends from town. Any other time she liked knowing he was there, and coming up the drive.

He navigated the gate's security procedures and retina scan, then drove through and stopped the Beehive once again to let the original lead car pull ahead. Tim Stone was in that car's passenger seat. He briefly rolled the window down and waved an 'okay,' but he looked as if he had a question. Murray rolled his own window down.

"They do know we're coming?" Tim asked. "Everything looks satisfactory to you?"

"My girlfriend's invited a few guests for the occasion--she wouldn't say who. She knows I'm due in from Washington tonight, she just doesn't know quite when. My arrival's supposed to be a surprise."

It was true. Flights times set up by the Secret Service were known only by air traffic controllers at the destination, and even then only after the plane was airborne. In spite of that, she'd know he was coming up the drive because the dogs would hear the Beehive and erupt in a chorus. Which should have started by now. He listened, but there was no sound other than the incessant wind. Blowing in from Kansas again, no doubt, but even so they'd hear the unique whine. The wind was blowing the sound toward the dogs, actually helping.

They normally began barking before he was even up to the gate, but there was nothing. Suddenly his blood ran cold and he flicked the headlights twice. The lead car had already pulled away, but it stopped abruptly, backing up. Stone jumped out of his car even before it came to a complete stop and ran back.

"What is it, Mr. Blake?"

"Tim, something *is* wrong. If Wilma had house guests, my two Great Pyrenees would definitely be tied out back or running loose, not inside the house. They'd have heard my car and by now should be barking their heads off. If they were loose, they'd have been here by now."

"I don't hear anything." Tim's hand was already in motion; it came up with his gun. "Abandon your car here." His words were short, chopped. "Get in our car." He bared a wrist, touching something on what looked like a watch. In seconds the agents in the following car had parked it and were there on foot.

"Okay, Mr. Blake. You sit in the back between us. Talk us up to the house and fill in any information you haven't already told us. Is there any chance those covert guards could have taken the dogs somewhere?"

"No."

"Do these people ever show themselves?"

"No. Well ... yes, once. They interrupted a raid designed to ... to...."

"They thwarted a *raid*? Forget what it was about."

"Yeah."

"How did the raiders get into the property? Better yet, who alerted your covert group?"

"The raiders took out one of the guards, coming in through the back fences somewhere. He managed to alert the others before ... well, before he--"

"Before he bought it?"

"Yeah."

"Was there an inquiry? Police on the property? Anything like that?"

"No. It was sanitized and covered up."

"You should have mentioned this in Washington, Mr. Blake. Who *are* these guards?"

"Can't identify them. Let's say someone high up is looking after me."

"The someone high up lost one of his men in a covert operation, and there was no inquiry? Pretty high up, if you ask me. Your named vice president is ex-army. Say no more."

"The house is just over a rise up ahead. We should be able to see some sort of lights from here. The house is totally dark. That's not like Wilma."

"We walk from here. You're ex-army and so are we. Phalanx, you in the center. Ten feet separation front and side. Blake, you hang back out of the line of fire. Be ready to drop on the spot."

"Right."

* * * *

Norman paused, concentrating. Wilma had gone into the bedroom. She couldn't have made it back out in those few seconds; she had to be in there yet. His peripheral vision registered a large, dark shape outlined against the sliding doors, black against black, something that changed form even as he'd crabbed his own way past the room's doorway. Was that her? His night vision had sharpened in the time since the candles had been blown out, and he remembered hearing something he'd assumed was her a few seconds before that, but the blob had been larger than Wilma. A fast peek around the jamb at knee height confirmed the worst. The large shape was already outside the sliding panel and a second form was shoving the door back into place.

What was it the man at the shooting range said ... in the dark aim higher, or was it lower? Higher! That was it, but the shape was gone before his first round shattered the panel. The safety glass deflected both bullets enough to make them miss his target, but glass fragments ricocheted everywhere, some landing at his knees. A short, involuntary cry from the hallway behind him was Ernie, gasping in fright and shock. Without thinking, he charged into the room--but it was empty. Wilma had been taken!

He whipped back around the door jamb. "Down, everyone!" His bark was more a coarse whisper than a shout. Back he scrambled on hands and knees. Gloria was already gone from her chair. Where was Ernie?

Then there was a sudden flash of light in the kitchen, another shot and then a dull *thud* combined with the sound of a gun clattering across the kitchen floor.

Ernie!

* * * *

With the sounds of the first two gunshots, Murray froze. "Tim, that came from the house!"

They were two hundred feet away at the time, but the man behind him snagged his belt and held him from running forward, forcing him to drop right where he was. The three remaining agents started forward fast, crouching and weaving into the short brush either side of the drive.

Agent Price maintained his grip on the belt. "Over here, Mr. Blake, behind this brush. Make no noise and stay down."

"Your friends are in real danger, Andy."

"So are we. It couldn't be much darker out here, but whoever's doing the shooting is doing it at or inside the house."

Then they heard the third shot.

"Oh, my God. Wilma!"

* * * *

The sudden light in the kitchen had come from the side-by-side refrigerator's freezer door being snapped open. Gloria had taken her shot at the hooded form from her spot behind the door, immediately slamming it shut and ducking behind the appliance before her target fell. Three seconds later she was standing over the form with her gun two-fisted, arms straight. The assailant's weapon was somewhere behind her, in the dark.

"Is that you, Norman?"

"Yeah. Ernie's with me." He scooted forward and shoved the body with his foot while she kept her gun trained. There was no reaction.

"His gun's somewhere on the floor behind me," she said. "Find it."

"That can wait. The kitchen door must've been unlocked. Cover me." With that, he dashed to the wall, nearly slamming into it, then slid along until he could reach the deadbolt. "Yeah, never bolted." There was a metallic sound. "It is now. Come on back to the front room. It's the only other way in. You and Ernie cover that door and I'll watch the master bedroom, but I think they're gone. They got Wilma."

"Oh, no! Is she?..."

"They must have dragged her away. They never made a sound, and neither did she. Not a peep. They might have ... I mean...."

"Oh, my God!"

"I almost plugged one of them."

"And I just killed this one, I think. Maybe they'll be back. Quick, you and Ernie--"

"No, they won't." With that, the kitchen light went on and Wilma calmly walked back into the room. "It's over. We can turn on the rest of the lights now."

* * * *

Tim Stone scratched his head, trying to put the picture together. One man dead and two others lying side by side not far outside the master bedroom, with their wrists duct-taped behind their backs. They could breathe, but their mouths, eyes and heads were duct-taped to the point where hair would have been cut

away before it could be pulled off. One had a beard. That would have to be shaved off, too. It was quality duct tape. Must've been a full roll each.

The raiders had managed to get past the 'day laborers' and right up to the house, but somehow Blake's covert force had arrived in time to defuse the situation. How had they known unless they'd used infra-red equipment? How could they have moved in so fast, unless they were already aware their perimeter had been penetrated? What kind of training must they have possessed to move lightning fast, in dead silence, disarming two men in the dark without harming them, then melting into the night even as three armed Secret Service agents swept down on them with guns drawn?

There hadn't been that much time between the first two shots and Wilma's reappearance in the house, at most a few minutes. Her saviors said not one word, simply freed her and pushed her toward the shattered glass doors, motioning for her to get back inside quickly. There'd been four men, but others must have been there, too, including some on the opposite side of the house. Why hadn't they figured those three fast-moving shapes coming at them from the drive were others in the raider group? There were no answers, except the obvious one: they were special forces of some kind.

Stone spoke for his team once again. "We don't want to know who your coverts are, Mr. Blake, but I sure wish they were part of our organization. I'd suggest, sir, that you consider keeping Miss Timms with you all the time. This kidnapping attempt can only mean someone's desperate enough to want you out of the race."

"You don't think they meant to kill her?"

"No, sir. I believe they were sent to kidnap her and destroy your mental state, possibly with torture or even mutilation. Kidnapping is far more devastating a crime while it's being played out, and it always holds the possibility of murder. Miss Timms was *very* lucky. Obviously someone who hired these criminals feels you're a real threat, which may narrow the possibilities. Oklahoma City FBI agents will be here in under half an hour. They may shed some light."

"My guests?"

"Gloria Stimpson has nothing to fear, since her gun was registered and she has the proper permit to carry. She was clearly being attacked by an armed assailant. She'll have to make a statement, as will the others, but no one here has to worry except for our duct-taped criminals. I do think it best I arrange for deeper security out here for the rest of the night--from now on, actually--unless you and Miss Timms wish to move to safer surroundings in the city."

Wilma's bruises included a big one to her ego. She was more than a little irked that she'd made things too easy for her kidnappers. "I should've gone right back to the dining room," she wailed. "I should've locked all the doors. I should've bitten him or something. Oh ... they killed Moose and Sugar, didn't they?"

"Miss Timms," Stone soothed, "everything's always clearer in hindsight. I'm truly sorry about the dogs, but their deaths served a purpose. These men could easily have slit your throat or taken you somewhere and tortured you. They all had knives as well as guns. You were very lucky. We found this on the dead one...." He held up a St. Christopher medal. On the back were the initials TT. "Not another scrap of ID on any of them, but I have a hunch our FBI friends might just know who he was. They'll use that information on the remaining two."

The FBI didn't even need to remove the duct tape. The dead man was Todor Tzella, a Bulgarian and senior brother of the trio. All three had rap sheets two pages long. When the two younger Tzellas were told their big brother had been shot clean through the heart by a woman--in a pitch black room, yet--they wept. The refrigerator door trick wasn't mentioned, but Gloria revealed privately that she'd learned the

ploy from a movie called "Wait Until Dark."

The second immediate clue was found in Todor's left shoe, on a scrap of paper under the insole. It was a phone number--in area code 202, Washington, D.C.

Perhaps if Allan Merlson hadn't been so furious he'd have realized he was setting his own trap by using a listed phone. There was nothing secret about the number; it was only a matter of minutes before its owner was known. The next thing was to call the number, which FBI agent Dan Milligan did from Murray's desk phone, with recorder attached. Murray was allowed to listen, while the three women and Norman stayed in the kitchen with agent Price. It was midnight in Washington, but Merlson answered on the third ring anyway. He didn't even bother asking who was calling. Apparently the phone number was one he seldom used.

"Did you get her?"

"Da," Milligan said, making the short word guttural.

"No trouble?"

"Mmmm-nn."

"Good. I'll tell the president. We'll have instructions for you in the morning. Call this number at ten eastern time."

"Da."

When the Washington end hung up, those in the room stared at the phone with sober faces. Finally Tim Stone broke the silence. "Mr. Blake, I think it's safe to say you may be facing just one other candidate two weeks from now."

His comment was seconded by FBI Agent Milligan. "Yes sir. There's no way in hell this evidence can be politically smothered, and Robinson's party won't have time to field anyone else before the elections. I'm sending this recording to fourteen destinations, plus three of my own choosing. The device is sending ... now." He lifted the handset and set it into the recorder cradle, then tapped out a ten-digit number. When a tiny red light came on, he pushed a larger button. "This prevents anyone from altering or destroying the record, since they'd have to find and destroy or alter all the copies. At least three locations are unknown to anyone but me, and if anything happens to me there are directions to those three locations known to two trusted people.

"The phone number in Todor's shoe ties him to Merlson. The conversation just now directly ties Merlson to the attempted kidnap and implicates the president. Frankly, I'd hate to be either man right now, given the public mood."

Murray grinned, causing the agents to stare at him with puzzled expressions. As soon as he had some privacy, the others could be notified. They had not one, but two of the precipitating incidents they had been looking for; a kidnap attempt *and* the president and his new running mate behind it. On top of all that had gone before, nothing else would be needed to assure his complete victory. It was almost anti-climactic.

Now all he had to do was concentrate on how to take full advantage of the coming mandate.

Chapter Eighteen

President Blake stood gazing through the greenish, bulletproof glass of the Oval Office, not quite focusing on the grass of the south Lawn or the trees now fully leafed out, or even the Washington Monument in the distance. His thoughts were on the chaotic events of the past year and a half and, indirectly, on his speech giving a summary of all that had been accomplished so far and what still had to be done in the future. He was due to address the nation not quite four hours from now. He was tired, and the lines in his face had deepened. It was true what the Red Queen said--it did take all the running one could do just to keep in the same place.

Connie'd been the one who used that line, back in his courtship days. She loved Alice in Wonderland and had half of it memorized. Another of her favorites was 'Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop.' Those had been the king's words, but she used it for all sorts of situations. Brenda used the same phrase that day at the ranch. She and Connie had more quotes just like it; they'd zing them back and forth in a sort of game between them.

If only Connie hadn't driven to town that day, how different life would have been. None of what followed might ever have happened. The nation would have continued its downward spiral into chaos, taking more than three hundred million souls down with it. Even before that horrible end, some other nation would have plucked the prize of his country--probably China. They'd been the strongest.

There was still plenty of rocky ground ahead, yes, but his accomplishments in just a year and a half had changed the nation and the world. The income tax was history, at long last, and the new national sales tax with its giveback provision was already a model for other countries. In the days following his tumultuous election, he'd appointed Adam Burr, Foreman's 'boy genius' out of Wake Forest, to craft the program. To everyone's surprise, particularly his own, the giveback amount was larger than he had envisioned per each qualifying American citizen. *All* with a Social Security card would get the giveback, even young children. Burr predicted with almost pinpoint accuracy that the injection of cash into society's lower strata would produce an even greater burgeoning of the economy than the tax reductions of earlier administrations. At the same time it replaced one of the most repressive tax systems since the days of the Romans. Those below the poverty line were actually lifted above it, or nearly so thanks to the elimination of the tax code. Hell, it had been little more than a catalog of loopholes. Once they were gone, the economy had rebounded in ways even his boy genius hadn't predicted, and hadn't required any government coercion or direction at all. It was a setback for the ills of socialism and a giant step for the benefits of capitalism, since it was all based on man's preoccupation with his possessions. No longer were expensive luxuries considered shameful by those who couldn't afford them, because those very acquisitions had pumped twenty percent of their price back into some poor family's pockets. At least, that was the perception, and perceptions were the heart and soul of any economic program.

American businesses were thriving, the exact opposite of predictions by all the nay-sayers. Every penny spent on purchases was faithfully figured back into the true cost of goods and services, and pricing became more competitive than ever, this in spite of the chaos of switching tax systems in mid-year.

Young Americans were quick to understand exactly how the new system would improve the world they were about to inherit. One of the scariest parts about reaching adulthood was realizing there was an end to the sanctuary of childhood, or even that of college. No more sanctuaries or excuses. Join the work world and deal with the reality of working from January through June just to pay income taxes. Half a year! Older Americans already laboring under the burden were more compliant, or had it been numbness?

The Blake program ended that. Spend less and actually save more in the process for a change. Doctoral theses had already been written on the new system. America's educational institutions had given it a green light.

Illegal immigration was already down to a trickle, thanks to the 'body illegal' being assessed twenty percent of each constituent's living needs. Further, the outflow of dollars back to relatives in the country of origin had all but dried up. There were few extra dollars after living needs were met. On the other hand, a few weeks of education in English and American history, several sessions with previously naturalized INS processors and a short test were all it took to correct that situation for any illegal bold enough to come forward and work for citizenship under the amnesty program. No freebies. Amnesty was offered in return for the commitment to become a citizen.

Nearly a million of the fifteen million undocumented illegals had been naturalized, and the pace was upwards of one hundred thousand per month now that the ranks of the INS had been quadrupled. That figure was still climbing as temporary help was hired and trained. Murray could see the end of it, probably in another four or five years. America's new citizens *could* begin sending money home, because they'd now enter the ranks of those being boosted above the poverty line. Those who'd risen even further than that on the economic scale were actually helping to support the new system. They set the example for millions to follow.

Morale among the military services had skyrocketed with the appointment of General Nathaniel Foreman as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. For the first time in recent memory, political meddling in the operation of all service branches sank out of sight. The so-called political generals were isolated without their congressional support system, itself in disarray. Some saw the handwriting on the wall and retired. The rest were fired.

Microproteins, strangely, had *not* taken the public by storm as feared. A focusing session involved several days and required someone responsible in attendance at all times. It didn't classify as another type of 'social drug experience' that could be entered on a whim, nor did it much help the undisciplined. It wasn't a form of sexual enhancement, nor could it mean anything in terms of group therapy. It was an immensely personal thing, almost religious yet not even accepted in that respect. Organized crime might have tried it, but they'd been too successful for too long to think they needed to improve.

Pharmaceutical firms shunned development when the perceived commercial value went south. First, it wasn't patentable. Second, there were already ripoffs and counterfeits offered for sale on the web, with lots of ugly results, but even those over-hyped attempts had failed. There was also an element of natural revulsion against microproteins when rumors characterized the derivatives as actually coming from chimpanzees!

Nobody had ever traced the origin of those rumors to a certain closely knit group that included the discoverer.

Oil had continued dropping in price and was heading lower. The initial global panic had passed as the world reshuffled its energy priorities, with more oil going to China and developing countries. It had all hinged on three major provisions, executive orders from fledgling President Blake in his first hundred days. One-percent government loans were made available to all entrepreneurs who built hydrogen fueling stations patterned after pioneers who'd already led the way. With the loans came free government expertise, specifications, safety regulations and public educational tools. The loan period would run for twenty years. It was one of the few government programs helping private industry, but this one had been necessary.

Eight stations had been completed already, with some fifty in various stages of construction. Thousands

more were planned for completion as soon as the equipment was available. It had become a race to see who could boast of being first in any town or city. And depolymerization plants large and small were springing up everywhere, turning all kinds of waste, from turkey guts to old tires into usable oil.

And with the tax system off their backs, industry was spending billions of dollars on alternative energy developments, including wind and solar. Oil would never lose all its importance, but it would share the future with hydrogen and other fuels, and 'free' energy sources.

The third in the set of executive orders mandated such draconian gas mileage increases on all new cars that production was quickly shifting to vehicles designed to run on hydrogen fuel, or alternate energy hybrids achieving spectacular energy efficiency. American industry had always been capable of turning them out; it had simply required a kick in the pants and simplification of the tax system. At present only the Japanese were offering many such cars, but Detroit was going all out to fill the demand. Delirious technical recruiters flooded university campuses seeking the best and brightest engineers and graduate students to fill the sudden demand for talent. No war could've produced a greater demand in a shorter time. As a result, universities had seen an immense increase in enrollments for engineering and physics majors.

The initial outpouring of U.S. hydrogen technology developments had already stimulated most of the industrial world to double and redouble its own programs in that direction. No longer were innovative ideas for hydrogen fueled engines and hydrogen generation systems found solely on websites, promoted by frustrated backyard geniuses who'd built their own cars, pumping stations and generators. The world hadn't listened to them, but it was listening now to the United States government under new, farsighted leadership. Complete and accurate details of tested and fully engineered home generators, farm irrigation systems, large engines, industrial power plants and, of course, automobiles and trucks were released to the internet. More was to come as soon as it was verified. As a result, the three newest members of the global nuclear club indicated they would abandon nuclear pursuits in favor of unlimited hydrogen energy sources.

The prospect of having abundant energy had blunted all national fears. Hydrogen was by far the cheapest, most abundant of any source--the energy of the sun. Its combustion yielded water as a by-product, with no pollution or carbon dioxide.

The 'Oval Office Visit' initiative bore fruit from day one. When it became clear that he actually did mean what he'd promised, that real people from all walks of life could really spend a few minutes with the country's president, the response was a roar of approval. One of his first had been a ninety-year-old woman. Another a high school senior. Blue collar or white, farmer or truck driver, teacher or cello player--all took their experiences back to wondering crowds of friends and the envious. The interviews were spontaneous and televised, as advertised. They were mostly nice, polite, thoughtful and sometimes funny. Some were not so nice, but still polite. Each interview drew to an end with President Blake's simple request to his visitor to read the Constitution and try to understand it. The final televised scene was both president and visitor 'standing up for America.' One visitor in a wheelchair raised both his arms to meet the challenge.

Mary had been right. It was a great program, worth the small amount of time it took from his workday even though it occupied dozens and dozens of others behind the scenes.

And the pin-stripe lawyers, bless their pea-picking hearts! What a wailing, sobbing collection of chest-thumpers they'd turned out to be now that they could no longer build fortunes on mega-settlements in the healthcare industry! His executive order establishing a national system for vetting medical professionals by a college of their own peers led to restoration of patient-doctor relationships that had gone the way of the buggy whip. His suggested cap on malpractice claims to actual damages was

accepted by both the medical profession and insurers as fair and reasonable, given the requirement that physicians continually prove to others of their professions that they had refreshed their skills and knowledge, every two years.

The announcement was branded unconstitutional from the beginning, but the hue and cry had gone nowhere. Nothing in the Constitution addressed private agreements between adults, one way or the other. The executive order merely set up the system; the rest came about naturally--and eagerly. Lawyers were the big losers. They were up against a popular new president riding an awesome wave of public support, itself too powerful for any resistance. The electorate screamed their message to the heavens--no more government meddling in private affairs--and got what they screamed for.

Six months after his inauguration, the Doctor-Patient Waiver Program went into effect. It was working and working well. Cry all they wanted, the legal sharks who'd spent whole careers milking the medical profession were out looking for new cows. And he had done the same for other industries, so much so that class action lawsuits were almost a thing of the past.

Congress? About what he'd expected. With three dozen simultaneous recalls ongoing and others already successful, those as yet unscathed were running between vengeful and scared. At first they'd balked at everything he'd tried to do until, one month after taking his oath of office, he took their belligerence public. Honesty was what he'd promised the country. Honesty was what he'd delivered, reciting name after name of those who were against change of any kind. That newscast gave him his first true test. It was one thing to rule by decree, using executive orders that in effect made him a dictator. It was another to call down what amounted to all of congress.

Senate and House angrily adjourned the following day. They walked out!

He'd used his constitutional powers without a blink, declaring martial law and throwing resolution of the stalemate to the judiciary. For six weeks thereafter he'd been supreme legislator, judge and chief executive while senate and house chambers remained empty. For that same period, federal courts were closed.

During which time he wrote another ten executive orders.

During which time fourteen additional representatives and two senators were added to the recall lists by their furious constituencies. Not once in that period did the military actually have to be called upon. More to the point, no segment of any of the service branches ever became a cause for concern. They were behind him one hundred percent.

When he'd threatened to fill all the congressional vacancies with appointees, Congress reconvened and sought a truce, which he'd accepted. The judiciary had failed to intervene primarily because there was no precedent. Nothing said the president was prohibited from chiding those in congress by name. Further, nothing allowed elected representatives of the people to abandon their responsibilities and walk out, leaving the government without an acting body. The new president had not only acted reasonably, he'd demonstrated leadership as Commander in Chief, and the world had taken notice. Those who'd come to believe the American system of government was rigid, 'stuck in stupid' or similar sentiments came suddenly awake. For a change, the United States had someone in charge who knew how to corral wild horses, even tame them. The common knowledge that he had the military fully behind him, prepared to act at his direction if need be, might have gotten many of his goals accomplished, but who cared? He certainly didn't, and the citizenry was happy. They wanted action and he was giving it to them.

His popularity soared to new heights, against hardliners, against half the legal profession, against organized labor, against the teacher's unions, against all those who began to see the days of wine and

roses coming to a close. But as sweet as individual successes had been, not all had gone well. There had been a great hue and cry initially over his executive order declaring that churches and religions were no longer tax exempt, at any level of government, but he had been adamant. Fair was fair. Every other individual and institution was subject to the sales tax now, even charities. Eventually the uproar died down, though not entirely. What had helped was local governments finding such new sources of revenue in property taxes on churches, just like others paid. Until his executive order, hardly anyone had been aware of just how much property churches owned and had been avoiding taxes on. It was mind boggling.

Lance Jergins became the first casualty of the age of honesty, gunned down while getting into a New York City cab. He'd been safer on the battlefield. Franklin Hedgeworth's massive stroke had ended his career.

And then there was Wilma.

Even the thought of her brought a touch of pain. As much as he'd loved her, and she him, she'd made her tearful decision and nothing he said could change her mind. Perhaps it had been her microprotein sessions, but she'd seen her destiny diverging from his. Their paths had crossed at a magic moment, yes, but the destinations were vastly different. He belonged to the people now, whereas she wanted more than that. She was an avid reader and a thinker outside the box, as he loved to say, but facts were facts. She was twenty years younger and had her own goals and ambitions. She'd witnessed the cruelty of those first few months, the raid at the ranch and then her kidnapping attempt, the political backstabbing, constant danger, duplicity, accusations, threats. She'd tired of the constant Secret Service presence and the media with their ridiculous lies. Hardly anyone in Washington was who they appeared to be, though that was changing.

She'd felt the terrible pressures, loneliness, anxiety and fear, and it had all taken its toll. Washington was not for her. Politics was not her great love. She needed to continue her education, return to school or a college somewhere when she could afford it, get a degree in something or other. And Murray needed to be President Blake. They'd met each other on the way to somewhere else. It couldn't work out.

She'd told him a few months after he took the oath of office.

He continued staring quietly out the window, wondering about the future. Nothing had really gone easy, but he'd gotten it done. There was so much more, though. Jack was working harder than him, using his vice presidential status to reach out to minorities. His constant theme was an appeal to them to quit thinking like minorities, to think like American citizens; stop feeling sorry for themselves and get to work. Legalizing many of the street drugs and taxing them to pay for treatment centers killed much of the illegal income of the hard core unemployed, but there were jobs going begging. He'd already begun arranging for cheap transportation from inner cities to jobs outside, so those who wanted to leave the ranks of perennially unemployed could do so. If they'd had police records or convictions of any kind, those were sealed to all but the police. No more 'one strike and you're out.' The move would help them find jobs.

Murray turned away, glancing around the Oval Office. There'd been some dark moments, yes. His refusals to stay the executions of a good number of white collar criminals under the new felony punishment guidelines had been shocking at first, but the message had gotten through to those in the business of ruining reputations with identity theft and fraud. As Mary predicted, nothing else could have done as much to gain the confidence of minorities. They knew he meant what he'd said about zero favoritism, but so did some at the other ends of the social strata. Usurious credit card interest rates had suddenly plunged. Corporate executives and accountants suddenly decided honesty might be the safest policy.

One other act that helped his status enormously was reform of the judicial system. Not directly, but

through the power of executive orders that Congress eventually made into law. The reforms eliminated the way lawyers had been able to string out cases for years, and sometimes a decade or more, with technicalities. The huge backlog in federal courts was for all practical purposes being eliminated. It actually tickled the majority of citizens to see miscreants get swift trials and be bundled off to jail or prison when convicted. They were especially pleased to see this happen with the so-called white collar criminals. He had seen to it that crime was considered crime, with no distinctions.

The nation still had a long way to go, but it would get there now, even if it did take ten more years. And after his two terms were up he intended to retire and raise a couple of Great Pyrenees, even another pair of cuddly little Pomeranians. Maybe Jack would take over the country's leadership after that, or perhaps young Burr. He and his gang of financial geniuses had been almost indispensable. A long way to go, but by God how far they'd come! And it hadn't even required a revolution; just almost.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft female voice on the intercom. "Mr. President, Mary Henderson's waiting on the beige phone."

Sighing, he took one last lingering look at the Washington Monument against the evening sky and turned to the desk so many presidents before him had occupied. He sat, shutting his eyes for a moment to blink away something there, then took a deep breath and reached for the handset.

"Hi, Mary. All set for tonight?"

"Do you mean set for your speech, Darling, or what I have planned for later?"

"Tell me about the part that comes later. The speech can take care of itself."

The End

Darrell Bain

Darrell is the author of about two dozen books, in many genres, running the gamut from humor to mystery and science fiction to non-fiction and a few humorous works which are sort of fictional non-fiction, if that makes any sense. He has even written for children. For the last several years he has concentrated on humor and science fiction, both short fiction, non-fiction (sort of) and novels. He is currently writing the fourth novel in the series begun with **Medics Wild**.

Darrell served thirteen years in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, **Medics Wild**. Darrell has been writing off and on all his life but really got serious about it only after the advent of computers. He purchased his first one in 1989 and has been writing furiously ever since.

While Darrell was working as a lab manager at a hospital in Texas, he met his wife Betty. He trapped her under a mistletoe sprig and they were married a year later. Darrell and Betty own and operate a Christmas tree farm in East Texas which has become the subject and backdrop for many of his humorous stories and books.

Visit Darrell's web site: www.darrellbain.com/

Gerald Mills

Gerry spent most of his first sixteen years studying the piano, reading everything in print and ruining as many staged events as possible just by appearing in them. His promising career as a concert pianist came to an end when he found it involved hard work. Instead he entered Northeastern University. In return for his promise never to return there, he was handed a degree in electrical engineering. Misreading that as encouragement, he began a career in avionics engineering. When the engineering industry learned his true value, he wisely switched to sales, but divorce unhappily followed. He later met and married Lori, continued in sales, then launched his own business, selling it ten years later.

The high-speed automation and robotics industry kept him occupied until 1990, when he took a brief sabbatical with Lori, his bride of twenty-eight years by then. They set out on a forty-five foot ocean-sailing yacht, managing to terrorize most of the Canadian Maritimes and eastern seaboard for over a year before ending up in the Bahamas, where fortunes ran out. Not one to fret, he immediately wrote his first novel, **No Place for Gods**, (originally titled "Then is the Power") typing furiously to see how the story ended, while Lori plotted a course for Florida.

While in Florida, he worked in automation and learned to herd nine cats.

Shying away from the purely technical, he enjoys writing character-driven stories dealing with human shortcomings, a topic in which he has a great degree of personal expertise. His latest hobbies are gardening and remembering the cats' names. He no longer sails, and the world is a safer place for it.

There are those who believe he should give up writing for the same reason, but so far no one has come forward with an acceptable bribe.

Visit Gerry's Web site: www.gerryscorner.com/