

**Witness Protection
by Atk. Butterfly**

Sometimes you get a second chance

Hard Shell Word Factory

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Chapter 1

"Mommy, there's a naked man in my bedroom!" Cynthia exclaimed as she ran abruptly from her bedroom instead of getting into her bed for the night. She ran into the living room to clutch her mother for security.

Behind her, the naked man walked through the walls into the living room. As he passed by Cynthia's mother, he shrugged slightly and grinned weakly. Cynthia's mother nodded in acknowledgement.

"It's okay, Cynthia. He's only a Phaser doing his duty."

"A Phaser?" three-year old Cynthia asked.

"Yes, he's probably on his way to his patrol area to watch for criminals so they can be stopped or caught. He can't harm you or anyone, but he's very good to have around."

"Why is he naked?"

"Well, that's because his clothes can't be projected with him."

"How does he walk through walls?" Cynthia asked as she peeked around her mother to see the Phaser walk through the wall to leave the house.

"Well, that's because he's not really here. His body is somewhere else and all we're seeing is a projection. Most likely, someone projected him wrong tonight, so now he'll have to walk to reach his patrol area."

"How can he see us and us see him if he's not here?" Cynthia asked.

"Well, I'm not really sure how it works. All I know is that it was discovered when some scientists were trying to create a teleporter. They still haven't figured that part out yet, but now we have Phasers to protect us, so it wasn't all wasted effort."

Rob Stone One couldn't hear what was said around him while in phase, but he could see. More than a little experience on the job had made it possible for him and his other phases to read lips with enough understanding that he could testify in court as to what was said in most of his cases. He hadn't missed seeing what Cynthia said upon first seeing him as he materialized inside her bedroom a full two blocks away from his patrol area. Fortunately, it really didn't take much effort to move about while in a phased condition, even though his body in the phase chamber was in charge of three phases of him in three different locations. At the very moment he was in Cynthia's bedroom, he was also in a bar and in an alleyway near a college. Already, Rob Stone Three was in the process of preventing a rape since just his presence was enough to deter a criminal.

Criminals had already learned the hard way that there was no way to harm a Phaser, not that they hadn't tried just about every way imaginable. Some of them had even killed themselves by accident in the process of attempting to harm a Phaser. The only real way to stop a Phaser was to find the body, but that was protected in a high security installation. Consequently, crime statistics were down significantly, but not so much that Phasers weren't needed. After all, there were only a few people whose genetic structure was compatible with phasing. As well, there was always more territory to be patrolled than there were Phasers to go around. Still, Phasers were having an impact, particularly on those areas where crime rates had been embarrassingly high.

The petite young woman paused momentarily at seeing the naked man in the alleyway, then smiled when she realized that she could see through him slightly. He was certainly a real Phaser and not anyone to be feared. She watched him briefly as he gave her hand signals, then walked wide around a dark portion of the alley that the Phaser directed her to avoid. It was hardly necessary since the would-be rapist could also see the Phaser and was quietly leaving before he could be accused of anything.

Rob Stone Two stood inside the bar and watched the patrons enjoy themselves. Usually, Phase Control sent a woman to watch over bars in rowdy districts since the bar owners felt better about having a naked woman for the men to ogle over, especially if they didn't have any live entertainment on the premises. However, for tonight, Rob Stone Two was on duty to the disappointment of the male patrons. But it didn't matter whether it was him or a woman on duty, the bartender wasn't going to let anyone drink so much that a problem would develop whenever a Phaser was around.

Rob Stone One reached his patrol area in time to see the end of a robbery. The robber stopped in shock at seeing Rob Stone One's opaque naked body casually stroll up to the crime scene. Aware that he'd been seen, the robber weakly sat down on the curb. There the robber waited for the police, who he knew would catch him anyway since he knew that the Phaser would follow him until he was caught. As the robber saw the situation, it made better sense to just save the energy and take a lighter sentence instead of trying to escape.

Unexpectedly, Rob Stone felt his other selves flash from their locations back to his central body. He was about to ask what was going on, but there wasn't an opportunity.

"Is she still in trouble?"

"It's not him! He's clean!"

"What's going on? I was sitting on a robber and preventing a rape! Damn it! Who brought me back?" Rob demanded.

"Later, Rob! Megan's in trouble!"

"What kind of trouble?" Rob demanded.

No one answered. No one even moved to assist him in climbing out of his tank, not that he really needed anyone since he wasn't at all exhausted as he might normally be after a four-hour shift. Rob climbed from his tank by himself. When he reached the floor, he took his robe from a nearby hook and slipped it on, not that he had to. Quite a few of the operatives didn't even bother anymore with modesty

since they'd been in the Phaser program long enough to no longer care. After all, they were seen naked by the public nearly every day, so it really didn't matter any longer whether they were dressed while in the compound or not.

"Megan, hold in there! We've almost got all the men recalled!"

Rob strode over to one of the managers who appeared to be doing little more than observing. "Bill, what in blazes is going on? What kind of trouble is Megan in?"

"Megan's being raped. We're trying to find out who's responsible."

"Raped? How? I thought we were immune to contact with the public."

"You are, but apparently not to each other. She's being raped by another Phaser."

"Then recall Megan, damn it! It shouldn't take a genius to figure that out."

Bill said, "We can't. Security policy dictates that we do it this way."

"What?! I don't understand. Doesn't Megan count or are we just..."

"Shut up, Rob. Stay out of the way, too. We know what we're doing."

"It doesn't look like it to me."

Bill closed his eyes for a moment, then stared harshly at Rob before speaking in calmer tones. "Rob, if we pull Megan's projections back, we won't know who's responsible. Then he'll be free to strike again."

"That's if he's one of us. What if he isn't? I know we're supposed to be the only ones on the grid, but..."

"Yes, I know. By now, someone could have figured out how to build one of these themselves. Believe me, we've got someone checking all the power usage in the region just to be sure that no one else has established a grid. So far, results on that have been negative."

"Then you think he's on our grid? He's one of us?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, so just stay out of the way."

"There is another way to find out. Send me back in and direct one of my Phasers to where Megan is located."

"So you can do what? Stand there and watch? We haven't trained any of you in self-defense. From what Megan has told us so far, this guy knows how to fight. Otherwise, he wouldn't be on top of her Megan Two Phaser right now."

Rob suddenly exclaimed, "Oh god! If he's in Phase, he could be after her other Phasers as well!"

"We know that, Rob. Right now, she's got her other Phasers on the move and alert. She knows what he looks like even though all we have right now is her verbal description."

"Then send more than one of us to her. If there's enough of us, then we'll figure out how to kick his ass. At least more than just Megan will know what he looks like."

"You know the rules, Rob. You just came out of the tank. No more phasing for you until tomorrow."

"Screw the rules. I was out for only twenty minutes. You know as well as I that it's still safe to send me out again."

"No. Now leave the control room and let us handle this," Bill replied calmly.

Rob glared at Bill momentarily, then realized it would do no good. Even if Rob climbed back into the tank, there was no way for him to send himself unless several technicians sided with him. From the looks of the control room, there didn't appear to be any technicians around who weren't already busier than one-armed paper hangers.

Rob entered the dining hall that served as their conference room when it was necessary to talk to all the operatives and staff. One such occurrence was being called to session.

Bill stood quietly at the podium and waited until the doors closed. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Most of you haven't heard yet because we've kept this quiet until now. Megan is dead. Whoever assaulted her managed to catch up with all of her Phasers before we could do anything to help her."

"Why didn't you recall her Phasers then?" someone shouted over the cries and gasps among the operatives gathered in the dining hall.

Bill said, "It happened too suddenly for us to react. One moment, Megan was fine, the next thing we knew, her assailant had killed her Phasers. We guessed wrong in thinking that he'd rape all her Phasers if he caught up with them all. It didn't occur to us that he'd stalk her and then strike each of her Phasers at the same time."

Rob challenged, "You mean you were going to let Megan get raped three times if necessary before recalling her?"

Bill replied, "I know it sounds like that, but no. We weren't going to let Megan be raped three times. We left her out only because she assured us that her other Phasers were still secure. She knew the risks just as we did and we left the decision in her hands. Now we know better. Next time, we'll do a recall immediately."

"Next time?" someone shouted.

Bill said, "I know, I know. It sounds cold, but we still have a job to do. If we're not out there, criminals are going to strike a public that's ill-prepared to defend themselves. That's how much people depend upon you. I hope you're not saying that you won't remain on the job."

"I want to know why we weren't warned that we could be hurt out there!"

Bill said, "Okay, that's a fair question. I won't guarantee that you'll like this answer, but I do know why. First off, we never knew for certain that you could harm each other. There was some initial theorizing just before this program was put into place, but it was decided that testing was out of the question."

"Out of the question? You bastards!"

Bill said, "It was out of the question because we couldn't just ask someone to let someone else's Phaser attack and try to kill them just so we could find out if it was possible. Would you have volunteered for that?"

Bill scanned the crowd of operatives and staff with his eyes as he paused for a moment to let the message sink in that such testing couldn't be done. Not ethically or morally, at any rate.

"I think you just answered my question. Since we held only theories, it was decided then that it was wiser not to alarm anyone with what couldn't be proven, particularly in light of the fact that this program was set up so that none of you would even be in the same sector with another Phaser. We figured that this kind of situation would never come up so long as you were all kept apart. That's without mentioning that we don't have enough of you on hand to put out patrols in teams to begin with."

"Well, you better put us in teams from now on if this bastard is still out there. Did the police catch him yet?"

Bill answered, "No, the police haven't caught him yet. No one could lay a hand on him even though the police reached Megan's location and saw what he looks like. Believe me, I talked to some of the officers who responded to our call and they're torn up emotionally over this. I've never seen a look of helplessness like that on a cop. Some of you know what I'm talking about if you were with us when we first started five years ago when the first criminals thought they could just thumb their noses at us and just go on with hurting people or whatever criminal activity they were doing. They found out eventually that we might not be able to stop them physically then, but we can testify later. They can't stop us from identifying them and putting them in jail afterwards. That's where our power lies and why people love us. Sorry, poor choice of words there. I didn't mean to say it that way."

"Rape isn't love! You don't have to apologize," a woman operative said.

Rob asked, "What are you going to do about this bastard?"

Bill replied, "I've been expecting that question. For now, we're going to continue operations as usual with one adjustment. If any of you see another Phaser enter your sector, you're to announce it immediately. As soon as you do, we'll recall all your Phasers to the compound. Until we have you all trained in self-defense, we're not taking any chances. As well, we've already passed information about this incident to all the other cities using Phasers in case this guy decides to change locations. Other than that, we're not telling the public about this. We don't want the criminal element to find out that we're afraid of the same shadows that we've put them in fear of. By the way, in case any of you are curious, the

culprit wasn't one of you. Every man here is still clean and to be trusted. The man who killed Megan is definitely an outsider."

Rob felt a bit more confident when he left the compound with a week of self-defense classes to his credit. There had been lots of joking during the classes about belts and such despite the overall seriousness that each operative gave it. As well, the instructor had never had to teach a class of all nude students since the operatives had all attended their training naked so that they'd learn under the conditions that they might have to use their acquired knowledge within.

Rob liked the territories he had received for the evening. Each of his areas included several tall buildings that gave him the opportunity to get an elevated lookout point. His three Phasers each entered a different building where two were fortunate to have an elevator, even though he had to wait for someone to use it, while the third had to climb the stairs. The locked doors for gaining access were no problem since his Phasers each just walked through those. Though he would have liked to have had some binoculars or night vision scopes, those just weren't possible since he couldn't carry anything. Still, he felt confident that he could spot something going on with just the street lighting to guide him. As well, if he had to react, he could merely step off the building and drop to the surface since a fall couldn't harm him. More than once, Rob had heard some of the stories told by the senior operatives about how the police once responded to a Phaser leaping off a building and searched for over an hour to find a body before anyone told them what happened. Since then, leaping off buildings had been prohibited unless responding to intervene in a crime. Rob knew that in two cases, the robbers had actually fainted when they saw a naked body falling at them. In both cases, the robbers had later confessed that they thought they were going to be smashed by some suicide jumper. Though no one quite knew why falls didn't harm Phasers, Rob was aware that scientists were trying to figure out all the rules by investigating each phenomena as soon as it was encountered.

Of course, not all Phaser operatives were involved in fighting crime. There were a few on duty with the scientists who investigated the phenomena that Phasers discovered. There were also some involved in other scientific studies. Rob knew that one team was investigating volcanoes and that another was exploring shark-infested waters in the Caribbean. He had considered those jobs and a few others after finding out he was genetically compatible with phasing, but the claustrophobic confines of those other jobs hadn't enthused him. Admittedly, his current job hadn't enthused him for a day or two after Megan's death, particularly after he found out by accident that the death of her Phasers had caused her physical body to explode within the electrolytic tank. It wasn't exactly his idea of the nicest way to leave the living. His feelings of claustrophobia had almost returned when he reported to duty that night and climbed the steps to enter his glass electrolytic tank. Still, he had gone on with it, just as he had when he first saw someone phased during his operative training. Even though Rob had seen it hundreds of times, the act of phasing still awed him.

He could still remember seeing the first training film which wasn't anywhere near as impressive as seeing a phasing in person. Particularly, he and a lot of operatives had asked why they had to be naked. The training film answered that more than adequately. It was hard to forget seeing a person's body suddenly split into four and shoot off three images to their destinations before your very eyes. The film showing the test subject dressed convinced everyone that nude was better since the clothing had burst apart from the phasing and shattered the chair the test subject was sitting in. Rob knew that Bill still joked about pulling splinters out of his ass for a week after that incident. As well, Rob was glad that they had tanks now instead of the chair that served as a prototype.

Of course, there were plenty of benefits to make up for what he and the others gave up. One was that they had to live in a protected compound since they were essentially witnesses for more crimes than anyone cared to count, though someone probably did keep track of that for funding purposes. As having normal lives, theirs were normal--when compared to each other. They came to prefer remaining within the compound so they'd have someone to talk with who understood what they were going through.

However, there wasn't a feeling of being shut in since they each got to leave the compound for four hours each day when in phase. In a way, that worked out to twelve hours apiece since they each actually got to experience the equivalent of three lives in three separate places with something different happening at each even though they couldn't physically experience everything that went on around them. Still, they could see what was happening even if they couldn't hear or otherwise participate. Somehow, they had all managed to compensate for that. Plus not every night was a tour of duty for all of his Phasers.

Occasionally, the staff even arranged for him and others to be present solely for the purpose of attending a show somewhere. In fact, the staff had sometimes rigged up remote feeds from some shows so that they could hear part of what was happening around them when there were large numbers of people around. At least Rob couldn't complain about not getting to hear some live concerts he otherwise could not attend.

Upon reaching the heights, Rob scanned the streets intently. The chilly night air didn't affect him since it was a physical aspect that he was immune to. However, that would be different once he left the phasing room inside the compound after his tour ended. Then he'd be sure to wear his robe if only to keep warm.

"Looks quiet all around me," Rob said to the recorder that hovered over his physical body. His voice was one of the few physical abilities that he still controlled. The rest of his motor reflexes were devoted exclusively to controlling his Phased bodies. He still wasn't sure how he controlled three separate bodies simultaneously even though they were each doing something different. Someday, he hoped that the scientists would explain that to him how they managed that feat. "In fact, right now, all I can see are my other Phasers on rooftops not too far from me. Seems strange having all my Phasers so close for a change. Heck, I can even wave to myself."

Rob Stone Two glanced down suddenly in the middle of a wave. His experienced eyes picked out something unusual in the street below. For a moment, he was stunned. Then he realized that he was seeing the bastard who killed Megan. For a moment, he considered telling the recorder to sound the alarm so he could be recalled. Then he realized that he'd never have the opportunity again to face the bastard and do something. Before he knew it, Rob Stone Two was plummeting down the side of the six-story building. His Phaser body still moved with the same velocity that gravity would give his normal body. Rob didn't know why, but he didn't care either so long as he reached the bastard in time.

The impact was harder than Rob Stone Two expected. Then again, he hadn't expected to land on the killer Phaser whose body Rob Two's velocity had almost crushed before coming to a stop. Rob Two kicked twice at the killer's body before he realized that the killer was dead. Only then did it occur to him that the other killer Phasers might be somewhere nearby. Immediately, Rob's other Phasers scanned intently for signs of the other killers, but they weren't to be seen. He was still searching when he felt himself recalled suddenly.

"What's the big idea?" Rob demanded.

Bill spat out, "No one told you to become a vigilante. Damn it, we just got a police report that a Phaser in your sector leaped off a building and landed on someone. It didn't take much brain power for me to figure out what you just did seeing as it was your sector."

"Yeah? Well, you can't expect us to just sit around and let the bastard kill again."

"Maybe not, but---Well, let's just say you got lucky tonight. Now the killer is going to know to watch the roofs. However, you just screwed up our entire plan for getting him."

"Plan? What plan?"

"Not that you needed to know, but we have a special squad standing by that we were going to phase in to surround the bastard once someone told us he'd been spotted so we could get all his Phasers. Now it's too late. You just told the guy to get out by going after just one of his Phasers before the others had been spotted."

"Doesn't it count that I got one?"

"I don't know yet. For all you know, he'll still phase into four the next time whether you killed one Phaser or not. However, I guess that didn't occur to you."

"Uh, no, it didn't. I'm sorry."

"Yeah? Well, sorry or not, you're grounded for the next two days. I want you to think about this and if you've got any questions, then come see me. Don't bother telling me that you did it for Megan. I already know that. We're all doing our part for Megan. Believe me, we're not going to forget her, even though it seems at times that we are."

"I never said that you were forgetting Megan."

"Fine. By the way, you might be interested in learning that we know now because of you how to spot when this guy is phased."

"You did? How? What did I do that helped?"

"It was in your report the night that Megan was killed about one of your Phasers being off target. Well, another of our Phasers was off target tonight and we suspected right then that Megan's killer was on the prowl. Of course, it would have been nice if you had reported where you saw this guy the moment you spotted him so we could triangulate on his likely entrance point and figure out where his other Phasers were as well as his physical body."

"But I screwed up and lost that for you, huh?"

"I couldn't have put it better, Rob. Now head for the compound. I'll see you on duty in a couple of days unless you have some questions before then."

Rob sat in front of a TV the following night in what was a deserted compound since most of the other operatives were on duty. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to watch Monday night television. After a few moments, he deliberately muted the volume so that the night would seem more normal. He was used to hearing quiet, except for the actual routine noise of the Phase Control room. Even that was quiet, except when compared to how it was on the beat. Of course, that was for operating necessity so anything he or another operative said could be picked up by their voice-activated recorders. Only the night Megan died had been different. That night had been like the difference between a rock concert and being on a boat all alone on a quiet lake.

Paying attention to the TV wasn't at all difficult even though Rob found himself trying to read lips as usual. Consequently, he didn't notice the sudden intrusion until the intruder stepped into Rob's field of vision. Only then did Rob become aware of the Phaser in the room.

"You!" Rob exclaimed as he started to stand before remembering that neither he nor the Phaser could harm each other in their current states. Rob settled back in his chair and watched the killer Phaser who then raised his hand to his throat and made a slicing movement.

"Oh, so you figure I'm the one who hit you? Well, you're right. I'll be back on duty in two more days. We can finish it then, so come and get me then if you're man enough," Rob replied before remembering that the killer couldn't hear. Rob quickly found a pen and paper and wrote his reply for the killer to read, then sat back in his chair and resumed watching TV.

The killer soon left after brandishing a one-fingered salute to Rob who was doing his best to ignore the killer and watch TV. For a moment, Rob thought nothing more of the incident. Then he remembered that he had an obligation to tell Bill. If nothing else, Rob realized that if anyone else had seen the killer, then he'd better tell Bill fast before he found himself grounded permanently.

Rob wondered why the same district was assigned to him as before, not that he minded since he had tall buildings to watch from. As well, he kept up a steady talk with the recorder above his physical body just so Bill or anyone else wouldn't think he was trying to dodge them or act like a hotshot. After all, Rob had learned some more in his self-defense training that convinced him that he'd been more than just lucky in his one fight with the killer Phaser. He knew now that he was up against an opponent more skilled than himself. As a result, Rob not only kept a careful watch on the streets below, he also kept a careful watch on himself. At least, he knew he could fully trust himself to watch out for himself. Then again, he knew he had no one to blame but himself if anyone managed to creep up on him.

An hour passed without any results. Rob maintained his position on the rooftops as it reduced the opportunities for the killer to strike. As well, he tried not to think about the consequences if the killer could return in three Phasers and he found himself trying to fight all three at once. Rob knew for certain that his inexperience would be telling as his brain probably wouldn't be up to countering hostile moves for three bodies simultaneously. Especially not against a skilled opponent.

Through the bricks, visages appeared. None of the Rob Stones noticed as each was once more scanning the streets below. They were still scanning the streets using the pale lamplight when bodies went hurtling past them.

"What the hell? Something just went past me on all three buildings!" Rob's physical body responded.

Bill said, "Join in if you want. Keep him occupied until we triangulate on his body."

For a moment, Rob hesitated. Then his three Phasers each dropped from their buildings to join in the fighting in the streets below. "Joining in!"

"Get 'em, Tiger!" Bill said while other managers talked with their own operatives who were now in action against the killer.

Rob Stone One landed behind the killer. For a moment, he was still stunned to see that the killer was facing not one, but two other Phaser operatives from his compound. Rob was thankful that he recognized them as such or he might have been reluctant to join in. Without a word, Rob Stone One launched himself at the killer's back with a basic kick.

Rob Stone Two landed between the killer and two more operatives. He felt a punch drive him down. Before it could become a killing blow, the other operatives were swarming over the killer.

Rob Stone Three landed to the side of the fight in time to see another operative walk through a brick wall to surround the killer. Before he could reach the fight, two of the three operatives were tackling the killer who was proving himself to be as good in a fight as Rob feared. As best Rob could tell, the killer was laughing and even enjoying the fight. There seemed to be no fear in the man's face.

Rob Stone One faced the killer who wheeled around after the kick connected. However, before the killer could react, one of the other operatives landed a telling blow to the killer's skull. The killer went down in a tangle of unresponsive arms and legs.

The killer shrugged off the operatives and made his way to stand over Rob Stone Two. The killer lifted his leg to stomp down on Rob when one of the operatives grabbed the killer from behind. Sensing an opportunity, Rob Stone Two kicked up between the killer's legs with more results than he expected.

Rob Stone Three felt the punch that cracked several of his ribs. Despite that, he limped back into the fray as best he could if only because he felt he couldn't let his buddies down. Perhaps his presence helped them since the killer once more turned his attention to Rob instead of them. Even as Rob Stone Three was going down from another punch, two of the operatives were driving elbows into the killer's head and back. Before Rob Stone Three fell to the ground, the third operative was placing a well-timed kick into the killer's middle.

Then it was suddenly all over as the killers disappeared from the fights. Just as quickly, the operatives and all three Rob Stones disappeared as they were recalled.

"Oh god, I hurt!" Rob remarked as his Phasers became part of him once more.

"Relax, Rob. The doctor will tend to you as soon as we help you out of the tank," Bill said.

"Sorry, Bill, but he got away. We tried," Rob said sadly.

"He didn't get away. You gave us enough time to find his home base. We got him, so it's all over now."

"You got him? Are you sure?" Rob asked between two more groans.

"Yes, we got him. Caught right in his homemade tank. The police put cuffs on him before they shut off his timer to recall him."

"I'm glad to hear that. I don't want to think about facing him again."

"Maybe not him, but someone else. After all, if he could figure out the system, then so can others eventually. Soon as you're on your feet, we'll get you some more self-defense training unless you'd rather explore a volcano or maybe the Amazon River for some scientists."

"Uh, I'll take the training. By the way, how'd you get those other people to me so fast? I know I was the bait, but I didn't think you could triangulate that fast."

"We didn't triangulate until we saw him. I had operatives watching you from within the walls before you even reached the rooftops. They told me the instant they spotted him entering from inside the buildings. I banked on him not thinking that we knew more than how to watch criminals from the open."

Rob grimaced at the thought of someone standing perfectly still inside a brick wall for over an hour. He knew that he couldn't have managed that. It made him glad that he was the bait.

Chapter 2

"Rob, want to pull a day shift?" Bill asked after entering the compound's recreation hall where off-duty witness operatives sometimes spent their time before or after a shift. Rob was off duty because he had to be available since Megan's killer, Ralph Ramsey, was coming up to trial.

"Sure I won't be needed today to testify?"

"I'm certain. The prosecutor has already indicated that you'll be our last witness since part of our case hinges on Ramsey's threat and attack on you. Besides, I wouldn't have asked unless I had something for you to do out there."

"Figures. What's the situation?"

"Bomb threat at the courthouse."

"The same one the trial is at?"

Bill grinned widely.

Rob said, "I don't guess you need to say anything more. A bomb, huh? Sounds interesting. Probably a hoax since the real bombers know we can approach anything they make with total immunity."

"Be careful anyway. There's always a chance that Ramsey passed on his knowledge to others about how to build a Phase Shifter."

"First sign of another Phaser, I'll have myself recalled."

The three Robs walked up to the bomb and stared at the package for a moment. There was no need to talk among themselves verbally since they were all controlled by the same mind even though it had been learned during the incident with Ramsey that Phasers could actually talk to and hear each other though not with the general public. Each of the Robs moved to a different side of the package and approached carefully, not that it was necessary for their welfare. It was more for the benefit of a police cameraman who was recording the sequence of events for later study. The three Robs moved to prone positions on the ground first. Then each shoved his face into the package for an inside look.

Rob spoke into the microphone above his tank, "It's a real bomb. No doubt about that."

That message was relayed to the police in his own words. The three Robs were unaware of the heightened activity by the police to move bystanders farther back for their safety upon hearing his relayed words.

"Klutzy job, too. No booby-traps that I can see. Give me a moment to move one of my Phasers under the bomb for another angle."

One of Rob's Phasers sank into the cement after turning over onto his back. Then he swam forward with a backstroke as if the cement was as fluid as water. He stopped almost directly under the bomb.

"Bad news, guys. There's a spring-loaded trigger on the bottom that will send her off if anyone picks this baby up. You'll have to put a plate beneath it first before you try to move it. I think your best bet is to cut into the top and disarm it on site. At any rate, it's safe enough to do that and get your own view of the

bomb provided you don't lift the package. Guess I better move out of the way now."

Rob knew his presence could distract the bomb handlers or even partly block their view. After all, he was opaque, not invisible. Two heavily-padded officers approached the bomb with deep respect as they now knew for certain that it was live. Both nodded to the three Robs with respect as they passed each other.

Even though Rob knew that his presence wasn't needed any longer, he remained on site with his three Phasers in case the officers needed another internal look at the bomb from an angle they couldn't manage on their own. As well, Rob was well trained in observing and was scanning the crowd in case the bomber was among the bystanders, though there were very few onlookers considering the seriousness of the situation. Most of the people remaining were those with official duties to perform in the courthouse. Otherwise, they would have left like other people had upon learning that it was a real bomb being dealt with.

Rob accepted the thumbs up and waves from the officers after they placed the defused bomb in the carrier and then acknowledged the Rob's assistance. His three Robs each returned the thumbs up signals, then disappeared from sight.

Chapter 3

"Mr. Carboni, your witness."

"Mr. Bill Wheeler, exactly how does Phasing work? By that, I mean, how does the equipment function?"

Bill answered, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not at liberty to divulge how the equipment works on account of the National Security Act covering Phasing."

"Seems to me that it doesn't matter since you're not the only ones with the ability to phase. However, I can understand that you're bound by the law even though it's now moot. However, should I need that information, I can probably get that from Mr. Ramsey."

The prosecutor sat up straight in his chair at hearing he might get a chance to question the defendant.

"Would you characterize the process as safe? Were all the proper safeguards in place on the night that Megan Fox died?"

"I would and those were," Bill answered.

"Yet one of your operatives was killed on the night in question while sitting in her tank, I believe."

"I can't answer anything having to do with describing the equipment," Bill stated cautiously.

"All right, let me put it this way. She was physically in the compound, was she not?"

"Her body was within the compound," Bill stated.

"Yes, I think we're all agreed on that. What I fail to see is how the defendant can be charged with murder when his body was at another location. He didn't shoot her. He didn't stab her. He didn't poison her. He didn't even so much as touch her. So, how can you state that he's at fault for her death?"

"He was seen raping her on the night in question by no less than four police officers, one of whom videotaped the sordid incident."

Carboni said, "Your Honor, I move to strike the characterization of the incident as sordid."

"So moved. Clerk will strike the word and the jury will disregard it."

"I find it hard to believe that Megan was being raped as you just stated, particularly in front of four police officers. Surely she could have indicated to them that she was in trouble if the intercourse wasn't consensual."

"Megan reported she was being raped."

Carboni said, "Move to strike as hearsay."

"So moved. Clerk is to remove the statement and jury is instructed to disregard the answer."

"Unfortunately, her recorded report was lost, I understand. At any rate, the autopsy didn't reveal even the slightest trace of sexual contact. I find it very difficult to believe that someone had intercourse without the benefit of protection and left not even the slightest trace."

Bill said, "You just said that it was either rape or consensual. That ought to be enough proof that something happened even without proof of the actual intercourse."

"So I did, but what I'm getting to is that there was no sign of forced entry on Ms. Fox's body. That usually accompanies rape, I understand. Since there was no sign of forcible entry, it stands to reason that the situation was more likely consensual."

The District Attorney said, "Objection, argumentative."

"Sustained."

"I heard her state that she was being raped," Bill replied slowly with his anger just barely under control.

"Objection, hearsay," Carboni said.

The judge replied, "Overruled under the Fresh Complaint Doctrine."

"Yet you didn't recall her as I understand you call the procedure of returning Phasers to the body?"

"She wanted to stick with the perpetrator so that he could be identified for prosecution. Megan voluntarily remained in jeopardy so we could identify Mr. Ramsey and get a fix on his location."

"Did you get a fix on his location?"

"No, we didn't."

"You didn't? Am I to understand that you had the entire time she was being raped to locate Mr. Ramsey and couldn't, yet you managed the same feat later in considerably less time than the alleged rape consumed?"

"We were poised and ready to triangulate upon Mr. Ramsey the second time."

"Meaning that you weren't ready the first time?"

"We were ready, but we were eliminating suspects first."

"You don't trust your own operatives?"

"We trust them, but we had to be certain first that it wasn't anyone within our ranks who might have suffered some kind of an emotional or mental breakdown."

"So you could what? Give them a bye?"

"Objection, prejudicial and without foundation."

"Overruled. Witness may answer."

Bill exclaimed, "Not on your life! We do not have a policy of permitting our personnel to willingly break the law and get away with it."

"Except for yourself, of course."

"Say what?" Bill asked.

"Well, isn't it a well known fact that you broke a number of laws five years ago just before the Witness Protection Project was initiated?"

"Not intentionally. Besides, I didn't ask for any favors when those charges were dropped even though they were only misdemeanors for public nudity. Neither I nor any of the other researchers was aware when I first tested the Phase device that I'd be shot out in three directions without any clothes. What happened was clearly unintended and apologized for. As well, I was quite willing to pay any fines assessed against me had the matter gone to court."

"Yes, I'll grant that much is true since it's on public record. Regardless, you did break some laws. Am I correct?"

"Your Honor, I object. The Witness is not on trial here," the prosecutor stated.

"Overruled, goes to credibility. Mr. Carboni, please go on with your questioning and try to keep it relevant."

"I'm leading to that, Your Honor. Now, Mr. Wheeler, since when did it become Witness Protection policy to interfere with private enterprise?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand the question," Bill replied.

"I'm speaking about your interference with Mr. Ramsey's business as a Phase Shifter. Are you not aware that you were interfering with Mr. Ramsey's business?"

Bill exclaimed, "What! We did no such thing. If anything, he was illegally operating a Phase Shift

device."

Jessica Morrissey, the District Attorney, asked, "Side bar, your Honor?"

The judge said, "Yes, side bar. I want to know where this is leading."

Jessica said, "I don't see what Ramsey's business conduct has to do with this trial."

Carboni said, "Your Honor, people might think that Mr. Ramsey was conducting an illegal business, but he wasn't. While the National Security Act might prohibit discussion by knowledgeable staff members of Phase Shifting research and their operatives, it doesn't prevent someone from building their own device if they're capable, provided it's not exported and the knowledge isn't revealed to foreign powers. As well, this other dimension that Witness Corps operatives travel within has already been designated by law as owned by the public just as the airwaves are. Since the National Security Act forgot to include licensing, Mr. Ramsey broke no laws by building and using his Phase Shift device for the purpose of establishing a business enterprise. Had such provisions been included, then he might be guilty of phasing without a license, but nothing more."

The judge said, "I don't see the relevance here. Unless you can explain how this matters, then I'm not going to allow this line of questioning even though the witness introduced the concept."

Carboni asked, "Why did your operatives attack Mr. Ramsey on the night that the police stormed into his home and arrested him."

Bill answered, "Mr. Ramsey was prevented from assaulting Rob Stone, one of our Witness operatives. At the time that Mr. Ramsey was interdicted, his three Phasers were in the process of sneaking up behind Mr. Stone's three Phasers. As well, Mr. Ramsey had visited Mr. Stone within the secured compound and given him a threat."

"You know this for a fact?"

"I know this for a fact because Mr. Stone reported the incident immediately to me as his supervisor after it occurred. Both he and I recorded his report."

"So, Mr. Stone heard a threat from Mr. Ramsey?"

"No, he didn't hear a threat. It was given in sign language."

"He didn't see a threat, either. My client tells me that he cut the conversation off with that signal and left upon realizing that the two of them couldn't talk."

Carboni said, "Officer Hassad, you videotaped the incident on the night that Ms. Fox died?"

"I did. I can testify that the tape there, is the one I recorded. It has my initials on it. I've seen it since that night and can state that it hasn't been tampered with."

"That's good to know. However, the quality isn't very good. Why is that?"

"That's accounted for by the conditions. It was at night, you know."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. So, both the victim and the defendant were quite opaque, even to the camera?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell for certain whether she's struggling or just enjoying herself."

"No."

"Can you describe the slap at the end just before her Phaser disappeared as anything more than a slap and not a killing blow to the skull?"

"Uh, no."

Carboni asked, "So, Ms. Tatum, you saw the defendant and the victim at what's been labeled as the second scene of the crime?"

"Well, I saw two naked people. Only for a moment, mind you, because they disappeared just like Phasers can do."

"Then you assumed then that they were Phasers because they disappeared?"

"Wouldn't you if two naked people you could see through disappeared suddenly in front of you?"

"I guess I might. Can you describe the two people you saw? You did look at their faces, didn't you?"

"I only caught a glimpse of their faces. It was so unusual seeing two Phasers at the same time, particularly a man and a woman. I'm very certain of their genders."

"Then I take it you were glancing at more than their faces?" Carboni asked.

"Well, yes, I was."

"Can you state for a fact then that the man you saw was Mr. Ramsey? Even though it was dark?"

"Well, he was naked then, if he was the man. I'm really not sure without seeing all of him. Like you said, it was dark. I really didn't see the two of them for more than a moment or two. Only long enough to see him suddenly strike her."

"So, what you're saying is that you saw that he was a man and then you noticed that he was striking her. When exactly did you look at his face if he was only there for a moment?"

"Um, I'm not sure when I saw his face."

"Your Honor, we ask for some special consideration in hearing the next witness," the Prosecutor stated.

"What kind of special consideration?"

"We'd like to call the next witness in as a Phaser since she's currently partly occupied in saving the life of a toddler who's trapped in an abandoned well that collapsed."

Carboni rose quickly to his feet. "Objection! Side bar, your Honor?"

The judge nodded.

Carboni said, "I can't very well cross-examine a witness who's not really here and is performing heroics to the detriment of my client's case. Just the mere mention of why she's not physically present will sway the jury into accepting her testimony against my client, leaving me with no way of proving otherwise. It's bad enough that one of the prosecution's witnesses was heroically involved here yesterday in a bomb incident without adding more heroics to the prosecution's cause. As well, my client has the right to physically confront his accusers."

The judge stated, "Counsel is correct in that Mr. Ramsey has a right to confront his accusers. Request denied. Have your witness make arrangements to get here as quickly as possible or reschedule her appearance among your other witnesses."

Rob stumbled out of the courthouse after testifying. Rob wasn't at all sure if what some of the defense had suggested wasn't the truth instead of what Rob had experienced in dealing with Ramsey. He simply hadn't expected the defense to be so ruthless in attacking him or his word, not after his previous trial experiences as an uninvolved Witness who had helped police apprehend more than just a few criminals. Rob realized that his involvement in the case had severely changed the rules as they applied to him. Consequently, he could understand why people were so reluctant to testify against criminals before the Witness Protection Project was initiated after Phase Shifting became possible.

"The defense calls Mr. Ralph Ramsey to the stand."

Bill asked, "How'd it go, Rob?"

"Ramsey's defense lawyer made me sound like I already had my mind made up to hate Ramsey. Personally, I didn't do well, but I still think they'll convict Ramsey."

"Mr. Carboni, you may address your closing arguments to the jury now."

The defense attorney stood from the defense table, then approached the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we appreciate you taking your time to hear this case, wrongful though it may be. After all, Mr. Ramsey was totally unaware that he was even wanted as a criminal. Otherwise, he might have reacted as a wanted criminal might behave in trying to escape the law. However, he knew that what took place was only within their thoughts. It was only within their thoughts, even though their thoughts were visible."

Because of that, he continued to go about his business unaware that the woman he had consensual intercourse with had died the same night in what can only be described as an unfortunate coincidence and freak accident as we are certain that the Witness Corps didn't have anything to do with her death, either. Regardless, the accident doesn't give them the right to bring charges in what can only be described as a voodoo murder charge since my client wasn't physically even in the same vicinity as the decedent, let alone the same room."

"You've heard testimony from my client who can only be described as being as much an expert on dimensional projection as anyone within the Witness Corps since he built his own dimensional projector without any input from their personnel. You heard Mr. Ramsey state that dimensional projection is best compared to projecting a movie on a viewing screen with the added ability for the movie to watch back at you while you're watching it. You also heard my client state that one of his Phasers was later killed in what he believes could have only been an accident, yet he suffered no ill consequences then or afterwards. Clearly, this goes to show only that what was seen by witnesses outside the Witness Corps compound was very much like watching a movie since only some thoughts from the dimensional participants were actually involved. You or I could take a gun and shoot holes in a villain on the screen just as he's being dispatched in a movie and someone seeing that might believe that you or I was responsible. Yet the fact remains that the movie can be shown again and again with the villain dying over and over each time regardless."

"Keeping all this in mind along with the sworn testimony, you have to remember that there's one person you didn't get to hear from. The victim herself. Had she not died in an accident, we might have very well learned that she wasn't raped which is what this trial would then have been about. We might have found out then that she reacted no more differently than would the President of the United States upon being discovered to be human when she reported being raped to her supervisor at the compound. Remember, too, that the victim allegedly gave only a partial description of Mr. Ramsey despite the closeness of their intimacy. Surely, she must have recognized that he wasn't a member of the Witness Corps and could have told her supervisor that rather than putting everyone through their paces as they tried to follow procedures. Put yourself in the same intimate closeness and decide whether or not a fuller description was possible. Surely, she should have been capable of at least stating that he wasn't a member of the Witness Corps. Then, too, put yourself in her position and think of the consequences of being discovered in an intimate situation when she was supposed to be working for the benefit of the public. For now, we have only Mr. Ramsey's word that the interlude was consensual and the testimony of the officers along with the brief videotape one of them took that showed no violence in use until the point at which, Mr. Ramsey stated, he learned that she was claiming rape to protect her job. No, it wasn't right for his Phasers to slap her Phasers, but you have to remember that the slaps were projected thoughts expressing his feelings of betrayal and we don't prosecute or convict people for what they think. At least, not in this country. Not yet, anyway, so keep that in mind when you think of this case. Would you want someone convicting you on what you might think today?"

Chapter 4

"Yes, Bill, you wanted to see me?" Rob asked as he stopped by Bill's office.

"Bad news, Rob. I wanted you to hear this from me and not on the TV. They acquitted Ramsey."

"They what?!"

"I'm sorry, but his lawyer caused enough doubt in the mind of more than one juror to get an acquittal after your testimony that you felt you killed one of Ramsey's Phasers only to see him with three the next time you encountered each other as Phasers. They didn't have much choice after that but to conclude that Megan's death was the result of an unfortunate coincidence. However, that's not the worst of it. Ramsey's getting his equipment back and he'll be free to phase whenever he likes. The judge even went so far to say that Ramsey had the same rights to use the public dimension as we have even though he'll be using it for profit. About the only good thing I can report is that Congress took notice of this and they're

drafting a bill to regulate private shifters in light of the technology getting loose from government control. I know this for a fact because I received a call from our office in Washington."

"He'll be free to walk around? Because of me?" Rob exclaimed weakly.

"Very free, but not because of you. At least the judge did enjoin him from messing with our operations since we're an official public service. Conversely, however, we can't make him leave if he's somewhere first. If that happens, we'll have to suffer his presence. Because of this, we're doubling our recruitment efforts so we can put out our operatives in pairs from now on. Also, I'm moving your assignment to training and public relations. I don't want a confrontation between the two of you until we're ready to deal with Mr. Ramsey on our terms."

"You can't do that to me! Please?"

"I have to because the judge warned me to keep the two of you separated. Either I change your duty assignment for the time being or I dismiss you. I felt it would be better to give you another assignment instead of condemning you back to slinging hash since you're a good Witness."

"So, what are my duties going to be?"

"Training and public relations as I just stated. You'll appear with me in phase and demonstrate some things while I talk to our prospects. Afterwards, you'll help train those who join. What with Ramsey stating after the trial ended that he's going to offer affordable phase trips to anyone who's compatible, we're not going to enjoy the monopoly we once had. People won't have to join up if they want to phase. After all, we do ask a lot of the people who work with us, since they often have to view gruesome crime scenes while being unable to do anything more than witness. It takes dedicated people for that and a lot of people still just don't want to become involved. Now Ramsey's making it possible for them to experience the good part of our job without getting dirty."

"When's our first, uh, pitch? Isn't that what you call it?"

"Tomorrow at City College for a small group."

"How small?"

"Four women and three men."

"More than were in the group when I was approached."

"Excuse me, I'd like to get into the conference room," the woman in the wheelchair said.

The people around her required a few moments before they realized they were in the way and moved to allow her access. She wheeled herself into the room after carefully voicing instructions to her motorized wheelchair.

Bill stared numbly for a moment at the sight of the woman whose presence he hadn't expected. It took him a moment longer to realize that she was the last of the students he was expecting for his spiel about volunteering for the Witness Corps.

"Ms. Brooks?" he asked after rechecking his list.

"Yes, I'm Cheryl Brooks."

"In that case, I guess I better get started. I'm sure you all know now that you're here because you've tested positive for phase compatibility. Obviously, I'm here to offer most of you the opportunity to join the Witness Corps, though just about everyone calls us Phasers."

"Only most of us?" Cheryl asked.

Bill hesitated, then said, "Okay, I'll be blunt about it, Ms. Brooks. The dimension we travel in doesn't have any wheelchair access. Regardless of what the laws state, there's no way possible for us to even create access for you since we can't even so much as carry a book to read in our spare time when we phase, let alone tools. I'd really rather not waste your time when you could be using it to study and accomplish something with your life."

"What if my disability doesn't affect me as a Phaser? I followed the recent trial where you all admitted that you didn't even know that you could phase into the same places and talk to each other. Won't you even give me a chance? I mean, being a Witness only requires that I be able to observe. Can't you just

phase me to some rooftop and let me stare down at people if we find that I can't move about? After all, my eyes, voice, and mind aren't handicapped and those are all that are needed to testify. It's not like I wouldn't be earning my way. All I'm asking for is a fair chance to try out for the team."

Bill rubbed the side of his face for a moment as he rethought his position. The silence seemed long before he answered slowly and deliberately. "Usually, I have to face other problems such as the required nudity issue. Perhaps I reacted too quickly in attempting to convince you not to remain here, especially since I'm trying to get as many volunteers as possible. I guess I'm not used to arguing against, since I'm almost always trying to convince people to join us, particularly since we don't run any background checks until after the compatibility tests are completed. Otherwise, we might have had twice as many people attending here today. Let me change part of what I just said. It isn't a case of perhaps. It's a case of I definitely reacted too quickly without thinking, especially in light of the fact that only one out of every five to ten-thousand people is compatible with phasing. Ms. Brooks, you'll get your chance to at least try out for the team. If you can't cut it, then you'll be dismissed just like anyone else who fails. Otherwise, I'll carry you to the tank myself, if need be. I hope you'll accept my apology for my hasty, ill-prepared response to you."

"That's all I wanted to hear. I don't see any need to apologize further."

"Okay, here's Rob, our demonstrator for today. He's here so that you can see first hand some of the things you'll have to face since some of those things require extra willpower just to do. After all, it's against human nature to thrust your face into a fire," Bill said as he demonstrated by lighting a torch and holding it where Rob could walk over and actually thrust his head into the flame. "Of course, you'll have to remember never to try this when you're not in phase. Then we strongly recommend against this sort of action. As well, you'll have to be prepared to do a number of other things that are also not recommended when out of phase such as stepping off tall buildings or walking in front of moving vehicles. If you decide to join, we'll teach you what we can so you'll be prepared not only for these kinds of things, but other things that are far more insidious and dangerous, regardless of whether you're in phase or not."

"What could be more dangerous than sticking your face into a fire?" one of the students asked.

Bill said, "Sticking your face in front of a defense attorney. That's what. Consequently, we'll teach you how to remain calm under most circumstances including a trial. On the other hand, the perks aren't at all bad considering what you have to go through. In fact, the perks begin the moment you join even though you'll be in training. First of all, you'll live in the secluded comfort of our secure Witness Protection Corps compound. Inside the compound, we've gathered as many luxuries for your use as possible. We have an Olympic-sized swimming pool with diving boards, on-site medical facilities, a dining hall that's always open and ready to prepare whatever you want when you want it, large-screen color television sets, stereos, the latest movies and videos, access to just about every radio and television station in the world, and more. What's more, we only ask you to work six hours a day which includes four hours in phase and two in classroom training and then pay you for a full day on top of all this."

"Do you have a retirement program?"

Bill answered, "Yes, though no one's been with us long enough to use it. After all, phasing is only five years old. However, some of our older operatives have already indicated that working for us is better than retiring which is another option. We actually have the right to work past normal retirement age despite being government workers because our specialty is so, well, unique in nature."

"What are some of the disadvantages of working for you?"

Bill said, "I wouldn't feel right if I didn't state those openly and frankly to you. One of our disadvantages is that we have to live inside the compound for our own protection. The only times that any of us leave are for recruitment, public relations, and testifying at trials. Then we have to be heavily guarded against reprisals. However, please remember that you can leave the compound daily while on duty when you phase. Not only that, but you'll have the ability to go to three separate places simultaneously and experience different things at the same time."

"I thought Phasers couldn't hear what's happening around them. If that's true, then how can they experience anything? Sure, they can watch, but watching alone in silence is pretty boring."

Bill said, "Among our perks is one particular favor we like to pull regularly without warning. Once we find out what you like in music and shows, we'll occasionally send one of your Phasers to take in a live performance and relay the sound from the site to the compound so that your body can hear what your Phaser is seeing. In other words, you'll sometimes be enjoying something you like even while you're working. I've done it and it's a blast."

"Being confined is the only disadvantage?"

Bill shook his head. "Sadly, it's not. There's one other thing that's definitely a downer, though sometimes it's an upper. What I'm referring to is the actual job itself. It's not easy watching a woman be raped or a man get killed by a criminal. Even beatings where the victim survives aren't easy to watch since we can't do anything while it's happening except observe. However, that's also where our real power lies. We can prevent many crimes from taking place simply with our presence since criminals know that we can attach ourselves to them and hang on like bulldogs. They know the police will definitely capture them since we're directing the police to their locations from within our compound. They know they haven't a chance in the world to escape, so most criminals don't commit crimes in our presence. Still, there are crimes of passion and emotional unrest that nothing can prevent. In those cases, it's our duty to observe and report what took place so that the perpetrator can later be brought to justice or treated medically, if that's possible and indicated by what you observed. You'll find yourself doing your best to observe through tears with only your hands to wipe those away. The only comfort you'll have for your own emotional stability is the knowledge that you're doing something to prevent a reoccurrence by watching, no matter how gory or sick the situation becomes in front of you. It takes a strong-minded, compassionate person to be a good Witness. Not many people have the courage to face what we've all seen and then report on it as well as testify later in court so that it can be ended."

"Besides that, there's the actions of the criminal as well that can become more than frustrating. On one occasion, I had a criminal drop his pants and defecate before scooping up a handful to sling at me. Others have pulled out their dicks and pissed at us. They've mouthed out threats and obscene remarks just to taunt us."

"Seems to me that they're pretty stupid then. Besides, we're free to give them back the same," a student remarked.

Bill stated, "Not really. You have to remember that our job is to observe, not to further incite the criminal into more acts of violence. No matter how badly the criminal behaves, you'll have to just stand there and observe. You can't flip the finger back at him no matter how badly you want to make him aware that he's screwed. Believe me, I know just how it feels. You'll never experience helplessness as much as when you're a Phaser and you have to watch a victim be murdered by a criminal who forces his victim over to stare at you with her dying eyes. All you can do is nod in acknowledgement to the victim if they're capable of asking you to see that the criminal fries for killing them."

"You had someone ask that of you?"

"I did. Another time, a dying woman tried to kiss me even as the killer twisted the knife in her back. Being a Witness is the hardest job you'll ever attempt in your life. What's worse is that we expect you to do it more than once. We expect you to do your best and go back out to do it again so that we can stop as much crime as possible. In return, we'll do our best to support you in every way possible, both on and off duty. You'll have access to counselors and all of us will be there as your friends, no matter what time of day or night it happens to be. Now I'd like to move on to nicer things to talk about. Just as a reward for coming to listen to me gab about the good, the bad, and the nasty, you'll be permitted to experience phasing one time without any obligation or cost. You won't have to witness anything, either. It's simply a way for you to experience the feeling of phasing and find out for yourself if you want to go all the way into the program or not. So, if you want to take us up on this offer, all you have to do is follow me out to our bus and we'll transport you to our compound."

"No catches?"

"Well, there is one catch. You'll have to strip down and undergo a body cavity search for security purposes. We can't take a chance on someone slipping in with a weapon. Other than that, there aren't

any catches or strings attached."

"Mr. Wheeler, would you mind undressing me?"

Bill turned to Cheryl and hesitated. "Are you sure you want me doing this? Wouldn't you feel more comfortable with a woman undressing you?"

"You're bashful?"

"Not exactly, but our program has relied heavily on all of us behaving properly despite the fact that our operatives have to work in the nude. It wasn't easy getting public acceptance of that at first. Therefore, I tend to be cautious."

"Then, in that case, I should be able to trust you to undress me. Besides, didn't you mention in the briefing that many of the operatives don't even bother to wear anything anymore? I figure if that's true and I pass the training, then dressing and undressing won't be a problem for me ever again, particularly if everyone in the compound is trustworthy."

"I'll vouch for their trustworthiness myself and, yes, if you pass the training and want to be naked all the time, except in court, then we'll respect your wishes and not say a word to you about it."

"Oh, I forgot about the court appearances. Too bad I can't appear there as a Phaser."

"Sorry, but that's one thing that's not likely to come about. Besides the basic right for a defendant to face his accuser, there's also the problem of having three Phasers. If one showed, how could anyone be certain that the correct Phaser was in attendance even though you'd be talking remotely by radio or phone? However, by having the Witness show in person, the court then knows that all the alter images are contained within that person and the correct Phaser is actually present. We might have caused some laws to be rewritten with our existence, but other laws and procedures have remained rock solid. I think it's good that some things can be relied upon no matter what."

"Okay, I can follow that logic. Now, would you honor me by undressing me at least this one time?"

Bill nodded, then bent down to the task of undressing Cheryl. "Be sure to let me know if I twist or move any part of you wrong. I don't want to hurt you."

"I can't feel a thing from the neck down. In case you're interested, I became this way four years ago in a car wreck. Drunk driver, of course. Before that, I could walk, run, and do everything just like you, so there's a chance that I might be able to move about as a Phaser."

"Well, it'll certainly be interesting to find out. There's still a lot we don't know yet about phasing and how we do some of the things we do as Phasers."

"Will a doctor be performing the cavity search or do we get to choose someone?"

"Sorry, but you get the cold hands of a doctor or nurse."

"I figured as much, but couldn't resist the opportunity to yank your chain some."

"No problem. I'm used to having people yank my chain quite often. Um, sorry, I didn't mean to touch you there."

Tears welled up in Cheryl's eyes momentarily.

"What's wrong? I sincerely meant my apology for touching you there. It wasn't intentional on my part."

"It's not that. It's just that I'd give anything just to feel someone touching me there, accidental or otherwise."

Cheryl asked, "Would you mind carrying me to the tank as well? Or should I think of it as a glass slipper? I feel almost like Cinderella. By the way, I won't mind where your hands happen to touch."

"If you're sure you want me to, I guess I can oblige. However, in this case, one size fits all," Bill replied before scooping Cheryl from her wheelchair. He carried her over to the steps that led to the glass tank, climbed until he was in position, then carefully lowered her into the water. When he tried to release her, he realized immediately that the situation was wrong. Quickly, he grabbed her before she could slip under the electrolytic fluid.

"Thanks," she said.

"Don't thank me yet. This presents another problem that I didn't anticipate. For the rest of us, it's an easy matter to sit in the tank. For you, this isn't at all easy since you have no control over your body. I'm going to pull you out right now and carry you back to your chair before I go over to discuss this with the staff."

"I might not even get a free phase?" she asked.

"We'll try not to disappoint you, but I've got to be honest with you. It could turn out that way."

"Thanks, I appreciate you trying."

Cheryl sat in her wheelchair while one after another, the other students' tanks were activated. In turn, each tank suddenly sloshed upward spilling some of the contents as the Phasers came into being and temporarily displaced part of the electrolytic fluid before becoming ethereal. As soon as the Phasers were separate, those could just barely be seen rushing away to their destinations. One had to watch closely to see them or the Phasers presented a mere blur.

Bill said, "I guess we could use one of the old chairs. It ought to be safe since she won't have any clothing on like I did. Any other ideas, Jim?"

Jim stood in apparent deep thought for a moment. "Well, I guess we could do it that way. What I'm concerned about is how we're going to handle this if she qualifies. We can't monitor and control the process as well with a chair. I shouldn't have to tell you that."

"No, you don't have to remind me that we have better contact and control with the tanks. However, until we come up with a solution, this is going to be a serious problem since we can't put a restraint in the tank with her. The act of phasing alone will probably cause those to shatter the tank. Plus, if the tank doesn't shatter, the restraints will be dislodged and she could drown. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't backed down earlier."

Jim stated, "No, you're right about bringing her here. We can't afford to alienate any segments of society other than criminals. Give us some time to ponder this problem. I guess if you want, you can use one of the chairs for now. I'll see that the hookups are taken care of."

Cheryl glanced around the room she was taken to. She couldn't help but notice one chair in particular that was shattered. "Serious termite problem?"

Bill replied, "No, that was the first chair we used. I was wearing clothes at the time and we didn't know better. The explosive force of phasing ripped my clothes apart and took the chair with them. I wound up in three places only a few blocks away. Fortunately, I was still connected, conscious, and capable of telling what was happening. Otherwise, the experiment would have been shut down immediately and we probably would have failed to discover phasing. We're going to use one of the old chairs for now to give you your first trip. You won't go as far as the other students, so I'll have Rob standing by to find and escort you around. We'll wait for him to move in close first before we phase you. Hope you don't mind waiting a bit longer."

"I don't mind. I can tell that you're all trying to do this right and that you're sincere in what you say and do."

"Whoa! What a rush!" Cheryl exclaimed as she felt her body release three images of herself that were propelled outward almost six blocks away from the compound.

"Hi there," Rob Stone Two said as he found himself standing next to Cheryl Two.

"Rob?"

"At your service."

"Be right down," Rob Stone Three said as he spotted Cheryl One below his position in an alley.

"Wow! This is awesome. Did you know we're carrying on a conversation somewhere else?"

"Yes, and I'm walking up behind you in another location. More importantly, have you noticed yet that you're standing in all three places?"

The Cheryls glanced down all at once to see with amazement that she was indeed standing in each location. "Oh my god, I can stand on my own again," each of the Cheryls stated in awe.

"That's good," Bill said softly beside the real Cheryl.

"Bill? Where are you?"

Rob Stone One said, "Bill's talking to you through your real body. We don't know why, but your real eyes close and you see everything through your Phasers. So, just listen to him and try out some of his suggestions. He's very good at leading people even when he can't see them."

"You mean he's blind?"

"Almost blind. You'd never know it by the way he handles himself. He lost ninety percent of his vision in an attack after the Witness Corps was founded. That's why we have such high security now."

"To think, I thought he was fumbling with undressing me because he was embarrassed. It didn't occur to me that he couldn't see what he was doing."

Bill said, "Doesn't matter, Cheryl. Finding out that you can walk..."

"Uh, I don't know if I can walk yet," Cheryl said.

Bill said, "Then go ahead and try. If necessary, I'll have Rob standing by close enough in case you lose your balance from lack of use."

"I'm afraid."

Rob Stone Three suddenly slapped Cheryl One on the ass. She jumped at the unexpected contact and turned to face him angrily.

"She can walk," Rob said into his recorder and to each of the Cheryl's through his Phasers.

Almost at once, Cheryl realized that she could. Her initial shock and anger at being slapped on one of her fannies were replaced with excitement and more first steps as each of her Phasers began to walk, dance, or jump around. "I'm whole again!"

"Not completely. Only so long as you're phasing. Much as I hate to remind you, you'll still be in a wheelchair when we bring you back," Bill said softly to Cheryl.

"Then I guess I'll have to qualify as a Witness if I want to keep this new freedom. It wasn't easy for me to make the decision to attend your meeting after I found out that I was compatible."

Bill asked, "How come?"

"Well, I was afraid to be seen naked, but I felt that I had to try if it was possible for me to prevent just one more person from having their life wrecked by a drunk driver. That was what really convinced me that I wouldn't mind letting people see my body even if they leered or made suggestive moves at me. That one thought of saving someone else from a wheelchair was what convinced me and I couldn't get away from it since my wheelchair was with me during every waking moment. Now that I've found that I can do the job just as well as anyone else, I'm determined to qualify no matter how many people get to see my tits and ass."

"I won't disappoint you on that score. You'll have plenty of perverts and just plain dirty old men eager to stare at you. Unfortunately, there's not much we or the police can do about that."

"It won't matter. They can go ahead and stare just so long as I get the chance to save someone else from living in a wheelchair."

Bill said, "I can't guarantee that, either. You'll have to take whatever assignments we give you. Rob can tell you that. Sometimes our decisions might not seem fair, but they're gauged by what we need most at the time and what's best for the individual as well. Still, he'll also tell you that we do try to take individual desires into account."

Cheryl walked toward a wall beside Rob and continued on as he stopped. A moment later, she bounced back to fall on her backside.

"Ouch! That hurt! So, how do I walk through walls or is that reserved for training? I'd really like to try that."

Bill said, "Concentrate on one of your Phasers that isn't trying to walk through a wall and direct the Phaser you want to walk through. As best as we've been able to theorize, the dimension you're in is still affected by magnetic powers on Earth. You can use those to your advantage with practice or overcome some of those with mind techniques."

"How did you discover you could walk through walls?" Cheryl asked.

Bill laughed briefly, then said, "Well, at the time it first happened, I suspected it could be done, but I hadn't succeeded in doing anything more than knocking myself down. Then it happened when I concentrated my attention on one of my Phasers that was walking across a plank someone left between two rooftops. After all, I was still very much concerned about not falling and getting myself hurt or killed where no one could help me. Anyway, I was so involved in keeping my balance that one of my Phasers just walked right through a brick wall. Then I suddenly realized what had happened and stopped all three of my Phasers as soon as my Phaser on the plank was safely on a roof once more. It took a bit more practice before I could do it smoothly. After that, it was easy. That in turn led to me to discover that I could fall without getting hurt."

"Oh? Would you mind telling me how that happened?"

"Sure, I'll tell. I was walking through a wall with most of my attention on one of my other Phasers. The only problem was that I forgot that I was on the tenth floor of a building and had picked an outer wall. Consequently, there I was suddenly on the outside of the building with nothing to grab and falling to the pavement like a rock. I screamed like a son-of-a-bitch, but reached the ground before I could be recalled. I was already standing around staring in awe at being unharmed before the circuit was broken to bring me back. After that, I tried jumping off some low structures just to see whether the results were identical or I was merely lucky that one time. When it turned out that the results were always the same, it became just another trick in our repertoire. We've theorized since, that the same magnetic forces we have to overcome for walking through walls is what saves us from getting hurt or killed in a fall. If you try to overcome the magnetic forces when falling, you can actually dive through dirt and concrete."

"Theorized?" Cheryl asked.

"That's the only way we can explain what's happening since we can't take scientific measurement instruments with us. Otherwise, we'd take clothes as well," Bill replied.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Of course, we do scientific work with measurements from this side. So far, we've created a grid that allows us to find people in phase. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell us who they are. As well, we've figured out how to aim your Phasers so that you'll arrive at an assigned sector."

"This must take a lot of power to do all this."

Bill said, "Actually, we do it with no more than it takes to run your refrigerator at home. Ordinary household current is more than sufficient to phase and maintain you in phase. We never saw any need to use more than was necessary. Plus, we were concerned about frying someone accidentally and figured that we stood a good chance of reviving someone without any lingering or permanent damage if that person was accidentally shocked by a smaller amount of power."

"You're right! I just walked through a wall! I guess I overcame the magnetic force by listening intently to you," Cheryl exclaimed.

"Rob, I think she's going to make it. Want to be her personal trainer?"

Rob answered, "Since training is my assignment for now, why not?"

"Cheryl, Rob is one of our best, though he tends to act brashly at times. You'll be in good hands, I feel."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Wheeler. Oh god! I'm going into training?"

"Rob, don't let her try too much on her first phase. Limit her to three-story buildings if she absolutely has to jump off anything. See you both when you return."

"Three-story buildings? Does this mean you'll take me where I can jump off? Please?"

Rob Three glanced around, then motioned to Cheryl One while saying, "Follow me. We'll use this building since it's convenient."

Cheryl looked at the old brownstone apartment, then followed Rob. She bounced off the wall after forgetting to concentrate on one of her other Phasers with her thoughts. After standing up from where she knocked herself on her ass, she did it right the second time as she entered through the wall while her other Phasers engaged in casual conversation with the other Robs.

"If you don't consciously try to climb the stairs or latch onto an elevator floor, you'll remain at the same level where you started. You have to think of yourself being on the next step until it becomes second nature," Rob Three stated after glancing down toward Cheryl One who couldn't seem to get onto the second step of the stairs without slipping off. "Once you do, you'll find yourself walking up stairs in what looks like stop-motion action. That's if you get to see yourself from one of your other Phasers."

"That's how I see you moving right now, though you do it very smoothly," Cheryl's One and Two each said. "Oops! I guess I have a bit more to learn about controlling which, uh, image I'm speaking through."

"There's no need to apologize," Robs Two and Three replied while Rob Two paused on the stairs for Cheryl Two to catch up.

"Whee! What the--? Aw, I wasn't ready to come back."

"Sorry, Cheryl, but you had the equivalent of twelve hours out there. You can go out and play tomorrow," Bill said as he stood beside Cheryl before lifting her from the phase chair to sit in her wheelchair once more.

"I'm definitely in the training program?"

"You're in."

"Here's one of our official robes," Jim said as he placed a robe over Cheryl.

"You don't have to cover me. I don't mind being seen. Not in return for what I'm getting out of this deal," Cheryl said.

Bill said, "It's traditional for one of the staff members to present each trainee with an official robe."

"Uh, thanks, then."

Bill said, "Yes, thanks, Jim. Jim was one of our original group of wayward inventors who thought we could create a teleport device."

Jim said, "I still think we can. It's just going to be a bit harder to accomplish without Arthur around to help us. Uh, Arthur was one of our original threesome, but he was killed in an attack just over four years ago."

"I missed hearing about that. Probably when I was feeling sorry for myself after being crippled," Cheryl said.

As he pulled a splinter from his arm, Bill said, "Actually, it was kept quiet so that people would have confidence in us. We only tell people who've been accepted into the Witness Corps. In fact, I shouldn't have mentioned it just now since you're in training and not completely official."

Jim looked askance at Bill for a moment, then decided not to say anything.

Cheryl noticed Rob entering the room in his robe. "If it's not prying, why is the pi symbol on the robe?"

Bill answered, "It's an in-house joke. We adopted it after we realized that our bodies split into four even though the physical body was largely incapacitated. In effect, we joked that we were being shot out with the fractional portion left behind. That's how it came about becoming our symbol."

"Neat. At least it shows you all have a sense of humor," Cheryl said.

Bill said, "Sometimes a really sick sense of humor. Last Halloween, one of our operatives returned to find himself dyed purple. It seems that someone put food coloring into his tank just as the switch was changed to recall him. I had to leave him on night duty for a few extra days until the dye finally came off. Of course, no one knew who did it."

Rob said, "Guess I better take Cheryl over to the living quarters so she can get settled in."

Cheryl asked, "Really, can I just remain naked unless I have to go to court? I think it will help me get over my shyness before I chicken out on this."

"Chicken out? Evidently you don't remember how you flaunted yourself in front of the public less than ten minutes ago," Rob stated.

Cheryl said, "I was feeling high then. Now I'm not. Believe me, this chair has depressed me more times than I want to admit to."

Bill said, "You can remain naked as long as you want provided you're not scheduled to testify in court after becoming an official member of the Witness Corps. We'll see to it that your clothes and robe are sent over to your quarters so those will be available when needed."

"What do you mean that she's not official yet? You told me that she was," Jim exclaimed as soon as he was positive that Cheryl was no longer in the building.

Bill replied, "She'll make it, but I don't want her thinking she's getting a free ride. Damn, but she's every bit as idealistic as Rob. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if she becomes a better operative than Rob."

"You know he let her jump from a five-story building, don't you?"

"Well, I couldn't exactly order him to restrain her from trying once she got the hang of moving around."

"No more than you ordered anyone ever to restrain themselves since they all have to get it out of their systems."

"Well, I just want her to give her complete attention to Rob so her training will stick. So long as she does the job, I..."

"...really don't care what she does with her life," Jim finished.

"Do I say it that often?"

"It's more like I'd call for a doctor if you didn't say it at least once a day."

Bill pulled a second splinter from his arms. "We better come up with a solution so she won't wind up with an infection from the splinters she's picking up."

Chapter 5

"Ready to walk through a burning building?" Rob asked as he walked beside Cheryl in her motorized chair.

"Um, I guess so. Hopefully, I won't pick up any splinters today," Cheryl replied.

"How would you know since you don't have any feeling below your neck?"

"I noticed Bill pulling one out of his wrist after picking me up to place me back in my chair. I figured it had to come from me."

"Excellent observation, I must say, since I saw it too. Sounds to me like you won't have any problem in learning how to observe details."

"Sure didn't help me while we were phased yesterday. I should have caught on quicker to how you were managing to move around."

"You were excited about being able to walk again. That'll probably wear off gradually. Then you'll find yourself devoting more attention to things around you."

"Whoa! Hold it there! Steer that rig into here!" Bill exclaimed as he hurried to head off Rob and Cheryl from entering the old phasing room. "Jim's been up all night solving the problem of fixing up a tank for Cheryl to sit in so she won't drown. Just steer that chair down to the front to the first tank."

"He solved the problem? So soon?" Cheryl asked.

Rob said, "These people are geniuses. There isn't anything they can't solve."

Jim said, "Actually, I cheated. I merely adapted the spring recoil from rifle technology to the restrainer we're going to place around you. When you phase out, the restrainer will open and then snap back into place before you can flounder about and drown. We'll still have someone near as a backup, but I really feel that this restrainer will work."

"Hasn't it been tested?" Rob asked out of concern.

Jim answered, "Yes, but there's always a chance that something might go wrong. After all, nature always sides with the hidden flaw."

"But it worked, right?" Rob asked.

"Yes, it worked flawlessly, but we're going to be careful regardless. Just so you'll know that it was properly tested, Bill was the test subject," Jim answered.

"Bill went out? Uh, how was your sight, Bill? I mean, did you experience...Um, I'm not sure how to put this," Rob said.

Bill said, "My sight returned completely, but I won't be going out as an operative. My place is here."

"But you're the best!" Rob exclaimed.

Bill said, "I was the best. Not anymore. It doesn't matter that I'm able to see while I'm phased. What matters is that I'd make a lousy witness for the prosecution once the defense brings out the fact that I can't identify the defendant inside the courtroom because I'm still almost blind. Now help Cheryl into the sling we fixed up for lifting her into the tank. Then if you want, you can assist the staff in placing the restraint around her."

Jim asked, "Weren't you a bit hard on Rob?"

Bill answered, "Not really. He needs to know that he's on his own out there. Or at least dependent upon his partner and himself."

"Come up with any ideas for a partner for him?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but there's a good chance that Cheryl might be the best match for him."

"Are you going to continue monitoring them for now?"

"Today? Yes. Maybe tomorrow as well. After that, I'll shuffle them to another staff member. Is there a problem?"

Jim replied, "Not really, but there's a call for you that I said you'd return."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. Who am I supposed to return a call to?"

"Oh, sorry. Do you remember Heather Glock in Hollywood?"

"Of course, I remember her."

"Well, she wants to talk with you and she sounded like she's not going to take no for an answer."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, first off, she mentioned already getting clearance from National Security. Secondly, she mentioned that she's been tested and she's compatible."

"Crap! Are you telling me that she's got clearance to actually enter the compound and phase?"

"Well, that too. More importantly, she wants to talk with you about making another movie in light of the Ramsey incident. She's already told me that this isn't at all like it was the first time when we gave them technical assistance. Plus she told me she's really sorry that the other movie was titled Phasers on Stun, but that the corny title was beyond her control. After all, they've left us alone for the most part since that movie bombed at the box office."

Bill said, "For them, it bombed. It sure did us a world of good though in gaining public acceptance. I'll give her a call after Rob and Cheryl return."

"Heather also mentioned that if we won't assist, she might find the studio forcing her to approach Ramsey. She's not too keen on that since she believes our side of what happened."

"Okay, call her and tell her that I'll return her call and even arrange a dinner engagement for more personal negotiations."

"You want me to tell her about your blindness? She doesn't know."

"I'd rather Heather didn't know so that it won't be publicized. She can't pass onto the studio anything she's ignorant of. Worst comes to worst, you can always have someone follow us and relay instructions to me by radio. If she notices the radio, I can tell her it's so I can monitor the situation. I'm considered important, almost indispensable, so I think she'll swallow that reasoning. They don't know that you're the real brains in this outfit."

"Oh, wow, we're beside ourselves and we're not even wet!" Cheryl exclaimed.

"Personally, I don't think my hearts can stand this much beauty. However, we'll just have to struggle onward regardless of my condition and go through this test."

Cheryl glanced down, then said, "Um, yeah, we'll struggle past your conditions. I guess I'm the reason for that though I didn't know I could affect anyone that way."

"Well, you were a bit too excited yesterday to notice."

"I'm still excited, but I've got one question. Where's the fire we're supposed to walk through?"

"The fire department hasn't set it yet."

"The fire department sets fires?"

"Yes, they're burning down this condemned building and using it for training. They routinely coordinate with us so we can bring our trainees through and learn some of their techniques in case we happen upon a real fire and have to lead anyone out to safety."

"But where's the rest of our group? Oh, never mind. I see them now. Why are they over there?"

"They're receiving instructions on how victims behave while we lead out the first victims."

"You mean we're first up?"

"Right, we're up first, so listen carefully while I explain the procedure since they'll be setting the building ablaze soon."

"This is unbelievable. Never in my life have I imagined that I'd one day be walking without a care through a burning building," Cheryl said.

"There's our victims. You're the one being tested, so do your stuff," Rob advised while pointing to some specially-garbed fire fighters.

Rob said calmly, "No, Cheryl, don't panic when they won't follow you. Remember what I told you?"

"Um, what was it you told me? I don't remember now."

"Okay, I'll repeat what I said before. Find one of the fire fighters and lead him to the victims."

"Oh! Of course! Um, which way should we go?"

"Just pick a direction and go straight until you're out. Then look around for a fire fighter."

Cheryl said, "You know something? I felt like I was Lassie trying to lead someone who couldn't understand me, only I couldn't even bark."

Rob said, "Don't take it personally, but we set everyone up the first time to fail."

"Everyone was in on this?"

"Well, all the fire fighters are. The rest of our group will find their victims just as unresponsive as you did. However, the truth is that real victims panic just like the fire fighters posing as victims acted inside. We're trying to point out to you that we're really at a disadvantage in most situations."

"You made your point. I felt almost as helpless as when I'm in my wheelchair."

"Good afternoon, Heather. It's been a long time," Bill said as he leaned back in his chair at his desk, a desk he very rarely used.

"Well, I'll be. You actually remembered to return my call."

"Have I ever broken a promise?"

"Well, no, but you've been difficult to reach this time."

"I've been busy, just as I'm certain that you've been busy. So, what's up?"

"You never were much for small talk. Get to the point and don't waste a cent of the call."

"No argument there."

Heather said, "Okay, the point of our discussion is that we want to make another movie now that everyone knows that contact between two Phasers is not only possible, but has happened. Just about every production company is geared up already for producing something about what happened between you and Ramsey. About the only holdup any of them face is the lack of a suitable script and technical assistance. Admittedly, the technical assistance portion is dispensable, but the other isn't. However, it's

only a matter of days before something will be ready for rehearsals and shooting."

"Okay, if technical assistance isn't necessary, then why do you want us involved?"

"Black Diamond Studios wants to beat out the competition with something better than computer-generated Phasers. They want to use the real thing in shooting the movie. As well, they want to get your side since they'll then have access to the actual participants in the incident rather than working from court transcripts as most of the writers are doing."

"How long will this interfere with our work?"

"Well, we're not looking to interfere with your work. I already know that most of your people go out at night, so we're planning on shooting during the day."

"It's still going to interfere with our work since filming will require the assistance of several of our personnel in phase. You do know that we have strict limits on how long we permit any of our personnel to phase?"

"We're going to use actors because of that. The most we'll tie up are some of your staff personnel who we'll need and pay for their time as phase monitors. Of course, we'll pay the Witness Corps for use of their equipment as well."

"You'll be filming here?"

"Black Diamond wants to shoot on the actual location so they won't have to build a set. Plus they want access to some of the actual personnel such as yourself for bit parts as well as more details on what happened."

"Heather, Heather, Heather, you know you can't get to me that way."

"I'm not trying to get to you, but I am offering you the opportunity to get your side told the way you'd like to see it. As well, I understand that you're recruiting for an expansion there. Seems to me that the right information presented in a movie could help that considerably."

"Okay, now you've got me interested."

Rob said, "Yes, Bill? You wanted to see me?"

"I do. Sit down if you want. I've got an additional assignment to place on you."

"Oh? What is it?"

"We've got a Hollywood production company arriving next week to shoot a movie about us and the Ramsey incident. Because you were involved in that and you're on day duty, I'm assigning you the task of training their personnel and providing technical assistance. You'll receive additional pay from the production company as compensation."

"I'm not here for the money."

"Okay, I know you're not. Still, you're entitled to it just as some of our other personnel will be. Anyway, Heather Glock will be arriving here in a few days. She'll be the first to go through an abbreviated training course, so just add her in with Cheryl. It won't matter that Heather doesn't get the full course just so long as she learns enough to move about safely. Any problems with that?"

"No, not that I can foresee."

"Good to hear that since the movie will be dedicated in Megan's memory. Now how did Cheryl do in the fire today?"

"As well as anyone. I think she experienced enough frustration and helplessness to prepare her for the real thing."

"You have water scheduled tomorrow?"

"Right, we'll be walking in the river."

"Hopefully, you won't come across any real bodies. It's a real downer when you find one in training."

"Yeah, I still remember my training when we found that dead kid and I had to wait there for a diver."

"Well, maybe it won't be so bad since our trainees will have someone beside them now instead of being talked through by me, since it's no longer in doubt whether it's safe to have two of our Phasers near each other. By the way, just to prepare you, I think I better fill you in now on some of my plans for

Cheryl. I'm going to do my best to keep her on day shifts for the time being. I don't want her on night shifts where she might be attacked by Ramsey, out of sight of her partner, since we can't give her any self-defense training here. It's hard enough seeing us at night even when we're trying to be seen."

"What about training her in self-defense while she's in phase?"

"We will, but I expect it to take longer for her since we'll first have to find an instructor for her who can phase. That's another reason for keeping her on day shifts. As well, she'll be good for our recruiting efforts. I want people to see her. Lots of people. Besides, this will help her get over her shyness about being seen naked in public."

"She's not going to like being on display instead of stopping crimes."

Bill stated, "Cheryl will have top priority for witnessing any crimes committed during the day. I'm not trying to dampen her reason for joining."

"Can I tell her that?"

"I don't see why not. Just tell her that we need the publicity and she's going to provide that while she fights crime. If she needs a reason for that, tell her it's because she's young and we want more young people to think of joining when they reach adulthood."

"Not because she's crippled?"

"You're becoming as sharp as I once anticipated you'd become. Okay, you and I know that's the real reason for using her in public relations, but don't tell her that even if she asks or suspects that to be the case."

"I won't."

"Good, then let's get on to the rest of the particulars."

Chapter 6

Cheryls One, Two, and Three finally stood beside Robs One, Two, and Three at the river. One couple had arrived at the river and waited for the other couples to make their way to them. As they waited, Rob had explained the procedure to Cheryl in detail.

"Just remember, you don't have to hold your breath since your real body is doing the breathing. On the other hand, don't try this in the pool back at the compound since you'll drown."

Cheryl replied, "Not likely that I'll ever get to use that in my condition. I used to swim real well."

"Actually, you can still swim when you're in phase. In fact, you don't even need water. Any time you want to swim, just do it. Doesn't matter if you're in water, air, or dirt, you can still swim."

"You mean the entire world is our swimming pool?"

"Precisely, but we don't do that often since it can cause people to have accidents when they watch us instead of what they're supposed to be doing."

"Yeah, I guess it would be a bit distracting to see someone swimming around without water."

"Okay, let's enter the water. This isn't at all like climbing stairs unless you reach a drop off or have to go over some rocks. Then you can do it like on a stairway or just swim."

Together, the Robs and Cheryls entered the water in pairs. Each moved away from the others to give them all plenty of maneuvering space.

"Oh, this is different," Cheryl said into her recorder.

"You can still talk to me directly in the water," each of the Robs said.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Well, at least I'm not trying to hold my breath," the three Cheryls replied.

"That's good. Notice anything yet?" Rob One asked.

"Am I missing something?" Cheryl One asked.

"You might be. Remember, you're also supposed to practice observing during all your training."

"Well, I don't feel wet."

"That's good. Anything more?" Rob One asked.

"Well, uh... Yes! There is something more! We're not disturbing the mud! We're not clouding up the water!" Cheryl One exclaimed.

"Very good! Because we don't disturb the mud and don't need to come up for air, we're considered better than sending in divers when it comes to finding drowning victims. On the other hand, it means that we have to prepare ourselves for eventually finding a dead body. For now, we'll just concentrate on looking around at the fish and scenery."

Cheryl One said, "Sure is a lot of garbage in here. You'd think that people would realize this is their drinking supply and take better care of it."

"Yes, that is a problem. Bill's got a project in mind for later on when we have more operatives. He wants to have us locate the worst of the garbaged areas and direct divers to remove it. It probably won't solve the problem, but solutions have to start somewhere and he figures we can do our share in our own way."

"I think it's a good idea. I'll gladly help in the effort, especially since I like my drinking water safe. Wow! I just had a fish swim through me!"

"Yeah, those things happen down here. I even had a fishing line cast through me once while I was in training. It's a good thing I wasn't in sight or it might have freaked out the poor guy and caused him to fall in."

"I just noticed something else. I can't feel any current."

"Excellent! That's another reason they prefer to send us in first instead of divers. We don't have to worry about being swept away. Even if we did, it would be simple enough to just do a recall and we'd be safe anyway."

"Rob, there's something I'd like to ask you. It's kind of personal."

"Go ahead and ask. Like we say, we're all here to help each other."

"Okay, but this is really personal and I don't want to offend you."

"I promise I won't be offended, so go ahead and ask."

Cheryl One hesitated, then stammered, "Since we can't be seen here by anyone other than our other Phasers, I'd like for you to make love to me. Now, before you get offended or anything, I better explain why I'm asking this favor of you. I'm asking since this is probably going to be the only time and place that I can do something like this and experience real feeling. It wouldn't do any good for you or anyone else to make love to me back at the compound since I don't have any feeling below my neck. Am I making sense to you?"

"Uh, uh, yeah, I guess you're making sense to me. It's just that I never expected you to ask this kind of a favor."

"Well, it's not only because of the feeling or lack of it. There's also the consideration that I don't think you can get me pregnant if we do it here whereas I'd definitely have to take that into consideration if I had someone love my real body. So, you really wouldn't have to worry about knocking me up and having to support me or anything. Then again, I also think you're as nice a man as any woman could ever hope to find and I'd consider you even if my circumstances were different. At any rate, I know you're attracted to me, so I'm hoping that you'll accept my offer since this appears to be the only secluded and private place available to us."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm certain I want to try since I never had the opportunity before I was crippled. Um, maybe I should say that I never availed myself of the opportunities then since there were a few occasions when I could have given away my virginity."

Rob One said, "Well, I guess we could since we can have our other Phasers keep watch just in case."

"Well, actually, I was hoping that all three of you could take all three of me at the same time. Maybe this sounds a bit kinky, but I once passed up a chance to do it in a motel with mirrors on the ceiling and I'd kind of like to see us as we do it."

"Our own orgy?"

"If you'd like to do it that way. Sure, I'll go along with that."

"I wasn't suggesting that. I just meant we'd all be in sight of each other."

Bill entered the control room quickly and made his way first to Cheryl's tank, then to Rob's. He

nodded with sudden understanding, then turned away and made his way to Jim's station.

Jim said, "Sorry I missed catching you so you wouldn't waste your time coming in, but one of the technicians became concerned over their unexpected heavy breathing and hit the alarm."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later. Since neither of them is complaining about what they're probably doing, we'll have to assume that they've both consented and leave them alone. If need be, let them go over the limit a little today. But only this one time," Bill replied.

"You must still remember what it was like to be in love."

Bill answered, "Yes, I do. In a way, I hope that's the reason for their actions today. Even if they're not, they're both still adults and I really don't care how they run their personal lives. Now that we know they're okay, I should get out of here so they can believe their secret is still secret. Advise the rest of the staff not to gossip about what probably went on out there."

Chapter 7

Bill stood at the front of the class. In front of him were the four new women and three new men in training. He said nothing about half of them being naked or the others wearing only their robes.

"Today's class is particularly important. We're going to discuss privacy and witnessing as it applies to us. If you have any questions, please interrupt. I don't want any of you leaving this class with any doubts or unanswered questions. First off, we're bound by the new privacy laws as to what we can witness and later testify about and what's off limits. To demonstrate, let's suppose that one of you has just phased out from the compound and that one of your phasers arrives inside someone's home where a domestic disturbance is taking place. Can you witness that? Emily, what do you think?"

Emily answered, "Well, if there's violence, then I think I would have to witness it."

Bill said, "Sorry, but you can't. You don't have a right to be in that residence and anything you see is verboten for you to testify about in court. Regrettably, the only right you have is to leave immediately without worrying about being sued for invasion of privacy or trespassing."

"You mean I can't do anything about it even if there's violence involved?" Emily asked in shock.

Bill replied, "Not officially, but there's nothing in the law to prevent you from staring hard at the aggressor in the disturbance and putting that person on notice. That will often cause someone to calm down quickly if you can make them think that you're memorizing their features. Just make sure you leave immediately. Okay, next scenario. What if your Phaser arrives in a department store and you see someone going through a cash register? Mark, what would you do?"

Mark slowly answered, "Uh, if the person looked like a store employee and it was during store hours, then I'd just continue on my way. However, if the lights were out, it was after store hours, and the person appeared not to belong there, I'd report it and remain there."

"Good answer, Mark. Now what if the person going through that cash register became nervous at seeing you and it was during store hours? Cheryl?"

Cheryl said, "Well, um, I'd take a good look at the person just in case, but I'd continue on out. I've heard that our presense makes some people nervous."

"Would you report it?" Bill asked.

"Um, sure, I guess I'd report it. Why, though?"

Bill said, "Whenever you're in doubt, go ahead and report it. Then one of our staff can telephone the business and ask them if the person we saw is properly authorized. After all, you might be walking in on an employee trying to embezzle the company. It's this kind of coordination that put businesses behind us as supporters instead of against us as in the beginning of the Witness Corps. We had a difficult time establishing the service because of the nudity and privacy issues. Part of the reason people like us is because we don't have any arrest powers. All we can do is testify in court about crimes we saw. We don't talk about what we see under any other circumstances. That means if you enter a home when you phase and the man of the house looks more like the mistress of the house, his secret is totally safe."

Richard asked, "Have you ever encountered anything like that?"

Bill replied, "That and even worse. It all comes with the territory of being a witness. Here's another question. You see the police arrive at a private home and one of them upon spotting you signals you over to them. He probably has a notepad and writes that he'd like for you to enter the home and check out what you see to be relayed to him over his radio from our compound. What should your response be?"

Emily asked, "Does he have a search warrant? If so, I want to see it first."

Bill exclaimed, "Excellent question and response, Emily! That is exactly what you should indicate either in sign language or by having the compound radio him. He'll either show you a warrant which will give you the right to act as the policeman's eyes or they'll tell us that they've received a call and we'll then have to verify whether or not the situation justifies permitting you to enter."

"What would justify us to enter if the officer doesn't have a warrant?" Emily asked.

Bill answered, "Well, if the officer is responding to a call indicating that violence was taking place or can physically hear something that sounds illegal or threatening, such as a domestic fight, then we'll notify you that the officer has the legal grounds to ask you to enter. On the other hand, he might merely want you to walk up to the door with him so he can intimidate the occupants into behaving. If that's all he wants, can you do so? Richard?"

"Sounds like it's legal to do that so long as I don't enter the home," Richard replied.

Bill said, "You're right. After all, even the officer's presence is an intimidating factor if all he does is go to the door and warn the occupants. You won't be doing anything more than one of those cameramen who follow the police around and then use the film as TV entertainment..."

Bill paused momentarily as a woman he hadn't seen in four years entered the room. "Class, this is Heather Glock. She represents Black Diamond Studios in Hollywood. Heather, you're here early."

"Hope I'm not interrupting something important, Bill."

Bill replied, "Yes, you are, but you might as well sit in since you'll have to go through this as well, so take a seat and make yourself comfortable while I continue with our class on privacy and witnessing."

Heather asked, "What about our, I mean, your expectations of privacy?"

Bill answered, "Our expectations of privacy take a back seat when in public. We don't have the right to become indignant or sue just because everyone around us can see our bodies and some people take advantage of that to leer or even take pictures or videos of us. By now, I'm sure, most of you have seen one of the Internet web sites and seen nude images of yourselves or someone you know. Those pictures are totally legal even though they're taken without our permission since that right had to be released in exchange for legal permission to appear nude in public. About the only right we've retained concerning portrayals of us is when something libelous is stated with those images. Then we can sue for appropriate damages, removal of the offensive wording, and an apology. However, I would think that you'd know that already since you deal with motion pictures."

Heather blushed, then said, "Okay, I just thought I'd try to take part in the discussion."

Bill said, "I would rather that you ask about those things you're not certain of instead."

As Bill left the classroom, Heather fell in step at his side. He said, "Like I mentioned before, you're here early. What gives?"

Heather answered, "The studio found the rest of the actors they need, so I was advised to get my ass down here quickly and get things moving. This compound is much nicer than what you had before."

"Safer, too. I hope you didn't have much trouble getting in."

"Well, you did warn me over the phone about the body cavity search. At least I was prepared for that. I wish you had mentioned that you allow your people to walk around naked. Had I known, I would have left my clothes off after the search since the students appeared uncomfortable after I sat down. Are they afraid that someone might have a weapon hidden in their clothing?"

"Actually, no. Most of them go about casual or nude simply because it's easier on them to move about

in public view if they're used to being seen naked. That way, they're less self-conscious of their nudity. Otherwise, I don't know why they'd be nervous with you around unless they're concerned about how they'll be portrayed should any of them wind up in your movie."

"I don't know if that will come about or not. The studio really found itself scrambling to find competent actors who are compatible."

"I can imagine it was difficult for them since recruiting is difficult for us. So, what's your part in this movie? Still casting and technical advice on the script?"

"Worse this time. Because I'm compatible, I'll be taking on even more responsibilities, including a part in the movie."

"Oh? You'll be acting?"

"Afraid so. I still haven't broken the news to my mother since I'm not sure how she'll take it when she learns that my first starring role will be an all nude role."

"Sounds to me like you might have to do some practicing to lose any self-consciousness."

"Trying to get me to strip in front of you, Bill?"

"Not at all since I'll get to see you sooner or later. I'll either see you in a tank or on the screen. So, what part are you playing?"

"Well, I get a co-starring screen credit and some lines, but I'll be playing the victim since the script will be closely paralleling the Ramsey case."

"You'll be playing the part of Megan?" Bill asked.

"Um, yeah, I'll be playing a part based upon her. Would you mind filling me in on some of her background? I really need the assistance."

"No, I don't guess I mind. However, I won't tell everything."

"I'm not asking you to divulge some of your private moments with Megan. Just give me enough to understand her so I can do her part justice and make her relatives proud of what she tried to do for society."

"You're still pushing buttons. Heather, aren't you ever going to learn that I don't like to be controlled by button pushers?"

"Maybe, maybe not. At any rate, some of the buttons still work on you."

"Only when I choose to let them work."

"Because of the attack?"

"Of course. I can't deny that I changed because of that. Arthur and two operatives died. Our operation was shut down for a week. Crime in our city went rampant for seven very long days until we got back on line. I can't even begin to count how many people became victims as a result."

"Knowing you, I'd guess that you've tried to count them."

"Maybe so. Still, we had a job and we dropped the ball that one time. We're not going to let anyone down ever again."

Heather said, "You shouldn't blame yourself for something that someone else did. After all, it only happened because you were doing your jobs too well. Had you been failures, there wouldn't have been any reason for anyone to attack you."

"I've taken that into account. That's why we have such high security. In fact, I'm not even allowed to discuss what measures we have in place."

"Not even the obvious features such as the uneven moat to prevent car bombs?" she asked.

"Not even the obvious measures."

"I guess that doesn't leave much for discussion. I can ask about Megan, witness procedures, and what it's like to phase. Plus I guess it's okay to show what kinds of luxuries you have for the operatives to enjoy."

"I'm sure there are other things you can learn about, but I don't know exactly what you'd be interested in hearing."

"Well, I'm interested in learning whether I'll be allowed to tag along on actual witnessing."

Bill said, "That can be arranged after you receive some training. Just be aware that you might

encounter more than you bargained for. The bodies and injuries we see are real."

Bill said, "Heather, this is Rob Stone. He'll be giving you your training while he trains Cheryl. You can go out with them on their assignments when he teaches Cheryl on the job."

Heather remarked, "Uh, if I remember right, he was involved in the Ramsey case. You're certainly not trying to keep me from talking to the principals."

"Wouldn't do me any good if I tried. Besides, it would go against the grain with what we stand for."

Rob said, "I sure wouldn't want to work here in that case. Pleased to meet you, uh, Heather, since I don't know your last name."

"Heather's fine, Rob. I'm ready to begin now. You want to show me the tank I'll use?"

Bill said, "Rob just got back and we have strict limits imposed on how much time anyone may be in phase each day. Sorry, but you'll have to wait until tomorrow. In the meantime, he can show you around the compound and answer some of your questions, including those about his part in the ordeal."

"I can't phase until tomorrow?" Heather asked.

Rob said, "You heard the boss. Come on, I'll introduce you to Cheryl since you'll be training with us."

Rob led Heather into the lounge area and directly to Cheryl. "Cheryl, this is Heather. Bill just informed me that she'll be training with us in preparation for a movie she's making."

Heather held out her hand and said, "Actually, Black Diamond Studios is making the movie. Ordinarily, I'm in casting and script consulting. However, this time, I'll be in the movie since I'm compatible and know how to act. Maybe not very well, but I've done some acting in college and...Well, I shouldn't bore you with my life story since I'm here to learn and find out about you instead. Rob, in particular, since he was involved in the Ramsey case."

"Sorry, but I can't shake hands with you. I'm paralyzed from the neck down," Cheryl replied.

Heather halted and shook her head involuntarily with a blink of her eyes as she recognized that the chair Cheryl was sitting in wasn't an ordinary chair. "Forgive me, I should have realized. I didn't mean to be so thoughtless."

"Easy enough mistake to make in the overall excitement. You don't have to apologize."

"Maybe so, but I jumped to the wrong conclusion that you were sunning yourself under the lamp. Then again, now I realize that's not a sun lamp. Hasn't anyone had the time to dress you?"

Rob said, "Cheryl prefers to remain nude so she can overcome some of her inhibitions about being seen walking around in public."

Heather shook her head and looked at Rob. "Come again? I thought Cheryl just stated that she's paralyzed from the neck down."

"She is, but she's not when she phases. Why else would I be training her?" Rob answered.

Heather replied, "Duh, I guess you're right about that, now that you mention it. Say, wait! She's not paralyzed when she phases? Do you realize this is big news? Does the medical community know about this yet? Or the news services? Wow! This has got to be in the movie! Wait until Black Diamond hears about this! Talk about budgeting, they're going to probably double the budget because of this! Would you all mind if I use my cellphone and catch up with you in a bit on the conversation?"

Cheryl said, "I don't mind, but I really don't want to be in a movie. I'm not ready to bare myself in front of the whole country."

"Neither am I, Honey, but ready or not the public is going to see what I've got. Sometimes you've got to be bold to keep from getting old and I'm not ready for anyone to put me on a shelf yet. Seeing as that's the case, I figure the public is going to get an eyeful. Maybe two eyefuls."

Rob said, "Cheryl is extremely dedicated to becoming one of our best operatives. In fact, she's hoping that her efforts help to prevent others from winding up in a chair like her."

Heather replied, "Really? Oh, that's good motivation. Maybe I can use part of that with my

Megan-based character. Maybe the writers will make her crippled in real life and a real crime fighting witness in Phaser life. Oh, this is good material."

"You're playing the part of Megan?" Rob asked weakly.

"I'm playing a part based on her. We'll have to keep it loosely based so Ramsey can't sue us or stop the picture from seeing distribution. You know what? Maybe I should start going around naked so I can be certain that I can get over my own inhibitions," Cheryl replied as she dialed her cellphone.

Chapter 8

"Bill, you didn't tell me that you hired the handicapped and gave them real work," Heather said as she set her wine glass down.

"I didn't see us as doing anything different from other employers so there wasn't any need to mention it. Besides, you came here to do a movie based on Megan's death and I didn't know you'd be interested," Bill replied.

"Maybe so, but this will be astounding news once it breaks."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Well, I hope you won't mind, but the producers are going to use some artistic license in telling the story."

"Don't they always?" Bill asked.

"Aside from that. Well, what I'm getting at is they feel sure they can give you and themselves, of course, a lot of added mileage by including a sub-plot featuring, uh, Cheryl. Well, maybe not her, but an actor with a disability like hers. Of course, we'll have to include Cheryl somehow just to show that it's based on some real life truth and not just a Hollywood happy story."

"It's up to Cheryl whether she wants to be in your movie. What our people do with their lives is their own business."

"Then you won't mind if I butter her up some?"

"You're welcome to try. If she agrees, then we'll do our best to accommodate you and her."

Heather stood up from the dinner table, then reached around and unbuttoned her dress. She pulled it forward and let it drop from her shoulders down to her feet before stooping down to remove her panties. "You like seeing me?"

"Of course. What brought this on or should I say off?"

"It just occurred to me that Cheryl is living nude, so I'll make better points with her if I join in with her. Looks like you'll get to see plenty of me whenever you want, Bill."

Bill smiled and did his best not to squint. "I'll try to appreciate what you're going through. Should I leer?"

"Um, not yet. Give me a chance to get used to being naked in front of people all the time before you give me any lecherous looks. Okay?"

"Whatever you say. I take it then that you got along well with Rob and Cheryl?"

"I think we did. They were both quite open about every topic we discussed though they didn't tell me anything about the forbidden subjects such as security."

"We give them the security procedures first and show them some pictures of the aftermath of the attack on us. It usually impresses our recruits enough that they keep quiet about our security since their asses are on the line as well. Otherwise, we really don't have any secrets. In fact, it's more like the opposite. They'll talk openly about almost everything else except what the courts tell them to keep quiet."

Cheryl said, "Rob, I'm not very impressed by Heather. She wants to run everything."

Rob said, "Sounds to me like she's meant to be in Hollywood. I mean, she sounds like what I'd expect a typical Hollywood bigshot to sound like. I guess she is one since she's in charge of casting and technical assistance."

"And phony sounding?"

"Of course, that too. She probably has to deal with a lot of phony people everyday, so she has to behave like them. She's probably just not used to dealing with ordinary people with real jobs."

"You shouldn't make excuses for her. She could have tried to be more honest."

Rob said, "Whatever you say. I sure don't want to argue about her."

"We're not arguing about Heather. Not yet, anyway. However, I'm willing if that's what you want."

"Uh, time out, please. Remember, I've got to deal with training both of you."

"Don't you mean all three of me?"

Rob opened his mouth to speak, then paused for a moment. Finally, he said, "All six of you. I feel surrounded already. Just remember, I didn't ask for this assignment, but I'm obligated to do my best to train you and Heather. Here and in phase."

"Well, uh, yeah. I guess I should remember that. Then again, maybe I'm thinking about this situation wrong since I really don't have any claims on you. After all, it was only by my request that we had some fun in the river. I hope we didn't spoil the fishing for anyone since we sure scared the fish away."

"You're jealous of Heather?"

"Probably, but I realize that's not fair to you since we didn't do it out of love. I guess I've been in this chair too long that I forgot how people react to me. No, that's not quite right. I haven't forgotten how people react to me. That's probably why I'm jealous since you accepted me without noticing the chair. You got to see me as the normal person I once was and...I think that's caused me to fall in love with you. At least it's made me think that I am. So, yes, I guess I'm jealous especially since right now we're in the real world where I'm a cripple and she's not."

"I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything. I'm the one who needs to adjust to the situation and straighten myself out. You didn't do anything to deserve some of the cracks I made."

"I didn't hear anything for you to be sorry about."

"Trying to argue with me again?"

"Uh, no."

"Hi, I'm back! Have I missed out on any training?" Heather exclaimed as she entered the room with nothing more than a smile on.

Cheryl glared briefly at Heather before turning back to Rob.

"What's wrong? Is one of my tits off center?" Heather asked.

Rob stared at Heather with his mouth slightly open, then said, "Uh, not that I can tell."

Heather said, "I was thinking about what you said earlier, Cherry, and realized that I better get used to being seen. The next thing I knew, I stood up from the dinner table in front of Bill and performed a complete striptease though it didn't phase him in the least. I guess he's used to seeing naked women around him all the time."

"It's Cheryl, not Cherry."

Rob said, "Yeah, we've usually got a bunch of naked women around us most of the time. Most of the time, I really don't notice since I'm so used to it by now."

Heather said, "Sorry, Honey. I'll keep that in mind. In fact, I'm surprised that more of the operatives don't walk around naked since you all work that way. Anyway, I've already become fairly comfortable like this though I didn't think I'd feel this way so soon."

Rob said, "Interestingly enough, the one thing that we've noticed lately is ourselves since we know it's safe now to approach ourselves in phase. You wouldn't believe how many of us have looked at ourselves, particularly from the backside just to see what blemishes we might have that we never knew about before."

"Have I any blemishes?" Cheryl asked.

Rob turned to Cheryl, then said, "I haven't noticed a one on you."

"You're not just saying that?" Cheryl asked.

"I'm not just saying that," Rob replied.

"You're welcome to inspect me as well," Heather said before turning around slowly.

"Uh, nope, I don't see any blemishes," Rob replied before he noticed the dagger-eyes Cheryl was giving him and Heather. "Of course, you do have some tan lines."

Heather said, "Um, yeah, I guess I'll have to work on those. The studio wants this movie to be realistic, so I better get plenty of sun so I'll look like I've been nude for more than a day or two. Anyway, what are we discussing? Are you talking about how to approach a crime scene or give the perp the evil eye?"

Rob replied, "I'm afraid the evil eye concept was Hollywood originated. It's not anything we really have a procedure on, though there are a few people who will give some cold stares as a warning whenever there's doubt about whether a crime is taking place, or about to. However, I think they got the idea from the movies."

"Doesn't matter where the idea came from if it's used. Should I practice giving the evil eye then? I thought that Cheryl was practicing that when I walked up to you. You were just practicing, weren't you, Honey?"

Cheryl said, "I was, since we discussed staring at people in the security and witnessing class before you joined us."

"Oh, you were there, too? I guess I was too intent on learning what Bill had to say that I failed to notice you then," Heather replied.

"I'm used to being overlooked," Cheryl replied.

Chapter 9

Heather asked, "Any ideas why Ramsey attacked Megan?"

Bill answered, "We have plenty of theories, but that's about it. That man never said one word to us or the police. In fact, the most any of us got out of him was some grunts during the fights in phase. He definitely helped strengthen his case by not saying anything that could be used later against him or to trip him up. Then again, he's smart enough to recreate the phase shifting unit, so maybe he was being smart by not talking to anyone other than his lawyer until he testified before the jury. Shouldn't you be running along to your first phase now?"

"Ohmigosh, it's almost time for my first time. I feel almost like a virgin again with the anticipation of what's going to happen," Heather said as she quickly turned and left Bill's office and headed for the control room.

Bill reached for the phone, then dialed a number from a list on his computer. "Hello, this is Bill Wheeler with the Witness Corps. I'd like to speak with Carlos Ramirez if it's at all possible."

"With Carlos? I don't see how he could have done anything wrong since he's confined to a wheelchair."

"No ma'am, he's not in any trouble. In fact, we might have a job for him if he's at all interested."

"How do I know you're with the Witness Corps? This isn't some sort of a sick joke you're trying to play on him for one of the neighbors, is it?"

"This isn't a joke, ma'am. Ma'am? Hello?" Bill replied before he realized that he'd been disconnected.

"Hung up on you?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, she hung up on me just like the family I called before Heather came in. How are you doing?"

"Not any better. Face it, we're going to have to either use an official letter or a personal visit."

"You mean I'll have to visit since my face is well known."

"Yes, I guess I mean exactly that."

"I'll have to eat some crow as well when I apologize to them for not contacting them sooner. Some of these people were tested two and three years ago," Bill said.

"Yes, you might have to do that as well."

Bill stared at the phone for a moment, then said, "I'll call security to arrange for travel."

Jim said, "I've got a better idea. It's less risky for you and bound to get their attention."

"How?"

"Phase to their homes and give them a number to call using sign language. Even if they don't know sign, it's easy to get numbers across if you give those one at a time after pointing at a phone."

"Well, it's certainly less risky, but it's also kind of..."

Jim interrupted, "Does it really matter whether it looks like a stunt if you can recruit even one of them? You said we need more operatives."

"Okay, set up the equipment to phase me when we have a tank free."

"I can get you going inside of the next ten minutes. You're not reading your email again or you'd know that we got the new tanks."

"Have I been that busy lately?"

"More like preoccupied with other matters, I'd say."

"Yes, with the recruiting that I'm hesitant to do this way. However, you're right. No matter what it takes, I have to be willing to do whatever I can that's legal and ethical to improve the organization if we're to see crime statistics drop even further. I'll be in the control room shortly so you can phase me to their homes."

"Since we have six names, I'll send you to three, bring you back, then send you to the other three. It shouldn't take you more than two hours at most. That's with an hour in between so you can answer the phone from the first three visits."

"We'll be breaking one of our own rules."

Jim said, "I really think it's safe since you'll only be phased for a few minutes each time."

"All right. Just don't let it get out to anyone else. I don't want everyone else saying that we don't follow our own rules."

"Okay, then how about if I rig up a telephone remote to you while you move to the other locations? Would that satisfy your fetish with the rules?"

"Jim, it was my breaking the rules that cost us three lives. I don't want to see us go down that road again. I know that we bend a few of the rules now and then, but let's not go overboard where it can be used against us. The telephone remote sounds a whole lot better."

Rob said, "Okay, I hope you're ready for your next lesson. See that pond over there?"

"Sure, I see it," Heather answered.

Rob said, "We're going to walk through it. The only trick to it is remembering to breathe. You don't have to hold your breath since your body back in the control room is doing your breathing for you."

"Okay. At least it sounds easier than jumping off a roof," Heather replied.

Bill materialized outside the homes he was aimed for. He walked to the front doors of each and paused as if to knock before he remembered that it was physically impossible for him to do so. Upon realizing that, he knew he had no choice but to violate the family's privacy by walking through the doors into the homes.

"Yes, this is Bill Wheeler, the man you see standing in front of your phone. I tried contacting you earlier today, but there was some misunderstanding as to whether I was really who I claimed to be. I asked you to call me because we'd like to have you attend a briefing for the purpose of explaining the Witness Corps and giving you the opportunity to try out for a permanent position with us. At the same time, I sincerely want to apologize for us not contacting you sooner. The fault is all ours and I'm sincerely sorry that we failed to act sooner."

Heather said, "This could become a new concept in a way. Dry water. This was an incredible experience. You know, I have an aquarium at home and I'd love to return here again just to study some

of the fish in their natural habitat. Do you think it would be possible for us to do so, Rob?"

Rob answered, "Well, it depends upon our schedule. It might be possible for one of each of our Phasers to revisit this pond. You'll have to bring that up with Bill since we do have schedules to adhere to and he's in charge of those."

Heather remarked, "Well, he probably will then since he told me that Megan liked tropical fish. This would go well with the background in the movie. It'll give her part more depth and make her more realistic to the audience."

Cheryl said, "I thought it was only a bit part?"

Heather replied, "Even a bit part has to look realistic. Besides, we'll want the audience caring what happened to her, so we'll have to make her more than just a celluloid character."

"Yes, I've got that, Control," Rob said before his Phasers said, "Ladies, we're going to make a detour now. Control just informed me that there's a fire a few blocks from us, so we're going to hotfoot it in more ways than one to see if we're needed."

"A real call! Which way?" Cheryl exclaimed.

"Just follow me and do your best to keep up," Rob replied.

Rob One said, "Control just relayed to me that the fire department wants us to make a sweep of the house. So, if you're ready, let's make our sweep. Remember, if you see someone, holler out to one of me."

The nine Phasers entered the burning house in a long line that assured them of viewing the whole structure with only a few feet of space between them. It would be unlikely for them to miss seeing anyone that way.

Cheryl Three whispered to Rob Three, "She ought to get used to seeing flames at the rate she's going."

Bill said, "Well, that's the last of them. At least they were all home and called us."

Jim asked, "Well, what was your impression of them?"

"Truthfully?"

"Of course."

"Well, if they're half as eager as Cheryl, they'll make fine witnesses. So, have we got anything happening?"

Jim answered, "Just a house fire. I sent Rob and his trainees over to check out the house for the fire fighters."

Rob Two glanced to the side expecting to see Heather Two only to see a gap instead. "Where's the other Heather?"

Heather One replied, "I'm, I mean, she's still inside with someone."

"There's someone in there? Damn it! I told you all to notify me if you found someone!" Rob exclaimed as two of his Phasers turned and ran back into the burning home. "Cheryl, send one of your Phasers to get the fire fighters in case my Phasers can't help the victim inside."

"Right, Rob, we'll recall her in just a moment. Are you sure you want her recalled?"

"She failed to follow orders in a crisis. Yes, I want her recalled."

Rob Three pointed to the old man as the fire fighters clad in their protective gear broke through the door that Rob Two was pointing to and made their way to the victim. Upon seeing them reach him, the two Robs walked through the walls of the burning house to rejoin the Cheryls and the other Rob.

"You had Heather recalled?" Cheryl One was asking.

Rob One nodded. "She failed to follow orders and that man didn't have any time left for press hungry

starlets. I know she hasn't had the fire training course, but she's still supposed to follow orders or I'm not going to train her."

"Good for you. She was getting on my nerves," Cheryl One replied.

Rob One said nothing as Rob considered what he was about to have his Phaser say before he got himself into deeper water with Cheryl.

"What happened? Why am I back?" Heather asked as she opened her eyes after her Phasers returned.

Bill looked sternly at her and said, "Rob ordered you to do something and you went against his orders. That's why you're back here now."

"Well, send me back. I can still show them where the old man is."

Jim hollered, "They've got the old man out! He's alive!"

There was a brief cheer within the control room by the staff members monitoring the tanks.

Bill said, "You're grounded for the rest of the day. This is normal procedure for anyone who doesn't follow orders. Now climb out of the tank and dry off. If you want to talk further about this, you can find me in my office."

Heather looked up with a glum face as Rob and Cheryl entered the lounge from their Phaser tour. "This sure hasn't been my day. I want to apologize to both of you for letting you down."

"Apology accepted," Rob said.

"Um, yeah, sure," said Cheryl.

"You just don't know how bad my day has been. The studio contacted me only a half-hour ago and informed me that they're going to use my ideas for another part. I'm not even sure if I have any speaking parts anymore. Basically, it looks like I'm relegated to just a small walk on performance where I get raped and killed."

Cheryl said, "I'd ask if you wanted me to help you practice that, but I don't have the right equipment, let alone the ability to move."

Rob glared briefly at Cheryl as he said, "I'm sorry to hear that, Heather. In the meantime, we have a debriefing to go through."

"Debriefing?" Heather asked.

Rob replied, "Yes, we go through a debriefing where we can analyze what we did and what we could have done better now that it's over and there's more time to think."

"So, who's getting the part?" Cheryl asked.

"I'm not sure yet. They didn't state whether it's going to be one of the actresses I already cast or if I'll have to find another actress," Heather answered.

Chapter 10

Rob One stared in disbelief at seeing Ralph Ramsey's Phasers walk up to where he, Cheryl One, and Heather One were standing on the movie set. Robs Two and Three instantly moved toward the Ramsey Phasers in anticipation of a fight breaking out.

Ramsey One stated, "I tried to contact the studio but I couldn't get past the security, so I had to come here this way. I assume that one of you ladies is working with the studio and will want to talk with me."

Rob One said, "You're breaking a court injunction to remain away from Witness Corps operations."

Ramsey One replied, "I hardly think this qualifies as a Witness Corps operation. Anyway, I've heard they're making a movie based on what happened between us and they ought to have the chance to hear the truth or at least my side of it. I don't know what you assholes are telling them, but it's probably a load of crap."

Rob said, "Recall all of us. Ramsey's on the set in phase and it could get nasty."

The monitor said, "I'll get Bill in on this. He might want this handled differently. Try not to get involved in a fight. Okay?"

Ramsey One said, "Now why don't you be a good little boy and scoot out of here before I have to beat the shit out of you again?"

Rob One said, "I'm not leaving unless the Witness Corps recalls me. I advise you to leave since you're in violation of a court injunction. You're not supposed to be anywhere near any Witness Corps operation and this is certainly one of ours since the movie studio isn't in control of the phase equipment."

Ramsey One, Two, and Three advanced on Rob One without concern for Rob's other two Phasers to the sides. "Heck, I'll even give you the chance to hit me from behind like you first did and with two of your Phasers this time. Of course, I won't be responsible for what happens when I defend myself."

Cheryl One stepped in between the Ramseys and Rob One. "I don't think you hear too well."

Ramsey One said, "Well, well, just like the second time we tangled when your friends stepped in. Doesn't matter this time since I'm ready for all six of you if need be. Or do you have some more friends hiding out in the brickwork?"

Bill One materialized off to the side of the group and said, "Get the hell out of here now, Ramsey. Otherwise I'll have the police confiscate your equipment and initiate procedures to have your license application rejected."

Ramsey One exclaimed, "Oh wow! We get the head honcho himself in the...Well, we can't call it flesh, can we?"

"Leave now or I'll instruct the police to proceed with breaking down your front door. Right now, I've got my other Phasers checking out your home for booby traps and I don't see any. I'd say that it won't take them more than a couple hits with their hammers to break down your door and maybe a few seconds to reach your equipment. It would be terrible if they smashed some of it while shutting it down to recall you," Bill One stated.

Ramsey One replied, "You're bluffing."

Bill One said, "Yeah, I must be bluffing. Otherwise, how would I know that there's a photo of you with a mangy mutt on the wall?"

"You'll hear from my attorney for violating my home without a warrant!" Ramsey One shouted before he suddenly disappeared.

Bills Two and Three walked onto the movie set and glanced about at how things were going.

Heather One said, "Wow, you sure know how to move fast! Or is Ramsey's home nearby?"

Bill One said, "I lied about being in his house. He won't believe that, but he'll probably leave one of his Phasers at home next time just to be sure no one enters through the walls."

Heather One asked, "Then how did you know about the photo?"

Bill One answered, "From police photos taken of his home after he was arrested for Megan's murder. He might be smart, but he's not infallible."

Rob One said, "Too bad you gave him the idea of placing booby traps in his home. He might actually do that since he's got the smarts and equipment."

Bill One said, "Well, now, if he does, that's a felony. Of course, I'll warn the police that he might be inclined to use those and for them to use caution. Otherwise, I think that will give Ramsey something to do for awhile and not bother us. Then again, maybe he'll forget about one of his own booby traps and do himself in. I really don't think I'll miss him if that happens."

Rob said, "We've got to get someone who can phase to train Cheryl in self-defense. She tried to step in between Ramsey and me."

Bill said, "I'm aware of that. National Security has been working on that problem not only for her, but the other recruits I expect us to have soon. They've assured me that they believe they can find us someone with the qualifications who can also phase. In the meantime, keep me informed if Ramsey shows up again. I'd hate to go up against him, but I will if I have to."

"Bill, we can't afford to lose you."

"I don't intend to lose. He might know hand-to-hand combat better, but I've got my own ways of

fighting. It's just that I don't want to use those unless I absolutely have to."

Chapter 11

Cheryl's voice trembled, "Bill, I've been asked if I'd like to star in Black Diamond's movie. What should I say?"

Bill looked at Cheryl, then said, "Whatever's in your heart. If you think that your appearance in the movie can help save lives and you want to do it, then say yes. If not, then say no. The decision is entirely in your hands."

Cheryl said, "The way you put it sounds like you want me to accept."

"You want the truth?" Bill asked.

"Very much so."

"I hope that you'll take the job so that we can increase our recruiting and save even more lives. However, that's selfish of me, so I can't tell you to accept. I can't tell you to appear naked in front of the whole country even though I understand that you're already on the Internet. It has to be something that you want, not what I want."

"I'm on the Internet already?" Cheryl asked.

"In the flesh. Someone got pictures of you at your first assignment. The one with that burning home where you all saved an old man."

"Oh my! I didn't know that anyone was taking pictures. That wasn't very observant of me."

"You're considered a real heart throb by your public, judging from the comments posted on the web page. If you take this role in the movie, you'll probably guarantee that it becomes a blockbuster in sales."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Check out the web for yourself and see what they have to say about you. You're a fresh, uh, face out of nowhere, to put it nicely. Everyone wants to know more about you regardless of what you do next."

"Gee, I've never had this much attention. This is so new to me. Would it really help our recruiting?"

"I think it will help ours and the efforts of other Witness Corps sites around the country. All the other sites are changing their procedures in light of what happened here, so they need more operatives as well. In fact, you've already helped more than you realize. Because of you, I've approached six local people who I should have asked before but didn't because I was too bigoted. I looked at them in the same light as I saw myself and figured that they couldn't do the job any better than I can now. Well, that's all changed now. We'll give everyone a fair shot at joining provided they pass the background check so we won't be providing lookouts for crooks instead of witnesses."

"You're sure this won't cause a problem because I'll be acting?"

"Even if the acting job takes a full month, the good you do for recruiting will far outweigh the good you can do as a witness. You might even want to talk to the producers and get them to agree to some demands such as your crusade against drunk driving. It might mean using a bit more of your real background in the movie, but that's going to come out anyway once the Internet finds out your name after your first appearance in court. Right now, you're just their mystery sweetheart."

"A mystery sweetheart?"

"Well, the site I saw doesn't exactly put it that way since it's mostly X-rated. By the way, you might want to restrict your activities to river bottoms like you already did."

"You know about that?" Cheryl exclaimed.

"It's none of my business what you do with your life, but you moaned quite heavily in the tank. It didn't take a scientist to figure out what was happening since Rob was also breathing just as heavily in his tank and our instrument grid placed all six of you in the same location."

"Oh? I didn't know that we showed up on anything like that."

Bill said, "No matter. I'm not bothered by what you did since we're asking a lot of our operatives by requiring that they live in this compound where they'll be safe. Believe me, I've seen more going on in this compound than I'll ever reveal voluntarily."

"Uh, in that case, I will restrict myself to river bottoms if there's a next time. That or a very deep lake. Uh, can we send anyone as far as the ocean?"

"I can arrange it if necessary. Just let me know."

Cheryl said, "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. Um, maybe I should go ahead and say yes to this acting job since it will help you and you're very good at keeping secrets."

Cheryl paused at seeing Rob leaving Heather's room. For a moment she glared at him and thought about not telling him that their secret was known by others. Then she remembered that she hadn't placed any claims on him and she didn't have the right to tell him who he could see, if see was all he had done.

"Rob? Hey, Rob!"

"Yes, Cheryl?" Rob answered as he adjusted his robe about himself.

"We need to talk for a moment in private."

"In private?" Rob asked as he glanced at the doorway he exited.

"Not about that. Something else more important."

"Okay, lead the way."

"He knows?" Rob exclaimed softly.

Cheryl replied, "Yes, he knows, but he's not telling anyone. He caged it more as a precaution I should follow if I get the urge to, well, uh, you know while I'm in phase."

"Well, if he knows, then probably half the staff knows as well. Most of them are good about not divulging anything. Otherwise I'd have been caught for putting dye in a tank."

"You did that?"

"Well, it was Halloween. Just a little devilish prank to have some fun."

"Whatever. Anyway, Bill said I should definitely restrict my activities to places like the river bottom unless I wanted to see myself that way on the Internet. Have you seen the X-rated site they put me on?"

"Uh, that one? You've seen it?" Rob asked.

"Is there more than one?" Cheryl asked.

"Unfortunately, there's more than one with you featured. However, the X-rated one is pretty raunchy."

"I'll say. I've asked our legal department about it. They informed me that the web site hasn't said anything libelous that I can sue it for. Now I guess I'll have to check out the other sites to see what they have to say about my tits and pussy."

"Hot, hot, and hot."

"What's that?"

"What one of the other sites has under your Phaser photo. They labeled you hot, hot, and hot. Probably because of the burning house in the background."

"Well, that's not too bad. Are you featured in any sites?"

"Uh, yeah. On a gay web site."

"You? Gay? Get real!"

Rob said, "I might not be gay, but that doesn't keep me from being featured on one of their sites with my privates showing."

"Well, if you want, I'll testify that you're definitely not gay."

"I wouldn't if I were you or they'll be stalking us to catch us in the act."

Cheryl paused and glanced down the front of Rob's robe. "It would almost be worth it to have a photo of us together. However, I guess I'll have to be content with memories of seeing us do it. On the other hand, I'm willing to give you another shot at me if we can set it up."

"You mean in the river?"

"Yes, or a deep lake or the ocean. Personally, I'd like to try them all eventually."

"Uh, are you looking for some kind of commitment now?" Rob asked.

"I'm not sure. I mean, I like you a lot. We're good friends and we shared some good sex. Maybe I'm saying that we can continue our relationship with only that much between us. Yeah, I know that I got jealous of you the other day and I almost did it again a little while ago when I saw you leave that slut's room. However, I remembered that I don't have any claims on you and what you do with that slut is your

business. I mean, until we both agree to more than we have right now, I don't have any right to interfere."

"Wouldn't having sex again be more than we have right now?"

"Not until I hear us both say that we love the other. I don't hear either of us mentioning eternal love yet."

"No strings?"

"No strings, just flings."

"I guess I can live with that then. Do you want to set it up or should I? It would probably be better if you make the arrangements with the staff."

"Yeah, it probably would seeing as Bill said he could arrange it for me if I'd let him know in advance. Oh, I also wanted to let you know that I was asked to take the starring role in the movie. I've decided to accept."

Chapter 12

Heather entered the control room clad in her robe. Tears streaked her face and she still clutched her cellphone in one hand.

"What's wrong?" Bill asked as Heather came to a stop in front of him.

"Everything's wrong. I thought yesterday was bad, but today's even worse. The studio just notified me that the movie is on hold. Ramsey's attorney threatened to sue them for libel."

Bill said, "That doesn't surprise me. However, I can't imagine any conceivable way for Ramsey to win."

"They could after Ramsey's attorney spelled it out for them. Since he's the only person who ever had a conflict with you as a Phaser, his attorney pointed out that even a loose relationship in the script to what happened would point immediately to Ramsey. Since he was acquitted, they'd consider any movie based on any of the facts as harmful to his business endeavors."

"Business endeavors? Hell, Ramsey doesn't have enough room in his home for another tank. Not according to the police photos I saw of his setup," Jim said as he entered the conversation.

Bill said, "Maybe you should pass that on to the studio and their attorneys. That might help them fight off Ramsey."

"Doesn't matter. Black Diamond is picking up its marbles and putting this project on hold for the time being. Looks like I'll be packing today and leaving as well. I guess I better say goodbye to everyone," Heather replied.

Cheryl said, "You don't look like this is a good time to ask for any favors."

Bill replied, "I don't know, it depends on what you're asking. Haven't you heard about the movie being cancelled?"

"Cancelled? What happened?" Cheryl replied.

"Ramsey threatened to sue the studio for libel, so the studio put the project on hold."

"No, I hadn't heard about that. Maybe that's why I couldn't get through to the producer this morning."

Bill asked, "What was the favor you wanted to ask for?"

"Well, I was hoping that you might send one of Rob's and my Phasers to the river today. Now it doesn't seem like a good idea under the circumstances."

The room's intercom blared, "Attention everyone. We need a witness immediately at the Family First Bank. We have a hostage situation in progress. The police are requesting our assistance."

Bill said, "Looks like you've got something else to do anyway. Our new procedure for hostage situations requires three witnesses. One to stand near the hostages, one to watch the gunmen, and one on the outside to watch for others who might be involved. Stick with Rob on this one so he can show you how it works."

Rob said, "We used to have to use everyone from the day shift for this type of call since we thought it wasn't safe for us to be near ourselves. We also had to be extra careful about not getting too close to each other. This time, it's just you and me. We'll pair off as soon as we reach the area and see what there is that we can help with."

"I'll follow your lead, Rob."

"Okay, watch for what kinds of weapons they have, any explosives they might have rigged, and their descriptions."

Moments later, two tanks sloshed about as Rob and Cheryl's Phasers suddenly sped out toward their destinations. One each of their Phasers arrived inside the bank. The other pairs of Phasers arrived within a block on each side of the bank and walked to take up their position.

Rob One said, "We'll check the hostages and let our second Phasers check out the gunmen."

Rob Three said, "We'll split up and each scan one side of the bank for any lookouts or getaway drivers. If we spot those, we'll notify the police so they can make the capture and maybe get some names for the gunmen inside."

Cheryl Two walked through the bank wall and stopped in front of one of the gunmen. He stared at her momentarily in shock while his AK-47 shifted to aim at her before he realized she wasn't there and couldn't be harmed.

"Oh shit, they've got witnesses already," the gunman said.

Cheryl Two stared calmly at the man and memorized his facial features despite the crude disguise he was wearing. She took her time in looking for visible distinguishing marks that the disguise wasn't covering.

Cheryl said as her recorder took in her words above her tank, "White male armed with an AK-47 assault rifle. He has two clips for it sticking out of one pocket. He's wearing work overalls with a blue cotton shirt. He appears to be in his twenties, has brown eyes, brown hair, and a moustache."

Rob Two walked through the second gunman and turned to face the man who appeared ready to cry after seeing someone pass through him.

Rob spoke into his voice activated recorder, "One gunman, five seven in height, blue eyes, blond hair, scraggy beard, armed with a 9mm. hand automatic."

Cheryl One looked at the tellers who were bound by their hands and ankles and on the floor behind the counter. She smiled softly at them as she did her best to give them confidence in the outcome. Rob One was doing his best to check out the bank manager who was bleeding from a scalp wound where he'd been pistol whipped.

Cheryl Three carefully looked over the car with the grungy interior. It had caught her attention because the engine was running and she discovered it needed even more when she spotted a loose rifle round on the front floorboard on the passenger's side. Cheryl said, "Tell the police that I'm standing beside what appears to be their getaway vehicle. License tag is DAG 131. I don't see any signs of a driver or lookout."

Cheryl's Phasers stood quietly beside Rob's as they watched the police take the two gunmen into custody after the two realized that there was no way to escape. It seemed anti-climatic to her that they meekly set down their weapons and walked out after only a minute of staring at one of her Phasers and Rob's.

Rob One said, "This is good. We kept the situation from escalating into more violence."

"I didn't expect this to be so easy," Cheryl One stated.

Rob One replied, "Sometimes, it's not. One time, I arrived on the scene of another robbery and the gunman saw me first, so he undressed real fast and tried to walk out as if he was a Phaser. However, he had to use the door. The police figured out that he wasn't a Phaser before we could even notify them from our control room radio. You should have seen the surprised look on his face while he kept protesting that he was a Phaser. Of course, they could hear him and finally made it clear to him that he wasn't fooling them. Of course, by then the press was on the scene, so they went ahead and

photographed him since everyone was used to seeing naked people in the paper and on TV. He was sure one embarrassed robber. First time I ever saw one with his hands covering his crotch instead of his face as his picture was taken."

The three Cheryls laughed as she imagined how the scene must have looked. Cheryl One finally asked, "So what do we do now?"

Rob One said, "We'll split up and move about on patrol. Maybe we'll get another chance to help someone."

Cheryl One said, "Yeah, we can set up a rendezvous another time."

Chapter 13

Cheryl said, "Looks like I'm no longer a mystery woman on the web. Sure didn't take them long to get my name."

Rob said, "Well, they probably got that from the police reports after spotting your photo in the news."

Cheryl said, "Yes, I suppose that's where they got it from. I just hope I do a good job in court when the case comes up."

"Most likely, we won't get called to the stand since the police were already there. We usually get called only when we're the only ones to see the crime and the police arrive after the fact. I wouldn't worry about this case."

"I feel sorry now for Heather since the movie was cancelled. I guess it was her big chance to become a star for a change."

Rob said, "Maybe it was. Whatever happens, I think she'll bounce back since she's still got her casting company. As well, she got to experience phasing and not many people get to do that."

"Looks like it's time for us to head over to the control room for our tour. Race you there."

Rob paused as he stood, then laughed. "I think we should keep the races fair and do that when we're in phase. It wouldn't be fair here unless you give me a head start."

Cheryl laughed, then caught herself as her chair reacted wrongly to her laugh. She straightened out her course with a verbal command and remained by Rob's side as they made their way to the control room.

Jim said, "Just got word that you're needed at the river. Possible drowning victim. Be prepared for the worst."

Rob nodded, then asked, "Are you sure you want to go on this call, Cheryl? I can do this by myself if you'd like."

Cheryl said, "I'll get a call like this sooner or later, so I might as well face this now. We'll go together. Besides, it'll take us less time to find a body if we're working together."

The Cheryls and Robs walked to the shore from their arrival points. Divers were already standing by as a small boat pulled into shore with another small, though empty boat in tow.

Rob One said, "We might be lucky that it was merely a boat that got away from a dock somewhere that they found. There might not be a body after all."

"I hope not, but I'm not backing out," Cheryl One replied.

Cheryl Three emerged from the river to stand on the nearest shore and point at the water. Moments later, Cheryl One emerged on the other side and pointed as well. Soon, Robs One, Two, and Three were in position around Cheryl Two to help guide the divers to her as she stood silently beside a submerged body.

The boats with the divers left the shore as soon as Witness Control notified them of the discovery and headed up the river until they spotted the two Cheryls pointing the way. Once between the two Phasers, the divers left the boat. Underwater, they soon found one of the Robs pointing them in the right direction

despite the swirling silt that obscured their vision at times. When the first diver reached the body, Cheryl Two headed for the shore.

Rob One said, "We weren't lucky this time. About the only thing I can suggest to you is that you think of the victim's survivors. Remember that you've erased any doubts from their minds as to whether the victim's alive or not. At least they won't be clinging for days to a false hope that maybe he was swept away and clinging to a tree somewhere or lying hurt on the shore somewhere."

"Yeah, I'll try to think of it that way. However, I don't think I want for us to visit here again for our rendezvous," Cheryl One replied as the Cheryls wiped tears from their eyes.

"I can understand why," Rob One said.

"I'll think of another place for us to have some fun," Cheryl One stated.

Chapter 14

Cheryl whispered to Rob as they left the lounge on their way to the control room. "I've been thinking it over for the past few days. I finally came up with a place where we can have some privacy if you still want to fool around since I still want to."

"You have?"

"Yes, I have and I think it would be a great place to do it. We'll ask control to send us to the top of the tallest building in town. The only way for anyone to see us then would be from the air and the only air traffic near there is during rush hour which is hours away from now. We should be finished well before then."

"Whew! Broad daylight on a rooftop. You better hope that no one can see us or we'll both be on your web site."

"It's not my web site, but at least it will prove once and for all that you're not gay if we're caught."

"Well, that's a thought. I really don't like getting some of the emails from fans that I receive. However, I still hope that we don't get caught since you might find yourself getting some suggestive emails."

Cheryl said, "I'm already getting those. It doesn't take me long to spot those and just delete them after I read a few words. I can't say that I wasn't warned about how I'd be treated by part of the public. Anyway, those weren't as shocking as when I received the first ones."

The Ramsey Phasers arrived inside the Witness Control room and walked around looking at the setup. One stopped suddenly at the sight of seeing Rob in his tank. Immediately, the Ramsey Phasers went over to the controls to see where Rob's Phasers were located. Then just as suddenly, they disappeared.

Bill entered the room just in time to see the Ramseys disappear.

Ramsey's Phasers materialized on the roof behind the Robs and Cheryls. Stealthily, he approached only to be spotted by one of the Robs. Immediately, Rob shifted his Phasers between the Cheryls and the Ramseys.

Rob said, "Recall us. Ramsey just appeared and he looks like he wants a fight."

Bill replied, "Just stall him for a moment, I'm going to join you there," as he hurriedly doffed his clothes while heading for another tank.

"Looks like it's between us this time," the Ramseys spoke.

"You're in violation of the injunction," Rob One said.

"So? Call a cop, if you can. Seems to me that the court's authority ends somewhere in the other world, so let's get it on," the Ramseys replied.

The Rob Phasers waited for the assault that came only moments later. Desperately, the Robs dodged and blocked the swings and kicks that the Ramseys launched. Within seconds, two of the Rob Phasers were lying unconscious on the rooftop.

"Leave them alone!" Bill One ordered as he arrived on the rooftop.

Ramsey One turned to face the new challenge just as Cheryl One caught hold of Rob One to prevent him from falling off the roof in his dazed condition. Ramsey One wasted no time in driving home his attack with a flurry of blows on Bill One.

Bill One struggled to his feet. He felt like he'd had the shit kicked out of him as Ramsey One danced about. For a moment, Bill considered using a secret he alone knew of. Then he realized that he couldn't so long as the others were in the way. For the time being, the fight would be on Ramsey's terms.

"Seeing as none of you are stopping me, I think I'll get me some ass," the Ramseys said.

Cheryl Two ducked under Ramsey One's grab before punching upward into his side. He gasped in surprise. "What the fuck?"

"Not with you," Cheryl One replied as she kicked from behind to connect with Ramsey One's head.

Bill One blinked at the motion as he hadn't known that Cheryl could fight. Even so, he felt sure she wasn't really as good as Ramsey. Now he was seeing otherwise as she held her own against Ramsey's Phasers.

Ramsey Two swept a leg hook out to trip Cheryl One and topple her to the surface. Ramsey Three was about to stomp down on her when Cheryl Three kicked out at Ramsey Three's leg and connected with his knee. She would have followed up with another kick but for Ramsey One slamming a fist upward into her groin. She fell to the surface beside him and felt Ramsey One's hands wrap around her throat.

Cheryl One lifted up a leg and dropped it into Ramsey One's midsection. "Idiot, don't you realize that you can't strangle anyone in phase?"

Bill One said, "Give it up, Ramsey, or I'll finish you off now."

"You don't frighten me," Ramsey Two replied.

"Then I guess you don't know where my other Phasers are now."

Ramsey One snapped, "No, and I don't fucking care. They can't do a thing to me unless they face me here. It won't do you any good to call the cops either unless you want to get a whole bunch of them blown to bits."

Bill One said, "Yes, I've already spotted the explosives you planted in your yard with a lead to a voice activated switch by your body."

"So you're really in my home right now?" Ramsey One asked.

"Believe it and I'm about ready to finish you off. Would you like a demonstration of what I can do? No matter, I'll give you one anyway," Bill One replied.

Ramsey One swung at Cheryl Three and connected with her head to knock her out. Bill One motioned with his hands in front of him with the palms facing each other and separated by only a few inches. As Bill One's hands moved up and down, a glowing ball materialized between them and grew in size until it was the size of a golf ball.

Bill Two finished checking the neighboring homes to Ramsey's house. He had to shoo away only one person to safety.

"RAMSEY, WATCH THIS!" Bill One shouted before moving one hand away and shoving palm first with his other hand at the hovering ball of light.

Immediately, the ball of light shot outward from Bill One toward a brick wall where it vaporized with a flash. When Ramsey One finished blinking his eyes, he saw that there was a hole in the wall. "What the hell?"

"Exactly where you're going now," Bill One said.

Bill Three moved his hands up and down to generate static until a glowing ball the size of a softball hovered between his hands. He removed his hands and then shoved outward with both palms extended against the ball causing it to leap toward the solitary tank in Ramsey's home.

The three Ramseys suddenly disappeared from the rooftop. Rob One stumbled toward Cheryl One and stooped beside her to lift her into his arms while his other Phasers remained unconscious on the rooftop where they had fallen. Cheryls Two and Three ran quickly to the fallen Robs and each took one

into her arms and held him to comfort and protect him.

Bill said, "Recall all of us now. Ramsey is no longer a threat."

Jim answered, "Understood."

Within moments, monitors were assisting Cheryl and Rob from their tanks. Bill climbed from his tank and took his robe from a hook to don it before sauntering over to see how Rob and Cheryl were.

Cheryl asked, "What happened? Why did Ramsey chicken out?"

Bill answered, "He didn't chicken out. He decided to check out another dimension beyond what we can reach now."

One of the monitors announced, "Fire at 2200 East Walnut. Have we got a Witness near there?"

Bill said, "I just checked that address. There was no one alive inside."

The monitor replied, "I'll pass that on to the fire fighters."

Rob asked, "How did you do that whatever it was, Bill?"

"The lightning ball trick?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, that," Rob replied.

Bill said, "Just another of those accidental discoveries I made when I was witnessing regularly. Once I realized that it was the only way for us to physically affect the real world from within phase, I knew right then that it had to remain a secret since I didn't want people fearing us anymore than I wanted the authorities deputizing us as law officers. If either of those happened, we'd find ourselves assuming the role of dictators eventually with one of us in charge and the rest behaving as his army. In the process, too many people would be hurt or killed. For that reason alone, it has to remain a secret for as long as possible."

Cheryl asked, "But doesn't it also mean that someone will someday find a way to use that same secret in reverse against us?"

Bill answered, "Probably, but we'll deal with that when the time comes. Hopefully, we'll make enough of an impact long before then that will reduce the chances of violence taking place. I still have to believe that people can change their ways and settle differences without violence. If I'm wrong, then there are going to be hard times ahead. However, I still think that people want to be peaceful. Despite the Ramseys of the world, I still have faith in that and them. By the way, Cheryl, when did you learn how to fight? I'm still trying to get an instructor to teach you self-defense."

"Me? Need lessons in self-defense? Oh! I know why you're wondering now! I guess I didn't put that on my paperwork since I was thinking that it didn't matter anymore seeing as I'm paralyzed. I used to help teach self-defense when I was in high school. I learned it before then and even won a few local tournaments. If I hadn't been out of practice, I could have taken Ramsey since he isn't as good as I once was."

Bill said, "In that case, you're going to become our self-defense instructor for our newest group of witnesses. You better plan on starting classes next week. Okay?"

Cheryl replied, "I guess I can if you'll help Rob and me with a trip to the ocean. I've heard that there are treasures to be found there that I'm sure Rob would like to explore and find with me."

Bill said, "I can do that. In the meantime, I better contact Heather and let her know that the situation has changed to theirs and our benefit."

Cheryl exclaimed, "Oh god, you mean she'll be back? Uh, could you teach me that ball lightning trick then?"

Bill whispered, "Please, don't even joke about that. Should I take it that you don't like Heather?"

"She grates on my nerves," Cheryl replied.

Chapter 15

Jim said as Bill entered the control room, "You don't look so hot. Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"No, I didn't. We have to talk in private. Your office or mine?" Bill replied.

"This sounds serious."

"It is."

"Then we'll use your office so you can feel more comfortable."

"Might as well. I won't have much need for it soon."

Jim cleared a chair to sit in, then looked Bill square in the eyes. "What's the problem, Bill? Need a vacation?"

"This is more serious than being overworked. Yesterday I killed Ramsey. I couldn't sleep last night because of what I did. I'm calling the DA when we finish to arrange for turning myself in."

"What? I mean, how? The way I heard it, Ramsey was kicking your ass yesterday."

"I could have lived with an ass-whupping if it had stopped at that, but Ramsey threatened to rape one or more of Cheryl's Phasers and I couldn't let the situation escalate beyond that. Two of my Phasers were at Ramsey's residence where I directed one to blast his physical body with lightning ball."

"How? I thought that Phasers couldn't react with the real world."

"That's a myth I've perpetuated since discovering the only way to affect what we'll refer to as the real world."

"Does anyone else know about this?" Jim asked.

Bill answered, "Rob and Cheryl know about it since I demonstrated what I could do on the roof to get Ramsey's Phasers' attention. I could tell that it wasn't going to stop him...That he was going to turn on me and then finish with Rob and Cheryl. However, neither of them know how to create and control ball of lightning, though it might only be a matter of time before someone else discovers how. Regardless, I can't continue on as director of the Witness Corps when I'm a murderer. That's opposite everything we stand for."

"You're positive this is what you intend to do?"

"I have to if I'm to live with myself and not tarnish the corps anymore than I already have. It's going to be difficult enough keeping it going once the news of this breaks."

"Difficult, hell! It might even be impossible. If people begin to wonder when one of us will unleash the lightning at them, it won't be long before we're disbanded and the equipment carted off for military use. We'll might even find ourselves drafted as soldiers. Give this some more thought and think this through more carefully."

"I have thought about it. All night, in fact. Whether I confess now or not, sooner or later someone else is going to discover how to create and control ball lightning and misuse it as I did. We'd only be postponing the inevitable. Besides, if I don't do this, I might as well kill myself since it's the only way I'll find peace of mind."

"Would you like me standing by your side when you call or meet the DA? We've been friends too long for me to just abandon you."

"Thanks, Jim. I appreciate the gesture, but shouldn't you distance yourself so the corps has at least a slim chance of survival?"

"That might be the politically expedient thing to do, but we've had a rule here that we don't abandon each other. It's been a good rule so far and I'm going to stick by it. If the corps sinks, then we'll say goodbye to it together."

"By the way, if the DA decides that I should await trial in a cell, would you see to it that Rob and Cheryl get a day off to spend exploring the ocean? You know, coordinate with one of the coastal cities for a link with their grid."

"Uh, sure, I'll see to that. Sounds like she's trying to make up for some lost time still."

"Can you blame her? Seeing as the project might be cancelled and dissolved, we ought to do whatever we can for her since she might find herself relegated back to her chair permanently then."

"I see your point. Maybe I should step up on some of the random acts of kindness we give out to the operatives."

"Yes, that's a good idea. They deserve whatever we can do in case the worst comes to be."

"Ms. Morrissey, Bill Wheeler here."

"Since when has it been Ms.? I thought we were on a first name basis, Bill?"

"I wish this occasion could be one of those, but I need to speak with you in your official capacity."

"Oh? Mind explaining a bit more then?"

"Ms. Morrissey, I killed a man yesterday and I want to arrange for my arrest and trial."

"You're joking, aren't you?"

"I wish I was, but I killed Ralph Ramsey yesterday in his home."

"I'm aware that his home burned down, but there's been no report of a homicide involved."

"Maybe it didn't look like murder because I used ball lightning to perform the deed, but I'm guilty none the less."

"No, I mean there's been no report of a homicide at that address because there wasn't a corpse found in the rubble."

"Then the ball lightning must have completely obliterated the body. Have someone sift the rubble more thoroughly. I'm certain that there should be some bone remnants there. I saw the ball lightning hit him squarely."

"Bill, I think you better speak with an attorney first since I'll probably have to use what you're telling me now against you in court. Do that, then have your attorney contact me to discuss turning yourself in. I'm going to give you that much consideration now in return for what you've accomplished. At the same time, I'll have investigators return to the scene and go over it with a fine tooth comb. One way or another, we'll resolve this."

Cheryl One said, "I didn't think we'd get to be together so soon, Rob."

Rob One said, "Did you see Bill at all? I expected him to be sending us here instead of Jim."

"Well, Jim said Bill had important business. Anyway, far as I can see, Jim is just as neat as Bill."

"True, he is."

"And I think you're also neat. Ready to do some exploring? I am."

"Are you getting serious about me? This makes our second time together unless we get interrupted once more."

"Maybe I am. I'm still getting to know you and so far I like what I've seen and felt. Not just in a physical way, either. However, you don't have to worry about me getting serious since I'm not looking to tie anyone down to waiting on me when we're not in phase. I'll probably live out my real life as a crippled old maid, but I'll have these moments to remember at least. Do you mind becoming one of my treasured memories for my old age?"

"Uh, no, I don't mind giving you moments of joy to remember. I don't think you'd be tying me down, either, if we did become serious about each other."

"Rob, you don't know what it's like having to see to someone's every need. I've seen the looks in the eyes of the nurses hired to care for me. They didn't have time to talk. I was a job they were paid to handle. Nothing more. My needs were too much for my parents otherwise. Why else do you think I begged and fought for the chance to enter the Witness Corps when I found out I was compatible? If nothing else, I'd have a real job for life and could pay my own way for my needs whether I had a college education or not. At least then anyone caring for me would have to say something to me once in awhile. Had I stayed in school, I had no guaranties that there'd be a job waiting for me upon graduation except out of charity. Even then, it probably would have been an unimportant job meant to show the public that the company was caring. So before you doubt our relationship as selfish on my part, though part of me is, we're together because in this form I can give as well as receive. I won't mind at all if you make a few demands upon me as to how we should fool around since you're entitled to some fond memories just as much as I am."

"I think you're already being overly generous in giving your body to me without any strings attached. Why should I want more?"

Cheryl One answered, "Because I want my pride intact. I'm proud now because I can give as well as receive. Now tell me how I can make our memories as rich as possible. Remember, I'm still in training and can flunk out. These memories might be all we have later."

"Mr. Jessup, Mr. Wheeler, come in and shut the door," DA Morissey said.

She waited for the two men to take seats in front of her desk, then passed a file over to Jessup. He opened the file and briefly glanced through the reports within it.

"I can agree with this for the moment. This ought to prevent any chance of a reprisal against my client since the jail is full of people he helped convict one way or another. Bill, for the time being, the case against you will be listed as the People vs. John Doe. Ms. Morissey is willing to permit you to remain within the Witness compound since you really can't go anywhere without an armed escort. As well, this will head off any immediate problems with public distrust of the Witness Corps."

"Bill, this is one case I don't want to see go to trial because of how it will disserve the public in the long run. What's worse is that I have only your confession that a crime even took place since my investigators failed to even find a granule of bone inside the rubble. Are you sure you don't want to recant your statement? If you do, you can return to the compound and continue on with your work as before while we forget this took place."

Bill replied, "Ms. Morissey, I can't. Not and have a clear conscience."

Morissey said, "Okay, then wait a moment while I summon the Police Chief to make the arrest. For now, we'll restrict who knows you're under arrest to as few people as possible. I think the Chief values his job enough to keep this quiet. Mr. Jessup, you'll find my office more than willing to discuss the aspects of this case whenever you have any questions. My secretary will be informed to see to it that any calls from you are given to me immediately. No going through in-betweens. Okay?"

Jessup nodded.

Chapter 16

Rob said, "Good morning. I understand that you're all eager to begin since you learned that the Witness Corps is serious about offering you the opportunity to join. Do any of you know Cheryl Brooks?"

"I do!" one of the wheelchair bound participants responded.

Rob said, "Good, then you'll have no difficulty recognizing her when she walks in here in a few more minutes."

"That's a good one. She's worse off than me. At least I can move my arms."

Rob said, "Regardless, she's going to show you something that we didn't suspect until she forced us to give her the opportunity to try out after learning that she was compatible. In fact, here she comes now. I wish she could speak with you, but I think you're all aware already that sound doesn't carry from the phase dimension to ours."

There was a gasp from the man who knew Cheryl. Then he waved at her and said, "My god! She's more beautiful than I ever suspected. I mean, she's beautiful 'cause she's walking! Damn it, she's walking! How is she walking? Will phasing cure our paralysis?"

Rob said, "If you'll all give me your attention, I'll explain what I know," as another wheelchair bound person was assisted into the room.

"Someone tell me, is he serious?" the newcomer asked.

The man who knew Cheryl replied, "Damn straight, he's serious. He's got Cheryl beside him right now and she's doing everything but talking to us."

The newcomer said, "Well, I'm compatible, but I wasn't invited. Is this part of what it means to be black?"

Rob quickly counted the participants and realized that he had one too many. "And you are who, sir?"

"I'm Mr. Jerome J. Jones. You must be a honkie."

Rob quickly wrote down the name and shoved his clipboard in Cheryl One's direction. She quickly hurried over to read what he wrote, then reported to the control room, "Rob's got a problem. He's got someone who wasn't invited at the recruitment meeting. He wants to know what to do. The man is being abusive."

"Jim! Cheryl needs some guidance!" her monitor shouted.

"I'm still waiting for an answer, honkie."

Rob replied, "I'm in contact with the Witness Corps now through one of Cheryl's Phasers. I'll give you an answer as soon as I know what the answer is. In the meantime, can I answer any other questions?"

Jim said, "He's not responding to your other Phasers?"

Cheryl replied, "Not in the least. I think he's blind."

A staff member arrived at their side, "Here's his test record, Jim. Cheryl's right. He's blind as well as wheelchair bound."

Jim said, "This isn't good. I'm not sure how he can point out a witness in court if he can't see who he saw while in phase. That's assuming he regains sight in phase."

The staffer exclaimed, "Regain? He's been blind from birth."

Cheryl said, "Maybe there's some other job he can do that doesn't require testifying."

Jim said, "It wouldn't be right to always assign him to dredging for bodies or entering fires."

Cheryl said, "I'd have taken that if that was all you could offer even though I can see."

Jim asked, "Are you asking me to give him a chance?"

"I'll beg if I have to. I think everyone who's willing to try deserves the chance."

Jim noticed a tear coming from Cheryl's closed eyes. Then he said, "Tell Rob to bring Mr. Jones with the others. He'll have his chance."

Cheryl One smiled and nodded while pointing to Jerome. Even as Rob spoke, the participants in the meeting began to roar and cheer with approval.

Rob said, "Mr. Jones, I've received permission to include you. If you have any questions, please ask them now before we head for the bus."

"You're going with us, man! You're in!"

"Attaboy, Jerome!"

"Who said boy? My name is Mr. Jones."

Rob said impatiently, "Mr. Jones, do not start any arguments or become a problem. Otherwise, I'll take it upon myself to leave you here. If you need assistance getting on the bus, I'll gladly help you, but I'll not tolerate your mouthing off. You'll see our bus outside waiting."

Jerome replied sarcastically, "Yeah, man. So, like what's a bus look like?"

Jim said, "We don't have enough restraints on hand. If anyone is capable of sitting upright without assistance, I need to know now. Otherwise, one of you won't be phasing with the group."

Bill walked in, glanced about at the wheelchairs in abundance with naked men and women in them. He nodded, then headed for his office without a word.

"Rob, go ahead and get them situated. I need to speak with Bill," Jim instructed.

"How did it go, Bill?" Jim asked.

Bill answered, "Not too bad. I'm under the equivalent of house arrest."

"You don't sound happy about that."

"Should I be happy when they treat me differently from the criminals we help capture?"

"I don't know. Do you mind telling me what transpired?"

"I get the feeling that they want to whitewash what happened. Now I've got a foul taste in my mouth. I just hope we're not giving those people out there another false hope if they find themselves whole again only to have my stupidity yank the carpet from under them."

"Even giving them a few moments of wholeness is better than nothing. I went ahead and accepted one more than we asked to participate after he heard about the meeting through the grapevine. Hope you don't mind."

"Why ask me? I'm not the director. You are."

"The way you sound right now is worse than one of the recruits. He went to the meeting with a chip on his shoulder. At least, he had some valid reasons for acting that way. I don't think you do. Not when we're all trying to help you."

"Are you involved in what took place at the DA's office?"

"Would I ask if I already knew what happened?"

"No, I guess not. You're not as secretive or devious as I am. Right now, they're listing the case as the People against John Doe. I'm John Doe in case it's not obvious."

"Okay, it does sound like they're trying to do something, but it might not be for your benefit as much as ours. They could be trying to dilute the effects your case will have on the Witness Corps."

"Of course they're doing it for that reason. That doesn't mean I have to like getting kid glove treatment."

"Well, you're spoiling their efforts. Besides that, if you don't quit looking and acting like the Earth fell on you, you'll have everyone trying to cheer you up and getting involved. You encouraged everyone to care, not that they didn't already."

Bill replied, "Um, yeah, you're right about that. I'll have to act as though everything is fine and dandy. This is sure going to hurt when it comes out, though."

"We'll deal with that when it happens. Now, if you really want to help the charade and possibly prevent the Witness Corps from going under in the city where it started, then why not go out and give everyone a hand with the recruits? It wouldn't be typical if you didn't."

"Oh shit. Something's happened to me," the Jerome Phasers exclaimed.

"Can you see me?" Cheryl One asked.

"I'm not sure. I mean, what's it like to see?"

Cheryl One said, "Try to concentrate on speaking through only one of your Phasers. Then tell me if things begin to change."

Cheryl One moved one foot to the side.

Two of the Jeromes shouted, "Something just happened! I don't know what it was!"

Cheryl One stepped back to where she had been standing.

"It happened again, only not the same way as before!" Jerome Three exclaimed.

Cheryl One said, "I think you're seeing me move."

Jerome Three exclaimed, "That's you? You mean I can actually see? Are there three of me? Which ones are me so I can see myself?"

Cheryl One walked to the side as the Jeromes stared at her until she was standing beside Jerome Two. "I'm standing beside one of you, Jerome. This is what you look like."

The Jeromes were all staring at each other as soon as Jerome Two figured out which people were staring at him. Then the Jeromes stared around at the other people. After a minute, Jerome One asked, "So, how do I tell the honkies from the bros?"

Rob One stated, "Well, you called me a honky. A bit derogatory, but accurate otherwise."

Jerome One said, "I don't see the difference. Our, uh, faces are different and we're different heights, but I still don't see the difference."

Rob One said, "Are you sure? Watch me as I move about," before moving to stand beside another black man who was crying over just being able to stand. "The man beside me is black, while I'm considered white or honky to you."

Jerome said, "I don't see the difference other than like before. I can see that his face is different and he's taller, but what makes him black?"

Cheryl One said, "Rob, I think Jerome is color-blind. That or he hasn't had enough time to adjust to seeing things."

Rob One replied, "His eyes might be color-blind, but his mind isn't."

"Hey man, I expected this to be a whole package, not a stripped down deal," the Jeromes said.

Cheryl said to her tank technician, "I think we need some help here with Jerome. Is Bill available?"

Rob One said, "We don't control how well you can walk or see. You get whatever phasing gives. You'd think that you would be grateful that you're standing and can see at all. No, you're next to impossible about trying to please."

Jerome One said, "Standing isn't such a big deal. I used to do that quite well on my own until a honky took my legs from me."

Rob One said, "Then I'd guess that you blame God for taking your sight."

"So what if I do?" Jerome One replied.

Bill One said, "Mr. Jones, you and I are going to have a talk. What I've got to say isn't something you want to hear, but you're going to hear it or I'll have you recalled right now and sent packing."

Jerome One replied, "Yeah? So, what have we got to talk about?"

"You, your attitude, and the chance that you can have access to sight and full mobility. I think that's plenty to talk about."

"This some sort of a threat?"

"Yes, this is a threat. Life is full of threats. Some we survive, some we don't. I'm not going to try to explain why life dealt you a rotten hand so far. However, I can explain why you'll get another rotten hand to play if you don't take my threats seriously."

"Okay, so get on with it, man."

"First off, you're not going to become a Witness, no more than I'm one now."

"Say what?"

"When I'm not in phase, I'm nearly blind. Because of that, I can't testify in court since I can't identify people who I can see perfectly well while in phase. You're already beginning to experience color and now know why some people are called black and others white or whatever color society calls them. However, no matter how well your sight develops while in phase, you'll never be able to testify in court as to who you saw doing a criminal act because you won't be capable of pointing to the correct person. Remember, you won't have the advantage of hearing any of the defendants until you have to face them in court, so you can't rely on your hearing to save you. In phase, we're as good as deaf to the rest of the world. We can only hear and touch each other. That's why you won't become a Witness. On the other hand..."

"It's not fair taking this away from me."

"As I was saying, on the other hand, there are other jobs that our operatives can do that don't require testifying in court. You'll probably be offered one of those instead. I say probably because everything depends upon you right now. Either you shape up your attitude toward others and yourself, or you're going to be cut off from any chance of joining the Witness Corps before you even get started in training. That's the deal the Witness Corps has to offer you. Either take it or leave it, but don't go blaming them for what you can't do."

"My attitude, huh? So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"First off, try to be friendly with the people around you. Most of them have the same problems as you, but they're coping with those and adjusting to whatever else comes along. Just remember, we can't help anyone who won't help himself. As well, many of us aren't likely to help anyone who tries to bite our hands off."

"Yeah? Tell you what, you try to take this from me now and I'll see you in court."

Bill snapped back, "Doesn't bother me what you threaten to do, especially since you haven't thought through what will happen."

"Oh yeah, what?"

"First off, if you lose, then you're out for certain."

"I don't plan on losing."

"Secondly, even if you win in court, you'll lose since you'll open up the door to everyone else who's either in a wheelchair or blind. By the time you get another turn in the tank, you'll have forgotten what it's like to stand or see."

"Say what?"

"You don't understand me? I'll explain it a bit better to you then. We have only a limited number of tanks and staff to handle phasing. If you win in court, everyone else who wants the same as you is going to sue for equal time in phase. With your win setting a precedence, they'll win as well. Once that happens, you'll have to wait in line to use a tank. That's what I'm saying. The other thing I'm saying is that you have to be sociable or there won't be anyone willing to turn on the equipment so you can phase. Okay, so you don't want to be friends with anyone. That's fine with me. Personally, I'd rather not be friends with a bigot. On the other hand, bigot or not, I can still work with someone who'll at least be civil and sociable toward me. Most of the people I know in the Witness Corps are very much like me in that respect. So, deal with it or forget the whole deal."

"I'm a bigot?" Jerome One asked.

"As big as any I've ever seen or met since you're blaming an entire group for something done to you by one person. I could understand you hating a group if they were of the same kind of thinking and one of their group's members was responsible. Not in this case, though."

"Just trying to excuse your own treatment of people, if you ask me."

Bill said, "Recall him. Then let him sit in the tank until the rest return. Maybe he'll use the time to think about his situation some more."

Jim asked, "Are you sure about this? He could probably sue us then."

"Then make your own decision on what to do since you're acting director, but he's already threatening to sue."

"What makes you think this is the right way to handle him?"

"I don't know what the right way is. All I know is that I've had enough of him since he doesn't listen to reason."

"Then just let him be for now. Just let him enjoy his four hours without anyone trying to recruit him or change his mind about anything."

Bill One said, "I've just spoken with the acting director. He just instructed us to let you have what's left of your four hours. Then I guess it's going to be up to you whether you go home or remain in the compound. Unless you want to talk sociably about something, just leave me alone for now. Believe me, I've got problems worse than yours."

Jerome One replied, "Nothing's worse than a problem that's with you for life."

Chapter 17

Rob left the office, then made his way to the control room just in time to phase out with Cheryl. Two of each of their Phasers went to the training site. One each arrived inside a lake within the city.

Cheryl Three said, "Well, this isn't as good as last time with all three of our Phasers..."

Rob Three interrupted, "It's not going to happen today. I wanted to tell you before we left that we might as well have all our Phasers working on training."

"What? Something's wrong here. Did I do something wrong? I'll do whatever it is you want."

"It's not that. What little I can tell you isn't going to explain a thing to you. For that reason alone, I'm asking you to trust me, but we can't do this right now. We have to stop this now before we hurt someone."

"I didn't think I hurt you."

Rob Three replied, "Not me. You haven't hurt me, but what we want to do together can hurt someone. Please trust me and don't ask anything more. I'm not happy about saying something like this to you. Not in the least."

"I don't see how what we want to do can hurt anyone if we don't talk about this. Also, I don't have the slightest problem about confessing to the world that we had sex twice. I mean, six times, if you count all our Phasers individually."

"Cheryl, whether we like it or not, our situation might be talked about anyway in a way that we don't want to see happen since it could become a weapon in someone else's hands. I spent two hours this morning in a private interview that I can't even mention anything more about other than to tell you that I'm convinced that we'll hurt someone if we continue. Damn it, but I don't like telling you no. By the way, your Phaser didn't have to kick me so hard just now in the training demonstration."

Cheryl Three wiped her eyes, then said, "Sorry, I'm transferring my feelings too broadly. I'm not taking this well at all."

"Apology accepted. Very likely, you'll find out only too soon what this is about, but I was ordered not to say anything. I hope I didn't violate that order by telling you this much."

"You were ordered not to fuck me?" Cheryl Three demanded to know.

"No, I was ordered not to talk about my interview. Believe me, what's happening right now is even worse than when Ramsey kicked my ass. That's all I can tell you."

"And you can't tell me anything?"

"If I do, I could wind up hurting you and others. For now, just trust me."

"Then what should we do now?"

Rob Three answered, "I guess we could just patrol this area unless you want to hitch a ride to the training area."

Jim was waiting beside Cheryl's tank when her Phasers returned. "You might want us to dress you since you're wanted for an interview."

"An interview? About what?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. However, this is an official function and you might want to wear something."

"I can't remain naked? You mean I'm going outside the compound?"

"You'll still be inside the compound. It was decided that it would be safer holding the interview here instead of exposing you to attack by transporting you elsewhere. Still, I think it would be a courtesy on your part if you let us dress you. I can have whatever clothes you'd like to be seen in brought over from your quarters."

"Who's interviewing me?"

"The District Attorney."

"Oh, as a Witness?"

"Yes, as a Witness."

"Well, I was warned that I'd have to get dressed for official functions as a Witness. Looks like I'll have to testify about that bank robbery after all. Could you have my black skirt, a white blouse, and my tartan jacket brought over. Oh, um, my black flats and some hosiery too, not that I'll really need those."

Jim said, "Okay, we'll get those brought over while we get you dried off."

"You're not going to even ask how the training went?"

He replied, "Judging from the remarks I overheard the recruits making, I think the training went well. They were impressed. Most of them are hopeful that they can even become half as good."

Cheryl asked, "What about Jerome? What was his reaction?"

"About the same until he found himself on his back after you gave him a chance to challenge you. To put it in his words, you're one bitch who deserves respect."

"I'm not sure whether he can cut it. He still remains away from the others and he still mouths off."

"Okay, well you can blame me for keeping him on. Maybe some of Bill's idealism wore off on me."

Anyway, I've got to try at least once."

"Oh god, Jessica! You can't mean that," Cheryl cried out.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't bring this about. I explained to you that I tried to give Bill an out, that he could recant his confession in light of our failure to find a body."

"I don't know if I can bring myself to testify against Bill."

Jessica Morrissey said, "I'm not asking you to testify against him. All I want right now is to hear what happened in your own words. What I'm asking you to do right now is help me find a way to get this reduced or thrown out. I don't want to prosecute the one man responsible for making this city twice as safe as it used to be. If it wasn't for him coming up with the idea of creating a Witness Corps in the first place after discovering phasing with his friends, our crime rate would still be just as bad as it was five years ago. That's all I'm asking. Keep in mind that Bill intends to plead guilty, so there won't be any need for you to testify unless it's as a character reference in a last ditch effort to get him the lightest sentence possible. So, just tell me what happened in your own words."

Cheryl glanced about her with the aid of her wheelchair's mirrors, then whispered, "I'm sorry, Rob, for misunderstanding earlier today. I just had an interview as well. It all makes sense now."

Rob quietly replied, "Then you understand why we..."

"Yes, I understand. We've got his future and that of the Corps to consider. I guess I'll have to be satisfied with the two memories I have."

"Or six, depending on how you count those."

"Yeah, or six. Believe me, they're even more special to me now. If I never get the opportunity again, I'll love you if only because you shared yourself with me so that I'd have these memories."

"I'll love you for letting me be the one in your memories."

Cheryl asked, "Can I ask you one more favor?"

"Sure, you can."

"Could you undress me? I feel kind of itchy in these clothes."

Bill's cries were too loud to be missed by the guard who was roving the compound as part of the overall security. Though he didn't enter Bill's room, he did use his radio to call the control room. Within minutes, Jim arrived at the door and knocked quietly.

"Come in," Bill sobbed.

"Bill? What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep, I can't eat right. Now I'm seeing hallucinations."

"Hallucinations?"

"I saw him tonight right here in my room. Just pointing at me. Why can't the trial get started so I can get this over with? I can't stand it with Ramsey's memory haunting me."

"You saw who? Ramsey?"

"Yes, I saw Ramsey. He stood in front of my bed and pointed at me for killing him."

Jim moved to sit beside his friend and comfort him with an arm for support. "I don't know the answers, Bill. All I know is that the DA is gathering the evidence she needs so that the case will hold up against appeal after it's over. She told me that much when she came here to interview Rob and Cheryl. Other than that, I'm pretty much in the dark. I tried asking her myself when the trial would take place, but she said court availability was still a factor despite the lower crime rates. Something about civil cases still clogging the pipes. She guessed that it could be another two to four weeks from now."

Bill exclaimed, "Two or four more weeks? How long does it take for the guilty to be sentenced anyway? It shouldn't have taken the two weeks that have gone by as it is."

"She's got to go by her procedures. Anything less would be an invitation to disaster for everyone involved. Maybe even you if the appeals court decides you weren't treated fairly. I mean, if you're determined to be found guilty, then you don't want an error vacating the sentence and freeing you."

"I am guilty, damn it!"

Jim said, "I need your help. There are but the two of you who I can ask since you're the only two operatives directly involved. I think Bill might be suicidal and I'm going to need your assistance in monitoring him."

Cheryl said, "Sure, I'll keep an eye on him when I'm not instructing."

Jim shook his head. "I don't mean it like that. It's when he's alone at night that I'm most concerned about. I'd like the two of you to take turns watching him from in phase."

Rob asked, "Won't that cause us to exceed the safety limits?"

Jim answered, "Rob, we really don't know how long is safe within phase. We use four hours because that's the longest we ever conducted a test before concluding that the twelve hours of triple phase acquired in that four hours would have to be enough for our purposes. We tried to always err on the side of safety, even though it meant that we were left with a lot of unanswered questions and a lot of unasked questions as we've lately discovered. We didn't have any reason to initially suspect that phasing would restore body functions that were disabled in this world. Until Bill admitted what he did, I didn't even suspect that there was actually any way possible to affect this world from the next. Sure, I speculated on those before. But that was long ago and dismissed because I lacked scientific evidence. Now I'm having to rethink everything I once dismissed as impossible."

Cheryl asked, "Then you want us to spy on him at night?"

Jim answered, "From within the walls so he can't see you. I don't want him seeing either of you in phase and mistaking you for another hallucination."

"Another?" asked Cheryl as Rob shuddered at the thought of being inside a wall.

"He told me that he sees Ramsey pointing... accusing him at night."

Rob said, "It's no wonder that he's pleading guilty if this has him that torn up. I wish he could be brought to understand that what he did was necessary. It might not make it feel right to him, but it had to be done or others would have died besides Megan."

Cheryl asked, "What happened with Black Diamond? I thought they were coming back."

Jim answered, "I put them off after Bill made me acting director. I didn't want him getting caught between them and justice. I'm certain that once the media finds out, they'll crucify him no matter what the courts think is fair."

"Then we can still expect them eventually?" Cheryl asked.

Jim nodded.

Chapter 18

"Morning, Rob, get enough rest?"

"I'm rested enough, Jim. Bill seemed to get more sleep last night now that the trial date's been set. He can't wait for the trial to begin. He keeps on working on his guilty plea when he's awake as if he has to make himself appear even worse than Ramsey was."

"He's a true idealist whose vision of a peaceful world was shattered by his own desire to protect others. I don't think he understands that it's okay under those circumstances to commit violence. Necessary, in fact. Anyway, take it easy until it's time for training to commence. No sense wearing yourself out. Are you certain that you're not experiencing any side effects from the extra phasing?"

"I'm positive. However, I think I'll let Cheryl take the first shift tonight if that's okay with both you and her."

"I'm fine with that. If she says yes, then consider it a done deal."

Cheryl One walked up to the wall of the compound as she had in the early hours of the same day,

then concentrated her thoughts on another of her Phasers as she moved into the wall until only her eyes broke through. She hoped that the wall picture would prevent her nose and cheeks from being seen by Bill should he happen to glance in her direction. Even as her eyes filled with the vision of Bill's room, she felt something that shouldn't have been possible. For a moment, she was startled until the body she barely came into contact with turned around to stare at her.

Instantly, she attacked.

"Jim! Get a guard to Bill's room! Ramsey isn't dead!" Cheryl shouted into her recorder and loud enough for everyone in the control room to hear.

Just as quickly as Cheryl One attacked, Cheryl directed her other two Phasers toward Bill's quarters in case Ramsey had all three of his Phasers near by. She kicked, elbowed, punched, and ducked as she pummelled the Ramsey Phaser with everything she could remember within her martial ability. Ramsey was on the floor cowering until the door to Bill's quarters opened. Then Ramsey disappeared as the light fell upon him.

Cheryl One motioned to the guard only to see the guard shake his head no.

"I'm positive that I encountered another Phaser and I'm just as positive that it was Ramsey. I've seen him up close before and fought him before. It was him. There's no doubt in my mind."

Jim said, "That would explain why the DA's investigators didn't find a body then."

Rob said, "Yeah? Well, try convincing Bill of this first. I don't think the DA is going to be half as difficult to sell this idea to."

Cheryl exclaimed, "It's not an idea! I fought the creep and was wiping the floor with him. This wasn't like on the roof when I was out of practice. I'm very much into practice now and Ramsey's definitely no match for me. I think the only reason he left was because he didn't want the guard to see him and confirm what I'm telling you. If the guard hadn't arrived, I probably would have been fighting all three of him with all three of my Phasers."

Jim said, "I'm not doubting you. I don't think Rob is, either. What we're saying is that Bill's not going to believe any of us until we have some proof and proof of anything within Phase is nearly impossible unless it's seen and recorded."

Rob said, "Put cameras in Bill's room then."

From the tank, Cheryl said, "Better yet, put Bill in another room and put someone else in Bill's room. Face it, Ramsey's smart and he's not going to show up if he finds new wires in the walls. Those can't be hidden from someone in phase."

"And give that person a video camera. It can be hidden under the covers where there won't be any wires for Ramsey to discover," Rob added.

Jim said, "The other question that hasn't been stated yet is where is Ramsey hiding out? If we knew that, we could pick him up and produce positive proof to Bill that he's not guilty of murder."

Cheryl said, "In that case, we should contact Jessica and tell her what we know now. Whether she believes us or not, she has a right to know since she's trying not to convict Bill. This might give her something to work with. I don't know what, but hopefully she'll know how to use it."

Jim said, "I think you're right. At least this will reduce our problems by one, if Bill can be found innocent after all."

"What other problems do we have?" Cheryl asked.

Jim said, "Poor choice of words. I meant my problems, not ours. Philadelphia notified me today that they tried phasing someone who was blind from birth just like Jerome and it didn't work. The subject remained blind. They want to know why and I don't have an answer for them. Bill was always our strongest at theorizing. He was and is our visionary. At least, I hope he will be."

Rob said, "Then why not ask Bill? Give him something to do besides rewrite his guilty plea."

Cheryl said, "I agree. Give Bill something constructive to do with his time. I wish Bill would give Jerome another crack. Somethings got to give sooner or later with him."

Jim said, "I'm not certain about putting those two together again. You've made more headway with Jerome than Bill managed. For now, I think you're the better choice."

Rob said, "One thing is for certain. If Ramsey is still alive, then the lessons you're giving are far more important than we thought in the last few weeks. You better push everyone as far and as quickly as you can if only to protect them from him later since there's no telling when he'll strike."

Jim said, "Rob's right. You're going to have to push everyone in self-defense and I'll back you one hundred percent. We're not going to have another memorial service because of Ramsey."

"Okay, I'll push them. I suppose I'll have to teach killing blows."

Jim said, "I don't see why not. After all, it's either them or Ramsey when it comes down to it. Ramsey has already killed, so they deserve to know whatever is needed for their own protection. Oh, I see where you're getting with this. Jerome, right?"

"Exactly. He might use what I teach him to get even with those he feels represents a threat to him. At least those he can face in phase since otherwise he's almost as paralyzed as I am. Blind, to boot. Still, blind or not, he's more than my equal on Earth."

Jim said, "I think he really respects you enough to leave you alone here."

Chapter 19

Cheryl entered the wall in three places, though only one Phaser was situated so she could see within the room. She hoped that Ramsey showed--and she hoped he didn't. She wanted him to show so she could prove once and for all that Ramsey was alive. On the other hand, she knew that she'd have to do her best to kill him since she was the only witness who knew he was alive. She knew that he'd try to kill her. She could only hope that if she had misjudged his ability that her death would be conclusive proof to Bill that he hadn't killed Ramsey. Still, there was that doubt in her mind that if she killed Ramsey, she wouldn't be able to prove that he had been alive since she wouldn't know where his body was located unless Jim and the other staffers were successful in triangulating on him before he died. She held that doubt because there wasn't any anomaly recorded during his entrance as had happened before.

Within a short while, she was glad that she had phased in earlier than usual. She was in position when she felt something brush just slightly against one of her Phasers. She waited only a few seconds more before springing from the wall while her physical body gave the alarm.

"Jim! He's back! I'm going in after him!"

Cheryl One struck out at the nearest Ramsey Phaser before she realized with a slight shock that there were more than three of him.

"My god! There's eight of him!"

"What?" Jim exclaimed as he stood beside Cheryl's tank before running for the control panels. "Call in any operatives you can reach!"

Cheryl replied, "I've already got all my Phasers there."

Jim replied, "Not you, Cheryl! I'm talking to the staff. Stall him if you can. Otherwise, get the hell out of there!"

Cheryl Two struck out at one of the Ramsey Phasers with a kick, then elbowed another that came up behind her. Before another Ramsey Phaser reached her, Cheryl Three drove a flying kick into the same Ramsey at the knee, breaking it.

"Are you recording this?" Jim asked over the radio.

"They're here already?"

"Open your eyes and move the your covers! Cheryl says that she's got eight Ramseys fighting her right now."

"Oh god! She's right! I'm recording it now!"

"Good! Now we've got proof that Ramsey's alive. I'm sending for Bill so he can return to his room. Then he can see the truth with his own eyes."

Cheryl One doubled over as two of the Ramseys kicked her in the stomach. Then one of them went down as Cheryl Three leaped up and drove an elbow down into his skull. Cheryl Two swept a leg out and around to knock another Ramsey off his feet before feeling two more Ramseys grab her from behind.

Jim exclaimed, "Get your sorry ass back into your room and take a look at what's happening. I don't have anymore time to explain, Bill. Rob! Are you ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be. Send us!" Rob replied.

Jim nodded at the technicians who then began closing the circuits on several of the phase tanks.

Cheryl said, "Shit! There's nine of them now!"

Rob hollered, "Cheryl! We're coming! Hold on, Darling!"

Cheryl One ducked the swing from one Ramsey only to feel another trip her. She kicked out wildly into the crowd to connect with yet another Ramsey. Then she felt two more grab her while another Ramsey moved in to punch her.

Rob One leaped onto the back of the nearest Ramsey and grabbed desperately for the Phaser's eyes. Even as he tried to gouge them out, another operative hit the Ramsey beside him and bowled that Ramsey over.

Then more operatives from the Witness Corps entered the fray as they each sought out the nearest Ramsey and kicked or punched him. Within moments, the Ramseys knew that they were both outnumbered and beaten. Without a word among them, three disappeared. Then the other six disappeared as well.

Bill slumped wearily against the doorframe. He hadn't expected to see a riot taking place in his room, especially one between nine Ramseys and fifteen operatives. Cheryl One limped over to stand in front of Bill. Though she hurt from the beating she took while outnumbered, he couldn't help but see her smile weakly despite the tears flowing from his eyes.

Cheryl said, "I think you better have Bill come over here so we can talk. He appears to be in shock as well."

Jim responded, "Good idea. I'm bringing all of you back as well so we can check you out. You, in particular."

"No argument from me, Jim. I was ready for three Ramseys, but not nine. Any idea how he did that?"

"Some, but I think I'll discuss it with Bill since he's good at theorizing."

Jim asked, "What do you think, Bill?"

Bill replied, "Don't rush me. I'm still trying to absorb what I saw. There are several angles capable of explaining this."

"Sorry, Bill, but we might not have the time to spare under the circumstances. Ramsey's dangerous and this makes him even more so, especially if he can exponentially duplicate himself."

"Okay, one possibility is that he might have figured out how to exponentially duplicate himself. If that's the case, then there's probably nothing we can do for now other than always have our operatives work together in small groups. On the other hand, it might be possible that the ball lightning I used caused him to break into three people. Perhaps the extra power caused the process to convert energy from the other dimension into matter to make up the difference when he became three people. If that's the case, then we're not going to see more than nine of him. Keeping our people in small groups will still be our best response."

"But to cause a split into three people? Wouldn't that imply..."

"That we somehow found a missing link to the teleporter solution and sent him somewhere? Yes, it might. It might very well imply that we didn't use enough power because we were always conservative in

our thinking and actions. However, we don't have any way yet of knowing if using more power is the solution or merely another problem in disguise. For all we know, Ramsey might have been using more power than we were to begin with. Maybe that was what made him violently aggressive toward us. We still don't have the slightest inkling as to what motivated his behavior. Furthermore, the only way we're going to find out or at least eliminate some of our theories is if we test some of these theories."

"Add more power to one of our tanks?" Jim asked.

"With a volunteer in the tank."

Jim said, "This is risky. If one of your theories is right, then we stand to create another enemy."

"If I'm wrong about that, then we stand to solve the teleporter problem and our work won't be for nothing. At any rate, I'll be ready to test this when you have the necessary modifications in place," Bill replied.

Jim asked, "What makes you think that you should be the test subject if we even test this?"

"Haven't I always been the test subject? Didn't I come up with the first breakthrough solution?"

Jim asked, "You mean about reducing the computer load by scanning and recording only one DNA molecule, the brain waves, and the constituent components?"

"Yes, I guess I mean that one."

Jim said, "In that case, I say no since you're too important to lose. As well, if you become evil, then we're sunk for certain. Someone else will have to be the test subject this time. The last thing we want is for there to be three of you, all as evil as Ramsey."

Bill said, "I seriously doubt that he became evil as a consequence of using his phase unit. Whatever his motives were, I feel certain that he had those to begin with. However, I'll agree with you on one thing. We're not testing anything until we're sure that we can do it without duplicating ourselves. The world is overpopulated enough without us adding to the problem."

Jim said, "As well, I'm concerned about whether the end result is stable enough to remain viable. For all we know, Ramsey could still disappear permanently without warning if he became three people and they're not stable enough to exist for more than a short while."

Cheryl said, "I think he's three people now since three of the Phasers disappeared when the cavalry arrived."

Rob said, "She's right. The others disappeared with a stunned look on their faces after seeing three of them leave."

Bill said, "Okay, that's more evidence for us to consider. In fact, if Ramsey was that stunned by his own actions, then there's a chance he might be arguing with himself right now. If so, I hope he picks a fight that he can't run away from."

Chapter 20

Jessica faced the bench and said, "Your Honor, the people move to have this case dismissed. Information has come to this office concerning what we believed was the decedent which gives us reason to believe that he is not dead. In fact, no fewer than ten people have been found who can testify about seeing him alive since the day he was believed to be killed. As well, the defendant has recanted his confession with this department concurring in his action."

"These people are trustworthy and weren't bought off?"

Jessica answered, "Sir, not only did seven of them see him at the same time, one of them even managed to record him on videotape. Of the other three who saw him, all three were law officers in another jurisdiction who saw him shortly after he was alleged to have died. In fact, they rendered assistance to him without knowing who he was at the time or that the story he gave them was false. I will even personally vouch for the accuracy of their statements."

"I see. Then, under the circumstances, as counsel for the defense appears to agree since I haven't heard any objection, this case is dismissed."

Jessica said, "Your Honor, one more matter has come to my attention concerning what was

considered the late Ralph Ramsey in that he violated a court order to remain away from Witness Corps operations on more than one occasion. On at least three occasions, he actually entered their compound which is clearly a violation of the court order. I wish for you to issue a bench warrant ordering his arrest and trial."

"Granted."

Jim said, "Well, Bill, Jessica's investigators found only tire tracks in a field where we isolated the most likely Ramsey triangulation coordinates."

"What kind of tire tracks? From trucks?" Bill asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

Bill said, "Sounds to me like Ramsey was busy after I first tricked him and more than a little concerned about keeping his operation intact. At any rate, it sounds like he prepared alternate phase units for his use in case someone tried to get into his home past the explosives he planted. I guess we won't know until the police capture him. That's if they can make him talk."

"Well, if he's mobile, the police aren't going to catch up with him easily."

"Doesn't matter unless one of him remains behind so the truck can be moved while the other two phase. If so, then that reduces his odds in our favor. However, I'd really like to know why he's doing this even more than where he is right now. Then we could take appropriate action and predict where he's most likely to strike."

Jim said, "Well, I'm glad to know that you're here and not in a prison somewhere. I much prefer you as director to myself. By the way, have you any ideas on why Jerome can see and that man in Philly can't?"

Bill answered, "I checked into that and took Jerome along this morning so he could see for himself even though he's still learning how to read anything other than Braille. He's not very happy over what we found out, so he's taking some time to think over the implications."

"Please don't keep me in suspense. What did you find out?"

"The wrong eyedrops were used on Jerome shortly after delivery when they were cleaning him up from birth. That was what took his sight away."

"So now he hates someone else instead of God?"

"He's not sure since going by his old rules he'd have to hate himself for that."

"I don't understand, Bill."

Bill said, "The delivery team was black like himself. Consequently, Jerome is having to rethink his reasons for hating anyone. Hopefully he'll come out of this with a better attitude."

"I hope this means there's a chance for him then."

"So do I. Anyway, what we see of someone in phase is how they should have genetically developed without any interference from disabilities gained by accident. Phasing doesn't make a person more whole than their genetic code. At least, that's my theory. Oops, I can't just gab right now! I just realized that I've left Rob and Cheryl in the Caribbean about an hour over the prescribed time limit. Guess I better go have them recalled."

Jim said, "Oh, give them a bit more time with each other in private. I really think that they're becoming serious about each other. Remember, if it wasn't for them, you'd be wearing stripes."

Chapter 21

"Why the special meeting, Bill? Is Black Diamond ready to return now?" Cheryl asked.

"No, this is something else. Just move on inside and find a place to park. I'll tell you when I explain the situation to everyone," Bill answered.

Cheryl directed her wheelchair to one side of the room and halted it beside Jerome's chair. Rob walked beside her in only his robe though it seemed useless on him since it was open at the front. He

grabbed a chair from the conference table and moved it so he could sit beside her.

"You have any idea what this is about, Rob?" she asked.

"Search me."

"I would if I wasn't paralyzed, even though it's obvious that you're not hiding anything."

Rob grinned and chuckled quietly with her at their private joke.

Bill soon announced, "If I can have your attention, I'd like to introduce a guest who's here today to ask our help. Colonel, please come in now."

A burly officer in an Army uniform strode purposely into the room from another doorway with his eyes focused straight ahead of him as if he was deliberately trying not to look at some of the nude operatives. He stopped beside Bill and placed his attention on Bill so that he wasn't looking out over the meeting's participants.

"Colonel Roberson is with military intelligence. They have a mission they'd like us..."

One of the operatives interrupted, "I thought we were prohibited from spying?"

Bill said, "I think we owe it to the colonel to hear his request first before you jump to any conclusions. Colonel, go ahead and brief us."

Roberson faced the operatives with his eyes focused on the far wall. "We need an operative's assistance in an espionage case..."

"Bill..."

Bill glared at the operative. "Go on, Colonel. I don't think you'll be interrupted again."

Roberson said, "As I was saying, we have an espionage case right now that requires the assistance of someone who can phase. However, we don't want you to spy for your government. What we want is for you to follow someone and tell us whether that person is spying or not. Right now, the evidence we have indicates that he's probably responsible, but it's very weak. We want to be certain we have the right culprit before we ruin anyone's career."

One operative asked, "Why can't one of your spies follow him around then?"

Roberson answered, "We need someone who can follow without being seen. We're aware that you can actually hide in walls or even a sidewalk and still observe around you. Consequently, we decided that using a Phaser would be the best way to follow our man without being seen and still find out. As well, we're not too comfortable with some of our personnel in the local office working this case seeing as they have access to the same material that was compromised. So, rather than bringing in someone from another base whom they might know or recognize, we decided that the time had come for us to try this new technology."

An operative asked, "So if we clear this guy, then he's not going to be bothered?"

Roberson answered, "Only way we intend to bother this man is if he's guilty. Otherwise, his record won't have a blemish on it. If one of you accepts this mission and clears him, then he'll be left alone and we'll look elsewhere for the responsible party unless you stumble upon that as well and inform us. For the purposes of this mission, the restrictions against entering a military base in phase will be lifted for those who are assisting us in this investigation. If anyone is interested, I'll brief you in person since I have the man's personnel records with me."

An operative asked, "What's his name in case any of us know him and shouldn't volunteer for this job?"

Bill said, "They're very close-mouthed about repeating anything said to them in confidence."

Roberson said, "In light of what Mr. Wheeler just stated to me, I'll tell you the man's name. He's Corporal Stuart Rush, so if you know him, then you shouldn't volunteer."

Jerome raised his hand.

Bill asked, "Yes, Mr. Jones. You have a question?"

Jerome answered, "No, I'm volunteering."

Nearly everyone in the room turned to stare at Jerome as it was the first time they'd ever heard him volunteer for anything aside from demanding to be given a chance to join the Witness Corps.

Jerome asked, "Is something wrong? Is this job reserved for honkies only? I feel like everyone is

staring at me."

Roberson whispered, "What's wrong with this picture, Bill? Fill me in quick, please."

Bill said, "Jerome is blind and he's had a chip on his shoulder since he began his training. I think everyone is startled to hear him volunteer for something."

"Blind? I can't use a blind person, Bill."

"He's not blind when he's in phase."

"Oh! Just like the paralysis I read about in recent reports?"

"Exactly."

Roberson said, "In that case, he might be more perfect than I had expected. Can he read?"

"I believe so."

"Oh well, I was hoping that he can't. Then I could even let him check on Stuart when he's in the secure storage area."

Bill nodded, then remembered something. "Oh, you mean printed words! No, he reads Braille. He's only now beginning to learn how to read printed matter. He needs a lot of help reading anything above the first grade level in printed material."

Roberson's eyes lit up at hearing that. "Then I think I've definitely found the man for the job. Have him meet with me in the office you assigned me."

Roberson looked up at Bill in surprise as he halted his conversation with Jerome.

Bill said, "I thought you might like to know why Mr. Jones here volunteered for this job. Seems that the name of the man who crippled him was Stuart Rush. I looked it up after thinking that the name seemed familiar. Whether these two are the same man is something I can't answer, but you might have someone investigating who's biased to begin with."

Roberson asked, "Jerome, I'd like to know if you can honestly put any bias you have behind you should this be the same man. I don't want an innocent man found guilty. If you can't, then I'll ask for a volunteer from the other operatives once more."

Jerome asked, "Just how many people can there be named Stuart Rush? He's got to be the man who crippled me."

Bill said, "Don't be so damn sure of that. I checked on the Internet directory before I came in here to see if he was, only to discover that there are more than seventy Stuart Rushes in this country alone that they know of. At least a half-dozen of them are the right age as the man who crippled you. The man you're helping investigate might not be the man who crippled you."

Roberson said, "This already sounds to me like I have the wrong volunteer."

Jerome demanded loudly, "How would you feel if you were crippled for life by someone who later told the police that he didn't see what the fuss was about since he only hit a nigger who was already broken?"

Roberson said, "All the more reason not to accept you on this case. We pride ourselves on leading society in breaking down the color barriers and a few other barriers as well."

Bill glanced at the open personnel record, then asked, "Who's the black woman? Another suspect? Perhaps Mr. Jones could shadow her instead?"

Roberson answered, "No, that's Stuart's wife."

"His what?" Jerome demanded.

Bill said, "The colonel just said that Stuart is married to a black woman. That makes it even harder for me to believe that he's the same man who hit you."

Jerome said, "If I could hear his voice, I'd be able to identify him. He shouldn't have gotten off so easily for crippling me."

Bill asked, "Colonel, will you be wanting me to reconvene the operatives so you can ask for another volunteer?"

Jerome demanded, "Are you saying that I can't do this job?---Well, damn it, are you?"

Bill replied, "No, I don't think you can hide your bias enough to be fair and still do this job. Under other circumstances, you'd do just fine. However, I honestly don't think you can set aside your feelings on this case."

Jerome said, "I'm being tested. Right?"

Bill said, "We're always being tested. By each other, by those we come into contact with, and most importantly by ourselves. Right now, you're failing all three."

Jerome said, "Colonel, let me have this job. Please? Listen, I'll do my best to set aside my personal feelings, but I've got to have this job."

Roberson looked at Jerome, then asked, "What kind of assurance do I have that you'll actually work this case properly?"

"I don't have anything to offer other than my trainee paycheck. Do you want that?" Jerome replied.

Roberson said, "I'd rather have your word of honor. I assume that you have one, otherwise you wouldn't be in training to be a witness."

Jerome said slowly and quite deliberately, "I promise that I'll do my best on this case, no matter who this man turns out to be."

Roberson said, "I accept your promise. For now, you'll work out of your compound here since we don't have phase facilities on the base. Mr. Wheeler, please see to it that Mr. Jones is permitted to phase as often and as much as he feels is necessary so that we can reach a quick conclusion on this situation, unless, of course, he's sick or otherwise unable to perform his duty. I'll let you be my judge as to his mental and physical limitations. Mr. Jones, now that I've accepted you, I'd like to go over some additional rules and procedures so that we won't have any complaints from the Inspector General's office concerning our conduct. As well, I think you and I better do this in the control room so you can see through one of your Phasers while we talk. I don't like having someone at a disadvantage unless I'm in combat."

Bill looked at the videotape, then shook his head at what he was seeing. He reached over to his intercom and pressed the button. "Jim, you and Rob better check in with me when Rob gets back. I've got something distressing that I'd like the two of you to see. I hope that Rob can explain this since it doesn't look good for us."

"Some sort of problem?" Jim asked.

"A very big problem if it's true. If you want, you can come to my office now. Maybe we should discuss this before we include Rob."

Jim said, "So, this came from Jessica?"

Bill replied, "No, from someone else, but I called her since I felt it wasn't right to exclude her before this is sprung on her in trial."

Jim said, "If she's coming over, I'll tell Rob to get dressed since he seems to be flaunting himself for Cheryl's enjoyment. She'll probably want to question him since it sure looks bad for him and us."

Rob entered Bill's office directly from the control room after his shift ended. He hastily pulled his robe together when he saw that the District Attorney was present, even though she had seen him and just about all the other operatives stark naked at one time or another as they sat in their tanks. "Sorry, Jessica, I didn't know you'd be here. Otherwise, I'd have taken the time to dress more properly."

Jessica said, "I'm more concerned about answers. Fortunately, Jim has managed to suggest a few things that lead me to believe that this is a doctored tape. For one thing, he and Bill tell me that you've all been working in pairs or small groups since just after Ramsey first popped into your lives."

Rob replied, "That's true. I still don't know where this is leading though. What kinds of answers do you need from me?"

Jessica said, "Just watch the video and then tell us if you remember when you were at the location it shows. This incident occurred after the initial incident with Ramsey."

Jerome One dropped into the asphalt and settled in for what might be several hours of waiting. Not far from him was the burn box, a steel structure specially built for the destruction of classified papers. Barely a minute after he disappeared into the road, a formation of soldiers marched over him on their way to lunch.

Jerome Two settled down through the rafters and into the thickest wall of the government quarters afforded to Corporal Rush. It wasn't long before Gloria Rush, Stuart's wife, entered the room half-dressed. Jerome held his breath momentarily before he remembered that she couldn't hear him, let alone see him inside the wall even though his nose just barely protruded.

Jerome Two couldn't help but notice that Gloria liked expensive items. Not only in her wardrobe that she was gradually putting on, but in the furnishings around her.

Inside the secure storage structure, Jerome Three passed through the vault, then a wall, and finally stopped inside a file cabinet. He had to edge forward slightly before he could see through a hairline opening at the top of one drawer. It wasn't much of a view, but it was enough for him to see half the room. He stared at Corporal Rush with wonder while wishing he could hear the man's voice just once so he could find out for certain if he was the same man. Time and again, Jerome remembered his promise and refrained from walking out to point an accusing finger at Rush.

An hour after Jerome Three settled in, Corporal Rush gathered a stack of classified papers and loaded those into a canvas bag that he padlocked after the contents were verified by an officer. Then Rush and another soldier signed for the contents before leaving.

Jerome One knew instantly that Rush was enroute to his location even as Jerome Three quickly moved through the walls until he was outside. Slithering through the asphalt, Jerome Three hurriedly made his way to the military vehicle assigned to Corporal Rush and pushed up out of the asphalt below the engine compartment before latching himself there with a technique that Rob had taught him. For once, Jerome was grateful that he couldn't be hurt by physical objects as the engine was started and some of its working parts began to move into and out of his Phaser's body.

"Colonel, he's driving directly to the burn location. No stops or detours. In fact, he just arrived there," Jerome reported from his tank.

"Okay, keep an eye on him as he burns the documents. Let me know if he pauses to read any of them," Colonel Roberson replied through the radio link.

Jerome One carefully edged upward so that he could see from one angle while Jerome Three watched from another within the vehicle. They watched as the two soldiers carefully removed the contents from the burn bag and tossed those in after igniting the first set with a lighter.

"Colonel, they just finished. They're locking up the burn box and standing near it. I guess they're waiting for it to finish burning the contents. I can't hear what they're saying...Oh, I guess one of them just asked the other for a cigarette since one handed a cigarette to the other one."

"Yes, it's normal procedure for them to wait and verify that the contents were totally destroyed. You're doing well, Mr. Jones."

"Should I report what I can see in his residence now?"

"Anything of importance?"

"Well, Mrs. Rush appears to be getting ready for something. She's been dressing while going through the house doing things. I only see her every few minutes as she moves about a lot. One thing for certain, she seems to have a lot of expensive stuff."

"I take it that you've had a chance to learn what looks expensive since your training began?"

"Uh, yeah. I didn't think it was important at first to learn how to recognize things like that, but Bill

pointed out to me that I wouldn't know if something expensive was being stolen or not unless I learned. She's got some really nice stuff. I mean furnishings."

Roberson paused, then asked, "Does it appear to be beyond his salary?"

"I'm not certain. It all looks new, but it could simply be well cared for since she did some cleaning before she finished dressing."

"So there's a chance that it's been accumulated over time?" Roberson asked.

"I guess so. You want me to nose around the rest of the house when she leaves?"

"Only if you're positive that she leaves the home. In the meantime, I'll put out some feelers on credit checks on Rush. If he's in hock to his ears, then he might have another reason to be stealing classified information."

Jerome waited patiently for the lift to assist him in leaving the phase tank. He was glad those had been installed since his joining, as they made it possible for him to get in and out with less assistance.

Otherwise, he wasn't at all happy with the results since he hadn't caught Rush red-handed in espionage.

"Colonel Roberson wants you on the phone. He has something for you to hear, Mr. Jones," the tank technician said.

Jerome patiently listened to the voice. It wasn't a voice that he recognized.

"Was he the one?" Roberson asked.

"That's Rush?" Jerome asked.

"I'll swear to you on a Bible that it's Corporal Rush's voice. Was he the one? If necessary, I'll have one of my men break into juvenile records where he grew up to see what he might have hidden there. Otherwise, our background records indicate that he's clean."

"No, it's not a voice I recognize," Jerome replied even though he was still skeptical.

Chapter 22

Jessica waited for the defense attorney to call his next witness and introduce what she knew was a doctored tape. She was eager for the moment to come as she had Rob sequestered outside where she could call him as a witness to refute what might have been damaging evidence to her case. As well, she had Jim Markee to further refute the tape as Jim could swear to the pairing of operatives and as to where Rob had been assigned on that day. As a last resort, she had Cheryl as well to further substantiate Rob's whereabouts though Jessica hoped that she wouldn't have to use Cheryl's testimony.

Jerome entered his tank, then spoke into his recorder. "I'm ready."

Within moments, Jerome's tank sloshed violently as the electrolytic fluid was momentarily displaced by the temporary physical reality of four bodies before three changed to electrical energy and entered the other dimension to retake their human form. Though he preferred not to have the automatic restraints that Jim created, since Jerome was capable of grabbing onto the rails inside the tank, the restraints operated flawlessly. The restraints moved out, then sprang back into place around him. For once, Jerome was slightly glad that the restraints were there as he missed grabbing the rail with one hand and was about to slip off the seat inside the tank.

Jerome's Phasers moved speedily through the ether of the other dimension until the acceleration given them fell off leaving them at the appropriate destinations. One was deposited at the secure storage site. The other two went to Rush's residence. Jerome had his orders to look through the house with one Phaser as soon as Mrs. Rush left. The remaining Phaser would follow her to see what she might be up to in case it mattered. After all, as Roberson had pointed out to Jerome, it was possible that she made the contacts while Stuart only obtained the classified material. Despite that, Jerome hoped that Gloria wasn't involved.

"And where were you on the day in question?" Jessica asked of Rob as he sat in the witness chair.

"I was sitting in a tank in the control room while all three of my Phasers were on the bottom of a river," Rob answered.

"Do you have any witnesses who can testify to that?"

"I have. Mr. Jim Markee can verify that I was sitting in my tank and that my Phasers were sent to that river."

"I have no more questions," Jessica stated.

Rob stared evenly at the defense attorney as he got up and approached with a look of bewilderment on his face. He clearly hadn't anticipated having the witness in question appear in person to refute the evidence that was supposed to place doubt in the minds of the jury and gain an acquittal.

"Mr. Stone, how do we know that all three of your Phasers were in that river? For all we know, one of them could have walked out and still have been caught on tape."

Rob answered, "Because there was someone with me in the river."

"I hope you don't mean a body since those can't talk. Or was the person a diver?"

Rob replied, "No, she's not a diver. Not that I know of. However, she phases as I can and all three of her Phasers were with me on the day in question."

"Oh? Would you mind elaborating a bit more for my benefit?"

Rob answered, "I'd prefer that you ask the questions so the information I give remains relevant to this case."

"Okay, then I'll ask you, what were you doing in the river?"

Rob replied, "I was fooling around with her since it's one of the few places that offers privacy for that sort of interaction."

"I think I understand what you mean by fooling around, but I'd prefer a much clearer answer."

Rob said, "We were having intercourse."

"I see. I guess that makes sense. Seeing as that's the case, I'll presume that you don't want to release her name so she won't be embarrassed."

"Quite the contrary, sir," Rob answered.

"I beg your pardon."

Rob said, "If you want to know her name, then just ask me."

"Okay, what is her name?"

"Cheryl Brooks."

"You're not much of a gentleman," the defense attorney said softly.

"Actually, she thought I was too gentle. However, you're the one who asked for the truth and I'm bound by the oath I took to answer with only that."

"I have no more questions."

Jessica said, "Your Honor, I'm prepared to call Ms. Cheryl Brooks if the defense wishes an opportunity to verify Mr. Stone's whereabouts on the day in question to everyone's satisfaction."

The defense attorney stared at Jessica with his mouth open for a moment before shaking his head.

Jessica said, "In that case, I move to have the tape stricken from evidence as inadmissible since we have proven that its validity is in question."

Cheryl said, "Shit, I got dressed for nothing since I won't have to testify. I'll sure be glad when we get back home so I can get these off."

Rob said, "I wish you could have been inside the courtroom when Jessica refuted the tape point for point and then called Jim and me to testify. You never saw anyone so disappointed in the results as the people at the defense table."

Jessica entered the waiting room, then said, "The marshals will be here shortly to escort you back to your compound. This case is all but over now. I think they'll want to accept the deal I offered them before. Unfortunately, they're about to find that the deal I offered has expired. I want you all to know that

I appreciate what you just did, even though it was merely the truth you testified to. Thanks. I really mean it."

Jim said, "We're glad that we could help. Someday, we'll have to have a better way to transport back and forth instead of using an armed helicopter."

Jerome Three couldn't believe his eyes when Gloria glanced around quickly before entering another set of government quarters. He deftly followed her by swimming through the ground, under the foundation, and up into the wall before seeking out a closet. He checked outside the closet carefully before realizing that he'd have to move about the house from within the attic. He easily moved up into the attic and then moved along the ceiling while poking his face out momentarily to get a fix on where the occupants were. It didn't take him long to find the bedroom where Gloria was almost undressed.

Cheryl didn't hesitate about asking to be undressed as soon as she was out of the helicopter after it landed within the compound. Rob gladly carried her clothes in his arms and walked alongside as she made her way to the lounge.

"We could ask Bill if he wouldn't mind phasing us somewhere if you want."

Rob replied, "Sounds nice, but I have training classes to give to our newbies."

Cheryl said, "In that case, I guess I'll cruise the Internet."

Rob asked, "Not visiting more of those x-rated sites, are you?"

"Why not? I'm an adult and I'm getting ideas on what to try. Hell if I'm going to lose this opportunity while I'm young considering that I'm paralyzed when I'm not in phase."

"I guess I can understand that."

"You better since you're receiving the benefit of my new education. I sure didn't hear you complaining our last time together unless those moans weren't coming from delight."

Rob said, "I assure you that I'm not complaining about how you've treated me. So, is that where you got the idea to...?"

"Everyone to the control room!" Bill suddenly shouted from behind Rob and Cheryl.

Rob asked, "What's wrong?"

"We're needed for a search! Whole town wiped out by a flood!" Bill replied as he stopped beside Jim.

Cheryl said, "Looks like we're working instead," as she turned her wheelchair around.

Rob replied, "Yeah, and it's one of the worst jobs we can get."

"Because of the bodies we might find?"

"That, too. However, I just don't like dirt swimming. Or mud swimming in this case since we'll have to burrow under the surface to find buried bodies."

"But we could find someone alive, couldn't we?"

Rob answered, "It's happened before, but don't count on it."

Jerome Three stared in wonder from the ceiling at the sight of the two women in bed together. He spoke clearly at the tank in the compound as he reported his finding, though his voice clearly revealed some shock.

Cheryl One swam beneath the mud by herself. She surfaced occasionally to get her bearings so she wouldn't leave the trail left by the downsweep of torrential mud that came from the mountainside before it tore away the town nestled on its base. In the control room, muted voices reported grim details punctuated at times with the discovery of another body. As Cheryl One surfaced, she glanced around for

survivors who might not be submerged, but who still might be in need of assistance that she could call in.

Cheryl Two walked along the edge of the ravine that marked the limits of the mud torrents. She scanned the trees that still stood for survivors. So far, she'd seen only a few dead animals stuck in the mud and just as few clinging to branches in trees that weren't ripped away earlier by the raging flood waters.

Already the sun was getting too low in the sky to provide enough light for the search. Cheryl Three stared into a pit trying to see if anything was inside before she realized that she'd have to go inside and check it out. Effortlessly, she stepped off the edge and dropped into the pit coming to a soft stop from dimensional magnetic forces that no scientist yet understood. She glanced around, then turned and walked to the side to enter and swim upward when she halted suddenly.

Colonel Roberson said, "Somehow, Mr. Jones, documents from the burn bag you saw delivered were directed to terrorists outside our country. Are you positive that neither of the men paused to read even a single page before tossing it inside the incinerator?"

Jerome answered, "They didn't even drop a page, let alone read any. I watched them from two angles and saw them take every single document directly from the bag and toss it into the fire without hesitation."

"Then I've got a real problem. If it's not either of the two enlisted men, then it has to be someone working inside the storage facility. I'd have bet my rank that they were all trustworthy."

As he walked past the tank, Bill asked, "Is there a problem? I think I can spare a moment for you if you need me."

Roberson answered, "Yes, but it's exclusively mine. Mr. Jones has performed well to my knowledge and I've still got a security leak."

"You're certain it's from your office?" Bill asked.

Roberson replied, "I put a dummy document in with the real documents. Kind of a tag so that if anything from it showed up, I'd know for certain that my office has the leak. Well, it showed up according to the CIA."

"That's not good then," Bill remarked.

Jerome said, "I watched the men burn the documents and they followed exactly the procedures Colonel Roberson outlined for me to watch for. I just don't see how either of them could have stolen any of the secrets."

"What about while the documents were transported? Could they have read those then?" Bill asked.

Jerome shook his head, "They didn't touch the lock on the burn bag until they reached the incinerator. It wasn't easy looking into the cab from the engine compartment, but I watched them the whole time."

"No openings or false seams?" Bill asked.

Roberson said, "I've checked the bag myself for those. It's in absolutely perfect condition aside from some soot that's rubbed off their hands afterwards."

Bill thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe you should shred the documents first, then burn them. That ought to at least prevent anymore documents from being read while in transport or at the burn area if either of those are where it's happening."

Roberson said, "It's an idea I'll have to consider even if it means revising the procedure."

Bill asked, "And another thing, has anyone checked inside the incinerator for unburned documents? Is it possible for any of them to remain inside unburned where they can be stolen later?"

Jerome said, "Both of the men looked inside the incinerator when the fire went out to see if there were any unburned documents. They even stirred the ashes looking for those."

Bill asked, "What about inside the flue or stack? Could some of the documents have risen with the heat and become stuck out of their sight?"

Roberson said, "That's a long shot, I think, since I'm not certain whether there's a grill over the stack to prevent that from happening. I guess I'll have to check on that somehow."

Bill suggested, "Why not just have Mr. Jones enter the incinerator and look? Then you'll know whether any documents are escaping the fire if there's no grill to prevent that."

Roberson looked at Jerome for a moment, then asked, "Would you mind waiting inside the burn box to see who retrieves them if we find that unburned documents are getting stuck in the chimney?"

"Might as well since I can't burn," Jerome answered.

Jim asked, "Hey Bill, you coming yet?"

Bill answered, "Be there in another moment, Jim. Have the rescuers got anything to the site yet?"

Jim answered, "Only a few diggers. Nothing big enough to dig out a truck."

Roberson asked, "What's up with the rescue effort, Bill?"

Bill answered, "Cheryl found a truck buried in the mud. Because of its size, we figure it's worth getting to in case someone's still alive inside. There's a good possibility that it's still got air inside of it."

Roberson said, "Good luck with that. Oh, and thanks for the idea. If they need anymore assistance there, I'll see what I can do to pry loose some extra manpower and equipment."

Bill replied, "I'm sure they can use additional assistance. Looks like I better get over to Cheryl's tank before they decide to replace me with a lab chimp."

Roberson said, "Mr. Jones, plan on checking inside the burn box tomorrow when the next batch of documents are taken there. As to Corporal Rush's wife, her situation only fuels the suspicion against him since her extra-marital activities could be something a foreign agent is using to force him into doing their dirty work. Go ahead and keep one of your Phasers following her and keep an accurate record of what you see her engaged in. I still can't believe that she's seeing another woman. If Rush is innocent and finds out about that, he'll probably be crushed by the knowledge."

"What about the residence? Do you want me to continue searching it?"

"No, I think you've gone through it thoroughly enough under the circumstances. Just keep it under surveillance for now. No, change that. You'll probably need two of your Phasers at the burn box tomorrow so you can watch the men and inside the incinerator for unburned documents."

"Oh, I figured that I'd check the box after they leave. But I can do it differently, if that's what you want."

"Well, I like the idea that you can watch both men at the same time with two of you there."

Chapter 23

Rob One dropped down into the pit that was expanded during the night. Already, workers were busy cutting into the side of the truck so they could enter it as the danger of a cave in by the mud was no longer present because of the digging performed during the night. As well, there was no sign of anticipation on the faces of the workers. Rob knew that no sounds had been heard by them during any of the numerous attempts during the night to communicate with whoever might have been in the truck.

Rob spoke over his radio, "Put a light through the opening so I can search now."

Rob One saw the men respond to his request before he passed through the side of the truck. The light cast through fell upon the remains of a large glass tank. Rob One halted immediately and stared at the sight for a moment.

Rob said to his radio hookup and monitor, "Have this site guarded and call in the police. Someone better call Bill about this, too. We've just found at least one of the Ramseys. He appears to be dead, so there's no rush in getting to him."

Rob's radio relay blared back, "Are you certain he's dead?"

Rob replied, "His throat is cut through by the broken tank inside. I'm ninety percent certain that he's dead."

Jerome ignored the commotion going on within the control room as work continued at the rescue site on digging out the truck with Ramsey's dead body within it. He could understand why everyone was

excited since Ramsey was considered an enemy and dangerous. In a way, he was saddened to hear the news since he had studiously practiced his self-defense lessons given by Cheryl in hopes of someday kicking Ramsey's ass himself. Had Jerome taken the time to analyze his own actions, he might have concluded that he wanted a chance to strike out at someone for the injustices life had dealt him.

Bill One entered the truck and stopped beside Rob One. "Yeah, he looks dead to me as well. I think we've just been handed the Rosetta Stone in trying to understand Ramsey if he really is three people now, even though this one's dead."

"How so?" Rob One asked.

"Except for what's broken, we've got hold of his entire setup intact. At least one of them, anyway, since there's only one tank in here. We'll either find proof that he knows how to project nine Phasers of himself or that he doesn't, in which case we'll be justified in concluding that he actually is three people now. Well, that two still exist. Either way, we'll have less to worry about."

"You'll forgive me if I hope that he learned how to project nine Phasers since that will mean he's now out of our lives completely."

Bill One replied, "You don't have to ask my forgiveness. After all, I even tried to kill him once. I'm still not entirely over that."

"Even though Jessica acknowledged that your action could have legally fallen under self-defense since you were protecting us?"

"You know that I'm against violence. I'm not even comfortable with us learning martial arts except for us labeling it as self-defense."

"Ramsey kind of spoiled our Eden, didn't he?"

Bill One replied, "I guess you could put it that way since we found a place where we could return to a natural state of peace."

Rob One stated, "Natural in more ways than one. No violence, no laws, no clothes, no nothing until Ramsey showed up to spoil the garden, even though it was barren of everything but us."

"Well, there's no need for you to remain here any longer. It might be best if you return to the search in case there's someone still alive to be found. I'll stick around here until the workers recover the truck. I want to get a good look at what Ramsey was using before anyone disturbs it."

As Rob One anxiously turned to leave, he said, "I checked the odometer in the cab. It looks like Ramsey really put some miles on this vehicle."

"That's assuming he was the only owner."

"Good point," Rob One said as he passed through the wall.

Jerome clung casually to the lift as his body ascended from his wheelchair before swinging over the tank to descend into the electrolytic fluid. As he descended, he heard the whoosh of someone's tank as the fluid within it sloshed about. Jerome wasn't sure if someone had gone out or returned. He had to remember what it looked like since he'd only seen the awesome spectacle while in phase. He admitted that the sight was nothing less than inspiring. However, he still felt cheated since he'd only seen it take place a few times. Then he felt the fluid reach a portion of his body where he still had feeling. He prepared himself mentally as he waited for the descent to halt so he could slip off the harness and grab the handrail.

Cheryl Two halted in her tracks as she spotted the dog caught in the branches of a tree. She wished she could talk to the animal to comfort it as it appeared to be weakly barking at her to gain her attention.

In her tank, Cheryl said, "Tell the rescuers that there's an injured dog in a tree on the west side of the ravine. I'll hold my second Phaser in place until I get some kind of word back from them."

Jerome Three almost fell through the ceiling shortly after arriving at Corporal Rush's home upon seeing Gloria tied and bound to a bed. He reacted quickly to stabilize his position so he could observe with the ceiling light fixture obscuring his face and making it all but impossible to spot him. Within the control room, his body calmly recorded his observations as Gloria's apparent lover returned to the bedroom.

Jerome One took up his station within the secure storage facility and waited for the burn team to finish cataloging the documents for destruction. He couldn't help but notice that the junior member was someone new. Immediately, Jerome suspected that was for a reason. As before, they went through the process in an orderly step-by-step procedure meant to leave nothing to chance.

Jerome Two entered the incinerator and glanced about within the darkness. He realized at once that he couldn't tell whether there was a grate to prevent pages from shooting up the chimney or not without any light. He concluded that he'd have to wait until the door to the incinerator was opened before he'd have the opportunity to thoroughly inspect. That or he'd have to wait until after the fire was kindled since he couldn't let himself be seen by the burn team. Once more, his body recorded his observations and his tank technician quickly notified the colonel concerning the situation.

Cheryl Two directed the rescuers to the dog's location. Only when they were on site did she move her Phaser forward once more to resume her part of the search. She felt more than a little relief at having saved the injured dog since there were so few victories within the overall rescue effort.

Jerome Two waited in the ground beneath the incinerator. He knew that it would require quickness on his part to leave the ground and travel upward into the incinerator without being seen since the burn box was on a raised platform meant to improve air flow to the fire. He'd have to keep a close watch on the burn team members with his other Phaser after it arrived with the team.

Bill One stared at the writing on some loose pages within the truck. Then he requested through the radio link from the control room for the light angle to be changed.

Jerome One moved about within the engine compartment as the burn team left the military vehicle with the burn bag and walked to the incinerator. The corporal carried the keys while the lower enlisted man carried the burn bag. When they reached the burn box, the corporal unlocked the door to the incinerator first. Then he turned to the bag the other man carried.

Jerome's Phasers watched from two locations as a few pages were taken out and twisted together before those were lit and tossed into the incinerator by the corporal. More papers followed quickly as the interior of the incinerator became an inferno. Jerome Two waited patiently for the men to turn aside so he could ascend into the incinerator.

"Oh my god. It sure looks like Ramsey was up to a lot more than we figured. Someone get me a line to Colonel Roberson," Bill said to his tank technician.

Jerome Two entered the incinerator as he kept watch on the two enlisted men to make sure they didn't see him as the Colonel didn't want them in particular to see Jerome and suspect that they were under surveillance. Once inside, Jerome Two used the light from the burning documents to check the flue. He saw that there was indeed a grill covering the flue. It simply wasn't possible for anything larger around than his pinky finger to go through the grillwork. Whoever was gaining the information from the documents was getting that elsewhere. Jerome Two looked down to leave the incinerator only to stop suddenly in shock.

Roberson replied, "Yes, Bill. I've read up on Ramsey."

Bill said, "Well, I think he's your man, if he's still alive. We've got his body or at least one of his bodies here inside a truck with a mobile phase unit. He's got a generator for power, computers, the whole works. So far, I've spotted at least three pages of notes that look like military secrets in what I believe is Ramsey's handwriting. There's another page that looks like it has information from an FBI case. I've already called for the police to seal this area off, but you'll probably want your own people here to take over."

Roberson exclaimed, "Ramsey's responsible? My god! He's the one kind of espionage threat we've most dreaded since you discovered phasing. I'll get busy right now putting together a team. Try not to read anything while you're there. In fact, have everyone leave the site alone until we arrive. We'll dig the truck out ourselves if we have to."

Jerome Two couldn't dodge the fist that Ramsey propelled into him. Jerome Two flew out of the incinerator and passed between the two startled enlisted men who didn't miss seeing him. Nor did they miss seeing with their surprised eyes the sight of Jerome One leaping from the engine of their vehicle and passing through the wall of the incinerator. Jerome Two clambered to his feet and leaped back into the fray.

Jerome shouted, "Someone get the colonel on the line! I'm fighting another Phaser inside the burn box! My god! It's Ramsey!"

Bill heard the shout across the control room. "Colonel, Jerome is fighting Ramsey inside the burn box. He must be reading the documents inside it."

Roberson asked, "How good is Jones? Can he beat Ramsey?"

"I don't think so. However, with your permission, I'll send Jones some reinforcements. Give us a few moments if the answer's yes."

Roberson answered, "Yes, yes! Do it! We've got to stop Ramsey before he does anymore harm! I'll clear it with everyone above while you send in someone."

Bill shouted, "Jim, recall Cheryl, Rob, and Leroy. Then send them to help out Jerome. After that, try to triangulate on Ramsey. He's on the base fighting Jerome."

Jim hollered back, "What about you?"

Bill replied, "No, I'm studying Ramsey's equipment to determine his range. Leave me where I am."

Corporal Rush said, "I'll stay here. You go to that building and call the MPs first, then our office. They need to know about this. Hurry!"

Jerome Two bounced onto the ground, rubbed his jaw for a moment, then rose to his feet and ran back into the fight. His momentum forced the fight out into the open where his two Phasers and Ramsey's Phaser picked themselves up and squared off for another round. In the open, it soon became apparent that Ramsey was the better fighter as he quickly downed both of Jerome's Phasers and openly laughed at them. His laughter lasted only a moment when he saw Cheryl One arrive facing away in front of him. He launched an attack upon her immediately without suspecting that she wasn't alone. Before he could connect with her, two of Rob's Phasers were on his back forcing him to the surface. A moment later, Ramsey felt a foot from Cheryl Two between his legs. Then he disappeared when he realized that he was clearly outnumbered once more.

"Are you all right, Mr. Jones?" Cheryl One asked.

Jeromes One and Two rose to their feet and nodded. Jerome One said, "Crap, I thought I could take him, especially since it was two of me to just one of him."

Cheryl One said, "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. In time, you'll be his match in a one to one fight."

Rob One said, "At least he didn't mop the ground with me this time. I hope that means I'm improving."

Cheryl One said, "Rob, so long as you can get in close enough to wrestle him, I think you'll have a chance. Otherwise, you still need more practice. Maybe I'll have to devote more time to you personally."

Chapter 24

Jerome listened to Corporal Rush for the first time as they met face to face inside the compound. The corporal had asked to meet with Jerome after learning why Jerome was on the base.

"I'm really glad you were there to clear me. I've already got seven years invested in my career and this would have ruined my life and career for sure."

Jerome relaxed and smiled as he realized that the voice he was hearing was nothing like the voice he once heard from a man with the same name. He knew at last that the colonel had played completely straight with him. "I'm glad I could clear you. By the way, Colonel Roberson asked me if I'd like to join the Army. Would you mind telling me what it's like?"

Corporal Stuart Rush blinked his eyes and his head went back slightly before he focused in on the fact that Jerome was a special case whose disabilities would be overlooked in view of his phase compatibility. "Well, I'm not sure how to describe how it is or what it's like. I just don't know where to start."

Colonel Roberson said, "Sorry, Bill, but if Mr. Jones is willing to join, I'm going to steal him from you. I'm certain that I can get him a commission. That was practically the first thing he asked about when I broached the subject with him."

Bill said, "I can forgive you for that. Just remember, he's not an easy man to deal with since I think he's still got a long way to go before he's ready to forgive anyone."

"Well, I think you're wrong on that, Bill. The impression I got from him was one of a person who most wants to be needed. Maybe even to be important."

Bill exclaimed, "Damn it! That's what I missed, of course. He took it to heart that he was unimportant and didn't matter because he was referred to as already broken. I should have picked up on that when he mentioned it after his previous demands to be called mister all the time. How could I have missed picking up on those clues?"

Roberson said, "Now that you mention it, I think you're right. I have to admit that I didn't pick up on those, either. However, in your case, you'll have to admit that you were preoccupied with other matters most of the time. Anyway, now I'm positive that I can convince him to join up. He might not ever rise to become a general, but I'm certain that he can someday reach colonel."

"Well, whichever of our services he goes with, I'm sure that we'll know how to reach him now. If it's the Army, then I'll wish him and you the best. If he stays with us, then I'll see to it that he has the opportunity to find out that he's important to us."

Roberson said, "Even if he joins us, we'll still have to leave him here for the time being since we don't have any facilities or equipment yet. I can, however, assign some personnel to see to his needs when he's not in phasing. As well, I'd like for his tank monitor to be someone from the service."

Bill said, "I can understand that. We'll be glad to cooperate for Jerome's sake alone. You don't even have to mention the nation's security to convince us."

"Yes, Jerome will have a big part in protecting the country since we don't have Ramsey in custody and Ramsey can show up anywhere. If Jerome joins, he'll be our only phase operative and our only counter to Ramsey for the time being."

"I'd say that's an important job, all right. You'll definitely stand a chance of convincing Jerome to join up if you use that as an argument to persuade him."

"True, but seeing as there are probably two Ramseys and there's only one Jerome, we're definitely going to have to recruit some more operatives. That is, unless you're willing to try duplicating Jerome for us."

Bill replied, "Sorry, Colonel, but I'm not going to repeat what I may have done to Ramsey. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if it turned out to be only an accident and I wound up killing Jerome. You'll have to make due with Jerome as he is for now."

"I thought as much. Still, I had to ask. No harm in asking, I hope."

"No harm. I don't think any less of you for trying. Before you even ask, I'm not going to reveal how to

make ball lightning, either."

Roberson said, "I figured as much after you stated the other answer to me. I won't insult or offend you with threats or guilt trips since it's clear that you've thought this through. I just hope that you're right in your decision and that Ramsey doesn't discover the process."

Bill replied, "If Ramsey does, I'll probably reconsider my position."

"In that case, I hope he doesn't get to you first before you can pass on the knowledge. I say this not only from a standpoint of national security, but because of what you're accomplishing here. Society needs you desperately."

"Me? Not really. What society needs most is witnesses willing to testify. As to that, we'll do our best to fill that need."

Roberson said, "By the way, I did some checking into Ramsey since I have more resources than you when it comes to investigations. I think I know why he attacked your operative."

"I'm interested in hearing about this," Bill replied.

"So am I. There was no reason for him to attack Megan or cause her death," said Jim.

Roberson said, "We discovered that some of the documents filed in his computer inside the truck were from more places than we realized were involved at first. When we plotted those on our maps to figure out where Ramsey had been, one of the locations turned up right beside where he attacked Megan. That was just a bit too coincidental for me, so I had my people check deeper into what was known to be compromised. When we did that, we discovered a pattern or schedule that Ramsey was more or less following so that he could be present at the various burn sites in order to steal whatever he could read. Those notes you found were things he probably remembered later and wrote down so he wouldn't forget them again. That or where he was piecing together what he missed while guessing at what was in between. At least, those are my theories on why you found written notes. Otherwise, he use a voice activated recorder just like your operatives use when he was in phase. His last recordings contained more than enough sensitive information in his voice to gain him a lifetime conviction for espionage."

Jim said, "That still doesn't explain why he attacked Megan."

Roberson said, "It might if he was simply trying to scare her away from the site by first raping her. He might have resorted to killing her Phasers only because she didn't leave immediately after being violated. For now it's only a theory, but we'll find out the truth for certain once we capture him. Rest assured, it's only a matter of time now since the entire resources of this country are now arrayed against him."

Bill said, "I shouldn't have let Megan make that decision."

Jim stated, "You and Megan had no way of knowing that you were supposed to recall her, so don't go blaming yourself. Besides, she made the decision since she couldn't identify him well enough to eliminate any of our men at the time. Maybe if she had a better look at him, she might have agreed with you about recalling her. So, remember, it's not your fault, Bill."

Bill said, "It was my fault and we all know it. Just like the colonel is responsible for what happens to his people, I hold that responsibility for mine. I should have over-ridden her decision regardless of what our policy was then."

Roberson said, "Even though I bear the responsibility, I still have to face the facts that good people are sometimes harmed while doing their jobs. In a situation like yours, there wasn't any possible way for you or Megan to know ahead of time that Ramsey would escalate the situation. You went with what you had and tried for the best. No one can fault you or her for that. For that reason, you shouldn't fault yourself, either."

Rob asked, "Why the Luray caverns? Isn't that a tourist sight? If we're seen there, we'll be photographed for certain."

Cheryl responded, "Not for that, Rob. I'm going to give you some more lessons in self-defense in an environment where you won't feel comfortable."

"You're right, I won't feel very comfortable in a cave no matter what we're doing."

Jerome held up his right hand and slowly repeated his oath as Colonel Roberson coached him through. He was barely aware that almost all the other operatives had taken time from their activities to observe until he finished and the soft roar of applause took over within the room.

"Shi...I mean, uh, wow. I didn't know there were that many people in here."

Bill said, "Congratulations, Second Lieutenant Jones. I guess we're all here because you have a lot of friends who want to wish you the best."

"Everyone's here?" Jerome asked in surprise.

Bill answered, "Just about. The only people out right now are in court, so I suppose we'll have to forgive them for missing this."

Jerome said, "Gladly."

Well off to the side, Roberson said, "Jim, keep a close eye on Bill. He's still not convinced that there was nothing more he could do. I really meant what I said about society needing him. It's not just the Witness Corps, but his idealism that's needed. Without that, we're not much of a society."

~ the end ~