

# **PROPRIETARY OVERSIGHT**

**Another Jim Richards Adventure**



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**Robert E. Brisbin**

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# Chapter One

February 1978

The ranch style home stood on a three-acre parcel near the outskirts of Alexandria, Virginia. It had white washed siding and a shake roof. Though only single story, it was an uncommonly large residence. Well-tended gardens, manicured lawns, and thick stands of trees to shield it from easy surveillance surrounded the house. The home belonged to Elmo Jefferson, Deputy Director - Covert Operations, Central Intelligence Agency.

Outside, the weather was bitterly cold. Several inches of newly fallen snow lay all about, masking the border between lawn and patio. The air had a clean, pure scent. Neighborhood sounds - the rattling of a garbage can lid, a car door closing - were muffled by the freshly fallen powder. As twilight deepened, the powdered snow glazed and froze, and sound became enhanced in sharp staccato tones common to cold winter nights.

Twilight faded to evening, exterior lights at the corners of the house were energized to illuminate a garden in hibernation. Subdued footlights lined the driveway and walking paths, accented by occasional tall antique gas lamps that cast a warm circle of light about their footings. Here and there, trees were bathed in lightly tinted amber spots.

The lighting lent a fairy tale quality to the grounds, while creating the illusion of concealing shadows where in fact none existed, thus assuring unwanted visitors wouldn't intrude unseen by Jefferson's security detail.

In a private study that faced onto the rear patio of the home, Elmo Jefferson and Dr. Richard Holt, Special Adviser to the President of the United States, sat in comfortable leather wingbacks. A snifter of cognac close at hand. A warm fire crackling gaily in a solid brick fireplace.

Jefferson was a big man, with white hair and a full, closely trimmed beard. When he laughed he resembled a Santa Claus in making. A deceptive resemblance, as more than one unfortunate enemy of the United States had learned.

Dr. Richard Holt, on the other hand, was thin as a rail and slightly built. A man filled with exuberant, nervous energy. As if he'd received a much larger man's allotment, and was forced to forever contain it within too small a vessel. He

was highly educated, with degrees in mathematics, physics, social science, and economics. Raised in China until the age of fifteen, Dr. Holt spoke Mandarin, Japanese, and several far eastern dialects, fluently.

It had been a long day for both men, at Langley, Virginia where the headquarters of the CIA was located. Reviewing situation reports and long-winded findings by analysts who pondered every conceivable nuance attributable to the actions under investigation. At the end of the day, Jefferson suggested Dr. Holt join him to his home for dinner. Then spend the night, rather than venture a return journey to his hotel in Washington, D.C. Jefferson's wife had overseen the preparation of an excellent meal. Their live-in housekeeper, Eleana, had prepared the seldom used guest room.

Elmo Jefferson took a sip of cognac, and then looked across the rim of his glass at Dr. Richard Holt to continue a conversation begun earlier in the day at headquarters. "Caring First has out paced itself, grown far beyond our original expectations."

Dr. Holt's steel blue eyes sparkled behind round wire rim glasses. He smiled momentarily in agreement. "My concern from the beginning."

Jefferson set his glass down onto the burl wood table to the left of his chair. He placed his fingertips together, tapping the opposing pads against each other. "We must find a way to determine who the *mole is* without disturbing its domain, then trace the product forward to the end consumer

Dr. Holt took a sip of cognac. "If we can locate the interlocutor, then replace them with our own asset, it might just be possible to improve the product. Create a tasty morsel of disinformation. Like sugar, satisfying but of little value."

Jefferson raised his right index finger. "If, and only if, we can leave the producer in place, or at least make it seem so."

Dr. Holt swirled cognac around the inside of his snifter. He stared at the amber liquid, absent-mindedly calculating the specific gravity required to allow a bead of fluid to coat the concave crystal of the glass. He shook his head with irritation. "I warned the community years ago, Caring First was risky. But no one seemed to understand the implications of what I was saying. All they could see was an opportunity to by-pass Senate Intelligence and its meddlesome inquiries into covert operations. Now we're in too deep to walk away.

Jefferson let out a long sigh. "Especially with regard to Iran."

Holt lifted his glass momentarily, as if in toast. "Another mess." He lowered his glass. "Ever since Kermit Roosevelt engineered the coup that brought

the Shaw to power, we've relied almost entirely on Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's apparatus for regional intelligence. Not just Iran, mind you, but the entire region east of the gulf."

"Now, after decades of dependence we're trying to cobble together something of our own through Caring First."

Elmo sighed audibly. "We must find a way to regain oversight. We cannot allow a critical proprietary to run amuck, there's too much at stake." He took a solid pull at his cognac, felt it warm his insides, a pleasant feeling of comfort. He drained his glass.

"You know Richard, virtually every member of the intelligence community has someone inside Caring First, yet no one has indicated anything's amiss."

Dr. Holt smiled. "Of course not, they're all too busy policing their own operations. Let's not forget, Caring First has some of our top *former Intel* people sitting at the senior executive level. As a matter of course, they've set up counter-intelligence loops." Holt stopped dead in mid-sentence. He got up from the chair and walked over to the window, then stared outside at the pure white, new fallen snow. He turned around and looked over at Elmo Jefferson. "That's it, of course."

Jefferson raised both eyebrows, but said nothing.

"The person we're looking for is one of their senior executives. Beyond suspicion of those below. Someone with a direct line to InSec, who'd know the moment we started an investigation of his activities."

Dr. Holt paced the room, then stopped and turned towards Jefferson. "We must insert our own asset. Someone so different, no one at Langley, nor inside Caring First, will suspect his role." Holt's mind grappled with logistics, the character of the individual to be chosen. "Someone who has no interest in getting their *ticket punched*. Who's financially incorruptible; not just because of personal prosperity, but more importantly because monetary acquisition is not the measurement of his own personal self-esteem."

"A rare individual." Jefferson said.

Silence passed. Then Holt suddenly beamed broadly, clearly pleased with the inspiration he'd come upon.

Jefferson tilted his head to one side, raising one eyebrow.



Dr. Holt raised his left index finger. "*Our* asset will need a youthful appearance. An impenetrable back story. And preferably a west coast residence." Holt paced to the far end of the room, then turned again to face Jefferson. "You know how small our little community is here in the East. Sons and daughters of the revolution, and so forth. We can't risk the chance of accidental recognition." He paused for a moment. His eyes twinkled. "I do believe we can solve our problem." He smiled broadly. "That young fellow we've used before on occasion. Jim Richards. What's he doing these days?"

#

The San Francisco Presidio is built on prime real estate. It stands on an undulating hill over looking the entrance to the San Francisco Bay. It's Officer's Club presents a spectacular view of the Golden Gate Bridge framed by tall eucalyptus trees, which surround the perimeter of the property. Not far from the Officer's Club, hidden by the hill's crest, is the United States Armed Forces National Cemetery.

Jim Richards stood off to one side in the shadow of an ancient eucalyptus that dwarfed his six foot two, broad shouldered frame. His intense brown eyes gazed stoically at the flag draped casket suspended over a hole in the manicured ground, dug to receive it. Just a few feet from the head of the casket stood five U.S. Navy SEALs: Steve Sheffield, Ross McIntyer, Vince Morris, Frank Prescott and Bob Spencer. All in full dress uniform.

Seated on metal folding chairs directly in front of the casket, were a few close family friends, a little girl, and Dave Wilcox' devastated wife. Her face puffed, her eyes red and swollen from tears that seemed to be unstoppable. Jim Richards' heart went out to her. He could only guess the stages of grief through which she'd already passed.

Perhaps if she'd known the true nature of Dave's work, he thought, she could have prepared herself. But of course, SEALs don't disclose the nature of their activities. She'd have had no inkling until Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer arrived at her doorstep with the worst possible news. Dressed in Navy uniforms, each with SEAL insignias pinned above their battle ribbons. Then the reality of her late husband's work would have dawned upon her.

His deception undoubtedly angered her, but was soon replaced by a depth of grief no one should ever have to endure. Jim Richards shook his head sadly. She should have been allowed the illusion that growing old together is a right, rather than a privilege that falls to only a lucky few.

The minister completed his eulogy, and then said a prayer. And though his voice carried well enough to Jim Richards' ears, he heard little of what was said.

His mind drifted back to missions he and these particular SEALs had run together. He remembered how close to death he'd come, how Dave Wilcox and the others had saved his life more than once.

Behind and slightly to the left of the family, stood seven Marines in full dress uniform. Hidden somewhere amongst the grove of trees, a bugler played Taps. The notes seemed to pervade the forest, to envelope the sad little group. Jim Richards choked back tears, swallowing hard to maintain his stoic demeanor. To turn pain inward, a reserve that joined other reserves where will it was formed.

As the last note trailed away, a Naval officer and his adjutant stepped to the casket and slowly folded the American flag into the requisite tri-corner. Words were spoken softly, heard only by Dave's wife and daughter. The flag presented.

At that very moment a flight of Sea Wolf helicopters rumbled overhead, high enough to assure the supersonic pop of their rotor tips would not intrude upon the moment, low enough to still be perceived. No one looked up. Yet a vision of stealthy black, mechanical dragonflies came spontaneously to mind. Then a moment of silence.

"Present...arms" A Marine sergeant cried out, pronouncing the last word, as *harms*. The irony did not fail to strike Jim Richards.

"Aim...Fire!"

A fuselage of seven blank rounds in perfect synchronization left the polished black barrels of the ceremonial M-14s shouldered by the Marine Corps Honor Guard. Three times the feat was performed perfectly.

And then it was over. As if the fading echoes of gun fire that drifted across the San Francisco Bay could close forever the memory of a brave man who'd died for his country, asking nothing in return but the respect of his fellow warriors.

Jim Richards did not know Dave's wife, or family. Not that it mattered; he came today in true camaraderie not just respect. But he could not bring himself to intrude upon her grief, to cross the space that now separated them to offer condolences. Another unrecognized face, another unanswerable question. Yet as she turned to move towards the black limousine that would carry her to the home she once shared with her husband, their eyes met. Jim Richards saw grief in those eyes, but he also saw anger.

The Crows Nest at the head of Pier 28 on San Francisco's embarcadero is a sailor's bar. It has a small lounge with large windows that look onto the bay, and a tiny outdoor patio.

Lately, the *Nest* had become a watering hole for cocky young executives who'd order a quick round of martinis, before boarding one of the five Red and White Fleet ferry boats for the commute across the bay to Marin county.

By eight o'clock, with the commuter's home at last, the Nest's old wooden bar, scarred by years of Liars dice and misdirected cigarette stubs, was nearly deserted. Jim Richards, Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer sat in chairs too small to be comfortable for men of their formidable size. They'd pulled together a couple of the Formica cocktail tables, reminiscent of large black Frisbees, for a surface on which to place their drinks. A large bowl of beer nuts took up most of one table.

Jim Richards shook his head sadly, and then knocked back the last of his Johnny Walker, Black. "*Histoplasmosis?* Jesus that's hard to believe." He took a deep breath, let it out audibly. "When I got your message, I somehow figured an operation screw up took him down. A terrorist with an AK-47. Chute failure at the least. Not some goddamn bird shit disease."

Steve Sheffield nodded. "Yeah. Unbelievable isn't it."

"How did he contract it?" Jim Richards asked.

Steve shrugged. "We were exfiltrating out of Iran, after a sneak and peek. Dave started feelin' run down. Things went from bad to worse."

Ross McIntyre nodded in agreement. "We hopped on over to Kuwait. The Company's got a hospital there, run by one of their management firms. We'd used it before on various patch ups, when things went sour in that part of the world."

Richards looked over at Sheffield for confirmation.

Sheffield rocked his chin up and down. "Straight up, Jim. No bullshit. We parked him at the al Sabah Hospital, figured he'd be fine in a day or two. Took turns sittin' in his room, makin' certain everyone coming in was A-okay." Sheffield shook his head sadly. "Seemed like nothing more than fatigue, and a little respiratory inflammation. Twelve hours later he was gone."

Ross spoke up. "Not your fault, buddy. Dave was doin' fine. Gettin' his antibi's, already feeling better. Talking about telling the Doc to release him the next day. Who'd have figured his heart was cavin' on him."

Richards frowned. "You're sure? An autopsy was run?"

Sheffield took a pull at the tankard of vodka tonic. "Absolutely. I went ballistic, broke protocol all over the place until the Navy agreed to ship him direct to Bethesda. Full medical inquiry. That's where they diagnosed the *Histo*. You get it from inhaling guano dust.

"The ChemWeps plant was underground, inside a mountain with a shear cliff on the back side. We got in through an air duct drilled into the cliff. Dave stayed just inside the inlet to watch our six. Everyone else wore masks, he figured he wouldn't need one since the only thing comin' in from outside was fresh air."

Sheffield grabbed a hand full of beer nuts, popped a couple into his mouth, and then stared for a moment through the windows. A containerized cargo ship slid past, illuminated by ambient light from the Bay Bridge, which loomed overhead not far from the Crow's Nest. He turned his gaze back to Jim Richards.

"Turns out, when the wind blows down off the higher elevations it carries dust from above, dust mixed with bird shit. Matter of fact, now that I think about it, the inside of the pipe was pretty dusty. Anyway, the brain trust at Bethesda figures the dust was the source of exposure. Autopsy found systemic bacterial damage to his heart.

"Histoplasmosis produces flu like symptoms, then attacks heart muscle. If he'd survived, he'd be runnin' on four cylinders the rest of his life. Wouldn't have wanted that anyway."

Jim Richards glanced at Ross, then back to Steve. "But you'd think the Docs at the al Sabah would have recognized the symptoms?"

Ross nodded, "You'd think."

Steve shrugged. "We asked that question. Apparently the bacteria mutates, or something. If it gets into heart muscle undetected, it's all over." He sighed. "Usually gets detected in time. But Dave was initially responding so well to the antibiotics, the Docs expected a full recovery. Never suspected anything more serious than fatigue, and a bad cold."

Jim Richards signaled for another round, holding his empty glass in the air. Then turned back to Ross and Steve after receiving an acknowledgment from the cocktail waitress.

"The one consolation we get from this rotten job we do," Ross said, "is a chance to avenge a fallen friend. How do you take revenge on a bunch of bird shit?"

Richards shrugged. "You don't."

The drinks arrived, they clinked glasses. "To Dave Wilcox." Jim Richards raised his glass. "He'll never be forgotten."

#

The roll up door to the warehouse rumbled and groaned as the jury-rigged automatic opener labored to raise the monster. Jim Richards drove his 1970 Mach I Mustang through the cavernous opening, and then hit the button on the remote to let the door slide down again. It grumbled in protest until it crunched to a stop. By then he'd parked his pony in line with the other three vehicles he owned: An old Opal rally coup, a dark blue Chevrolet Blazer, and a white over white 1964 rag top Mustang.

He'd promised himself a new car two years ago, but there weren't any new American cars of interest to him. The shameful fact was, Japan Inc. turned out more interesting stuff than Detroit. What the hell? He could wait. U.S. manufacturers would eventually catch up.

He bent over to pick up mail, shoved through the slot in the walk-in door. Then climbed the stairs to the mezzanine level. Jim Richards felt around the corner of the wall for the credit card size piece of spring steel that rested inside a fortuitously located drywall seam. He slipped the steel between the door latch and the serrated striker plate until it tripped the spring activated door locks allowing him to enter his mezzanine level quarters.

As he reached around to replace the entry device, he chuckled to himself: Thank God the *wood butchers* who'd built the place hadn't been highly skilled artisans, or the seam would have been tightly plumbed leaving no place convenient for concealment.

Jim Richards walked through his office, dropped the mail on a three-quarter inch thick tempered glass desktop, then continued on through the kitchen, and into a large bedroom.

He quickly pulled off his clothes, tossed them down the laundry chute to fall unceremoniously into a large plastic bin that served as a hamper. Then walked into the bathroom to take a steaming hot shower.

He climbed into his king size bed, hoping to fall into a deep sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. But sleep would not come, at least not immediately. So he propped his pillow up and stared out the window at the lights of homes on the east bay hills that reflected off the dark bay waters. The window slider was open, the scent of salt water drifted in on the evening breeze.

He took stock of his life. There was something about the loss of a friend that caused one to assess one's own circumstances. To face the fact of mortality, the tenuous nature of life itself. He'd *retired* from contract field intelligence work after the Guatemalan affair, swearing he'd carve out a normal life for himself, and at first he had. He'd met a gorgeous girl, whose clear blue eyes and musical laugh took his breath away. But eventually he found he missed the work he was best suited for, and returned to his old profession.

She accepted without question his quasi-legitimate cover, assisting commercial clients with loss control problems. That his assignments sent him into the field, sometimes for a week, sometimes longer.

He'd not disclosed his *Nom de Guerre*. She, and all their mutual acquaintances, knew him as J. Robert Bushman. He'd also not told her about the warehouse on the shoreline of San Francisco Bay. Explaining all the equipment, weapons, disguises, and cars would have been dicey. And where the heck could he have stashed all the stuff he owned in the apartment they shared? Certainly not in the padlocked carport storage unit that overflowed with winter outfits, quilts, stuffed animals, and old photos of ex-boy friends.

Jim Richards sighed; a day like today took all the spirit out of him. He longed for her warm arms, the feel of her lithe body against his own. Yet he'd chosen of his own volition not to go home tonight. He could not share his sorrow with her. To do so would bring her too close to *his* world, and that would be dangerous for both of them.

His old control officer, Arnold Batiste, had retired to a yacht somewhere on the Caribbean. And the CIA observation post formerly on Green Street had given way to an investigative proprietary run out of a warehouse by John Harding's elder son, Ty Harding.

Jim Richards spent most days following leads on various foreign intelligence agents who'd immigrated to the United States under self-procured bogus documents. When found, they were turned to the life of a double agent, deported, or when necessary neutralized. Occasionally, he'd stumble onto an operation of true concern. Then follow the pipeline wherever it might lead. Hours of boredom, moments of stark terror.

Outside, a semi-trailer pulled to a stop at the loading dock of one of his neighbors, its powerful air brakes exhausted into the cool night air. The rattle of its diesel breaking the silence.

Jim Richards let out an audible sigh. The industrial complex was finally beginning to turn a profit for its developer, which meant his privacy and solitude had ended. He'd bought space in the complex years before, when the developer was desperate for cash to see him through until demand caught up to supply. Now the buildings were worth a small fortune. Unfortunately, the solitude and quiet he'd once enjoyed, especially at night, was gone forever. Still, as a *safe house*, the location was far superior to a residential neighborhood where there was always at one nosy neighbor.

#

As Jim Richards finally drifted off to sleep at three in the morning, a young Hispanic caregiver who'd recently arrived in the United States from Mexico, began her daily rounds of elderly patients at the Green Acres Convalescent Home in Nashville, Tennessee.

Sylvia Esperante had dreamed all her life of coming to the United States. But she'd never expected her dream would ever come true. Raised in the high country of Monterrey, Mexico; her education saw her barely past the equivalent of the sixth grade. Her family could not afford to feed five children, most especially not as they reached their teenage years. And so she was sent to the city of Monterrey when she was fourteen to work as a live-in housekeeper for a landed and moneyed man. There she learned to care for the *padrone's elderly* mother; she also learned to *care* for the padrone.

One day when she was eighteen, while shopping for the household, she was approached by a young man, who at first appeared to be interested in her romantically. But as their relationship progressed, through quiet talks and secret meetings, she came to realize he was in fact in the business of recruiting caregivers for American homes.

She could not believe her good fortune. For only a small fee, one she could actually afford from her meager savings, he would send her to the United States to work, under contract, caring for the elderly. And, he assured her; she would be able to become a United States citizen when her contract had expired.

She knew the immigration documents he'd provided her with were not legal, she was not stupid, and in any case the method of transport across the border made it clear her entry was illegal. But he had been true to his word. She was now safely working under contract as he'd promised. And there were other girls like her at the facility, and they confirmed she could stay in the United States

even after her contract expired if she found another job. And if not, she could just continue on at the convalescent home.

Of course, her pay was very little, not even minimum wage, but then she really didn't have a lot of expenses. Just the few things she might buy for herself. Her room and board were paid for, well actually, taken as part of her wage. But she could still save a little. Maybe when her contract was up, something better would come along.

She enjoyed caring for the elderly. It wasn't a bad life. The only stain on an otherwise acceptable routine was the occasional *visit* by another *padrone*, and he expected things from her that were not spelled out in her contract. But she'd put up with such before; it was the way of the world she supposed.

At eighteen she was an attractive girl, a little plump but not unduly so. She had dark sensuous eyes, silky black hair, and smooth olive skin. When she walked her full round buttocks swayed provocatively from side to side. But she wished her breasts were not so large, they were what attracted the men. She knew this because their eyes always dropped to her chest whenever they talked to her.

Sylvia stopped at the first room on her right as she made her five AM rounds. Mr. Henderson was a dear old man, nearly ninety. Sometimes angry, telling her she was nothing but a *wetback*. Sometimes fearful, like a little child. And she'd hold his hand, and tell him everything was going to be okay.

There were moments when he could remember all he had done in his life as if it were yesterday. And sometimes he would look at her with full understanding of what fate had done to him, and tears would fill his eyes.

He was difficult to handle at times, because he was afraid to put his feet on the floor. He thought he would fall through to nothingness. "Don't let me fall." He'd say to her. Or, "You know Sylvia, I'm *afraid*." As if it were a sudden revelation he had to share with her...over and over again.

There was a name for his illness, but she could never remember exactly what it was called, *Old Timers Disease*, was the way it sounded, only with an *Al* at the beginning, sort of the way a European might pronounce it.

However it was pronounced, she knew it was fatal. Eventually, whatever it was that affected the memory, took away the body's ability to function as well. She'd already seen one or two of their patients die from it, lying at last in fetal positions. It usually happened when they were all alone at night.



She thought Mr. Henderson must have been a successful businessman, that he had a large amount of money. Or else, how was it he could afford to spend his final days being cared for in such a fine place.

In her own country, only the wealthy could afford such care, but mostly it was the children who cared for their parents. And those with neither children nor money, fate alone determined how and where their days would end.

The other girls laughed when she mentioned the idea of Mr. Henderson having money. But it was the Supervisor, who'd worked at Green Acres for many years, who explained that in America, the government doled out money, from taxes collected expressly for care of the elderly, when their own meager savings were exhausted, and their families were unable, or unwilling, to bear the burden.

Mr. Henderson had no family of his own. Well only a distant nephew. And *his* only concern was to avoid any inconvenience to his own life. Sylvia knew intuitively he had no real concern for his demented uncle, because he had never come to visit him and probably never would.

As Sylvia gradually opened the door to Mr. Henderson's room, a game she played each morning, opening the door very slowly so he would not see a sudden movement and become frightened, she noticed something odd, well two things actually.

One, there was a tube in his arm. An *eye vee* *she* thought it was called. That was unusual because she had never seen one in his arm before. And two, he was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. His eyes set in the fixed stare of the dead.

# Chapter Two

Ty Harding International was located in an ancient building on Townsend Avenue, as far south of San Francisco's Market Street as one could get without finding themselves in the Third Street slough. The building's decrepit exterior was reminiscent of a monochromatic still life, haphazardly slapped onto a three-story brick canvass.

There was no sign at the front entrance stating the name of the company, for those who might be interested in such information. And either John Harding, or some other clandestine member of the intelligence community owned no convenient spot along Townsend Avenue for the installation of an observation post, since every building on the block. Hence, there was little chance a tenant in a neighboring space would turn out to be anything more than totally benign.

And since the district's businesses supported every mode of dress: Blue collar, white collar, business suit, jogging suit, and wino rags. No one ever gave a second thought to the vast variety of attire that came and went from the old building. Any disguise short of Bozo the Clown would draw not the slightest attention.

Another intrinsic advantage to the old building, the entire first floor was dedicated to temporary vehicle storage, *parking*, and an issue of considerable importance in downtown San Francisco. The garage was entered at the back of the building. Jim Richards turned right and swung his Mustang into the narrow alley that led to the rear. There was another alley, between Second and First, that passed behind the structure; but it was a one-way affair used only for departure.

Jim Richards pulled into the first available space, which happened to be next to THI's surveillance van, a converted delivery truck festooned in the colors, logo, and advertisement of a well-known brand of snack food. Apparently the maniacs in the Psych Ops Center, back at Langley, had come to the conclusion that making a surveillance van appear to be a recognizable snack food delivery vehicle would satisfy an observer's curiosity about what the hell the damn thing was doing in *their* neighborhood. Naturally the advertising was changed from time to time to fit the nature of the stakeout location. Red Rider Milk was always a popular choice for suburban locales.

Jim Richards slipped out of his automobile. Waved a high five to Pete, their in-house mechanic, then walked over to an antiquated freight elevator for the trip to his third floor cubicle.

At the front of the building, a flight of stairs led from the sidewalk to the second floor. On that level an Insurance Inspection and Commercial Investigation service was operated, serving insurance companies and underwriters in need of field information about the risks they were about to insure. The investigation division primarily focused on insurance fraud, a segment of loss control guaranteed to keep their operations in the black.

The intelligence operations were run out of the third floor offices, though field operatives would often use an insurance investigator's cover for preliminary information gathering, otherwise known in the trade as reconnaissance.

The elevator rattled and clanked all the way up to the top. Jim Richards was glad he seldom came into the office, as he was convinced that sooner or later the old lift, which strongly resembled the technology of a water well bucket, would one day plunge to the bottom of the shaft carrying whoever was on board to the not so happy hunting ground.

The elevator *clunked* to a stop, then free fell a half-foot to settle plumb level at the third floor lobby. This little hiccup occurred almost all the time, and would get Jim Richards' heart started if he wasn't paying attention. Problem was, about one percent of the time it stopped, then forgot to do its little free fall. On those occasions, Richards would find himself standing in the old cage waiting for the inevitable until he screwed up enough courage to gingerly lift the horizontal scissors doors, and step out. And then there were those most rare occasions when the damn thing hiccupped just as he placed his foot onto the linoleum floor of the lobby. A double *kalong* that.

Jim Richards turned right, and walked along the hallway. It had several doors, all of which were nailed shut. Insulation, cinder block, and plaster were on the far side. Only one door actually provided access to the third floor offices. He reached the last door on the left, a walnut stained, and solid wood unit with an old brass knob. He opened it and stepped through into a small reception area. Roxanne, their receptionist, looked up from the magazine she was reading, then smiled.

"Morning, Roxy. Who's ahead? Us, or them?" Richards said in greeting.

"I've no idea, but if *you* find out... let me know."

Jim Richards pulled on the handle of a two-inch thick billet aluminum door that led into the operations center, just as Roxanne hit the electronic lock release.

He set his attaché case down on the work surface inside the cubicle assigned for his use. He didn't store anything of significance in the cubicle, though

the work space was stocked with a selection of supplies needed to write reports, label photos, and otherwise cover one's butt in support of expensive, unsupervised field activity.

A keyboard and screen linked to their mainframe computer sat forlornly on the work surface. He hated the machine. With network computing truly in its infancy, and prototype software still trying to remember its own boot up commands, any work performed on the piece of crap, as he fondly called it, only took twice as long as would otherwise be required.

He punched in his entry code and waited, what seemed, an unduly long number of seconds for an image to appear on the screen. Usually it told him he had no messages, but, to his surprise, today there was a message. It was from Ty Harding, asking him to stop by his office when he came in this morning. He acknowledged its receipt.

Not bad, he thought, two minutes and twenty-five seconds to stop by his cubicle, enter his code, read the message, acknowledge its receipt, and then punch out of the system. Now he could walk around the corner to Ty's office and see what was up. Something he would have done anyway, two minutes sooner, without the system.

Ty Harding occupied a large corner office. The only one with a decent view, albeit via a couple of small, old fashioned, throw-up windows. Beyond the brick window sills, lightly frosted in pigeon droppings and feathers, was a view of the China Basin Boat Harbor, and the Alameda Naval Air Station across the bay.

An F-4 Phantom rotated, climbing northwest at three thousand feet per minute to streak out over the Bay Bridge, just as Jim Richards stepped through the doorway into Harding's office.

"Morning, Ty. I saw your message on P.O.C. What's the code of the day?"

Ty Harding was six years older than Richards. He stood right at six feet with a well-developed muscular body. Like Richards he had an unusually youthful appearance that belied his true age and experience.

They'd met years ago on a training assignment, each had heard of the other through Ty's brother Matt. The training included a buddy team problem. They quickly worked their way through it as if they'd been paired for years. They'd remained close friends ever since.

"Morning, Jim. How you feelin' today. Matt said we lost a friend from Team Three last week. Someone you both worked with on that Guatemalan deal."

Richards nodded his head. "Yes, unfortunately. Just bad luck, he'd picked up a particularly virulent strain of pneumonia, couldn't fight it off. Left a wife and daughter behind."

Harding shook his head sadly. "Damn, that's tough." He glanced out of the window at the bay for a moment. Then turned back to face Jim Richards. "You got anything pending at the moment?"

Richards shook his head. "Nope. Just closed the Moon Ranch case. Haven't checked the incoming files as yet for anything interesting."

Harding smiled. "I got a call from Elmo Jefferson early this morning. Matt's flying him out today. He wants us to meet him at the Marines Memorial Club for dinner tonight."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "What time?"

"Eight o'clock sharp."

#

The air blew chill off the cold Pacific Ocean, straight down Sutter Street, funneled like a wind tunnel between the multi-storied buildings of downtown San Francisco. Jim Richards was glad he'd decided to wear his Navy blue cashmere overcoat, an article he'd purchased for visits to colder climates in winter. Tonight it covered a medium gray business suit.

Richards turned right at the entrance to the Marines Memorial building, and then swung the heavy glass door open against the wind's onslaught to step into the club's long narrow foyer. A straight line of red carpet bordered on either side by Italian marble led to the reception desk. The club served as a hotel for traveling Marines, as well as a sort of retirement community for Marine officers living in San Francisco.

As Jim Richards walked towards a bank of elevators in an alcove on the right, he glanced reverently to his left at wall mounted bronze plaques honoring heroes who'd sacrificed their lives for the freedom so many Americans took for granted.

The elevator deposited Richards on the top floor. Straight ahead was the cocktail lounge. He saw Ty Harding and Elmo Jefferson seated at the bar. He

stepped forward, then paused a moment at the entrance to the lounge, to gaze at the magnificent view afforded by a wall of windows that over looked downtown San Francisco. City lights twinkled like multi-colored precious stones. The Ferry Building spotlighted in gold at the foot of Market Street, the Bay Bridge just beyond.

As he stepped into the lounge, he noted another building two blocks away with identical windows, as if a mirror had been held up for each building to view itself - the Starlight Room at the top of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel. For a moment, in his mind, Jim Richards felt himself carried backward in time to the intensity of World War Two. He sensed all about him the spirits of Marines who'd stayed at the Club, in recuperation from fatigue of battle, or anticipation of that which was to come as each shipped out to his point of ordered assignment.

And over at the Starlight Room, wives and girlfriends shared a last close dance with those whom they'd love forever, but lose to the vagaries of battle, or the accidents of war. In his mind, he heard the dance band softly playing: *These Foolish Things Remind Me Of You*.

The vision passed and Jim Richards found he'd closed the distance between the entrance and the low bar. Elmo Jefferson rose from his chair, hand extended. Richards took the proffered hand, it's grip sincere. He liked Elmo Jefferson, knew he'd played a role in the background of many of his adventures. But somehow, Richards also sensed Jefferson would never intentionally leave him stranded simply to satisfy a political expediency.

"Evening, Jim. Thank you for coming tonight."

"My pleasure, Elmo. It's good to see you again." He pulled a low backed, Danish modern armchair from under the bar. He nodded hello to Ty Harding as he settled his one hundred and ninety pound frame into the seat."

The bartender slipped a cocktail napkin across the bar in his direction, and then took his order. They had a couple of drinks, chatted about current events, sports, other inconsequential, then adjourned to a small private dining room one floor below.

Over an aged prime rib served rare, with garlic mashed potatoes and baby peas accompanied by an excellent 1966 Leoville, Elmo Jefferson explained the problem for which Jim Richards' services were required.

"Several years ago," Elmo began, "the agency funded a proprietary to expedite field operations. Like all proprietaries, the enterprise had to be completely legitimate and sufficiently successful to justify itself. Otherwise, foreign intelligence would soon realize the true nature of its operations."

Elmo cut a piece of prime rib, forked it into his mouth. Enjoying its succulent flavor before continuing with his explanation.

"To everyone's great delight the enterprise became hugely successful, particularly with its domestic business activities. Thus providing a nearly unlimited source of private funding for international projects."

Jim Richards took a sip of wine, and then glanced over the rim of his glass at Elmo. "Sounds to good to be true."

Elmo chuckled. "Exactly. Though, in fact, it is."

Richards glanced over at Ty Harding, then back to Jefferson. "What type of business are we talking about?"

Jefferson finished swallowing a morsel. "Hospital management."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Hospital management?"

Jefferson nodded. "Well actually: Management, development, construction, staffing, the whole nine yards." He paused for a moment gathering his thoughts, and lathered some creamed Horseradish onto his prime rib, took another bite, and then continued.

"The United States has a reputation for running the best medical facilities in the world. When the proprietary started operations, it bought or signed contracts with hospitals, convalescent homes, and medical clinics here and abroad. Later it got into the development and building side.

"In time, its reputation came to the attention of foreign investors seeking a safe depository for discretionary capital. In other words, they stash their cash in our financial institutions. While we take the risk of establishing business operations in their country."

Ty Harding spoke up. "You might want to bring Jim up to speed on how we use the proprietary."

Jefferson smiled. "Sorry. I've been livin' and breathin' this thing for so long, I've forgotten its one of our most closely held secrets."

He took a bite of garlic potato, washed it down with wine.

"Okay, here's how it works. Let's say we want to insert an asset into Albania. There's a proprietary managed hospital at Karzoni, Greece just a few

miles from the border. We insert someone into hospital staff. He gradually acclimates over a period of a few weeks. Contacts are made with cooperative members of the Albanian dissident movement. Papers are forged, and our asset moves across the border."

Elmo took another bite of his meal; Jim Richards took the opportunity to ask a question. "How's this any different, or better, than simply using ordinary cover?"

"Oh it's much better," Elmo replied. "For one thing, our asset has the time to become accustomed to the nature of the situation. To develop a rapport with his contacts before venturing into secured territory. It also gives the opposition time to check out his bonafides should he come to their attention. Then categorize him, accept him, forget about him, and move on. That's the real beauty, our asset gradually becomes accepted and eventually ignored by the very people he's most concerned about avoiding."

Jim Richards nodded his understanding, blending in was a matter of both time and talent. Usually time was the kicker.

Elmo continued. "Let's say we have someone who wants to defect. He comes over, checks into the hospital. Where's he gonna go? The opposition has the exits under surveillance day and night. They send fake relatives inside to confirm where their guy is, but they can't do much while he's under close medical scrutiny. Besides, they're not really certain he's gone squirrel on them. Could be he really does have *appendicitis*. They waste time checking on his medical records. Keeping the facility under observation.

Ambulances come and go. Routines are identified and accepted. A *watcher* gets a little sloppy. Next thing you know, defector's disappeared." Elmo grinned his Cheshire cat grin. "Ever try to unravel hospital records? Impossible. It's the same all over the world."

Richards smiled in his turn. "And I suppose if you want to snatch somebody right off the street, who's gonna notice? The guy takes a needle in the butt, goes down on the ground. Ambulance shows up and takes him away. So what?"

Elmo nodded his head up and down, "Exactly."

Richards glanced over at Harding, then back to Jefferson. "How many hospitals does this company manage world wide?"

"Eighty-five internationally, nearly six hundred domestically."



Richards looked genuinely impressed. "Six hundred?"

"Including clinics and convalescents. See that's the base of their financial strength, the domestic stuff."

Richards shook his head. "Yeah, but that's amazing. And staffing as well?"

Jefferson nodded. "Pretty much. Depends on need. If they take over an existing facility, staff remains in place. Except for the requisite downsizing, of course. At the international level they fill key positions, but leave enough holes to create anything we need for someone to operate in-country."

There was a short knock on the door, immediately followed by their waiter and a bus person. The table was cleared. Orders for coffee and cognac taken.

Outside in the lobby, Elmo's second security guard replaced the first, to allow a meal break. Then posted himself comfortably in a leather chair, a magazine in hand. Still mindful of his duty even in a low risk setting like the Marines Memorial Club.

The cognac was served in crystal snifters, with macanudo wrapped cigars, and steaming hot coffee from a tall silver pot.

Richards passed on the proffered cigar, he figured he'd probably get enough second hand smoke to satisfy any unconscious craving he might have for orally delivered carcinogens. He gently swirled the cognac in his snifter. Then looked across the table at Jefferson and Harding happily puffing away, after completing the ritual of clipping and toasting to ignition.

It was time to cut to the chase before everyone's brain fagged out from lack of oxygen. "So, what's the name of this management firm, and the problem you'd like me to solve?" Jim Richards asked.

Jefferson exhaled a puff of blue smoke towards the high curved ceiling. "Caring First."

"Caring First?" Richards raised his eyebrows.

"Caring First Medical Associates, Incorporated."

Richards frowned. "Never heard of them. But then I don't hang around hospitals much, except occasionally, after you and the mind readers send me on

one of your little excursions." Richards followed the comment with a sarcastic lopsided grin.

"Where are they headquartered?"

Jefferson chuckled at Richards's cynicism. "Their corporate offices are about a half hour south of Nashville, Tennessee. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of them before. They keep a low profile outside their own industry. And most of their hospitals retain their original community names. Though usually there's a small logo painted just below the facility's name: A hospital ship on a stormy sea sailing towards a lighthouse, with the words: *A Caring First Company* printed underneath the image."

Richards lifted his chin, "And the problem?"

Jefferson did not respond immediately. He took a sip of cognac, and then drew a deep puff on his cigar, savoring the mixture of flavors.

"The operation has grown so fast, I have a concern that security has been breached. There is a mole inside their corporate headquarters."

Richards tilted his head back slightly. "And you'd like me to ferret him out?"

Elmo smiled like a Cheshire cat. "More or less. Penetrate the corporate structure, nose around, and find out who the mole is without disturbing his domain. And by the way, while you're at it, gather any intelligence you feel pertinent to the security of the operation."

Richards frowned.

"You see," said Jefferson, "we want to use the mole, for awhile at least, to misinform. But we also want to know if there are others of concern. Problem with moles at this level of an operation is they seldom work alone."

Jim Richards pinched the bridge of his nose, and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "You're talking about a company with thousands of employees world wide, plus a couple hundred in their corporate headquarters. Even assuming I had the rest of my life to complete the assignment, the odds against success are enormous."

Elmo smiled. "True, but we've narrowed down the field substantially for you. First, your only area of concern is Caring First's corporate offices. Second, only their upper management, which narrows the list down to no more than twenty individuals including support personnel."

Elmo paused for a moment, another puff of smoke rose towards the ceiling.

Richards picked up his coffee cup, took a sip. "Problem is," he set his cup down. "A new face will be thoroughly, if unofficially, vetted." He thought for a moment. "Where am I to insert? Even with the most creative resume, I don't recall ever serving as Vice-President for a multi-national company, or any company for that matter."

Elmo smiled. "Actually I was thinking more along the lines of the mail room."

Richards let out a short laugh. "You're joking." He shook his head incredulously. "That's about as far from the executive suite as a janitor. Excuse me, Building Superintendent."

Elmo nodded once. "Agreed. But on the other hand, you would have free run of their facility. And exposure to virtually every piece of documentation that comes, goes, or internally flows through their corporate headquarters. It's been my experience the best deep cover uses the simplest method of penetration.

"You would be thoroughly briefed, of course, on every shred of evidence we have that has led us to the conclusion Caring First has been compromised. That coupled with your inherent skill and past experience, should guarantee success."

Jim Richards tilted his head to one side, and smiled. He lifted his glass of cognac and clinked it against Elmo's. "Thank you for the compliment. I always do my best not to let you, and the others back at the *Fort, down.*"

"Then you'll accept the assignment?"

Richards took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Let me think about it, Elmo. I want to analyze the evidence, give some thought to exactly how the task may be accomplished. I'm skeptical of the insertion point, notwithstanding your faith in my intelligence alchemy." He took a sip of coffee. "That said, I'm intrigued. And you know how much I enjoy a challenge."

#

The waters of the Adriatic Sea can be as tempestuous as any ocean, or as smooth and calm as a bathtub. As Jim Richards, Ty Harding, and Elmo Jefferson sat down to dinner, the sun was rising over the mountains east of Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia.

The morning bitterly chills. The sea smooth as glass. A coastal patrol boat came upon a body floating face down. Captain Mostar Kovac ordered his yeoman to hook the collar of the jacket with a boat hook, and pull the already putrid carcass close to the boat for recovery.

They had no body bag on board, so they wrapped the remains in an old canvass tarp.

Back at the dock, an ambulance from the Dubrovnik coroner's office took the body to the morgue for examination. Worms and crabs had already begun to devour the bloated thing, beginning with its face, leaving what was left mostly unrecognizable.

The coroner found an identification card in the man's jacket, Yuri Sosyka, a scientist and a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The coroner immediately called his local contact with the KGB.

An autopsy was performed, the stomach contents examined. It confirmed what the KGB agent already knew; Yuri had dined on a local dish only a couple of hours before he died. The coroner also found a cancerous tumor in the man's liver."

The KGB agent had kept Yuri under surveillance ever since he'd arrived in Yugoslavia with his wife, on holiday to the sea. The agent had received a tip; Yuri might be planning to defect to the west.

But if that were the case, his wife Myra certainly wasn't planning to join him. She'd been observed in rendezvous with another man, a good-looking Nordic type, believed to be from East Germany.

The KGB agent shook his head in irritation. To save money he'd only assigned one car to the surveillance operation the previous night, once he'd realized Yuri and Myra would be dining together. But after dinner, they'd argued on the sidewalk, and then separated.

Yuri had returned to the restaurant, and then called for a taxi to take him back to the hotel. The KGB agent had listened to the one-sided telephone conversation.

Then the agent made a mistake. Instead of following the taxi, he called ahead and told his assistant to stake out the hotel and watch for Yuri's return, while he followed Myra on foot. Just as he'd expected, she met with the East German. They crossed the street to a nightclub, the agent followed. But as they

were about to enter the club, a cab pulled up, they climbed in. The cab pulled away and turned left at the next street, towards the port.

At that moment, the KGB agent realized the defection tip had been valid. And though he made the telephone call to his assistant, he was not surprised to learn Yuri had not returned to the hotel.

Now with Yuri lying on ice in the Dubrovnik morgue, another picture seemed to be emerging, though it would take a lot of research to assure the conclusion he'd reached was accurate. The East German and Myra were lovers just as he'd surmised. They'd met on one of her trips to Germany when her husband went to convention in Berlin, or perhaps when the East German came to Moscow on business. Local KGB surveillance reports would certainly clarify which of the possibilities was correct.

Myra was unhappy, and badgered her husband to defect so they could have all the things she longed for that were so readily available in the west. Finally he'd agreed. She'd introduced him to the German, convincing Yuri he was in the business of helping Soviet citizens defect. Yuri desperate not to lose her fell for the ruse. Once out on the Adriatic, the German killed Yuri, and then dumped his body overboard.

The KGB agent shook his head. Plain old lust had taken Yuri, not the Midnight Special to America.

#

As Yuri's body was in the process of being tentatively identified, a jet transport, leased from a proprietary that supplied chartered aircraft for covert operations, landed at Raleigh-Durham Airport, North Carolina. There were few people awake, at three-thirty in the morning, to see the picture perfect landing made by a former U.S. Navy aviator with thirty thousand hours of unlogged pilot-in-command flying time.

The gray Boeing 727, fitted with long-range tanks, taxied directly to a hangar on the far side of the field. The doors to the hangar were pushed open; a diesel powered tug towed the jetliner into the cavernous structure. Once inside, with the hangar doors closed, the rear stairs to the 727 were lowered. Yuri and Myra Sosyka carefully descended to the concrete apron then breathed for the first time in their lives the free air of the United States of America.

#

In Galatina, Italy, a woman of about Yuri's age stared vacantly out the window of her modest home. In her mind, she saw her husband sailing his tiny,

brightly colored fishing boat. She thought of his hands, kept smooth by a habit of always wearing gloves whenever he fished. And also by the naphtha contained in the diesel fuel he often had his hands immersed in, when cleaning parts of engines he'd rebuild to earn additional money, when not out on the water fishing.

His body had not been found, only his empty boat. She knew he would not return. Like so many other men who made their living from the sea, the sea had taken him.

She was a superstitious woman. And though a devout Catholic, who prayed to the Blessed Virgin. She firmly believed the sea was a living being that chose for itself the tribute necessary to allow mankind to continue to partake of her largess.

# Chapter Three

Jim Richards was awakened by the first golden rays of sunlight rising over the undulating green hills of the East bay. He stretched his muscles, and then rolled out of bed. Outside, the air was crisp and clear. Birds were awakening, singing songs of greeting to each other.

He dressed in workout sweats, and then stepped out for a run. South along the shoreline of the bay. The water mirror calm. He followed a bicycle path. Gazed at sea birds foraging in the shallows. Now and then, an airliner, on approach to San Francisco International Airport, passed overhead.

Forty-five minutes later, he returned to his warehouse. Worked out for a half hour on the weight pile. Another half hour on his climbing structure, scaling a variety routes, jumping and tumbling down its steep incline onto rollout mats below. He finished his exercise by going a few rounds with the spring-metal mounted medicine balls, to keep his kicking and punching skills at a reliable level.

Thoroughly winded, he pulled open the door to his shooting range, stepped inside. The range was a long narrow structure built within the warehouse, out of concrete block. The walls lined with acoustical material from Sionics Corp. He'd installed a fan to extract cordite gas created by the discharge of his weapons.

Just to the right of the entry was an old bank vault. He spun the combination back and forth with practiced ease, then pushed down on the stainless steel handle and swung the door open to reveal a collection of combat firearms.

He reached inside and slipped an accurized Model 1911, slim framed, Remington Forty-Five caliber pistol, off its storage rest. Then picked up several pre-loaded magazines, filled with military grade parabellum ammunition. He slipped a magazine into the butt of the auto-loading pistol, and then chambered a round.

Jim Richards fired a few hundred rounds each week, to keep his shooting skills finely honed. He never knew when an assignment might require their use. His firing range had several targets, both stationary and moving, hanging at various distances along the fifty-foot structure. The limited distance was somewhat compensated by artistic renderings of opponents as they would appear at much greater yardage.

One target portrayed an opponent crouched behind the open door of a car drawn to represent a distance of thirty yards. Only a headshot would equate to a kill. Installed down range, a system of pulleys stretched the width of the structure. The pulleys were operated by an electric motor connected to a timing mechanism that selected pulley operation in a more or less random fashion. Targets would pop up, or traverse the structure at unexpected times. The mechanism created by a friend with an electronics shop, and a penchant for semi-robotic devices. Multiple targets, and variable lighting, assisted in maintaining positive shooting skills, and reduced boredom to a minimum.

Jim Richards preferred to shoot after working out, as it introduced fatigue to the fine muscles required to hold a weapon steady. Some combat shooters made the mistake of only practicing when they were rested, in peak condition. Unfortunately, in the field, stress, lack of sleep, and muscle fatigue were factors that had to be overcome. Often his scores were mediocre, though realistically related to what he could expect in actual combat. Of course, there was no way to simulate the affect of adrenaline.

Jim Richards set the timing mechanism to level five on a scale of ten, the levels did not equate to degree of difficulty, but rather to the order of target presentation. Jim Richards quickly adapted. To overcome this trait, he periodically switched wires around at the activating mechanism, changing the relationship of presentation to numerical setting.

The old forty-five autoloader was his favorite side arm; it had saved his life on more than one occasion. A forty-five caliber round hit hard, with the force of a nine pound sledge hammer moving sixty miles an hour. Yet its low velocity was unlikely to penetrate exterior walls. A downside under some circumstances, but preferable to harming, or killing, an innocent as the result of a stray round plowing through the wall of a building.

As he blasted away, he found it difficult to maintain full concentration. His thoughts drifted to whether, or not, he should accept the assignment. There were issues that bothered him. The primary one, the unlikelihood of success. Jim Richards suddenly realized he'd run through a hundred rounds. He set the pistol down, and took a walk through the range amazed to find an eighty percent hit ratio. Well down from his usual ninety-seven percent. It was a little frightening to realize without any concentration at all, he'd managed to kill eighty percent of the targets he'd fired at, while still avoiding innocents. Of course, under actual field conditions the other twenty percent would have filled him with enough lead to turn his miserable self into bathyscaph ballast.

He picked up the hose of an industrial vacuum cleaner stored nearby, and sucked up the spent brass. It would be recycled to a scrap metal dealer. Richards



did not believe in reloads, at least not at the powder levels he routinely used. As he policed his range, his mind continued to ponder the decision to be made.

Most proprietary were single function businesses. Compartmentalization was intrinsic to their nature. And most proprietary needed funding for covert operations. Caring first had taken the proprietary concept to whole new level, eliminating the usual oversight by audit of allocated funds.

Jim Richards unconsciously reloaded the magazines he'd used. Then cleaned his weapon. An interesting thought crossed his mind: If the organization was beyond oversight, it might eventually turn on those who'd set its wheels in motion.

He wiped down his weapon, and then returned it to the vault. He closed the door, spun the combination lock, and then turned out the lights.

Could he in fact do the job? Could he penetrate corporate culture? Or should he pass? Allow another agent, perhaps one with a stronger background in corporate operations, handle the job. It was not an easy decision to make. On the one hand he'd never failed an assignment. On the other, he'd never accepted one he wasn't certain he could complete.

Jim Richards climbed the stairs to the mezzanine, and then took a hot shower. He dressed in blue jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers. Then slipped into a red cotton windbreaker. He went back down to the main level, where he pulled the cover off his old '64 Mustang Convertible. The top was always down now, as he only drove it on sunny days.

He headed up to Hobe's in San Mateo for breakfast. Then returned to his warehouse office to thoroughly read the data Elmo Jefferson had provided him following their dinner meeting. As he studied the material, he became convinced he should not accept assignment.

#

Jim Richards pushed a shopping cart along the aisle at Winston's Hardware. Whenever he came to buy an item, he was never content with just going to the part of the store where it would be found. He always had to wander up and down the aisles to see what new items were in stock, and think about the gadgets and projects he could build.

He turned into the plumbing aisle, and then came to a sudden stop. Directly ahead was Dave Wilcox' wife. She seemed to be staring, almost lost in time, at a display of garbage disposal units, of all things. For a moment Jim

Richards considered turning around. What if she were to recognize him from the services? What would he say to her?

He watched her for a moment, she seemed to drift back and forth between making a decision, and remembering something sweet but sad. How many times had she and Dave come here together he wondered?

He rolled his cart forward. She caught the movement in the corner of her eye, and then turned towards him. She was beautiful. Blonde hair cut short in pageboy style. Pale blue eyes. A cute turned up nose. Full lips, that even in repose would seem to smile. She was exactly as Dave had often described her, and suddenly he again felt angry at the capriciousness of fate.

As she turned her head towards him, he smiled in a friendly way, and rolled his cart towards her. "It's hard to believe there are so many ways to chew up garbage, unless of course it's an artichoke." Richards said. "Funny how it's called a *Dispose-all*. When you read the owner's manual, there are three pages of items it won't dispose at all." He stopped beside her, motioned with his head towards the display. She looked at him in a quizzical sort of way, and he knew recognition was bubbling towards the surface.

"Now if it were me," he continued. "I'd go for one with a three-quarter horse motor; drive a Go-Cart close to thirty miles an hour. Or choke down a left-over T-Bone faster than Rin Tin Tin"

She laughed suddenly. Now for a graceful exit, he thought, before the moment was lost.

"Okay," she said. Nodding her head up and down. "That's one question out of the way. But then there's fusing and amperage. And which collar to attach underneath." She sighed. "Maybe I'll just go ahead and call the plumber."

He was hooked. "Nonsense, your half way there."

She looked directly into his eyes. Recognition returned. Her smile faded. "You were at the service. The Presidio."

Richards nodded. His face serious. "My name's Jim Richards. I'm so sorry, Elizabeth. Dave and I were colleagues,...friends."

At that moment another shopper stopped near by, she glanced over her shoulder. Then back at the display.

Jim Richards picked up the thread of conversation again. "Grab the one on the top left, we'll install it together."

#

Dave and Elizabeth's place was only a short drive from Winston's, in the hills of San Mateo. It was a charming older home, and Jim Richards could see they'd been in the process of gradually completing upgrades. Nearly all the land in San Mateo had been developed years before, so any home that was anywhere near affordable was several years old, and always in need of help.

Jim Richards and Lisa, as she'd asked him to call her, grunted and groaned, struggling to get the disposal into the under sink space. A normally simple task made difficult by the age of the kitchen, and its antiquated cabinetry. Lisa explained it was the next major project she and Dave had planned to complete.

It was nearly six in the evening by the time the job was finished, including a trip back to the hardware store for a circuit breaker panel to replace the fusing module originally installed on the old circuits. Dave had upgraded the wiring, but had been called away for his last assignment before the breaker panel could be installed.

Lisa asked Jim Richards to stay for dinner. Jolene, her daughter was visiting a friend. It was going to be a lonely night for Lisa, notwithstanding the fact there had been other lonely nights, but always the knowledge of Dave's return had been a comfort.

They sat at the table sipping a second cup of coffee.

"Dave spoke of you on more than one occasion, Jim. He was very fond of you. Said you were the only person he'd ever met, outside the guys in the team, he totally trusted."

Richards was flattered, but a little embarrassed, he felt his eyes water up. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Lisa. We had some interesting experiences together. There was no one else I'd have wanted with me on those occasions." Jim Richards looked away for a moment. "At the services, when I first saw you, I thought perhaps you'd not been aware of the work Dave was involved in, but from what you've just told me it appears I was mistaken."

Lisa smiled. "Oh you mean about the Teams? Heavens, Dave and I were sweethearts in high school." She smiled dreamily for a moment. "All he ever talked about was becoming a Navy *frogman*, SEALs were not known to the general public in those days. Before we were married, he was assigned to the Naval Special Warfare Group at Del Coronado. I came out to California, and stayed down on the strand." She laughed remembering a moment from the past.

"Some nights he'd come home completely pickled from carousing with the guys. But he was always true to me, I know. We were just that way." Tears came to her eyes, but she did not break down. She wiped a tear away before it ran down her cheek. "I'm sorry."

Richards swallowed hard.

"There were no secrets between us. Though he could not, did not, talk about specific missions. They never do, the ones who saw combat I mean." She smiled. "You could always tell the new ones, the Tadpoles. Always boasting about their training missions, near death experiences. But after combat, that kind of talk stopped."

She got up from the table and pulled a tissue from a box on the kitchen counter, blew her nose gently. "Would you like some more coffee?" She asked.

Jim Richards shook his head. "No thank you. I'm fine."

She returned to the table. "Dave once said if anything ever happened to the whole team, I was to find you and tell you. He gave me your card, said you'd know what to do. I now know what he meant, I saw it in your eyes at the services."

Richards looked down at his cup. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Revenge is never sweet, but it's a duty in the profession Dave and I shared. But there's no revenge I, or anyone, can take, Lisa. It was just bad luck. At worst incompetence."

Lisa shook her head emphatically. "Don't you believe a word of it. Dave was never sick a day in his life. I'm a nurse, Jim, a good one. I'm not just speaking as his wife. His immune system was amazing. Do you know his Small Pox vaccinations never took? He had a natural immunity. Typhoid, Dengue Fever, Malaria, all those tropical diseases. Not even a hint. They kept giving him shots before every trip. Never took."

Jim Richards frowned. "Maybe he just didn't allow the reactions to show. He was a tough guy."

She smiled. "Yes he was, but not that tough. And I know what to look for in any case. Subtle signs, skin flushing. Eye reaction...medical stuff."

Richards looked at her quite seriously. "My understanding is the bacteria developed too fast to be detected. It went right for the heart muscle."

Lisa shook her head. "It doesn't work that way. People who are infected with Histoplasmosis get progressively ill over a long period of time, that's not what happened to Dave."

Jim Richards looked at Lisa thoughtfully for a moment. "Have you discussed any of this with Steve, or the others?"

Lisa shook her head. "I was quite distraught. Not expressing my thoughts well, when there was an opportunity for us to speak. But I'm coming to grips with the fact Dave is gone, and I'm thinking more clearly now. Remembering my medical training. But they were all too close to it. They believe the results of the Bethesda report."

Jim Richards raised his eyebrows. "It is the medical center that treats the President of the United States. If they're not the best, then who can we trust?"

Lisa's mouth turned downward cynically. "They were the best at one time. I'm not so sure anymore. The only thing doctors care about today, is how much money they can make. That's why the ones that handle all the big cases at Bethesda have their own practices, and do most of their surgeries at hospitals owned by their own consortiums, designed primarily to maximize cash flow. Tish is a good example."

Richards frowned. "Tish?"

"Dr. Harold Tish, the forensics examiner who did the autopsy. He's an investor in a management company that books him all over the country to do autopsies on those who've died from the disease of excessive wealth - heart failure from worrying about how to keep all their money, and make more."

"Harold Tish owes his soul to that management company for Christ's sake. They're also the ones who manage al Sabah Hospital in Kuwait. No chance of a cover up there, by golly. You can check it out yourself if don't believe me. It's public record."

"What's the name of this management company?" Richards asked, but the hair on the back of his neck stood up, even before he heard Elizabeth's answer.

"Caring First International."

Jim Richards sat at the glass desk in his mezzanine office, a mug of steaming coffee to his right. A multi-line telephone to his left. There was only one line into the warehouse; the phone console disguised a scrambler unit.

It was six o'clock in the morning west coast time, nine in Langley. He dialed the private number for Elmo Jefferson. The phone rang twice before it was picked up. Elmo's secretary answered with her usual greeting. "Hello, you have reached the offices of the Central Intelligence Agency. This is not a secure line."

"This is Lone Wolf," Richards said into the receiver. "The code of the day is Lucy Too. May I speak to St. Nick with discretion."

At the other end of the line he heard a series of clicks and hums. While this was going on, he put himself on hold, to switch the scrambler on. Just as he punched off hold, someone who called himself St. Nick but sounded like Donald Duck came on the line.

"Hello, Jim. Sorry about the connection."

"You sound like a Toons character. When are the Comm. people gonna get this thing fixed?"

"Oh they figure to have it A-okay by the year two thousand and ten."

Jim Richards chuckled and shook his head. "I've made my decision, Elmo. When do we get started?"

# Chapter Four

Misti DiMartine looked at herself in the full-length mirror and tried to decide if the dress she'd just slipped into would have the proper effect. It was royal blue, with a high neck and open back. She decided it would be perfect. It fit her well, in all the right places.

Her jet-black hair fell to her shoulders in a natural wave. She was happy with her look tonight. Sometimes her fine silky hair would gather static, and misbehave. She applied a touch of mascara to long dark eyelashes that surrounded her blue eyes in a most flattering fashion. Next she applied a subdued red lip-gloss to her full sensuous lips. She thought they were perhaps a little too full, but knew that was nonsense.

She did not consider herself beautiful, though men had always commented favorably on her high cheekbones and sculpted features. Her legs were long and well shaped; she thought they were her best feature. She was comfortable with her body, though she would like to have been blessed with larger breasts. Still, her lovers had never complained. She smiled to herself. There hadn't been many, only three. And now only one but he was all she needed, at least in that department.

She turned out the bathroom light, then passed through the bedroom into the living room where she poured herself a cream sherry from a bottle kept on a shelf over the built in desk she'd converted to a bar.

Her apartment was on a wooded hill that over looked Larkspur, a quiet town in Marin County across the bay from San Francisco. She walked over to the windows at the far end of the living room. Then gazed out across the valley at the lights of homes on the opposite hillside. While below, lights in the village of Larkspur twinkled.

She was, as usual, excited. Looking forward to seeing him again. He'd insisted on their having dinner in the city, a date. It was their ritual when he returned, to have a special date and get to know each other all over again. Sometimes he brought flowers, as if it were their first date, though not always and she expected none tonight.

Just then there was a knock at the front door. A solid decisive knock, *one-two*, a brief pause, *three*. So much more interesting, she thought, than the grating *brrr* of an electronic doorbell. A knock had rhythm and harmony, in

keeping with the character of the visitor. While a doorbell was cold, always the same tone. One never knew if it were the harbinger of good news, or bad; the implication never pleasant.

Misti smoothed her dress, then stepped over to the door to peer through its view port. He'd trained her to look, even when she thought she was sure she knew who stood on the other side. He was cautious to a fault, but then with all the mayhem in the news perhaps it was prudent to be so careful.

She swung the door open. He was tall. His eyes dark brown, intense. An aura of danger seemed to hover about him. As when they'd first met, she perceived he was not a man one took for granted. He wore an exquisite wool business suit, tailored in midnight blue. Her favorite. Their eyes met. He smiled. It was such a sincere smile, and she knew at once how much he'd missed her.

"May I come in?"

It was then she realized she'd not stepped back as she'd planned, but stood frozen in place barring his entrance. She moved aside.

Jim Richards stepped into the room the way a predatory cat might step from the branch of a tree to a nearby boulder. Then quickly scanned the room, head turning from right to left.

She closed the door. "Let me take your coat." She reached towards him. "I thought we might have a drink first, unless you'd prefer to go straight to dinner?" It was important to maintain the formality, the tension for as long as possible. It heightened the senses, or so he'd said when they'd first begun the ritual of his return. Though frankly she did not think her senses could be any further heightened.

He turned towards her, and slipped out of his suit coat. He had the build of a trained athlete: Broad shoulders, a well-developed chest that tapered to a narrow waist. The muscles of his arms clearly evident, even though the sleeves of his tailored shirt were cut more full than standard.

As she turned away from the closet, she noted he looked at her appraisingly. She also noted her nipples had gone hard.

"You're very beautiful," he said.

"Thank you." Her voice caught in her throat. She felt herself blush, and turned towards the bar. "What can I pour you?"



He stepped closer, and scanned the liquor bottles. He had a clean, masculine scent. Yet never wore after-shave or cologne.

He started to reply, but she threw her arms about his neck. And then he was kissing her with such passion, it took her breath away. In moments his hands were searching her body. And she responded in kind. Their breathing heavy with erotic excitement.

He picked her up as if she were no more than a child; she felt the strength and power in his arms. A feeling of peace and safety came over her. He carried her into the bedroom and laid her gently onto the bed.

Her level of arousal was the highest she'd ever experienced, time seemed to lose all perspective. One moment he was setting her down, the next they were in each other's arms. Their garments strewn upon the floor about the bed, various articles of clothing entwined as if they too had become instant lovers.

She'd never felt such passion or desire for any man before him. He was so gentle, and yet there was an intensity that brought her to climax with such ferocity, she thought she might never stop coming. The muscles of his body were tense with excitement, hard as sculpted steel. And then all at once he could contain himself no longer, a hot liquid fire seemed to envelop her entire being, and at that moment she knew she would rather die than ever give up the chance to be with this man.

#

They lay on their sides together, like two spoons. His arms about her. He nuzzled her neck, kissed her ear. They basked in the after glow. After several minutes she slipped from under the covers, and padded into bathroom, when she emerged she'd snuggled into a thick terry cloth robe. She left the room for a moment then returned.

She handed him a drink. "Johnny Walker, neat. As you like it."

"Thank you." He kissed her lightly on the lips. Then pulled on a pair of cotton fleece sweat pants. She admired the muscles of his shoulders and back as he stepped away from her.

They went into the living room. She picked up her cream Sherry from the small table near the door, where she'd set it down when she'd answered his knock. Then crossed the room and joined him on the leather sofa.

They clinked glasses.

"*Skol ol alcohol, enda morgan kommen son.*" He said.

She raised her glass in response. "*Drink all the alcohol. In the end, the morning comes too soon.*" She snuggled into the crook of his arm. And they sipped their drinks in silence. The slider to their deck was open, somewhere in the distance a piano played. Sweet music drifting on the evening breeze.

At last he broke the spell. "You know one of these days, we'll have to make it all the way to dinner."

She laughed. "You've forgotten. We did once, and nearly killed each other with passion when we returned home."

They kissed.

"You hungry?" He asked.

"Famished."

"Let's slip into something casual, we'll dine in the village. I have a feeling we don't want to get too far from the apartment."

#

Their dinner conversation, at the Lark Creek Inn, was for the most part light. She laughed too much, as always. He complimented her on her poise and beauty. And each time the words were fresh and sincere.

There were men, she'd met before, who spent their days shackled to a desk. Some would keep themselves in excellent shape; perhaps even spend a week or two training with the military reserve. And then when they thought they'd met an impressionable young woman, they'd lay on the tales of hot and heavy missions. Some were more convincing than others, but none had the pure aura of primal energy he exuded.

Yet she had no idea of exactly what he did for a living. His explanation: *Management Consultant specializing in loss control* meant nothing to her. She'd not met any of his colleagues, and he never spoke to her of his work. If she needed to talk to him when he was away on business, she'd either wait for him to call, which he'd do each night whenever possible, or leave a message with the service at Ty Harding International. She suspected he did something *secret*, and it titillated her to fantasize she was involved with a real life James Bond. Though nothing he ever said, or did, alluded to such a possibility.

Their social life was confined to dinners and parties with mutual friends, all made since becoming acquainted, or with those who were her friends before they'd met.

He played guitar and sang. And was a composer of sorts. There was talent there, and she wondered why he'd never pursued it. Or perhaps he had, and simply not told her. He was a strange man in many ways. It was as if his life's experiences were each kept in their own little box. Sometimes he would open the lid of one of the boxes, just enough for her to glimpse inside, and then it was shut again. Yet within the box that was their life together, it was as if it were always open. Or so it seemed since she was within it too.

Misti gazed at Jim Richards intently, looking carefully at the lines about his eyes. Pain was etched there. Perhaps the most telling proof of the life he lived, but never discussed. Yet there was a soft side to him, a way he had of carrying himself, at times, so as to seem less intimidating. She'd noticed it again this evening with the hostess when they'd first come into the restaurant. A young girl, new to her position and obviously nervous. He'd instantly put her at ease, and managed in the process to get the best table in the house.

They sat in a bay window alcove that over looked Lark creek, where it flowed amongst majestic redwoods. Though not secluded from other diners, there was an intimacy to that particular corner of the room, a sort of ephemeral partitioning.

Over coffee and cheesecake their conversation became more serious. It was late, though still an hour before closing.

"Have you had any luck with finding a teaching position?" He asked.

She looked out the window at the flowing stream, illuminated by incandescent spots affixed to eaves of the single story building, once a summer retreat for a well to do San Francisco family during the nineteen-twenties.

"None at all." Misti replied. "It seems there's no need for teachers here in California, at this time. At least not in the field in which I qualify." She turned her gaze back towards him. "Though one would think Spanish as a foreign language would be a mandatory subject, rather than an elective." She took a sip of coffee.

Jim Richards smiled. "If Hispanic immigration continues on its present course, one day it will be mandatory." He also took a sip of coffee. "At least, you've had the opportunity to use your language skills professionally."

She nodded her head. "Yes. My first real job out of college. Caracas, Venezuela, Shell Oil. I was assigned to monitor meetings, translate minutes and

reports. The fuel crunch we're in right now came as no surprise to anyone, I can assure you."

Jim Richards smiled cynically. "Tell that to the poor slob emptying his wallet to fill the family jalopy. Take a look around this place. Friday night, half empty. Certainly not because the food's bad. The cost of fuel affects every segment of the economy."

She nodded in agreement. "I suspect OPEC's beginning to realize they've about killed the goose that laid their golden egg."

Richards shrugged. "Let's hope so. They forget, when push comes to shove, we're still the United States of America. And one of these days we may have to remind them of that."

He poured her another cup of coffee from a silver pot left at the table. "You've spoken often of Caracas. You seemed to have enjoyed the adventure of being in a foreign country. Away from home and family."

She smiled. "I did at first. It may sound corny, but I became homesick. Not for my family, per se. I wasn't homesick for Oregon, but for the United States. You don't realize how much we have here, until you've lived elsewhere. I kept requesting a transfer, but never got one, only compliments on the quality of my work. Finally, I quit. Came back to San Francisco. Took the job at the advertising agency, editing copy.

Jim Richards nodded his head in understanding. "I know what you mean." He paused for a moment. "Are you happy now."

She gazed out the window, then back at Richards. "With our relationship, very. At work...frankly, I'm bored. And frustrated."

"Then it's time to move on."

She sighed. "To where? I want to teach, but there are no jobs to be had, at least not in any decent school district."

Jim Richards looked deeply into her eyes. She thought he looked at her in a penetrating way, as if seeing something for the first time.

"I want to share something with you, something I've never spoken of before." He said.

She felt her eyes open wider of their own volition, she thought she knew what he was about to reveal to her.

"I've always wanted to be a country music singer."

She laughed involuntarily. "I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you. I'm just .. well ... shocked."

He smiled, but she thought it held less sincerity than usual. She hoped she hadn't hurt his feelings. "I mean, you sing so well. Play wonderfully. Let's face it, half the invitations we receive to parties, no, most of the invitations we receive, are because our friends want to hear you play guitar, sing, and entertain them."

Jim Richards started to take another sip of coffee, but stopped and set the cup down. "One of the songs I've written, *Turn to Me*, has been picked up by a publisher in Nashville, Tennessee. They want me to come back and do some demos. They think they can get it cut."

Misti reached across the table and took his hand in hers. "Darling that's wonderful. But what about your work?"

Jim Richards shrugged, almost too nonchalantly she thought.

"I can do management consulting anywhere. It just takes a little time to find the right need to fill."

He took a sip of his coffee. Held her eyes over the rim of his cup. The look sent a momentary chill through her, it seemed so calculated.

He set his cup down. "You know how I am, no point in doing anything halfway. If I'm going to take a shot at the big time, it's got to be my best shot. Which means we need to move to Tennessee. The question is, are you game?"

#

Nelson Banderhof fed two quarters into the soda-dispensing machine on the third floor of the Central Intelligence Agency, Langley, Virginia. Tonight was the beginning of a three-week rotation. After which, he'd be given an additional two days off, for diurnal readjustment. Then return to the day shift, followed by the swing shift, followed by...

He struck the machine with the palm of his hand, pretending he'd driven sinus cartilage into the brain of an enemy, as he'd read in the field manuals he'd perused while sitting on the can. The ol' coke *machine* rocked back a half millimeter, but still refused to give up the can of cola he'd paid for.

"You stupid bastard." He kicked it, using the ball of his foot karate style. Nothing. Finally he gave up the battle, and pushed the root beer button. An aluminum can *ka-rumped* into the tray at the bottom.

Just one of many irritations on night shift at Langley, he thought. All the drones on days and swing got to the goddamn machine first. Assuring it was stocked in time for the night crew wasn't exactly a priority for the building Superintendents.

It hadn't always been that way, not back when the invisible *men at the* agency were the darlings of the White House. But that was before the peanut farmer, as Nelson Banderhof fondly thought of President, Jimmy Carter, had decided to clean up the spooks and kooks over at CIA by cutting personnel, and shaving budgets. Now they rotated shifts like factory workers punchin' out hubcaps.

The only good thing about the night shift was the relative freedom he had since all the tight ass, butt sniffers were home diddling themselves. No one looked over his shoulder, or demanded another useless analysis of cost over runs, paid to some sleaze bag, third world snitch. Not that disciplinary action would be taken in any case, for Christ's sake.

He strolled back to his office, stepped in, and closed the door. Then set the root beer down on his desk. He attempted to open it gingerly, knowing full well the trip down the dispenser would cause it to squirt and foam. It did not disappoint him.

Mumbling under his breath, he fumbled through a desk drawer for a paper towel purloined from the Men's room. Banderhof wiped up the root beer residue that ran down the side of the can to pool on his desktop. He shrugged, screw it, fake walnut veneer anyway.

He returned to the computer terminal that took up half his desk, and stared at an accounting ledger displayed on the screen. A new column of figures had been added since last week, under the code word: ALSOP. Banderhof knew from experience the word itself had no intrinsic meaning, a random choice by the mainframe computer. The interesting part was that the word began with the letter "A". Or Alpha, as in Alpha-Omega.

Banderhof knew Alpha prefixes referred to costs associated with a new operation. He'd also gleaned, from the numerical designation on the receipts payable page that the operation originated out of a section of Counter Intelligence commonly referred to as Internal Security. Further, it appeared from the nature of the transactions, telephone calls, and transportation reimbursements, the operation was domestic.

Banderhof gulped down a slurp of root beer. He got up from his chair, left his office, and wandered down the hall to see his old friend, Miles, in the mainframe section of cost accounting.

Fifteen minutes of chit chat, with a few pointed questions tossed in for good measure, assured Banderhof the new operation was some sort of investigation into one of their proprietaries.

As he left the computer room to return to his office, he rubbed his hands together gleefully, and smiled. Suddenly his stint on the night shift took on a whole new meaning, because he'd have the time to peruse and subsequently determine which of the CIA's many proprietary operations had been targeted for scrutiny. And that information would bring him another one of the lucrative bonuses, as he thought of them, he'd become so accustomed to, as supplement to the paltry salary he made as a low level accounting clerk for the most powerful intelligence organization in the world.

# Chapter Five

Caring First International's corporate offices stood on three acres of rolling meadow, twelve miles south of Nashville. The main building had five stories. With four, two story buildings flanking. Paved paths wove among quiet ponds fed by a gurgling stream, recycled through a pumped waterfall at the summit of a knoll near the Human Resources building. Groves of strategically planted trees gave the impression the grounds were more vast than reality would reveal. Here and there, benches, or tables and chairs, were placed to better enjoy the garden atmosphere.

Just now, the ground was covered with snow. But soon, in a week or two, three at the most, there would be an explosion of color in the carefully nurtured flowerbeds.

The grounds resembled a college campus, in fact Caring First employees referred to it as *their campus*.

#

In the tallest of the buildings, on the fifth floor, where executive management had its offices, a meeting was in progress, inside the largest of three conference rooms. The room was long and narrow, its walls paneled in a deep red mahogany. Sandwiched between the wood paneling, and the original drywall, was eight inches of acoustical insulation. The door that led into the room was five inches thick. The interior side padded in button leather, stuffed with acoustical insulation. The wall at the far end of the room was made of triple thermal glazing that rose from the floor, twenty feet to the ceiling. It looked out towards the skyline of Nashville. The glass capable of stopping a full metal-jacketed military round, fired from a seven-millimeter sniper's rifle.

At the head of a long elliptically shaped conference table, sat the Chief Executive Officer of Caring First: T. Harris Williams. To his right, one slot down was John L. Blankenship, Chief Financial Officer. Across the table from Blankenship, on Williams' left was Mary Foldenstein, Corporate Secretary. To her left, was Francis "Frank" Huber, V.P. Real Estate Development. Directly across the table sat Robert "Bob" Jacobson, V.P. International Acquisitions and Treaties. On Jacobson's right, Allen P. Maxwell, V.P. Domestic Operations. Just across the table, Michael Fitzgerald, V.P. Mediterranean and Middle East Region. On his left Howard McFarland, V.P. Human Resources. And at the far end facing the CEO, was Raymond D. Harbinger, Chairman.



They sat quietly, waiting for Mr. Williams to finish reading the report that rested on the table before him. There was no idle chatter. And no one thought it odd that Williams never came to their meetings prepared. He'd always bustle in, often a minute or two late. Ask one or two hushed questions of Mary, who'd barely whisper a reply. Then open the report, and begin speed-reading the sections pertinent to his interest for the meeting.

T. Harris Williams looked to be just past forty, but was in fact fifty-one. His hair sandy blond, usually a bit tousled. His face craggy, almost gaunt. Crows feet were etched at the corners of steel blue eyes, surrounded by a perpetually tanned face. He had a tall, lanky frame that never seemed to quite fit into the two thousand dollar suits his position forced him to wear. Around the office, even at meetings such as this, he shunned his suit coat. His tailored dress shirts seldom completely tucked in, and, likely as not, his collar would be unbuttoned, his tie loosened.

Harris Williams was an avid runner. A fitness freak in a part of the country where organic food consisted of chitlins and fried Okra. He ran every day on campus when he was at the corporate office. Otherwise, wherever he happened to be. And it was not unusual to see him jogging along Franklin Road headed for the airport, a chauffeured Mercedes-Benz creeping along behind.

But T. Harris Williams was no idiot savant blundering his way through life. He was the founder of Caring First International. A former Strategic Air Command pilot. And a well respected Cardiologist.

Caring First was originally founded as a *proprietary*, because Harris Williams knew a strategic alliance with the intelligence community would enhance growth, especially overseas. Of course, he was no stranger to intelligence. No SAC commander would be. He'd held the third highest level of security clearance attainable during his stint with the Air Force. Now he held the second highest, the only level above his own was President of the United States.

Harris Williams finished his review of the report, took off his half lens reading glasses, and looked around the table. His gaze stopped at Michael Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald, also a physician in his fifties, looked like a public accountant. He had dark brown hair cut short, which he kept meticulously in place with the help of a few drops Vitalis every morning. A pair of tortoise shell glasses were perched squarely on the bridge of his nose. These in combination with his slicked down hair, gave him a nineteen-fifties retro look that would have made Buddy Holly proud.

Michael Fitzgerald had planned a career in the Army, a steady trip up the promotion escalator. But his plans were side tracked when military intelligence asked him to monitor Caring First. He'd accepted the assignment just to get his *Intel* ticket punched. It had not taken him long to see the economic potential of private sector participation. So without a second thought, he'd resigned his officer's commission and secured in its place a senior vice president's position.

Harris Williams opened the meeting without any unnecessary preliminaries. "Michael, that was an excellent job your people did on the Sosyka case." His voice emoted enthusiasm.

Fitzgerald nodded once. "Thank you. It did go rather well after all."

Williams smiled his approval, which seemed to indicate everyone else should do the same.

"How are Yuri and Myra doing?" He asked.

"Very well, actually. We've relocated them to North Carolina, where they're continuing biological research at one of Duke University's campuses. Their contribution to the field is well known, and they seem to fit in at the facility." He paused for a moment. "We have them under twenty-four hour surveillance for their own protection. Their work on anti-viral gene splicing is within a year of patent application, then we need only license to the highest bidder for product development to realize a seventy fold gain over the cost of extraction."

Williams nodded. "Excellent. Any repercussions from the other side?"

Fitzgerald shook his head. "None so far. It appears they've accepted the manuscript and the *replacement* hook, line and sinker." He chuckled. "Sorry, no pun intended."

Williams smiled and shook his head. "And the Italian fisherman who replaced Yuri, a volunteer?"

Fitzgerald thought for a moment. These matters were always a little difficult to explain, though justification seemed easy enough during the heat of field application.

"There wasn't a lot of time to prep the replacement. He came into our clinic at Bari, Italy only a short time before the defection was to take place, complaining of general malaise, and a feeling of congestion in the upper right side of his belly.

The biopsy was positive for mid-stage liver cancer. Terminal prognosis in six to eight months. When the plan to extract the Sosykas went into motion, my

people hired him to take them across the Adriatic Sea where his participation was secured."

Williams raised an eyebrow. "I find no mention in your expense report for compensation to his family. Did he have a family?"

Fitzgerald turned the page on his own copy, then ran his finger down the expense column. "Actually, it's included under miscellaneous mission expenses. Thirty thousand set aside for his widow, under the assumption he had no children. We found none living at home. Therefore, no dependent entitlement other than spousal.

"However, as it turns out, he did have a son, age sixteen, who lives with a master woodworker in Bari. He's an apprentice, wants to get into the business of building fishing boats."

Williams frowned. "What's the current rate on defector replacements with two dependents in that area of the world?"

Fitzgerald did a quick calculation in pencil on his pad. "Fifty thousand, structured over twenty years plus about five points on the declining balance."

Williams nodded once. "Okay, check out the boy's skills. If he has talent, mentor him in the boat building business. Use a blind trust, call it... Orphans of the Sea, something like that. Make sure it's set up so the widow receives proper care. If the son's savvy, he can manage her funds past the age of eighteen, which will take some cost off our books at that point in time. Run the whole thing out of the same trust."

Williams spun his swivel chair around, then looked out the window for a moment. He turned back to the table "The whole east coast of Italy fronts the Adriatic. If we cultivate this young man properly, we'll have an excellent asset in place for future need. Just make certain it's noted in his file, he's never to be used on any replacement operations. Set the trust up for sixty thousand, thirty if it looks like he won't make the grade."

Fitzgerald nodded once. "Done."

Williams held his reading glasses up to his eyes, flipped the report's pages to another section, then gazed down the table to Robert Jacobson.

Jacobson, also in his fifties, was a retired Naval aviator with a Juris Prudence degree in International law. He was a highly energetic and aggressive individual, typical of carrier-qualified pilots. He came aboard at Caring First as a direct liaison from Naval Intelligence.

Jacobson stood exactly six feet in height. He had a full head of salt and pepper hair, which he kept trimmed to military standards. His face revealed perpetual smile lines, in keeping with his jovial personality, and hundreds of hours spent squinting into the sun through the canopy of an A-4 jet. He seemed to be universally liked; if he had any fault at all, it was a tendency to be a little scattered especially when his enthusiasm was on full after-burner.

"Bob, where are we at with Iran?" Williams asked.

"Frankly, we may want to reconsider our position. The deal is as good as done as far as the Shaw is concerned, but his power is rapidly waning."

Williams frowned. "His health?"

Jacobson shrugged. "A definite factor, of course. His malignancy is presently under control, and has thus far not leaked to the press. If, or rather when, that happens, he's history as far as getting anything done is concerned. But no, his health's not the primary problem, at least not at this moment.

"The problem is that thousands of young Iranians have been traveling to the United States over the past ten years to attend our universities. The vast majority return to Iran, not with more liberal views but with more conservative ones. It's almost as if exposure to our culture, acts as a forge to fire their zeal into a non-malleable opinion. This is particularly true of those raised in the Shiite religion."

Williams shook his head. "So instead of using the education we've given them to support the Shaw's efforts, they're using it to undermine the whole process."

Jacobson nodded his head vigorously, "Exactly." He looked across the table at Fitzgerald, to see if he wished to make any comment. But Michael Fitzgerald remained silent. He seemed to be basking in the glow of his defector scheme, and felt no need to taint his success with the disaster clearly developing in Iran.

"The real issue is money," Jacobson said.

Williams raised both eyebrows involuntarily. "Money? They don't have enough rolling in from all those oil pumps?"

Jacobson smiled. "It seems the money has been rolled right back out into U.S. banks. Approximately eight billion, most of it loaned to third world countries. Mexico's a good example. Hell of a deal. Iran's funds are secure in our banks,

earning interest while we take the risk of default. However, that's apparently not good enough, now they want control of the principle."

Williams screwed up his face. "Oh no." He shook his head slowly. "Where do they get these ideas. You never touch the principle."

Jacobson chuckled inwardly at the old chestnut. T. Harris Williams came from a moneyed family who'd never need to touch *their* principle.

"We're talkin' Harvard School of Business, here. Not a bunch of camel jockeys." Jacobson said. "The Iranians feel they have the education and ability to husband their own funds. And the old Mullahs are feeding the fires."

Williams sat back in his chair, shook his head derisively, and then ran one hand through his tousled hair. "Let's just say for the sake of argument, they have the ability. There's no way we can repatriate eight billion dollars. Think of the effect it would have on *our* economy, for Christ's sake. In any case, from a purely pragmatic point of view we don't have the money. We loaned it out as the Shaw requested."

Jacobson took a deep breath. "No doubt, but this problem's not going away. U.S. companies in Iran are already beginning to feel the heat as bills go unpaid. Not by the Shaw mind you, but young hot shots in Comptroller positions. I hear horror stories all the time. Slow pay. No pay. Naturally the Shaw, or rather those loyal to him, step in to over ride the comptrollers recalcitrance. But it's a case by case deal, which is causing the whole process to grind slowly to a halt."

"Initiated by the Mullahs?" Williams asked.

"Not directly, but certainly through their religious rhetoric, which pits fundamentalist Iranians against everyone else."

"But how influential can they be in the long run?" Williams asked. "Surely common sense will prevail."

Jacobson shook his head. "I don't think so. CIA is trying to find a relatively reasonable religious leader to support, working through their Mossad contacts. Who knows if they'll find someone? And if they do, whether or not he'll play along. Got to understand the Muslim way of thinking. It's real simple: They're the *Chosen*, everyone else is Camel dung."

The comment brought forth chuckles from around the table.

Jacobson shrugged. "Personally I think the whole country will unravel the moment the Shaw's health is revealed. My advice on opening a hospital in Tehran is to shelve the project, until we see which way the wind's going to blow."

Williams sighed. "We've put a lot of effort into this project, Bob. I'm getting pressure from Langley to speed the whole process up, not slow it down. The sooner we're in place, the sooner they'll have people on the ground. Right now they're sorely lacking in that regard."

Jacobson turned his palms upward. "I understand, Sir. But my advice, as it pertains to our profitability and effectiveness, is to delay further development in Iran. My read is: Anything we do will be undermined. We'll never get the facility built and staffed in time to be of any value to Langley, or ourselves. All we'll do is piss away the money, then lose the building to the next regime."

"How long does the Shaw have?" Williams asked.

Jacobson shrugged. "If you mean to live? I don't know, maybe five years. But that's not the issue. I put his power retention at two on the outside. What you have is the fomenting of revolution by a very well educated, fanatical group with support from their religious leaders. This is a no-win situation for us."

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence around the table. Caring First was built on success. Everyone had the attitude the firm need only apply enough effort, and any obstacle could be overcome, any race won. Even when the outcome seemed self-evident, there was a tendency to throw everything they had at the problem, and anyone who voiced an opposite opinion was generally not destined for greatness.

However, this meeting was not composed of up and comers who needed to prove themselves. They were each at their level of authority because they'd made correct decisions in the past. Everyone knew you couldn't win them all.

"I have to agree completely." The silence broken at last by Michael Fitzgerald. "Langley's problem with Iran goes way back. They allowed themselves to become dependent upon the Peacock Throne for control of the Iranian population, as well as, social intelligence. It worked for so long, no one paid any attention to the gradual changes taking place over there. Least of all the present occupant of the White House."

Williams nodded with complete understanding, he looked around the table. "Anyone else have an opinion they'd like to express?" No one spoke up.

"All right, Bob, we'll go with your analysis. Thank you for your candidness. You're absolutely right, if we can't help ourselves, we sure as hell

can't help anyone else. Keep your ear to the ground. I want to know immediately if you pick up anything that may have long term implications over there. At least, we can pass along to Langley the best information we have."

Jacobson nodded. "Will do."

Williams looked at his watch. "Okay, I'm running short on time this morning. Got to catch a flight to D.C.. So let's pick up the pace a little. First let me congratulate Allen for a job well done domestically. Our convalescent centers are out performing our competition by huge margins. Your control of personnel costs is absolutely amazing. Once again, you are fully vested in this year's profit sharing plan. Keep up the good work."

Applause broke out around the table. Allen Maxwell beamed. He was a short, taciturn little man just past sixty. So when he smiled it was an occasion in itself.

"Thank you, Mr. Williams."

Williams smiled broadly. "You're quite welcome, Allen." He glanced down the table to Frank Huber. "How are we doing with the California project?"

Huber seemed to be cut from the same cloth as Williams, though at least twenty years his junior. He was a charming, athletic individual with sandy blonde hair and a perpetual tan. Like Williams, he came from an old money family. Nevertheless, his own wealth had been self-made in the real estate market. Like all the VPs at Caring First, his income was in direct proportion to the success of his division, but unlike the others, his opportunities for profits were not dependent upon subordinate performance. Rather, on his own ability to network amongst financial institutions for the very best land deals available.

"California is wonderful," Frank Huber replied. "We've picked up three facilities in Marin County. Two were in foreclosure, and one probably less than a heartbeat away. With mortgage loan rates in the stratosphere, few independent buyers can qualify, so no one's bidding against us. Cash is king."

Williams smiled. "Cash is always king."

He glanced down the table towards his CFO, John Blankenship, whose demeanor and appearance were exactly as would be expected of a financial officer with millions of dollars in assets to track and manage. He was in his fifties, a rotund man with a balding head that sported a fringe of neatly cut dark brown hair. His family had been in the banking business in Tennessee since the early eighteen hundreds.

"John, how are we doing with our payroll?"

Blankenship opened his copy of the report to the financial section.

"Never mind specifics, John," Williams said. "Just give us an overview. We can read the detail later. I'm most interested in the payroll float project."

Blankenship took a deep breath, then began to speak. His voice a deep velvet baritone. "We're on track, hitting our goals, while expanding the opportunities gradually month by month. At present, one third of our payroll, roughly fifty-four million dollars, is being sent around the world on twenty-four hour loans over the fifteen day period between the time our checks are cut at the Bank of Hong Kong until they actually clear the individual deposit accounts of our employees.

"We could pick up an additional five days by waiting for the paper to actually arrive in Hong Kong on its return trip, but as we've discussed before, I feel this would be imprudent. As it stands right now, we make an annualized two percent every pay period, which works out to approximately two point two million dollars every thirty days."

Williams smiled broadly. "And our off shore subsidiary, Commercial Banking Associates, is the sole depository of the float?"

Blankenship nodded. "Exactly. The plan has been in effect for eighteen months, with a total thirty-nine point six million ceded to CBA. Where it remains tax-free until we choose to repatriate. Thirteen million is currently loaned out on short-term notes. At three point five points above prime, we generate roughly a hundred and fifty-seven thousand dollars annualized income per month. Leaving twenty-five to thirty million principle still unfettered, should we need to fund a totally black operation at some time in the future."

"Excellent," Williams said.

He then looked toward Howard McFarland, VP Human Resources. Howard was an odd looking man, his head seemed too big for his narrow shoulders. His torso too long for his legs. He had an ingratiating way of speaking, and carrying himself, typical of people inclined towards the diplomacy requirements of Human Resource management.

"Howard, please give us a brief run down on the progress you've made with World Personnel Resources."

McFarland cleared his throat, he suffered terribly from pollen allergies not completely relieved by the anti-pollinate injections he received each spring. "WPR



is on track as planned, we've set up training centers in every major city of the United States as well as most capitals world wide. WPR Education Services will begin production of training videos in June, following a complete remodel of the west wing of our HR building. We're bringing in professional set designers, production engineers, and directors, to assure the facility is state of the art and will meet the highest standards of production. This will assure standardization of training protocols, as well as, give us a leg up on the competition.

"One of our first modules will be on the logistics of supply. Most hospital management operations are still allowing individual care facilities to purchase their own supplies from local providers. The buyers have no idea of how to negotiate volume pricing plans relative to treatment needs, which means economies of scale are lost due to the inability to predict supplies for treatment regimes. Local providers sell at exorbitant pricing.

"We on the other hand will be able to adequately predict needs to a confidence level of eighty-eight percent, thus keeping local purchases to a minimum."

Williams smiled. "Very good, Howard. And I understand your local HR people are working in conjunction with purchasing to monitor adherence to protocol. "

McFarland nodded once. "That's correct, Sir."

Williams then looked to the very end of the table. Raymond Harbinger, Chairman of the Board at Caring First International, and President of Global Assurance, sat quietly taking in the meeting in his usual way without comment. In his middle sixties, he was one of the most respected businessmen in the United States. He, too, was from an old line Tennessee family. When he did speak at their meetings, it was normally only to compliment someone on a good performance. Any dissatisfaction he had was never voiced, but rather discussed with Harris Williams privately. Still it was a well-known fact, the quickest way to assure a one-way trip out the front door was to raise the ire of Raymond Harbinger.

"Raymond is there anything you'd like to add?" Williams asked.

Raymond smiled deprecatingly, raised his hand palm outward and shook his head in a folksy sort of way. "No, no. I'm well impressed with the numbers this quarter. I read the reports in their entirety last night. Very impressive, you've all done an excellent job as always. Makes my job a bit easier when the Board meets."

Harris Williams brought both hands down onto the table top with a resounding thump. "Gentlemen, and Miss Foldenstein, this meeting is adjourned."

As if they were a group of school children suddenly released from class, everyone except Williams and Harbinger began talking at once, exchanging barbs and views on various current events. They arose from the table, and filtered their way out, stopping perhaps for a moment at the sideboard to refill their coffee cups, or grab a Danish. Although refreshments were always available at their meetings, no one ever helped themselves until the end, or at recess, if the meeting turned out to be a particularly long one.

Eventually the room cleared, leaving only Raymond Harbinger and Harris Williams still seated at the long table, facing each other from opposite ends. Harbinger arose from his chair, then poured himself a cup of coffee from one of the tall silver pots that sat on Bunsen warming pads. "Can I pour you a cup?" He asked.

"No thank you, Raymond." Williams replied.

Harbinger added two small spoons of sugar, a little cream, then stirred slowly as he paced the length of the table to take the chair to Williams' right. "You know Harris, the money generated by the payroll float could assure a successful senatorial campaign. You really should consider throwing your hat into the ring."

Williams took a deep breath, let it out slowly. They'd had this discussion before, and each time Harbinger's arguments in favor of his political candidacy became more persuasive. But then that was why he'd asked him to be Chairman of the Board. The man had an uncanny sense for predicting the long-term run of future events. "We have sufficient influence in Washington for our own needs as it stands." Williams replied.

Harbinger, took a sip of coffee. He held the cup and saucer in his lap, legs crossed. An odd trait, when a table was at hand, or so Harris Williams thought.

"Harris, you need to look at the big picture. The Democrats are making a mess of things, especially the President. CIA's castrated, their findings ignored. Do you realize, Harris, *we* are the CIA. We are what they once were, and now is the time for us to strike. The only thing that stands between us and total clandestine domination, is the Senate Intelligence Oversight Committee."

"I hear you, Raymond. But CIA is not finished quite yet. Certainly they don't believe it to be so. We're not the only proprietary operating out here in the cold. And let's not forget Internal Security. This place is riddled with their people,

any hint we're diverging from our sanctioned mission, and the autonomy we enjoy is over."

Harbinger shook his head. "I don't think you realize how far the agency has fallen. Certainly, InSec has their people here, but we've identified them all. Neutralized their effectiveness. They spend their days mired in our agenda.

"Good Lord, our recruitment budget alone exceeds the entire operations budget for InSec. Their a gnat on an elephant's ass, as far as we're concerned."

Harris Williams stood up, then stepped over to the window at the end of the room. He gazed out over the Caring First campus. Towards the town of Brentwood. The old white washed church steeple, a quaint landmark in the distance.

"You know this all looks so solid." Williams gestured expansively as he turned away from the window. "However, the fact is, if we don't continuously manage this juggernaut it will go sideways. Our margin of profit is really quite narrow. Half the ideas my executive managers bring me are not profitable. And who will make those decisions if I step away from the helm?"

Harbinger took a sip of coffee. "Look, you've got some outstanding people here in upper management. Let's put our heads together, choose one of them. Free yourself up for greater accomplishments. If we don't take the steps needed to secure our ability to guide this country in the future, we may not have a country to guide.

Williams looked at Raymond Harbinger for a long moment. "It's a long step from dissatisfaction to revolution."

"Not so long as you might think," Harbinger said. "The elements are all there, they just haven't quite come together yet. But they will, given sufficient time. Less time, I think than you realize." Raymond Harbinger sighed, then gazed out over the rolling hills of Tennessee. It was such a beautiful state, but there were times when it felt too confining. If only he were a younger man, he'd take up the banner for freedom himself.

"You may be right, Raymond." Williams said. "And there's no doubt the opportunity intrigues me. Still, I'm not convinced we have anyone on board I'd feel completely comfortable with as CEO. I selected each of our executive managers for their skills, and their unique knowledge in the areas of the world their people operate. But I also chose them because they were ingrained by their former military careers with the concept of subordination. The concept that certain levels of command were in fact beyond their reach. It's one other reason, besides the generous compensation package we offer, the turn over here is so low.

"It would not be easy for any one of them to make the transition to full corporate leadership. Civilian promotion beyond the point of senior management is not quite the same as in the military. And, inevitably jealousies would arise, some of those who sat in this room this morning would be more than a little unhappy to learn they were not the one chosen. Lose too many to bruised egos, and we'll lose the core of our success."

Williams returned to his chair and sat down, he crossed one leg over the other in a casual, relaxed way. "We've always promoted from within, but not above middle management. Everyone on board at the senior level came from outside, and is well aware they've reached the pinnacle of their individual careers. Making money is now their primary motivation, which clearly is in the best interests of Caring First. Then there's the clandestine side of our business, which doesn't allow us to recruit just anyone."

Raymond Harbinger nodded his head once. "Agreed, but it would not be impossible. You know with political campaigns, as with everything else in life, timing is everything. We should not let this opportunity slip away." Harbinger drained his cup, then looked at it as if he were surprised how quickly it had emptied. He got up from the table and paced back down to the sideboard.

Harris got up from his chair and stepped back over to the window. He gazed out at the Nashville skyline, yet could still see the reflection of Raymond Harbinger as he paced back down the length of the table, cup and saucer in hand. "Damn it's hard to give up the reins, or change a successful formula."

Harbinger stepped up beside Williams, and placed his hand on his shoulder in a fatherly fashion. "Let me do some thinking about this, perhaps there's a candidate out there we could begin courting. I agree there may be issues of discontent raised if you select from within, but either way I'd very much like to see you representing our interests in Washington. I can almost guarantee a post on Intelligence Oversight. At least, then we'd have a chance to shield our operations. And who knows perhaps one day the White House will be your residence.

Williams smiled cynically. "I'm happy with my home in Belle Mead, thank you."

# Chapter Six

Nelson Banderhof lived several miles from CIA headquarters. He drove home just as the sun was rising, then parked his VW Rabbit in the carport space assigned his townhouse. Fatigue dogged his gait as he walked along the concrete path that led to his two story condo, over looking one of the shallow lakes, landscaped into the twenty-five acre residential community. Banderhof opened his front door, then glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall, 07:00. 08:00 in Tennessee. He'd wait another half hour before calling his contact.

The budgetary trail had been simple to follow, once he'd deciphered the meaning of the alphanumeric code. He then used a password stolen from Miles, in cost accounting, to break into the item description section of InSec's general ledger. As with everything else at the agency, accounting was compartmentalized on a need to know basis. However, using purloined passwords, Banderhof had *hacked* his way into the ledgers of operations not within his purview.

He'd come to realize, over time, that six hundred dollar hammers, and two thousand dollar toilet seats, supposedly purchased by the idiots over at the Pentagon, were not payoffs to Purchasing Officers in the pocket of some government contractor; but in reality line item descriptions for covert operations so sensitive and illegal it could never be chanced a Senate Oversight audit might reveal their true nature. Hence, the thinking went: Better to appear incompetent than unscrupulous.

Internal Security, on the other hand, never worried about such fine points of layered cover-up, since any money spent could be justified. Their job was to ferret out those within, who might damage the nation by stealing its secrets. They protected their sensitive operations by code word only. And relied upon heavy vetting of anyone allowed access: Polygraphs, reverse surveillance, and other slightly paranoid forms of suspicion verification. But *never* by embarrassing bogus over payments for common everyday items.

Nelson Banderhof chuckled to himself as he showered. Internal Security had created a Maginot line, that once penetrated left them totally vulnerable. And he, Nelson Banderhof, had succeeded in penetrating their defenses. Once inside the description section of a ledger, every item was clearly labeled. As a result, not only was he able to read what they had spent, but also ascertain future budgetary allocations. Which was tantamount to viewing the plans for an entire operation.

The plan Internal Security intended to execute was, in Banderhof's opinion, completely childish. For some unknown reason, since accounting entry

descriptions do not provide the rationale for expenditures, Internal Security had targeted Caring First International's flagship hospital.

InSec knew all personnel hired by Caring First were thoroughly vetted. However, low level, high turnover employees such as: Orderlies, janitors, and so forth, received only a cursory vetting. InSec, therefore, had decided to insert their investigator as a lowly Orderly. Probably, Banderhof thought, because the bozo would have access to virtually any department in the hospital. Who paid attention to Orderlies anyway. *Hey you! Get the bedpan in one- fourteen C!* Banderhof chuckled again.

InSec set up a cover op. Then paid their agent his salary in cash, disguised as covert expenses. Meanwhile, they debited a ghost employee's budgeted salary through H.R. channels, cashed the check, and redeposited it back into their cash account to cover the budget short fall generated by the bogus field expenses.

To assure their insert would pass a cursory background check. They created a manuscript wherein their guy was a country music saloon singer trying to land a Nashville recording contract. Working at odd jobs: Janitor, orderly, whatever, until he hooked the brass ring.

Banderhof stepped from the shower. He toweled himself off, then padded down the hallway towards his den. He set scrambler equipment up, dialed the dedicated number, and waited the obligatory four rings. He then hung up, and called again. If someone who sounded like Donald Duck answered the phone, he'd know a scrambler was at the other end, and his contact was ready to receive information.

"This is Ghost." Banderhof liked using the code name. Agreed upon when he'd first accepted their offer of supplementary income five years before. During a most trying time of his life, when his ex-wife cried *alimony* instead of wolf. "I've got some interesting information for you."

#

Byron's Stagecoach Inn stood two hundred yards southeast of Interstate 30, a mile outside Texarkana. The long, rectangular building appeared to have been a barn at one time, or an old produce warehouse. A neon stagecoach and horse team, clearly visible from the interstate, spilled multi-colored light from the roof onto Byron's parking lot.

Misti DiMartine swung her fire engine red, 1977 Olds Cutlass into the pea graveled parking lot. The Cutlass prowled along the lines of vehicles, parked three rows deep. The note of its dual exhaust reverberating off good ol' boy pick-ups,

rusted jalopies, and custom built muscle cars. She turned her head from left to right, looking for one vehicle in particular, a white over blue 1978 Ford Bronco with *shaky state* license plates. She soon spotted it near the side entrance, an open space available to its right.

She freshened her lip-gloss in the rear view mirror, then slipped out of the Olds. Her black hair teased full. Blue eyes, outlined with too much mascara. She'd poured herself into a pair of skintight jeans, then tucked in a fitted western shirt with a wooden spatula to avoid breaking her shapely glue on nails. She wore a pair of Tony Llamas. And a scarf at her throat, one point leading the way to heavenly cleavage, revealed by three open buttons, and a push up bra.

Misti swung open the screen door that led inside the dimly lit, smoke filled nightclub. Along the left hand wall, maybe twenty feet from the entrance, was a long wooden bar. A polished by leather boots brass rail ran around its base, three inches off the beer stained wood floor. There were no bar stools. Byron's patrons stood, leaned, or slumped against the beveled edge of the cigarette-scarred woodwork.

Just to the right were three competition size pool tables with faux Tiffanies hanging directly over their centers. Highchairs ran along the back wall, then made the turn and continued a few feet farther. Every chair occupied. All three tables in play. As the screen door slammed behind her, heads turned in her direction.

To her left were rest rooms. A small crowd queued up, standing on one foot and then the other, waiting for a chance to use the facilities. A cowboy stepped away from the group, moved in Misti's direction, tipped his hat, then stepped outside. She heard his footsteps crunch the gravel, as he moved off around the building into the night. She guessed he'd found the lavatory line a tad too long for his beer bloated blander to endure.

At the far end of the club was a mechanical bull, inside a fake corral. Weekend cowpunchers, and wanna be Rodeo stars, stood in line for a shot at a two-minute ride. The steel and leather bovine spun left, right, then bucked forward. One of the wanna be's flew off into a pile of burlap sacks.

In the middle of the room was a large slab of polished hardwood, packed with couples doing two steps, waltz steps, and cling-to-me-sweetheart shuffles. All in rhythm to a western band that punched out country top forty, and retro Rock-a-Billy hits from a low stage.

Everyone in the place was dressed in jeans and western shirts; most wore cowboy hats. The women, too much make-up. Misti fit right in. Not even the local two timers, who'd normally *cat swipe* any new-girl in town especially

one that looked too demure, gave her much thought, as she slow walked to the near end of the bar. Byron's close proximity to the interstate guaranteed a bountiful bevy of fresh faces every weekend.

On both sides of the dance floor, five rows deep, were round wooden tables large enough to seat four or five people, all occupied. The Stagecoach Inn was a popular place.

Misti stepped up to the bar. To the right of the server's station was an unoccupied slot, devoid of half filled glasses, or long neck bottles to mark the territory. As she waited for one of the four bartenders to notice her, she continued to glance around the room. She'd expected he'd be on stage, but he wasn't.

"Whada ya have?" One of the bartenders asked.

She stopped searching the room, and turned towards him. "A Margarita. I hear you make the best." Her voice raised to overcome ambient sound levels, which pushed ninety-five decibels.

The bartender smiled and nodded, then moved off to mix her drink. Misti glanced up at the neon rimmed Miller clock over the liquor shelves, half past midnight.

The bartender returned with her drink in a huge wide mouth glass. She shoved a ten spot in his direction. "I thought Jimmy Ocean was playing tonight?"

The bartender nodded as he took her money. "Yeah that's right. Featured performer, they'll call him up in a bit. He's over there on the other side of the stage. The table with all the women."

Misti flashed a wry smile. In the dimness of the smoke filled room, with bobbing and weaving bodies interrupting her line of sight, she wasn't able make him out, though she could just see the table.

Misti collected her change, left a buck, declined a dance, and gradually wove her way around the floor towards the far side of the stage. He did not see her approach, distracted by one of the gals sitting at the table, who in Misti's opinion was clearly heavy hitting on him. A twinge of jealousy crossed her mind.

"Ladies and gentleman," the bandleader began in his best stage voice. "Byron's proudly presents the next up and coming recording artist... Jimmy Ocean."



She watched as Jim Richards stepped upon the stage. He swept up a red Gibson acoustical, amid applause from the crowd. Slipped the instrument's strap over his head. Nodded once to the band, and immediately kicked into a driving rendition of an old Elvis tune. Misti was thunderstruck. She knew he sang well, but this was pure showmanship not just a guy with a decent voice. He commanded the room. She closed her eyes for a moment. It was amazing, he sounded exactly like the *King*. She opened her eyes. And moved like him too.

The crowd went wild. He segued into another Elvis song. Then on to Waylon Jennings, Ed Bruce, and other country music favorites, always the voice an exact duplicate of the original artist.

He looked different than when she'd last seen him, six weeks before. The change subtle, when broken down into its individual parts. His hair longer, though not excessively so. A full beard, trimmed very close. He wore the obligatory jeans, but black not blue. In place of cowboy boots, soft suede hiking boots. Instead of a western shirt, a faded black T-Shirt that fit like a second skin, to better display his buff physique. Perfectly ordinary clothing set him apart from the crowd, and the band, all of whom were dressed in western outfits that seemed to have been purloined from central casting. He projected an every man image, yet stood apart as every successful performing artist must.

The crowd moved closer to the stage. A semi circle of perhaps fifty people was gathered listening, swaying, and even singing along. A half hour set slipped by in what seemed to be only moments. Jim Richards paused. "I want to thank y'all for the welcome you've given me this week. Tomorrow I must move on to my next gig."

There were moans of displeasure from some in the crowd. Jim Richards raised his hands into the air, palms outward. "I promise I'll come back, as soon as I can. I love this place."

The crowd cheered.

"Now listen I'm gettin' the signal from Byron, we gotta make this the last dance. So I want y'all to get *real* close to each other. 'Cause here's a song I'm gonna record, and I'll be thinkin' of y'all when I do"

More cheers, and applause.

The stage lights dimmed to a single spot, Jim Richards began with a soft guitar strum. The band signed on as the song progressed.

"When you see he doesn't love you, turn to me.

"When you see he doesn't want you, turn to me.

"I'll be there to take your hand, you won't be lonely,

"I'll understand.

"When you see it's really over, turn to me."

The music was sweet, the way a love song should be. It's melody struck at the heart. Couples through out the room clung to each other. In the shadowed corner areas a few necked. Even the players at the pool tables stopped to listen, some with their arms around a wife, or lover, who'd been watching from the gallery of highchairs.

"Turn to me I'll comfort you.

"I can see the hurt you're going through.

"I've waited for so long for you to see it's wrong,

"To love someone who only makes you blue."

As Jim Richards returned to the first verse to finish the song, Misti thought about the psychology of music, the blending of melody and lyric that somehow strikes with poignancy. Clearly there were many here tonight who'd felt the pain of broken relationships, the need for someone to turn to when love went wrong.

Suddenly she felt his eyes upon her and looked towards the stage.

"When he finally sets you free.

"I'll be there, you won't be lonely.

"When you know it's really over, turn to me"

And then the band was playing a quick run of notes, a drum rolled, and Jim Richards aka J. Robert Bushman, aka Jimmy Ocean left the stage.

Misti tried to move towards him, but the crowd about the stage surged forward to surround Richards, and she saw there was no chance to move any closer. She found a table out of the way, and sat down. The jostling crowd caused her to spill most of her drink, she ordered another. Gradually the room thinned out, the knot of people near the stage dispersed. The last to leave, a great big gal with huge breasts, which she kept *inadvertently* bumping against Jim Richards, finally

she gave him big hug, and a kiss. He spun her around and slapped her on the butt. She squealed and scurried away, over to one of the players apparently engrossed in a game of pool.

At last Jim Richards made his way over to her table, pulled out a wooden straight back and sat down across from her. There was a long moment of silence as they stared into each other's eyes, neither wanting to take the opening gambit.

She opened up first. "I never would have guessed." She said smiling. "You're very good."

Richards grinned broadly. "Yeah, and I can sing too."

A cocktail waitress stepped up to the table and set an old fashion glass down, filled with an amber liquid. Jim Richards thanked her, fished a buck out of his jeans and dropped it on her tray. She smiled a thank you. As she walked away, Jim Richards lifted the glass high in the air, and turned towards the bar. Byron waved.

"How many of those do you knock down a night?" Misti asked.

Richards took a pull at the Johnny Walker neat. "First night, Byron laid down the rules. Said: *You get three drinks, kid, on the house. After that, they're on your tab.* I told him I never drank when I performed, but a nice stiff one after the show was always welcome."

"Looks like you got all three at once." Misti observed.

Richards nodded. "Exactly."

He continued to look at her without comment, she could not tell if he was pleased to see her, or disappointed at missing the opportunity to pursue the buxomy gal. She'd always thought half the reason a guy wanted to be a singer in a bar was for all the different women he could meet and sleep with, just because he stood upon the stage and moved in a certain, sexy way.

He took another pull at his drink. Then held his glass towards her. "*Skol ol Alcohol...*"

Misti clinked her glass to his. "*Enda morgan kommen son.*"

Jim Richards set his glass down. The place was nearly empty, it was past closing time. The band breaking down. Bus boys and waitresses cleaning up. He took her hand in both of his. "You know what really knock's me out? That you're

sitting here right now, and I'm so happy to see you. I was beginning to believe all those sad country songs I've been singing. I've missed you *so* much."

#

The parking lot was deserted, Jim Richards' amplifier, speakers, guitar case, and microphone stand, stood in a semi-circle ready to load into the Bronco. Misti had driven up the Interstate to a Best Western he'd reserved for the night. She was sleepy, it had been a long couple of days, driving from San Francisco to where he'd booked his last gig before rolling into Nashville.

The area around his vehicle was lit by an overhead flood that shined into the darkness from the roof directly above the side door. One or two streetlights, out by the road, cast a miserly glow into the middle of the parking lot. When the neon signs were lit, the area was bathed in a soft warm glow. But they'd been turned off a half hour before closing, to assure no one more for the roaders would stop in for a nightcap.

Just then a pick-up truck turned into the parking lot. It headed straight for Jim Richards, then swung left skidding on the gravel, showering him with dirt and pebbles. Dust billowed into the still night air, to hang about the truck's headlights like fog in a grade B horror movie. Three men emerged from the truck's cab, one carried an ax handle. The other two appeared unarmed, but there was no way to tell for certain.

The guy with the ax handle walked around the front of the pick up. The other two had piled out the passenger's side. All three headed straight for Jim Richards.

"Hey, asshole. You shoulda stayed away from my ol' lady."

The man with the ax handle stepped into the circle of light. He was huge, at least a head taller than Richards. The other two were no midgets either.

Jim Richards recognized the guy sporting the ax handle as the pool player with the gal who'd been all over him at the end of the show. Richards moved to the right, placing his amplification equipment between himself and the three approaching good ol' boys, as a kind of defensive barricade.

"Hey *faggot*, where you think you're goin', uh? No escape for you that way."

His pursuers squinted as they stepped into the flood lit area Jim Richards had just vacated.

"We gonna teach you some manners, boy," said the one with the ax handle.

Jim Richards made his move. Two of the men were bunched together, hindering each other because one failed to lift his booted foot high enough to clear the amplifier obstructing his forward progress. The guy with the ax handle momentarily came forward alone, turning the corner created by Richards' equipment.

Exactly between Jim Richards and the oncoming belligerent, stood a chrome plated microphone stand. Richards closed the space between himself and the three men. As he stepped forward, he swept the weighted microphone stand off the ground.

None of the men had paid any attention to the mike stand. Its chrome shaft reflected both the truck's headlights, and the overhead spot, creating the illusion it had disappeared into thin air. A magician's trick, reinforced by Jim Richards' movement into the shadows, further diverting their attention and perception.

The heavy stand swung upward in a cruel arc, though the weight of its base was significant, Jim Richards handled it as if it were nothing more than a broomstick. The base of the mike stand contacted the big man's wrist, just below the hand that wielded the ax handle. An involuntary yelp escaped his lips as tendons and cartilage tore loose. The oak handle flew from his grip, rocketing skyward as if launched from a mortar tube.

Impact with the wrist neither impaired, nor slowed, the upward sweep of the mike stand. In fact, almost in response to the primal scream released from Jim Richards' throat as first contact was made, the stand seemed to accelerate catching the big guy squarely under his jawbone. It stood him on his toes. There was a loud crunch, as underlying bone and teeth shattered. A concussive shock reverberated deep into his skull. Like a marionette dropped by its puppet master, he collapsed in front of Jim Richards.

One of the other two good ol' boys had cleared the intervening equipment. Richards continued forward, growling like a man possessed by some sort of demonic spirit. His right hand slid lower on the mike stand, he reversed his grip. The air sizzle as Jim Richards turned the upward momentum of the stand into a downward power slam directly onto the left clavicle of his second attacker. There was a thud, followed by a moan. The man went to his knees, then fell forward catching himself momentarily, his right hand flat on the graveled surface.

Immediately, Jim Richards slammed the base of the stand down onto his attacker's fingers. The man screamed once, then lunged forward onto his face

propelled by an involuntary muscle spasm. He skidded face first along the gravel until completely prone.

This new obstacle caused the third attacker to stumble, as he attempted to leap over his fallen comrade. Jim Richards caught him with a solid right cross on the point of the jawbone just below the his left ear. The impact sounded like a porterhouse steak slapped down on top of a butcher-block table. The man staggered forward, increasing his own momentum in an attempt to regain footing. Almost immediately there was a loud, hollow thud as he hit the side of the Bronco just aft of the driver's door. He staggered backward, blood streamed from his broken nose. He'd literally bounced face first off the bodywork of the big ol' box on wheels.

Jim Richards spun completely around, lending centrifugal momentum to a heel kick delivered directly to the man's solar plexus. A puff of dust exploded from his shirt, followed by a hollow grunt. He momentarily left the ground, hurtling backwards, landing with a skid and a crunch on his back in the graveled dirt. His head slammed onto the ground, imbedding several pebbles superficially into the back of his skull. He then slid two feet farther before coming to a stop, and lying perfectly still.

Jim Richards turned slowly in an arc of one hundred and eighty degrees, making certain there was no movement from any of his attackers. Then scanned the darkness beyond the immediate vicinity for others. There were none. The encounter had lasted less than thirty seconds.

Jim Richards' breathing was short, rapid. Then slower as if a lethal engine were gradually powering back to idle. He looked around again. Then glanced up and down the road. There was still no one in sight. He quickly threw his gear into the back of his Bronco, climbed into the driver's seat, and drove out of the parking lot.

As he gained the highway, he glanced at the graveled lot below. The three men were now on their feet clearly in a daze, but doing their best to assist each other.

Jim Richards' muscles began to shake, the after effect of adrenaline. He rolled the driver's window down, took several deep breaths of cool night air. The Interstate was nearly deserted. He began to settle down. Then a kind of sadness came over him, another after effect of the adrenaline, complicated by fatigue. An hour slipped by until he saw the neon sign announcing the Best Western Inn.

Bob Ed Hoerten, and Ronnie Joe, occupied a table at Byron's. Hoerten's jaw was wired shut, forcing him to pull his whiskey soda through a straw. Ronnie Joe was forced to suck long necks through a straw, as well. On account his left hand, left arm, and left shoulder was currently cast in plaster.

"Shit." Bob Ed said as he slurped his whiskey. "Should've carried a goddamn shotgun, 'stead of an ax handle. Fuckin' faggot ever comes through here again...gonna blow that motherfucker right off the stage." He took another pull at his whiskey. Then shook his head, disgusted with himself and his cohorts. "Who'd of thought a goddamned saloon singer, turn out to be a fuckin' black belt, or somethin'."

Just then Slim Ranken sat down, a strip of surgical tape across his nose. "Hey, guess what?" Slim said.

Bob Ed scowled, still pissed off. Far as he was concerned, Slim pussied out of the fight with nothin' but a busted nose.

"That faggot singer. Remember him?" Slim asked.

Bob Ed started lookin' real mean.

"Small article in the mornin' paper." He slid a newspaper clipping across the table to Bob Ed.

"How's that?" Ronnie Joe asked.

"Guess he was supposed to come back here to play next week." Slim said. "Paper says, he done canceled his engagement."

Bob Ed tried to laugh, but it comes out through his wired jaw soundin' like a pig gruntin' slop. Then he said: "Guess we taught *him* a thing or two."

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Nelson Banderhof waited for the static to clear on the telephone line, and wondered if he too sounded like Donald Duck to guy at the other end. "Jesus, isn't there something better than this Mickey Mouse equipment?"

His contact assured him there wasn't.

"Well anyway listen up." Banderhof continued. "That Orderly scam, InSec was running. Looks like they've given up on it. Whole operation's shut down. Money's gone back to budget."

His contact seemed pleased, but skeptical.

"Maybe the guy chickened out." Nelson Banderhof shrugged his shoulders, in unconscious emphasis. "Idea of cleanin' bed pans probably changed his mind." He chuckled. "Or maybe he had an accident. Died or something. Seen it before when an operation gets shut down unexpected." He listened to the garbled voice. "Of course I will, if they start it up under some other guise, you'll be the first to know."



# Chapter Seven

June 1978

Jim Richards drove south along Franklin Road, a two-lane highway that ran from Brentwood to Franklin, Tennessee. He glanced to his right, caught a glimpse of the sprawling Caring First International complex.

On his first day in Nashville, he'd rented a Cessna 172. Then flown around the perimeter of the city, returning to Nashville Metropolitan Airport from the southwest. Thus he gained a bird's eye view of Caring First's campus, as well as the surrounding terrain. The city of Nashville was built amongst heavily wooded hills adjacent to the Cumberland River. At one time, the river was a major source of commerce. Now, four Interstate highways intersected the city, substituting asphalt for water. The Interstates created a centralized trucking hub for freight shipments criss-crossing the country.

In Summer, the city was sub-tropical. Winter, quite frigid, snow often blanketed the ground. Spring brought an explosion of verdant hues, from pale almost translucent green in grassy meadows to dense dark velvet forest. From the air, hundreds of lakes, streams, and ponds shimmered in the sunlight. Sprinkled everywhere were brilliant red, orange, and gold blossoms in well tended flower beds that dazzled the eye.

Yet for Jim Richards, accustomed to standing at the edge of the Pacific Ocean and gazing west into infinity, a feeling of confinement weighed heavily upon him. The city of Nashville lay inside a geological depression, the view from the ground was never more than a few miles.

Jim Richards accelerated west along Murray Lane, adjacent to the south boundary of Caring First's campus, then climbed a steep wooded hill, and dropped into another meadowed valley.

He and Misti had been in Nashville for just over two weeks, initially staying in a motel on the east side of town. Misti had immediately approached the local school districts in search of teaching opportunities. To her disappointment, there were none available. Hiring for the fall semester had already been completed. Nevertheless, she was encouraged to find there might be openings the following Spring when schools, both public and private, again screened prospective teachers for the Fall semester.

The first order of business for Jim Richards was to establish a banking relationship. Two accounts in two separate banks. One under his stage name Jimmy Ocean. The other under J. Robert Bushman. The Bushman account would receive operational funding from Ty Harding International. And would be available to receive funds transferred from other personal accounts Jim Richards maintained here and there through out the country as emergency back up. The Jimmy Ocean account would be earmarked for daily operating expenses, paychecks automatically deposited once he managed to penetrate Caring First.

His cover was manuscripted to reveal a relatively successful nightclub entertainer who'd come to Nashville with sufficient savings for a reasonable attempt at establishing himself in the country music community. Yet modest enough, if scrutinized, to support his need for a straight gig until luck turned his way. Everyone in Nashville knew there was no work in the music business for *unknowns*. And anyone without a hit record was unknown as far as the music scene was concerned.

Jim Richards had designed his cover to include the convenience of using his given name. To use a first name alias was unwise. You never knew when you might bump into an acquaintance who'd inevitably call out the name they knew you by. Then if you were foolish enough not to respond, they'd immediately follow the gaff by calling out your family's name; usually only twice as loud as your first name.

Of course, Mr. Murphy that ubiquitous thrower of monkey wrenches, would assure such an event occurred at the most inopportune moment. The best scenario under such circumstances was complete nullification of the entire operation. The worst? Torture and death.

The real Jimmy Ocean had performed since the age of sixteen. His stage photos actually bore a remarkable resemblance to Jim Richards. But Jimmy Ocean had died a painful and embarrassing death at the hands of organized crime, the result of an attempt to bilk the *house* during a lounge stint in Vegas. His headless body was found buried in the sand, one hand sticking up just off Highway 95.

Ocean's death was not publicized. In Las Vegas, not all the news fit to print, is printed. As far as Jimmy Ocean's fans were concerned, he'd found another gig. Unfortunately for him it was the big one in the sky.

Criminal Intelligence - Domestic Division - Langley, picked up on Jimmy Ocean's murder from one of their snitches, then shelved the intel for future reference. When Jim Richards had asked Elmo to find such a scenario, luck had fallen their way.

With cover and bank relations established, his next order of business was to find a secure base of operations. An apartment was out of the question, they were always insecure, and unsecurable. Renting a house was a possibility but also questionable as security installations could not be hidden indefinitely from landlord inspections, especially if conducted when tenants weren't at home.

Purchase was the best choice, however, struggling performers were not usually blessed with sufficient funds to buy a home, not even in a depressed housing market like Nashville's. Homes all over the area were in foreclosure, thanks to Jimmy Carter's Keystone Cops credit policy.

To solve their dilemma, Jim Richards and Ty Harding formed a real estate partnership then bought half a dozen homes around the Nashville area using local agents to close the deals and manage the properties.

From Jim Richards's perspective, the arrangement assured personal funds used for operational needs would be secured. Eventually the economy would turn, with any luck at all he, and Ty Harding, would do quite well. All of the properties had been leased to local residents, except one; located just over the hill from Caring First's headquarters.

Should anyone decide to scrutinize Jimmy Ocean's living arrangements, they'd find the home was owned by Croquette Properties LLP. Further scrutiny would lead them into an electronic roach motel where every inquiry generated reverse surveillance. The harder someone attempted to scrutinize Jimmy Ocean, the greater the odds were they'd reveal themselves in the process.

Jim Richards turned the Bronco off Murray Lane onto Fischer Court. The house he and Misti would live in was on the left-hand side, one house down from the cul de sac's end. It was a single story, adobe colored, all brick home that sat well back from the road on a half-acre of property. A huge front lawn, with low bushes and flowers bordering.

Mid-way down the gradually sloping driveway was a tall, stately Elm, devoid of leaves and bark, with only a few bleached branches. One arched out over the driveway. Its wood polished smooth by wind and water. The old tree had become a free-form sculpture, uniquely beautiful but stone cold dead.

Jim Richards proceeded down the asphalt driveway, then parked outside the garage. He shut down the *three fifty-one* Windsor engine, then slid out of the driver's seat. For a moment he stood perfectly still, surrounded by near silence.

In the area of California where he had lived, there was no such thing as silence. There was always the distant hum of tires on asphalt. A siren, perhaps.

At the very least a continuous indefinable buzz generated by the interaction of thirty million people.

Alone in the driveway of his Nashville home, he heard the burble of a brook meandering through backyards. Then as they grew accustomed to his presence, the songs of birds high in the surrounding trees. Crickets in the grass. The only man made sound that came to his ears was the soft ticking of the hot V-8 engine under the hood of his *four by four*.

He took a deep breath. Then realized how different the air felt, compared to the exhaust-laden atmosphere he'd left behind. He hadn't realized the adaptation his body had made, here a full breath of air seemed almost unnecessary.

Jim Richards walked around the exterior of the house. Steps led to a wooden rear deck. A large screened porch was attached to the rear of the house, almost an additional room. He'd noted, as he drove down the driveway, the windows in front were at ground level. Now he saw those at the back were a good ten feet above ground. Richards smiled approvingly. Direct entry through a window into any of their bedrooms would be difficult for an intruder. Yet an easy route of escape remained in the event of fire, or other dire emergency.

As he circled the house, he saw a huge black and tan German Shepherd crossing the lawn between his driveway and a neighbor's home. When it saw him, it stopped and stood its ground. The dog appeared neither friendly, nor unfriendly. It raised its head and sniffed the air. Then lowered it again as Shepherds will when approaching a stranger they've not determined to be a friend. The dog walked straight up to Jim Richards, and stuck his nose into his crotch. He sniffed twice then worked his way down Richards' pant leg to his shoe.

At this point most people would have been thoroughly intimidated, but Jim Richards had been through the same routine with another German Shepherd many years before. And as this one circled around him, his mind went back to a time when his life had been saved by an enormous, black Shepherd. He smiled as the memories flooded in.

"He won't hurt you, you know?"

Jim Richards' reverie was broken, he looked across the grass in the direction of the voice. Then bent down and gave the dog a ruffle behind one big ear. The dog turned, and trotted over to its owner. Jim Richards followed, as the owner approached. They met mid-way on the grass, the dog cross ways between them.

"I'm Marsha," she reached out her hand. Richards accepted the firm handshake. The dog watched the contact intently, but made no move to intervene.

Marsha was an attractive, young woman. Brown eyes. Brown hair - cut short and permed. A slim athletic figure. Jim Richards glanced beyond her towards toy vehicles: A tri-cycle and pedal car sat in the driveway. He guessed she had two young ones, probably both boys. At the moment in school.

"My name's, Jim." he said. "Misti and I are moving in today."

She smiled warmly. "Welcome to the neighborhood. Chet and I, Chet's my husband, were wondering when the place would be occupied again. Nice to have neighbors once more."

Jim Richards smiled and nodded, but felt at a loss for words. He suddenly realized, it had been years since he'd lived in a real neighborhood. It would take some adjustment to fit into the routine of suburban life.

"Y'all have children?" Marsha asked.

Richards shook his head. "Not yet. Just getting started."

"Well good for you. And the perfect place. God's country we call it. Plenty of time for children. Lot's of little ones in the neighborhood already. Hope they won't be a bother running on the lawn."

Jim Richards smiled broadly. "What's a lawn for anyway...that and mowing three times a week." He glanced around at the grass. It suddenly occurred to him to make certain he retained the property manager's landscaper. No way he'd be able to mess with the lawn, once he got rolling on the case. He looked back at Marsha, but couldn't think of anything to say.

She seemed to sense his discomfort. "Well, y'all don't hesitate to holler if Chet or I can be of any help. After you get moved in, we'll introduce you to everyone."

"Thank you, that's very kind. Always a little hard moving to a new place." He smiled tentatively.

"Oh yes, I know exactly how you feel. One of the better points of this neighborhood though, everyone's from somewhere else. We're all in the same boat so to speak. Where y'all from?"

"California."

"Beautiful state. Went there on our honeymoon. Carmel. Ever been to Carmel?"

Jim Richards smiled and nodded. "Many times, one of my favorite places."

"Ours too. What in the world brings you to Nashville?" She asked without skipping a beat.

"Music, " Richards replied. "Country music."

Marsha nodded, but her face conveyed a lack of understanding.

"I write music. Sing. Of course, I'll need to find a real job, but maybe one day it'll all work out."

Marsha smiled. "Well isn't that a hoot. You're gonna just love it here."

"I'm sure I will."

Marsha nodded as if everything was settled, then turned to walk back to her house. It occurred to Jim Richards he'd just been interrogated, and categorized. And was sure within twenty-four hours, everyone in the neighborhood would have the information. And why not? It was *their* neighborhood. Where *their* children were nurtured and raised. Why should *they* not have an interest in knowing who the hell came to occupy a house vacant for over a year.

"By the way, what's your Shepherd's name?" Richards asked.

She turned in mid-stride, "Alexander... You know as in *the Great*."

Richards laughed, "Perfect."

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The house was laid out in a simple rectangle. He entered through the two-car garage, passed into a small laundry room and stepped up two steps into the adjoining kitchen. A large window looked out across the wood deck to unfenced yards, where tall cedars and elms grew in random fashion.

Beyond the kitchen, the house was divided longitudinally for half its length. A dining-living room combination on the front side of a central wall. A wood paneled family room with a brick fireplace on the other side. At the far end of the house, three bedrooms, two baths off a long narrow hallway.

Jim Richards set a large black duffel bag down onto the carpeted floor of the empty master bedroom. He unzipped the bag, reached inside, and withdrew a jungle green, zippered photographer's vest. Then loaded the vest with several items extracted from the bag. He slipped the vest on over a blue T-shirt tucked into dark blue jeans.

Satisfied he had everything he needed, he walked down the hall to a pull down access door that opened into an attic. He unfolded the ladder and carried the duffel bag up, then set it down on unfinished plywood laid over the ceiling joists. The bag would be safe from curious fingers.

Although Jim Richards had no children of his own, nor for that matter even a brother or sister, he knew children loved to explore. And they always knew the way into vacant houses. Not all the items inside the duffel were simply interesting, some were simply lethal.

He checked each of the doors leading into the house, to assure they were locked. Then turned on the air conditioner to cool and recirculate the stale, humid air that had collected in the empty house. He then left via the rear door.

Outside, he crossed a small bridge of railroad ties that spanned the brook. Then turned right to skirt its banks. The brook emanated from a forest of Cedar trees that marched shoulder to shoulder up the ridge behind the neighborhood. To the left, almost where the stream emerged from the undergrowth, a narrow trail entered the woods.

Less than fifty feet along the trail the undergrowth ended, and Jim Richards stepped into the aromatic shade of the forest. He moved a hundred yards farther, then stopped and hunkered down. Listening for the sounds of the forest to return to normal. He then waited another ten minutes to assure no one had followed him, and no one else was in the forest. When he was sure he was alone. He reached into one of the zippered pockets of his vest and withdrew an aerial photograph of Caring First and the surrounding terrain, taken when he'd over flown the area. He quickly identified his neighborhood, on the west side of the ridge. And soon located his house and the small stream he'd followed into the woods.

Taking a field compass from one of his pockets. Then using coordinates he'd noted on the border of the photograph, he determined a course through the woods to bring him to the top of the ridge behind Caring First's headquarters.

The distance was not far, perhaps a mile at the most. However, he soon found he could not travel in a straight line. The woods were not continuous, in reality the forest consisted of several stands of cedar trees. Between these

forested islands were patches of thick undergrowth, heavily laced with poison sumac. As he made his way from one stand to the next it became obvious the trees had been planted, they were not indigenous to the area. His route became more and more circuitous, and though he frequently referred to the aerial photo, it seemed he was taking the longest path possible to his objective.

He'd purposely avoided bringing the short machete stowed in the duffel bag. He didn't want to be seen carrying it. Nor did he want to leave a trail of chopped and broken brush straight to his destination. The terrain began to rise steeply, he passed through another stand of cedars, however, and instead of undergrowth on the far side he found an open area. He checked the photo, and noted his location. About half way to his destination but north of the course he'd intended to follow. He was about to veer south, when an odd formation up ahead caught his eye. Curiosity overcame his desire to take the most expeditious route. He turned towards the anomaly.

It was a large mound made of stones set in place, some cut square like large bricks. Others simply fitted as they were found. Jim Richards was no geologist but it did not require a Ph.D. to recognize river rock. The stones had been transported a significant distance to this particular spot. He began to search in a slow circle around the base of the formation. And soon found several pieces of round lead. Ball ammunition, or grape shot perhaps. He climbed to the top of the formation, and found a hollow depression. Then stepped down into it. He then turned around and looked out over the ground from which he'd ascended. Gradually as if seeing the area with altered sense, it dawned upon him he was standing in what was once a Civil War battlement.

There would have been no forest of cedars then. The hill barren except for scrub brush, and a few elms perhaps. The battlement would have controlled the high ground on this side of the valley. Men had fought and died here, fellow Americans. Brother fighting brother. Jim Richards visualized the battle that had raged below. The men who'd died trying to take this spot.

And then one-day people had planted cedar trees. Perhaps in memory of those who'd fought here. Perhaps there were as many trees as soldiers who'd given their lives for this piece of costly real estate. It was a sobering thought, and Richards felt a twinge of sadness. He stepped back over battlement onto the high side of the hill, then continued his trek. Turning south as he climbed to the top of the ridge.

The remainder of his journey went quickly, beyond an imaginary line drawn on a north south heading that bisected the battlement, the brush was almost non-existent. Within a few minutes he'd reached the spot he'd set out for.



As he neared the crest of the ridge he lowered himself close to the ground, then ever so gradually eased forward. He did not want to present a stark profile against the blue sky. At last after five minutes of excruciatingly slow progress, he lay prone looking down upon the Caring First campus.

Jim Richards reached into the zippered pockets of his vest, he withdrew a thirty-five millimeter Minolta SRT camera body, and a four hundred millimeter lens. He twisted the lens into the camera's lock-down ring, then used the view through-the-lens feature to scan the entire complex, sector by sector, taking photos as areas of interest came into view.

There were five buildings. A tall central structure with four lesser buildings arranged in a wide semi-circle to the south. A driveway led from the main gate on Franklin Road to a circular roundabout. Two separate roads branched off to the south and north, while the main road continued straight towards the parking lot in front of the tallest building. The southern drive curved down to single story buildings, with individual turn-offs to associated parking areas. The northern drive ran parallel to the north perimeter fence past the main building, then made a wide one hundred and eighty degree turn to approach the rear.

Although landscaping obscured much of the ground at the back of the main building, Jim Richards was fairly certain he could see the entrance to an underground garage, and a loading dock wide enough to accept two forty foot semi-trailers parked side by side.

He took thirty-six photos from the ridge. And was particularly interested in photographing as many of the vehicles as possible that were parked around the buildings. It would then be a simple matter of running Department of Motor Vehicle checks to gather personal data, which could be expanded to credit reports, and further deepened to include childhood origins.

Few people realized the true reason all credit applications, wanted to know the maiden name of the applicant's mother. The early life and personal details Jim Richards would gather via Ty Harding International's data researchers would provide insightful clues to the character of each employee. One of the most important tools used by counter-intelligence operatives was to determine a suspect's early life detail. Lack of depth usually indicated identity falsification.

He was about to load another roll of film into his camera, when he realized the forest had become absolutely silent. He heard no birds, cicadas, or crickets. And since they'd become comfortable with him, and would not have been disturbed by the movement of a forest animal, the silence forebode the presence of another human being. One not far from Jim Richards' position.

He immediately broke down his camera, slipping it into his vest. Then crawled with silent precision into the undergrowth below and to the left. Away from the path of approach he'd used to reach his observation post. He ignored the spider webs, lizards, and poison sumac he was forced to crawl through, but kept a wary eye for any sign of a snake. Tennessee was home to several, some were highly poisonous. Twenty-five feet southwest of where he'd started, he stopped and remained perfectly still. He was completely enveloped in undergrowth, his view of the surrounding terrain no more than six feet in any direction. He strained his ears to hear the approach of footsteps. No one could reach his position without making enough noise to give a few seconds warning. He listened for any unusual sound, and hoped the forest would soon return to normal.

Perhaps one of his neighbors had decided to go for a stroll. The forest was fragrant and peaceful. Based upon the numerous footprints, and well tread trails he'd initially encountered, it appeared the children of the neighborhood played frequently in the woods.

The minutes slowly ticked by, off in the distance he heard a crow call, but in his immediate area, there was only silence. Time continued to slip by. A large red, wood spider dropped down inches from Richards' face, and began repairing its web, undoubtedly torn by his intrusion. He felt something crawl across his neck, it took an effort of will not to swat at it.

He'd almost decided to arise from his position, having nearly convinced himself the threat, if such it was, had passed, when the softest crunch of stone, or perhaps a dry twig caught his attention. There *was* someone nearby, he was sure of it. Perhaps the intrusion was benign, though intuitively he did not think so. His hand moved to the handle of his field knife, a Swedish hunting knife, and razor sharp. The only weapon he'd carried with him on his first excursion into the woods. He'd been more concerned about running into children or a neighbor, than facing an adversary. He did not want to alarm anyone by displaying a weapon. He listened for approaching movement. Suddenly, it was near by on the trail he'd followed. Slow stealthy steps.

As he lay in the undergrowth listening and waiting, his mind began to visualize the stalker. Most likely a man versed in tracking, but not really very good at it. A truly top-notch stalker would have made no sound at all, at least not until he'd entered the undergrowth where Richards lay.

Jim Richards heard the man pass his position, then stop at the point where he'd laid prone to take his photographs. The man would see the grass, bent and crushed, and know someone had been there. The shape and alignment of the indentation pointing to the target of observation. The man would also note someone had crawled away, perhaps into the brush. Would he follow? Jim Richards withdrew his knife silently from its leather sheath, strapped inverted to

the inside of his vest. His fingers wrapped tightly about the handle. He slowly, slowly bent one leg. Then silently shifted his position in preparation of a leap forward if he heard the stalker enter the undergrowth. But to his surprise, and temporary relief, the stalker did not enter. Instead he turned and walked away without any attempt at stealth, back down the hill from the direction in which he'd come.

It was an old trick. If an enemy is hidden in a defensible position, and you do not know exactly where he's located, one course of action is to walk away making a good deal of noise. Then find an ambush site nearby, and wait. Usually, the enemy also waits. But eventually if you're patient, he will come out warily, having assumed you've given up and left the area.

Jim Richards knew the game well. He used the noise his stalker made in feigned retreat, to cover his rising to a crouched position from which he caught a fast glimpse of the man just before he ducked behind a tree on the north side of the trail.

The man now had two choices, one was to wait in ambush. The second, to circle around to a better position nearer to Jim Richards point of concealment, thus eliminating the possibility his quarry would elude him by using a route of escape different from that used to approach.

Jim Richards did not waste the precious few moments he'd been given. Whether his stalker circled, or stayed where he'd stepped off the path, Richards' course of action remained the same. As quietly as possible he scampered on all fours, then slipped down the far side of the ridge. Using the ridgeline, to mask the sound of his movement, he headed north then climbed to the top of the ridge to come behind his stalker's position. He then returned to slow silent movement, thirty minutes later he sighted the man crouched in the shadows of the tree line watching both the spot where Richards had stopped to observe Caring First, and the clump of undergrowth into which he'd originally disappeared.

Jim Richards watched the man intently for several minutes, during which time the man shifted his position several times allowing Richards to get a clear look at him from many different angles.

He was heavier than Richards, but looked to be as tall. Older, probably well into his fifties judging from the lines on his face, the gray beard, and hair that fringed below an old boonie hat. His face was badly scarred, as were the portions of his arms Jim Richards could see below rolled up sleeves. Shrapnel wounds. Most likely from combat in southeast Asia.

The long wait seemed to be a bother, he constantly shifted position, trying to stretch, perhaps to avoid cramps. He wore jungle fatigues. And carried a short

twelve gauge, pump shot gun. Its folding stock fully extended. And a K-Bar fighting knife inverted in a sheath at his left shoulder.

Jim Richards looked around on the ground, there were several stones lying in the dirt. He picked up two, then tossed them to the right out of the watcher's line of sight, into another clump of undergrowth. They landed one after another, as if someone were attempting to move away through the brush.

The man tried to jump up and turn in the direction of the apparent movement, to see if someone were coming out of the undergrowth. He never made it, a cramp seized his right hamstring. He went down with a moan, grasping the back of his left leg then rolling in the dirt and leaves at the base of the tree. "Ah my leg. Ah shit. Oh motherfu..."

Jim Richards suppressed a chuckle. He turned away, kept the trees between himself and the incapacitated watcher. Scampered down the hill, past the battlement, and onto the main trail. In less than twenty minutes, he was again at the edge of the forest, peering through the trees towards the back of Chet and Marsha's house.

He glanced at his watch, six o'clock, or 18:00 as Jim Richards gauged time. He'd been in the forest for three hours. While he'd been gone the neighborhood had transformed itself. No longer silent. The buzz of power mowers. Children laughing. Dogs barking.

He hunkered down at the edge of the woods. And watched in fascination a routine scene he'd not experienced since the days when he'd also played with neighborhood ragamuffins, in another time and place. To his left several children vied for a place on the swing set behind Marsha's house. A pair of boys used pedal power to propel a tricycle and a ride 'em car around the turn before their garage, crashing into one another like bumper cars at an amusement park. Jim Richards had to chuckle, as he watched the smaller of the two run into the garage, then come back out steering a pedal car larger than the one his brother had used to knock him off his trike.

Like crazy men they chased each other around the driveway, until once again a crash ensued. This time it was the older one that climbed out of his overturned pedal car, and ran into the garage. Jim Richards wondered what he'd come out with next...the family sedan?

His gaze shifted right, a Franklin Rents delivery truck was parked in his driveway. Misti directed the workers as they carried furniture into the house. Further to the right, the neighbors beyond the west end of his house, and the ones across from them, sat out on their respective patios and decks, with an evening cocktail in hand, enjoying the raucous shenanigans.

Alexander roughhoused with an old English sheep dog on the lawn, between the brook and the woods. Suddenly he stopped, and looked towards Jim Richards. Then put his head down and trotted in his direction.

The game was up thought Richards. He could hide from children and neighbors. And outwit boogiemens in the woods, but there was no fooling Alexander.

# Chapter Eight

Jim Richards began to rise from his hunkered position. But Alexander trotted past, moving across his line of site to stop, to stare into the woods. His long pointed ears fully erect. Richards remained where he was, concealed by the underbrush. He'd not heard the watcher, because his movements had been masked by the cacophony of the neighborhood. He watched Alexander's head swivel slowly from left to right, as he tracked the watcher until he'd moved well back into the woods.

Jim Richards remained down on one knee, the classic trail surveillance position. Nearly five minutes passed, then Alexander craned his neck around and looked back at Richards, then turned to face him. Jim Richards stood up, and stepped out of the woods as if he'd just returned from a casual hike. Though the dirt, brambles, and twigs adhering to various portions of his attire and springing from his mused up hair, made it seem as if he'd completed the hike by diving head first through the thickets.

He glanced down at Alexander. "Thank you." The dog lifted his snout once in acknowledgment. Then moved out in front, leading the way through the children near the swing set, who'd stopped their play to stare at the apparition stepping from the woods.

Marsha was in her driveway talking with Misti, who'd come over as the furniture truck pulled away. Chet was in the process of pulling the start cord on his weed trimmer. When the children fell silent, everyone looked towards their play area.

Jim Richards had hoped to slip between the trees, and ease into his own back yard before he was seen by anyone, but as soon as the children ceased their laughter he knew that option had evaporated. Alexander led him over to Chet, Marsha, and Misti. All of the children went back to their games. Except the two toe heads with the crash 'em cars, they crowded around Chet's leg's staring up at Jim Richards in unabashed curiosity.

"You look a mess," Misti opined.

Jim Richards smiled sheepishly. "I tripped coming down the hill back there." He pointed towards the woods. "Now I'm covered in sumac."

Misti made a cross of her index fingers, and held them out in front of her, as if he were a vampire. "No hugs for you. Not until you shower. And don't you dare bring those clothes past the laundry room."

Everyone laughed.

"Did you see the Boogie man?" One of the toe heads asked?

Jim Richards crouched down, eye level with Chet's oldest son. The other boy, too shy to chime in, hid behind Chet's leg peeking around his knee to stare at Richards.

"Whose the Boogie man?" Richards asked.

"Um... he guards the trees. And, and, he won't let no one hurt the animals. And he's scary 'cause... his face is all messed up."

Richards looked up at Chet.

"His name's MacKenzie, though some folks 'round here call him *MacCrazie*. Lives up the dirt driveway at the end of the street. By the way I'm Chet." He stuck out his hand.

Jim Richards grasped the proffered hand, and Chet helped him back to his feet as they shook in greeting. "As a matter of fact, I did see someone back in the woods. All dressed up in camouflage gear, packin' a shot gun."

Chet grinned. "That'd be Mac, all right."

"Hunting?" Richards asked.

"Keeping hunters away, actually. Family owns all the land this side of the ridge, he considers it his private sanctuary. Doesn't want anyone hunting the property."

Jim Richards nodded his understanding. "Doesn't care much for hikers either?"

"Well once he knows you live here, he makes allowances. We all go in there from time to time to cut up downed trees for firewood, or just walk around. Every now and then we'll bump into Mac. No problem, he's pretty much figured out who lives down here. Kind of watches over the children too. Been a time or two he's brought one home, lost in the woods."

"Sounds like a good neighbor." Jim Richards said.

Chet smiled. "Well that might be pressin' it some. He's real high on the eccentric scale. Came back from 'Nam pretty messed up in the head. On disability, post traumatic stress, or something. Still you can't fault a man willing to go out of his way to find a kid lost in the sumac. 'Course they're all scared of him on account of his appearance."

Chet looked off towards the woods for a moment, then back at Richards. "Loves stray dogs though, and they love him. Sometimes half dozen up at his house. Quite a few strays 'round here, abandoned by their owners. They all seem to know his place. The Dog Hotel we call it."

"Speaking of dogs, " Richards said. "That's quite a pup you've got."

Chet looked down at Alexander, lying on the cool grass, off to one side, watching the children play. "Yeah, he's a good ol' pooch. Belonged to a neighbor of ours up in Connecticut. Marine in Nam, worked K-9s. Guess he and Alexander were war buddies. Brought him home with him. Had to give him up though, when he took a job overseas. So we said we'd care for him, then I was transferred down here."

That explained the dog's reaction at the woods, Richards thought. And his willingness to accept someone like himself so quickly. His movements in the brush would have triggered memories of old training. Jim Richards looked down at Alexander, their eyes met for a moment, the dog lifted his head again, a sharp upward nod. Richards smiled, then looked back at Chet. "What kind of work do you do? Connecticut's a long ways away."

"Quality Control at Caring First. Just over the hill."

"Really?" Misti piped in. "I've just been hired as an executive secretary."

Richards was shocked, though he hoped his astonishment didn't show. He smiled but realized he was frowning at the same time. Misti stared at him quizzically.

"Well, congratulations." Marsha said with enthusiasm. "I'm sure you'll just love working there. They've been very good to Chet."

He nodded in agreement. "Great benefits for the children."

Misti grinned broadly. "Actually it's only a temporary position, but hopefully something permanent will come up before the job runs out."



Marsha smiled, and waved her hand at Misti. "Oh, of course, that's the way they hire everyone. Kind of a probationary thing. If you work out, they bring you on full time. I'm sure they'll hire you, you're just the type they look for."

Misti glanced quickly at Jim Richards, his smile never wavered.

Richards raised his hands in mock surrender. "I'm covered in sumac, got to get to a shower."

"Ooooh, you're gonna itch like crazy." Little Chet said.

Richards feigned exaggerated scratching, and turned towards the house. As he and Misti crossed the lawn Marsha called out. "Don't forget, tomorrow's the Kentucky Derby party at Bruce and Martha's."

Misti waved back. "We'll be there."

"Bruce and Martha?" Richards asked.

"Our neighbors across the creek."

"Oh. By the way, congratulations on your new job. You are a fast worker."

She smiled at him mischievously as they crossed the driveway towards the back door of their house. "You think so? Just wait 'till I get you in the shower."

#

They sat in the dark out on the screened porch, a glass of iced tea at hand. Fireflies flitted between the trees. Some twinkled gold, others blue green. The night warm, the air thick with humidity.

They'd made love in the shower, then christened the bed, then slept awhile. It was nearly eleven PM, the neighborhood quiet except for the ever-present crickets. Lights were out in all the nearby homes. They sat side by side on a wooden, canvas cushioned love seat, and chatted in near whispers.

"You've certainly had a productive day," Jim Richards said. "Caring First in the morning, home furnishing in the afternoon."

"I guess I just got lucky. There's a little personnel agency in Brentwood, owner used to work for Caring First's Personnel Department. I guess they're her

biggest client. I'll be working for two executive vice-presidents, up on the fifth floor."

"Perfect." Jim Richards' mind was reeling, the last thing he wanted was Misti involved with a target, which was how he thought of Caring First. On the other hand, the possibilities were intriguing. Then he shuddered.

"You cold?" Misti asked. "It seems warm to me."

Jim Richards hugged her close for a moment. "No, not at all." What the hell was he thinking. Over the past three years he'd gone to great lengths to assure Misti was completely separated from the covert side of his life. Albeit having her join him here was a departure, but then there wasn't really much choice considering the length of time the operation was expected to run. Now this, he sighed, leaned his head against hers. He'd just have to be extra cautious... for both of them.

"Hopefully it'll work out full time, at least until something comes up in teaching." Misti continued her train of thought. "The two executives I'll be working for have gone through several temps already, according to the gal at the personnel agency. Apparently, each of them has a different idea of how a secretary should perform. And both think they ought to have their own, but neither is budgeted for a full time person. Caring First's been phasing out personal secretaries, shifting responsibility to centralized word processing. But the big wigs on the fifth want their own. I guess sharing one's a sort of gradual withdrawal for them. Bottom line, I don't know how long it'll last"

Jim Richards changed the subject. "This is a peaceful house; acres of grass, the stream, woods. Imagine what this would cost in California."

Misti smiled in the dark. "Um, especially if it were in Marin county. Half a mil, at least. I wonder who lived here before?"

Richards looked at Misti, her profile barely discernible in the hint of light from stars, and a thin sliver of moon. "An elderly couple lived here for about ten years, sort of their retirement home. Both ended up with Alzheimer's. Wife's progressed more rapidly. Husband cared for her to the end. But then there was no one to care for him. He ended up in an assisted living facility, retirement home, whatever you want to call it. I think his name was Henderson."

"How sad." Misti said. "They might have saved all their lives to have this little place to be happy in together. But then fate would have none of that." Tears came to her eyes. She sighed and hugged his arm. "We'll do our best to make this a happy place for ourselves...in their honor."

#

The windows were open wide, Jim Richards slept without covers, naked except for a pair of jersey boxers. The night hot and humid, almost stifling. They'd contemplated shutting the place up, and turning on the air conditioner, but agreed the crickets and babbling brook were preferable. Summer would arrive soon enough, forcing the need for full-time AC all too soon.

A cool breeze wafted across his body. He felt chill and opened his eyes for a moment. The first gray of dawn began to lighten the sky outside. He glanced at the luminescent numbers on a stainless steel Rolex Sea Dweller strapped to his wrist, 05:30.

He looked over at Misti, asleep under a single cotton sheet, then rolled onto his left side, draping a portion of the sheet over his upper body. Vaguely he heard the first patter of raindrops outside. The weather girl on the late night news had predicted showers by early morning. He took a deep breath, inhaling the clean earthy scent of raindrops. Then drifted off to sleep again as water began to trickle down the metal rainspout outside their bedroom window.

#

The bell inside the telephone was their only warning, it dinged once, as if someone had dialed a wrong number, realized their mistake, then tried to hang up before the phone at the other end began to ring. A flash of brilliant blue-white light pierced his eyelids, momentarily dazzling his pupils as if his eyes were not closed at all. Jim Richards rolled to his right, dragging Misti with him, diving for the floor. His mind raced back to the jungles of Guatemala. He knew the concussion wave would precede any warning sound.

It hit as they were mid-way to the floor, but less severely than he'd expected. Followed almost immediately by a blast of overwhelming sound, as if a cannon had gone off within a few feet of them. Misti gasped as the impact of violent sound reached her brain, her shock multiplied by the effect of Jim Richards' desperate attempt to cover her as they fell to the floor.

He steeled himself for the bite of glass shards, followed by the impact of falling plaster and woodwork. But instead, all he felt was a light sprinkle of rain water, as huge oversize drops, driven by a westerly wind, shattered against the screened bedroom window misting into the room, spritzing the skin of his exposed back and legs. He felt the foundation of the house vibrate in diminishing resonance, an after effect of the force it had withstood.

He rolled off of Misti, his back pressed against the cool plaster of the wall, and stared into equally startled blue eyes. A deep rumble echoed off the

hills. An epiphany hit them both. "Thunder?" They said simultaneously. Then burst out laughing.

Outside, rain poured down in torrents. Slowly they rose to their feet. And stared out the window, side by side like two small children amazed at their first site of heavy rain. It looked as if a sheet of water was pouring down from the clouds above. Jim Richards lowered the window, but left it cracked enough to release the concussive pressure should another bolt of lightning strike again.

"Unbelievable." He shook his head. "That bolt must have struck directly over head."

They each grabbed blue jeans off the floor, where they'd tossed them in passion on their way to bed the night before.

"More likely, it struck the lightening rod." Misti said as she did a quick, one-two hula step into her jeans.

"Lightening rod?"

Misti shimmied, sans bra, into a ribbed cotton pull over. "Sometimes you are a silly one, you know?" She laughed. "The wire that runs off the TV antenna, down the outside of the chimney to a stake in the ground."

Jim Richards stood with one leg in his jeans watching Misti's *dress* performance, which he enjoyed only slightly less than her *undress* performance. "Really? I thought that was what it might be, never occurred to me a lightening strike would sound like a bomb."

They walked down the hall, then through the family room and out onto the screened porch. A fast moving line of thunderstorms was already pounding the woods to the east. Bolts of hot blue light shafted down amongst the trees, followed by cracks of thunder, then deep rumbling echoes, but directly overhead the sky appeared to be clearing.

They stared in amazement at the brook. Last night it had been a trickle, a mellow relaxing burble that tinkled philosophically over smooth mossy stones. Now a raging torrent spread across the lawn almost to the deck at the back of their house.

Because their house was on a slight incline, the water did not reach the porch's support stilts. Down stream it washed up against their neighbor's foundation, floated the twelve-foot long railroad ties that bordered their once beautiful flowerbed.

Jim Richards made a mental note to look into getting a backhoe in to widen and deepen the brook. He timed the rapid progress of a small branch washing down stream. Counting off the seconds in his head as it passed between two fixed points. Later he'd measure the distance and calculate the flow rate. Armed with that information, a knowledgeable contractor could easily determine the depth and width the stream would need to be to accommodate the next *toad floater* that came their way.

They'd each left a pair of canvas boat shoes by the rear door to slip on when they wanted to run outside for a moment since they wore no shoes in the house. Jim Richards squatted down, grabbed both pairs of shoes, and then slammed them down onto the backs of their heels. Just to make certain no little critters had crawled inside to sleep. A precaution he'd learned while on one of his extended expeditions at the behest of Uncle Sam. They each slipped into their shoes and went outside to look for damage to the house, believing the storm had passed to the east, and the clear sky above was not just a *sucker* hole.

They skirted the back of the garage heading towards the driveway, just as they reached the corner of the house a tremendous gust of wind literally propelled them the last three or four feet. They turned the corner, using the structure as a windbreak. Debris flew through the air, leaves and twigs swirled everywhere.

Jim Richards looked up at the old elm tree in the driveway. It swayed erratically, as if the wind were coming at it from all directions at once. Suddenly, it leaned nearly thirty degrees towards their neighbor's house, then snapped upright. A large branch that arched over the driveway seemed to explode away from the trunk with a loud crack. It cart wheeled down to the ground, then shattered on impact with the asphalt. Clearly the old wood was rotten, held together only by its polished outer shell. Richards made a mental note to cut the tree down, if the storm left it standing.

He and Misti moved across the width of the house, staying close to the garage door for protection from the wind. They peered around the southeast corner, gazed across the front lawn and down the street. Everywhere trees were swaying wildly. The street littered with branches and other debris.

Another bolt of lightening struck nearby, the crack of thunder startled them even though they were expecting it. Water poured down harder than ever, and they found themselves huddling against one of the garage doors. Protected temporarily by the eaves of the house and the prevailing wind. It poured for perhaps five minutes. The legs of their jeans, and their shoes, became soaked from splash back as the rain impacted the driveway. Then the rain suddenly stopped, and the wind howled from yet another direction. No longer were they protected by the house.

They scurried around the front, hopped onto the porch. A slab of concrete recessed into the main structure in front of the living room, a full roof over their heads. They looked across their lawn, and over the roofs of the houses across the street. A funnel cloud appeared perhaps a half-mile away, moving west to east. It was not in continuous contact with the ground, which gave it the appearance of a huge vacuum hose swinging about erratically in ponderous slow motion. Every now and then, it would touch the ground. Where it touched, debris flew up, then swirled around in a arc much larger than the cloud itself, scattering wide and returning to earth far from where it was picked up.

The roar of the wind was incredible, at least 90db, mimicking the sound of a loaded freight train blasting full speed through a long dark tunnel. It occurred to Jim Richards that the hills surrounding the valley where their neighborhood was located, had interrupted the complete formation of the tornado, such that it could only touch down here and there momentarily before being disrupted. Nevertheless, where it touched, or where the peripheral wind, generated by its vacuum, encountered weak or flimsy objects the effect was devastating.

As Jim Richards and Misti huddled on their front porch, the sounds that came to their ears gradually became more distinct. The sizzle of lightning strikes. The sharp crack and rumble of thunder - near and distant. The roar, whistles, and whooshes of wind encountering a wide variety of stationary shapes. The sound of debris rattling against buildings. Garbage cans turning over, their contents spilling out. Cans and bottles clattering along the ground. Now and then, glass shattering. The crack of wooden branches being torn from trees. The multiple cracks and crunches of a tree falling somewhere nearby.

The wind shifted, driving rain onto the front porch of the house. The front door was locked, they scampered around the west end of the house. The creek continued to spread around their neighbor's home, neighbors they hadn't yet met. Fortunately, the depth of the water remained shallow, and though it was reeking havoc with the landscaping, the flooring of the home remained above the high water line.

Now, he and Misti were sloshing through ankle deep water. Turning the northwest corner of the house, they moved away from the protection of the brick structure to circumvent the screened porch that creaked and groaned in protest of the wind. As they turned the corner, the effect of the wind decreased. Once again they were in the lee of the structure. Jim Richards gazed east along the creek towards the forest. He saw that several cedars had fallen, smashing down into the undergrowth.

As Richards looked towards the point where the brook emerged from the forest, he observed an object in the swift flowing stream. It appeared to be a

small animal struggling to stay afloat in the rapids of the raging stream. As it passed by the swing set behind Chet and Marsha's house, the shape resolved into a black puppy, small and round.

Soon it would strike the flat, wooden bridge that crossed the creek behind their house. The puppy would be forced by water pressure under, or tumble over, depending upon the whim of fate. In either case it would sustain injury, perhaps drown.

Without a second thought, Jim Richards began a headlong dash toward the bridge. His unexpected departure startled Misti, and she stared in amazement having no idea what had prompted him to suddenly run.

The bridge was only a few yards away, but even as he approached, running as fast as he could, it occurred to him he might not make it in time. His feet pounded through the ankle deep water that had flooded over their lawn, each step sending an impact geyser into the air.

The course of the stream forced the puppy towards the south bank, for a moment it tried to scramble up, its little paws scrabbling desperately in the mud. All four feet moving at once, to no avail. The stream swept it on.

Yet its struggle for safety was not in vain, the few extra seconds it managed to delay its downstream progress gave Jim Richards just the amount of time he needed. As he closed upon the bridge, the puppy came twirling towards it. Richards dove headlong, the way an NFL receiver might, his body fully elongated. He reached down, snatched the puppy into his arms, and then rolled over onto his back. Hugging the dog to his chest, he slapped down onto the grass beyond the stream's bank, skittering along on four inches of rushing water. Finally, coming to rest against the base of a tall elm that grew a few feet from the normal course of the stream.

He lay there for a moment, catching his breath. The puppy licking his face, and whimpering. And within the time it took for him to recover from his sudden burst of exercise - the wind stopped, the rain stopped, the clouds dispersed above their neighborhood, and the sun popped out.

#

Jim Richards stood up slowly. He looked across the stream at Misti, who stood on the opposite side shaking her head. He looked down at the rushing water, it seemed to be receding before his eyes. Already, it ceased to pour over the top of the bridge. But though the onslaught had slowed, it would be several hours before the stream returned to its former rate of flow.

Jim Richards glanced at his watch, 07:00. The sun slanted through the forest's trees casting the golden glow of early morning onto the walls and roofs of homes in the neighborhood. He crossed the bridge, then handed the puppy to Misti. She nuzzled its wet fur, got a lick in return, then set it down gently at her feet. She fully expected it to scamper off, but instead it seemed not to know in which direction to go. It followed them both around as they began a second inspection of the their house.

Except for the sound of water clattering down drainpipes, dripping heavily off eaves; coupled with the diminishing rush of the stream, the neighborhood was quiet.

Jim Richards took a deep breath. The air crisp and fresh. There was a clean, green scent to it. As they rounded the front of their home, they heard the sound of doors being opened through out the neighborhood. People stepping outside to call to their neighbors, and ask if everything was all right.

By the time they reached the west end of the house, their neighbors in that direction had come out onto their patio. They sloshed through the soaked grass, to introduce themselves.

Through out the course of the morning, Jim Richards found his Bronco much in demand as he assisted with dragging trunks of downed trees out of the brook, after others had attacked them with chain saws. Thus opening up the flow of not only their stream, but also several others that confluenced into a sizable creek further down the valley. In the course of the clean-up operation, he and Misti met all of their immediate neighbors, Diane and Dan and their children Michael and Kathy.

Bruce and Martha set up a luncheon on the large wooden deck that attached to the back of their house, turning the Derby party into a clean-up relief center. Neighbors came and went partaking of food and fellowship, with many contributing to the fare as well in potluck fashion.

Around one in the afternoon, Jim Richards decided to try to return the puppy to its rightful owner. He surmised, if it had come downstream it must belong to someone living upstream. The only person anyone in the neighborhood could think that might be was MacKenzie.

It would have been a simple task to walk up MacKenzie's driveway with the dog, but Jim Richards wanted an excuse to reconnoiter the approach to MacKenzie's house from the forest. He slipped the puppy into the front of his shirt, and buttoned it up part way. He and Misti had decided the dog was most likely a Labrador retriever. The animal soon fell asleep, like a kangaroo in its mother's pouch.



Silently he made his way up stream, carefully climbing over, or around fallen debris. The stream wound back into the woods. It poured over a series of low stepped waterfalls down the side of a steep hill. As Jim Richards gained the summit, he peered between the branches of trees and brush that bordered the stream.

Ahead he saw the source of the brook. A small lake, probably stocked with fish by its survivalist owner. A depression in the hill's summit was dammed with earth and rock, a wooden slush box served as an out flow. There was most likely a spring somewhere near the center that filled the lake, and fed the brook under normal conditions. In the heavy rain, water had over flowed, and washed away a portion of the dam.

Jim Richards moved cautiously forward. Trees and brush surrounding the lake obscured his view, but off to the right somewhere beyond the trees he could hear the buzz of a chain saw cutting wood. He moved in that direction. He passed through a narrow stand of trees, then stopped just inside the grove at the edge of a clearing.

Straight across, on the far side, was a log house. Not a homemade shelter, but a well built two story home. Masonry mortar was laid between each log. Thermal glass windows, a sturdy roof, and an L shaped, railed wooden porch attached to the north and west sides of the home. On the east side, there was a carport. Inside, a 1966 Chevrolet pick-up. The house stood on a solid, river rock foundation, vented by narrow slots in the stonework, to assure moisture did not collect underneath.

Off to one side, a cedar tree of great height and girth had toppled. It had apparently just missed the log home, fallen instead on a collection of small wooden enclosures. It occurred to Richards, the structures might have been dog kennels. Though there did not appear to be any animals inside, or on the property at all for that matter. MacKenzie was stooped over working feverishly to cut through the trunk of the tree, apparently in an attempt to get at the wood structure that lay partially destroyed directly beneath. The tree was so large, it was obvious to Jim Richards from the number of cuts made, and that MacKenzie had been working at the job alone for several hours.

Jim Richards stepped out of the woods, and began to walk directly towards MacKenzie. He kept his path of approach aligned in such a way that MacKenzie would not see him from the corner of his eye. He did not want to startle him, or distract him, while in the process of operating a powered tool as hazardous as a chain saw.

As he approached, he continuously scanned the area, noted MacKenzie wore no side arm, though he carried a field knife in a sheath at his right side. His shotgun stood on the front porch, in sight but well out of immediate reach.

Jim Richards ceased his approach ten feet from MacKenzie. Almost as soon as he arrived, MacKenzie shut off the chain saw. Jim Richards fully expected him to turn around, having somehow sensed his presence. But to Richards' surprise he remained intent on his activity seemingly oblivious to any outside influence. With great strength he heaved a section of tree trunk out of the way. A groan of anguish escaped his lips. There on the ground before him was a full-grown Labrador retriever, with four puppies huddled around her. All gone, crushed by the weight of the fallen tree.

"Oh no..no." His voice filled with sadness. He sagged to his knees onto the ground. Stroking the animal, checking each puppy to see if one might still be alive.

"I'm so sorry," Jim Richards said. Touched by the obvious grief the man was suffering.

MacKenzie turned suddenly to stare at Richards. His hand automatically dropping to the handle of his field knife, though he did not take it out. "Who are you?" He asked, anger tingeing his voice.

"My name's Jim. I moved into the Henderson place. Didn't mean to startle you. When I saw you working with the chain saw, I stayed out of your line of sight. Dangerous piece of equipment, if you get distracted."

MacKenzie's glare softened a little, he seemed to appreciate common sense. Then his grief returned, he looked back down at the ground. Touched one of the puppies, then shook his head sadly. "Not yet three weeks old." He stroked the mother's side.

"She was a good dog."

He looked up at Richards. "The storm hit too fast. Came out when I heard the wind, to see if they were okay. Opened the gate, one of the pups spooked, ran off towards the stream. I went after him, didn't want him gettin' into the water. Rain pourin' down somethin' awful.

"Then I heard the *crack* of a tree comin' down. Turned to look, nothin' I could do. Lost them all, first one in the stream as the damn broke lose, the tree took the rest."

He sighed, and stared at the ground. "Hadn't been for the one that spooked, tree would have got us all." He brought one hand to his face, covered his eyes. "Jesus... when will you give me peace?" His hands balled into fists. "Why must I always be the only survivor?"

Jim Richards knelt at MacKenzie's side, he placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him, but MacKenzie pulled away. His eyes angry again, ashamed he'd shown weakness to a stranger.

"Not the only survivor this time." At that moment, the puppy popped his head out of Richards' shirt.

# Chapter Nine

Roget Akhondan settled back into one of six leather armchairs inside the passenger cabin of his Gulfstream business jet. He placed a pair of stereo headphones over his ears, reclined the chair back, and closed his eyes. He and his brother Rashad were born to a family of wealth. Wealth from land under which oil happened to exist. When it was discovered, his great-grandfather held a position within the ruling government party, which assured his land would not be confiscated.

Of the two brothers, Roget had been the one with a mind for business. Well educated and very good-looking, even by western standards, he had all the facets necessary for early success in business.

He'd left Tehran early that morning to arrive in Geneva with plenty of time to make the nine-thirty meeting. Like many of his countrymen, Roget looked upon the United States as the "Great Satan". After all, Muslim countries in the Middle East were divinely blessed with the most abundant oil reserves in the world. Control of world wide profits generated by those reserves should be in the hands of Muslims, not infidels. But the machinations of Kermit Roosevelt, coupled with the traitorous actions of the Peacock Thrown, had usurped control of much of Iran's vast wealth.

In 1975, Roget Akhondan made his first bid to recover the money. With virtually unlimited funding from cooperative Iranian interests, he attempted to discreetly buy a series of American banks. Unfortunately, his plan was discovered by a routine federal audit.

Roget had to almost chuckle at the thought of some bespectacled government accountant ponderously checking stock registrations. Then gradually coming to the realization, a single foreigner owned controlling interest in not one, but several U.S. banks. Akhondan's assets were seized, and he was deported for violation of U.S. banking regulation.

Roget's face remained impassive even pleasant as he relaxed in the recliner, but anger seethed in his mind. He rebelled against the thought of anyone, or any country, daring to challenge his will. He took a deep breath, reminded himself it was not his will that was being challenged but rather the will of Allah. Had he been able to complete acquisition of only three more banks, it would have been possible to shift money off shore while still reporting growth on paper. With

prudence, it might have even been possible to recover the entire eight billion dollars ceded to the United States by the Shaw of Iran.

He was not discouraged, he believed in the will of Allah and the *Seven Gates* through which all mortals must pass in order to reach paradise. And though the gates referred to in the Koran were spiritual, *The Book* was, nevertheless, a blue print for life on earth. He accepted the fact that travails would occur and would have to be overcome, before success could be attained.

#

Misti DiMartine stepped from the elevator onto the fifth floor of Caring First's executive building. She turned right, walked confidently towards the doublewide, twelve-foot high, solid walnut doors that led into the executive suite. She pulled open the right hand door. Beyond, was a large plush carpet. To her left, along one wall, four leather wing back chairs. Between each pair, a side table of polished walnut. The wingbacks were further divided into two pairs, by a round table on which was set a reading lamp with a polished brass base.

Beyond the wing backs, just before the smaller of two conference rooms, was a narrow buffet table. On it stood a silver coffee urn filled with fresh brewed coffee. The urn was flanked by china coffee cups, and a silver sugar and cream service.

Around the perimeter of the floor were the executive's offices. The largest belonged to Raymond Harbinger. Next came Harris Williams' office. To the right of Williams, and directly in front of the entry, were the offices of Michael Fitzgerald and Allen Maxwell.

It had surprised Misti to learn that Raymond Harbinger did not have his own secretary. She supposed he generated little correspondence in his capacity as Chairman. Of course, he always had access to Mary Foldenstein, Mr. Williams' long time personal secretary.

The other two-thirds of the fifth floor was dedicated to the remainder of the executive staff. However, their offices were for the most part smaller. Their area eminently more functional. It was in this area that all of the usual office furniture and equipment could be found - filing cabinets, copy machines, and large work surfaces on which to collate reports and projects.

The two distinctly different areas of the fifth floor were divided by a wood paneled wall, with another set of double wide twelve foot high doors just beyond Misti's desk. These were normally left open, which created the feeling of a more spacious environment for the staff, as well as, convenient access to files and equipment.

Misti walked across the light gray carpet, her high heels wobbled slightly as the deep pile gave way beneath. The calf muscles of her shapely legs flexed in response and steadied her gait. Misti hung her suit jacket on a clothes tree, which stood just beyond the doors that led into the staffing area, then stepped behind her desk.

Mr. Fitzgerald glanced up from a copy of the Wall Street Journal, which he read religiously each morning, Misti returned his smile. She sensed his eyes lingering on her as she pulled the chair from under her desk to sit down.

Allen Maxwell had not yet arrived, and would not arrive before eight forty-five, or maybe even nine. In the three weeks she'd been with the company, Mr. Maxwell had never arrived before eight forty-five, though Mr. Fitzgerald was always in by the time she reached her desk at eight o'clock.

As had been the case on all prior mornings, other than her first, there were two notes on her desk. One from each of the executives for whom she worked. As usual, both were tagged as priority. Thus far Misti had been able to avoid an open conflict, primarily because she'd been able to accomplish their tasks with maximum speed and efficiency. But it was clear to her, each executive was playing one-upsmen on the other, it was only a matter of time before deadlines would openly conflict. Then she'd see how good she really was at negotiating an acceptable compromise.

Over coffee, on her first day, Mary Foldenstein had warned her of this likelihood. And indicated to Misti that if she were completely overwhelmed to let her know. But Misti knew, intuitively, her only hope for longevity was to find a way to resolve deadline issues on her own.

Of the two executives, Misti felt a greater rapport with Michael Fitzgerald. He seemed friendlier, and more consistent in his behavior. While Allen Maxwell was always on edge, as if things were never quite right.

When Mr. Fitzgerald asked her to do something for him, he took the time to explain how his request fit within the context of what he was trying to accomplish. It made her feel more like a member of the team.

Whereas, Allen Maxwell would offer no explanation. Nor instructions, not even with regard to the number of copies he'd need produced. He acted as if Misti should simply know what was expected.

Then too, there were the personal habits of the two men. Michael Fitzgerald's appearance was always neat and fresh. Coincidentally, he used the same after-shave her father wore. Somehow she found that comforting. Not that

Mr. Fitzgerald reminded her of her father in any other way, except perhaps in years.

Mr. Maxwell, on the other hand, always reeked of cigar smoke. The stench riddled his clothing, and seemed to exude from his skin. If he wore an after-shave it was undetectable to Misti, though it amused her to think it might be Eau de Macanudo.

#

Jim Richards crawled the last few feet with extreme care. He was in the process of placing black and white video cameras at all four corners of the house. The cameras mounted inside the attic. A small hole drilled through the wall just below the eaves of the roof. The hole was then fitted with a fish eye lens, linked to the camera via a short fiber optic lead. Adjacent to the camera lens, a second hole was drilled to accept a sound transducer to provide an audio feed to augment the video.

They were difficult to mount because only the center portion of the attic was floored. The corners and outer edges were impinged upon by the slope of the roof, and so were left without flooring. In order to accomplish the job, Jim Richards had to transport tools and equipment along bare joists, completing the installation while lying on his stomach supported by three narrow joists. One mistake, one slip, and he'd crash down through the interior ceiling. In his present location over the southeast corner of the garage, the drop was twelve feet to unforgiving concrete.

Earlier in the week, Ty Harding had shipped him several crates marked with logos of well-known music recording equipment manufacturers. Jim Richards had answered Marsha's inevitable questions with the explanation he was building a small recording studio in one of his extra bedrooms. Which in fact was true, but only accounted for one-third of the equipment received.

On the other hand, he'd told Misti that he'd ordered the cameras to improve their personal security, as well as, protect the property. After all they were living *out in the country*. He made certain she understood the camera system was not to be discussed with anyone, explaining that most successful burglaries occurred as the result of the burglar gaining information by word of mouth about the devices he'd need to defeat.

Jim Richards tightened the Phillips head screw that locked the camera in place. Then ever so carefully backed crawled out of the corner using the strength of his forearms and toes to reach the plywood flooring that ran down the center of the attic. There he rested for a few moments, beads of sweat dripping off his forehead. The temperature in the attic at least ninety-five degrees.

Regaining his strength, he duck walked the cables to a spot directly over the closet in the smallest of the three bedrooms. There he'd previously drilled a hole through the ceiling large enough to accept one inch PVC pipe to serve as conduit for the cables.

With the camera installation complete, Jim Richards climbed back down the access ladder, folded it up, and then closed the trap door. He stepped into the bedroom nearest the access door, and over to the closet. A twelve-inch monitor displayed the area covered by the video cameras. Four separate VCRs recorded any activity that took place outside the house. The display could be divided into four mini screens - its normal mode. Or locked onto any one camera's point of view. The control module, monitor, and VCRs stood behind a false rear wall, fashioned to swing out into the room for access. The system activated by a series of infrared sensors, placed at various strategic locations outside. Anyone, or anything, entering the sensitivity field would trigger the corresponding camera, and its slaved videocassette recorder, which would record as long as the sensitivity field remained stimulated.

In front of the closet, on two rolling racks was the recording studio's electronic equipment. A small soundboard, four-track over-dub machine, one-quarter inch reel-to-reel final mix machine, and a cassette recorder for demo copies. The varying dimensions of the equipment, its cables, and the fact the closet's two sliding doors had been removed, would serve to draw the gaze of the curious away from the shallow depth of the closet.

Jim Richards lined the room's walls, including its single window, with sound baffling material creating an acoustically dead room. He placed microphones, his Gibson J-45, and a stool near the center of the room. A small, reostatically controlled, pencil spot illuminated the vocalist's position. Ambient light from the equipment's LEDs, VUs, and other lighted instrumentation cast a warm glow over the rest of the space.

He'd pre-recorded several songs before leaving San Francisco, then dubbed them down to one per cassette. Earlier in the week, he'd made the rounds of the music houses along Seventeenth Street South. One of the thirty publishers he visited signed him to a year's contract.

To keep the *manuscript* going he'd need to deliver a tape every three or four weeks for as long as his assignment lasted. And though he in no way over-estimated his talent as a songwriter, he couldn't help but wonder if one of the tunes he penned might actually turn out to be a hit.



There's something about Lake Geneva on a mild spring evening, thought Raymond Harbinger, that was truly invigorating. Perhaps it was the way the lights of the fabled city scintillated in sparkled reflection off the surface of the lake. Or maybe it was the crisp, clear air of the Swiss Alps.

Harbinger climbed the narrow steps to Michelle's Bistro. He was glad it was within walking distance of his hotel, at least he was able to get a little fresh air to clear his mind. He was greeted, just inside the door, by a comely young hostess. He gave her his name, she nodded in recognition but nevertheless consulted the reservations list that rested on the podium before her, then made a neat tic, in pencil, next to his name.

As she led him towards the private dining room reserved for the dinner meeting, Harbinger looked about, taking in the room's decor. The carved beamed ceiling was low, by American standards, though perfectly normal to Europeans. The thick plaster ceiling had been painted a pastel yellow, with hand painted purple and blue flowers on trailing green vines, giving the appearance a chain of blossoms had been woven over and around the ceiling's dark wood beams. The walls were also covered in pastel yellow, then decorated with a variety of original oils depicting rural life below majestic mountain peaks. Here and there, a mirrored shadow box was hung. A lighted candle before the mirror.

There were perhaps twenty small tables placed through out the room, each with a white tablecloth. Candles with tiny brass shades. All of the tables occupied. In the corner, was a small semi-circular bar. A collection of liquor bottles stood behind on glass shelves.

Harbinger followed the hostess through a pair of curtained French doors, behind that was another similar dining room also fully occupied. They wove between the tables to a single wood door. The hostess smiled at Harbinger, then held the door open. "Right this way, Sir." She said.

Raymond Harbinger stepped through and into a small private dining room with one round table, at which four persons could sit comfortably. Only two places were set. The room was paneled in polished wood, and appeared to be an extension of the main building. Harbinger thought he'd find a single car garage directly below at ground level. At one end of the room was a large window that looked out over Lake Geneva.

As Raymond Harbinger stepped through the doorway, the lone occupant of the room arose from his seat at the table. He was dressed in a fine Armani suit of dark blue. He was of medium height, clean-shaven, though the shadow of his beard was dark. And it occurred to Raymond Harbinger, the man would have to shave at least twice a day. His hair almost black, cut long by American standards.

His eyes an intense dark brown. He came towards Harbinger, his hand extended in greeting.

"Good evening, Mr. Harbinger." Roget Akhondan said. "Thank you so much for coming tonight." He clasped Harbinger's right hand in his, then placed his left over the top of the handshake, bowing slightly in deference to the seniority of his guest. Akhondan turned slightly, removed his left hand from their handshake and gestured towards the table. "Please, come. Sit down."

At that moment their waiter appeared, entering through a second door at the rear of the room. He seemed to have stepped directly off a Lautrec canvas, with his small black bow tie, gartered sleeves, and perfectly trimmed mustache. He held a chair for Raymond Harbinger, while Roget stood to one side beaming. Then he too was seated.

Roget lifted a previously opened bottle of wine from the table. May I pour you a glass? It is a fine Cotes d'Rhone. Or would you prefer something else?"

Harbinger smiled. "I think a glass of claret would be perfect, thank you."

Roget held the bottle a little higher. It was immediately taken by the waiter who proceeded to pour Harbinger a full glass. He then topped off Akhondan's.

They polished off the bottle. Engaged in small talk. Ordered from a private menu. Ate an excellent meal of Tournedos of Argentine beef with sauce Bernaise, glazed carrots, petit peas, and garlic mash potatoes. And generally avoided any reference to the reason they had each agreed a discreet meeting was in their mutual interests. At last, over Creme Caramel, and deep dark coffee, they settled into substantive conversation.

"Mr. Harbinger." Roget began. "I appreciate your agreeing to meet with me tonight."

Harbinger shrugged. "I agreed because I believe you have a vision. "

Roget smiled, and nodded his head enthusiastically. "Total managed care."

"Exactly," Harbinger said. "Currently, Global Assurance's cash flow is sufficient to develop earnings great enough to satisfy investors. However, all else being equal, in twenty, maybe twenty-five years, that will no longer be the case."

Roget Akhondan nodded in agreement. "It must be so. Your people will age. Yet length of life increases, thus will medical claims accelerate."

Harbinger raised one finger. "But not only will people age and live longer, medical technology will improve. Such improvement increases costs enormously, as previously untreatable conditions become treatable."

"Yes, of course. And pharmaceutical costs as well. New, more powerful medicines. Each with its own R and D cost profile to be recouped." Akhondan gestured with his hands as he spoke. "But unlike technology, pharmaceuticals can be controlled."

Harbinger raised an eyebrow. "And how would you propose to do that?"

"How are medicines dispensed?" Roget asked rhetorically. "A doctor prescribes them. He recommends a particular brand because he's read about its effectiveness in medical journals, or learned of it from a sales technician, or by word of mouth from colleagues." Roget paused for a moment and smiled broadly. "Control the source of information. Limit duplicative development of product. And you'll ultimately reduce cost. How many central nervous system analgesics do we really need on the market? And *they* are just a tip of the redundancy iceberg."

Roget smiled unctuously. "I have a secret to share with you. It is not only the pharmaceuticals that must be capitulated and controlled, but the medical providers as well."

Harbinger nodded his head in agreement. "Global Assurance is making headway there, which is why I allowed myself to be talked into taking a position as Chairman of the Board at Caring First."

Akhondan took a sip of coffee. "It's not enough to control hospital expenses, which is Caring First's forte. You must also control fee for service costs."

Harbinger nodded his head sagely. "Agreed. But that day is yet far off. Perhaps, beyond the years I have left on this tragic planet."

"Now you sound like a reader of the Koran." Roget Akhondan smiled.

"I have read the Koran. And the Bible. There's much in common between the two."

Akhondan nodded his head once. "All right, let me place my cards on the table. I represent a consortium of Assyrian businessmen. We do not believe in government control, not your government...not our government. And we do not believe religious affairs have any bearing on the secular life, but we must abide by the laws of our religious leaders when we are in our own country, or face the

penalty of death. That's why we're quietly moving our wealth across borders, investing in multi-national companies whose leadership shares our view of the world. I think you're such a leader."

He took a sip of coffee. "We've invested heavily in three pharmaceutical companies. The United States represents potentially our largest market, but there are many competing drugs. To grow our companies, we must have access to approval by health benefits insurers, such as Global Assurance. Also, use of our medicines by doctors. Well, Caring First doctors I should say. That would be our best advertisement. If access were exclusive, I can assure you our price to Global Assurance and Caring First would be most competitive. In fact, I can guarantee both firms would enjoy an additional ten percent margin."

Harbinger thought for a moment. He chose his words carefully. "In the long term, I think it would be important for Global Assurance to invest quietly in your enterprise at a sufficient level to allow one of our executives to sit on your Board of Directors. After all, you and I will not live forever. Our agreement tonight should not be limited by our mortality. Our children's children shall inherit the world we leave."

Roget Akhondan did not respond immediately. He poured himself a bit more coffee from a glass serving pot that stood on the table. He gestured to pour a little more for Raymond Harbinger, who declined with a shake of his head, a hand over his cup."

"A feasible concept, " Roget said. "If we might likewise hold a similar position with either Global Assurance, or preferably, Caring First."

Harbinger nodded. "Not an impossibility, but it will have to be arranged carefully to avoid arousing the concern of our government."

Akhondan nodded, a smile slowly spread across his face. "You know, in the end, the final piece for managing cost is Caring First. They need to play a leading role in generating acceptance within the medical community for capitated provider fees. In order to assure benefit funds will remain available for medical care into the next century. Caring First is the largest single provider organization in the world, without their leadership it cannot happen. Yet it must happen, you and I know this to be true."

Harbinger arose from the table but gestured for Roget to remain seated. "In my old age I find I must stretch now and then, forgive me." He paced the room for a moment or two. Stopped at the window and looked out at the lake, then turned to face Akhondan. "You're right, of course. And I've been trying to move Caring First in that direction. Unfortunately, its founder and CEO are

adamant about maintaining autonomy for physicians. An understandable point of view, considering he's one of them.

"His motivation for forming Caring First was to control hospital costs. To open up a wider margin of profit for the individual physician investor. It does not occur to him the end user, the patient, will not be able to pay for physician services within two decades time. By then the insurance industry, of which my company is only one of many, will no longer be able to offer affordable policies to the employer community. It's those policies that pay eighty-two percent of all provider bills."

Roger Akhondan arose from the table, and walked over to the window to stand next to Harbinger. "Then perhaps it is time for new leadership at Caring First."

Raymond Harbinger looked suddenly askance at Roget. "What are you suggesting?" Indignity tinged his voice.

Roget Akhondan chuckled for a moment, which only served to further arouse Harbinger's sudden concern. Roget looked Harbinger straight in the eye. "I am sorry Raymond, for a moment you were looking at me as if I were a Shiite terrorist, suggesting assassination of Dr. Williams." He chuckled a moment longer. "Believe me that is the farthest thing from my mind. I was just thinking, perhaps now would be the time for him to pursue other interests, political perhaps. Is that not often the way of your most successful corporate executives?"

Raymond Harbinger visibly relaxed. "Not necessarily, but it is a course some will follow."

Roget Akhondan thought for a moment. "Perhaps there's another way. Your company, Global Assurance, has a sizable stake in Caring First?"

Harbinger nodded. "Sizable, yes. But not sufficient to control."

"An opportunity may present itself. Oil profits are always in need of a home. Together we might be able to achieve the control Global Assurance cannot achieve independently."

Harbinger stepped away from the window. "A valid possibility, given time. But first, there's much we can and should accomplish." He stepped over to the table, then poured himself a bit more coffee.

"I am amenable to your offer of a relationship between our two companies. We should concentrate our efforts in that direction first. Then look towards control of as much of the pharmaceutical and medical supply field as can

be reasonably attained. Those two costs alone make up forty-five percent of the problem."

Harbinger drained his cup then set it down on the table again. "We will need a five year plan to accomplish the task. By then, Harris Williams may very well have seen the light, or have moved on to other challenges."

Roget extended his hand. "Then it will be so. Let's plan on meeting in the near future to move our endeavor forward as quickly as possible."

They shook hands warmly.

"I suppose," said Roget Akhondan. "We should leave separately. It would be best not to be seen together quite yet."

Raymond Harbinger left with Akhondan's warmest regards for a safe flight home. Then Roget Akhondan sat down, and allowed the waiter to pour him a nice fifty-year-old Napoleon cognac. But as he swirled the liquor about its snifter, his mind returned to the issue of control. Caring First was the key to success. And in the back of his mind he vaguely wondered if perhaps it would not be Allah's will to hasten acquisition of that piece of the puzzle, to move its priority forward, rather than backward as Raymond Harbinger had suggested.

# Chapter Ten

Jim Richards turned left into the tree lined private drive of Caring First's corporate headquarters. He cruised slowly towards the parking area that served the main building.

#

A fragrant Spring had turned into a hot and humid Summer. Jim Richards had found himself killing time, tending to chores about the house, or writing and recording songs in his home studio. It was frustrating, waiting for the opportunity to penetrate Caring First, having no way of accelerating the process.

He'd thoroughly explored the woods. Had been seen by MacKenzie on so many occasions they'd eventually become more acquainted. From time to time they'd stop and chat about the puppy, which was rapidly growing into a handsome Lab, devoted to his master. Though he'd not forgotten his rescue from the storm swollen stream. He was always over joyed to find Jim Richards in the woods. Of course, that meant Richards had absolutely no chance of avoiding MacKenzie. It was fruitless to hide from the two of them, because the puppy would give him away, and so he'd quickly given up on any further attempt at avoidance.

One day he'd gone into the woods armed with his .45 autoloader, then waited for MacKenzie and the dog to show up. It had been nearly a month since he'd done any shooting, which was far too long. His profession required maximum shooting skill to survive those occasions when gunplay was necessary.

They chatted and MacKenzie gave him permission to set up tin cans for *plinking*. If blowing apart soft drink filled aluminum pop tops with .45 caliber slugs could actually be considered plinking.

Now and then, MacKenzie would show up with a .44 magnum *Hog leg*, and together they'd blast away trying to one-up each other, both being equally skilled marksman. Yet their conversations never strayed from the mundane, and neither really learned much about the other, though they both agreed the woods were not for random hunters to roam at will.

#

With time, Misti became friendly with various people on the fifth floor at Caring First. So in the course of her conversations with Jim Richards, she'd

unknowingly provide bits of raw intelligence, adding to the picture he was gradually developing of his target. She'd learned, for example, Bob Jacobson kept two locked fireproof file cabinets in his office, and the only person beside himself with a key was his personal secretary. Bob Jacobson was the only other person on the floor, perhaps in the entire company, other than Mr. Williams, who rated his own secretary. Yet when she'd looked at the corporate organization chart, he seemed to hold no greater level of authority than her own bosses, and according to Myrna was significantly less senior. This was another bone of contention for Allen Maxwell. Jim Richards mentally filed each bit of raw data away for future reference.

#

He swung the Bronco into the main parking lot in front of the five story executive building, then chose a spot in the shade of a tall magnolia tree.

#

The opportunity to work for Caring First came in a completely unexpected way. Michael Fitzgerald had recently built a home in the fashionable Green Hills section of Nashville. He held an open house on the Fourth of July. Everyone on the fifth floor had been invited, including Misti, as well as a few *old timers* from *below* who'd been with the company since its inception.

Jim Richards positioned himself in a corner of the dining room near a large potted ficus, adjacent to the food and drink buffet. Thus he was able to surreptitiously pick up interesting pieces of information from conversations, as people came and went. He had the uncanny knack of *disappearing* in plain sight. Consequently, no one paid any attention to him standing quietly in the corner. In fact at one point, Misti stared directly at him, yet gave no indication she saw him. Later when he stepped to her side, she said: *Oh there you are. Where have you been?*

This chameleonic skill provided Jim Richards with some rather interesting insights into issues and motivations at Caring First, as well as one particular problem that would prove to be his penetration opportunity. He'd learned from a conversation between Michael Fitzgerald and Bob Jacobson, who for a few moments had stood just around the corner from his listening post, that Sharon Wiltz, the Word Processing Manager, was becoming increasingly frustrated with the overwhelming workload created by the company's shift from private secretaries to total dependence on centralized word processing. So much so, she'd requested authorization to hire an assistant whose responsibility would be to manage mail, duplication, and supply responsibilities.



They'd also commented on her attire at the party, both opining how they'd love to get her away from the office for a weekend. These lustful comments made it easy for Jim Richards to identify Sharon amongst the many party guests.

Sharon Wiltz appeared to be one of those career single women who longed for domestic bliss, but was married to the corporation. An attractive woman in her mid-thirties, with silky, dark hair, cut short for convenience. Her deep, green eyes were surrounded by a perpetually youthful face that freckled when tan. She reminded Jim Richards of the high school cheerleader he'd had a crush on long ago.

She wore a ribbed, scalloped neck, T-shirt that revealed a discreet, but enticing cleavage, as she leaned forward to scoop a little guacamole onto a tortilla chip plucked from a basket on the buffet. But the *peace de resistance* from Richards' point of view, were the shrink to fit blue jeans she wore. He was convinced she'd pulled them on wet, then let them dry in place.

"Very enticing," Jim Richards said.

Sharon blushed, cupping her hand under the chip as she took a bite. One of those awkward moments, trying to eat and respond at the same time. "Um, I can't resist." She replied, between the sounds of molar induced crunching.

Jim Richards smiled disarmingly. "Nor can I." He scooped up some dip with a chip and handed it to Sharon. She accepted it with a quizzical look, obviously trying to place him.

"Thank you." She said, after she'd swallowed her first morsel. "I don't believe we've met. Are you with International?"

"No," he replied. "I'm not with Caring First at all. Though I venture to say you could use me."

Richards reached across the table and plucked a chilled bottle of Chardonnay from a silver ice bucket, then poured two glasses, handed one to Sharon. "My name's J. Robert Bushman. Jim to my friends. Yours?"

"Sharon Wiltz."

"Ah, then *you* were the topic of conversation earlier. Your two esteemed colleagues, just here by the buffet, our host and ..."

"Bob Jacobson." She filled the gap for Richards. "And now you *do* have my curiosity. What *were* they saying?"

Richards grinned roguishly. "Let's step outside to the deck. And I'll share a secret with you."

They moved outside. As they headed towards the corner of the expansive wood deck that overlooked Michael Fitzgerald's immaculately landscaped yard, Jim Richards caught a glimpse of Misti scowling at him briefly.

He took a sip of wine, then gazed out over the garden. "Beautiful isn't it?"

"Yes, " she replied. "But you've aroused my interest. What *did* you over hear? "

Richards looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, first, it was all very complimentary. But it seems you're having an organizational problem with mail and supplies."

Sharon took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Oh yes."

"And if I know Caring First, the company doesn't much appreciate inefficiency."

Sharon drew deeply on her wine, her cheeks beginning to flush slightly. "No they don't, and I've had a heck of a time finding a supervisor for that area. All of the current department employees are in college. Two of them are not quite mature enough for a supervisor's position, and the most senior is leaving next month to attend Duke University. No one else in the company wants the job, as it's obviously not a prestigious department."

Jim Richards nodded his head sagely, but made no comment.

"You see," Sharon went on, "we try to promote our supervisory people from within. Not only is it more economical than hiring a new person, but more importantly we know what we're getting, and they understand our way of doing business."

Jim Richards raised an eyebrow. "Which is...?"

"Total commitment. We expect every member of management to be completely devoted to the company, and do whatever it takes, make whatever sacrifices are required to assure our goals are met."

Richards smiled. "A wise approach, though I imagine more than one relationship has suffered as a result."

"Oh yes." And then she blushed completely. She looked side long at Richards. Who gazed at her with an enigmatic smile on his lips. "You are insightful aren't you."

Richards raised his eyebrows once. "I can solve one of your problems." He lifted his index finger. "Let me ask you a question. How are supplies and duplication priorities handled?"

Sharon smiled ironically, and shook her head. "They aren't handled at all. Our sales rep from the office supply company stops by every Tuesday, does an inventory of our supply room, rides the elevator up to my office, and let's me know what we're low on. Then picks up any special orders sent, or called in to me."

"And how are supplies distributed?"

"Pretty much everyone helps themselves."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "No requisitions, no gate keeper."

Sharon shook her head. "Not really. We've grown so fast there wasn't time to worry about an area that was, at first, minuscule part of the budget."

"How much are you spending out of that department?"

Sharon thought for a moment. "Combined with duplicating costs, copy paper, and so forth. We're running around forty thousand a month."

Richards was incredulous, "Forty thousand dollars?"

Sharon sort of ducked her head, then laughed nervously. "I know it's ridiculous. I tried to bring it to executive management's attention last year, but they were too busy to listen. They just thought I was trying to get out of running two departments."

"Then this past March, they got the results of a year end audit by our accounting department. The report targeted mail, duplication, and supply costs as an area for improvement. Finally, they started to listen. The frustrating thing is, now I can't find anyone willing to take the job."

Richards nodded his head in understanding. "Let me tell you something about myself. I'm a businessman. My product is entertainment, specifically music, under the marquee name: Jimmy Ocean. I'm the product's package if you will."

"For the past seven years I've managed a company that included five other musicians. A road manager. A clerical person. I've had to deal with every personality type you can imagine: Club owners. Venue managers. Booking agents. Manufacturer's reps hawking everything from earphone mikes to drum machines that sound like hyperventilating diesel engines. And I've had to manage the money, and logistics, that make the whole enterprise work."

He took a sip of wine then continued. "In other words: I've managed costs. Supervised and motivated people with much more difficult egos than your average college student. And negotiated, placated, and satisfied managerial types whose only concern is meeting the bottom line while avoiding as much personal hassle as possible. Sound anything like your executive prima donnas?"

Sharon laughed. "Oh yes."

Richards smiled broadly. "I need a job. I've quit the performance business to concentrate on song writing. There's a ton more money, and whole universe less headache having other people perform my tunes. But it'll take me at least a year get my foot in the door.

"Here's my offer: I'll come in, put your mail, duplication, and supply department on track. Develop and install accounting controls. Placate and educate the prima donnas on how the system works to their benefit. Then train a replacement to keep the whole thing going, after I've finally broken through the music sound barrier. Think of me as a sort of *management consultant*. I promise you, you won't be sorry."

Sharon Wiltz did not respond to Jim Richards' offer immediately, nor did she reject it out of hand. She gazed at him in silence for several seconds. There was something about his presence that told her he'd do exactly what he said, and do it quite well. But selling him to management would be difficult.

And then there was the intuitive feeling she had, that he was not quite what he seemed to be, though she didn't doubt his background would check out. She'd been with the company from its founding, and though her authority was focused only in one mundane area, an organizational chart wasn't required to know what really went on at International.

If he were a plant, friendly or otherwise, the boys upstairs would soon figure it out. In the meantime, he'd perform as promised, of that she had no doubt. It was intriguing, Sharon thought.

She took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "Come see me Monday morning. Understand, I'm not making any promises. I need to think about your offer... when not under the influence." She held her empty glass up.

Richards smiled as he took her glass. "Understood. What time shall I be there?"

"Nine o'clock."

Richards nodded once. "Let me get you a refill."

#

He locked the Bronco more out of habit than need, then strolled towards the front entrance of the executive building.

#

His interview with Sharon Wiltz had gone even better than he'd anticipated. He'd queried Misti on the layout of the mail and duplication department, her opinion of its employees, and how the duplication requests were handled. Then arrived at the interview with a plan roughed out, which he presented to Sharon.

It was simple but effective, as most good plans are: The supply room would be locked. All supplies ordered by requisition. Department accounts established and recorded in a ledger he'd organize and keep. Each month the requisition totals would be sent up to accounting for charge-back to individual departments. Ditto duplication costs, which would be tracked by installing a removable interrupter switch that counted copies. The machine wouldn't run without the switch, which he and his copier operator would control. And finally, a system of first in - first out by reservation, or walk-in, would be established. He'd be able to tell a user when they could expect a duplication project completed, then deliver it on time.

The company leased a Xerox state of the art high-speed color copy machine. Service time was expensive. Especially when some untrained *yo-yo* shut the thing down through incorrect programming, an apparent common occurrence according to Sharon. Service calls were running way over budget for no other reason than untrained use. Of the forty thousand spent each month, Jim Richards figured four thousand was in service calls with another four slipping home in purses and brief cases for *Johnny's* school supplies.

By the time she'd finished her interview, the only thing left for him to do was head down the hall to Human Resources for the formality of a written application.

#

Jim Richards walked lightly up the concrete steps spanning the front of the building, leading to a pair of double wide, twelve foot high glass doors set in the center of expansive glazing running the width of the lobby. He pulled open the right hand door, and stepped through. To his left was a waist high security desk. Manned at night, but seldom in the day.

Monty Regadet, Director Corporate Security leaned against the outside of the desk-watching employees enter the building. He was a fire plug of a man in his late thirties, with forearms reminiscent of the cartoon character *Popeye*. His tone of voice always condescending. And though he smiled at everyone, there was a mean spirited look in his eye.

"The guy gives me the creeps." Misti had said when describing Monty to Richards, her first week at Caring First.

Monty Regadet had a way of looking at women, especially the attractive ones, which telegraphed a primordial predatory intent. Men did not fare much better, only in their case the inference was of fatal competition. Of course, he was unctuously gracious to those who worked on the top floor.

For the most part, Jim Richards ignored him. But when he did think of him, a tingle of anger would run down his spine. And on occasion he'd find himself assessing the man's vulnerabilities, and how good it might feel to drive a sharp object through his beady left eye, deep into the gray matter of his brain.

#

"Whata ya got in the leather case, Jimmy, a gun?" Queried Monty sarcastically. Richards grinned and kept walking.

"Only mail boy I know, carries a leather portfolio to work." He heard Monty mumble, not entirely to himself.

The irony was, Jim Richards did have a gun inside the portfolio, a model 1911 .45 caliber autoloader. The first time Monty made the comment, Richards was sure he'd perused the case, though he'd kept it locked away in the supply room from day one. However, within a day or so, Jim Richards realized Monty's uncanny guess was nothing more than an extension of his obnoxious personality.

It seemed his way of remembering the names of Caring First employees was to come up with some sort of sarcastic salutation for each. The concept of some *fruitcake musician* from San Francisco having the balls to carry a weapon into corporate headquarters under his watch was, to Monty's way of thinking, a

complete impossibility. And therefore perfect fodder for his mnemonic sarcasm. Still the intuitive accuracy was unnerving.

The back of the lobby opened wide at its center to create a throughway with two elevators on either side. The far end of the throughway opened onto another lobby. To the left were several offices mostly unoccupied, one of which belonged to Monty Regadet. To the right were the mail and supply rooms. Jim Richards turned right. Unlocked the supply room door, flipped on the lights, then stepped into a narrow, windowless area filled with an inventory equivalent to a small retail office supply store.

One of his first chores upon being hired, was a complete count of inventory. He compared supplies in stock to the latest billings received from their supplier. It was soon apparent, billings were being padded by at least five percent. Which meant, without doing anything more than simply monitoring deliveries and matching bills, he'd immediately save the company a minimum of two thousand dollars per month.

Jim Richards walked to the back of the supply room. He put his brief case on top of the last row of metal shelves, then pulled a strand of hair from his head, ran it across his tongue, and placed it in such a way as to assure he'd know if the brief case were opened.

Next he placed a paper clip on the shelf parallel to the edge of the case, just touching the leather. If someone wished to peruse the case, and were tradecraft trained, they'd assume the paper clip was placed to indicate if the case were disturbed. They'd carefully note its location. Oh so carefully lift the case away, peruse it, and then very pleased with themselves, return it to its original position next to the paper clip. Not realizing the nearly invisible hair, strategically affixed, was the item of concern.

Next, as he'd done each morning since joining the company, he carefully examined each ceiling tile for any sign of disturbance that might indicate a camera had been installed. He then locked the door, and crossed the hall to the mailroom.

The mail and duplicating rooms, including his office, took up approximately fifteen hundred square feet. The sorting area was partitioned by vertical sorting bins. One bank of bins represented locations for each person working in the corporate offices, while the rest were dedicated to each of the hospitals managed by Caring First.

One wall of the sorting room was solid glass that looked out over the campus at the back of the building. From this window a direct line of sight led to the ridge that looked down upon the complex from the forest behind his house.

Two of his employees worked the sorting room, Fabian Joust and Mary Beth Osland. Fabian was the senior mail person, though a *short-timer*. In fact, his replacement had already been hired, and would start training the following week. Fabian was definitely a ladies man. Tan, fit, and handsome, the secretaries all loved him. He was a hard worker, who'd set his mind on psychiatry as a profession, and looked forward to continuing his schooling at Duke University in September.

Mary Beth was also a short-timer, as she was expecting her first child in about six months, and planned to take her maternity leave at the end of her second trimester. She was an easygoing gal, who shunned make up, and wore her medium brown hair long and straight. She worked a normal eight to five day, delivering the mid-morning mail, office supplies, and otherwise handling the myriad of routine duties carried out in any corporate mail facility.

The duplicating room sat to the right of the office where Jim Richards' desk was located. It was a windowless rectangular room filled almost entirely by the copy machine, plus a work surface for paste ups, padding glue, and paper cutting. There was also an industrial strength, medium size paper shredder located in the room.

The copier was run by Cheryl Landers, a southern belle who fit the conventional image of every homecoming queen ever chosen to grace the pages of a college newspaper. She worked only to support an insatiable desire to buy clothing. And drove a virgin white Porche her daddy had given her as a high school graduation present. She was devastatingly beautiful, with the sweetest Georgia accent ever spoken. But quickly displayed a stinging sharp wit, when speaking of someone whom she considered incapable of outwitting a turnip. Her boy friend was equally well off. A football star at Vanderbilt University. Betrothed to marry her the very moment he graduated, and the single most frequent topic of conversation.

Work wise, she displayed an exceptional artistic talent, boundless energy, and an uncanny ability to get the copier to do everything Xerox claimed it could do, and more. *"If, and only if, the gauche, under dressed, over blown idiots on the fifth floor left her alone to run the thing, without trying to sneak in at lunch and copy their snotty nosed little brat's latest book report!"*

The other employee who called the mailroom home, was Walt Washington. Walt was Raymond Harbinger, and Harris Williams' personal chauffeur. He was a black man who'd grown up in a time when society, the government, and military, considered African Americans less intelligent, less motivated, and less courageous than Caucasians, notwithstanding the precepts of the Constitution.



Walt was in his sixties, with a deep gravelly voice. His desk was located behind one of the sort bins in a corner of the mailroom. His responsibilities were to pick up the mail at the post office around four each morning, run special deliveries, and or, visitors to and from the airport, and drive Mr. Harbinger, or Mr. Williams, anywhere they requested, anytime of the day, or night.

He bore no anger or bitterness towards those who carried the baggage of Darwin's misinterpreted theory of evolution. He did his job well, giving the position an air of dignity that unconsciously commanded respect from nearly everyone at corporate headquarters, except, of course, the ever obnoxious, Monty Regadet.

Jim Richards' desk was located just inside the door that lead from the hallway to the mail and duplicating rooms. It was a standard issue, gray metal job with a rubberized work surface in place of a desk pad.

Everything destined for the scrap heap passed through the mailroom, for at least one last try at utility before its final destiny was reached, which according to Walt Washington accounted for *his* presence.

Jim Richards pulled back the ergonomically non-configured secretarial chair and eased down into it, careful to avoid leaning against its backrest. The backrest was limper than overcooked spaghetti, which guaranteed anyone attempting to use it, a trip straight to the floor unless there happened to be a fortuitously located wall within the angle of descent. Richards proved the validity of this factoid the first moment he used the bastard, which was just prior to his relocating the desk closer to the wall. He also swore he'd replace the POC, but had been so busy it kept slipping his mind.

Once settled at his desk, he quickly looked through supply requests mentally noting those he had in stock, and those he'd need to order. Just as he set the stack to one side, Fabian came through the door, pushing the mail cart used for inter-department deliveries.

"You ready for that tour?" Fabian asked.

Jim Richards' first priority had been to implement changes to the mail and duplication operation, then make certain all worked properly. To have toured the facility prematurely would've only attracted undue attention to himself as each and every administrative assistant gave him a piece of their mind for screwing up the mail and supply operation, which was as far as they were concerned running quite nicely before *he* arrived, thank you.

But now, after three weeks of adjustment and fine-tuning, reports of satisfaction were filtering down from above, and he could safely accompany

Fabian without creating so much as a ripple amongst the guardian's corporate tranquility.

# Chapter Eleven

October 1978

Jim Richards cleared his desk, slipping unfinished work into the top right hand drawer. He stood up, and stepped towards the door. Just then, Bob Jacobson walked in with a stack of computer print outs in his hands. He often came in at the last minute with something that needed mailing, or duplicating. Jim Richards was always willing to accommodate, though it usually required him to put in an hour or two overtime on top of the hour he routinely pulled. But that was what the job demanded, at least until the department's problems were fully solved.

He liked Jacobson's enthusiasm, though it was a double-edged sword, according some of his people. Bob Jacobson gave no consideration to anyone else's plans. The most important thing in his life was whatever he was working on at the moment. And he assumed everyone else felt same.

"Hello, Jim. Thought you'd be gone by now."

Jim Richards glanced at the clock on the wall, 19:00, and an hour past his usual closing time. "Needed to finish up some accounting chores. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing really," Jacobson said nonchalantly. "I just need to use the shredder."

This struck Jim Richards as odd. Why hadn't he had his secretary handle the chore, earlier in the day? Was the material so sensitive he didn't want even his secretary to see it? If so, Monty's department had a shredder that went straight to incineration.

"That pile will take at least an hour to put through our shredder, why don't you have Monty shove it through his?"

Jacobson scowled. "The guy's a pain in the butt, nosy as an old lady. I can't stand the asshole to be perfectly honest with you."

Jim Richards grinned, he could relate to that all right. "I hear you." He swung his head towards the door leading into the duplication room. "Right this way." He flipped on the light, and stepped over to the shredder. Then reached behind the machine and popped the circuit breaker, while at the same time making

a show of flipping on the power switch. A residual surge coursed through the machine momentarily, it turned over once then stopped.

Jim Richards flipped the switch on and off a couple of times. Then slapped the top with the palm of his hand. "Shit! Bastard's jammed again." He puffed out his cheeks, and blew a breath of air in feigned frustration. "I'm sorry Mr. Jacobson, piece of crap's jammed. Probably some *dip shit* used it while I was on lunch break, tried to put too many pages through at one time. Thing's a light weight chewer." He thought for a moment. "Look, I can fix it. Take 'bout a half hour, if you want to wait." He eyed the stack. "Gonna take you another hour to shred that stack without jamming it again."

Jacobson winced, he glanced at his watch. "No can do, I've got a dinner engagement in a half hour."

"Tell you what," Richards said. "Leave the stack right here." He patted the work surface next to the shredder. "I'll get this thing goin', and do the job myself before I go home. I need the overtime anyway."

Jim Richards immediately knelt down and popped open the door on the shredder, he pulled out a full bag of shreds. Then started making a show of pulling paper out of the teeth. There was always residual shredding in the secondary teeth because the yo-yos who came in to use the machine from time to time, shut it off as soon as the last piece disappeared into the top, not realizing there was a second set of rippers that needed to be cleared. This simple detail often caused the shredder to jam, and was the primary reason he tried to discourage its use by anyone other than his own employees.

He stood up and carried the bag over to the trash container, then opened a drawer and removed a tool pouch. As he was carrying the pouch back to the work surface, he looked over at Bob Jacobson who seemed to be trying to decide if he should take Richards up on his offer. Then he set the stack down, and looked Richards in the eye. "There's nothing of great importance here, still I'd rather no one else saw it."

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "It'll be done tonight."

Jacobson thanked him, then left. Immediately, Richards opened one of a pair of doors under the counter and slipped the stack of computer paper onto the upper shelf. He then walked into the mailroom.

Each week they received a computer print out from Sharon Wiltz' department with names, addresses, and personnel for all of the hospitals Caring First managed. All inter-company mail was sent twice per week in bulk, it was temporarily stored in cubbyholes that corresponded to the unit to which the mail

was directed. For the most part each piece of mail, whether in its own envelope or not, was fully addressed. But every now and then, something would come through with only the receiver's name on it. The print out was used to determine where the piece was destined.

Jim Richards carried the print out into the duplication room and set it down on the work surface, where Jacobson's material had been earlier. He then finished clearing the shredder, no sense having an actual jam when he hit the reset button. He glanced at the clock on the wall, 19:15. He heard the jangle of keys against the hip of someone walking down the hall towards the mailroom. Monty Regadet checked the doors each evening, beginning with the first floor. Usually, he came through the mailroom around six-thirty, tonight he was apparently running late.

Jim Richards spread the tool pouch out on the floor, then made a show of working on the shredder. He appeared to ignore Monty, but kept an eye on his shoes as he meandered about the duplication room, nosing into finished product, and glancing at the duplication orders for the next day. It wasn't long before he began flipping through the print out.

Jim Richards pulled his head out from under the machine, then stood up next to Monty. "Something I can help you with, Monty?"

Regadet let the sheaf of papers drop back onto the counter. He stepped back, putting a couple extra feet between himself and Jim Richards. "I thought I saw Bob Jacobson come in here with a print out, it seemed he left empty handed."

Jim Richards nodded at the stack on the work surface. "Right there."

Monty shook his head. "Don't give me that crap. That's your address list. You get one every week. You think I was born yesterday?"

Richards shrugged. "Jacobson borrowed it earlier today. Brought it back, that's all."

Monty eyed him suspiciously. "So what are you doin' workin' on the shredder after hours on a Friday?"

Jim Richards turned his palms upward. "Hey, give me a break will you? I need the overtime."

Regadet snorted, then sneered. "You havin' a little difficulty keepin' that hot number satisfied? Maybe she figured you'd be a star already. How's the song writing comin', Hank?"

Richards grinned. "It's coming. I write a little each week. Who knows maybe next week I'll get lucky."

Monty Regadet snorted again, then sauntered towards the door. "Yeah sure you will, hot shot." He stopped just inside the door. "Just remember, Jimmy, that shredder you got there is strictly for recycle. Scrap paper, envelopes, that sort of thing. Everything else comes to my department. Anyone brings you anything to chew, you bring it to me. Savvy?"

Jim Richards nodded.

"Especially that blow hard, Jacobson. Always trying to get around the rules. You play it smart kid, and we'll get along just fine."

"You got it, Monty. Last person in the world I want pissed off at me, is you."

Regadet nodded once. "Got that right."

As he listened to the jingle of keys fade off down the hall, Jim Richards shook his head, chuckled to himself, and thought: *What an asshole.*

He quickly finished clearing the second set of teeth, closed the access door, then rolled up the tool pouch and put it away. Monty would take at least an hour, probably more, to go through the entire building. Jim Richards had timed his rounds on more than one occasion, when he was reconnoitered the routines of the people at Caring First.

When he was sure Monty had enough time to finish checking the first floor, and taken the elevator to the next, he withdrew Jacobson's print out from under the counter. He'd have just enough time to scan each page as he fed it into the shredder, hopefully completing the job before Monty returned.

To assure he'd not be caught by surprise he pulled the anti-collision mirror off its holder, and set it on the counter at an angle to reflect the image of anyone coming through the door to his office. One of the first problems he'd noted when he'd arrived, was the frequency of near collisions with the mail cart by people coming into the mail room as it was being pushed out to make the office rounds. To solve this issue, he'd installed a convex mirror to warn the person pushing the cart of anyone approaching from the hall.

Monty Regadet was about as dumb as fox. He sauntered around with keys jiggling, acting as obnoxious as possible. But there were other times, when Richards had observed him to move with extreme stealth, as light and quiet as a

ballerina. The keys removed. He did not put it past Monty to come sneaking quietly back, in the hope of catching him about to shred a sensitive document, since he already suspected Jacobson of bringing one to the mailroom.

Jim Richards kept the address print out near at hand while he scanned Bob Jacobson's material. He was about halfway through when movement in the mirror caught his eye. He quickly slipped the paperwork under the counter. In a heartbeat the figure in the mirror appeared around the corner of the doorway.

"Oh boy, workin' you as hard as me. Guess they figure we haven't any home life anyway."

It was Don Dancing. Jesus thought Richards, this is all I need. And then it occurred to him that maybe it was *just* what he needed. Rumor had it, when Don Dancing first came to Caring First, he'd worked on the fifth floor with Bob Jacobson. Not long afterward he'd been assigned to complete a particularly important project, and had completely screwed it up, leaving Jacobson in the embarrassing position of not having the necessary information to report to the Board of Directors.

Jacobson was livid, he'd chewed him up one side and down the other. Long story short, Don Dancing had been consigned to an office on the first floor, just down the hall from Monty Regadet. Needless to say they hated each other, oil and water. No two people could have been farther apart philosophically, or physically.

Don Dancing stood just under six feet, he had a round face with an unremarkable countenance. There was no feature that seemed particularly unique, save the fact he wore very thick, coke bottle glasses with perfectly round lenses, apparently to compensate for an extreme case of myopia. The glasses caused his lipid blue eyes to appear twice their normal size. With thinning hair, cut very short, and parted much too far to one side, he had the appearance of a stamp collector whose only vision of the outside world was gleaned from the images engraved on the tiny squares of gummed paper, so carefully cataloged.

No one seemed to know exactly what Don Dancing did for Caring First, but whatever it was, it included popping into various departments at unexpected times. He frequently dropped in on Jim Richards to talk, seemingly about nothing in particular, but always there were one or two questions of substance. Such as: How much duplication was done by Human Resources? Or: Had usage of office supplies increased from the Media Relations department? He'd note the answer in pencil on the ever-present clipboard he carried where ever he went, then he'd wander off again.

Richards sighed. "Hey Don, what's keepin' you here tonight?"

"Usual stuff Bob Jacobson has me followin' up on. How much this cost? Why'd we spend so much on that?"

Richards grinned. "Seems Mr. Jacobson's got us both on the rack. He reached under the counter and pulled out Jacobson's material. "I promised to shred this for him tonight. Problem is, Monty came sniffing around two minutes after Mr. Jacobson left. If I turn this thing on before he leaves the building, he's gonna be back here wondering what I'm doing. He specifically told me not to shred anything brought to me by anyone, especially Mr. Jacobson."

Don Dancing's eyes suddenly seemed to lose their usual dullness, a slight smile came to his lips. "I see you neglected to mention to him that Bob had already brought you something to chew."

Richards grinned conspiratorially. "Even if Monty wasn't a complete asshole, I'd keep this to myself. Jacobson's a VP. Monty's a janitor, who thinks he's in charge of the place."

Dancing smiled broadly, his eyes still bright. "How much time you need?"

"Bout an hour."

Dancing nodded in the direction of the phone that sat on the counter. "Keep your eye on the buttons, if number one lights, shut the machine off."

Jim Richards watched Don Dancing in the mirror, as he made his way back down the hall. He flipped on the shredder and started to shred, while reading the remainder of the print out. It was an assessment of Saudi Arabia's ability to defend itself against an attack from Iran. The conclusion not optimistic. The information clearly classified beyond the level of a mail clerk, and though the security breach would infuriate Langley it really had no bearing on his mission.

It occurred to him the shredding assignment might be a red herring, to see if he could be trusted. On the one hand, if he were a spy, say working for the Russians, this data would find its way to the GRU, where he knew the Defense Intelligence Agency had an asset well established.

Receipt of the data would be forwarded back to DIA, and Jacobson would know exactly who passed it on. Or, if he reported it to Langley, Jacobson would be reamed for breaching security. After a couple of wrist slaps, he'd be back in business as usual, with Jim Richards pegged as another plant.

Obviously the only option was to remain silent. Then wait and see what other tid-bits might come his way.



As Jim Richards came to the last two pages of the report, he noted they appeared to be part of another assessment not intended to be attached. Jacobson must have grabbed the stack in a hurry, and inadvertently torn off the first two pages of an underlying report without realizing it. The report appeared to be a synopsis of computer network intercepts linked between military bases, contract laboratories, testing facilities, and the Pentagon. The last synopsis on the second page snapped Jim Richards to attention.

"To: B.J.

"From: Eyes Down"

"Milnet Intercept - Biological Warfare protocol transfer. Indicates SH R&D missing ten units Histoplasmosis accelerant. Records of access to lab show four SH Exc staff toured lab day of loss. Two names your level, one SI, one QC..." The synopsis apparently continued on the next page. Damn!

The number one button on the telephone began to blink. He memorized the series of numbers that preceded the synopsis, and the date of loss, then fed the last two pages into the shredder, waited for both to clear the second set of teeth, then shut down the machine.

Just in time. He heard the bell ding once, which signaled the elevator doors were about to open.

#

Building Fourteen was a long, narrow warehouse built out over the Alameda estuary. The first thirty feet of the building housed a military surplus store, run by Ross McIntyer's brother. Scott McIntyer was four years older than Ross, a former Army Ranger LRRP, Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. He'd been badly wounded serving a third tour in Vietnam.

The remaining seven-eighths of the building housed the offices and equipment of SEAL Team Three, Squads Alpha, Bravo, Charley. Officially, Team Three did not exist, was never commissioned.

Steve Sheffield pulled a 1969, charcoal gray, Corvette into one of the angled slots on the south side of the building. He climbed out, then entered the building through the storefront. On his way past the boonie hats and camo shirts, he was intercepted by Scott McIntyer.

"Hey, Steve. Hold up a second."

Sheffield stopped, and turned around as Scott came up to him. He gestured with his head towards the back of the store. Sheffield followed to a small office, just off the narrow hallway that led to the main portion of the warehouse. They stepped inside, Scott closed the door.

"I had a call from Jim Richards this morning, 'bout ten hundred. Needs you to give him a call at this number, around eighteen hundred our time." Scott handed Sheffield a small piece of paper, with a telephone number written on it. "Said he had some information about Histoplasmosis accelerant."

Sheffield's face showed surprise, and interest, as he accepted the folded piece of notepaper.

#

Jim Richards closed the door to his home studio, where he'd taken the call from Steve Sheffield, confident the lead would be pursued. He walked down the hall to the family room. The door was closed to keep heat from the fireplace concentrated in that one room. He glanced to his right, and looked out through the living room picture window. Frost was already forming on the lawn. Winter near at hand.

He stepped through the doorway into a wood paneled room, a fire crackled brightly. Misti sat in one of the leather club chairs, reading. One leg curled under her, a position Jim Richards failed to see any possible comfort in, popular though it seemed to be with many young women.

He'd once asked Misti how she could possibly find it comfortable? She'd said, when she was a little girl, about eight or nine, too old for a booster seat, too short to sit comfortably at adult size tables, she'd begun sitting on one leg to boost herself just enough. Eventually it became a habit.

Jim Richards sat down in the other club chair, then stared into the fire. He thought about Dave Wilcox. Even if Steve Sheffield could somehow tie the accelerant to his death, it would still not bring him back. This maudlin train of thought brought to mind friends lost over the years to the vagaries of field operations, and he wondered if there was any point to it all.

He sighed. Maybe the mission was just getting to him. It was not his usual style. No clear-cut goal, no quick in and out. He wondered why Elmo Jefferson had selected him in the first place? More importantly, why he'd accepted?"

"Penny for your thoughts?" Misti said.

Jim Richards turned his gaze away from the fire, and looked over at Misti. "Nothing in particular. How's the book?"

"Good. Its called *Passages*, one of the books on the recommended reading lists for my psychology class. It discusses the ages and stages we all pass through. I seem to be going through one right now."

"A passage?" Richards asked. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recalled Misti was attending classes after work, over at University of Tennessee extension. Working on the additional units she needed to qualify for a Tennessee teaching credential.

"You know, the old biological clock. Thoughts about my value as a worker bee. Thinking about whether or not I want to have children." She paused for a moment. "What about you, Jim.?"

Richards raised both eyebrows. "Career, or children?"

"Well both I guess, they're not mutually exclusive."

Jim Richards gazed back into the fire, he did not respond to Misti's question for several minutes. She went back to her book, having assumed he was unprepared to answer, or just didn't want to think about it. He was funny that way, not always very responsive, especially when it came to matters of long-term emotional commitment.

"I've had second thoughts about trying to make it in music." He said at last, trying to segue into a conversation that had some bearing on why they were here in the first place. "But on the other hand, nothing else really interests me. Even in our present circumstances, I feel I'm making progress. Though you'd never know it by the meager pay check I bring home." He sighed. "Last week, Julie Mills recorded *Turn to Me* for her spec album. Maybe it'll be the hit."

Misti nodded. "I hope so. We seem to have fallen into a rut here. So different from the bay area, beautiful and all that, but unsophisticated compared to San Francisco." She paused for a moment. "You only answered half my question."

Richards frowned. "Guess I was hoping to avoid it." He shrugged. "We've discussed it before. I've no interest in having children. My childhood was... let's just say, not conducive for the development of a desire to have kids."

Misti nodded her with understanding, though a little sadly, Richards thought.

"Yet you seem very comfortable around the neighborhood children, and they certainly all like you." She said.

Jim Richards smiled. "Oh well I enjoy their company, but that's a far cry from having the entire responsibility."

Misti made no comment. A long silence passed. "Next week's Thanksgiving. Dan and Diane have invited us over. Should be fun." She was silent for several more moments. "Have you thought about Christmas?"

Jim Richards shook his head. "No. You?"

"Thought I might make a quick trip back to Oregon, see my folks. Why don't you join us for the holidays?"

A picture of Misti's family came to mind. They were truly the all American family. A sister and brother, only a couple of years younger than herself. A lovely home on five acres of rolling hills, just south of Portland. He always enjoyed their Christmas' there. They were everything he never had as child. There was real love in the family, and it all seems to come together at Christmas. It would be fun. Unfortunately, the assignment did not allow for such indulgences, the holidays might provide opportunities for additional insight, especially when tongues were lubricated by copious quantities of liquor-laced eggnog.

He shook his head. "I'd love to Misti, but I think I'll just hang out here. All the studios and publishers will be having parties. The artists will be in town, off tour for the winter. A good time to *pitch* some tunes. Why don't you do the circuit with me."

Misti sighed, then shrugged her shoulders. "I need to see my family. Guess I'm just a little home sick."

Jim Richards nodded his head. "I understand."

#

December 1978

They sat side by side on a park bench, overlooking the reflecting pool at the base of the Washington Monument. The two men huddled in overcoats because the bright, clear December morning was exceedingly brisk.

To anyone passing by, they appeared to be two older gentlemen, retired or soon to be, who'd decided to meet and chat awhile. Perhaps two old friends,

visiting Washington, each from different parts of the country, who'd taken the morning to chat, while *the wives* shopped to their heart's content.

Elmo Jefferson looked out across the reflecting pool, then turned his gaze back towards Dr. Richard Holt. "I hate to say it, but I think this one's gone sour on us. Never would have expected it from Jim Richards."

Dr. Holt leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, he stared down at the concrete between his legs. "Maybe you're being unfair, Elmo. After all, we knew from the beginning this was not going to be a quick in and out. Have you spoken with him? What's his assessment of the mission. Is he making any progress at all?"

Jefferson stood up, he thrust his hands deep into his overcoat pockets and looked down at Holt. "No. I haven't spoken to him directly. The contact plan runs everything through Ty Harding, just to make certain there's no chance of a trace back to us. And Jim Richards has maintained contact right on schedule, every week for the past eight months. But hasn't come up with a single shred of substantive information."

Elmo shook his head vigorously with irritation. "I mean, Jesus, every single person we insert rolls over, or disappears into a black hole."

He paced back and forth. Dr. Holt draped his arms across the back of the bench, his face turned up towards the pale December sun. He seemed completely at ease.

Jefferson continued. "I'll tell you what I think. I think the Nashville lifestyle's seduced them both. They're dreamin' about settin' up a baby factory. Richards probably figures the best thing he can do is transfer his loyalty to Caring First, and be done with it. What the hell, if he plays his cards right he'll move into management, and make ten times what we pay him to risk his butt."

Dr. Holt chuckled. "If you're right, I'll have to throw out thirty years of character research because Jim Richards' isn't the type to set up any sort of permanent housekeeping. Misti on the other hand could go either way."

Elmo Jefferson scowled down at Holt. "Well there you have it. She wants bambinos, and he's just like every other guy in the world, ruled by his pecker."

"You're forgetting one thing, Elmo. If she wants children, he's not the type she's going to select to father them. Trust me on that one."

"Oh yeah," grumbled Jefferson, "as if any sort of thought process is goin on. We're talkin' raging hormones here."

Dr. Holt chuckled and shook his head. "Trust me. Jim Richards doesn't want children, no matter how strong the siren's call. Now I'm not saying he can't, or won't father them. He just won't raise 'em. And somewhere deep down inside, Misti knows that. If the instinct of motherhood is strong within her, the instinct for the type of man who's right for her future is even stronger. And, notwithstanding, all the positive genetic traits Jim Richards may bring to the table, or bed in this case, there's one he sorely lacks. And I assure you, Misti is only too well aware of that fact, even if consciously she's yet to come to the conclusion.

"Let the operation run a little longer. I have implicit confidence Jim Richards will come through for us, he always has in the past, though usually in a way we least expect."

Elmo looked side long at Richard Holt. "I hope you're right."

# Chapter Twelve

February 1979

Jim Richards closed and locked the supply room door. He carried the latest documents, Bob Jacobson had brought to him to shred, then set them down on a small rectangular table. The shredding assignments had become more frequent, running about one every other week. The material more current.

He removed a Model C Minox camera from a narrow pocket sewn into the lining of the pleated dress pants he wore to the office. Setting the document under a full spectrum fluorescent desk lamp, he proceeded to photograph each page.

Over the past ninety days, he'd learned Bob Jacobson ran an enormous number of missions into Iran, using Caring First's hospital in Saudi Arabia as the primary conduit. The missions garnered excellent raw intelligence. Today's material was very different from anything he'd seen thus far. The first report appeared to be the transcript of a conversation between Raymond Harbinger and Harris Williams. Harbinger had made contact with an Iranian businessman willing to provide Caring First with discounted pharmaceuticals manufactured in France. However, Harris Williams wasn't pleased with the offer, though Raymond Harbinger was doing his best to persuade him otherwise.

There was additional material as well, copies of hand written notes. As Jim Richards read the notes he came to realize they were written by Harbinger himself, a sort of diary of trips to Geneva.

Richards chuckled to himself. The diary was written in the first person, like a novel with Raymond Harbinger cast as the hero. The notes covered contact preliminaries and several clandestine meetings held with the same Iranian businessman mentioned in the transcribed material. Harbinger referred to *furtive meetings*, where he took precautions to avoid being followed. Transferring by public transportation all over Geneva, or crossing the lake by ferry to get to a restaurant he could have easily walked to directly from his hotel.

He used phrases like: "*And then all hell broke lose.*" In reference to a close call. He'd nearly been recognized by a friend's wife, who was over to do a little skiing in the Alps.

Finally, just as Jim Richards was about to photograph the last page, he found the name of the Iranian businessman with whom Raymond Harbinger had been meeting. The name was familiar to Richards, he needed to get the information to Langley, as soon as possible.

He turned out the lights, then unloaded the camera by feel. Later, he'd develop the negatives inside a small *dark room* at the back of his garage. Richards reloaded the Minox, then stepped out of the supply room.

Down the hall he noticed Don Dancing's office door was open. A rare occurrence, it was usually closed. No way of knowing if Dancing was in, or out. Richards had wanted to get a look at Dancing's office for quite sometime. He walked quietly along the deserted hallway. At two in the afternoon, everyone was either at their desks, or out of the building. It reminded him of the quiet that fell over a nursery school at about the same time in the afternoon, when all the children were napping.

He passed Monty Regadet's office, the door was closed. A good omen. On prior occasions, when an opportunity to get into Dancing's office seemed to have come up, Monty's door was always open. The lout seated just inside, his feet up on his desk. No way Richards could slip by without being seen by the nosy bastard.

He paused for a moment outside Dancing's door, then leaned around the corner to peer in. He'd expected to look directly at a desk, as was the case in all of the other offices on the first floor, but in this case there was a L shaped hallway, created by the back wall of the elevator shaft.

Jim Richards crept down the short passage, peered around the next corner. Don Dancing was seated at a gray metal desk, his back to the hallway. Richards quickly scanned the room then stepped back.

Of the impressions gleaned in that momentary scan, the most important were Dancing hunched over the Wall Street Journal reading stock quotes without the aid of the thick glasses he always wore. And several framed photos, two of which showed Jacobson and Dancing in flight uniforms standing next to a Navy jet.

Jim Richards eased back up the hall, then returned, making certain his footsteps fell heavily on the hard vinyl floor. "Hey, Don. You back here?" As he turned the corner into the office he found Dancing still seated, the newspaper spread out on his desk, his coke bottle glasses firmly in place.

"Hey, man," Richards said in greeting. "Looks like your office is almost as depressing as mine?"



Dancing smiled deprecatingly. "Guess Bob Jacobson figures this is all I deserve."

Jim Richards glanced up at the photos on the wall. "You a flyer?"

Don Dancing frowned for a moment, then looked up at the wall. He seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to consider the pictures, it appeared to Jim Richards he was trying to come up with an appropriate response. When he looked back, he had an odd smile on his face. The look seemed to say: *If you believe this one, I've got some beachfront property in Montana for you.*

"Jacobson used to fly for the Navy." Dancing said in a matter of fact tone of voice. "I was his Adjutant... you know, secretary. Anyway, he'd make me fly around with him now and then, just to humble me." He shook his head, then shrugged. "To be honest, just between you and me, scared the shit out of me every time. Guy's a maniac."

Jim Richards nodded, then moved closer making a show of looking at the photos. One clearly showed Dancing's carrier qualification wings pinned to his dress uniform. Richards smiled slowly. "Must have had those shots taken before you went up, eh?" He looked down at Dancing, seated at his desk. His blue eyes neutral behind the coke bottles. He was definitely cool under pressure. "You sure look happy, or were you just mugging for the camera?"

Dancing didn't reply.

Along one wall, left and forward of Dancing's desk was a hide-a-bed sofa. Jim Richards lowered himself onto it. He wondered how many nights Don Dancing *crashed* on it. He always seemed to be at work when Jim Richards arrived in the morning. And often his car was still in the lot in the evening.

Don Dancing took off his glasses, then set them down on top of the newspaper. He pinched his nose and rubbed his eyes. "So what can I do for you?" His voice held a hint of irritation, probably with himself for having left the goddamn door open..

Richards shrugged. "Nothing. Just passing time 'til I make the three o'clock mail run. Saw your door open. Thought I could hide out here for a moment or two. Gets noisy in the mail room when the copier's running, the stamp machine's cycling, and everyone wants something shredded yesterday."

Dancing raised his eyebrows. "Whose everyone?"

Richards grinned. "Just kidding. Jacobson's the only one." He thought for a moment. "Cept some mornings, I come in and find the sack's full. Someone else is using the *chewer* at night." Richards grinned. "Maybe we should mount a camera or something"

Dancing nodded his head. "Maybe someone already has."

Richards shook his head slowly his face serious. "No, that's the first thing I check each morning when I come in."

Dancing stared at him, an enigmatic smile on his lips. He made no comment. The room was silent, except for a soft whir that seemed to ooze through the wall whenever the elevator rose, or descended. Jim Richards got to his feet, then started for the door, as he passed Dancing's desk he glanced at the eyeglasses resting on the newspaper. They were the most interesting pair he'd ever seen. From the front they made the print look larger, from the back, the print looked normal.

"Anyway, gotta run," he said. "Let's get together for a beer one of these days."

"Sounds good, " Dancing replied unenthusiastically. "Hey, Jim."

"Yeah."

"Close the door behind you."

#

March 1979

The Boeing Seven-Two-Seven touched down lightly on the tarmac at Miami International. Jim Richards followed other passengers along the concourse and into the main terminal. He didn't look for the luggage carousel, he had everything he needed in a carry-on.

He turned into one of the many shops, picked up a magazine and pretended to browse through it. As he flipped the pages, he glanced up from time to time to take a look around, noting briefly each individual within the view of his scan.

He paid for the magazine, then stepped back out into the terminal, moving a little closer to the main entrance before again stepping into a shop. This time he used the mirrors behind the gift displays to scan the faces of people outside, he didn't recognize any from the prior scan. Nor did he see any of the usual warning

signs: Someone suddenly stopping to pick up an imaginary object from the floor, or ducking into another shop. And he had no intuitive feeling of being watched.

#

He'd arranged with Sharon Wiltz for a *long weekend* off, Thursday through Monday. To his surprise, Monty Regadet seemed to know almost immediately. It was unlikely Sharon Wiltz would have told him. So the information had to have come from Human Resources. Made sense though, let the head of Security know who was, or was not expected to be around. Avoid impersonators, and all that.

Monty couldn't let him leave without commenting to the effect he must be doing a good job *servicing* Sharon, to warrant a vacation after such a short time with the company. He also made a point of indicating he thought it tacky to leave Misti behind.

Apart from pissing Richards off, the comment triggered his internal security alarms. He made elaborate plans to avoid leaving any sort of paper trail, which would make it easy for someone to follow. Of course, that only added an additional day to an otherwise short trip.

The greater problem was one of a more personal nature. Ever since Misti's visit to Oregon at Christmas, she seemed distant. Their relationship had hit some sort of plateau. Perhaps it was the sameness of their life, coupled with the closed in feeling of living in a valley within a larger geological depression. Traveling each day to work, a distance of only five miles, through a beautiful pastoral setting, was like perusing the same photo album over and over again.

#

Outside the terminal the air was warm and humid, a major change from the frigid conditions he'd left behind. He made his way circuitously to the lot where a rental car awaited his pick-up.

As he headed south along Highway 1 towards Key Biscayne, his thoughts returned to Misti. It never ceased to amaze him, the poor timing he had in personal relationships. Always a dime late, and a dollar short. Ever since she'd raised the question of children, he'd given the concept a great deal of thought. And to his own surprise began to warm to the idea. Clearly, he'd need to give up the line of work he was in. Or maybe not, if he chose his assignments carefully. Problem was when he'd finally organized his thoughts enough to broach the subject, he'd found her answer most disconcerting.

*"You're joking," she'd said. "I love you dearly Jim. You're the most exciting man I've ever known. And I'm flattered you'd even consider the idea. But we both know it would never work"* Deep down, he knew she was right. Yet that knowledge did not lessen the sting of rebuke.

A few miles farther, Jim Richards turned left off the highway. Then drove east on Killian Drive until it intersected Old Cutler Road. No one followed. To his left the Atlantic Ocean sparkled in the late afternoon sun, visible between honky tonk shops and third-rate motels crowding the shoreline.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Blue Marlin Inn. Climbed out, stretched, then walked over to the office. A bell over the door dinged as he stepped into the small foyer. An attractive woman in her mid-thirties came out of a room behind the reception desk. She had long dark hair, dark brown eyes, and spoke with a pronounced Cuban accent.

"Good afternoon, Sir. If you are looking for a room, I'm sorry to say we have no vacancies."

Jim Richards smiled, acknowledging her statement. "Then I take it business is good?"

"Well it's always good this time of year, unless we have an unexpected storm."

"My name's Bushman, I have confirmed reservations."

She was wearing a white cotton blouse with a sweeping scalloped neckline that revealed no bra when she leaned forward to look up his reservation on a three by five card inside a file box behind the counter.

"Ah, yes. Here it is: J Bushman. Your room is paid in advance. Please sign the card." She turned around and reached for a key hanging on a hook board. Then turned back towards him. "Number 269."

He accepted the key, and started to turn away, then stopped himself, as if his next question was almost an after thought. "Oh by the way, a friend of mine was going to try to make it down as well: Steve Johnson?"

"Yes, Sir. He checked in about an hour ago. Room 225."

#

The sleek, black cigarette boat sped north. Its twin twelve cylinder engines driving the craft close to seventy knots, sending bow spray fifteen feet

into the air each time the hull tore through a crest of the low evening swell. They ran just outside the reflection of city lights and neon signs, past Key Biscayne, South Beach, and the City of Miami. Then slowed to the barest murmur, the engines cut to idle as they turned west under Highway 1 into Bal Harbour.

Ross McIntyer deftly steered the craft into a vacant slip below a three-story complex of condominiums located on the west side of the inlet. Jim Richards and Steve Sheffield jumped from the boat, landing softly on the deck of a floating, wooden dock. They quickly secured the boat, as McIntyer shut down the engines. The ocean racer had been borrowed from Delta squad, based out of South Florida.

The three men made their way along the dock in single file. Moving from one circle of shadow to the next, avoiding as much as possible patches of illumination cast by incandescent overhead lights. Each man walked silently on the balls of his feet, a natural way of walking, or so it seemed, after years of willful stealth. They gained a set of concrete steps, Sheffield defeated the gate's single cylinder lock with a spring metal *credit card*, then all three ascended through landscape foliage to the rear entrance of one of the buildings.

Using the card again, they slipped through the rear door into a small foyer. Ignoring the elevator, they took the interior stairs two at a time quickly climbing to the third floor. Then passed along a hallway to a door on the right marked 358-D. Sheffield rapped twice, then once again.

It was opened by a man who'd easily pass for a pro linebacker with the Miami Dolphins. He nodded once. His demeanor serious. No smile of welcome. No hale, hearty, well met slap on the shoulder, or shake of the hand. He stepped to the side allowing Sheffield, McIntyer and Richards to enter.

They stepped onto a small entry covered in slate tile. A four-foot wrought iron railing ran along the left hand edge to give the illusion one was not stepping directly into a living room. The condo was appointed in Danish modern, with paint by number renderings on the walls. Gold tone floor lamps, and wall mounted seashell lights controlled by a rheostat, set to warm and intimate.

In the corner, at the far end of the living room, a door led to a darkened hallway. Two bedrooms and a bath, Richards surmised. The far wall opposite the front door was mostly glass, with sliders leading to a large balcony. A view of Bal Harbour beyond. The room L'd around to the right into a dining area, off a small kitchen. Seated at a Formica table, in contoured Naugahide chairs, were Ty Harding and Elmo Jefferson.

"Well, well, the prodigal son returns." Jefferson quipped. "I'd begun to wonder if perhaps you'd crossed over to the other side."

Jim Richards grinned. "Sorry to have been so uncommunicative, Sir. But as I hope you'll see tonight, the information I've ferreted out was well worth the wait."

Richards moved towards the table, Harding met him half way. They shook hands warmly. Jim Richards stepped over to the table to shake hands with Elmo Jefferson, who remained seated.

Jefferson motioned to the chairs surrounding the table, indicating they should all sit down. "I see you brought your own security team." He motioned with his head to Steve and Ross.

Jim Richards nodded once as he pulled a chair back from the table. "Yes. It isn't wise to meet the Puppet Master alone. Or so I've been told."

Jefferson chuckled. "Is that what they're calling me now?"

Richards grinned. "Well that's one of the *kinder* things they're calling you." His smile broadened. "Actually, I wanted Steve to tell you his side of the tale. Ross is just along as a confidence builder."

Elmo looked over at Ross, and raised one eyebrow. "Whose confidence?"

"Mine." Richards said, and then he laughed.

The doorman was one of Jefferson's personal security staff, he'd quietly returned to the balcony where he'd undoubtedly been when they first pulled their boat into the slip. His partner was probably posted below. Had they not been expected, they wouldn't have reached the third floor unchallenged.

Ty Harding pulled several beers from the refrigerator, then set them on the table, along with a large bowl of blue tortilla chips, and salsa dip. Ross grabbed a hand full, and happily munched away as Jim Richards opened the conversation.

"Thank you for meeting me tonight, Elmo. And Ty, an even longer flight for you." He turned to Jefferson. "Caring First appears to be completely out of control. Individual executives are in violation of Federal law. Have compromised national security, and flaunted plain old decency. If these revelations reach the public eye, or perhaps *when* they reach the public eye, the collateral damage to covert intelligence will be absolutely irreparable. You may want to consider shutting the whole thing down as soon as possible."

"Serious allegations. A drastic option." Elmo said. "Do you have hard evidence to back up your theories?"

"As hard as it ever comes in this business," Richards replied.

Elmo raised both eyebrows. "Then we'd best hear it all." He reached over and switched on a portable cassette recorder that sat on the table in plain sight.

Jim Richards opened a soft leather portfolio, removed a file folder that contained a sheaf of hand written notes. "Let's begin with the executive meetings held on the first and third Mondays of each month. Mary Foldenstein, Harris Williams' secretary, is the only person allowed to take minutes of sensitive meetings. She takes them in an abbreviated plain English style of short hand, then, according to Misti, transcribes them onto a tape, which is secured in Mr. Harris' office.

"Mary uses a bound notebook for her shorthand. The notebook is kept locked in the lower right hand drawer of her desk until full, then transferred to a location unknown to Misti. I've broken into Mary's desk on seven separate occasions using a master key acquired from the office supply company that services Caring First."

Elmo shook his head with irritation. "We installed tamper resistant, one key locks on the original desks."

Richards shrugged. "Well most of the idiots and assholes up there, lost their keys some time ago. Others like Mary, got new desks, and never bothered to have one key locks installed. In any case, I was able to photograph seven successive board meeting minutes." Richards patted a stack of waxed paper, Minox negatives between each. "The filmed transcripts are right here. You'll find them very interesting, especially discussions that involve overlap between domestic and International's activities, which may, or may not be as you would expect.

"What does Mary do with her stenographer's notes? And what would be the downside risk to covert operations should they end up in the wrong hands?" Jim Richards asked rhetorically. "I suspect they are going home with her, perhaps as *insurance*."

Elmo nodded his head slowly.

"Next we have Raymond Harbinger. He should be watched *very* closely. Bob Jacobson's been having me shred reams of field operations reports. Amongst those documents was a diary, hand written by Harbinger, covering a series of trips made to Geneva, for meetings with an Iranian businessman.

"I'm not certain, but based upon the diary's description of the meetings, Harbinger's either playing a dangerous double agent's game, or he's setting the stage for a hostile take over of Caring First. I'll let the mind readers back at *the fort* make that call, after you, and they, have had a chance to thoroughly analyze this material."

"Why have you waited so long to bring this stuff forward?" Jefferson asked, a hint of irritation in his voice.

Jim Richards glanced across the table at Harding, then back to Jefferson. "It will make more sense as we progress. But suffice to say, once inside Caring First, I realized there was no way of knowing who was working for whom. Who might be an enemy. Who was simply loyal to their own Directorate. Bob Jacobson's a classic example, whom does he report to? Whose side is he really on?"

Richards took a pull at his beer. "I was shocked at the stuff he gave me to shred. Problem was, if I turned it over immediately, and word got back to him, my cover would be blown. Nothing would ever flow my way again."

Jim Richards turned both palms upwards. "I asked for this meeting as soon as something came through I was certain needed immediate attention, regardless of the consequences to my cover."

Jefferson's face did not soften. His voice remained flat. "We designed your mission with adequate cutout protocols. If you can't trust THI, whose founder is your closest friend, who can you trust?"

Richards shook his head. "Not a matter of trust. Follow me on this: At Langley, someone in one of the Sub-Directorates waits for an obscure piece of data to come through that could only have come from Caring First through me."

Jefferson frowned.

"Don't you see, Elmo. Caring First has become so over bloated, involves so many Directorates, nothing is secure. At first I thought Jacobson was dirty, but my intuition kept saying no. Now, I thoroughly believe Bob Jacobson chose me out of desperation. Better to throw away the product of his own effort, than run the risk field agents would be blown. He knew the shredder Monty runs is insecure, if only because Monty is so goddamn nosy he can't be trusted with national security issues.

"Bob Jacobson's in the middle of an ocean, treading water with sharks all around. Running his own operations. Doing his own analysis. He can't come



forward until he believes he has something so critical it absolutely must be passed on." Richards sighed. "We both fell into the same trap for different reasons."

Jefferson's face softened for a moment, it seemed he was having an epiphany. "Jesus..." He looked down the table at Ty Harding, then back to Richards, but said nothing of the thought that crossed his mind.

Jim Richards took another pull at his beer. "Let me go on. This business with Raymond Harbinger is scary." He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. "I talked with a friend, a stock broker. Seems Harbinger has taken a sizable position in Medico Internacional, a pharmaceutical consortium.

"I then asked if an identical value of Global Assurance had been sold when Harbinger picked up Medico?" Richards paused for a moment and looked around the table. "It took some digging, but as it turns out, the trade was run through one of Global's European agents, the stock bought by one of Medico's major stockholders, a man named Roget Gamsar Akhondan. The same man Harbinger's been meeting in Geneva."

Harding frowned. "Akhondan? Name's familiar."

Jefferson's eyes turned hard.

"It should be," Richards said. "He tried to buy a majority position in several U.S. banks, then got his butt run out of the country."

Elmo Jefferson nodded his head. "We sent a bulletin around last year." Jefferson again looked down the table. "It passed through your office, Ty." He turned back to Richards. "You have a good memory."

Jim Richards accepted the compliment in stride. He raised his right index finger. "There's more. Medico is really just a holding company. According to Harbinger's diary, their goal appears to be the take-over of medium sized pharmaceutical manufacturers world wide, with the intent of consolidating product offerings to eliminate redundancy.

"To Caring First's credit, based on Harbinger's diary, when he offered Harris Williams a chance to drop their costs another ten percent by buying pharmaceuticals exclusively from Medico, Williams turned him down."

Jefferson dropped his chin once. "Good for him. Can you imagine the enormous power Roget Akhondan would have if he were the sole provider of Caring First's meds?"

Richards took a pull at his beer, then popped a blue tortilla chip into his mouth, and munched it rapidly. Then continued: "Since the date of the turn down, rumors around the office have it that Harris Williams is being strongly encouraged by Raymond Harbinger to run for congress. Another rumor says a political war chest has been established offshore, to assure the opposition has no way of judging the extent of political lubrication available to Harris Williams. Naturally, his declaration of campaign finance will fail to reflect the true extent of his resources."

Jefferson's face showed surprise. "Interesting rumor, who's your source?"

Richards shrugged. "Pure scuttlebutt, heard round the water cooler, literally. However, the person who did the talking works for Caring First's finance department, and ultimately reports to John L. Blankenship, Chief Financial Officer."

Jefferson looked up towards the ceiling. "Rumor's very possibly accurate. Harris Williams' got a hell of an ego. Not entirely satisfied with the way the country's run. I can see him making a run for Senate. He's a no holds barred kind of guy. If he goes for it, he'll pull out all the stops. I wouldn't put it past him, or Blankenship, to have an off shore war chest already developed."

Jim Richards continued. "If the rumor's true, and Harris Williams were to resign to pursue a political career, then Raymond Harbinger would be in a position to call the shots on the next Chief Executive Officer."

Jefferson pursed his lips tightly. "And Roget Akhondan would gain extensive power over the meds prescribed for a huge plurality of our population." He shook his head at the enormity of the consequences.

"Exactly." Richards scooped up some guacamole with a chip, and popped it into his mouth.

Elmo placed both hands flat on the table and looked at the space between them as if it contained a box he feared to open. He raised his eyes and looked directly at Jim Richards. "My apologies for doubting your persistence, or intent."

"None required, Elmo. But let me continue." Jim Richards paused for a moment gathering his train of thought. "As I've already noted, Bob Jacobson's been running missions in and out of Iran, doing much of his own leg work. Last week, he had me make a bogus pilot's license for Saudia Air, so he could ride jump seat into Tehran, thus avoiding customs and other inconveniences.

"I was really uncomfortable with the request. I mean anyone who's ever seen me sign my name knows I'm no artist. It wasn't a bad boggy doc, still I'd hate to put my life on the line with it.

"Course, Jacobson was pretty cool, said no one ever checks the IDs closely anyway. He just wanted to make sure his *business* trip stayed on schedule, 'cause he hates to be away from his family any longer then necessary. But Jesus, we're talkin' desperation here." Richards patted the negatives again. "I realize I'm the last person in the world who should point this out, considering my own proclivity for impromptu field work, but Jacobson's pushing his luck big time. If he gets nailed by the Iranians on bogus papers, they'll squeeze him 'til he shits class info out every orifice of his body. And the first thing to go down the toilet will be Caring First. He's too far up the ladder to be pullin' cowboy stunts."

Jim Richards held up two fingers. "So now we've got two ways for Caring First to blow up. Bad enough we have to watch out for ol' Roget."

Elmo sighed audibly. "You're right. Bob's always had a wild hair up his butt. Though luck's been with him nine times out of ten. He and his wing man, Don Dancing. Met him yet?"

Richards chuckled. "You mean the *milk toast* with the coke bottles... who's carrier qualified."

Elmo frowned. "He's not pulling that old one again is he? Guy must be relivin' his youth." Elmo looked down the table at Steve Sheffield.

Sheffield grinned. "Dancing's a classic all right. Comes into our area of operations in country, back in '69, posing as a *correspondent* for Reuters. Fact is he's AWOL off the *Independence*, 'cause Bob Jacobson's got his butt in a ringer, having been shot down over triple canopy.

"Talks his way onto an Air America flight resupplying our AO. Steps off the C-130, glasses all steamed up, says he's a reporter and he's arranged for an interview with a VC Commandant holdin' a Naval aviator prisoner across the border in Cambo Land.

"Goddamn, got our interest up right quick." Sheffield looked off in the distance for a moment, recalling the mission. "Anyway, we insert on the QT with about as much planning as two teenagers in the back of a Chevy Nomad, at an all night Drive-in.

"Dancing walks right up to the gate of the compound, in character."

Ross starts chuckling. "Oh man, what a scene. Turns out Jacobson went down, not twenty-four hours before, 'bout ten klicks from the compound where he was temporarily being held. Local cadre chief hadn't had a chance to move him. Security was piss poor."

"Long story short," Steve went on, "we called in support on the spot, hit 'em with rockets around three sides of the perimeter while we went in the back door shootin' and lootin'. Pulled Dancing and Jacobson out before the commandante realized what was happening."

Ross gestured expansively with his hands as he spoke. "Only reason it worked was Dancing had the balls to go in cold, countin' on us SEALs to pull 'em both out once we realized what was at stake. Which, of course, was a no brainer 'cept for the part about maybe gettin' everyone's ass waxed."

"Hell of it was," Sheffield said. "If he'd told us the truth, we'd of had to report it up the line. Next thing you know, the Brass'd be plottin' and plannin', taken recon photos, saying please 'n thank you to the Cambodians, and by the time the Op was launched Jacobson would have been decked, checked, and bunked at the Hanoi Hilton"

Jim Richards looked at Sheffield, and shook his head, feeling new respect for Don Dancing. How often the unlikeliest were heroes.

"For all the good it did Dancing," Ross said. "Should have got the Navy Cross, 'stead it cost him his flying career. Though I heard Jacobson never forgot, soon as he made Brass grade, he pulled Dancing off shit detail, and promoted him up to Intelligence.

"I do believe those two are inseparable. If they weren't both so happily married with kids and all, I'd say they were fruit for each other." McIntyer chuckled. "One hell of a friendship though, one thing to risk your neck when oh shit and dear God's goin' down, quite another to walk into unfriendly territory, unarmed, in cold blood, bettin' on the come a half dozen *Froggers* will get the picture in time."

There was silence around the table for a moment, each man thought about friends lost to well planned missions where every contingency was supposed to have been considered. It was a good feeling to know, now and then chance fell the right way.

Jim Richards finished off his beer in one long pull, then continued with his report. "Finally, we have an anomaly. As you'll recall, we lost Dave Wilcox this past February. Came down with pneumonia from Histoplasmosis, as Steve and his squad were exfiltrating out of Iran."

Jefferson nodded his head sadly. "I recall the after action report, and the autopsy."

Richards looked across the table at Sheffield. "Steve why don't you pick up the story."

Steve took a deep breath, and thought for a moment. "Amongst some of the papers Jacobson has been having Richards shred, were a couple of pages inadvertently attached from another report."

Richards again patted the filmstrips.

Sheffield continued. "The partial report referred to Histoplasmosis accelerant missing from one of Caring First's labs. Jim fired the Intel off to me. Ross and I made our way down to Atlanta, under Centers for Disease Control covers, to see what we might be able to find: Four Caring First employees, including two fifth floor executives were down at the lab in June of 1977 to tour clean rooms and crisis management vaults. Immediately following their visit, ten units of Histoplasmosis accelerant disappeared.

"We talked with the head of the research unit, Dr. Kimberly Souza. The accelerant is freeze dried, stable as long as it doesn't come into contact with moisture - water, mucous, whatever. Three grains is lethal."

"How's it delivered?" Jefferson asked.

"Airborne, mix it with common dirt, or dried guano, sow it on the wind."

Jefferson frowned. "I don't see the connection to Wilcox' death."

Sheffield gestured to Richards, who reached into his brief case and withdrew a large manila envelope then handed it across to Steve.

Steve Sheffield took several eight by ten reconnaissance photographs from the envelope. He laid them out on the table so that Jefferson could view them. "These photos were taken by U-2s and satellites over the course of several weeks, June through December 1977. This is the location of the biological weapons facility." As he spoke he pointed to various photos. "Remember the facility is underground, the cliff is actually the rear wall of the plant, in effect, a wall thirty-five feet thick. Note the dark round hole in its face. That's the airshaft we used to penetrate the facility. As you know, our mission was to determine the extent of their capability, not destroy the site.

He tapped another photo with his index finger. "This photo, taken in June 1977, and this one January 1978, look identical." Sheffield put them side by side for Jefferson to view. "But look at the ones in between, no change until the middle of August, then we see a large galvanized pipe running up the side of the cliff.

"When I first reviewed these photos for the mission, I assumed the pipe was an attempt to get better air quality into the facility. But that assessment was wrong, I now believe the pipe was used as a means to bring guano down from near the top of the cliff, where thousands of birds nest year after year.

"These are the photos we worked off when planning our mission. Notice the pipe is gone. We assumed it was removed for fear it would give the facility away to reconnaissance."

Sheffield then placed three additional photos in front of Jefferson. "These were taken by SEAL Team Three, Delta squad, in northern Iran just across Iraq's border not far from Khvdy. What you're looking at is an entire Kurd village wiped out by a highly infectious, and virulent form of pneumonia."

"Caused by Histoplasmosis?" Jefferson asked.

Sheffield nodded. "Yes. The World Health Organization went in on a relief mission across the Turkish border. Samples were shipped off to the Centers for Disease Control. We checked their records, all tests were positive for Histoplasmosis caused by a strain of the bacteria they'd never seen before.

"We pressed this issue with the Director of CDC, Atlanta. After all the clearance mumbo jumbo was out of the way, he indicated the strain appeared to be very similar to a strain he believed Caring First Labs was working on under contract to the United States Army."

Harding asked: "What were you able to find out about the employees who visited the Caring First lab?"

"Of the four," Steve replied. "Two were in the company of Dr. Souza the entire time. The other two at one point excused themselves to make telephone calls. They were shown to vacant offices, to assure their privacy."

"Who were those executives?" Jefferson asked.

"Michael Fitzgerald and Allen Maxwell. And coincidentally, both are former Army Research doctors."

Harding said: "Let's look at time, opportunity, and motive."

Steve nodded. "According to Dr. Souza, both executives left the tour subsequent to viewing the clean rooms where the accelerant was stored. Michael Fitzgerald left first, followed almost immediately by Allen Maxwell. Both men used offices that opened onto the same hallway. The hallway T's into a corridor that leads to the wing where the accelerant was stored. Both executives rejoined the tour within a minute or so of each other."

"Did you check the phone records?" Jefferson asked.

"Yes," Sheffield replied. "Michael Fitzgerald called Caring First's corporate offices, the call lasted 18 minutes. Allen Maxwell also called the corporate offices, his call lasted 21 minutes."

"How long would it take to go from the offices where the calls were made to the lab that held the accelerant, grab the accelerant, and return?" Harding asked.

"Ross and I each took a shot at it. Nominal time required, six point five minutes assuming they knew the entry code."

"Key pad?" Richards asked.

Sheffield nodded. "Five digit code. We can assume whoever took the accelerant memorized the code while on tour. Dr. Souza said she took no special precautions to hide the input with her body, as they were all company executives."

Elmo thought for several seconds. "What about motive?"

"There we've drawn a blank," Sheffield said. "I suppose monetary gain would be most likely. However, a check of the financial holdings of all four executives showed no unusual deposits. No extraordinary purchases. To all outside appearances they're all clean."

"Nothing on video tape?" Harding asked.

Sheffield shook his head. "Nope. Whoever took the accelerant, simply used reduced interior lighting, and careful body positioning to avoid being taped. The cameras within the facility are poorly positioned. Something my report will recommend correcting."

Jefferson was silent for several minutes. Harding opened four beers. Jefferson declined the offer.

"Hell of a mess" Jefferson said at last. "Worst part, we can't simply shut Caring First down. Notwithstanding all you've uncovered, Jim. There's still a great

deal that's working right. What we have to do is figure out how to cure the malignancy without killing the patient.

"I want you stay in place. Send every scrap of information you get to THI as it comes in, daily if necessary."



# Chapter Thirteen

March 1979

The Fox n' Hound Restaurant, south of New Haven, Connecticut, was a grand old Tudor. A gingerbread house with high gables that curved downward at the eaves. Maple trees grew all about, their barren branches projecting a somber image in the dead of winter. The circular fountain that merrily trickled from Spring to Fall, was silent. The last few cups of water suspended in defiance of gravity, as if time itself had frozen, and would remain so until the warmth of Spring set it free.

Bob Jacobson swung the rented sedan into an empty parking space at the south side of the building. He opened the door. Then carefully placed his foot onto the frozen asphalt, testing its coefficient of slip before fully committing his entire weight, for the half second it took to get his other foot down, as he slid from the driver's seat.

He looked up into a clear, crisp sky, at diamond blue stars. And was reminded of high altitude flight, at night over the ocean. He missed those moments of pristine beauty, the thrill of flying at Mach 1.5, wearing the cockpit of a Navy fighter. He sighed. Those were simpler days. Though they hadn't seemed so at the time, now he longed for them once again, knowing full well it could never be.

He activated the power locks, without conscious thought, as he swung the door shut. Then thrust his hands deep into the pockets of the camel overcoat he wore, its collar turned up against the chill night. His breath came out in puffs. The leather soles of his wing tip shoes crunched salt crystals, tossed upon the asphalt by the restaurant's staff to prevent the formation of ice. Bob Jacobson took a deep breath, his nostrils pinched shut as the moisture within momentarily froze.

He walked around to the front of the building, pulled open the solid oak door. Then stepped into a dimly lit entryway that spanned the space between a cocktail lounge and the restaurant's small intimate dining rooms.

Immediately to his left, a hostess stood at a podium. Jacobson momentarily glanced to his right into the bar area, and quickly scanned the room. Recognizing no one, he turned, and stepped over to the podium.

She was dressed in attire commonly attributed to wenches of the Edwardian era. A long flowing burgundy, velvet dress underpinned by several

petticoats. Tight at the bodice, to push up and display the charms of a comely lass. Jacobson, entirely by coincidence, read the nametag pinned above her left breast. Bridgëtte. She had long, dark hair that fell in waves to her shoulders. Doe shaped hazel eyes, creased at the corners from laughter. A stunning smile.

Bob Jacobson raised his eyes, and returned her smile of greeting with his own lopsided grin, that even at the age of fifty-one still conveyed the virile charm of a United States Naval Aviator.

She said: "Good evening, Sir. Welcome to the Fox and Hound. Are you having dinner with us tonight, or only a cocktail? What is your pleasure?"

He found he could not resist a little flirtation. No harm in that. He held her eyes for a moment longer than necessary. "My pleasure would be to turn time around for myself, while leaving you as beautiful as you are; then I would walk through that door again, and truly answer your question."

She blushed, and tilted her head to one side.

He continued, "I'm meeting friends tonight, a private room has been reserved for three?"

She looked down at her list for a moment. "Oh yes, and you are?"

"Bob Jerrold."

She nodded her head in recognition, and placed a tic next to his name. "Your friends have already arrived. Please follow me."

She led him though a series of small dinning rooms, each with no more than seven tables. The rooms divided by partitions, the top half of which was composed of pass through frameworks of various sizes, constructed of English walnut. Pewter pitchers, wet with condensation from ice water within, and goblet glassware stood inside some of the frameworks. The walls were decorated with British Coats of Arms, dirks in leather sheaths, replicas of sixteenth century gauntlets used with suits of armor. The floor carpeted in deep red.

At the back of the last dining room, a narrow stair led to the second floor. Bridgëtte smiled, and motioned with her palm turned upward, that he should climb the stairs. "Enjoy your meal, " she said.

As he climbed the staircase, it occurred to him how difficult it must be for waitpersons to serve the upstairs room. But when he reached the top, he found a long narrow hallway lit by soft incandescence. Bridgëtte had not indicated which

way to turn at the top of the stairs, but he was fairly certain the private room would be to his left towards the front of the building.

He turned right exploring towards the back. He'd not been here before, and was naturally curious *and* cautious enough to want to know how the place was laid out. At the very end of the hallway, he found another set of stairs wider than the ones he'd climbed, uncarpeted. At the bottom a screen door led outside, probably to that portion of the parking lot behind the restaurant. Also at the bottom, a pass through to the right. Judging from the sounds and aromas filtering up the staircase, the kitchen was in that direction.

As he turned to go back along the hallway towards the front, he noticed a dumbwaiter. Perhaps table service was not as difficult as he'd surmised. He continued forward, passed two doors on the right: One said Men, the other Ladies. At the end of the hall, another door. He opened it, and stepped through.

The room was almost perfectly square. The ceiling, low, slopes at the ends. The walls devoid of decoration. A window faced the roadway. A round table was set in the center of the room. A white linen tablecloth, fine silver place settings. Seated at the table were the two men he'd come to meet.

Jacobson said: "I see you've left your security people out in the cold. Or are you so comfortable here you felt no need."

"Oh I seldom feel that comfortable." Elmo Jefferson replied. "They're out there in the shadows."

Jacobson stepped around the table to an empty chair, set so his back would not be to the window. However, of the three he'd be the one who'd cast a shadow on the translucent curtain that covered the glass. Not his favorite position, but perhaps only what he deserved for arriving late, as usual.

"Hello, Richard," Bob Jacobson nodded to Dr. Holt. Who enthusiastically grinned, and bobbed his head once. An odd duck, thought Jacobson, though brilliant.

Jacobson looked at Elmo. "The Ayatollah Khomeini has succeeded to power just as I suspected would occur. I hope the White House appreciated the cost of obtaining that information."

"They would have appreciated it a whole lot more, if Jim Richards had given it to us before last week." Sarcasm tinged Jefferson's voice.

Jacobson looked completely shocked. "What? But why?"

"Apparently, you neglected to mention what you wanted done with the material. Or, for that matter, the role you're playing at Caring First."

Jacobson shook his head and sighed. "I assumed you'd fully briefed him."

One corner of Jefferson's mouth turned downward. "An unfortunate oversight."

"But why would he hang onto it all this time? Why not pass it on as it came in." Jacobson asked.

Jefferson shrugged. "One of those things you can't explain completely. He thought you were trying to avoid sending anything to Monty Regadet to shred. That you'd only chosen him out of desperation, figuring he was nothing more than a mail handler. After all that's the part *he's* playing. Then of course he began to wonder if it was some sort of trap."

"Oh boy... I'm sorry, Elmo." Jacobson said.

Elmo sighed. "Well don't be. I take full responsibility. Somehow it was left out of the pre-mission briefing."

"But he's now aware of my position?" Jacobson asked.

"Actually no. I thought I'd leave that up to you at this point. If you feel it appropriate to bring him into your trust, fine. Either way he'll pass on everything he comes across immediately, those are the orders I've given him." Elmo took a sip of wine. "Our meeting tonight is to bring you up to speed, and decide where we go from here."

"Exactly." Dr. Holt agreed. "Iran's a write-off. As a matter of fact, our relationship was history the moment the Shaw's terminal condition leaked. Revolution inevitable. With fifty thousand Iranians imprisoned by the SAVAK for nothing more than dissatisfaction with the Shaw, where else could it have gone?" Dr. Holt turned his palms upward with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "Whether, or not, the Ayatollah will prove to be someone with whom we can work, remains to be seen."

"Bottom line? With or without a more timely warning, the outcome would have been the same. Of course, *ZBig*... Brezinski would probably have a different opinion. But then what else is new."

Jefferson asked. "How long can you keep your pipe line into Iran open?"

Jacobson thought for a moment. "Good question. I've already lost two assets."

"Your people are all we've got on the ground, Bob." Jefferson said. "But it's your call. If you feel you need to pull them out, then do so."

"Fair enough."

"One more thing. You need docs? Contact Steve Sheffield if you don't want to risk normal channels. For Christ's sake don't go having Jim Richards make up some half assed pilot's license for you. You nuts, or what?"

Jacobson looked duly contrite.

Jefferson shook his head and chuckled. Then mumbled something about Jacobson having made one too many night carrier landings. He looked across the table at Dr. Holt. "What say we order dinner?"

#

May 1979

Málaga, Spain is one of those places where almost everyone seems to be on holiday all of the time. A port city on the Spanish Costa del Sol, it hosts ten thousand Scandinavian tourists each year. Jules Louzer could hardly wait for summer to actually arrive.

Louzer was born and raised in Southern California. His father a second generation German, his mother of Italian-American stock. Jules spent his early days in Whittier, far enough from the beach to avoid being sucked into the rip tide of surfing life, close enough to develop a fine athletic body from outdoor sports natural to southern Californians. He was tall, with light brown hair, and pale blue-gray eyes, an easy smile. His complexion tanned well, but he did not spend an inordinate amount of time *working on his tan*. Women found his looks, and outgoing personality, attractive.

He'd studied acting, found he had a talent for impersonations and vocal impressions, especially regional accents. But the life of an actor bored him. In fact, being tied down to a single narrow vocational plan bored him. So after a number of academic false starts, including a stint in pre-med, he found himself recruited by an organization that valued his chameleon like personality and amoral attitude toward what most of civilized society considered good ethics.

He was seated at a tiny out door table, on the patio of the Café Bravo, under an umbrella advertising Compari. Enjoying an early evening Latté, and contemplating how good his luck had been of late.

After the Sosyka defection, which he had to admit he'd carried off with perfect aplomb, he'd been transferred to Málaga both as a reward, and a precaution. Although he was sure there was no need for concern, he certainly wasn't about to voice an objection.

His success had boosted his personal value to Caring First, from that of a mere field operative, to the more prestigious, and lucrative, position of recruiter. Interviewing applicants for openings available at the Hospitale de Málaga. While at the same time, keeping his eye out for that *certain* applicant for whom there was always a special opportunity.

In each country where Caring First operated a hospital, a strategic interest existed for the United States. Jules Louzer knew there were always a certain number of disgruntled citizens who wanted to get even with the existing government for one reason or another. It was this type of individual he seemed to have a natural affinity for identifying and recruiting.

When a country's leadership was hostile to U.S. policy, the idea was to cultivate malcontents who'd prove useful in promoting a future transfer of power. Or, as in the case of the two Soviet scientists, sell out their own country in exchange for an opportunity to immigrate to the land opportunity and excess.

On the other hand, if a country's government were pro-U.S., then it only made sense to identify and penetrate the opposing party for the purpose of assuring rightful leadership remained in power.

Jules smiled cynically to himself. This, of course, was called interfering with the internal affairs of a sovereign nation, though he preferred to think of it as assuring peace and tranquility within his area of operation.

Today he'd interviewed a young woman who'd stirred his imagination, as well as his loins. And while he intuitively sensed she had what it took for the special work Caring First did, he also sensed she had what it took to make him a very happy, if exhausted man. And tonight he intended to thoroughly test his intuition.

He took another sip of Latté, and looked out across the azure blue Mediterranean. It was a good life he led. Exotic locales, good food, fine accommodations, beautiful women. What more could he ask for?

"You seem lost in thought, I hope it is of me."

He turned toward her voice. "Of what else would I be thinking." He smiled in welcome, and arose from his chair. They looked at each other for a long moment. "Thank you for coming. I was afraid you might not." He stepped around behind to hold her chair.

She sat down, crossing one long gorgeous leg over the other. Her caribou leather mini skirt revealed silky tan skin, from mid-thigh to the tips of her delicate toes. She had fine blonde hair, worn long down her back. A soft cotton scalloped T-shirt with no bra to encumber her full breasts. Her face was not beautiful, but well put together. High cheekbones common to Scandinavians.

Her deep blue eyes held worldliness and a charge of electricity. Whether she was one of those women who enjoyed the hunt, and the first encounter as much as a man, or was simply enthralled by the excitement of the moment remained to be seen.

Her lips were full and sensuous, not the aquiline line of a true Scandinavian which made him decide she was most likely Finnish, passing herself off as a Swede. On her application she'd given her home address as Stockholm.

"I did have second thoughts, you know. It's not normal to go out with someone from whom you are job looking." She said.

Julles smiled at her lilting accent, and backward English, which he found intriguing. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Please, Karon, think nothing of it. Besides your application is out of my hands at this point, so there really is no conflict of interest." He leaned closer and spoke in a low conspiratorial voice. "But just between you and me, I gave you my very best approval rating." He squeezed her hand, then released it and sat back to gaze deeply into her eyes.

She did not blush, nor make any comment. In fact, it seemed she expected no less. He liked that, aggressive, confident women always turned him on. He'd only need to play out the evening properly to assure it ended with an invitation to her bed.

The waiter came to see if the lady would like something, but she declined. It seemed a walk along the harbor would be more to her liking, to work up an appetite. And then perhaps dinner.

As they walked he found himself running fantasies of how she would be in bed. He visualized her straddling his naked body, reaching crosswise to pull her T-shirt up over her head. Her ample breasts jogged upward by the hem of the shirt. Then leaning forward over him, her silky hair brushing his face as her

breasts came within reach of his lips. His tongue licking each taut hard nipple in turn, as she settled onto his engorged member.

He reluctantly pulled himself away from the reverie for he felt a bulge growing in his pants, and didn't want to embarrass himself. Or perhaps it would not be an embarrassment. Perhaps she might think it rather titillating to find she was already turning him on so.

He'd not been paying attention to what she'd been saying, but as they walked beside the harbor she'd become quite excited about a particular yacht berthed at one of the slips. Suddenly he was jogging to catch up to her, as she ran to the boat.

"Isn't this gorgeous." She said as she ran her fingers along the polished hull.

The boat was a sixty-foot cabin cruiser with aggressively swept lines. Perfect for cruising the Mediterranean from island to island, skirting the coasts. Probably less than perfect on the open ocean, but that was not the intent for which she was built.

"Would you two like to come aboard?" The voice came from a swarthy looking man, who though very well dressed, gave Jules Louzer the impression he'd made his fortune in a fashion most probably outside the law. Jules started to say no thank you, but Karon was too quick for him.

"Oh yes. May we? I have admired your craft on so many occasions." She turned toward Jules, her hand held out towards him. He took it, and let her lead him up the gangplank, his eyes focused on her tight round buttocks.

He smiled and nodded to the boat's owner as they came aboard, but inwardly was annoyed the evening had already diverted in a direction that did not bode well for his plans.

"The hull was built by Perini." The boat's apparent owner said, as he made a sweeping gesture with his right arm. "I had artisans complete her to my specifications." He smiled at Karon, then turned to Jules and held out his hand. "My name's Roberto Muertodina."

Jules took the proffered hand. "Jules Louzer." He was impressed by Roberto's grip strength. The skin of his hand tough, not soft as one would expect from a man who most likely spent his time poring over ledgers and documents. An anomaly that tickled the back of Louzer's mind, though his train of thought was immediately distracted by Karon's repartee.



"Oh this is so beautiful, " she said. Then looked around wide-eyed, like a little girl seeing a grown-ups dress store for the first time. "In my country boats are very important. The Vikings were the first to sail the world. Did you know that, Jules."

Roberto laughed, then said to Jules: "It makes me so happy to see someone so young and full of enthusiasm. *N'cest pas?* She is not yet like us," he winked conspiratorially. "Who've become too accustomed to the good life to be impressed by the mere skill of common laborers." He smiled broadly. Then turned to Karon. "Come let me show you both around my little boat."

Karon giggled, "Oh it doesn't seem so little to me."

Roberto gestured towards the companionway that led below to the main saloon. Karon enthusiastically descended the stairs. Roberto looked in Jules' direction, his smile never wavered, his arm held out palm upward toward the dimly lit interior.

Jules took a step forward, then glanced at Roberto, a warning bell went off in his mind but he couldn't tell if it were for his own safety, or the likelihood he'd already lost Karon to the lure of overwhelming wealth. But then his ego prevailed, nonsense, he thought to himself. I'm younger and decidedly more attractive. "Thank you," he said. And descended the gangway.

The main saloon was well appointed with nautically functional furnishings. Many times Jules had been aboard yachts that were nothing more than floating apartments, moored alongside wooden docks on a near permanent basis, occasionally taken out for a short run along the coast to keep the engines from freezing up, and the local Gendarmes from enforcing the no live-aboard rule that nearly everyone ignored.

At the far end of the of the cabin was a mahogany wet bar. Just in front of it an oval shaped, teak table for dinning. Along the bulkhead, both port and starboard, were benches with removable cushions, and button upholstered backs. Interspersed between were built-in cases and cabinets, with books, videos, and various forms of electronic entertainment. A small television was tuned to a local news station, the sound muted. At the center of the cabin were two love seats with a teak coffee table between.

"Oh this is wonderful." Karon said enthusiastically.

They walked the length of the saloon, which seemed to take up nearly a third of the hull's length, then stepped through a bulkhead hatch into a narrow passage. They moved in single file along the interior passage, doors branching off to the left and right, leading into individual sleeping quarters. Karon stopped

suddenly, and Jules bumped into her. She giggled, and put her right hand back as if to take his hand but instead slipped it between his legs, and gently grasped his entire package.

The gesture took him completely by surprise, his focus dropped to that single point in exquisite anticipation. At the same moment he felt a sharp prick, as if he'd been stung, or bitten by an insect high in the muscle of his buttocks. His brain seemed to have difficulty processing which of the two sensations was most predominant. Then Karon was turning around, and hugging him to her, for a moment he felt her arms completely about him, her breasts pressed against his chest. There was a sensation of strong hands, Roberto's hands, gripping his shoulders tightly. Then his legs gave out, and he lost consciousness.

#

Jules Louzer awoke, groggy, disoriented. A bright light seemed to be shining directly into his eyes. He squinted, tried to open one eye at a time, not having much success. He attempted to raise his right hand to cover his eyes. But found his arm restrained, the same with his left.

He was lying on his back on a flat hard surface. He attempted to roll over onto his side but could not. Fear suddenly took hold of him, as he began to remember what had happened. Then anger with himself for being so stupid.

"Turn the light off, damn it. Let me open my eyes." There was no response. Gradually, the light seemed to grow dim on the other side of his eyelids, though intuitively he knew this was not the case. It only appeared so, as his eyes began to adjust. The drug he'd been given must have dilated his pupils, a common reaction to relaxants. Realizing his predicament, adrenaline surged through his system countering the effect of the drug.

He got one eye open, then the next. Then found he could lift his head, and look about a little, covering perhaps two hundred and seventy degrees. He first looked along the length of his body. He was naked. Lying on a slab of stainless steel. His wrists, ankles, and torso restrained by leather straps.

Overhead, a single incandescent light bulb encased in wire mesh to protect it from accidental breakage. He rolled his head to the right, then all the way back to the left. The motion made him feel a little queasy, so he closed his eyes again.

He was in a room, strapped to a stainless steel table. The walls tiled, the floor concrete. To his right, just barely within his vision if he rolled his eyes upwards, a single steel door with a small square window. There were no other windows in the room, which he now presumed to be some sort of infirmary,

though not aboard the boat onto which he'd been lured. Even at dock, there would be some slight motion, yet the table and the room felt rock solid.

Beyond his feet, at the far end of the room, was a washbasin with a chromed gooseneck faucet. To the left of the basin a cabinet with glass doors. He could not determine what it contained, but surmised medical supplies, in keeping with his first assumption.

He wondered how long he'd been unconscious. Apparently long enough to have been removed from the boat. Perhaps he was still in Málaga? But no, what would have been the point of luring him to a boat?

The boat had got under way, taken him somewhere else. Some place where the sight of someone being carried off unconscious would have raised little curiosity, or concern.

He struggled to loosen the restraints that held his right wrist, chafing his skin in the process.

"Well I see you are at last awake." The voice came from behind his head in the area he could not see from his restrained position. "I've learned from past experience that a person is not completely awake until they begin to make an effort to free themselves. An impossibility of course, and if you continue to struggle you'll only give yourself a nasty abrasion."

Louzer ceased his efforts, for the moment. But turned his head straining to see into the blind spot, to put a face with the voice. He heard the rustling of cloth, apparently the man had been sitting down, and was now standing up. The sound quite distinct to his ears, it was then he realized it had been absolutely silent until that point in time. Which meant, where ever the room was located, it was very well insulated from sound. And if no sound entered, none would escape. Louzer suddenly felt the need to urinate.

"Usually," the voice continued. "One first remembers where they were, and then tries to decide where they are. A variety of thoughts will go through the mind, and sometimes sleep will again occur. But eventually one's predicament becomes self evident, and there is only one thought: That of escape."

Louzer focused on the voice, the tone and accent. It was a man's voice, a tenor. The tone well modulated, the speaker quite comfortable, familiar with the situation he was involved in, no hint of nervousness or hesitation. He spoke English well, though with the hint of an eastern Mediterranean accent underlying the word pronunciation. As the man spoke, he slowly came into view to the left of the table. He stepped over to the basin and washed his hands. Then turned to gaze at Louzer.

The man was not particularly tall. He had a balding head, a round unremarkable face, a small tight mouth. His eyes, behind a pair of wire rim glasses, were the color of weak coffee. He wore a white lab coat that appeared freshly laundered, the breast pocket devoid of pens, tongue depressors, or any of the usual doodads doctors always seemed to carry. However, he did have a stethoscope draped around his neck, perhaps to give the impression he was a physician.

"Where am I? Why have I been kidnapped?"

The man raised his index finger indicating a moment of patience was needed. "All in due time, young man. But first there are some preliminaries we must complete before we can answer each other's questions." He stepped over to the wall, and removed a rectangular device hanging just out of Louzer's line of vision. It had a long cord running in the direction of the table. He pressed a button on the device.

Jules Louzer felt a vibration transmitted through the table and heard a whirring sound. Very slowly the table began to tilt upward until he was nearly vertical. He felt himself slip towards the floor, but the heels of his feet were arrested by a lip at the end of the table.

"There now, that's more comfortable for you." The doctor came around more to his front, but still kept his distance slightly off to one side. Louzer found this odd considering he could not attack the man, restrained as he was, he began to wonder if perhaps the man had a bad experience in the past. Maybe there was a way to get free. Someone had found it and used it, or at least made a desperate attempt.

"You're probably feeling the need to urinate about now. But I'm afraid I cannot yet accommodate you with bathroom privileges. Of course, if you cooperate? Well anything within reason can be arranged."

"Or maybe I'll just piss all over the place, whenever I can't manage to hold it any longer." Louzer said in an angry tone of voice.

The man chuckled, a sort high-pitched gurgle. "Yes, yes that has happened before." He was again out of Louzer's line of sight, when he reappeared it was from behind and to his right. In one deft movement, he grasped Louzer's penis, squeezed open its orifice and inserted a catheter. Louzer groaned more from surprise of the unanticipated action, than from the mild pain and discomfort. "Son of a bitch, why the hell did you do that?"

The man stepped around directly in front of Louzer. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, appearing quite pleased with himself. "Oh it wasn't all that bad."

"Easy for you to say..."

"Now you can relieve yourself whenever you wish. And I, on the other hand, can concentrate on our conversation without having to worry about your *pissing* all over me. You see that is normal, I have been through it before."

Louzer struggled with his restraints for a moment or two. Then relaxed. He definitely wanted to pee. Trouble was the damn tube was burning the inside of his cock, he could only imagine what it was going to feel like when he pissed.

"And what's your plan if I have to take a shit?" Louzer asked, angrier still.

"Oh well, that's your problem. There's a drain in the floor, and we have a hose available to wash you down." He considered Louzer for a moment, the way a decorator might consider how he wanted to hang a sheet of wallpaper. "Usually, my patients are more than happy to relieve themselves, once they have the opportunity. But you seem reticent to do so. You've been out for eight hours. You have no urgency?"

Louzer's heart rate began to go up. What the hell was the maniac into?

"We need to chat, you and me. And I find that...well you know it's hard to concentrate when all you can think about is taking a piss." He shook his head. Then tapped his index finger to his temple, as if contemplating the seriousness of the problem. He then shrugged his shoulders, and stepped over to the wall and removed the control device.

He came back into Louzer's view, tilted his head to one side the way a haberdasher might when selecting, and offering, the perfect tie for a most distinguished customer. He turned the device towards Louzer, and showed him its face.

"You see this dial. " He pointed to a knob on front of the device. "It's graduated from A to Z. And controls a charge of electricity. A is very mild. Z will stop your heart."

Louzer braced himself as he saw the man twist the dial to H, then almost simultaneously press a button. A surge of electricity stiffened his body. Every muscle seemed to go into an agonizing cramp, the pain like the worst Charley

horse he'd ever experienced. In his mind he writhed and twisted trying to escape the onslaught, in fact he was frozen in place.

The electrical surge lasted no more than a second, though it felt like many minutes to his assaulted nerves and muscles. Then as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Louzer immediately relieved himself into the catheter tube.

"You see, " the man said, obviously pleased with his skill. "We have everything under control."

Louzer's breaths came in gasps, as the effect of the shock gradually subsided, though his muscles continued to twitch painfully, threatening to cramp on their own. Suddenly he felt a soothing warmth come over his body, a tingling sensation that was pleasing. His muscles instantly relaxed.

"There now. It's entirely up to you. Pleasure or pain?"

Louzer looked at the man with undisguised malice. "You bastard."

The man wagged his finger from side to side. "No, no.. not so quick to judge. Let me explain my side of the perspective. I have been directed to obtain certain information from you. If you choose to cooperate our conversation will be painless. In this room I have all the electronic equipment necessary to know if you are telling the truth."

He paced across the space in front of Louzer as he spoke. "If, on the other hand, you choose to lie, or not talk at all, then as you have already seen it will be quite painful."

Louzer thought about the alternatives for less than ten seconds, he'd been trained to face this moment, knew there was no point in resisting, that one way or another he would talk under torture. No one expected him to resist, actually. What they did expect was for him to give up the least amount of information possible, and to shade it in such a way that when the enemy acted to validate the information, their actions would immediately warn his Control the operation had been compromised.

Louzer sighed. "Who is it you work for?"

The man smiled. "I suppose that is of interest to you. And something you will learn eventually in any case, so I will tell you now. I am retained, as they say, by the Komitet Gossudarstvennoy Bezopanosti.

Louzer winced. "The KGB."

"Precisely, however, on this occasion I am working for a higher source."

Louzer frowned.

"Have you heard of Islamic Jihad?"

#

Jim Richards reconnected the coaxial cable to the satellite dish, then screwed the electric alignment motor cover back into place. It was the second time this month he'd had to replace the electric motor.

The Middle Tennessee Electrical Power Cooperative serviced their area, a private corporation that purchased electricity from a variety of wholesale sources, then sold it retail exclusively to its members. Really a sweetheart deal, its customers had no competitive alternative. If they were unhappy with the service, tough shit. Richards found this good ol' boy palm greasing quite interesting, though aggravating. To keep the whole thing apparently honest, the co-op's membership had representation on the MTEPC Board. Two seats out of twelve, now there's leverage for you.

Since the cooperative *competed* directly with the Tennessee Valley Authority, they were not provided with advance warnings of impending blackouts, or surges. After all, such warnings would not be in the best tradition of *true* competition. As a result, at least three times in the past two months, power had been interrupted. And twice, the power surge that accompanied reinstitution of service had burnt out the alignment motor. He shook his head at the stupidity of the arrangement. Then thought: What the hell the rates were no worse than TVA's, even if the service sucked big time.

When the dish worked properly, which was only about half the time, he was able to receive every major network, as well as, thirty cable channels, which included CNN's raw news feed. The same feed piped to the White House, the Pentagon, and Langley.

Unfortunately, the unsightly piece of crap, as Jim Richards fondly thought of the eight-foot high dish, was another bone of contention between he and Misti. She'd been royally pissed when she found out how much the damn thing cost. And for what? So they could watch sports twenty-four hours a day?

Jim Richards had tried lamely to justify its need as a way to prevent the kind of aggravation they'd endured during last year's Super Bowl, when a lightning strike blew out a local network tower, and knocked the game off their set. Taking all the fun out the party they were hosting. Then to add insult to injury, everyone traipsed on down the street to Everett's house to watch the game on *his*

satellite dish. Leaving he and Misti with enough beer and pretzels to open a tavern in their front room.

Jim Richards sighed as he gathered his tools together, and placed them into the toolbox that sat on the ground next to him. Their relationship was becoming more and more strained. He'd found himself giving serious thought to telling Misti about the work he was doing at Caring First, in the hope it might save their rapidly failing marriage. But two problems prevented him from bringing her into his confidence: One, she might not believe him, or if she did she might be even more angry that he'd lied to her for so many years about what he really did for a living.

And two, if things did not work out for them in the long run, she'd be under no legal obligation not to disclose anything she'd learned from him. Which, besides being quite dangerous personally, brought to fore his allegiance to the Official Secrets Act, which he'd signed at the beginning of his career.

Basically, he could tell Misti nothing without Langley's approval, and they would only approve disclosure long after all was said and done, or she'd been recruited, vetted, and had signed the *act* herself. Something he had absolutely no intention of ever allowing to happen. The coincidence of her taking a *temporary* job at Caring First was bad enough, and had nearly prompted him to withdraw from the operation before he'd even started. The last thing he wanted was her life at risk because of him.

He shut the lid on the toolbox, then snapped the two closures into place.

She'd planned to begin teaching this past fall, but the opportunity had not worked out as expected. And now what? Another hot and humid summer of discontent? He shook his head, maybe he should've just left her behind. Things certainly couldn't have been any worse between them then they were now.

He flipped one of the toolbox closures up and down a couple of times.

Truth was he wanted her with him. And wanted to believe the demographics that seemed to point to a teacher shortage in Tennessee. Kill two birds with one stone. Get her into the career she said she desired, and leave him free to complete the assignment without giving up her companionship. Beyond that, he hadn't thought. The assignment looked to be a long one, at least two years, maybe three. So far that much had turned out to be correct, even if Langley thought it should've cooked along a little faster. What did they expect? Stupid bastards already had the place riddled with InSec personnel who'd blown their cover through impatience.



Jim Richards rose to one knee, he'd been down on both as he worked on the motor. He looked over at Alexander lying on the grass nearby. The satellite dish was located in an open space at the end of the driveway, not far from Chet and Marsha's property line. Alexander would often come over, and sit near Richards when he was working outside. Sometimes taking a walk in the woods with him, when the kids were away at school, and Marsha wasn't home.

"So what do you think, big guy, piece of crap gonna work for more than a day this time?"

Alexander cocked his head to one side, his tongue hanging out as he panted off excess heat. May was already portending a hot summer. Jim Richards reached over to ruffle his fur, then proceeded to roll around on the ground wrestling with the huge German Shepherd, pretending he was a bear come out of the woods.

#

Misti stood at the kitchen window, she smiled as she watched Jim Richards playing with Alexander. It wasn't long before Davey and Little Chet were piling on as well. And she knew before it was over, all four of them would have inadvertently, on purpose, rolled into the creek, getting wet and covered with mud. Then she'd have to hose them all off, and later commiserate with Marsha about the mess they'd made, and how one would think a grown man would know better.

She felt a rush of love for Jim Richards, something she'd not felt for a long time. She didn't know how to assess her feelings for him. He was a strange man. So serious most of the time. Like a little boy at others. Buying the satellite dish, instead of the living room furniture they needed was a good example.

What bothered her, when she considered his attributes, was the fact he seemed to have no long term plans for their security. They came to Nashville so he could pursue a music career, but he'd made no progress, or any particular effort in that direction. True, he occasionally wrote a song, or played his guitar now and then. Even took a tape around to his publisher once a month. But mostly he was content to work in the mailroom at Caring First, put in enormous amounts of overtime, and putter around the house messing with electronic equipment with no thought of where they might be heading in their personal lives.

Misti sighed, perhaps she was being unfair. They should talk. But when she tried, he always veered away from the subject. It seemed the only thing he was interested in anymore were the affairs of Caring First. The only time he perked up his ears was when she mentioned something about her bosses. Or other executives on the floor where she worked.

Maybe he was thinking more long term than she realized, maybe he was thinking: *One day he'd work his way up from the mail room to the fifth floor.* She shook her head. Ridiculous, it didn't work that way, at least not at Caring First.

#

They sat at the old wooden picnic table they'd sanded and refinished the first summer in the house. A hurricane light burned low, bathing their meal in a soft warm glow. Beyond the porch, fireflies sparkled and danced in mid-air. Jim Richards finished the last of the meal on his plate, then took a sip of Rutherford Cabernet, imported, as he thought of it, from California.

"I came across an odd thing the other day." Misti said. "Do you remember our discussion about the Hendersons?"

Richards nodded, "Sure. The people who used to live here."

"Exactly. Well, last week, Allen Maxwell asked me to complete a personal project for him. As it turns out he owns several care homes for the elderly. He needed to prepare a statement of occupancy to verify income, in order to secure a loan on another facility he plans to buy in the near future.

Anyway, the statement lists names of patients in each home, Social Security numbers, date of birth, prior address, and so forth. It also shows the amount they pay, or receive from Medicare. Apparently, Mr. Maxwell has a mix of both private pay patients and Medicare patients, which really surprised me. I mean, usually a facility wants one or the other, and those facilities that predominantly accept Medicare are not very nice."

Jim Richards frowned. "How did you learn all this?"

"I just told you," Misti replied a hint of irritation in her voice. "Mr. Maxwell asked me to complete a personal project for him."

Richards shook his head. "No, I mean about the difference between Medicare and private care facilities."

"Oh that, well before you and I met, my grandmother had a mini-stroke. And my mother needed help in choosing a skilled nursing home for her. So I flew up to Oregon, and we looked at several. The ones that accepted Medicare patients just weren't as nice as the privately funded ones.

"Anyway, let me finish. I was really surprised at Mr. Maxwell. I mean you know how taciturn he always is, like he really doesn't care about anyone at all. Yet here he owns all these nursing facilities, and they're pretty evenly mixed.

"I complemented him, and told him what a kind thing he was doing, and you know it's funny, he actually smiled at me and said *thank you*. I think we may be reaching a whole new level in our relationship."

Richards smiled. "Well good. I know how difficult it's been for you, trying to please those two egomaniacs, maybe this is a good sign."

She nodded, and took a sip of wine.

"So what does all this have to do with Henderson?" Richards asked.

Misti set her glass down. "Oh, well he isn't dead like you thought."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"He lives at Green Acres, one of Mr. Maxwell's homes, right here in Nashville. He's a Medicare patient. I guess he ran out of money, having depleted so much of it caring for his wife. But Mr. Maxwell let him stay on. Really surprised me."

Jim Richards nodded his head. "Yeah, surprises the hell out of me as a matter of fact." Then thought to himself: There's no chance in the world the man was still alive. When he and Harding had made their real estate purchases, the title check positively confirmed the house was owned by Henderson's estate.

"Did you mention to Mr. Maxwell that we're living in Mr. Henderson's old house, and were under the impression he was deceased?" Richards asked.

"No, it really didn't seem pertinent. I mean obviously if I'm making copies, I'm going to glance at the material, but I certainly wouldn't want to make a point of bringing that to Mr. Maxwell's attention. That would be impolite."

"No doubt." Richards agreed. "But tell me, why didn't he have the Administrative Directors at each of his care homes handle the copying duties, aren't the records kept at each home?"

Misti shook her head. "Actually, no. All payrolls are run through Caring First's accounting department, as well as, income records and so forth." She thought for a moment. "I guess the company is sort of partners with the executives. I mean they all have some sort of medical related business going on the side. You know, for tax purposes."

"Then Accounting could have made the copies?"

Misti shrugged. "I suppose they could, sure. But you know Mr. Maxwell, when he wants something done it has to be right away. He's certainly not going to wait for Jenny Thompson to get around to it."

Richards grinned. "Be a long wait. So you just went there, and what? Had her pull the records?"

Misti got a mischievous look on her face. Her voice took on a conspiratorial tone that took Jim Richards by surprise. "Actually, Mr. Maxwell told me exactly where to find the records. And where to find the key to the filing cabinet that held the records. I guess he goes there and looks them up himself, whenever he needs a piece of information about one of his facilities. And you know how Jenny is, queen of her domain. Two-hour lunches. I just slipped in at lunchtime, got the records, copied them, and returned them exactly as I found them with no one anymore the wiser. Mr. Maxwell really liked the way I handled it all."

A chill ran down Richards's spine. Maxwell had just given Misti a black bag job to run. His mouth went dry. He took a swallow of wine.

"What would you have done, if you'd been caught in the act?"

Misti laughed. "By Jenny? Not a chance, she never takes less than an hour and half for lunch. The whole job was done in one."

"But let's just say someone saw you, called you on the access protocol?"

Misti scowled and looked at Richards, as if he were a silly schoolboy. Then said in a sarcastic tone. "Well, I suppose I'd just have to tell them to talk to Mr. Maxwell." She got up from the table to clear the dishes. "You know sometimes I think, you think, I'm just a stupid twit." She disappeared through the sliders, and into the family room on her way to the kitchen.

Richards sighed, and said softly to himself. "No Misti, I don't think you're stupid. Just too trusting, and too willing to please."

Jim Richards stood up. He opened the screen door, and stepped out onto the wood deck. The brook gurgled happily. Frogs and crickets chirped in the night. A thousand stars sparkled overhead. He felt an overwhelming weight settle onto his shoulders. Lord, what had she done. And what in the world was Allen Maxwell up to?

Richards stepped down to the ground, and strolled slowly along the creek.

Was it possible he intended to recruit her, and this was a way to test the water? Or was there something in the records he didn't want Jenny Thompson to see? Perhaps it was the loan Maxwell did not want Jenny, and ultimately her boss, John Blankenship, to discover.

Richards mulled this over. Each of the fifth floor executives had successful side businesses, the usual tax dodge. Deferred income, expenses, and all that. Caring First provided seed capital at very reasonable rates for such undertakings. So capital could not be the real issue.

Recruitment? He wants information he's not authorized to receive, but feels certain Misti could gain access? So he tests the waters with something he is authorized to receive. If she does well, then on to the real stuff.

What if she were caught? Probable deniability: *What did she want with the information? What do we really know about her, a temp employee. My goodness. Never did a good job for me anyway.*

Richards turned around and began pacing in the opposite direction.

Very slick. Divert the focus of an investigation towards someone else. It was then the intuitive flash struck, diversion of focus was exactly how the Histoplasmosis accelerant was stolen.

# Chapter Fourteen

Julles Louzer stank of stale sweat, mixed with the stench of feces. He remained strapped to the stainless steel table, tilted upward at a fifty degrees. His head lolled to one side at an awkward angle, unconscious.

Awareness gradually returned, accompanied by deep pain. His muscles ached, as if he'd been severely beaten. Joints racked with an arthritic-like inflammation. Slowly he began to recall the ordeal that had driven him into blackness. The gaze of his downcast eyes fell upon the alligator clips biting into the tender, wrinkled flesh of his scrotum, the attachment points exquisitely painful, though nothing compared to the surge of electricity applied soon after attachment.

He'd screamed, until he was sure he'd sustained aural nerve damage, and torn his vocal cords in the process. Then sobbed like a baby, crying for momma in a ragged horse voice, begging his tormentors to believe he'd told them the truth. Could tell them no more. Still the torture continued, until he'd come to the inevitable conclusion: A slow, excruciating death was what they were most interested in having him provide, not valid information. And then he'd passed out.

He tried to move his head, to look at something other than his burned and bruised genitals but found his neck frozen as if some sort of restraint had been clamped to his head. And perhaps that was the case, he had no way of knowing. A shutter ran through him. Didn't matter. Nothing mattered now. Only that death would come soon, to put an end to his agony. He wished for nothing more.

An epiphany had hit him hours before. Or was it years? They had no intention of setting him free. When this realization dawned upon him, his heart dropped to his stomach. He'd whimpered, begged for his life. Implored them to believe all he'd already told them, to understand he knew no more. But the questions were repeated, the surges of pain applied until he'd begun to say anything that came to mind to satisfy their queries.

Now he wished he'd told them nothing. At least he would have died knowing they'd wasted their time running up an expensive electric bill. That thought made him chuckle, but only for a moment. Then he began sobbing again. A minute later he was cursing them in his mind. The lousy stinking bastards. His emotions bouncing randomly from one extreme to another.

A shuttering moan escaped his lips. His entire body went into another muscle spasm, he could not breathe, nor even cry out. But they'd not turned on the

electricity, weren't even in the room. His muscles were seizing of their own volition. Guttural grunts and moans escaped his lips. Or were they only in his mind? He could not tell for certain. Multiple knots of charley horses seized and racked his body, he writhed spasmodically in agony then passed into oblivion again.

#

He knew not how long he'd been unconscious. Or how long he'd been in the room for that matter. A day? A week? Forever? No natural light filtered into the windowless room. Only the single overhead bulb, caged in wire. No way of judging the passage of time.

His body now relaxed. His cramps had subsided, at least for the moment. Time must have passed. The alligator clips had been removed. Someone had come into the room while he was unconscious.

He found he could lift his head, though any movement at all made him nauseous. He turned his head slowly from side to side, but found there was no one within his line of sight. His mind seemed to close upon itself, a sort of tunnel vision. As if there were only darkness beyond its periphery. He couldn't remember anything before *the room*.

Extraordinary fear seized him, followed by unmitigated despair. What if they returned and asked more questions? He wouldn't be able to answer because he'd forgotten everything that had come before. Forgotten the answers he'd originally given. What if his new answers contradicted what he'd already told them? Tears came to his eyes and he sobbed like child who'd suddenly found they were all alone in the world.

And then determination welled up inside. He was here for questioning. Okay, okay. The questions, what were the questions? And then it all came flooding back. The blackness in his mind opened a little. He took a deep, painful breath, let it out slowly.

At first his interrogation had gone well, or so he'd thought. After the initial sample of pain, he'd resolved to cooperate. Obviously they already knew he was involved with Intelligence. Now there was an oxymoron, *Intelligence*. If he'd possessed any, he'd never have signed on in the first place. *It's a simple recruiting job, nothing more. Very low risk.* But low risk and *no* risk was not the same thing. He'd been trained to get through interrogations, *just in case. The Soviets were quite civilized outside their own country.* He'd been told. *Worse case, they hold you awhile and trade you back for one of their own. It's just a game really. But not to worry, Caring First has never had one of its recruiters taken.*

Of course, the Sosyka affair wasn't exactly recruiting either. He'd volunteered hadn't he? To boost his career image. But he was not dealing with the Soviets now, and all the good training he'd been given. All the assurances that torture was no longer a method of interrogation, were out the window. Apparently the Islamic Jihad had not gotten the message.

*Doctor*, that was how he thought of his tormentor, had asked all the expected questions, and he'd answered honestly, well as honestly as his training allowed. Unfortunately, his trainers had failed to mention an interrogator might want to verify the data provided, by application of excruciating pain. Doctor hadn't been so bad, but when the two other inquisitors came, then the ante of pain had been upped. He'd told them every goddamned thing he knew about Caring First from the moment International had hired him, till the moment he'd blacked out in the arms of their seductress. Why wouldn't they stop hurting him?

He heard the door behind him open. It did not close immediately, which meant more than one person had entered. He tried to swallow but found his throat so dry the act was impossible. In his peripheral vision he recognized Doctor's white coat. Well, white was a relative term. It had been white at first, now stained rusty yellow. Blood and urine. The catheter had ejected with the first sustained surge of electricity.

Julles Louzer watched warily as his tormentor lifted a chrome plated, trigger nozzle from a hook on the wall, then stepped into his line of sight, forward and off to one side. Doctor squeezed the nozzle's trigger, a stream of warm water struck the stainless steel surface between his legs, the odor of feces wafted up momentarily, before the residue and stench was washed down the drain in the floor.

Over spray misted his body, each individual droplet a needle to his skin. Louzer gasped. But it was nothing compared to the stream of water, as Doctor hosed him down. Immediately, Louzer began to cramp, but somehow managed to control himself. The warmth of the water helped, at least it would cleanse him, and that was something.

As suddenly as the wash began, it ended. Now, two additional inquisitors stepped before him. They were clearly Iranian - dark almost black hair, olive skin, black eyes. They spoke Farsi to each other. Louzer did not understand a word. Then switched to English, laced with a heavy middle eastern accent. The smaller of the two spoke first.

"You are stupid American. Why do you not tell us what we want. End this pain for yourself."



The resolve Louzer felt earlier passed, only despair remained. He vacillated between answering and remaining silent, but an answer would at least delay the pain a moment longer. "Because I don't know the answers. I cannot tell you what I don't know. I've told you everything I can."

"Liar," said the second inquisitor. He slapped Louzer hard across his face with the flat of his open hand. "You received training at Caring First headquarters. You return from time to time. This you have told us. Why do you insist on holding back the one thing we need to know?"

Louzer shook his head slowly. "I don't know more about the security of their headquarters. I've already told you everything I know. No guards during the day. Only limited security at night. But in the building where I was trained, there are no numbers on the doors. There are cameras everywhere. And the doors can only be opened by an electronic pass, like a credit card. I swear, that's all I know."

The second inquisitor threw up his hands. "Infidel shit." He said in Farsi.

Doctor shook his head, speaking also in the native tongue of Iran. "I don't think so. If he knew more he would give that too. He is weak. He does not know more. He is a stupid American boy, who saw too many movies about James Bond. He thought he'd live a life of parties and girls, which is why we caught him so easily. However, even party boys sometimes know something worthwhile. The information he volunteered about the two Soviet scientists, is valuable information we can sell for weapons at least."

The second inquisitor curled his lips downward. "Then his usefulness is over. I will kill him, and be done with it." He partially withdrew a razor sharp, double-edged knife from a leather sheath worn on his belt. "I will cut off his genitals and shove them down his throat. Then we will leave him for the Americans to find in Málaga."

Louzer saw the knife being withdrawn and felt his anal sphincter let go, but there was nothing left inside to crap out. His heart rate went up, he began to cramp again. "No." Was all he said.

The smaller man put his hand on the larger's forearm. "He is still useful to us. And we do not want the Americans to be alerted by finding his body defiled. Let them think he has run off with the blonde whore he was supposed to recruit. They would expect that from this piece of shit anyway."

He turned to Doctor. "Clean him up, and rehabilitate him as best you can. I want him for our next graduating class. He will make decent training material."

Stefane Luzhkov, AKA Steve Worthington loved the United States. In fact, he could not think of another country in the entire world where he'd rather be stationed. It was so easy to move around, to go from one point to another with only a driver's license and a Social Security card. No check points to cross. No need to show transit papers. As long as he obeyed the speed limit and renewed his license by mail each year, he'd most likely never have occasion to show his identification to any government official.

Luzhkov chuckled to himself. Operating inside the USA was almost too easy. He'd trained for the assignment for five years in a town not far from Leningrad built to resemble a small city in mid-western United States. It was called Harmony. English was spoken exclusively. Western style foods eaten. Western customs observed. A perfect training environment, populated by American defectors and prisoners of war.

Occasionally a tourist would be taken, usually a female, from various locales through out the world, to assure an appropriate mix was presented. For the most part, Harmony's residents adjusted well to their captivity. Some formed familial relationships, even had children. But, of course, they were taken away at a very young age to be properly parented and indoctrinated.

A few of the residents, especially the POWs, never really adjusted at all, tried to escape from time to time. Or simply disrupt the town's *harmony*. They were eventually culled from the group, if time and indoctrination failed to resolve the problem.

However, the unfortunate fact was, the pace of culture within the United States changed so rapidly it was very difficult to keep the town populated with residents familiar with current events. Consequently, although the experiment proved successful, and Luzhkov was living proof of that fact, inevitably it would lose its value as Harmony's residents aged.

Luzhkov surmised that Harmony was the KGBs most closely guarded secret, one it would never divulge, or allow to be uncovered should the USSR ever fail. A very remote possibility in Luzhkov's opinion, when one considered the great operational disadvantages western intelligence organizations faced with regard to penetrating the USSR.

Another disadvantage, especially for the United States, was the fact Soviet resident agents were quite happy to spend the rest of their lives on assignment. Whereas, Americans could not wait for their assignment to end so they could return to the *States*.

Also, it was much easier for a Russian to blend into the melting pot of America, than for an American to fade into the background of the Soviet Union. Luzhkov's own appearance was a perfect example. So completely average, he practically defined the meaning of the word.

He was thirty-five, and stood just over five foot eleven, with sandy brown, thinning hair. Hazel eyes with light brown eyelashes and eyebrows. He had a pleasant non-descript face that was difficult to recall only moments after being introduced. He did not appear to be particularly athletic, and he wasn't, though he had a slim build that fit perfectly into clothing directly off a retail rack. His personality was equally *nebbish*.. But rather than wishing for greater personal presence, Luzhkov actually cultivated his image as it fit his needs exactly.

Stefane Luzhkov pushed back the leather executive desk chair in which he was seated, stood up, then carried a stack of file folders over to one of six filing cabinets in his office. Each drawer contained the personal profiles of *patients* under his care. Five years ago, under the direction of his control officer, he'd come to the Raleigh-Durham area to buy a skilled nursing home. He'd looked for, then targeted an established home with an unblemished reputation.

Luck had been more in his favor than he'd anticipated. Not only did he find exactly the home he was looking for, he also found it run by an owner about to retire. Who planned to turn the business over to her daughter, who spent virtually every moment of her quiet life tending to the needs of those within her care. Unfortunately, the business was not doing well and was in dire risk of being taken over by one of the large hospital management organizations that were rapidly buying up skilled nursing homes.

Stefane Luzhkov wooed and won Mary Beth's hand. Of course, Mary Beth was no beauty queen, but then he wasn't much of a catch either in the looks department. Not to worry, an infusion of covert KGB funding assured his ownership, position, and endearment to Mary Beth's heart.

The turn over of patients through death by natural causes provided a constant stream of American citizen's names, personal background data, birth certificates, and social security numbers. All of which were invaluable to KGB operations.

And the relative close proximity of the facility to Duke University, one of the top medical research universities in the United States, assured a healthy turnover of young people to serve as caregiver assistants. Who willingly talked in casual conversation, about sensitive research projects on which they were working at Duke.

A perfect assignment. No great personal risk. Comfortable easy living. And an opportunity to remain in the United States for many, many years to come.

Luzhkov made certain all the file drawers were locked. He took his coat off the hanger, turned out the office lights, then closed and locked his door as he stepped into the hallway that led to the main reception area.

Randomly spaced along the hallway were the usual three or four elderly residents rocking back and forth in their wheel chairs, trying to move another inch or two farther down the hall. Mary Beth tried her best to keep the residents occupied and attended to, but it was an impossible job. Most of the residents were admitted because they were in an advanced stage of dementia. Many, though confined to wheel chairs by need or restraint, would wander away from organized activities by propelling themselves along the hallway with their feet, the way a child might propel a toy ride-em car.

Of course, their rate of movement was excruciatingly slow, and their ability to steer the chair virtually non-existent. They'd progress a few dozen feet down the hall until one of the omni-directional front wheels bumped into a wall. And there they'd sit, bumping the chair back and forth in a vain attempt to continue their aimless trek. Some sat quietly, a look of concentrated determination on their aged and wrinkled faces, sure they'd eventually succeed in re-directing the recalcitrant chair's movement. Others would carry on a stream of conversation, or obscenities, directed at no one in particular while struggling to realign the front wheels. If left alone they'd eventually wear themselves out and fall asleep, which was how many nursing homes dealt with the problem.

That wasn't the case at Happy Times Convalescent Home. The residents were seldom left alone for long. One of the student aids, at least, would come by and roll them to their room or take them back to the organized event from which they were absent without leave.

"Hello, Lola." Luzhkov said as he passed by the ninety-two year old woman. He stopped for a moment and gently stroked the back of her head. She looked up at him with sad brown eyes, the eyes of a child in great distress but said nothing. "I'll have Martha come to help you."

"Thank you, Doctor. " She said in a small quiet voice.

She was a dear lady whom all the caregivers loved, and she always called him Doctor. Though in fact he wasn't, but there was no point in trying to explain that to Lola. As soon as he took his hand away from the back of her head, and moved off down the hall, she returned to her futile attempts at redirecting the chair.

Luzhkov felt a vague pain in his heart. After five years in the business, he'd still not become immune to the sadness of what he saw each day. Perhaps it was because he knew one day it might very well be his fate to finish out what remained of his life in a vain attempt to move a chromed steel and gray chair another foot farther down a endless vinyl tiled hallway.

As he turned the corner into the main living room, which also served as a reception area, he saw Mary Beth seated behind the counter. He looked at his watch, six PM, Pilar was due on, but he guessed something had come up at the last minute. He stopped at the counter, and smiled at his wife. "I hope it won't be another late one for you?"

She shook her head. "No, no just filling in. Pilar had car trouble again, but she'll be here as soon as her husband gets home from work and can drive her. Are you headed for home now?"

Luzhkov shook his head. "Unfortunately, I must meet a friend from New York. He's in town for a seminar at the University. I should be home by ten. I'll call if it looks like I'll be any later."

She smiled and nodded.

"Oh by the way, Lola escaped from Arts and Crafts again. Gino too, and Mrs. Johnston." Luzhkov added.

Mary Beth smiled broadly. "Never a dull moment. I'll ask Sheila to get on it right away. Have a good meeting. I'll see you at home later."

He went out through the front doors of the single story facility, turned left, and crossed the asphalt driveway to his car, a Volkswagen Cabriolet. Not the Beemer he really wanted, but a whole lot better than the sled he'd be driving, were he back in the USSR. It was strange to think one day it would all end. One day he'd be reassigned, would walk out of the facility, as if everything were perfectly normal, and never return.

How long would it take Mary Beth to get over the fact he'd simply walked away? He sighed, no sense dwelling on the inevitable. He and Mary Beth were compatible enough to make the assignment tolerable, even pleasant, but it would not be all that difficult to walk away when the time came to leave.

As he opened his car door, a vague sense of foreboding crossed his mind. Perhaps that was what the meeting tonight was all about? Certainly it was not one of their normal meetings, which were always scheduled well in advance. Clearly an emergency of some sort had come up, though he had no idea of what it might be.

Normally, he'd have received notice weeks in advance, with detailed instructions of the location. He'd have plenty of time to prepare the names and data he'd gathered. But this time he'd been given less than forty-eight hours, and was told to bring nothing but himself.

As he drove northwest along Interstate 40 towards Durham, he pondered the risks and rationale of such an impromptu rendezvous. Was he to be reassigned? Doubtful. His operation was running smoothly, the product he produced pertinent and fresh. And he'd done nothing to jeopardize his cover. His real concern was the meeting itself would jeopardize his position.

The greatest obstacle faced by Soviet field operatives within the United States, was secure communication. Notwithstanding the apparent openness of America, government personnel closely monitored all electronic and postal communication by Soviet personnel who operated under diplomatic cover. Soviet control officers were always under official diplomatic cover, while field operatives were, by nature of their operations, under no official cover. NOC in field parlance.

To avoid discovery, meetings were planned weeks in advance through carefully placed intermediaries, who chose their own time and method of communication. Any sudden unplanned communiqué, or impromptu trip by a heavily surveiled Soviet resident agent, greatly increased the chances of a field operative being discovered.

Although the message to which Luzhkov was responding had come through an intermediary, its suddenness meant his control officer would have to find a way to slip from under the surveillance net, and do so without arousing the suspicions of his watchers.

Unlike their past meetings, which had taken place under the guise of a routine trip home to Philadelphia, where another resident agent stood in as his widowed mother. This meeting was to take place in Durham, with contact made at a motel just outside of town. It was the most dangerous kind of encounter, because there was no way of being absolutely certain they were not being watched.

When contacts were conducted in known locales, especially quiet residential neighborhoods, the intermediaries had long before identified area residents and developed background dossiers. Any unknown person was readily recognized, the meeting called off. Under tonight's contact protocol, that level of confidence could not be assured.

Luzhkov sighed, nothing to do but trust in the expertise of his control officer, Viktor Koroleva, a KGB Colonel attached to the United Nations Soviet delegation, who'd been operating in the states for over fifteen years without so much as a minor blemish to his record. One thing for certain, thought Stefane Luzhkov, the reason for the meeting must be very important to warrant such risk.

The interstate exit he sought came up on his right, he slowed from sixty-five miles an hour to fifty, then eased off the highway. The exit lane ran nearly straight, bending slightly to the right and ending at a stop sign. He waited for cross traffic to clear, then turned left, and drove south along Highway 15. After traveling approximately five miles, he took the first turn to the right while watching his rear view mirror to see if anyone followed, there was no one on his tail. He made a U-turn, returned to Highway 15, and continued in his original direction. Five miles farther he saw a neon sign advertising the University Lake Motel. Luzhkov pulled off the highway, onto an intersecting road, then immediately jogged left into the Motel's driveway.

It was a single story affair running north and south with a short dogleg at one end. The office was a small square cottage set forward of the main building, with a fenced kidney shaped swimming pool in-between. Judging from the number of cars parked outside the rooms, there were plenty of vacancies. Luzhkov pulled his VW into a guest space shadowed by a tall willow tree just beyond the office. He climbed out, locked his car door, then strolled over to the office entrance. The hinges on the door groaned and creaked loudly as he opened it to step into the foyer. He closed the door, sure its noise would rouse anyone crapped out in the back.

The motel office was typical: A small reception area, windowed on all sides. A glassed in door. The arrangement provided good visibility into and out of the interior. A belly button high counter spanned the width of the room. Behind the counter, a small workspace, multi-line telephone console, a cubbyhole fixture nailed to the back wall for keys and messages. A doorway leads to a night residence, where a television played loudly.

Luzhkov stepped up to the counter, and briskly slapped the brass service bell twice, then called out a couple of "Hellos." Apparently to no avail. He slapped the bell a couple more times even more briskly.

The volume on the television went down, accompanied by what sounded like the creak of a lounge chair rising to its upright position, followed by a tired voice that said: "All right, all right I'm coming. Hold your horses." A moment later, a round little man, with a sparsely topped head of stiff white hair, shuffled through the residence doorway. He was dressed in an old cardigan sweater, the color of pond scum, a red and green plaid shirt and khaki chinos. His feet stuffed into heel-less house slippers.

"Yes sir. Sorry to keep you waiting. I must have dozed off watching the evening news. What can I do for you? Room for the night?"

Luzhkov smiled broadly and thought to himself how perfectly comical the old innkeeper seemed, and perfectly chosen. He'd not remember a thing about his guests, even the next day, if anyone bothered to ask.

"Quite all right. I'm looking for a good nights sleep myself." Luzhkov replied. "Been on the road all day, with another long one tomorrow. Just hoping you have a vacancy."

The old duffer bobbed his head up and down. "Oh yes, oh yes. Too many vacancies really. Used to be everyone stopped here, place was full every night. Not anymore. Not since Holiday Inn went up just down the road. 'Coarse it costs a pretty penny more too."

Luzhkov smiled and nodded. "Then perhaps I could have a room with no one else on either side. How much for the night?"

"Fifty dollars. I'll put you at the end, doubtful we'll fill up tonight."

Luzhkov took out his wallet. "Cash all right?"

"Cash is fine, credit card's okay too. Don't take checks, too many rubber ones anymore."

Luzhkov filled out the registration card using a bogus name, and transposing his vehicle license plate numbers, then accepted the key from the night manager.

He left the office, then walked around the pool to unlock the door to room 106. He entered, grabbed the ice bucket and left the room. On the way to the ice machine he confirmed the room to his left was vacant, as well as the next three rooms.

At the far end of the building, he'd noted a telephone booth. Luzhkov then followed standard operating procedures, relying on the anonymity of a public phone over the convenience of the one in his room. He dialed the number he was given, then spoke only three words when the call was answered. He hung up, and returned to his room.



Viktor Koroleva was fifty-one years old. He had black, salt and pepper hair, trimmed short in the style of American business executives. He was a stocky man with coarse facial features, a broad nose, and dark almost black eyes. His mouth taciturn, the corners turned perpetually downward. His hands were large and fleshy, which only served to accentuate his short, almost stubby fingers. Yet they were powerful, muscular hands that belonged to a man who possessed great determination.

Koroleva had not come alone to their meeting, he was accompanied by a thin young man, who spoke with a North Carolina accent. Stefane Luzhkov wondered if the man were in fact an American, recruited by the Communist party, or perhaps a recent graduate of Harmony. The man had a full head of medium coarse brown hair. His features not at all Slavic, if he were from the USSR, then he was most likely of east European origin. He had a thin nose, light blue eyes, and an easy smile in direct contrast to Koroleva. He seemed outgoing and friendly, typical of a successful field operative. Contrary to the image created by Hollywood films about spies.

They sat around the small round table in Luzhkov's room. He and Koroleva took the contoured leatherette chairs, paired to the table, while the man, who Koroleva had introduced as David Shane, sat nearby on the edge of the double bed.

Koroleva opened the conversation. "We have taken every precaution to assure the security of our meeting. David is very familiar with this area, he's been in residence here for several years. Although you've not been aware of it, he's been facilitating our communications for quite sometime."

Luzhkov glanced at David Shane, who nodded in a neutral fashion. Luzhkov knew the KGB often used secondary agents to monitor the activities of primary resident agents, to assure they'd not gone over to the Americans, or were beginning to fall out of character with their cover. This aspect of KGB oversight greatly irritated Luzhkov, but he was careful to conceal his feelings.

"We've received some very important information, Stefane." Koroleva continued. "And as a result we must redirect your activities. Is that a problem for you?"

Luzhkov felt a wave of anxiety pass through him. So the meeting was to relocate after all. He'd prepared himself for this moment, and yet now it had arrived he found the prospect entirely more painful than he'd imagined. He made an effort to keep his voice emotionless. "Certainly, Sir. I am prepared to move at anytime. However, there are loose ends I've not really tidied up. If this is not an emergency, they should be resolved before I leave the area."

Koroleva smiled and shook his head. He raised both his hands palms outward. "No, no you misunderstand me. I did not mean you should leave the area. Though I'm pleased you are prepared, and not overly attached to your cover relationship. But no, everything is fine. In fact, quite perfect. You are doing an excellent job."

Luzhkov felt his anxiety evaporate, but held his emotion in check. He sensed David Shane's eyes watching him closely, and Luzhkov wondered if his body language disclosed his true feelings. He glanced over at Shane, but read nothing in his facial expression.

Koroleva placed his hands, palms down on top of the table. "We've received rather momentous intelligence from our friends with the Islamic Jihad."

Luzhkov frowned. "Friends? I didn't know we had any *friends* within that organization."

Koroleva smiled and shrugged. "Well I use the term loosely. Let's just say that for the moment our efforts to, how should I say, work the American issues, coincide. In any case, we have received intelligence, and confirmed, that Yuri and Myra Sosyka have defected to the United States, and," he raised one finger. "They're working right here," Koroleva tapped the table top with his index finger. "At Duke University."

Luzhkov frowned. "I don't understand the significance, Sir."

Koroleva glanced over at David Shane, then back to Luzhkov. "Of course you don't, I'm sorry. A problem I've been working on for quite sometime. Their disappearance was not well covered here in the west, though now I understand why.

"Yuri and Myra are biologists, geneticists to be exact. They were researching a methodology for attaching genes to viruses in order to correct biological defects. Sometime ago, Myra disappeared, apparently off with a handsome German. While, Yuri was subsequently identified as a floater in the Adriatic. It seems, however, they defected. And are now working here at Duke."

"How in the world did Islamic Jihad pick up on this?" Luzhkov asked.

Koroleva shrugged. "Long story short, they snatched one of CIAs field people in Malaga, Spain. And I guess he ran out of things to tell them pertinent to their own needs. Turns out he was the stand-in for the German."

Luzhkov nodded, then glanced over at David Shane. He smiled broadly. Luzhkov looked sideways at Koroleva. "You're not thinking about snatching them back are you?"

Koroleva burst out laughing and shook his head. "No, no Stefane. Nothing so dramatic as that. David here, has kindly agreed to enroll at Duke, where contact will be quite normal. And you my friend will become our intermediary, the conduit for transport of their product to me."

Luzhkov turned to David Shane. "And how will our contact be facilitated?"

Shane smiled, a twinkle in his eyes. "I was wondering if you might have an opening in your kitchen for a dishwasher shall we say?"

Luzhkov thought for a moment. "Actually a general helper would be better. You have no aversion to bed pans, I assume?"

# Chapter Fifteen

June 1979

Julles Louzer awoke suddenly. He lay for several minutes listening to the sound of his roommate's snores. Then swung his feet around, and sat on the edge of the bed. He stood up quietly, then silently paced the short distance to the window that looked toward the southeast. Judging from the color of the sky near the horizon, it was about an hour before sunrise. The window was small, maybe three feet square, cut into a solid thirty-eight inch deep adobe wall.

He was in some sort of prison, or fortress. And though it was well preserved by the dry desert air, there was no doubt of the structure's advanced age. The window's casement contained no glass, nor covering of any kind. No need, no one could escape through it. The fortress, as he preferred to think of it, was at least seven stories high and seemed to have been built at the brink of a deep ravine. Or perhaps it was on a high bluff. In any case, the thick, smooth walls offered no hand, or foothold. And it was, at least, a hundred and fifty feet straight down to the ground.

The air was cool at this time of the morning. Now his favorite time, before the sun rose to bake the day and turn the little room into an oven.

His interrogation had taken place in the basement of the fortress. When they'd finished with him, he'd been placed for a short time in a private room where his electrical burns had been treated. It was there he learned he was being held in Oran, Algeria. After a week of medical recuperation, he'd been transferred to this room where he'd been ever since. A period of time he estimated to be four to five weeks.

He wondered if Caring First was looking for him, if any inquiries had been made, had they learned about the girl and the boat. Or did they simply assume he'd run off with the Nordic beauty with whom he'd last been seen. He chastised himself for the hundredth time. A foolish, foolish thing to have done. If he ever managed to return to his former life, he'd never mix business and pleasure again. Of course, there was little chance of that in any case, he'd not awaken with an erection since his torture. He touched his genitals through the cotton briefs he wore. Still tender, but at least it no longer hurt to urinate.

He wondered why he was being held, why he'd not been executed in some painful and embarrassing fashion. That had been the intent of at least one of

his captors. Apparently a cooler head had prevailed. Perhaps, they intended to trade him for one of their own at sometime in the future. That was his roommates' theory.

There had been three of them when he'd first been placed in the cell. Scott, a geologist on sabbatical from British Petroleum, who'd come to Algeria to study its terrain first hand. He'd been taken on his second day in country, but not as yet interrogated. And Addiz, an Egyptian businessman, who, unfortunately, from Islamic Jihad's perspective, had chosen Christianity over the Muslim religion.

Louzer was not much into any religion, and never understood what all the fuss was about; even under his current circumstances, he saw his capture as a purely political issue, rather than a religious one.

After his recovery, he'd been given clean clothes. Cotton underwear, a light khaki military shirt, pants, and leather sandals. So he had to admit, all else being equal, he'd not been treated badly since the completion of his interrogation. Each morning, they were taken down an L shaped hallway to a communal shower, and given a reasonable period of time to use the facilities. Not that they weren't closely guarded. No opportunity for escape was ever presented, their guards carried AK-47 assault weapons to assure no attempt was made.

Following their shower, they were returned to their cell. At noon their only meal of the day was brought, usually a stew of some sort. Mutton, fowl, occasionally beef with rice and water. Late in the afternoon they were taken, one at a time, five floors down to the basement, then marched back up, seven floors to the top, then back down to their own floor. This was their daily exercise, along with whatever they chose to do on the floor of their room. Which in fact was very little, the short rations leaving little energy to spare.

The first time he'd been taken down the stairs, he'd trembled in fear expecting interrogation. His guards seemed to enjoy his discomfort.

Water was brought at noon, enough to last until the next day if they were careful. But when it was very hot, the guards would bring an additional amount, ordering them to drink in a gruff, almost parental fashion.

Louzer turned away from the window. His roommate was awake now, sitting on the edge of his bed. Addiz had left three days before with the guards, for the usual stairway exercise, and not returned. They'd tried to learn from their guards what had become of him, but it was to no avail. Communication was a one-way street, as far as their overseers were concerned.

"It'll be another scorcher." Scott said, matter of factly, with an educated British accent, as he stepped over to the window to stand next to Louzer. "I've

been thinking a bit about Addiz, could be he was traded back, as we've discussed before. If so, he'll do his best to get our governments involved.

Julles Louzer looked sidewise at his roommate. "I'm sure he will, he's a man true to his word. Though I suspect it will be of little value. Neither your country, nor mine is willing to go to war over the likes of us. And any rescue attempt would cost more lives than would be the case if we are left to languish." Jules sighed and looked down at the floor. "Our best hope is to be traded."

Scott put his hand on Louzer's shoulder in a comforting way. "Keep your spirits up my friend. If we were of no value to them, we'd already be dead, I'm sure.

#

Captivity altered priorities, Jules Louzer thought, it made small routines important while past routines from a former life seemed completely trivial. On the one hand, routines were tedious and led to narrowed points of view. On the other, routines were the substance of captivity, the one known quantity to psychologically hold on to when all else was unknown. A way of marking time.

Addiz' unexpected departure introduced another element of anxiety into their routine. So each day when one of them left for their exercise period, the other sat alone and wondered if they would be relegated to solitary confinement. While the one exercising was unable to use the time as a release of tension, because there was always the question: What had become of Addiz? And am I to be next?

A week passed since Addiz' departure, the days scratched on the wall of their room. They'd settled again into the routines of captivity. Grateful each afternoon for each other's continued company.

#

Julles Louzer sat on his cot awaiting Scott's return from the day's exercise session. Without a watch, or clock, it was impossible to mark time precisely but a sense of it was noted. He knew from daily experience approximately how long it took to *run the stairs*, and as the minutes ticked by, beyond that intuitive point in time, Jules felt his anxiety grow until he didn't believe he could stand it any longer.

The door to his cell opened, and he looked up with expectation, the way a child who's been banished to his room for the violation of some parental edict looks up in hope of absolution. But there was none. Only the night's ration of water... for one.

Julles Louzer reached the first floor of the building, automatically started his right turn to take the next set of stairs to the basement. It had been three days since Scott's departure. No new roommate had been introduced, and he found himself reliving conversations in his mind that he and Scott had together over the weeks. As he began to take the first step down the last set of stairs, he felt a hand grip his arm tightly about the biceps, spinning him around, and propelling him forward through a set of doors at the end of the hallway.

He blinked, and shielded his eyes from the harsh, hot afternoon sun. He was led to a waiting military vehicle, a two-ton, four wheel drive used for troop transport. As he climbed into the back of the vehicle, its bed shaded by a canvas cover, he noted several other men, and one woman, seated on the metal benches that ran the length of the bed. They all appeared to be middle eastern, except one, a scroungy looking Caucasian seated near the rear wall of the cab.

The guards began attaching leg irons to the ankles of their wards. Louzer moved towards the front of the truck. Then sat silently waiting his turn to be shackled. When the guard had finished with Louzer he reached over to place the shackles on the scroungy guy, but found his legs were not quite close enough together to set the shackles. There was little room to maneuver, and so the guard struggled to get the shackles in place, while the prisoner subtly made it as difficult as possible. Suddenly, the guard became angry, he grabbed the scroungy guy by his shirt labels, and slammed him against the back of the cab, then proceed to punch him several times in the side of the head all the while cursing him in an unintelligible middle eastern tongue.

As he struggled with the prisoner, a second guard boarded the truck and waded forward through the sea of feet and legs thrust out into the middle of the bed. Soon Louzer's view was obscured by the backs and butts of both guards as they struggled with the prisoner ultimately falling down on top of one another.

Suddenly, a burst of gunfire went off. Everyone froze. A third guard appeared at the rear of the truck. A smoking AK-47 pointed skyward. He then lowered it, its muzzle pointed forward.

"Enough!" He exclaimed in English.

The scroungy guy raised his hands in mock surrender, then tilted them downward as if to say: *Look, I'm shackled. What more do you want.* The three guards stared at his ankles. Found it was true.

The third guard barked another order, this time in their own tongue. The guards moved towards the rear of the truck, as the last one dropped to the ground he looked back at the scroungy guy, anger shown on his face, and gave him the *up yours* salute.

It was almost comical, Louzer suppressed a chuckle, then looked across at the man who'd caused all the commotion. The scroungy guy glanced back at him for a moment, then burst out laughing while shaking his head. He gave the one-fingered salute towards the back of the truck, though none of the guards were there at the moment to see it. And then he laughed some more.

At first Louzer was terrified his continued disrespect would cause the guards to lose control, and kill them all on the spot. But as the moments ticked by, and nothing worse than the initial beating occurred, he found he had a bit of admiration stirring within. Though he could not understand what the gesture of defiance had actually accomplished. Even if he'd somehow managed to avoid having to wear one of the shackles, what difference would it have made? A chain ran through each set of shackles, linking everyone in the truck together. All he'd accomplished was to single himself out for greater abuse, perhaps even death later when they arrived at their destination.

Louzer continued to scrutinize the rebellious prisoner. He appeared to be in his twenties - twenty-five or twenty-six. Long hair, in the style of hippies Louzer had seen back home in California. He had an athletic build, extremely low body fat, which defined a wiry, well-developed muscular physique.

The state of his body seemed a contradiction to his appearance, unwashed with a scraggly half grown beard. Obviously, he'd not taken advantage of the grooming time given each morning, or perhaps he'd been recently captured. Clearly, the Islamic Jihad was taking hostages for some reason other than gathering information, which gave Louzer reason for hope. As soon as the truck started, and began to rumble down the dirt road, Louzer attempted to strike up a conversation.

"My name's Jules." He stuck out his hand. But got no response. Of course, he thought, the man doesn't speak English. It was after all the rim of the Mediterranean. And so he tried Spanish: "*Mi llamo, Julio.*" Nothing. "*Mit namen, Jules.*"

The man chuckled, and shook his head. "I don't give a shit what your name is, asshole. Just shut the fuck up. Okay?"

Louzer was shocked, his feelings hurt, at first, but then he got a little irritated himself. "Well fuck you. You skinny little piece of shit. I was just trying to be polite, having been stuck in solitary for the past..." He was about to say, three



weeks. When he remembered it had only been three days. Jesus, he was startin' to lose it.

The scroungy guy nodded his head. "That's right, much better to be pissed off. Makes dyin' easier."

"What are you talking about, I thought we were to be traded?" Louzer said.

The guy laughed out loud. "You really are goofier than Goofy. You know that? Traded my ass. We're going to be *training*. You know T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G. Not Trading.

Julles shook his head slowly. "I don't understand."

The guy looked away, out the back of the truck for several moments. "Islamic Jihad's got camps set up back in the high dessert, where they train terrorists, or Soldiers of Allah as they prefer to think of it. They like to provide some actual kills, so the trainees can get up to speed real quick."

Louzer's jailhouse pallor blanched even more.

The scroungy guy chuckled. "Scary shit, uh? But there's a catch, you may get the option of attempting to escape and evade, even defend yourself. A few actually make it. So, like I said, stay pissed off. You might be one of the lucky few."

Julles tried to swallow but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. "How do you know all this shit?"

"Been in Morocco five years now. Shit gets around, if you know what I mean."

"How'd they get you?"

"You ask too many questions."

#

Bob Jacobson's office was in the southeast corner of the fifth floor. His polished, solid maple, executive desk was set in the center of the room facing the door. Behind him was a wall of glass, to his left another. To his right along part of one wall, a dark green leather sofa. Matching wing back chairs faced the desk. Behind the wingbacks, a row of seven fireproof, steel and concrete filing cabinets that backed up to a wood paneled wall.

Jacobson sat in a leather, high-back chair. Don Dancing sat across from him in one of the wingbacks. Resting on the seat of the other was an file folder he'd brought to show Jacobson. It was a SitRep on the Jules Louzer case.

"Jesus," Jacobson exclaimed. "What the hell was he thinking?"

Dancing smiled. "With what? Would be more to the point."

"Have we found the woman?"

Dancing shook his head. "Not a trace. However, one of the *Company's* resident agents believes he knows where Louzer is being held."

"And?"

"Nothing so far. It's difficult operating over there."

"So what's the best guess?"

"Algeria. A prisoner of Islamic Jihad."

"Oh Christ." Jacobson swiveled his chair to look out the window, but it was dark outside, and all he saw was his own reflection. "They'll cut his nuts off to get whatever they're after. That poor dumb son of bitch." He swiveled back and looked across at Dancing. "Anything we can do?"

Dancing made no response for several moments, as he considered the options. "Well... not really. If Langley's guy can confirm where they've got him. We can run the odds on a SEAL team snatch. Frankly, I'm not sure it's worth the risk."

Jacobson looked down at his desk pad, staring at it for several seconds as if somehow it would give him a better answer. He sighed. "Let me know as soon as you have confirmation. I want to keep the rescue option open."

#

Jim Richards stared up at the acoustical tiles of the hung ceiling in the supply room, contemplating today's mission. He'd waited weeks for an opportunity to get into Monty Regadet's office. Finally his patience was about to be rewarded. Regadet was off attending some sort of security seminar. No one else would use his office while he was gone, so once inside, Richards would have the place to himself.

He climbed the supply room shelving, then removed one of the large ceiling tiles, creating a hole in the ceiling large enough to climb through. He looked up at the metal support beams that made up the skeletal structure of Caring First's corporate offices.

Jim Richards stood on the top most shelf, his upper body extending through the space he'd made for himself. The steel beam well within his reach. He attached two safety trolleys to the horizontal I-beam directly overhead. The trolleys were friction devices used by steel workers to prevent falls. The devices moved smoothly in one direction, but locked in place when moved in the opposite direction. He then hooked himself onto the trolleys, using carabineers and a climber's harness. One trolley supported his upper body, the second his lower.

He hated having to make the traverse from the supply room to Regadet's office in this manner. It was difficult, tiring, and would take a substantial amount of time. But there were no other options. Regadet had the hallway outside his office covered by a video camera. There was no way Jim Richards could get inside without being taped. And no assurance the camera's recorder would be located within the office, meaning he might not be able to erase the tape.

He alternately pulled with his arms, and pushed with his legs, until he arrived over Regadet's office, which he recognized by a second video camera linked via an optical cable to a fish eye lens expertly concealed with in the ceiling tile. Obviously Regadet's paranoia for privacy assured he'd cover the office from at least two angles. Fortunately, it had not occurred to him that someone might use the narrow two and a half foot space between the upper floor and the hung ceiling below to gain entrance.

Jim Richards unscrewed the coaxial connector just enough to allow him to insert a short length of copper wire. Next he partially disconnected the video lead, wrapped the other end of the copper wire around it, then reinserted it into the camera. The end result of this manipulation was unacceptable static recorded on the videotape, a seemingly intermittent anomaly, which in fact was not uncommon to such systems.

He then took the time to examine each and every one of the wire and conduit parallels running up into the ceiling space, out of Regadet's office, to make certain there were no other security measures present. Once satisfied, he carefully removed a ceiling tile over the office to allow his entry. Then slowly lowered himself to the floor.

Monty Regadet's office was divided into two sections, something Jim Richards had failed to notice on those occasions when he'd passed by, and glanced in from the hallway. The front portion of the office was quite small, having only enough room for a desk, a filing cabinet, and a bank of video monitors

that displayed views from the various cameras mounted outside the building. A doorway led from the front portion of the office into a sound proofed room where a commercial shredder was located that sent *all* discarded sensitive material to the incinerator below in the building's basement.

The back wall of the shredder room was in fact a false wall. When Jim Richards first removed one of ceiling tiles he found they overlapped the top of the false wall. A removable panel allowed access between the front portion of the office and the rear.

Jim Richards made a slow three hundred and sixty degree turn scanning the contents of the room with a coal miner's flashlight strapped about his head. He found racks of VCR's. Some were recording, others were not. An elaborate system of electrical switchovers that shifted cameras from one VCR to the next, as tapes ran out of recording space. Richards wondered how long the whole shebang could be left unattended, and whether or not Mr. Murphy would have someone enter the room at any moment to service the VCRs. Therefore, his first order of business was to illuminate the main monitor, then rotate the camera selector until it displayed the hallway outside Regadet's office. He soon realized that traffic in the corridor was just sufficient enough to be a constant interruption of his thought processes. He decided to run a quick reconnaissance of the space, then return that evening, when everyone, except the outside security detail, had gone home. It would make for a long night, but eminently more secure.

In addition to the VCRs, there were several, locked, fireproof filing cabinets, and a huge multi-track recording system, consisting of four, thirty-two track machines, slaved to incoming, and outgoing telephone lines. Adjacent to the voice recorders was a teletype style print out that traced the telephone numbers on all incoming, and outgoing calls.

Jim Richards stepped over to the printer, and looked at the print out run for the day. He then checked the collection box on the floor under the machine, and found the run extended back only as far as four PM on the day before, which coincided with the time Monty Regadet had been expected to leave the office for his flight out of Nashville that evening.

Richards turned to his right, and carefully examined the file cabinets for any indication of an alarm system, or passive security measures, he found none. He then took a few moments to look over the recording system, and to make some mental notes of the equipment he would need when he returned to complete his black bag job.

The return trip to the floor of Regadet's office, at nine that evening, took a little less time, as Jim Richards was prepared for the obstacles he'd need to overcome. He'd brought along his locksmith's kit to use on the file cabinet locks. Fifteen minutes later, he opened the first cabinet.

Four filing cabinets, two hours later, he found the print out he was looking for, the one with the Caring First Research Laboratory's number, and the date that coincided with the calls made by Allen Maxwell, and Michael Fitzgerald. Adjacent to the print out was a fifteen-inch audiotape reel. He placed the reel onto one of the multi-track recorders, then used a pair of head phones to listen to individual tracks. It took another thirty minutes to figure out the recording sequence of the tracks, and how they corresponded to the printout sheet from which he was working. Once he'd deciphered the chronology, he was able to locate Fitzgerald's, and Maxwell's, calls from the lab.

Both men had in theory called the office, and spoken to someone for several minutes. However, Allen Maxwell's line, the only thing recorded was the *Please hang up and try again* message, followed by that goofy tone the telephone company broadcasts to signal a user they've left their phone off the hook. Fitzgerald's line indicated several lengthy messages were picked up.

Neither recording was conclusive evidence of which executive might have used the time to acquire the Histoplasmosis accelerant. The dead time on Maxwell's line could easily be explained by the telephone receiver's failure to disconnect, or a problem at the telephone company's switching center. But as Richards pondered the issue of the two calls, it seemed to him Allen Maxwell was the most likely suspect.

It was common knowledge that Monty Regadet received printouts from the telephone company, tracking calls placed and received for department charge back purposes. If Allen Maxwell wished to establish an alibi, he'd leave the line open to his office to support an affirmation he was on the phone at the time the theft took place. Of course, he'd have no knowledge a telephone tap had been installed as well, since that was not commonly known, in fact, it had been specifically denied in memo form.

He returned the tape, and printout, to their respective places in the filing cabinet, then glanced at the stainless steel dive watch strapped to his wrist, one half hour past midnight.

He'd obtained the primary information he'd come for, but was curious about the extent of the video surveillance, Regadet had set up. He stepped over to the monitor, and slowly clicked through the camera selection options. Not all departments were covered, and Jim Richards could not, at first, figure out the logic attendant to the ones selected, as opposed to others overlooked.

As he continued to slowly scan through the camera stations, a pattern of surveillance began to emerge. Monty Regadet had targeted primarily management staff with camera angles located directly over desks and workspaces. He also targeted, hallways, elevators, and of no great surprise to Jim Richards, the women's bathroom down the hall from word processing.

As he scanned through the selections, it gradually dawned on him, there was a camera in the Accounting office, where Misti had acquired the information for Maxwell.

He looked around the room, wondering where the tapes might be stored. His eyes fell on two filing cabinets he'd not yet perused. It took another fifteen minutes to get both open. There were no videotapes inside, but rather files labeled by year and department.

Looking into the file for Accounting, he found a photo of Misti taking the filing cabinet key from the center drawer of the department supervisor's desk. Then a second photo of her standing at the open drawer of one of the filing cabinets apparently pulling a document out of one of the file folders. The photos were grainy, as would be expected when extracted by taking a picture of the *paused* video image on a monitor.

Jim Richards mouth went dry. He turned the photo over, on the back were notes jotted in Monty's precise printing, indicating date and time, as well as, a storage reference number, and reel inch count. Apparently, the videocassette was stored in some other location.

Jim Richards sighed to himself, and wondered what Monty Regadet intended to do, or had already done, with the intelligence gathered. Richards returned the photo to its folder, then closed and locked the file cabinet.

#

Misti awoke suddenly, she didn't need to reach out her hand to know Jim Richards was not in bed beside her. The clock on the nightstand, normally obscured by his sleeping form, displayed the time, three-fifteen in the morning.

Misti felt sick, then alternately angry. Where the hell was he? More and more frequently he'd been staying late at the office, coming home later and later each time. Uncommunicative about exactly why it was necessary for him to be there. It was ridiculous. What kind of an idiot did he take her for anyway? She wasn't blind. She'd heard the rumors weeks before, when he'd taken that trip alone, supposedly to the Keys to dive with an old friend. How convenient Sharon Wiltz just happened to be out of the office at the same time. She wasn't blind,

she'd seen him ogling her as far back as Fitzgerald's party. He was charming and sexy, certainly she could attest to that herself, though lately there wasn't much passion in their lives.

Tears formed in Misti's eyes. How inadequate she felt, not even able to satisfy her own man. Nor meet her career goals. Just slog it through day after day, trying to keep the two beasts in the office happy, and finding it more and more difficult.

She sighed. Maybe she should confront him, and get it over with? Then what? He'd move out? No. She didn't want the house, the constant up keep. It was he who'd wanted a house in the first place, even though an apartment would have been less expensive.

They should never have come here. They'd been happy in Larkspur. But Nashville had ground them down. And he'd changed, almost as soon as they'd arrived. It was as if he had some other agenda planned all along, and there was never the intent to include her.

She reached over, pulled a tissue from the box beside the bed, blew her nose. If he didn't care for her anymore, didn't want her anymore. Why had he dragged her all the way back here in the first place? Out of sympathy. *Owe the old girl something. Get her started in a new career, then get on with my own life.* Well screw you guy, she thought. I don't need your sympathy, and I don't need your support.

She lay on her back staring up at the ceiling. Heard his car in the driveway. The infrared activated spotlights came on, flooding the perimeter of the house with light, a little spilled into the bedroom through the window. It seemed inordinately bright, in contrast to the prior near complete darkness. Another aggravation, Misti thought. Goddamn lights coming on at all hours, when someone's cat walked by. What the hell was he so scared of anyway? Neighborhood's safe.

She heard his key in the back door, and rolled over onto her side away from his side of the bed. Quiet footsteps down the hall. The rustle of clothing as he undressed. The gentle sway of the bed as he lay down next to her.

#

Jim Richards took a quiet deep breath, then let it out very slowly, composing himself for sleep. He rolled his head to the right, and looked at Misti's sleeping form. The down lights clicked off plunging the room into near total darkness again.

What should he do with her? How could he convince her to get out of Caring First before she was drawn any deeper into its intrigue? It seemed her plans to teach had evaporated as completely as his meager attempt at song writing. At least, he had the bad excuse his aspirations were nothing more than a cover in the first place.

He was making headway, felt certain a break would come before the end of the year. Then they could return to San Francisco. Maybe take that trip to Hawaii they'd talked about. Get their relationship back in order. It would all work out.

He started to reach for her to bring her close to him, but was afraid to awaken her. With any luck she'd have no idea of what time he'd come home, she was often a heavy sleeper. To awaken her now would only bring the inevitable questions he couldn't answer.

#

Tears trickled out of Misti's eyes, she suppressed any hint of a sob until his heavy breathing signaled a deep sleep, by then she was through crying. She quietly eased out of bed, carried her robe down the hall to her chair in the family room.

She sat there alone in the gray early morning light, her feet curled under her, an Afghan across her knees. And wondered if her tears had been for love lost, or only embarrassed anger? Oddly she bore him no ill will. When it was good, it had been the best there ever was, perhaps ever would be. At least she'd always have that memory.

As the morning gradually brightened, it occurred to her there was no point in waiting. She could, after all, afford a small studio on her Caring First salary.



## Chapter Sixteen

Julles Louzer sat, dozing with his head to one side, resting against one of the metal frames supporting the green canvas cover of the troop transport. They'd driven all day through the hot desert sun, until it set, plunging them into darkness. The constant rumble of the poorly muffled engine, the rhythm of the wheels on rough pavement, plus dehydration, conspired to cause he, and the other hostages, to slip into a fitful sleep.

The truck turned south off the paved road onto a dirt track, the sudden jolt of the turn awakened Louzer. It was then he noticed Tom, the scroungy guy across from him, was gone.

As the trip had progressed, Tom had become more communicative. He'd given Louzer his name, and also a piece of advice: "If the opportunity to escape presents itself, take it without hesitation."

The moon rose over the rim of the earth, some of its light spilled into the truck. Julles Louzer looked down between his legs, Tom's shackles lay open on the floor. A small key was stuck in one of the locks. It all came back to him: Tom rousing him, urgent whispers to jump to freedom. But he'd refused. What was he thinking? Dehydration must have affected his will, dulled his thought processes. He bent forward, pulled the key out of its lock, then popped it into his mouth, letting it rest between his cheek and gum. Now Tom's struggle with the guards came back to mind, and suddenly Louzer understood. Tom had seen the key, recognized its value, then used the altercation to cover his pilfering. *If the opportunity to escape presents itself, take it without hesitation.*

But Louzer had hesitated, still hesitated. Where would he go if he did escape? He didn't know the desert, nor how to survive in it. He was not a field operative in that sense of the word.

He mulled the pros and cons over in his mind again, then finally came to the conclusion he'd rather die free than languish in a prison until illness and insanity overtook him. But just as he'd made up his mind to jump, the truck began to slow down, he felt the brakes firmly applied.

The thought that Tom would be missed came to Louzer's mind. His captives would torture him again in some crude, cruel manner. Yet there was nothing he could tell them about the man's escape. Oh sweet Jesus. He felt the

key in his mouth, immediately he spit it out. If they found it on him, what then? They'd assume he'd stolen it, helped Tom. They'd kill him on the spot.

The truck came to a complete stop. Louzer heard the sound of the cab doors closing, the crunch of footsteps on dirt and gravel, as two men walked to the rear of the truck. He began to tremble.

One of the guards stood a few feet from the back of the truck with an AK-47 assault rifle, its barrel held low, pointed inside. The other guard unlocked the padlock that secured the chain, which ran through each prisoner's shackle. He pointed to the first four prisoners nearest the back of the truck, two on each side. Told them in Farsi to climb out.

They protested, begging for their lives. At least, that was the impression Louzer had, but the guard ignored them and growled something unintelligible in return, then pointed at the other guard with the assault rifle. That seemed to convince them, and they quickly, if stiffly complied. One by one each climbed, or jumped to the ground.

Their shackles were removed, and tossed unceremoniously into the back of the truck. Then they were ordered off into the desert. The group hesitated for a moment, each pair of eyes held the look of a cornered animal that knew not which way to run. Then all of a sudden they scattered in different directions. The guards laughed uproariously. Locked the shackle chain back in place, returned to the truck's cab, and rumbled off again.

Louzer breathed a sigh of relief. They'd not noticed Tom was missing. An easy oversight, the forward part of the truck was in deep shadow. Now he wished he'd not spit the key away. He looked down at the floor, the moon no longer low on the horizon, no longer shining into the back of the truck. Even if the key had somehow jumped back into the shackle lock, he'd not be able to see it.

"Does anyone speak English?" Louzer asked of the group in general.

At first no one answered. Then a voice came from a man just two-spots down on his side of the truck. "Only a little."

Louzer looked towards the sound, it was too dark to see who had spoken.

"Thank you. Can you tell me what the guards said to those others? Why they were released?"

The man did not respond immediately, it took time to translate the question in his mind, then formulate an answer. "The guard told them to run

away." He said at last. "At first they were afraid he would shoot them for sport. No matter, there's no escape from this part of the desert."

"Why not?" Louzer asked.

Another pause. "Because the Islamic Jihad controls the area, they will let no one pass who is not their own."

The truck rolled on for another hour. Each time Louzer thought it was about to stop to unload the last of them, it would make another turn and continue on. Finally, after another hour of bumping over the dirt track, they pulled to a stop. Louzer's heart began to race.

They were ordered out of the truck, lined up side by side, their shackles still locked to their ankles. They stood facing a set of tall, wooden doors - gates to an old fort. Possibly one that once belonged to the French Foreign Legion. A smaller door, the size of a normal doorway, was cut into the left hand gate. It swung open, two men dressed in desert khaki stepped through. Louzer could not determine their nationality. As they approached, one of the men began to ask questions in Farsi. He appeared to be in charge, at least the guards who'd driven the truck responded as if he were their superior.

He seemed pleased with the answers they gave him, and they seemed relieved all had gone well. He then spoke directly to one of the guards, who jogged over to the truck, climbed in, started it, and drove away, around the far side of the fort.

Louzer thought that interesting, as he would have expected the truck to have been driven inside the compound. Obviously, they felt the area was secure and there was no need to store their vehicles within the walls of the compound.

Again the man spoke in Farsi, addressing the prisoners. Louzer watched what the others did and followed suit, which was to march in single file through the small door, entering the old fort.

So far no one had noticed Tom missing. At first, Louzer thought this odd, and kept waiting for the other shoe to drop as soon as someone decided to confirm a head count. But then it dawned on him, the guards who'd driven them were not the ones who'd loaded them into the truck. Apparently, his captors wanted to keep the location of their destination secret, even from their own people.

They stepped into a large courtyard. An array of equipment and supplies was staged in wooden crates under tarpaulins. Four sets of stairs, at the corner of each wall, ran up to a battlement that encircled the courtyard. Around the inside

perimeter were a series of one story rectangular buildings that shared a common rear wall. Louzer assumed these were used as sleeping, supply, and administration facilities.

They were led across the courtyard, circumventing the supply stacks until they reached one of the rectangular buildings. Four doors faced the courtyard, and four small open windows. One of the window openings had heavy gauge grid attached to the outside wall.

The room, or more accurately the cell, was no more than twelve feet long, maybe seven across. Except for a bucket placed in one corner, there wasn't another item inside. The prisoners shuffled over to the far wall, then stood together in a small knot. When the guards left and the door was closed, one of the other prisoners said something in Farsi that sparked a hushed but heated debate.

The first gunmetal gray light of dawn was beginning to show in the sky through their window. Finally, Louzer interrupted the conversation, asked if someone could translate for him. One man said something to the others, they each nodded almost apologetically, and then he began to explain what they had been discussing.

"We are debating whether or not it would be feasible to escape by finding a way to unshackle our ankles, then jump the guard when he comes to take one of us away to slaughter. If we could get hold of his weapon, maybe we could fight our way out."

Louzer thought about the option for a moment, again wishing he'd not lost the key. "Perhaps we are to be traded. Why would they not have sent us into the desert, like the others if they only wanted to kill us?"

The man translated what Louzer had said, the others nodded thoughtfully, then returned to the debate.

"We've been saying, we wish it were true," the one who spoke English said, "but there is no doubt of our fate. They don't even know who we are, and don't care. It makes it easier to use us in the fashion they intend. Which is why they have no record of exactly how many of us were placed into the truck. And so do not miss your friend."

Further debate ensued, which Louzer could not comprehend. And then just as their interlocutor was about to translate again, the door burst open. Three guards entered the cell, two carried assault rifles. One appeared to be unarmed. He came forward, pushed three of the other prisoners out of the way, unlocked Louzer's shackles, then ordered him, by both word and gesture, to move towards

the door. The other men watched in silence as Louzer shuffled dejectedly out into the first light of dawn.

#

He was led to a cleared area, within sight of the holding cell. Then made to stand upright between two wooden posts, his arms spread eagle, bound at the wrists.

Louzer asked: "Why are you doing this to me?" The guards ignored him as they went about securing his wrists. "There must be some mistake. I can give you important information." Louzer was sure he was about to be shot. "I am an American, you can't do this."

This last statement proved his captors understood English at least, as it elicited a response - they laughed. One of the guards slapped him on the back. "We know. That's why we are going to kill you first." And then he laughed again as he turned away, muttering under his breath: "Fucking Americans".

The dawn slowly grew brighter in the eastern sky. Louzer sagged to his knees. His arms ached, his hands numb from reduced blood flow. The muscles of his chest and shoulders stiffened, making it painfully difficult to breath. A classic crucifixion, he thought, the condemned man eventually dies from lack of oxygen as the result of muscle spasms in the upper torso. But that avenue to death was hours, perhaps days, away.

He struggled to his feet again, relieving the muscle tension. The cramping subsided and he took several slow deep breaths. He'd be fine, he thought, as long as he could remain standing.

#

He must have passed out. The sun had risen completely when he again became aware of his surroundings. Ten men sat on the ground in a semi-circle facing him, an instructor paced back and forth giving some sort of lecture in Farsi.

The instructor held a double-edged combat knife in his right hand. Periodically, he'd walk over to Louzer, haul him to his feet, and point to a portion of his body with the tip of the knife. All the while continuing his lecture. Occasionally he'd demonstrate a parry, then a thrust, pulling up just short of penetration.

The first time he did this, Louzer wet himself. His khaki pants becoming stained as warm urine spread down his crotch then along his left trouser leg. The trainees laughed uproariously.

The lecture went on for several minutes. Then it was the trainees' turn to demonstrate their parries and thrusts. He tried to keep the tormentors away, lashing out with kicks that soon became feeble, and thus ineffective.

Either as a result of their poor coordination, or his attempts to defend himself, now and then a trainee would thrust his knife over zealously and superficially wound him. Each time this happened, Louzer cried out. And a small amount of blood would ooze from the fresh wound.

Over time, this extreme repetitive stress caused his knees to buckle and he sagged to the ground. But there was no respite, the instructor hauled him roughly to his feet to assure the trainees got the right perspective on the process.

Tears of frustration and fear welled up in Louzer's eyes, and he began to sob like a small child. "Please don't do this anymore." He pleaded. But as the process continued his pleas were reduced to whimpers, and occasional grunts when a student went too far.

After each of the trainees had demonstrated the skills they'd learned, there was a pause in the training process. The instructor let go of Louzer's collar. And this time he did not sag to his knees. He toppled backward instead, with his legs thrust out in front. Head lolled to one side. A groan escaped his lips with each labored breath. Black spots danced before his eyes.

He heard the instructor ask the trainees a question. There was an enthusiastic response, then silence. Next he felt two pairs of arms lifting him to his feet, steadying him again in an upright position.

His heart tried to race, but would only beat irregularly. He gasped for air, hyperventilating in the process, which only served to elevate his fear. He felt as if his eyes were about to pop out of his head. One of the trainees stepped before him, a combat knife in his right hand, held low. He was a thin man, with a hawk like appearance. He said something in Farsi, a phrase even Louzer understood: *God is great*. And then he thrust.

At first Louzer did not feel its penetration. Instead he heard the sound of fabric tearing. And felt a dull thud. It seemed as if he'd only been punched hard in the stomach. Then, as if he were standing to one side listening to someone else, he heard a guttural, pathetic groan escape his lips: "Oh, OOOh."

His legs went weak. He felt as if he had the worst case of the stomach flu he could ever imagine. A wave of nausea overwhelmed him, his esophagus contracting into an involuntary wretch.

The instructor barked a command.

Immediately, Louzer felt a searing pain deep in his chest. Something was driven upward, then rocked back and forth. A deep burning pain tore into his heart. It was so excruciating, he was certain he'd lose consciousness, yet he did not. Rather he continued to wretch uncontrollably, as if he were trying bring up a nine-pound bowling ball.

Suddenly, the pain ceased, and the pressure subsided in his chest.

The trainee stood before him, blood running down the blade of his knife. Louzer knew it was his blood and he wanted it back, yet somehow it no longer seemed to matter. His bowels let go. A blessed sense of relief, one last full evacuation. Then embarrassment.

As the odor of fresh feces wafted up to his nostrils, an exquisite sense of weakness spread through out his body. Something above and beyond any level of fatigue he'd ever known. But there was no longer any fear in his mind, and that was also a relief. He'd not realized how truly terrified he'd been of death, but now it was upon him it seemed less terrible than he'd imagined. Still there was a profound sadness. So many things he'd wanted to do.

Hot wind swirled about him, stirring tiny dust devils, miniature tornadoes. His last conscious thought was how odd the booted legs looked that stood before him in the beige colored sand, a pool of red liquid all about...

#

August 1979

Roget Akhondan leaned forward in the rear seat of the Mercedes-Benz 500 SL and tapped his driver on the shoulder. "Pull over at Rue Du Maubeuge. I'll walk from here. Pick me up later tonight, at Bistro Loir." The Mercedes immediately pulled over to the curb. "Don't bother to open the door. I'll let myself out."

As soon as the big sedan came to a stop, Akhondan opened the right rear door, and slipped out. He crossed the sidewalk, paralleled the buildings, then quickly turned the corner.

He was well dressed as always, in a light gray business suit and dark gray overcoat. Paris was unseasonably cool, especially for someone acclimated to a much warmer climate. He wore soft leather gloves, as he never thrust his hands into his coat pockets to keep warm. A foolish habit. American movies had given

the world the gesture. Humphrey Bogart walking about with his overcoat collar turned up, hands deep in its pockets.

A good look for a former *rag* model turned matinee idol. An easy mark for any cheap, two bit hoodlum stepping out of a doorway. Roget Akhondan had once seen a man go down on the streets of Berlin, arms pinned to his sides, teeth kicked out in the blink of an eye. He couldn't even put a hand up for protection.

He walked a half block up the street, then crossed to the other side and entered a men's clothing shop just as it was about to close. Inside the doorway he turned around to see if anyone had followed. A man turned the corner, stopped and looked down the street. He was dressed in casual clothes of French design, but looked typically American to Akhondan.

Another Mercedes, similar to one he'd just climbed out of, pulled away from the curb to his left. The man at the corner gestured with his hand in the air, a gray Peugeot came around the corner, he got in quickly. The car accelerated up the street trailing the Mercedes.

Akhondan shook his head and smiled. Too easy. The CIA was so understaffed they couldn't even mount a decent surveillance effort. It was pathetic to think the United States should have control of so much of his country's wealth, when they were no longer even world-class players in the great game. He winked at the shop owner, who seemed perplexed at his behavior, then stepped outside to cross the street.

He continued along the dimly lit sidewalk until he came to an apartment building, Les Domicile de Elegance. He chuckled to himself, as he stepped into the high arched entryway. It never ceased to amaze him how self-delusional people were, especially Parisians.

The building and its apartments were anything but elegant, yet he did not doubt there were those within who lived there simply because the name bespoke of something better. "And *Monsieur*, where do you live? ...Ah *C'est se bon*." He chuckled again at the dialog in his head.

On the right hand wall of the entry way were a series of buttons with apartment numbers adjacent to them, he ran a gloved index finger down the directory until he came upon number 418. He pressed the button twice, then waited to be buzzed inside.

The building's foyer was both a stairwell, and an elevator shaft. Its lack of square footage emphasized by the fact the ceiling rose four stories above his head. An old cage elevator stood empty directly before him, the stairs ran around the perimeter of the shaft to landings at each floor. Akhondan crossed the foyer



in four steps, then threw back the scissors door, and stepped inside. He pushed the button marked *Quatre*, and braced himself as the elevator jerked upward the first foot or so, until the momentum of ascent smoothed out its antiquated mechanism.

It rose past the fourth floor, jerked to a stop, then settled back even with the landing. Akhondan slid the door to one side, and stepped out into the corridor. Stucco walls, barren of decoration, ran off to the right and left. He turned right. Outside 418 he stopped, and rapped twice on the door.

He saw the barest movement behind the peephole, then heard two deadbolt locks slide back. The door was opened by a man with a full, neatly trimmed beard. His black hair cut very short, brushed straight back in an attempt to give his rather low forehead a more intelligent and sophisticated look. He was of average height, about the same as Roget's, though he was decidedly more muscular. The man stepped back to allow Roget Akhondan to enter, then immediately closed the door behind him, and snapped the dead bolts into place.

They embraced. "Rashad, it's good to see you. It's been too long." Roget said.

Rashad Akhondan hugged his younger brother. "Yes too long. How is Tehran? How is the family?"

Roget smiled broadly. "Everyone is well, they send their love to you. As for Tehran, it's much better now we are rid of that goat fucker, the Shaw. Soon you will be able to return safely."

The door of the apartment opened directly into the living room. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen, and bath. All sparsely furnished. As Roget and Rashad turned away from the door, Roget noticed two men sitting on an old worn out sofa that appeared to have been picked up at a rummage sale, or perhaps stolen from a warehouse full of second hand furniture.

The men were both Iranian. They sat casually, each with one arm placed along the top of the backrest their fingers nearly touching. One man was tall and thin, his muscular development sinewy. He had a hawk like nose, and small black eyes that seemed to hold perpetual malice even when he was in repose. The other, stockier with a broad face and nose. Both had full beards, trimmed but not as closely as Rashad's.

The two men nodded in Roget's direction, smiling at the warm meeting between two brothers. They did not arise from the sofa, or voice any type of personal greeting. They knew who Roget was, and the role he served in their movement, but they were never inclined towards a show of emotion except

perhaps chronic discontent. Such was the nature of those who joined Islamic Jihad.

On the coffee table that stood before the sofa were two auto loading nine-millimeter pistols, Beretta Model 92s. Roget thought nothing of the weapons, he was familiar with them as well as several others. He, like his brother, and the two men seated on the sofa, had been through terrorist training. However, unlike the other men in the room, Roget preferred to use the strength of his business acumen whenever possible, to accomplish his goals.

"Please sit, " Rashad said. "Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

Roget removed his overcoat, and draped it over one of the straight back chairs shoved under a Formica table that stood in the dining area. He then settled into an upholstered armchair across from the sofa.

"No thank you, Rashad. I must attend a business social tonight, my excuse for being in Paris. I don't want to be late. No sense in arousing any more suspicion than necessary from my watchers."

Rashad nodded his understanding, then took the other armchair. He leaned forward his forearms resting on his knees.

Roget looked at all three men in turn. "I have not as yet been successful in obtaining an exclusive contract from Caring First. And we do not have time to wait for the machinations of their Chairman to eventually come to fruition. The obstacle of the founding President, who opposes the use of one supplier, must be removed. We need to take direct action."

All three men nodded their heads in agreement. Rashad said: "I'm glad you now agree with my original assessment. If Caring First is a front for CIA operations, as we have learned from one of their employees, the decision may not be entirely in the hands of either their Chairman, or President."

Roget shook his head. "Based upon my conversations, Harris Williams has the authority. He's just following good business practice by refusing to contract with a single supplier, regardless of pricing.

"My hope, was that his desire for public office would take him out of the decision loop, but the announcement seems to have been delayed. Raymond Harbinger was apparently not able to accelerate the agenda. Though he indicates at each of our meetings he is getting closer to his goal."

Rashad turned his palms upwards. "Time is no longer on our side. Plans are a foot within the movement to take the U.S. Embassy, and hold Americans

hostage, then exchange the hostages for the money the Great Satan refuses to return to us."

Roget sighed. "All right, we must move quickly to deal with Harris Williams. Have you established your routes of ingress and egress? Is anyone watching you here, or in America?"

Rashad shook his head. "I have come and gone many times without a hitch. Both on passports, and covertly."

Roget thought for a moment. "Then it's time to proceed. With Harris Williams out of the way, I can close the supply deal. Then we'll control Caring First, and be in position for the next phase of our attack upon the United States of America."

#

The living room and adjacent dining room had no furniture, unless one counted the over size beanbag chair Misti had made when they'd first moved into the house. She'd originally rented only the items they needed to get started, it had been their intent to buy individual pieces little by little.

The living room faced south, thus it received a full measure of sunlight during the winter, with loads of indirect light the rest of the year. Misti loved plants, there was a Ficus in the corner, a Palm at one end. With several plant varieties of various sizes growing profusely in between. A virtual potted rain forest. In the center of the forest was the beanbag chair.

Jim Richards scrunched himself into the chair, wiggling his upper torso from side to side to create an indentation custom made for his body. The Styrofoam pellets supported his weight evenly. He rested his head against the mounded back, then gazed at the distant hills beyond the large front window.

He pondered the case, trying to fit all of the pieces together. He did not have incontrovertible proof as yet, but felt certain Allen Maxwell had stolen the accelerant. Money was most likely the reason, though one would think he had sufficient, at least sufficient to make the risk of detection unacceptable. But then greed has no bounds, no logic. Like a fit of jealousy, it simply is.

#

Misti stepped quietly into the room. She stood under the arched entrance that separated the living room from the dining room and gazed at Jim Richards. She wondered if he were asleep, or if he were in one of his ostensible meditative states. Well he wasn't snoring, so he was probably not asleep.

She shook her head, a cynical smile on her lips. There was a time when she found his many unusual qualities endearing. Meditation for example, believing it was in such *states* he exercised and revitalized his intuitive senses. Now, she just wondered why he wasted so much time lying around in the beanbag chair.

Once she'd made her decision to leave, she couldn't wait to get out of the house. But then she'd run into Sharon Wiltz in the bathroom, and noticed her wearing a diamond engagement ring. They'd chatted, and she learned that Sharon had become engaged at the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Engaged to one of the executives over at International whom she'd been dating for years. Engaged on the very weekend Jim had made his trip to Florida.

Misti felt rather foolish then, foolish that she'd suspected her husband of infidelity. But it soon occurred to her the possibility of his cheating had only been the catalyst, not the cause of her discontent. She'd planned to tell him she was leaving, but then it occurred to her he might not be willing to let her go so easily. So she resolved to wait until she had all of her ducks in order, none the least of which was saving enough of her earnings to pay the first and last month's rent on the apartment she intended to lease.

#

Jim Richards sensed Misti's presence in the room. He'd been on the edge of dozing, the transition stage from meditation to light sleep that always refreshed his intellectual powers. He purposely allowed himself to come slowly back to the present, not opening his eyes immediately to avoid increasing his heart rate too suddenly. The rush of adrenaline accompanying such a sudden increase would have the effect of undoing the restorative benefit of the meditation he'd undertaken. As he open his eyes, he noted she was about to turn away. He smiled at her, but her smile in return seemed insincere. Something was wrong. He raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

"I thought you'd fallen a sleep, after all." She said.

He shook his head. "Not really, just, you know, meditating." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

Misti came towards him. She sat down on the carpet, legs curled to one side. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Okay." He said in a level tone of voice.

Head down, she brushed her hand back and forth across the carpet, alternately ruffling then smoothing the nap. Obviously, there was something she

wanted to say that was difficult for her. Jim Richards thought he already knew what it was, things were clearly not going well with them. But what was he to do?

She took a deep breath. Her hand stopped its back and forth motion. She lifted her head and looked directly into his eyes. "I don't feel the same about you anymore." She pursed her lips and shrugged. Then smiled nervously, a wary look in her eyes.

Jim Richards was surprised at how hard the words hit him. An almost electric shock seemed to flow through his body, draining out his feet. But then again it was exactly what he'd expected. They were no longer the passionately in love couple that had arrived in Nashville, so full of excitement and enthusiasm. He'd fooled himself into believing it was just a transitional stage, a maturing perhaps of their relationship. While a little voice in the back of his mind kept saying no, it's a dying relationship.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Can I do anything at all to change your feelings." The question seemed stupid even to his own ears, but he felt he had to say something.

She shook her head. "It's not you, Jim. Not something you've done, or not done. It's me, I...I've just lost the feeling. Like that old song, *Lost that lovin' feelin'.*"

Jim Richards looked away, emptiness inside. He now knew how people felt when they learned they had a terminal illness. When they'd known all along they were sick, and getting sicker. Known there wasn't anything a doctor could do to change the course of events, but still grasped at a straw of hope. Until at last, after all the tests were in, all the options explored, the words were spoken. And the joy for life just sort of drained away.

He swallowed, his throat dry. From the tone of her voice there was no room for negotiation. He nodded his head. "I understand. Do you want to separate? Move out?"

Misti frowned for a moment, surprised at his response. It was not what she'd expected. Or was it? With him, she never knew for certain. Often his opening gambit was apparent capitulation, draw the opponent in, then attack. He was taking this entirely too well. Where was the persuasion, the oh so valid reasons for a change of heart? If she stated now it was her intent to move, would she not be tipping her hand? Thus losing the opportunity to ease away as she had so carefully planned?

Misti shook her head. "No. I don't think so. I don't know. I just wanted to let you know my feelings, or rather lack..."

He took her hand, but she pulled it away. And shook her head.

"I don't understand," he said at last. "But I can empathize. If that's the right word. I still love you, Misti. I really do. I know I don't always show it. I know I'm wrapped up, at the moment in the work at Caring First, but there's light at the end of the tunnel. I promise. We just have to get through the winter. Then in the spring, or summer at the latest, we can decide if it's best to move back to California. I mean our reason for coming here was as much for you to teach, as for me to write music. Neither seems to have worked out."

Misti looked away for a moment, and thought: So there it is, the persuasion at last. A logical plan to resolve the issue. But first, a small step. Plug the wound. Delay the inevitable. *We'll just get through the winter*. Oh God, she thought. I can't stand another winter with him now.

She looked back at him, and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jim. I wish there was something...something concrete. But, you know, I just don't feel the same about you anymore. I believe you love me. I mean it's not that I don't care about you."

Jim Richards nodded his head. And took another deep breath, he felt hypoxic, he must have been holding his breath without realizing it. "If there is anything I can do?"

She shook her head again. "There isn't."

# Chapter Seventeen

Jim Richards climbed the fire stairs at the rear of the Caring First building. The doorway leading to the third floor was locked, he defeated its single cylinder latch with a spring metal credit card.

He glanced at his watch, 21:00. Unlikely anyone would be on the floor. The walk he'd taken around the building, fifteen minutes earlier, had revealed no lights in any of the third floor offices. As he opened the door, he thrust forward a detachable strobe from his thirty-five millimeter camera, setting it off as he stepped through the door. The security camera was too far away to *see* the strobe mechanism, only the initial movement of the opening door would be recorded. The flash would overwhelm its aperture, plunging the video feed into momentary darkness. Like a human eye exposed to a flash bulb, the camera's aperture would take nearly a full second to return to its low light setting.

Jim Richards used the time to cross the hallway, and step into the men's room. He'd learned from his excursion into Monty Regadet's office, the banks of VCRs were not continuously monitored. Rather the tapes were used as a review source to check suspect activity. In this case, the tape would reveal a bright anomaly, it was doubtful anyone reviewing the tape on fast forward would notice the door ajar just before the anomaly presented itself. Factory defects, or tape wear, often-caused image drops outs that appeared as momentary flashes on a video monitor. Whoever reviewed the tape, would assume it was worn or defective.

On his mail rounds earlier in the day, he'd left a sealed cardboard box marked janitorial supplies, under the sink in the men's room. He now opened the box, inside was the equipment he'd need for tonight's activity. He climbed on top of the lavatory counter. Then used it as a platform to reach the acoustical ceiling tiles, which he moved aside to allow access to the space between the third and fourth floor.

Unlike the supply room adjacent to his office, there was no shelving to boost him high enough to reach the steel beams. Jim Richards strapped a pair of drywall stilts onto his tennis shoes to raise himself sufficiently to attach the two safety trolleys he'd use as transportation from the men's room to Jenny Thompson's office.

Another difference between tonight's activity, and his previous excursion, was the need to replace the tiles over the men's room during the time he was

transiting along the beam. He could not afford the possibility of discovery by one of the roving security patrols. He also made certain the open cardboard box left under the sink contained a few common janitorial supplies to support the ruse originally established.

The trip to Jenny's office was uneventful. He temporarily disabled the camera that covered her workspace just as he'd done above Monty's office. Then, after several minutes listening for activity on the floor below, used the climbing rope to lower himself.

Jim Richards checked his watch, 21:50. He looked towards the row of filing cabinets that ran along one wall, going first to the one marked M-O. It took him less than three seconds to defeat the filing cabinet's lock with a master key obtained months earlier from Caring First's office furniture supplier, coincidental to delivery of the cabinets. He quickly found Allen Maxwell's financial records. For all her idiosyncrasies, Jenny Thompson was highly organized.

Jim Richards placed Jenny's desk lamp under her desk, then shielded its light with his body as he proceeded to photograph the entire file with his Minox camera. He then returned the file to its place in the drawer.

He again glanced at his watch. The security guards would begin their rounds of the building's floors at 22:00. Based upon prior observations, they'd not reach the third floor before 22:25, but there was no need to press his luck. He returned the file, closed and locked the file cabinet, then ascended the rope, and replaced the ceiling tile.

The one piece of unwanted intrusion evidence he could not control, were the particles of acoustical tile and dust that would flutter down into Jenny's office, as a result of his disturbing the ceiling tiles. For this reason he'd made certain he'd lowered himself into the office as far away from her desk as possible, and as much out of the normal traffic pattern as feasible. He also made certain he cleaned up the detritus of his entry with a small battery operated vacuum acquired from the service rep who tended their copier machines.

Unfortunately, he could do nothing about the flakes of acoustical material that would fall as he replaced the tiles from above. However, with any luck at all, the roving guards would notice nothing amiss tonight. He'd make certain to arrive in the morning well ahead of anyone on the floor, to assure the carpet and cabinet tops were clean. To cover his morning activity for the reactivated camera, he intended to deliver a potted plant along with the mail, then spill the plant where he'd need to affect the clean up.



It was 23:15 when Jim Richards walked through the door leading into his kitchen. Misti was still up, watching the late news. Richards stuck his head into the family room.

"Hi babe, everything okay?"

"Just hunky dory." She replied without taking her eyes off the television.

"I'll be out in the garage for a few minutes, if you need me." There was no response, and he knew she'd be in bed, asleep, by the time he finished developing and printing the photos he'd taken.

The house was dark when he silently made his way down the hallway to their bedroom, undressed and slipped into bed. Too exhausted to even glance at the material he'd photographed. Tomorrow evening, Misti would be attending night classes at the University of Tennessee. He'd use the time alone to analyze the information collected, then send it on to Ty Harding, along with whatever requests for follow up he felt were needed.

#

Bob Jacobson's office looked east and south from the fifth floor of Caring First's headquarters. Don Dancing came through the open door, an anxious look on his face, a fat file folder under his arm.

Bob Jacobson glanced up from his desk as Don Dancing walked in, clearly something was seriously amiss. Dancing had forgotten to wear his bogus coke bottles, yet carried himself like a man who could see only too clearly. He said nothing by way of greeting. But simply barged in, closed the door, then turned to look at Jacobson.

"We've got problems." Dancing said, in a matter of fact tone. "CIA's guy in Algeria located Julles Louzer."

Jacobson smiled. "You forgot your glasses."

Dancing patted his pockets, then shook his head. "Must have left them on my desk. Sorry."

Jacobson shrugged. "Don't make the mistake of reading any fine print on the way out. What's the story on Louzer?"

"According to Langley, he was taken to an Islamic Jihad training facility inside Algeria."

Jacobson frowned. "What do they want for his return?"

Dancing shook his head slowly. "Not even an option. The facility's used strictly for terrorist training. According to Langley, there's no way he's still alive."

Jacobson swiveled his chair around, and stared out the window for a few moments, then spoke to the vague reflection of Dancing in the glass. "Louzer's been missing for weeks. How long has Langley been sitting on this?"

"It just came through," Dancing replied. "Seems their asset working the western Mediterranean was put on alert the day after Louzer disappeared. By the time he discovered where Louzer had been taken for questioning, his captors were in the process of moving him out to the training facility. Apparently, Langley's guy tried to tag along and arrange an escape, didn't work out."

Jacobson swiveled back around. "Gutsy move, but foolish. If he'd failed to make his own escape, we'd still be wondering what happened."

Dancing nodded his head in agreement, then smiled cynically. "On the other hand, that's what we pay 'em the big bucks for."

Jacobson chuckled. "Yeah, right. Where was Louzer originally held?"

Dancing expression became serious again. "The old monastery at Bel Abbes."

"Oh Christ." Jacobson shook his head. "Bel Abbes is notorious for inquisitions." He stared down at his leather desk pad for a moment. "No chance at all he's still alive?"

Dancing shook his head. "Not one."

"Confirmed in the field?"

"No, however, no one who's not with the Islamic Jihad comes out of the El Bayahd valley alive. Langley's taken high altitude reconnaissance photos of the facility, and received some very reliable human Intel sources as well. Seems the Israelis have captured several trainees over a fairly lengthy period of time. There's no question about it, the prisoners sent there are used exclusively for wet work training. They don't even keep 'em long enough to serve a final meal."

Jacobson sighed. "Poor bastard."

Dancing stared at the file he'd carried in. "Guess his cock got the better of him."

Jacobson shook his head slowly. "I wonder if he thought it was worth it in the end?"

Dancing shrugged. "Probably not."

"How much you figure he gave up?" Even as he asked the question, Jacobson held up his hand, palm forward before Dancing could reply. "Stupid question. He gave up everything he knew."

Dancing's mouth turned downward. "We must assume the Soviets are now aware Yuri and Myra are alive and well. The information provided by the Jihad movement."

Dancing opened the file he'd brought with him. He flipped through several pages until he came to the data he was looking for, then folded the top most pages up out of the way. "I've reviewed Jules Louzer's debrief, following the operation to assist the Sosykas' defection. There's no indication he had any knowledge of where they were relocated. He wasn't even aware of the medical field in which they specialized. So we may be certain he didn't give that information to his inquisitor."

Jacobson nodded his head, then raised one finger. "But remember the entire ruse depended on the Soviets believing Yuri Sosyka was dead. As you say, they're most likely now aware he's alive. How long will it take for them to determine where the Sosykas are located?"

Dancing thought for a moment. "We should assume they've deduced their location already. Certainly they've had enough time to do so. Which means we must move Yuri and Myra immediately. Their lives may be in danger."

Jacobson tilted his head from side to side. "Yes and no. I can't recall the Soviets ever killing one of their scientists, too great an investment in a very limited resource.

"Their usual approach is to convince them to return *voluntarily* to Russia. If that doesn't work, then they apply pressure by threatening the lives of relatives and close friends." Jacobson leaned forward, reaching across the desk. "Let me see that file a moment."

Dancing rose from his chair, and passed the heavy file across the desk. Bob Jacobson flipped the pages down and started from the front.

"Interesting," he mused. "This case was originally initiated by Allen Maxwell."

Dancing tapped his front teeth with the end of his index finger, ruminating. "Didn't Maxwell run a unit back in his Army days that studied some of the same material as the Sosykas'. Seems to me he made their acquaintance years ago at some conference or another, held in Eastern Europe."

Jacobson made no reply at first, he seemed absorbed in reading through the file. "Judging from this, it looks like the Soviets have no leverage back home. The Sosykas have no children, no immediate family."

Jacobson rubbed his fingers along his jaw line. "My guess is they'll use a resident agent to contact Yuri, or Myra. Then over a period of time try to get them to cooperate by sharing their research findings. World good and all that, typical Russkie deal, we pay for the work, they steal the results."

Jacobson thought a moment. "This may be the perfect opportunity for us to identify a Russkie *sleeper*, they're bound to use one. Later *we* can use the sleeper for disinformation. Might make the whole exercise worth the effort. I'll get something off to Langley today, see if they can't get a team down to Duke to lay back and surveil."

Dancing nodded his head, then rose from his chair and reached for the file.

Bob Jacobson placed his hand over it. "Leave it, I want to give it a thorough going over. One thing bugs me, can't figure why Islamic Jihad would have any interest at all in Jules Louzer?"

Dancing raised an eyebrow. "There's an inquisitor in Algeria, known as Al Doktor. Hires himself out to the highest bidder. Right now the Iranians are paying pretty good, but he still maintains his contacts at KGB."

Jacobson's eyebrows went up. "So the inquisitor convinces Islamic Jihad to pick up Louzer for G.P. 'cause he's heard rumors Louzer might know something worth paying for. Then Al Doktor does his thing, and passes any collateral material on to the Soviets, giving Jihad only that which they specifically asked for, whatever in the hell that might have been."

Dancing thought about it for a moment. "Could be the Soviets employed Al Doktor in the first place. Let's say KGB ran a full background check on the East German, Jules Louzer pretended to be. Then figured out the guy's been dead for ten years"

Jacobson pulled on his ear lobe. "They compared the Oester Deutsch's file photo to Louzer's. Saw they looked similar but not identical, then started

searching, using anyone available to assist, including Islamic Jihad, and Al Doktor."

Dancing nodded his head in agreement. "Which means they suspected a defection long before Louzer confirmed it."

Jacobson shook his head cynically. "If so, we're even farther behind the eight ball then we thought."

#

Yuri Sosyka quietly slipped from beneath the sheets, careful not to disturb Myra. He glanced at the lighted numerals on the clock radio next to the bed, it was five-thirty in the morning. The sun would rise at six-fifteen, and so would his wife. Her circadian rhythms had quickly adapted to the milder climate of the United States. And though it had snowed this past winter in Durham, North Carolina, to Yuri it wasn't really winter, at least not the winters they'd known in the Soviet Union.

Yuri stepped into a pair of fleece sweat pants, pulled on a T-shirt, then slipped his feet into a pair of shearling lined leather moccasins. He descended the stairs of their modest Tudor home, on the campus of Duke University. The home provided to them by the school's Regents, paid for, he was sure, by the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

Yuri padded softly into the kitchen, then smiled at the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. He loved Mr. Coffee. Of all the many material items, and conveniences now available to him, this simple machine seemed to bring him the most pleasure. A device completely unavailable in Moscow, even on the black market. For some reason no one had yet thought to import Mr. Coffee. Probably, because coffee wasn't the beverage of choice back home, its availability restricted by price and supply.

Yuri poured himself an oversize mug, added copious quantities of sugar, and plenty of milk. Then stepped out onto the patio, taking a seat on one of the cushioned wrought iron chairs paired to an outdoor dining table.

This was his favorite time of day. The quiet of early morning, before even the birds awakened. A time for thought of the future, and the past. The air fragrant with magnolia. The sun was just beginning to rise beyond the hills to the east, casting a golden red glow that reminded him of sunset. A new day beginning in America, and just ending in the Soviet Union.

America turned out to be all he'd expected it to be, proof, if one truly needed such, that capitalism, and not communism, was the economy of choice.

Economic growth was only possible when people of entrepreneurial talent had the incentive of monetary success. The Soviet Union made a grave mistake taking the simplistic path of communism. Which stifled growth, instead of encouraging it. Rewarded corruption, as the most aggressive turned *public service* into personal aggrandizement.

Of course, America had its *apparatchiks* too, in some ways its bureaucracies were even more pervasive. In fact, if the most recent census was to be believed there were more people employed in government positions, both state and federal, than in the entire manufacturing sector. Yuri shook his head, amazing, and sad. America's strength was in her ability to out produce any other nation. That advantage would not last long if the current trend continued; government produces nothing of value. Yuri took a solid pull at his coffee. It had cooled to the point where it was now quite drinkable, and he was not one to sip at anything.

In only one aspect was he thoroughly disappointed with the experience of living in the United States: It was the lack of prestige attendant to his work, and it gnawed at him daily in a way he would never have expected. Of course, how could he have anticipated that such a situation would exist. After all it was America that led the world in scientific discovery and technological innovation. He chuckled cynically to himself. In America an emaciated, pimply kid with the education of a fourth grader, and the musical ability of a chimpanzee, garnered more attention, and often greater monetary reward, than the most highly educated scientist. How could it be?

In the Soviet Union, every youngster aspired to attain the prestige of a scientist. To have the golden opportunity to pursue such an education was considered the epitome of success. Every school child knew who the great scientists of their country were, as well as, the great and wonderful discoveries they made for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In America, *bah!*. Only the *intelligentsia* knew or cared. This had come as a great shock to Yuri. He was a man driven, not by the need for great wealth, though he expected to live well and as a matter of fact had lived very well by the standards of Russia, rather he was driven by the need to be recognized. Recognized not only by his peers, but by the students who shared his campus. And by others with whom he came into casual contact. He basked in the glow of recognition. But it seemed there was none for him in the United States of America.

Well none was not entirely accurate, he had to admit. His colleagues certainly recognized his accomplishments, sought his advice and opinions. As did the United States government. Otherwise, why would they have gone to such great effort to proselytize him from the Soviet Union? Yuri sighed, then took

another pull at his coffee, and watched the sun peek its head over the tops of the nearby hills.

He heard Myra puttering about in the kitchen. Soon she too came onto the patio, carrying a cup of freshly steeped tea. She did not care for coffee.

Myra was a petit, attractive woman, several years younger than Yuri. She'd been one of his star students when he taught at the University of Moscow, as a younger man. When the fifteen-year difference between their ages had not mattered. When, in fact, it had enhanced his ability to seduce her. The way an aging rock star might easily seduce an impressionable young fan. Except that beyond the sexual chemistry of a professor-student affair, there was the intellectual capacity for mutual growth and understanding.

When the Ministry of Science had chosen Yuri to head up their gene identification project, he'd asked Myra to be his assistant and his wife. And she'd agreed, knowing he could provide her a life of intellectual growth and relative comfort, available only to a very few in Russian society.

At first that had been enough, but then they'd been allowed to travel *west* to scientific conferences in Paris and London, and once even to New York. And Myra began to long for something more than would ever be available to her in the U.S.S.R.

Yuri was no fool. The idea a scientist is so narrow minded he cannot see the forest for the trees is a haggard concept. Perpetrated, perhaps, by the antics of Alfred Einstein who feigned a persona of absent-mindedness for reasons he never made clear.

Yuri had been well aware of Myra's desires, and of the fact his sexual attractiveness would not grow with age. He had been painfully aware she would leave him - how was it said? In a New York minute. If the opportunity ever came for her to emigrate west, particularly to the United States of America.

In due time, American intelligence picked up on that fact, how could they not, it was their job and they were very good at it. So the manuscript eventually developed to affect their defection was not all that far from the truth, thought Yuri. He was not a blind man, but he was a man in love. In love with the same woman for fifteen years. And he could only hope the change would be all Myra needed, certainly it seemed to be so, for they had never been as happy together as they were now.

"Good morning," he said as she sat down in the chair next to him. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did. And you?"

"Yes."

They sat in silence for a long moment enjoying the rising of the sun, feeling its warmth gradually grow as it rose above the tops of the eastern hills.

"It's been almost a year since we left our home, Myra. Do you have any regrets? Are you happy with the work we are doing now?"

She continued to look at the sunrise for several moments before answering. Yuri gazed at the delicate curve of her neck, the firm line of her jaw, her aristocratic nose. She had the refined appearance of Czarist royalty, rather than the Slavic look so common to their country. She was, and always would be, beautiful in his eyes.

Myra turned towards him. "It is fulfilling work, yes. But a little disappointing to find so few in America have any interest in all we have accomplished. Still, I'm not homesick. There's nothing that would make me want to return to the Soviet Union.

"And what about you, Yuri. Are you homesick. Do you wish for the recognition you once had?"

Yuri shook his head. "Not really. There are times when I'm saddened that we must work in relative obscurity. Times when I wish we could share our findings with those who will follow in our footsteps back home. For although the United States leads the world in the application of scientific findings, there is a paucity of pure research in this country, in that respect the Soviet Union is far ahead."

Myra blew across the brim of her mug to cool her beverage, then took a sip of tea. "That is the choice we made when we elected to come here, my love. And I for one do not regret it."

#

David Shane watched Myra Sosyka cross the closely trimmed grass of the common area, heading towards the Student Union. He'd been surveiling the Sosykas for quite sometime, trying to decide which of the two defectors would be the easiest to approach.

Yuri was the brain trust of the two, the one the United States would carefully guard. Where as Myra was expendable, if it came right down to it. That



was his opinion, at least, based upon KGB dossiers read at the start of the assignment.

The advantage of targeting Myra, was it gave him two equally effective approaches: One, a straightforward seduction. If successful, her disloyalty would be brought to Yuri's attention by other KGB operatives, with himself portrayed as her American lover. The resulting pain and anger would drive Yuri back into the arms of mother Russia.

A second, or perhaps concomitant approach, was to convince Myra that sharing of their research was in the best interest of both nations. If this approach were successful, and intelligence gained, the liaison would be allowed to run its course thus increasing the debauchery of Yuri's trust, virtually assuring his ultimate return to the U.S.S.R..

#

Myra Sosyka, turned left into the entrance of the Student Union. She walked along the hallway towards the main cafeteria where she intended to have a Chef's salad for lunch. She picked up one of the fiber glass trays stacked at the head of the food service line, then set it down on the stainless steel rails that ran along the counter. She selected a knife, fork, and spoon, from plastic containers that held hundreds of utensils. Pulled several paper napkins from a chrome dispenser, then began to slide the tray along the railings.

There were other restaurants on campus that provided full table service. And there were hamburger and pizza concessions also. But Myra preferred to see the almost unlimited variety of food steaming in stainless steel warmers, as she progressed along the line. This, after so many months in America, was still the most amazing display of food to Myra. In the Soviet Union, in the town where she had grown up, such a cafeteria was unheard of.

Perhaps in the spring, in her hometown, there would be some fresh greens. And in a good year, a full supply of beef. Any beef; cuts were not important. Who in her hometown had ever heard of grades of beef? Choice or Prime? Good lord, did such a thing really exist?

But in America, it was all taken for granted. At any time of the year, any kind of food was available. As much as anyone could desire, all of excellent quality, with grades to choose from if one were so inclined.

When Myra had first stood at the head of the line in this very cafeteria, she had cried. Tears had streamed down her face. Not tears of joy, but tears of sadness for all of the little ones at home who'd never experience the pleasure of

seeing such a variety of food. Who'd never savor the simple pleasure of knowing they'd not want for food again.

It was not that Myra herself had suffered, she'd been lucky. Later as she grew to womanhood, it was seen she was intelligent and attractive. Then fortuitous circumstance had brought her to the attention of Yuri. And he'd always assured she had food to eat, the best the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had to offer. But it was not until she stood at the head of this very line that she realized how limited that menu had been.

When she'd traveled to the *west*, she had, of course, eaten wonderful meals. But she assumed these were available only to persons of her status, for it was clear the restaurants and hotels in which they ate on such occasions were patronized by the wealthiest and most educated of the west.

Not until she first made her way along this food line, did she realize the paucity of socialized economics. The gross failure of the U.S.S.R to secure the most basic of needs. It was at that moment she converted to an unwavering belief in capitalism, and her loyalty to the United States of America sealed.

Myra slid her tray along the stainless steel rails, breathing the aromas of the food line. And she remembered when they'd first arrived, she'd gained an enormous amount of weight, because she ate as if it was all a dream, and she would one day awaken to find herself back in the rude cottage of her youth, staring in despair at boiled cabbage and a half a potato. But it was Yuri who'd brought her back to reality with the simple phrase: "Sweetheart, you're getting fat!" And then he'd laughed. But she wanted to please him, and she knew he'd been attracted to her as much because of her figure, as her mind. And she wanted to always please him because he'd brought her to this wonderful place, where she'd never have to fear the future again.

She'd joined the campus health club, reduced the amount of food she ate, and soon returned to her normal weight. Now she could pass by the food, enjoying the aromas, on her way to ordering what she believed to be the freshest salad in the world.

#

David Shane set an iced *mocha latte* down onto an umbrellared metal table outside the Student Union cafeteria. The open-air patio looked out over one of the campus commons. Students strolled between classes, while others sat in the shade cast by trees to study. He pulled a molded plastic chair out from under the table, and sat down. He was careful to position himself in such a way as to observe Myra Sosyka from behind dark sunglasses, while assuring his body

language appeared to convey no interest in the woman who sat less than five feet away.

Today was the first day he'd allowed his stalking to bring him this close to his target. His KGB Control Officer, Viktor Koroleva, had cautioned him to make certain Myra was not under protective surveillance when he made contact. Over a period of several weeks he'd gradually closed on his target. He'd carefully observed her routine movements about campus, the people she interacted with, and those in her immediate vicinity with whom she did not interact. He also spent time observing peripheral areas, to see if she were being watched at a distance. The end result of all his observation was a confirmation of the conclusion he'd originally drawn from her dossier, she was not important enough to warrant full time security.

David Shane considered himself a *ladies man*, he was confident his athletic good looks and casual charm would make him attractive to Myra. He also knew that no long-term relationship, not even Yuri and Myra's, could remain fresh. And this was the Achilles heel he intended to capitalize upon.

In the process of surveiling Myra, there were naturally many times when he'd also have Yuri within his line of observation. And he'd specifically looked for tell tale signs of staleness in their relationship. The lack of common courtesies, such as opening a door, or holding a coat. His observations showed several fractures in their relationship. And as his observations continued, his confidence grew. He had the skills necessary to exploit the fractures observed, and gradually gain her confidence. Then as the seduction progressed, he'd work on her willingness to share the fruits of her labor with him. Exactly why she would want to do so was not yet clear to David Shane, but he knew with time, as their relationship progressed, he would figure out which *buttons* needed to be pushed to elicit the information he desired.

Today looked like a good day to begin. The preliminaries of target acquisition were complete. He'd now waited a week for the opportune moment. A moment when Myra was alone, relaxed, and in what he considered to be a receptive mood. Right now, he judged, was such a time, as she pushed her plate away, and sat back languidly to enjoy the warm North Carolina sun.

#

Susan Price was a first year student in criminal psychology. Her career goal, to join the FBI as a *profiler*. She was an attractive girl with dark brown hair, a pleasant, though not extraordinary face, and a full figure.

In the summer when she wasn't attending classes, she could be found at the drama department rehearsing, learning lines for the plays in which she loved

to act. It wasn't so much the limelight she loved, nor a desire for fame and fortune. It was the opportunity to dress up in period costume, to change appearance with make up and appliances. To be, for a short time, someone else. Perhaps it was a carry over from the happy days of her childhood, when she would *dress up* in her grandmother's clothes, discovered in an old chest in the attic. The old dresses, hats, jewelry, and feather boas. What fun. To escape for a little while to another time and place.

But Susan was by nature a serious girl. And when it came to the course of her life, she was conscientious about the need to plot it out carefully. Unlike many of her peers, she'd not selected a career at random. She'd studied the literature written on the subject. Visited the FBI. And taken the aptitude tests freely given to those whose grade point average, and preliminary background checks, had shown them to be of the exemplary character and intelligence.

Susan knew once her studies were complete, she was virtually assured a job in her chosen field. And she knew also, that from time to time, opportunities would arise, on a temporary basis, for her to *get her feet wet* doing something minor for the FBI, under the quiet junior cadet program, run for those future recruits identified as especially desirable candidates. After all, it was important to assure the Bureau got the cream of the crop.

And so it had not really come as any great surprise to her, when she was approached and offered a temporary job, by a man who said he was with the Bureau. Whose appearance, demeanor, and impeccable identification, seemed to assure he was a member of their elite counter-intelligence division. She certainly did not mind at all supplementing the allowance her parents provided, with the money she'd make for what seemed to her to be a very simple job. One that would even give her the opportunity to *dress up*.

For the man who'd hired her, who'd provided her with all the necessary equipment she'd need. Who'd given her a telephone number through which to contact him twenty-four hours a day. Who'd provided code words and counter-code words to allow her to make absolutely certain she was talking to a legitimate contact, had said that it was very important for her to never look like herself. Or to ever look the same as on any previous day, when she performed her task of photographic surveillance.

As David Shane crossed the short space between his table and Myra's, then asked politely if he might sit with her, he unknowingly presented a full frontal face to the lens of Susan's purse camera.

Before the day was over, Susan Price had photographed David Shane from every conceivable angle. She'd photographed the car he drove. And in a flash of opportunistic brilliance, had the audacity to surveil him, in one of five

vehicles she had complete access to, all the way back to the convalescent home, where she assumed he probably worked when not wasting his time following Professor Yusef Ben Josef's wife around the campus of Duke University.

#

Nelson Banderhof rolled over, and looked at the digital read out on the electric clock next to his bed, nine in the morning. He rolled onto his back and stared blankly at the ceiling for several moments, contemplating a minor communications problem he needed to solve. The rotation of shifts at Langley now had him scheduled for the *swing* shift, three PM 'till eleven in the evening. The perfect shift for a single guy like himself. Lots of time after work to party, to prowl the watering holes looking for something warm and willing, followed by a late morning sleep in to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Unfortunately, the swing shift wasn't as ideal for his other line of work, finding and passing secrets to his contact.

Banderhof slipped out of bed and padded to the bathroom. After washing the sleep from his eyes, he put on a terry cloth robe, then opened the cabinet under the sink. He reached to the very back, and withdrew a black leather Dopp kit. He carried the kit over to the nightstand, then sat down on the edge of the bed. Removing a portable scrambler, he prepared the device for immediate hook up.

# Chapter Eighteen

The telephone buzzed softly on her desk, the cacophony of a standard ring not allowed in the executive suite. Misti glanced at the console, it was Allen Maxwell's line. When Michael Fitzgerald wanted to talk to her, he always came to the door of his office, observed if she were engaged in a conversation, then waited for her to finish. But Maxwell observed no such protocol, when he wanted her, he simply picked up the phone. If she did not respond immediately, he made certain she was aware he wasn't happy. At first this was an aggravation to her, but after a year of massaging his ego she'd become accustomed to his idiosyncrasies and did not give it a second thought. Misti swiveled her chair around, then walked into Maxwell's office.

"Mr. Maxwell, what can I do for you?" She'd never called him Allen, he'd not given her permission.

Maxwell smiled unctuously. "Sit down, Misti. I have a favor to ask of you."

Misti took one of two curved leather chairs that stood across from his desk.

"I need you to find a file for me."

Misti nodded her head, and smiled. A nervous habit that gave the impression of being too willing to do anything asked of her.

"It's in Bob Jacobson's office. He's out of town on business. I asked him to send it over to me before he left, but he forgot as usual."

Misti frowned, Norma Odell was Bob's secretary. "Have you mentioned it to Norma?"

A look of irritation crossed Maxwell's face, he didn't appreciate anyone second-guessing him. He quickly softened his expression. "No I haven't Misti." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Just between you and me, Norma's primary function around here is to take long lunches. Yet, she acts as if she's his gatekeeper. It doesn't matter how innocuous the request, if Bob hasn't given her specific instructions, she'll refuse." He paused for a moment. "I know for certain Bob's made no mention of returning the file."

"Oh. Then it's your file?" Misti asked almost too quickly.

Maxwell nodded his head once. "A project I've been working on for quite some time. He was supposed to give me an estimate of land costs."

"Where will I find it?" Misti asked.

"In the file cabinet in his office, under M. The project's name is: MedEx - an expansion project for our Mediterranean division."

Misti raised her eyebrows unconsciously, thought for a moment then frowned. "When I was first given a tour of the floor, Miss Foldenstein pointed out his file cabinets to me. She said they were always locked, *secured* was how she put it. And that Mr. Jacobson was the only one with a key."

Maxwell smiled, then shook his head slowly. "There's another key. You're probably not aware of this, because you have little interaction with Bob, but the guy locks his keys in his car at least once a week. He's always having to call Monty for assistance. He'd forget his own head, if it weren't attached. And there are times when I'm not convinced it is." He chuckled, then continued. "There's another key, for those times when Bob forgets his. It's in the center drawer of Norma's desk, on a key chain with a little cable car attached. You know, like the one's out in Frisco." He glanced at his watch. "It's eleven-thirty. My guess is Norma's already gone to lunch." Then he paused, the rest of his request unstated.

"Won't Mr. Jacobson miss the file?"

Maxwell shrugged. "I doubt it. If anything, he'll think he gave it back to me as he was supposed to in the first place."

Misti nodded her head once, then got up from her chair. "It might be best if I wait until just after noon. Then there will be no one else in that area. No one to mention anything to Norma."

Maxwell smiled broadly. "Very good. No sense stirring the pot anymore than we have to."

"Will you still be here? Shall I leave the file on your desk?"

Maxwell's face lost all expression for a moment, almost as if he'd not heard her. "No don't do that." He said after a moment. "I have a lunch meeting, another immediately following." He thought for a moment longer. "Tell you what, would you mind terribly dropping it by my house after work? It's just down the

road, on the south side of Belle Mead." He scribbled his address on a page of notepaper.

#

Jim Richards had just completed the mid-month figures for the Duplicating Center. The charge-back plan, he'd designed, had been fully accepted by Caring First's departments. Quarterly budgets now reflected Center use, and everyone seemed happy with the service they were getting on their projects. A small task in the scheme of things, nevertheless, Richards was proud of the fact he'd resolved a thorny issue.

He placed the Duplicating ledger on a shelf just to the left of his desk, then turned around, planning to head on up to the second floor to pick up an envelope that needed to be taken across town. He was startled to see Misti standing in the doorway.

When he'd first come to work at Caring First, they'd agreed to keep their personal contact in the office to a minimum, in order not to draw attention to themselves. They were the only married couple working in the building. It had always been an unwritten policy of Caring First not to hire married couples. Of course, office romances occurred, but in the past a child had normally foreshortened the tenure of the wife. However, as time went by everyone came to accept the two of them, and their relationship became a non-issue. Thereafter, it was not unusual to see Misti entering his office around lunchtime. At least that had been the case until the strain in their relationship began to manifest itself.

Jim Richards was pleased to see Misti in the doorway. His first inclination was to interpret her unexpected presence as an indication she was hoping to join him for lunch, which he would otherwise take alone. But that thought quickly left his mind as he rapidly realized it was only 10:00. Perhaps she needed a project completed, usually she just telephoned, but occasionally she'd come down *to stretch her legs*. However, she had no files in her hand, and appeared dressed to leave the building. These thoughts passed through his mind in fractions of a second, and it took perhaps a moment more to see there was a look of embarrassment on her face. She looked as if she were about to burst into tears.

"Misti, what's wrong?" He asked, and moved towards her.

She turned away, and shook her head. "We'd better talk somewhere else. Perhaps the supply room would be more private."

"Of course." He reached into his pocket and extracted a set of keys. They crossed the hall, then stepped inside.



"What's the matter?" He asked with concern in his voice.

"I've been fired." Her voice tinged with anger and embarrassment.

Richards frowned. "I thought everything was going well?"

"So did I." She smiled ironically, but her eyes were tearing. She was on the verge of breaking down. He moved to embrace her, but she turned away again. "I think I was set up...by Allen Maxwell."

Richards' frown deepened. "What do you mean set up?"

"Remember when I got that file from Jenny Thompson's office? And you warned me to be careful, that Maxwell was not to be trusted."

Richards straightened his shoulders, tucked in his chin momentarily in surprise. "Yes, but that was weeks ago."

Misti shook her head. "I wasn't fired for that incident, but I think I was only lucky as things didn't come off as Maxwell planned."

Jim Richards shook his head incredulously. "I'm not following your train of thought, Misti."

"I mean that I think I was supposed to get caught, but wasn't. This time my luck ran out."

"He asked you to get another file out of Jenny's office?"

She shook her head. "No. Out of Mr. Jacobson's."

Richards stood perfectly still, his eyes narrowed. "Allen Maxwell asked you to go into Bob Jacobson's office to retrieve a file? From where... his desk? Lying out in the open?"

She shook her head, her eyes wide with embarrassment. It seemed so foolish in retrospect. "No, from his locked files."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "What possible excuse did Maxwell give that led you to believe he, or you, had a right to access those files?"

Misti took a deep breath. "He said the file belonged to him. That it was a project he was developing. That Mr. Jacobson was supposed to do the land costs

for him. He needed the file for a meeting he was attending." She shrugged once, her palms turned upward.

Richards shook his head slowly. On the one hand, he felt sorry for her. On the other, he could not help feeling reproachful for her breach of decorum. "How were you found out?"

Misti sighed, tears filled her eyes. "Norma Odell caught me red handed." She sniffed, pulled a Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose, then wiped away her tears. Jim Richards made no further move to comfort her. She continued her explanation. "I went to her desk, and got the spare key. It was right where Allen Maxwell said it would be. I made certain everyone in the department had gone to lunch. It was twelve-thirty, Norma always goes early, and comes back late. This time, as it turned out, she'd run an errand, and had come back with the intent to work through her lunch hour."

Richards stepped over to one of the supply shelves, leaned against it. "When did all this happen?"

"Last week. I was too embarrassed to tell you. At first I thought everything would be all right. Norma didn't seem upset with me. She just said that Allen Maxwell had no authority to ask me to do such a thing. That I should have come to her with the request.

"Several days went by, I heard nothing further. And Mr. Jacobson said nothing when he returned the following day. I thought the issue had been resolved. That Norma had spoken with Maxwell." She dabbed at her eyes again.

"Anyway this morning, just a little while ago, Howard McFarland called me into his office. He said he realized the incident was not entirely my fault, that I'd been misinformed by Maxwell, but the bottom line was they could not have a secretary at the executive level who'd violate protocol."

Jim Richards felt his face beginning to flush. Clearly, Maxwell had given her up, saved his own butt by claiming she wasn't telling the truth. That he'd never asked her to get into Jacobson's files. That Misti had taken it upon herself to try to help him out. Richards could almost hear Maxwell's mealy, mouthed explanation. He'd be apologetic, blame himself, while his tone of voice inferred she was an *incomp* who should've known better. And then he'd have alluded to the fact, all the confusion was the result of sharing secretaries, getting temporary help from the outside. And couldn't they have found someone internally in the first place? Someone who understood how things worked around there.

Jim Richards looked over at Misti. She steeled herself for his reproach.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Sorry I ever brought you here. We should've stayed in San Francisco." He crossed the space between them, and embraced her.

She broke away from his embrace then turned away to blow her nose again, as if that were her reason.

"You know," he said, "we can fight this thing if you want. They've no right to fire you under these circumstances, not really. Granted you broke an unwritten rule. But you were following the request of a superior."

She shook her head. "Oh I don't care about the damn job. In fact, Mr. McFarland has already offered me something on the second floor."

Jim Richards frowned at the contradiction. "So you weren't fired?"

"I was fired from my position as executive secretary." Misti replied, her voice defensive.

"You mean demoted."

"Demoted, fired...it means the same to me. How can I continue here? The smug looks from all the girls below who covet my former position, who were angered by the fact they were passed over by someone from the outside. A temp no less." She shook her head vehemently. "No I cannot accept a demotion. I'll find other work to do."

Richards took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"Anyway," she went on, her voice dropping an octave. "It's probably for the best. There's a teaching position open in the Williamson County School District. It'll be a cut in pay, if I get it, but a start. I have an appointment tomorrow morning. Mr. McFarland, and even Michael Fitzgerald, have assured me they'll give good references. But I wouldn't ask Mr. Maxwell for the time of day."

Jim Richards nodded his understanding.

"You know it's funny. I was just now cleaning out my desk, the executive suite was deserted this morning. Guess they're all out of the office at meetings. Anyway, Bob Jacobson stopped by. Said he was sorry, I was leaving. And he wished I'd reconsider taking the job on the second floor. Said it would most likely be only a temporary spot, that International would have some openings after the first of the year. Then he said the oddest thing: *They'd appreciate your skills over there.*"

Jim Richards felt a cold chill flow through his body. He knew the implications of such a statement. "Misti, did you by any chance look at the contents of the file you took?"

She looked at him as if he'd struck her in the face. "Of course not, I'm not a snoop you know?."

"I wasn't inferring you were, but from your reaction, I surmise you were asked the same question by others."

"More than once in rather different ways."

"By Mr. Jacobson?"

A momentary frown crossed her face. "As matter of fact, no. Isn't it ironic, the one person who should be most concerned, never even asked the question. He at least believes I'm an honest person." She stared at Richards for a moment, her eyes defiant. "Look, I have to run. I want to get my resume and transcripts copied for tomorrow's interview."

#

Jim Richards walked into his office, he stepped behind his desk and sat down. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Misti had indicated her interview with the school district was scheduled for eleven that morning.

He stared down at the top of his desk, pinched the bridge of his nose. The wilderness of mirrors was beginning to overwhelm him. The more he delved into Caring First, the more convoluted the picture. But one thing was clear, Allen Maxwell was definitely a mole. And apparently Bob Jacobson thought so too. The file Misti had accessed was obviously bait, set to see who'd bite. Which explained why he had no interest in whether or not she'd read it. And no real concern about the fact she'd taken it. In fact, it appeared her loyalty to Allen Maxwell was a trait Jacobson admired. Why else would he have dangled the offer of downstream opportunity in the International division?

Maybe he should go ahead and meet with Jacobson, get things out in the open so they could all work together. Almost imperceptibly, Jim Richards shook his head. That was not his assignment. Report to Ty Harding, no one else.

He sighed, fiddled with some paper work on his desk, going through routine operations while his mind ruminated on the situation. His telephone rang. Jim Richards stared at the console, hearing the sound, yet not responding to it. Another ring. This time it broke through to his consciousness. He reached for it,

automatically lifting the receiver to his ear. The thoughts on which he'd been concentrating fading into the background of his mind. "Hello, this is Jim."

"I'm sorry to have to call you like this. You don't know me, I was just a passer by." A man's voice. There was an urgency in the voice, it brought instant fear to Jim Richards' mind.

"What's happened?" Richards asked.

"Now I don't want to worry you, everything's going to be all right. I don't think it's as serious as it looked at first.

Richards' heart began to race. A taste of copper came to his mouth. "Please tell me, what has happened?"

There was a moment of silence, perhaps as long as a heartbeat. The caller seemed to be trying to find a way to break the news as gently as possible. In the end, he could only blurt out the facts. "Your wife's been in an automobile accident, a head-on collision. They took her to St. Thomas."

#

The interior of the room was square, its dimensions ten feet by ten feet. The walls and ceiling composed of a gray acoustical foam that gave the appearance of upside down egg cartons. Behind the foam was acoustical tile board, backed by dense polyurethane attached to high-density foam studs. A one-foot airspace existed between the inner walls and the outer walls. Within this airspace, tiny pizeo-electric speakers created an invisible wall of white noise.

The floor was carpeted in a cut Berber wool overlying an acoustical pad, set a top dense foam that rode upon foam joists that rested on a concrete slab. The space between the sub-flooring and the slab was likewise protected by white noise generators.

To enter the room, one passed through an airlock via a set of single doors. The outer door composed entirely of billet aluminum, the inner of the same dense foam as the interior walls. Inside *the box* there was a small oblong conference table made of bird's eye maple, polished to a glass like finish. The table was surrounded by four curved armchairs, upholstered in caribou leather. Dr. Richard Holt sat in one of the chairs. Elmo Jefferson in another. The room was the most secure location for conversation within CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia.

Three thousand miles away, in a similar room in San Francisco, Ty Harding waited for the secure line to his sound proof installation to ring. One

thousand miles away, Don Dancing and Bob Jacobson occupied an identical room inside Caring First International's office building, just south, and across the driveway, from the executive offices.

At exactly 10:00AM Eastern time, 9:00AM Central time, and 7:00AM Pacific time green diodes on each of their secure phone consoles blinked. At each console a finger depressed the teleconference button, simultaneously activating microphones and speakers.

Unlike *speakerphone* options on standard telephone consoles, the participants did not have to wait for one person to completely finish speaking before another could comment. The transmission outputs and inputs were on separate dedicated lines, with independent repeater equipment slaved to underground fiber optics. And because the teleconference was conducted in acoustically neutral rooms, fitted with ultra-sensitive microphones, voice transmissions had none of the echo found in standard speakerphone set-ups. It was as if the participants were in the same room.

Elmo Jefferson began the conversation by announcing his name, and title. Since they all knew each other on sight, it was easy to visualize the appearance of the person behind the voice. Lending an almost face-to-face quality to the conversation. It was as close as one could get until the day video conferencing was finally perfected.

"All right," Jefferson said. "Now that we're all on line, let's begin our discussion with the facts as we understand them today. We've concluded from three separate sources: Jim Richards, Bob Jacobson, and Steve Sheffield that Allen Maxwell has most likely *screwed the pooch*.. However, to date we still have no idea of what his motivation is, with whom he's working, or if there are accomplices within Caring First.

"Therefore, we've a decision to make: Do we go ahead and arrest Maxwell, and attempt to ring the truth out of him? Or do we let the operation run to see if we can identify the other parties involved, and perhaps use their pipeline to our advantage? If we choose to let it run, do we leave our current *insert* in place?

"Let's open the discussion with Bob Jacobson, as his was the final piece to the puzzle with regard to Maxwell."

There was a moment of silence, then Jacobson's voice came on the line.

"I think we should let the operation run. At the very least, we need to find out who Maxwell is passing his information to, which may or may not be the same person to whom he sold the missing vial of accelerant."

"I would agree completely," Dancing said, "but I have some concerns about Jim Richards continued effectiveness."

"Really?" Ty Harding broke in. "I was under the impression he'd done an excellent job?"

"He has," Dancing agreed. "However, he's come to the attention of Howard McFarland. McFarland's a constant worrier. And was against Richards being hired in the first place, doesn't like husband-wife relationships at work. Now he's afraid Richards will try to *get even* in some petty way for his wife's termination.

"McFarland spoke with Jim Richards yesterday, right after Misti left the building, just to let him know the company had no hard feelings, and wouldn't hold it against him in terms of future opportunity. He said Richards was completely cordial.

"Somehow McFarland decided the reaction was abnormal. That Jim Richards should have been a little angry. Now McFarland's worried he might be one of those silent time bombs, you read about at the post office.

"After our meeting, I saw McFarland head into Monty Regadet's office. Later, I ran into Monty. He had a smug look on his face, said something to the effect Jimmy needed watching, that he intended to put him under a microscope. Monty's never cared much for Richards anyway."

There was a another moment of silence. Then Harding came on line.

"Doesn't look good. Monty's a big question mark himself, based on the information we've been getting from Richards. He's supposed to be running security there at Caring First, but if I understand Jim Richards correctly, a lot of the data Monty's gathered has not been passed up the line. Misti's intrusion into Jenny Thompson's office, for example. Could be Monty Regadet and Maxwell are two peas in a pod?"

"Could be," Elmo replied. "But if so, Regadet hasn't bit on any of the bait we've offered so far. Could be he's exactly what he seems to be, a rude voyeur, with an over blown opinion of himself, and the importance of the position he holds. Right now Maxwell's our only solid suspect."

"So do we leave Jim Richards in place, or recall him?" Harding asked.

"I'd pull him out." Dancing said.

"Problem is," interjected Elmo. "It would take several months to get another insert up to speed. Jim Richards is quite resourceful, I'm sure he'll find a way to continue operating."

Dr. Holt spoke for the first time. "You know, we really have very limited information at this time. But I tend to agree, Jim Richards may have run out his usefulness for the very reasons Mr. Dancing has outlined.

"You see, it really doesn't matter which side Monty's on, he's too much of an oaf to play any sort of major role in this scenario. But he's just enough of a pain in the ass to make it impossible for Richards to continue in his current capacity.

"It's rather ironic, so much of what Jim Richards has been able to provide us was based upon information inadvertently uncovered by his wife." Dr. Holt let this thought hang for a moment. "Perhaps a team effort inside Caring First is the way to go. I'd like to give some thought to that concept. In the meantime, we should leave Jim Richards right where he is, even if he is unable to uncover any new information. At the very least, he may keep Monty Regadet occupied.

"I'll give some serious thought to how we may proceed to a successful close of this case. Ty, I want you to tell Jim Richards to become gradually disgruntled, say over the next four to six weeks. Then we'll have him quit suddenly, perhaps over a confrontation with Monty. It might prove the perfect diversion for insertion of another operative."

#

Jim Richards tore headlong out the front door of the building, ignoring a snide remark tossed his way by Monty Regadet, to the effect he should walk not run, as it might be hazardous to his health. He sprinted across the parking lot, leapt into his Bronco, then fired up the engine before the door was shut. He snapped his seat belt into place while backing out of his parking spot, then slammed the gears into low, and accelerated up the private drive towards Franklin Road.

He shifted the automatic transmission manually, using second gear to accelerate rapidly, keeping the RPMs high for maximum power, and control. He sideslipped into traffic, then accelerated north towards Nashville. In less than five minutes he was on I-65, headed for the loop, and the exit that would take him onto Broad Street. In less than twenty minutes, he skidded to a stop just outside the emergency entrance to St. Thomas Hospital.

Inside the Emergency waiting room, an antiseptic odor assailed his olfactory sense like a pungent punch to the nose. Images of blood and mayhem



skirted across his mind. Residual memories, long suppressed, of pain and suffering. He stood stock still for a moment, then scanned the waiting room. It's pale green walls, barren. Garish orange chairs of vacuum formed plastic, stood along the walls. Most filled with miserable looking people. A few empty, giving the impression their former occupants had somehow been admitted to another level of misery.

Directly across from the entrance was a wide window with a broad counter. A man stood at the counter, his back to the entrance, apparently filling out some sort of form. Or perhaps paying for services rendered. Jim Richards stepped up to the counter, if the space had been narrower he'd probably have knocked the man aside.

Beyond the counter was a small office, a sign on its back wall read: *Admittance*. There were two women dressed in white nurse's uniforms. One had her back to the counter, accessing something from a file cabinet. The second stood at a desk just beyond the counter, she leaned forward, pointing with a pencil to a line on the form the man was filling out.

Jim Richards gripped the counter's edge, and stared intently at the nurse. His body so tense it quivered like a hunting dog in anticipation of its master's next shot.

The nurse glanced at Jim Richards, her eyes showed recognition of his discomfort, she lifted the tip of her pencil, and said to the man. "Go ahead and complete line two, Sir." She then addressed Richards. "Can I help you?"

Jim Richards stared dumbly at her for a moment, he suddenly realized he didn't know what to say first, what to ask, all he wanted to hear was that Misti was alive, and not seriously injured. But fear of the truth gripped him. All of his concentration had been bent on just getting to the hospital, as if that effort alone would be all that was needed. Now he was confronted with the reality of the situation, while memories of friends and colleagues whose final hours were spent in places such as this, hovered at the back of his mind.

"I understand my wife, Misti, had a car accident and was brought here."

"Yes, Sir. And she's doing fine. Just a nasty bump on her head."

It took a moment to sink in, then a feeling of exquisite relief flowed through his body.

"If you'll come around to your left, through the doorway, I'll have Judy show you to the recovery room." The nurse continued with a smile.

Jim Richards stepped in the direction the nurse was pointing, he passed through the doorway into a corridor. As he stepped through, the nurse who'd had her back to him stepped out of the Admittance office and smiled at Richards.

"Right this way, your wife is in room C."

They walked down the corridor, past two emergency operating rooms, and two recovery rooms. He followed the lead of the white uniform through the fourth door on the left. Misti was sitting up in bed, wearing a pale blue hospital gown that was obviously too big for her. Its short raglan sleeves came nearly to her elbows.

Jim Richards stood just inside the doorway for a moment, looking at his wife. She saw him, and smiled in an embarrassed sort of way. There were no IVs coming out of her arms, no catheters, no monitoring machines. Just a half finished glass of orange juice with a bent straw on the nightstand to her left. And a ugly bruise on her forehead, above her right eye. Her left arm in a light cotton sling.

He crossed the room in three long strides, then sat on the edge of the bed to hug her. "You scared the life out of me," was all he could think to say. He held her for at least a full minute. Then sat up straight. "What in the world happened? I was so worried when I got the phone call."

Misti nodded. "I'm sorry. A passer by offered to call someone for me. I asked him to call you. I should have waited, and called you myself. It wasn't really an emergency. But the Olds is totaled."

Richards shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We can replace it. The important thing is you're unhurt. Well almost." He brushed her bangs gently off her forehead. "Does it hurt much?"

Misti shook her head. "The forehead, no. Shoulder and ribs, yeah they do smart a little. Doctor thinks the shoulder harness may have cracked a rib."

Richards winced, he knew first hand how painful such an injury could be.

"But I'll tell you what, I'll never drive so much as down the driveway without my belt and harness on, definitely saved my life."

Richards smiled, and placed both his hands on each side of her head, then gently kissed her. "That's all that matters."

They sat in silence together for several minutes. Then he asked: "How in the world did it happen?"

"Bottom line? Not paying attention," she said. "I was thinking about my interview with the school district, all excited about the prospect of teaching, or at least the chance of doing so. Anyway, you know where Lafayette Boulevard divides just before going through that goofy underpass where one side is a tunnel and the other side passes under a railroad trestle?"

Richards thought for a moment. "You mean out towards Murfreesboro Road. Four lanes, narrows down to two each way. As I recall, left hand lane merges into the right."

Misti nodded her head in agreement. "Exactly. Well I forgot all about that, buzzing along lost in my own thoughts. Suddenly, I realized I was running out of lane. I couldn't merge right as there was a big old black sedan on my right. And the concrete abutment of the tunnel straight ahead. So without thinking, I changed lanes to the left into oncoming traffic."

Richards let out a puff of air, he'd been holding his breath as Misti told her story. "You were lucky you weren't killed. Anyone else injured?"

"No. Fortunately, there was no immediate traffic in the on coming lane. As you know the tunnel actually has two lanes going west, it's only on the eastbound side where the road passes under the trestle that it narrows to one lane. Anyway, as fortune would have it, just as I entered the tunnel I encountered a guy in a big ol' Buick coming directly at me. I couldn't turn to the right because of the tunnel wall, but he was able to change lanes to his right as there was no traffic there. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time for him to complete the lane change, we sort of hit head-on at an angle. I ran into his left front fender just behind the wheel well."

Richards let out a low whistle. "You *were* lucky. Most of the energy from the impact was directed into parallel opposing angles. How fast were you going?"

Misti shrugged. "I'm not sure, maybe forty-five miles per hour."

"What happened to the other driver?"

Misti shook her head. "I don't know. I must have bumped my head on the steering wheel, even with my shoulder harness on, thank God you talked me into putting that padded leather cover on when we first moved here, or I might have split my forehead open. Anyway, I must have passed out for a moment, or two. Next thing I remember, someone was helping me out of the car, and I could hear sirens in the background. The Olds was hissing and steaming, green fluid leaking

all over the pavement, a steel animal losing its life's blood. It was so sad, really. The front all crumpled up."

Jim Richards took her hand, gave it squeeze. Then asked again. "What about the other driver?"

"Oh I don't know. He, or she was gone. The Buick was sideways across the right lane, its left front wheel bent outward, fender all bent up. Glass broken on the driver's door. That's all I noticed, or remember.

"Someone called an ambulance, the police. They came, I said I was okay but they insisted on having me come here."

Jim nodded his head slowly. "Were you cited?"

Misti frowned. "No, because the other driver had left the scene. They told me they'd wait until their investigation was complete to issue a citation, if any. But it was clearly my fault. I was not paying attention." She sighed, and then in a small voice said: "Can we go home now?"

#

Jim Richards walked carefully around the crumpled carcass of Misti's Oldsmobile Cutlass. It sat forlornly on the back lot of Hendersonville Oldsmobile. The car had been insured by the same carrier that covered THI's fleet, their adjuster had already declared it a total loss.

Although Misti's explanation of the accident two days before, had been confirmed by the police report he'd acquired from the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department, Jim Richards decided to go ahead and conduct his own investigation. He began the process by walking around the car, comparing the damages listed on the police report to those observed. The entire front of the car was smashed inward. The hood bent in the middle like a teepee. The windshield cracked, a single horizontal line running its entire length.

As he walked to the rear of the Olds he looked down the left hand side. It appeared as if the entire frame had been bent, an indication of the impact's severity.

He then sighted down the right hand side. Though the damage here was less severe, there was, nevertheless, a tell tail rippling in the sheet metal. As he walked along the right hand side, checking for additional damage, a black mark caught his attention. It ran horizontally along the passenger's door for about two feet. The police report made no mention of this damage.

He hunkered down to more closely examine the mark. It was, in fact, a scrape imbedded with black paint. Misti's description of the accident came to mind, a black sedan had been to her right. Had she bumped into it?

Jim Richards stepped over to his Bronco, then rooted through the glove box for a small first aid kit. The kit contained a magnifying glass attached to a pair of tweezers used to remove splinters.

He returned to the damaged Oldsmobile, then got down on his hands and knees. A careful examination of the mark revealed initial impact had occurred at the rear of the scrape then ran forward. The evidence inferred the sedan had run into her. In fact, it inferred she'd been bumped into on-coming traffic, possibly at the same moment she elected to go in that direction anyway.

Jim Richards sat on the ground contemplating the damage and recalling Misti's words at the hospital. Could she have been struck on purpose? Probably not, Richards concluded. The most likely scenario was the driver of the other vehicle realized Misti might suddenly swerve into his lane. To avoid being hit, he'd decided to accelerate to give her clearance. Misti started to drift right, an automatic reaction when she realized her lane was running out. At that same moment the sedan accelerated forward, they touched fenders. Jim Richards used the tweezers to remove several chips of black paint. He carried these carefully in the palm of his hand back to the Bronco, then placed them inside an envelope.

He then retrieved his Minox camera from the console between the seats, using it to photograph the entire car. He wished he could purchase the wreck, then store it for a while. But the Olds had already been sold for scrap. By tomorrow afternoon, it would be the shape of a five by five cube, headed for the smelting plants of Japan to be reincarnated as a Honda Civic.

#

Nashville's skyline loomed ahead as Jim Richards crossed the Cumberland River. He'd decided to take surface streets out to Brentwood, they were almost as fast as the Interstate, which looped away to the east, then cut back west, before turning south again. Lafayette Boulevard came up on his left. He turned at the last moment, deciding to visit the scene of the accident.

As he approached the trestle, remaining in the left hand lane as Misti had done, the first thing he noticed was the lane did not completely run out. It reduced to perhaps a half lane. Street signs and lane markings directed traffic to merge right, but, as a matter of fact, it was possible to remain on the left shoulder, and clear both the tunnel abutments and the trestle supports, even with another vehicle immediately adjacent on the right.

Jim Richards merged smoothly into the right hand lane, passed under the bridge, then pulled off the road to think. Misti had said she could not merge right, that was exactly correct. She could not even follow the curve of the road because the sedan was preventing her from doing anything except cross into on coming traffic.

A cold chill went down Richards' spine. Was it possible the accident had been staged? He flipped through the police report, the driver Misti had run into fled the scene. His vehicle stolen. Coincidence? Must have been, even assuming she was forced into on coming traffic, that individual could not have anticipated exactly when the event was to occur, could not have arranged for an accomplice to have been in the tunnel at exactly the right time. But the driver of the sedan could have had her under surveillance, could have recognized the opportunity when she failed to initiate a lane change in advance of the split.

Jim Richards pulled back onto the roadway, then headed south in the general direction of Brentwood. He continued to mull over the accident. If the vehicle on her right had forced her into on coming traffic, it would have to weigh substantially more than her Cutlass. That eliminated all but a few automobiles. And then the thought came suddenly to mind: *Caring First had a fleet of executive automobiles, all black. Four Cadillacs, three Mercedes SELs, and a half dozen Olds Eighty-Eights.*

A cold anger took hold of Jim Richards' imagination, as he ran suspects and scenarios through his mind. All the while admonishing himself for allowing her to be finessed into harms way. For using her, as he'd done, to gather information for him. For God's sake what had he been thinking of, to allow his own wife to become an unwitting agent in the accomplishment of a task he'd been assigned.

#

The supply room was secured, as always. He unlocked the door, then swung it open. The first thing he noticed was that the interior lights were on. Someone had been in the room, and forgotten to turn them off. There were four people with keys: Monty Regadet, Don Dancing, Sharon Wiltz, and himself. He was certain he'd turned the lights off when he'd left work to drive up to the dealership the day before.

He walked to the rear of the supply room, placed his portfolio on a shelf, then walked back to the front. He automatically reached for the light switch, flipping it downward as he pulled the door open to leave. The lights remained on. He frowned, then toggled the switch up and down. Nothing happened, someone had rigged the lights to remain on.

Jim Richards stepped back into the room. Only one person could have re-set the lights, Monty Regadet. Could it be an error? Had Monty needed to replace a bus at the circuit panel, and got the outgoing wires crossed? Possibly. But there were other possibilities. An image of Monty's bank of videos came to mind.

Jim Richards began walking slowly up and down the rows of shelves, pretending he was looking for a particular item, all the while surreptitiously scanning the ceiling tiles. He soon found the camera, hidden behind an acoustical tile near the middle of the room. The only indication of its presence, a slightly larger air hole. Richards knew if he removed the tile, he'd find a wide-angle lens attached to a fiber optic cable that ran to a video camera.

He continued to search for the apparently needed item, then made some appropriate notes to an inventory list kept on a clipboard near the entrance. Next he rearranged some of the stored items, the larger, bulkier ones. Cartons of air light mailing envelopes, bags of Styrofoam peanuts, that sort of thing. When he finished, the camera was left with an unobstructed view of the outside of a cardboard carton.

Monty would, of course, move the lens. And he would again rearrange his supplies. Not immediately, no sense being obvious about the whole thing. Give the stupid bastard a day or two, then screw up his line of sight once again.

Halloween was coming up soon, orange spray paint would be ordered by Lilly up in Communications. She was, unofficially, in charge of corporate decorations. One of the cans would have to spring a leak. And oh my gosh, good-bye wide angle lens - hello blown budget. Jim Richards chuckled to himself. "Happy Halloween, Monty. You asshole." He muttered to himself, as he stepped out of the supply room.

#

The underground executive garage was dimly lit, though it seemed positively dark if one came down the ramp at the rear of the building out of bright sunlight. Some of the middle management Execs called it the Bat Cave. Parking underground out of the weather, was considered a major perk for those whose offices were located in the Executive Suite.

Jim Richards wound his way between cars, looking especially at the front left hand quadrants of the fleet vehicles. He found none damaged, nor recently painted. He was just rising from a crouched position, having given one last thorough check to Maxwell's Mercedes, when Monty Regadet stepped out of the elevator. Jim Richards knew it would take Monty's eyes a few moments to adjust to the dimness of the garage, he remained hunkered down.

One of Richards occasional duties was to make certain all the fleet vehicles received an updated registration tag from the DMV. He'd been given a list of vehicles owned by Caring First, as well as, the drivers assigned.

The elevator doors closed behind Regadet. Jim Richards continued to wait, remaining in a semi-crouched position. Monty turned his head to his right, looking in the direction of the ramp, inadvertently delaying the onset of his night vision. Jim Richards took this opportunity to move to the rear of the vehicle, then around the fender, to remain perfectly still, crouched at the license plate, apparently checking his list.

As Monty began walking the length of the garage, Jim Richards quickly placed check marks next to all but one of the names on the list. When Monty had covered about half the distance, Jim Richards stood up.

"What the hell you doing down here?" Monty asked in a belligerent tone of voice, startled at the sudden appearance of Richards in his peripheral vision.

Jim Richards looked nonchalantly in his direction. "Checkin' registration tags."

Monty strode over, his hand extended, silently asking to see the clipboard.

Richards handed it to him when he was within reach. "I forgot to check off Mr. Maxwell's name when his tag came in, couldn't remember if we'd received it. Fabian was responsible for some of these. Anyway, I came down to make certain."

Monty looked the list over, then looked up skeptically at Richards. "Some people 'round here aren't convinced you're quite what you seem, Jimbo."

Richards frowned. "And who would *some people* be, Monty?"

A broad grin appeared on Monty's face, it displayed a set of horse's teeth badly in need of a good whitening job. "Me, for one. See I figure you always got an answer. Like this here list. How come you need a list, if all you got to do is check one ol' car."

Richards shrugged. "Short memory, I guess."

Monty's smile dropped, and his countenance returned to its usual cynical demeanor. "Or maybe you figured, you might just need some excuse to be down here snoopin' around."



Jim Richards raised his eyebrows. "The list speaks for itself, Monty. Only way I'll know if the right tags went on the right cars is to cross reference the registration numbers against the VIN."

Monty nodded, clearly unconvinced. "Way I figure it, you ain't too happy 'bout that hot little number of yours gettin' her ass fired. 'Cause now you can't keep your eye on her night and day." He sucked his teeth a couple of times. "Hot little number might wander, while you're lickin' stamps and kissin' ass."

Richards face lost all expression. He suppressed an urge to drive the toe of his right shoe solidly into Monty's groin.

"So, you figure, you come down here, check out Maxwell's car. Maybe put a little nick in his brake line, or somethin'. Then maybe he runs into a tree one night on the way home, make things *even Steven* in your little pea brain."

Jim Richards looked off past Monty for a moment, willing himself to calm down, to stop thinkin' about smashing the bastard's nose all over his face. He looked back at Monty, his demeanor restored. "Yeah, and maybe he hits a baby carriage instead."

Monty shrugged. "What do you care?"

"I care." Richards replied Then reached for the clipboard. Monty let him grasp it, but refused at first to release it, then let it go suddenly. It flipped up nearly slapping Richards in the face.

"You be careful, Jimbo. 'Cause I got my eye on you. And sooner or later, you ain't gonna have the right answer."

Richards sighed. "What's your problem, Monty. You been on my ass since the first week I came. I work my butt off 'round here. Do the best job I can."

"What's my problem?" Monty's face started to turn beet red. "I'll tell you what my problem is, Jimmy. You come here to be a big star. Get yourself a nice cushy job working for Sharon Wiltz. But you know what, wise guy? It's my job to run the backgrounds on everyone comes through this place. Far as I'm concerned, asshole, your nothin' but white trash."

Richards eyes narrowed. How far down the manuscript had he read?

"Jimmy fuckin' Ocean. Got your name changed all legal back in '68 didn't you. "

Jim Richards stood perfectly still. Here it comes, he thought.

"Even got the courts to seal the records. Well I'll tell you what. I been around the block a time or two, and I know the only reason a court seals a public record is when Justice tells 'em to. How long you been in witness protection?"

Jim Richards almost burst out laughing from relief. Son of a bitch the next time he saw Elmo, he was gonna give him a one hell of big hug. Damn they'd done a good job on the double back. Nothing left to do, but ride the wave.

"Fuck you, Monty. That shit's private. I paid my dues. Now I'm trying to make somethin' of myself."

Monty laughed cynically. "Don't give me that crock o' shit, Jimbo. All you music pukes are the same. Bunch of scumbags. Everyone thinks Nashville loves country music. Well I got some news for you, far as I'm concerned you, and your *geetah* pickin' buddies, nothin' but coke addicts and drunks... or former jail birds like yourself."

Richards made no reply. He watched Monty's face turn even meaner.

"Don't worry, *Elvis*, I'll keep your secret for you. Long as you don't get no funny ideas 'bout movin' up in the company. You want a career in the mailroom? Great, you got it. And that's as far as you're goin'. But way I figure it, only a matter of time 'fore you fuck up. Then I'm gonna be right there to blow the whistle.

"That little enchilada you got for your main squeeze thought she was pretty cute too, snoopin' into everyone's private files. Maybe thought she'd find something interesting for you to scam off of? Or was she settin' up on her own?"

"Fuck you, Monty."

Regadet guffawed. "Sure thing tough guy. Anytime you think you want a piece of me, I'm always available. Love to go a short round with ya." He laughed another mean, derisive laugh.

Jim Richards turned away.

#

He sat at the console in his studio. Headphones plugged into the secure line disguised within the circuitry of his soundboard. The red light over the door turned on to assure Misti would not interrupt him. One of his tapes played through a monitor speaker, to give the impression he was working on a tune. Jim Richards

glanced at his watch, 18:00 - four in the afternoon on the west coast. Ty Harding picked up his line on the second ring.

"Hey Jim, how goes the battle?"

Jim Richards related everything that had happened since Misti was let go by Caring First. Harding was silent at the other end of the line for several moments, mulling over what Richards had just told him.

"So your relatively sure no one at Caring First was involved?"

"Yes. After my excursion to the garage, I went back to the Nashville police. It took a little cajoling, but they finally told me they'd had two or three suspicious collisions out in the same area prior to Misti's accident. Usually the victim's car appears to have drifted into another's lane. The second car claims to have lost control as a result, then of course there's a lawsuit, insurance companies pick up the tab.

"Police figure that's what happened, but things didn't work out as planned. So the perpetrator left the area, fearful he'd get charged with attempted murder. One good thing though, they decided not cite her, figured she was bumped over, lucky to have lived through the deal. Misti's relieved about that at least."

Ty Harding sighed audibly at the other end of the line. "I'm getting a bad feeling about this operation, Jim. Maybe its time you two came back home."

"Yeah I hear you, Ty. But I hate leavin' lose ends dangling. Not my style, you know that."

"Look, Jefferson wants you out in couple months anyway." Harding responded. "Why not send Misti home now. Then you follow as soon as we have another team in place. Monty Regadet won't give you a moment's peace. Trying to operate with that asshole loomin' over you, be like doin' a marathon with two buckets of concrete for running shoes."

Jim Richards thought about the offer, it made sense. Harding was right, he was all washed up at Caring First. "All right, Ty. I'll talk to Misti tonight. I can't promise she'll listen to me though, things been gettin' kinda sideways between us here in the relationship department."

"Why didn't you say something before?" Harding asked.

"Not your problem. Job's still got to be done. Probably should have made it a solo run from the start."

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the line. Then Harding said, "Sometimes there isn't any *right* choice."

"Maybe." Richards replied. "Anyway, I'll talk to her, give it my best shot."

Jim Richards closed the secure line. He looked over at his guitar in the corner on its stand. There were times when just playing a few tunes was all that mattered. Times when he wished he really was Jimmy Ocean, come to Nashville to make his nut.

Pickin' up the pieces of another broken dream.

Wearin' my heart on my sleeve.

You'd think the time together, would make the love complete.

But there ain't no such thing as Easy Street.

Being down ain't half as bad as wakin' up lonely.

A king size bed is always half empty.

And money can't buy friendship, but it sure buys company.

There ain't no such thing as Easy Street

There ain't no such thing as Easy Street, oh no.

No place to rest a weary soul.

Just a mountain to be climbed, a place you never reach.

There ain't no such thing as Easy Street.

Sometimes it feels so heavy, it makes me want to cry:

"Ain't none of us gettin' out of here alive."

It's the effort of winning, not the victory that's sweet.

There ain't no such thing as Easy Street.

#

Misti was in the kitchen, preparing dinner when Jim Richards came out of his studio. He walked into the kitchen, his taste buds aroused by the sumptuous aromas conjured up at the stove.

They chatted over their meal, about clothes and shoes. The banality of the conversation caused him to drift off into thoughts of his own, until he'd unknowingly shut Misti's voice off from his consciousness.

Several Caring First employees had stopped by his office to say how sorry they were that Misti had left. It surprised him how many had interacted with her. They all said her problem with Allen Maxwell was so typical, that when she first came on board, bets were taken as to how long she'd last. Several of the *girls* said they'd started out in her position, but soon asked for a transfer. They were amazed how long she'd managed to hold out.

Lilly up in Communications made the comment: "You know, he hates women. Sometimes I think he'd be happier out in San Francisco, he could come out of the closet there."

Jim Richards found the appraisal interesting if true, because a person who continually hid their true nature was by definition dishonest. Over time, such dishonesty became endemic to their personality. Once that occurred, concealment of any truth became so natural as to be undetectable by polygraph, voice stress, or any other method of reliability oversight. The pathological incorporation of justification for false acts into a personality, created the most dangerous type of traitor. A person able to commit any act without the slightest hint of guilt. And hence, if clever, likely to succeed in their nefarious endeavors for an indefinite period of time.

A change in Misti's voice brought Jim Richards back to the moment. He suddenly realized she'd just said something of extreme import. It hit his consciousness, like a blind side punch. The words innocuous, it was the tone that set off warning bells in his mind.

*"Jim, there's something I have to tell you."*

Richards knew whatever Misti was about to say would not be good. He waited in silence, as a man might wait for the announcement of a jury's decision.

"I've found an apartment. I'll be moving out this weekend."



# Chapter Nineteen

October 1979

The three men sat around a circular table, next to the window, in a ground floor room at the Days Inn, fifteen minutes northeast of Nashville. All three had shaved their faces, though their heavy beards were so dark it looked as if they'd forgotten to shave. Rashad Akhondan was a tall man, muscular, his dark hair cut close. The other two Iranians were not as tall as Rashad, nor as good looking, at least not by western standards.

Yousef Abadeh was five foot ten, with a thin hawk like face, and an unattractive hooked nose. He had a tendency to keep his head down, his shoulders rounded as if he were trying to make himself as indistinct as possible. A trait acquired when very young, to avoid the taunts of peers who referred to him *asbird man*.

Mustaf Shushtar was a bit taller. And though he kept himself fit, his efforts failed to translate his physique into a slim athletic body. He was barrel chested, with the hint of a gut just waiting to fully develop.

They were each dressed in similar garb. Black denim jeans, dark T-shirt, brown leather jackets. Their feet shod in military style field boots. Rashad spread a map of the local area onto the table, then over laid a diagram of the Caring First campus.

"We have two options. One," he pointed to the diagram, using the retracted tip of a ballpoint pen. "Move within thirty yards of the perimeter, then take Harris Williams with suppressed rifle fire, as he indulges in a *healthful* jog around the complex." Pleased with his own gallows humor, he grinned malevolently at his two companions. "For this option, Yousef will wait at the van, here on this dirt road. Mustaf, you and I will make our way across this field, below the ridge line, then set up here approximately thirty yards from the perimeter.

"The greatest risk with option one, Harris Williams isn't always on campus, and when he is, his schedule can change at any moment. However, when he's at the corporate offices, he always runs in the afternoon. So we may get lucky, and pick him off on day one."

Mustaf tapped the diagram of the Caring First campus with an index finger so thick and misshapen, it looked like a carrot left too long in the ground. "Can we set up at more than one location? Two snipers increase the odds of success."

Rashad shook his head. "Unfortunately no. Only the rear of the complex has cover within a reasonable distance of the running trail. To the north, an open field. A few widely separated trees. Horses graze in the field, which keeps the grass short." He again pointed to the diagram. "East and south are bordered by heavily traveled public roads. No opportunities there either."

"For a sniper kill, the rear perimeter is our only option. There's plenty of natural cover. Brush, trees, several gullies run perpendicular to this ridgeline. We have only to hope Williams takes an afternoon run tomorrow, or Wednesday. If not, then we go to option two."

Yousef pushed himself back from the table, he'd been hunched over the map and diagram, as were Rashad and Mustaf. He thought for a moment. Then leaned forward and pointed to the ridge. "This high point here, we should check it out carefully. Make certain Caring First has not placed a watcher up there."

Rashad thought about this for a moment, or two. "Yes, I suppose so. According to the pathetic bastard Islamic Jihad wrung out earlier this year, Caring First has security guards disguised as landscape personnel. The head of maintenance, a former military man, is their Director. But they have been performing their duties for over five years, with no more serious incident than an occasional truant crossing the property on their way to school. Nevertheless, I agree it would be prudent to check that ridge. If only to finalize our route of approach, and catch a hawk's eye view of the complex."

Yousef nodded once, pleased his suggestion was given credence.

Rashad continued. "If we're unsuccessful doing it the *easy* way, then we'll move to option two."

Mustaf nodded his head, as he chuckled cynically. "Option two has a high probability of getting us killed, my friend."

Rashad sighed. "Perhaps, but either way, we'll strike terror deep into the invincible facade of the CIA. They believe they can interfere with the internal affairs of other countries with impunity. Our raid, regardless of which option we exercise, will teach them otherwise. But you're right, option two is dangerous. However, it is survivable."

Geneva, Switzerland



Raymond D. Harbinger stepped off the Lake Geneva ferry. He was careful to assure he was not followed, or so he thought. In fact, he was rather pleased with himself. This was his fourth meeting with Roget Akhondan, tonight he intended to close the deal he'd been working on for over a year. Roget represented the future of Iran, a moderate Muslim who wished only to integrate his country into the mainstream of the western world.

Harbinger walked beside Lake Geneva, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his camel hair overcoat, his head covered by a mink fur hat with earflaps. Something he never thought he'd ever find himself wearing, but in the chill evening air of Geneva in late October, it was most was comforting.

As he approached the restaurant, he saw a man sitting on a bench that over looked the lake. What drew Harbinger's attention, was the man's enormous size, and the full red beard he was in the process of growing for the on coming winter. Harbinger thought it a practical thing to do, in a climate such as Switzerland's. Not that Tennessee couldn't get just as cold, though for a much shorter duration. He passed the bench without giving the man any further thought, then climbed the stairs to the restaurant where he and Roget would meet once again.

Ross McIntyer arose from the bench, then walked along the lake in the direction Harbinger had been heading prior to entering the restaurant. After another hundred yards or so, he came upon another bench identical to one he'd been sitting on earlier. Steve Sheffield glanced in his direction, then got up from the bench. The two men continued along the walkway, separated from each other by several feet. Almost imperceptibly Sheffield slowed down, McIntyer soon caught up. Then both men stepped off the walkway, disappearing into an ally between buildings.

The technique they'd used to tail Raymond Harbinger was called *leapfrog*. It required at least two surveillance personnel, more if they were following a truly wary target, which would certainly not describe Harbinger.

"Interesting." Sheffield said, as they stood facing each other in the narrow ally. "We're the only ones watching. Kind of odd, don't you think?"

McIntyer shrugged. "According to Jim Richards, Harbinger's journal indicates he often takes the ferry before meeting his contact, sort of a ritual he thinks assures he's not followed. He grouses about the need for security, the constant looking back over his shoulder for watchers."

Steve chuckled. "Only time I saw him look over his shoulder, was to stare at the tits on that girl serving hot cocoa to the ferry passengers."

Ross sniffed the air, sumptuous aromas drifted out from restaurants that overlooked the lake. "Could be his contact isn't really Roget Akhondan, but some scam artist waiting for the right moment to shake him down."

"That's what we're here to find out, isn't it?" Sheffield said, as he stomped his feet a couple of times to warm them up. He looked at the lake for a moment. "Sure wish we could've gotten some electronics in there. Be nice to know what the hell they're so cozy about."

Ross nodded his head in agreement. "Then again, all we really need is confirmation on Roget. After that, we can start putting the pieces together ."

#

The chalk colored Chevy van turned right, off Murray Lane, onto Fischer Court. It stopped short of the T intersection just west of Jim Richards' house, the driver consulted a map, before turning left. Johnson Chapel Road ran straight north for a quarter mile, then became a graveled, single lane, that turned into dirt, as it past the last house on the left. The road curved around to the east, and headed up to the top of the ridge behind the subdivision. At the crest of the hill were ruins of a civil war church, built by slaves who worked the plantation that once occupied the land within two miles, south and west of Brentwood.

The church had been built of river rock. The same rock that composed the gray stone perimeter wall, now choked with Kudzu vines, and overhung by cypress and oak trees. In front of the old church was a turn out, large enough to accommodate three vehicles, while leaving room for traffic to pass on the roadway. In fact, it was the only spot where two cars could pass abreast of each other, between Fischer Court and River Estates, the subdivision at the east end of the road where the asphalt began again.

The *back road*, as it was known to locals, was the only way over the ridge when black ice coated the tarmac of Murray Lane. And so the road was never paved, dirt and gravel offered greater traction in freezing conditions.

Rashad Akhondan turned towards the rear of the van, and looked at his two companions. They were in the process of loading a pair of assault weapons. Akhondan shook his head emphatically. "We'll take only side arms concealed under our jackets. I want to appear to be nothing more than visitors to this historical holy place, lost in the woods when we began walking to enjoy the beauty of the area."

His two companions looked at each other skeptically, then complied. They returned the assault weapons, and the sniper rifle to their equipment case.

The back of the van was filled with a variety of gear. Mostly camping equipment, to support their cover: Canadian tourists visiting Nashville, seeing the sights, and camping along the way as opportunity allowed.

Rashad locked the van. Then all three men crossed the road, and faded into the forest. Once under the protection of the trees, they stopped and waited. Watching and listening for any indication of followers. Rashad crept to the forest's edge to observe the van. No one else was at hand. There were no other vehicles parked nearby, no sound of another traveler on the road.

They spaced themselves into a standard reconnaissance unit, then moved south just below the ridgeline. Rashad walked point, twenty-five feet behind came Mustaf. Yousef stayed well back making certain no one followed. They progressed slowly, quietly. It was their intent to learn as much as possible in one sweep of the area.

On a prior visit, Rashad had completed a general reconnaissance of Nashville, including the area around Caring First. At that time, he'd determined the best approach to the sniper hide. Today's look would confirm his decision, as it would give them a high view of the area.

Rashad dropped prone in the dry grass, then crawled the last fifteen feet to the crest of the ridge. Mustaf soon joined him. The two lay side by side, staring down at the Caring First complex. Rashad, slowly, carefully scanned the campus with a pair of binoculars. Then adjusted his field of view to encompass the route they'd use from the back road to get into position. They spoke softly to each other, discussing technical details, issues of sight lines, and windage. They did not notice the forest becoming unusually quiet.

Yousef, however, became wary almost immediately. Rashad and Mustaf had been in position on the ridge less than five minutes, when he noticed a change in the timbre of the woods. It had occurred when they first entered as well, but soon the forest birds had returned to their normal chatter, having concluded the humans passing through their domain were of no threat.

Yousef's place of concealment allowed him to observe the trail they'd just followed, the position where his companions lay in observation, and the approach along a deer trail from the west.

Ten minutes passed, the forest did not return to normal. He looked towards his companions, contemplated giving a signal to return, when movement in his peripheral vision caught his eye. He looked to his right. A large man dressed in military camouflage, carrying a shotgun, carefully made his way up the deer trail. Just ahead of him, a black dog sniffed the ground, meandering to the left and right of the trail.

Rashad and Mustaf heard the approach of something on the trail, they turned to look over their shoulders. It was a large black dog. Mustaf reached inside his coat for the grip of the nine-millimeter pistol, he'd concealed beneath his jacket.

Rashad whispered, "Easy, my friend. Let's wait and see what develops."

The dog saw them almost at the same time as they'd seen him. He stopped his random motion, and pointed in their direction, as if they were a quarry his master might be hunting.

The two Iranians rolled into a sitting position facing the dog. They sat casually, legs curled to one side as if they hadn't a care in the world. Their faces appeared relaxed, the hint of a smile at the wonder of seeing a dog in the woods. Even when they realized there was a man behind the animal, coming up the trail, a pump shot gun in his hands, barrel pointed upward, their expressions never changed.

MacKenzie continued to move forward head down, looking warily from left to right. Not until nearly abeam the dog, did he look high enough on the trail to see the two Iranians. He stopped mid-stride, and though he did not lower the barrel of his weapon, his right index finger moved from outside the trigger guard to resting on the trigger itself.

"This is private property, you're not allowed to trespass here."

Rashad looked at Mustaf, then back towards MacKenzie, a look of surprise and concern on his face. "I am so sorry. We did not know." He slowly rolled to one knee and then rose to his feet while keeping his empty hands in plain sight. Mustaf did the same, making certain he remained slightly behind, and to the left of Rashad.

"My brother and I were just walking in the woods. We are visitors to see, how do you say it, history places. And also the Grand Old Opera."

MacKenzie frowned, thinking about Rashad's statement. "It's Opry, Grand Old Opry. Nothin' to do with opera."

Rashad flashed his most magnanimous smile, then shook his head, and gestured with his hands. "Opry. Yes, that is it. I am sorry. I only speak a little English." He continued to smile, looking MacKenzie straight in the eye with as much sincerity as he could conjure up, so much in fact, he almost believed himself.

As the exchange began, Yousef withdrew an auto loading nine-millimeter pistol from within his jacket. The act required an exaggerated movement of his arm, because the barrel of the pistol was long and cumbersome, made so by a blast suppresser fitted to the outside of the barrel.

It was not necessarily his intent to kill the *intruder* that was what he considered the man with the shotgun to be, though for all he knew the man might very well be the owner of the land, or some form of security. He knew Rashad would most likely talk his way out of their predicament. On the other hand, he needed to be prepared just in case things didn't turn out well. In case the man foolishly insisted on trying to take them into custody, or worse.

The problem was, the man had moved slightly higher on the trail, and now he was no longer securely within Yousef's kill zone. Yousef, ever so cautiously moved around the tree behind which he'd been concealed, then very quietly closed towards his target. There was open space, between two trees, that he needed to cross. But once he made it to the next tall cedar, he'd again be able to cover himself, while keeping the intruder in his sight picture.

"We came to visit the church that was built by slaves before your civil war. The little booklet said there was a battle here, and the remains of an old fort in the woods. But we could not find it. So my brother, and I, stopped to admire the beautiful view of your valley." Rashad continued.

MacKenzie had moved a little farther up trail, until he was within fifteen feet of the two Iranians. The story was one he'd heard before. Tourists were always looking for the old fort, he wished the *garl darn* Chamber of Commerce had left the thing out of their brochure.

"Fort's back towards the road, 'bout fifteen meters west of the trail you took to get here. Still private property though, and I'd appreciate it greatly if you, and your brother, would just turn around and follow the trail back to the road."

Rashad smiled broadly. "Certainly, my friend. We mean no harm at all, and will gladly do as you ask."

MacKenzie relaxed a little, same ol' story, he thought. Just kinda pissed him off the two were *ragheads*. Probably got more oil money than brains anyway. He glanced down at *Lucky*, the dog's hackles were up, and he was staring off trail, to the left and behind.

MacKenzie swiveled his head around, caught movement in his peripheral vision. He turned his shoulders, and picked up a third Iranian moving between two trees, a silenced autoloader in his right hand. MacKenzie brought his shotgun

around to bear on the third Iranian, firing off a blast as soon as the man filled his sight picture.

The moment the barrel of the pump gun moved off Rashad and Mustaf, they drew their weapons in near choreographed unison.

MacKenzie's weapon discharged with an ear deafening roar into the spot where Yousef had been a moment before, perimeter scatter of double O buckshot impacted the edge of the tree Yousef dove behind. Pieces of bark, and bits of dust exploded sideways, while other pellets snapped twigs well beyond. The main grouping of .30 caliber lead balls sent a geyser of dust upward, just beyond where Yousef had been when MacKenzie pulled the trigger.

MacKenzie started to shift right, towards the two Iranians he'd originally confronted, pumping another round into the chamber of his twelve gauge.

But Rashad, and Mustaf, had already brought their weapons to bear. They opened fire with non-suppressed nine-millimeter autoloaders, stuffed with semi-jacketed hollow points. MacKenzie's body jerked spasmodically as the rounds tore into the center mass of his upper torso, ripping through both lungs, pulverizing his heart, and shattering three ribs. Bullet fragments split in all directions, tearing through arteries, and muscle tissue within his upper body cavity. Three of the rounds tore straight through leaving golf ball sized exit wounds.

His arms flung wide, the Ithaca pump cart wheeled crazily into the air, bouncing and scraping to a stop twelve feet down trail. MacKenzie staggered backwards two steps. A grunt escaped his lips, in unison with the slap of the first rounds to arrive on target. His legs stiffened, then turned to rubber as he toppled onto his back, skittering three feet down slope, even as the final rounds stitched the ground around his body, ricocheting off into the woods beyond. Blood hemorrhaged out his open mouth, his eyes stared vacantly at a cloudless blue sky that peeked down through the tops of tall, aromatic cypress trees.

The firefight lasted no more than ten seconds. The two killers came forward, their weapons trained on MacKenzie, as the sound of gunfire faded off into the distance.

"Yousef," Rashad called in a stage whisper. "Are you hurt?"

Yousef stepped around the tree. His face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm an idiot, Rashad. But I am not hurt."

Rashad nodded once, but made no statement of admonishment.

The dog whimpered, Mustaf shifted the barrel of his weapon in the direction of its sound. *Lucky* had been totally unprepared for the onslaught. He'd experienced gunfire before, but that was when his master, and his friend from the backyard outside the woods, came to shoot tin cans. That gunfire had always been directed away from him. Single shots that knocked the cans down, which he then scampered to retrieve.

He lay in the brush where the reflex spring of his legs had propelled him in abject terror, and now he cowered just off trail shaking uncontrollably, whimpering as he excreted urine and feces in spasmodic spurts.

Yousef took aim at the terrified animal's head, then squeezed off two rounds from his silenced autoloader. They both found their mark. At least the worthless cur would not pinpoint the location of his master, by sitting and howling in the woods.

Rashad glanced at MacKenzie's body twitching at their feet. Then looked over at Mustaf. His lips formed a slow smile of resignation. "It seems Allah has chosen option two for us. A sniper attack is now out of the question."

#

Darkness had fallen by the time Jim Richards pulled out of Caring First's parking lot. He crested the ridge at the top of Murray Lane, then headed down into the valley. October twenty-eighth, three days to Halloween, and he'd still not picked up any candy for the little goblins that would be knocking on his door. Another little domestic chore, Misti had handled in the past. Another unconscious reminder of her absence.

As he approached the intersection of Murray Lane and Fischer Court, he noticed rhythmic flashes of red, blue, and amber lights, reflected off trees that rose above the roofs of homes along his street. The thought came to mind, a fire had occurred at one of his neighbor's houses, or perhaps his own. Which made him wonder if he'd remembered to turn the electric burners off, on the stove that morning. Had they finally reached critical mass, melted through the thin metal stove top, and set fire to the kitchen?

As he turned the corner, it became apparent, all the action was centered at his end of the cul de sac. He quickly identified two sheriff's cruisers, a fire engine, and an ambulance. A shot of adrenaline squirted into his heart. There wasn't enough equipment around to handle a fire, which meant someone had been injured.

His first thought, it could only be Marsha, Chet, or one of the boys. He was surprised at how much anxiety he felt. Chet and Marsha were good

neighbors, especially supportive since Misti moved out. Marsha had taken it upon herself to keep an eye on things for Jim Richards. Making certain newspapers, and other deliveries, were picked up from the driveway and slipped through the back door into his garage. They'd had him over to dinner a couple of times.

As he drew closer, he came to realize the vehicle he'd originally identified as an ambulance was in fact a Coroner's wagon. He could see Chet and Marsha in the driveway talking to one of the sheriff's deputies, and little Chet between them but where was his brother?

Several neighbors were standing about in small groups, some in Chet and Marsha's driveway, others in the street, or near their own homes. Jim Richards turned into his own driveway. He quickly brought the Bronco to a halt, shut off the ignition, and jumped out. Leaving the door open, his parking lights on. Adding yet another increment of amber light to an already surreal scene.

Bruce and Martha were standing at the back edge of Chet's driveway, talking to Dan and Diane. As Jim Richards came around the front of his vehicle, he saw the youngest boy with Alexander, over by Chet's car, parked behind their house. Jim Richards' level of anxiety went down immediately, it seemed everyone was accounted for, but what had happened?

He crossed the lawn between the two houses, and headed towards where Bruce, Dan, Martha, and Diane were standing. Alexander came bounding over, blocking his approach at first, until he recognized Richards, then wagged his tail, and nuzzled Richards' hand as he continued toward his neighbors.

Dan stuck out his hand in greeting, as Jim Richards walked up. Bruce did the same. Richards smiled, and nodded to Diane, and Martha. "What in the world has happened?" He asked.

Dan nodded towards the woods. "Found MacKenzie in the forest this afternoon. Shot dead."

Jim Richards eyebrows went up in unison. "Hunting accident?"

"Doesn't look like it." Bruce said. "Someone shot the poor bastard at least a half dozen times in the upper body at close range, according to one of the deputies."

"Jesus." Richards shook his head. "Who found the body?"

"Police," Martha answered. "I guess Marsha heard some shots today, around three in the afternoon. Didn't think much about it at first, on account you and MacKenzie used to do some shootin' up there every now and then."



"Guess she let it go for a half hour or so," Diane added.

Martha nodded her head in agreement. "But then she got to thinking, something wasn't quite right. You were at work, and the shots seemed to come really fast, then nothing."

"Didn't seem right to her," Diane said.

Martha continued. "Anyway she came outside, 'bout three-thirty, to meet Chet's school bus. Guess that's when she heard the dog howling."

Richards frowned. "Alexander?"

"As it turned out, yes. He was just inside the woods. Came bounding over when she came out. Then sat down here in the driveway and let out a wail to wake the dead. Old wives' tail, dog howls when someone's died."

Dan spoke up. "That's when she decided she'd better call the police. Soon as Chet's bus came, she went inside, telephoned the sheriff. They got here 'bout four-fifteen. Took 'em less than hour to find the body, guess Alexander showed the way."

"Where's Lucky?" Richards asked.

"Killed him too." Dan replied. "Probably first. Sheriff said, MacKenzie got off one round from his twelve gauge. Doesn't know if he hit anyone."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Any suspects?"

Dan shook his head. "Not so far, 'least none the sheriff's willing to name. Looks like MacKenzie might have surprised someone walkin' around up there."

Bruce nodded his head in agreement. "Had to happen sooner, or later. Mac's been walkin' the woods for years, runnin' off hikers, and such, with that shotgun of his. Must've come across someone armed, tempers got hot..."

Made sense. Jim Richards had the same thought on more than one occasion. One day Mac would meet his match in the woods. Maybe his intent all along. The guy carried a lot of pain, remorse for comrades lost. Guilt for his survival. No need to shoot Lucky, though, he was too gentle to ever be a threat. Richards sighed. "Too bad. I kind of liked Mac, he was okay."

Bruce, and Dan, agreed. "Yeah he was...". "Sure was." They said in succession.

Jim Richards sat in one of the leather, club chairs that faced the fireplace. He nursed his second glass of Johnny Walker Black, and thought about the shooting. There were no suspects yet. Too dark by the time the deputies found the body to do much in the way of forensics. First light tomorrow, they'd have a team in there going over every square inch of ground, looking for anything that might help the investigation. One odd point he'd learned from one of the deputies, they'd found no brass casings on the ground. Yet at least six rounds had been fired, maybe more.

Richards thought about that fact for a moment. Seemed odd. If the killer had used a revolver, there would've been no casings thrown about, but Marsha indicated, when he'd finally had a chance to talk with her and Chet, she'd heard many shots fired in very rapid succession. Only an autoloader could have delivered that kind of firepower.

Based on Marsha's account, MacKenzie had managed to get off one round. At least she'd heard a single loud report, which most likely was his twelve gauge. Then immediately several very fast shots, not as loud. She'd described them as sounding the same as when she'd heard Richards out in the woods shooting his gun.

The deputies had talked to him about that of course, but his alibi was air tight, and when he showed them his old forty-five they immediately dismissed it. Apparently, Mac had been shot with a nine millimeter. They'd recovered at least one slug. Again that tended to implicate an autoloader, which once again brought to mind the odd fact: No brass was found at the scene. Whoever killed MacKenzie, had the presence of mind to pick up the expended cartridges.

Jim Richards pressed the side of the glass against his forehead. The idea Mac's killer picked up expended brass, indicated a professional. The question was motive? Who'd want to take out Mac, anyway? Richards wished he could look at the scene himself, but there was little chance of finding anything of value in the dark, and getting his own foot prints, or other evidentiary material mixed into the crime scene would be patently stupid.

Bruce seemed to have an inside line to law enforcement, probably because of his Vice-President's status at the Bank of Brentwood. Jim Richards decided he'd just have to rely on Bruce's updates to satisfy his own curiosity.

He downed his drink, then pushed himself up out of the club chair. It was nearly eleven o'clock in the evening. He'd planned to go over Allen Maxwell's financial file again, see if there was any detail he might have over looked. He

stepped into the studio, then stepped back out. He was just too tired to study the file. It could wait another day, at least.

# Chapter Twenty

The lettering, STACEY'S Fine Office Furniture Since 1942, was magnetically affixed to both sides of the white, Chevy van that pulled into Caring First's driveway. Two landscape personnel using gasoline powered weed trimmers near the entrance, took note of the van, and let it pass without a second thought. The company was expanding, executives added daily. It seemed they all needed office furniture.

Yousef Abadeh sat in the driver's seat, a baseball cap pulled low on his forehead. Dark sunglasses hid the malevolence of his eyes. He drove slowly down the driveway, following the directions given by Rashad Akhondan from the passenger seat.

#

Monty Regadet sat in front of a bank of video monitors at the rear of his office, scanning camera stations, looking for that scum bag mail room supervisor, Jimmy Ocean, or whatever the fuck he called himself this week. The bag of dirt was getting on his nerves, screwing with his cameras, and smiling cordially every time they ran into each other on campus.

He'd tried everything he could think of to get the bastard to lose his temper. But the yellow bellied, son of bitch just wouldn't rise to the bait. Now his only recourse was to build a strong enough case to take up to Howard McFarland, and get Ocean's butt bounced all the way back to the faggot-infested hole he'd crawled out of in the first place.

Monty paused a moment. The wide-angle lens he'd installed over the women's bathroom, just down the hall from Word Processing, showed Sharon Wiltz as she stepped through the doorway. Now there was a dish. What a nice piece of ass she'd be. Come on baby, that's right. Slip those panties down, all the way to the ankles. Oooh, so nice. That's right, just a little dab with the toiddie paper. Hey, nice bikini line. Shave your bush do you? How sweet it is. Regadet stayed on station, as Sharon Wiltz freshened her make up.

#

Yousef swung around the back of the building, then made a ninety degree right turn to get the van lined up with the loading dock. He backed up slowly until the rear bumper kissed the impact spacer on the right hand side of the dock.

He swung out of the driver's seat, walked to the rear of the van, then opened the cargo doors, exposing a cardboard carton, stenciled with bold lettering indicating a secretarial desk was inside.

Rashad pushed as Yousef pulled, together they slid the carton out of the van, and onto the loading dock. Then tilted it onto one end. Next, Rashad used a small hand truck to roll the carton into Caring First's receiving area. Yousef closed the van doors, then followed Rashad inside.

Stan Forden, Caring First's Receiving Manager, and a member of Monty Regadet's security force, sat at his desk checking over the list of shipments received the day before. He looked up as Rashad wheeled the carton into the receiving area. Normally there were two of them on duty, but this morning Mike Comier, his co-worker, had called in sick. Stan stood up, then came around the end of the shipping counter to greet the two men who'd just arrived from STACEY's.

He wasn't expecting a shipment this morning, but that didn't mean anything. The prima donnas up on the fifth were always ordering stuff without bothering to tell Receiving, didn't matter how many times Monty chewed their butts.

"Morning guys," Stan said. "What've we got here?" He knelt down to check the shipping label on the side of the carton, which happened to be at the end nearest the floor. As he leaned forward to get a closer look at the label, he felt a sharp blow to the base of his cranium, just where his spinal column entered his skull. An electric shock seemed to run down his spine, a flash of bright light inside his head. Then it seemed as if he were falling into an eternal blackness.

Yousef quickly slipped the lead pipe wrapped in newspaper under his jacket, and into his waistband. He knelt on one knee next to Stan's body, it twitched as if random jolts of electric current were being applied. Yousef touched two fingers to the carotid artery of the fallen man, there was no pulse. He looked up at Rashad, and nodded.

Yousef looked around behind him, saw a door that appeared to lead into some sort of storage room. He stepped over to it, peered inside. Indeed, it was a closet. As Rashad wheeled the carton towards the freight elevator, Yousef dragged Stan's carcass into the closet, closed the door, then returned to the van to await their get away.

Monty Regadet watched Sharon Wiltz leave the women's rest room, then continued his search for Jimmy Ocean. He tried the mailroom, duplicating room, and office. No luck. He glanced at his wristwatch, 09:45. Probably doing a mail run. Hustling the honeys along the way. Very fucking good, asshole. I'll just locate you, and start timing the stops, maybe see if you're wastin' a little too much time. He skipped from station to station looking for Jim Richards, without luck. Maybe on the fifth?

Regadet clicked over to the fifth floor cameras, the one that came up first faced the elevators. The door on the elevator used for deliveries was just opening. "You dip shits," he said out loud to no one in particular. "You're not supposed to be bringin' furniture up, still inside the carton. Jesus!"

He picked up the telephone, dialed Stan Forden's extension, no answer. Then quickly switched the monitor over to Shipping and Receiving, no one there.

Regadet jogged over to elevator number one, which happened to be at ground level. Then used his key to express to the fifth floor. The doors slid open, he stepped out, and turned right. "Hey," he addressed the man wheeling the carton towards the executive suite. "Where do you think you're going?"

Rashad turned around slowly, and stepped away from the carton.

"No way you're gonna take that piece of crap into the executive suite." Monty Regadet continued as he approached. "First of all, nothing comes up inside a carton. You understand what I'm saying? Everything gets processed at Shipping and Receiving. Second, no deliveries after nine in the morning. STACEY's knows damn well to set up all deliveries after hours."

Regadet stopped moving towards Rashad. It suddenly dawned on him he didn't recognize the man. Caring First had been dealing with STACEY's for years, he knew every one of their delivery personnel on a first name basis. The other thing Monty Regadet noticed was a look of unmitigated hatred in the eyes of the person who stood before him.

There are times when a man knows he's made a *deadly error*. If there's help at hand, or something misfires in one's favor, the error may be survived. Monty Regadet was reminded of a time when he was a *cherry* in Vietnam. He'd stepped on a land mine. They were moving through the jungle on patrol that night, moving by necessity very, very slowly, one careful step at a time. He remembered he'd taken a step forward, and felt the ground depress beneath his foot the way it does when a gopher burrow is stepped on. And then he heard a click. What crossed his mind at that moment was that someone had taken his picture.

His squad leader placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered: "Freeze. You just stepped on a mine."

But good fortune had been with him that night, he'd obeyed his squad leader implicitly, and had not lifted his foot. The triggering mechanism was designed to set off the mine when pressure was released. It had taken an hour, but with care and ingenuity, they'd managed to get him off unscathed.

Today, intuition told him, he'd not be so lucky.

#

Jim Richards stood behind the mail cart waiting for the doors of the number three elevator to open. He usually pulled mail out of the dividers as he rode from one floor to the next. But this morning the mail was light, he could just as easily do it as he rolled the cart down the hall.

The elevator doors slid open revealing a scene so unexpected, had it not been for the years of rigorous training he'd adhered to, and his own natural aggressiveness in the face of danger, he might have stood there mouth agape until the doors closed again.

Directly outside the elevator a man held an auto-loading pistol. Monty Regadet was in the process of doubling over as if he were taking a bow after a particularly successful performance. Except there was a look of shock, and agony, etched on his face. Both hands clutched his stomach, as he rocked back on his heels. A fine red mist seemed to hang in the air, while puffs of smoke were projected outward from several holes in a large shipping carton. The roar of an assault weapon could be heard echoing in the narrow hallway.

Jim Richards reacted without hesitation. He hurled the cart forward, slamming it full force into right leg of the man with the pistol. An involuntary scream of pain escaped his lips as Jim Richards heard, with satisfaction, the willow branch snap of bone, under the impact of a rolling steel cart. Richards' momentum drove Rashad sideways into the shipping carton, which under the weight of the falling man, and the continued force of Richards' thrust, toppled onto its side.

As the carton fell, Jim Richards launched himself over the top of the mail cart. He grasped Rashad's wrist with one hand, and the barrel of the nine-millimeter pistol with the other, allowing the force of his propelled body to convey more torque than he could have obtained from the strength of his arms alone.

Rashad screamed again, in agony, as the fingers of his right hand were broken in blinding succession, the weapon ripped away as the intensity of Jim

Richards' assault continued unabated. Every sinew in Rashad's arm was torn asunder - wrist, elbow, shoulder. Accompanied by the sickening sound of popping tendons.

Jim Richards slammed down onto the carton, bounced to the floor, and rolled away struggling to get the auto-loading pistol into firing position. The shipping carton seemed to be alive. A nightmarish monster that belched smoke, and roared flame in bursts of automatic fire.

Inside the carton, Mustaf kicked with his legs while firing his weapon wildly, trying to create hole through which he could escape. He seethed in frustration at how their plan had gone completely awry. What could have been simpler? Roll the carton into the executive suite. Open it up nice and easy, as if they were unwrapping a desk. Then blow T. Harris Williams and his staff, all to hell.

Jim Richards remained prone, trying to pull his head down between his shoulders like a turtle. Rounds ricocheted all about the hallway. The roar deafening. Then suddenly everything seemed to slow down, as Jim Richards fell into a surreal state brought on by massive amounts of adrenaline. A place where the smallest detail is seen and comprehended by a brain pumped to near sensory overload.

Only a very few, rare individuals, possess the discipline to remain at such hyper-awareness for more than a half second before losing all ability to react. Jim Richards was one of those very few, in fact, it was this state of mind for which he lived, and might one day die. Nothing else - no artificial threat, no sport or recreation, no training simulation, could ever bring him to such acute awareness. He saw the man he'd attacked grimacing in terrified agony. The box splitting open from the thrust of powerful legs, and more powerful bursts of automatic fire. Yet sound no longer seemed to reach his ears. Only the input associated with light could be processed by the human brain at this speed.

Jim Richards watched in detached fascination as the hand in which he held the commandeered weapon came up on target. The gun bucked twice.

The first round entered the Rashad's throat just above his Adam's apple, a squirt of dark liquid belched outward. The second round entered his mouth blowing cranial contents against the wall to the right of the elevator. His legs buckled. He dropped to the carpet, like a sack of day old garbage.

Now the weapon shifted to the carton, suddenly split in half like a rectangular shaped egg from which some alien monster would emerge. The sight picture fell between two booted feet kicking at the last scraps of cardboard that still enclosed the carton's occupant. Jim Richards kept pulling the trigger, stitching



individual rounds up the torso of the monster's body until the Ak-47 assault rifle, now pointed at the ceiling, ceased to jerk and spit smoke.

Suddenly, sound again reached his brain. As if a jet fighter had flown a low pass past his ears. Jim Richards took several deep breaths, staring for two or three endless seconds at the carnage before him. The echoes of gunfire careened from one wall to the next, then faded into the distance.

A pall of cordite gas hung in the air. Pieces of ceiling tile, flakes of cardboard drifted down to the gray-carpeted floor, like snow falling from hell. The first of the two gunmen lay completely still. The second, kept moving his left leg as if he were attempting to scoot away from a bad dream. The spasms nothing more than bioelectric impulse from an oxygen deficient brain.

Jim Richards remained prone, his back against the wall. His gun arm stretched towards the remains of the shipping carton. He rolled onto his stomach, then rose to one knee. And finally to his feet.

He heard a long drawn out moan. Monty Regadet, lay on his side in a fetal position. Now and then he'd heave spasmodically, puking blood onto the carpeted floor. Jim Richards stepped over to him, and knelt at his side. Monty, in his final agony, rolled partially onto his back. He looked at Jim Richards with eyes already turning dull. He stared at the gun in Jim Richards' hand. His mouth formed a word. "Why?"

#

Yousef Abadeh waited nervously inside the Chevy van. He glanced at his watch, 09:50. They'd be coming out any moment. He started the engine. His eyes shifting between looking about the van, and glancing in the rear view mirror. Suddenly two armed men appeared at the entrance to Shipping and Receiving. Both were dressed as maintenance workers, but carried CAR 15's, the short-barreled version of an M-16 assault rifle.

Immediately, Yousef slammed the transmission into drive and sped away from the dock, the accelerator smashed to the floor. Tires squealed in protest as he swung away from the building. In the rear view mirror, puffs of smoke were emitted from the weapons, followed by metallic *thunks* and *clangs* as .223 caliber rounds crashed into the metal work of the van.

Yousef careened and swerved, accelerating up the driveway towards Franklin Road. Off to his right, he noticed two more landscape workers. The ones he'd seen cutting weeds, when he drove through the gate earlier. It looked as if they were still at it. One had opened a small locker bolted to a trailer, attached to a large ride 'em mower.

Only a hundred feet left to go, then he'd be free. He glanced to his right again. The landscaper who'd appeared to be getting a tool out of the locker, was now holding something that didn't look much like a Weed Eater. Just then time slowed for Yousef Abadeh, in fact, it came to a complete stop shortly after a rocket propelled grenade tore through the grill work at the front of the van. He didn't have time to say: *Allah is Great*. Or for that matter, to even scream.

#

The apartments were built amongst a grove of trees. Jim Richards turned off Old Hickory Road. He wound his way amongst the buildings until he found Building G. He scanned the vehicles parked under the car ports, spotted the one he was looking for, then pulled his Bronco into a vacant spot.

The buildings were each two stories high. Primarily one bedrooms, with wood balconies where a couple of lawn chairs and a Bar-B-Q grill might fit. He climbed the stairs to apartment 201, then stood before the door, hesitant to knock. After several seconds, he knocked twice, then once. The sound of his knuckles on the wooden door less confident than he'd have wished.

The door was not opened immediately, and he wondered if she were home. If she were, would she be alone. Would she even want him to have come. He heard the sound of a dead bolt turning, then the door was open. Warm light spilled out, illuminating the landing. Misti stood before him, dressed in a soft pink sweater, over a pair of tight fitting stone washed jeans, feet bare.

"Jim," her voice edged with relief. "It was on the news. I...I've been trying to reach you all day. At home, at the office..." And then she was in his arms, drawing him through the door way, he felt tears of relief moisten the skin on his neck. He held her close for several seconds.

Then she broke away, and closed the door. Misti turned to look at him, her eyes wet with tears. "They said on the news a gunman had gone berserk, killed three people including the mail room supervisor."

Jim Richards shook his head. "They must have got it wrong as usual." Then he looked past Misti, a television stood on a small, square table. The late news was just beginning, Caring First the lead story. He nodded in its direction. "May I?" He crossed the room, turned the volume up.

#

*We've just received the latest update on the tragic events that took place at the corporate headquarters of Caring First, Inc.. Let's go now to our reporter on the scene, Lori Johnson.*

The news channel coverage switched to an attractive, young, female reporter outside Caring First.

*"After an exhaustive day of following this bizarre story, here are the events as we have been able to determine: Two former employees of Caring First ,who'd been terminated for insubordination , returned to the company for revenge.*

*"Disguised as STACEY's Furniture delivery people, the men were able to enter the building via the loading dock you see behind me. Once inside, they overpowered and killed the Receiving Department Manager, bludgeoning him to death with a blunt object. Possibly a pipe found near the man's body. It was erroneously conveyed to us earlier, that a Mail Room Supervisor had been killed."*

Jim Richards glanced over at Misti. She had her hand up to her mouth, and seemed to be biting the knuckle of her first finger.

*"One of the two men climbed inside an empty shipping carton ,which at one time held a secretary's desk. The other wheeled the carton into the elevator and took it to the fifth floor. There he was confronted by Caring First's Director of Corporate Security.*

*"Here the events become less easy to verify, as the only living witness to the story has been sequestered. Apparently, the man inside the carton was armed with an assault rifle. It was their intent to use the ruse of delivering a desk, to kill as many Caring First Executives as possible.*

*"Again, based upon what we have been able to gather, just as they were about to enter the executive suite they were stopped by head of Security. Then the elevator doors opened, a mail delivery person pushing a cart filled with inter-office mail, collided with the furniture carton.*

*"According to our sources, the man inside the carton began firing his weapon indiscriminately, hitting both his accomplice ,and the head of Security. However, though mortally wounded, the Security Director heroically returned fire, killing the gunman.*

*"But that isn't all to this strange and violent story. One of Caring First's Landscape employees was involved in a fatal automobile accident just inside the gate to the property at about the same time as the tragic*

*events were occurring inside the building. It is believed the landscape employee suffered a heart attack, thus losing control of his vehicle which then ran off the driveway, up a low berm, rolled over several times, then blew up when its gasoline tank ruptured. This coincidence greatly hindered fire and ambulance personnel responding to a call for assistance ,as a result of the shooting inside.*

*"The police are withholding the names of the deceased, pending notification of their next of kin.*

*"This is Lori Johnson, reporting to you live from Brentwood, Tennessee.*

#

"My God, Jim. Is that right? Is that what happened?" Misti asked.

Jim Richards gazed at her in silence for a moment, then said: "That about covers it."

#

November 4, 1979

Through out the country people watched their televisions. Some in fascination, others in disbelief. Most with some degree of anger. The scenes broadcast in color, live as they occurred, because it served the perpetrators to assure all who watched were made abundantly aware of exactly what was taking place. They did not want the spin doctors in Washington D.C. to shade the events in any way.

Their plan for media attention was greatly enhanced by the fact that evening in the United States was mid-day in their country. There would be no dark and murky night to confuse viewers as to exactly what was occurring.

The event pre-empted all other broadcasts, not just because of its momentous nature, but also, perhaps mostly, because each network needed to make certain no other network *scooped* the story. This too was anticipated, even cultivated by the perpetrators.

At the White House, President Jimmy Carter sat before his television. In the situation room at the Pentagon, a television was rolled in because the monitors installed were not designed to receive standard broadcast channels. On the seventh floor of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, Elmo Jefferson watched on a small table model.

#

"Jim, come here. " Misti called down the hallway, beckoning Richards from his studio office. She'd not *officially* moved back after the incident at Caring First, but was spending more and more of her time there, even sleeping over on occasion. "You've got to see this, you won't believe it."

Jim Richards padded down the hallway, into the family room. It took him a moment to interpret what was going on. At first he thought he was having a flashback to the sixties, it was almost as if he was back on campus at San Francisco State. A crowd of protesters were shaking their fists and chanting. There were signs, hand painted with various slogans, all condemning the United States.

As he watched, it gradually dawned on him, by the appearance of the protesters, and the scenery in the background, the demonstration was in a foreign country. Finally, the voice of an announcer broke through to his consciousness, the camera's focus pulled back to widen the scene. And it became clear, Iranian *students* had taken over the United States Embassy in Tehran, and we're holding American citizens hostage.

His reaction was immediate anger at the audacity of Iran, to invade the sovereign territory of the United States of America, which was what the embassy grounds were in fact. And then anger with President Carter for allowing the prestige of the United States to become so disrespected by other nations, that such an event could even have been considered, let alone carried out.

#

January 1980

The white-over-blue, Gulfstream II business, jet touched down at Washington's National Airport. Another perfect landing had been executed by its pilot. T. Harris Williams transferred from tower frequency to ground control, then requested clearance to transient parking at the executive FBO. He deftly swung the sleek aircraft into an open parking slot, then shut down the engines. Williams greatly enjoyed flying his G2, but missed the feel of the B-52s he'd commanded during his time with the Air Force.

As Harris Williams stepped out of the *front office*, he smiled at Bob Jacobson who clearly hated riding in the *back seat* . On a longer flight, Harris would have had him come forward for awhile.

"Not bad, for an Air Force guy," Jacobson quipped, "of course it really isn't *kosher* to get your three take-offs and landings all at the same time. The Navy used to make us go around the patch in order to count each bounce for currency requirements."

Harris Williams grinned, and shook his head. In the board room such insubordination would have been considered bad form. But amongst pilots, executive titles and old money, meant nothing. Personal performance was the only yardstick when the integrity of aircraft, and the lives of those on board, were in the hands of the person at the controls. All three men aboard were the best of the best. Harris Williams, former Plane Commander, Strategic Air Command. Bob Jacobson, Navy fighter pilot, carrier qualified. And the G2's regular pilot, another former SAC Commander.

"At least we won't have to replace the landing gear after every half dozen or so landings." Williams replied. "How you Navy guys can keep a straight face while calling those belly flops aboard a floating wrecking yard *a landing* is beyond me. I suppose anything less than five Gs down force you'd call a *greaser*."

Jacobson laughed, in turn, as he hauled himself out of the caribou leather arm chair he'd flown in to D.C.. "Well at least we're sure we're on the ground."

Jacobson stepped over to the cabin door, then swung the lock handle to the right, allowing the access steps to deploy. A cold January wind wafted into the cabin as Jacobson stepped to one side to allow Harris Williams to proceed, then followed him down to the tarmac.

The two executives crossed the apron towards the FBO Terminal. They were greeted midway by a man, with shoulders so broad he had to buy two *off the rackers* every time he needed a new suit. A size fifty-two for the jacket, the other one for a pair of thirty-six at the waist pants. He showed his identification, then motioned in the direction of a limousine with blacked out windows.

The drive to Langley was uneventful. Williams, and Jacobson, passed the time bantering about football. One doesn't discuss anything substantive inside a CIA limo. Unless the exercise is to pass disinformation on to the gnomes, who'd later scramble out of their warren to fetch the voice recorder tapes, activated as soon as weight is placed on the seats of the vehicle.

At the entrance to Langley, they were number three to pass through the security check, tightened since the taking of American hostages in Tehran. Williams thought: Right here, waiting in line at the entrance to the CIA complex was where they were most vulnerable. Though it would probably take nothing

less than a sabat round to penetrate the armor plate, and bullet resistant glass, of the tank in which they rode.

However, the vast majority of employees working at Langley were not so fortunate, or perhaps burdened, to warrant encasement in near impenetrable armor. Williams could imagine a line of cars backed up, awaiting clearance through the check point each morning, as the first shift of the day arrived. Naturally, that shift had the most senior and experienced personnel, no midnight grind for them.

Sooner, or later, it was bound to happen, some crazed gunman, more than likely a disgruntled former employee, or goof ball terrorist, would show up at eight in the morning, and hose down a few cars with automatic weapons fire. While the occupants sat passively, reading the morning newspaper.

Harris Williams hated security procedures. He'd found they always had a flaw. Clearly proven by his own near fatal experience. Shame to have lost Monty, boorish though he was, he'd been a loyal employee. If his people at the perimeter had followed policy, called the van in when it first came through the gate, the whole incident might have been nipped in the bud, with the bonus of having a chance to interrogate at least one of the perpetrators.

The CIA driver deposited them at the entrance to the main building. Once inside, Williams and Jacobson were required to pass through another check point. A side by side affair that looked something like turn styles at a football stadium, or perhaps Disneyland. Once in the main lobby, they were required to obtain a visitor's pass from the keeper of *the gate*, an airline type metal detector. A pass was issued only when orders to do so were on the gatekeeper's computer screen.

Regular employees enjoyed the perk of circumventing *the gate*, most of the time, as their permanent pass was sufficient. Although they might be asked at anytime to show their full identification, then take a stroll through the gate under the watchful eye of armed personnel.

Williams glanced at his pass as he clipped it to his lapel. It was bright blue, with a large number seven on its face. Visitors were not allowed to roam freely through the building, they were given access only to the floor on which they had specific business.

The visitor's elevator sighed open. Williams and Jacobson stepped in, then pressed the button corresponding to the seventh floor. In fact, they had no idea on which floor it would stop. A numbered light panel designated the floors they passed, then lit up brightly as the elevator slowed to seven. But there was no relationship between the numbers displayed and the actual floor at which the elevator stopped.

The doors sighed open, Williams and Jacobson stepped out, and were immediately greeted by Elmo Jefferson. "Morning Harris. Bob." They shook hands. "This way please." Jefferson gestured to his right.

They were in a narrow hallway that ran north and south from the elevator. Every few feet, on each side, an office door. Or at least Williams presumed the doors led to offices. In fact, they might be broom closets, as there were no names or numerical designations on any. He supposed one learned one's way around by memorizing locations, or counting steps and turns.

They turned left at the end of the hallway, then proceeded down another equally innocuous corridor to a door like all the others. Elmo Jefferson opened it, then stepped aside to allow his guests to enter.

Williams and Jacobson found themselves stepping into a conference room without windows, lit by indirect lighting. The walls paneled in warm mahogany. There was a large oblong conference table. To one side a silver coffee service, with baskets of fresh breads and Danish pastries.

Dr. Richard Holt was seated at the table. Harris Williams and Bob Jacobson joined he and Elmo Jefferson, after helping themselves to coffee and Danish.

Elmo began the meeting. "We've a lot to discuss, not all of it pleasant. As this crisis deepens, everyone's pointing fingers, trying to find someone to blame. The President's approval rating is falling faster than a barrel over Niagara Falls."

Williams shrugged. "Breaks my heart, 'bout the only good news that's come out of this mess so far. But let's get down to business. I suspect we need to reposition Caring First."

"Unfortunately, yes," Jefferson said, nodding his head agreement. "Here's the long and short of it. Practically speaking, Caring First's cover and usefulness as a proprietary, is blown. Not only are the Iranians fully cognizant of its operation, which was the signal they were sending by that blatant attempt on your life, but the Soviets are now also keenly aware of the roll Caring First plays."

Dr. Holt nodded his head vigorously. "Even as we speak, KGB is in the process of attempting to turn Yuri Sosyka. Though, as yet, they're not aware of our knowledge of that attempt."

Harris Williams shook his head. "We always knew our effectiveness would eventually be limited, but I'm surprised how quickly and completely it's



come apart." He looked away for a moment. "Frankly, if it weren't for our mail room guy, I'd not be sitting with you today."

Elmo Jefferson nodded his head gravely in agreement. "I hope you've given that young man a nice promotion, Harris. Its not everyday an employee puts his life on the line for you." Jefferson said in a silky smooth tone of voice.

Harris Williams smiled. "As a matter of fact, I told him he could write his own ticket. Choose any department he wished, and we'd see to it he was trained for executive management."

Jefferson beamed. "Good for you, and what did he choose?"

Williams shook his head. "He didn't, not even with a major increase in salary." Williams shrugged his shoulders. "Matter of fact, he resigned just before Christmas, said he needed to get back to writing music, reason he came to Nashville in the first place." Williams shook his head, then said cynically, "Guess he was only a mail boy after all."

Jefferson raised both eyebrows. "Tenacious in any case."

Williams smiled. "Oh yes, no doubt. I wonder where it came from? There was nothing in his background we could discover. Never served in the military. Played music, did some odd jobs. Howard McFarland was probably the only one not surprised, said his action fit the profile he'd developed. Said Ocean, that's his name, or stage name at least, Jimmy Ocean, harbored a grudge since we fired his wife over that file flap with Allen Maxwell. McFarland's been worried ever since about his blowing up, doing something violent to get even. Figures his reaction was a release of pent up anger, just happened to work in our favor." Williams shrugged. "Hell., I don't know. Guess it could have been that way.

"Fact is, Jimmy Ocean saved our butts, and I won't forget it. He's got an open invitation to call me anytime. If he wants back on board, the offer stands."

Dr. Holt grinned enthusiastically. Jefferson nodded his head once, then asked: "What do you make of that file business of Maxwell's?"

Williams shook his head. "Can't really say," he looked over at Jacobson. "Bob, would know more about it than I. Typical stunt Max would pull though, never really suspected the girl - what was her name?" He looked at Jacobson.

"Misti."

"Misti, that's right - of anything more than poor judgment. Still, something had to be done. Maxwell annoys the hell out of me sometimes. He can be an

irritating son of a bitch, but damn if he doesn't pull in the numbers. His domestic division, which is primarily elder care, is unbelievably profitable." He glanced at Jacobson again, then smiled. "Course, if your buddy Bob here could remember his keys more than once a week, we wouldn't need a spare in his secretary's desk."

Jacobson ducked his head, while everyone else had a good chuckle. Just then the telephone at the far end of the conference room rang. Jefferson slowly hauled his bulk out of the chair, and walked a little stiffly over to it, then picked up the receiver.

"Jefferson here. Yes. I'll be right there." He hung up the phone, and shook his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, some damn document, or other, I've got to sign. Please excuse me, I won't be more than ten minutes. Bathroom's down the hall, first door on the left. I'll be right back."

He left the room. As soon as the door closed behind him, he picked up the pace with no hint of stiffness in his stride. At the junction of the hallways, he turned right, then entered the first door on his right, walked through an outer office into a darkened cubicle adjacent to the conference room. The cubicle contained a bank of four video monitors, three covered the conference room from different angles, the fourth looked down the hallway. High quality microphones, and recorders, archived the words spoken. While an analyst monitored real time PSI - personality stress indicators - of those speaking.

"What've you got, Frank?" Jefferson asked as he entered the room.

"So far, he looks clean, Mr. Jefferson."

Frank spun the tape back to the point where Harris Williams discussed Jimmy Ocean. He then moved the tape forward to Allen Maxwell, showing Jefferson the numbers.

"There's a little blip here," Frank pointed to a numerical spike when Williams was discussing Maxwell's phenomenal profitability. "He's not being completely candid, but I suspect from the topic discussed the issue has something to do with how Maxwell gets margins well above industry standards. Something questionable there, my guess would be labor costs. Maybe knowledge of wage violations, use of illegal aliens, something like that. However, in regard to your concern about Jim Richards' activities, or suspecting an insert, he's clean."

Jefferson nodded his head thoughtfully. "Thanks, Frank. Keep it rolling, I want a full analysis of the entire meeting first thing tomorrow."

Jefferson returned to the conference room. Jacobson had his back to the door, helping himself to another Danish. Harris Williams sat, chatting pleasantly with Dr. Holt.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry. We won't be interrupted again." He lowered himself ponderously into his chair, then waited a moment for Jacobson to return to the table.

"Okay, let's get down to business. Dr. Holt would you please bring Harris up to speed on the latest developments."

Dr. Holt's eyes sparkled enthusiastically as he began to speak. "President Carter has ordered the military to design a rescue operation for the hostages, wants to utilize the Special Warfare people."

Jacobson groaned. "Can't be done, not in Tehran."

Williams just shook his head.

Dr. Holt raised his hands, palms outward. "I know, I know, but that's not our concern. The President's ordered a full assessment of CIA's capability inside Tehran. Fact is, Bob's the only one with people on the ground. Problem is, if we volunteer his cell we expose Caring First to Senate Oversight."

Williams looked over at Jacobson, his eyebrows went up unconsciously.

"I'm afraid he's exactly right," Jacobson replied.

Williams' mouth turned down cynically. "When it goes bad, it always goes completely bad." He looked at Jefferson. "So what *are* your plans?"

Jefferson's face turned very serious. "First, we *will* give the President the intelligence he needs. Everything we've got, whatever the cost. If that's what it takes to get our people out of there."

Harris Williams raised his eyebrows. "Then it will likely bring down Caring First International, once Senate Oversight gets itself involved in the after action analysis."

Jefferson's lips formed a Cheshire cat grin. "Not necessarily. Initially we'll keep them away by utilizing the President's emergency powers. That won't be a problem. It will give us time to disperse International's *assets*, and get a team of auditors in to cook the books."

Harris Williams protested. "If you eliminate capital generated by our domestic operations, International will be so deep in the red it'll be bankrupt."

"Not quite." Jefferson argued.

"Close enough, " Williams replied.

Dr. Holt shook his head. "No it won't. Here's what we'll do. We'll cook the books to show a third of the facilities are profitable, a third are marginal, a third are losers. Bob will sell off the losers as direct real estate deals, that'll generate the cash flow necessary to give the appearance the remaining properties are in the black.

"Next you'll do a quiet offering to sell off a substantial portion of the company. I suspect Global Assurance will step in, suck it up - lock, stock, and barrel."

Harris Williams looked genuinely shocked. "Whoa, wait a minute. I can't agree to *that*.. Raymond Harbinger's already committed a hell of a lot of his own personal wealth to Caring First. Without Raymond's capital infusions on our early real estate deals, we'd have had to auction ourselves off piece meal to the hyenas on Wall Street years ago. I can't let him, or his company, buy further into Caring First knowing it may be torn apart downstream by Oversight.

There was complete silence in the room for several moments, then Elmo spoke, his voice menacingly soft. "Oh I think you'll feel much more comfortable about that prospect, Harris, after you've heard all we've learned about Raymond Harbinger's true loyalties.

# Chapter Twenty-One

February 1980

Wayne Generette eased the black Mercedes-Benz 500 SEL to the curb. He opened the driver's door, and climbed out. Ice crystals swirled about his ankles, crackled under foot. The sun shone brightly, but gave no warmth. Its radiance chilled by a freezing wind that howled down Seventeenth Avenue South. Generette zipped his hooded parka up as far it would go, then walked gingerly around the front of the car to the passenger door. He reached in, grabbed a leather briefcase, then slammed the door shut.

He looked up and down the street, paying particular attention to cars parked along the route he intended to take, searching to see if any might contain a watcher. The only other person he saw on the street was a man bundled against the cold in a fur trimmed parka that matched his full, neatly trimmed, beard. He wore a navy blue watch cap on his head, rolled to cover the tops of his ears. Leather gloves to warm his hands. His gait steady in a pair of insulated Gortex hiking boots. He seemed oblivious to the peril of ice, completely balanced and sure footed. He carried a portfolio. And looked to be in the process of pitching songs to publishers and producers, on the street known as *Music Row*.

The man crossed Seventeenth Avenue South. For a moment Wayne Generette thought, perhaps the man was going to engage him in a conversation. But then it seemed he looked directly at the front left side of the Benz, though Generette could not tell for certain, as the man wore a pair of dark, aviator sunglasses.

Just before reaching the car, the man silently acknowledged Generette with an up-lift of his chin, as he veered left, to continue on down the icy sidewalk. Generette watched him shrink into the distance until he turned up a walkway, and disappeared into one of the publishing houses.

Generette's curiosity got the better of him, he skittishly walked around the front of the Merz, to look at the fender, but saw nothing of note. Generette shrugged, probably just his imagination. Or maybe the guy had been smoking too much funny weed, and thought he'd seen nirvana reflected in the high gloss finish of the Merz. Musicians, bunch of potheads anyway.

Generette stepped carefully back to the sidewalk, then turned and trekked two blocks north until he came to a house built in the late 1930s. A nondescript

place, single story with wood siding, composite shingle roof. Its gray exterior in need of a fresh coat of paint. The house, like most of its neighbors, had been converted to offices. And like most of its neighbors, served the music industry. There was a struggling producer in the front space.

Wayne Generette walked up three wide steps to a wooden porch, opened the door, and stepped through. To his right, the producer's office door was closed. He heard no sound from within to indicate anyone was there. A narrow hallway led straight back to the space he'd rented under an assumed name. The sign on the door read: *New Day Music Publishing Company*. No one worked in the office, and no one except Wayne Generette ever came to visit.

He unlocked the door, then stepped inside. The room he entered had once been the home's master bedroom. There was the remnant of a hearth in the middle of one wall. A table and one metal chair in the center of the floor. Otherwise, the space was completely devoid of furniture, or decoration.

He made the rounds, performing a perfunctory security check. He entered so seldom, it was possible some derelict, or wanna be country singer, had taken up temporary residence in his absence. As he went from room to room, he assured the window blinds were completely closed, and no one was lurking about outside with an ear to the bottom of water tumbler. Assured the space was secure, Wayne Generette clicked on the overhead light. He glanced at his wrist watch, there was still twenty minutes to spare. He set about hooking up the equipment he'd brought with him in the brief case.

It took a full ten minutes to link the slim line telephone to a descrambler device, and then to a cassette tape recorder. He dialed *POPCORN*, and listened to the operator tell him what time it was, while he set the gain controls, and filters in anticipation of the incoming call he was about to receive. Once everything was in place, he pulled a romance novel from his valise, and settled himself into the chair to wait. If the call did not come as expected, he'd pack up and leave, then return at the next scheduled contact time.

#

Nelson Banderhof plugged the mini-telephone plug into his descrambler device then dialed the number he'd long since memorized.

#

At the CIA's communications intercept center in Langley, Virginia, an annunciator L.E.D. told duty technician, Philip Auralhost, that Nelson Banderhof was about to prattle on to his contact. The signal from Banderhof's line had long since been laboriously traced from one telephone switching center to the next.

However, CIA had not yet found the location of the telephone where the calls were received. By the nature of the information conveyed, the call was most probably picked up somewhere in the Nashville area but the exact location eluded them.

When making contact, Banderhof routinely dialed a telephone number that connected to the offices of a Los Angeles answering service that offered secure call forwarding. The answering service catered to movie moguls, paranoid their slightest musings on a screen play premise might be stolen from their very lips via an illegal wiretap.

At *the service* all calls were routed to an outgoing line, randomly switched every thirty seconds. As a result, tracing a call past the first level became impossible without first obtaining a warrant, and forcing the service to cooperate. Something CIA could not do without the assistance of the Department of Justice, precisely the entity they'd least want knowledgeable of Caring First's operations. Philip Auralhost supposed an undercover agent could be introduced into the answering service, thus garnering the information needed. But that was not his concern, and in any case it appeared, based upon the fact he was still monitoring Banderhof's calls, any such scheme had failed to yield results.

Philip Auralhost duly recorded the Banderhof communication, copied the tape, then sent it on to Elmo Jefferson for analysis.

#

Banderhof hung up the phone. As he put away his scrambler, a vague sense of uneasiness came over him. He shrugged it off. The possibility of discovery was something he'd learned to live with, and the extra money more than made up for such anxieties. He was not really committing a serious crime. Caring First itself was illegal. So, what was the worst that could happen? They'd fire him. The agency would certainly not want any sort of trial, or scandal, to illuminate the secret of Caring First.

Banderhof chuckled to himself. The more he thought about it, the stronger he felt. Hell, they might not even be able to fire him. Might actually have to give him a promotion, just to keep him from filing a wrongful termination complaint. Ha! Wouldn't that be a hoot, watching them try to come up with a *cause* for termination without revealing the source of his alleged activity.

#

May 1980

The man who leaned against the grill work of a four wheel drive Ford Bronco, parked adjacent to the perimeter fence at the Nashville Metropolitan Airport, had a full, neatly trimmed beard. He wore his hair longer than was usual for him. His attire, blue jeans casual. He watched the Cessna 310 turn from base to final, touch down gently, roll out, and turn onto taxi way Charley. As the executive twin approached the tie-down space, Jim Richards was able to make out Ty Harding's face behind the windscreen.

While Harding shut down the engines, Richards made his way along the fence to a gate. He *popped* the security latch with a spring metal credit card, then stepped through, and walked over to the white-over-maroon Twin Cessna. He extended his hand in greeting, as Harding climbed down from the starboard wing.

"Jim, good to see you." Harding said.

"Likewise." Richards replied. "This *is* a surprise. Can you stay a few days."

Harding grinned, and tilted his head to one side. "Well... not a few days, but overnight at least."

Jim Richards released his grip, then looked at his friend for a moment in silence. He suddenly realized how much he'd missed seeing him, their morning chats, and after-mission discussions. Not to mention the good times they'd shared, doing things they both loved. Flying, SCUBA diving, sailing, ... and drinking too much Scotch every now and then. Their friendship went back a long ways, and they'd seen each other through many difficult episodes personally as well as professionally.

Jim Richards helped Ty Harding tie down the aircraft, then grabbed his *overnight* out of the baggage compartment, and motioned Harding towards the Bronco. As they drove through the hills of Nashville, Harding opened the conversation. "How are things with you and Misti?"

Jim Richards glanced over at his friend, then returned his eyes to the road. "We're seeing each other, dating I guess you'd call it. I always have the feeling I'm walking on eggs. Though she's been spending more time at the house lately."

Harding glanced out the side window at the countryside, then looked back at Richards. "Have you two talked at all about returning to the bay area?"



"I've broached the subject with her once, or twice. This is her first semester as a full-time teacher. The kids love her. She has no interest in leaving. So for right now, I'm taking it one day at a time."

Harding nodded his understanding. They rode along in silence for several minutes. At the intersection of Old Hickory and Franklin Road, they turned left then headed south. Jim Richards gestured towards a cluster of buildings set amongst a grove of trees. "That's Caring First over there."

Ty Harding looked at the campus through the passenger window, as they turned up Murray Lane. Then looked over at Richards. "Elmo gave me a call last week, he's shutting down the investigation. You'll be off contingency pay end of this month."

Jim Richards made no comment.

"I can send some insurance investigations your way, if you want to hang out here awhile, see if you and Misti can put it back together. Won't be much though, just so you know."

Richards glanced over at Harding. "Thank you."

"What *are* your plans?" Harding asked pointedly.

Jim Richards shrugged. "Been doing some writing, a little production work. Cutting demos, jingles that sort of thing. Always a chance something will hit. Then, who knows, maybe Jimmy Ocean's the next Elvis." He laughed once. "In any case, it'll get me through the summer. End of the year, latest. By then Misti and I will either be back together and ready to head west, or she'll be able to handle it here on her own."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Then Richards asked: "Anything from Steve Sheffield?"

Harding shook his head. "No. Elmo indicated they made the insertion into Iran safely. Thank God, he and the guys weren't assigned to Dessert One. Those poor bastards never had a chance. Faulty planning from the get go. Too many fingers in the pie. Everyone wanted a piece of the glory. Now they're all trying to blame each other. FUBAR infinito, typical military politics." Harding shook his head in disgust. "I'm sure Steve and his merry marauders will turn up fine one of these days... God willing."

Jim Richards swerved gently to avoid a rabbit that darted across the two lane country rode. "Any luck tracing that Histoplasmosis stuff? Anything we can pin on Allen Maxwell?"

"Nope." Harding replied curtly.

"What about a follow up? Might be worth keeping me in play for awhile longer." Richards said.

Harding sighed. "Elmo brought Allen Maxwell in for questioning. He passed the polygraph they gave him." Harding shook his head, and shrugged. "Hard to believe with all the circumstantial we had but sometimes it just works out that way. Anyway, for now, getting the hostages back, and getting some good HumIntel on the middle east is priority one for just about everyone at Langley."

Jim Richards ignored Harding's explanation. "How about that file, Maxwell had Misti access?"

Harding shrugged. "Fact is, he *was* entitled to it. Though his method of retrieval was questionable." Harding sighed. "I hate to say it, Jim, but Misti screwed up big time on that deal. I agree he set her up. But not because he was after something for which he wasn't cleared. He just wanted her out of Caring First, and she played right into his hands."

Jim Richards said nothing.

"Elmo's current focus, other than the hostages, is to cover up Caring First's ties to the community," Harding continued. "Senate Oversight will undoubtedly look into the intelligence provided to Dessert One's planners. If Caring First's past operations are uncovered in the process, there will be a bunch of finger pointing. Nothing like a covert operation to serve as scapegoat, when the guys with the scrambled eggs on their hat brims over at the five cornered building have fucked up."

The corner of Jim Richards' mouth turned down cynically. "Lots of time and effort wasted, Ty. Allen Maxwell's a bigger part of the Caring First problem than anyone realizes. He may have even been the root cause of Dave Wilcox' death."

Harding turned his palms upward. "Jim...listen to me. Dave Wilcox died on a mission. A dangerous mission. That's what Navy SEALs do. You know that better than I. Don't matter whether it's a bullet, or bird shit, end result's the same."

Richards compressed his lips. "Maybe so, but the proximate cause was perpetrated by someone. If Maxwell was the cause then justice needs to be dealt. Someone stole that accelerant, sold it, or gave it to the Iranians, maybe via a middle man. My opinion is the perpetrator was Allen Maxwell.

"Polygraphs don't mean shit. Hell, in Psychology 101, the professor we had at San Francisco State taught everyone in class how to beat the *poly*, just in case we got hauled in for protesting the war, or wanted to claim we never smoked dope to secure a sensitive job.

"You know as well as I, *polys* are basically bullshit. Even *the room* at Langley can be beat. I'd lay you ten to one, any Hollywood actor worth two cents could lay down a voice track strong enough to fool a personality stress indicator."

Harding made no reply for a moment, then said: "Thing is, Jim, it's out of our hands. That's the hell of it on contract. Client says: We'll take it from here. You just have to let it go." Harding glanced side long at Jim Richards. "You do get my point, I hope?"

Richards nodded once. "Completely."

They rode on in silence until he signaled to turn down Fischer Court. "Listen Ty, Misti will most likely be at the house when we get there. I let her know you were flying in, soon as I got your call this morning. However, she doesn't know I've told you about our situation."

Harding nodded his understanding, then looked over at Richards. "You ever think maybe marriage isn't in the cards for guys like you and me?"

Jim Richards shrugged. "I don't know 'bout you. But I'd say there's a good chance it's not a long term bet for me and myself." He shook his head. "Strange thing is, when it worked between Misti and me, it was the best. *The best.*"

Ty Harding thought about Jim Richards' comment, then about his own late wife. *She was the best* thing that had ever happened to him but it all came to an end too soon. And she was so young. He felt the ache deep in his heart, and wondered if he'd ever be free of the pain. At least, he had the children to remember her by.

Jim Richards turned the Bronco down the driveway. Misti was standing just off the asphalt, watering the flowers. As they pulled to a stop, she turned and beamed in their direction. And Jim Richards truly wished her smile of welcome was for he alone. A lyric came to mind, and it occurred to him he'd have to write it down later.

*Loving you was sweet, losing you is sure gonna hurt me.*

*I don't think I'll find another love as warm as you.*

*But I don't mind the time, I'm gonna have to take to forget you.*

*For loving you was sweet, but not as sweet as your loving me.*

#

The fifth floor at Caring First was quiet. It was six-thirty in the evening, everyone had gone home except Harris Williams and Raymond Harbinger. Harbinger's office was decorated in the style of an old English study. Windows heavily draped. A polished rosewood desk, as big as an aircraft carrier, and more solid than a bank vault. The credenza included a tall book case, a portion of which was enclosed by swing-out cabinet doors. To the right of the desk, in an area set for casual conversation, was a round walnut table on which rested a shaded lamp. It stood between two comfortable club chairs, upholstered in polished, maroon cowhide.

Harris Williams lifted a snifter of fifty year old cognac to his lips. Then thought for a moment before opening the conversation. "You know Raymond, I've been giving some serious thought to following your advice about getting involved in the Washington arena."

Harbinger raised an eyebrow. "Really? I had all but given up hope, you'd ever come to see my point of view."

Williams smiled. "Well, it isn't easy giving up control of a business you've built from the ground up, and that's what would be required. Then there's the issue of timing, the downstream perspective."

Harbinger nodded his head sagely. "Precisely. Timing is everything, most especially in politics." He paused for a moment. Toasted the end of a Cubano, then puffed it to life. A cloud of blue smoke enveloped Harbinger's head. "Now would be a good time to start the process, the Republicans are clearly in the driver's seat come this November. I've no doubt Ronald Reagan will take the coming Presidential election by a landslide, especially with the mess Jimmy Carter's made of the hostage situation."

"You're right, of course." Williams agreed. "No question about it. My thought was to contribute heavily to the Presidential campaign here in Tennessee. Then make certain I maintain high visibility in the Republican party. I'll need your help to assure that happens."

Harbinger smiled broadly. "Absolutely. We'll get you on the right committee, let them see your leadership and organizational abilities. The electoral landslide will sweep everyone along, and all opposition aside. Once Ronald Reagan is inaugurated, we'll plot your political future - fast track to the Senate. In

fact, I can almost guarantee you *friend of Senate* status during the campaign year. We'll announce your candidacy for the upcoming Senatorial elections, and go to work on endorsements."

Harris Williams took another sip of cognac, then looked over the rim of his glass at Raymond Harbinger. "What do you figure it'll cost?"

Harbinger drew on his cigar, and thought for a moment. "Million and half. You should have more than enough off-shore to cover expenses." He took a pull at his own drink, Kentucky sour mash with a splash of branch water. "You know if there was some way to assure the hostages would be released immediately after inauguration, the Republican party would be almost guaranteed a sweep of the next Senatorial election."

Williams gazed skeptically at Harbinger. "Perhaps, but I don't see how we could in anyway influence the outcome of that situation. Bottom line, the Iranians are going to hold them until Treasury comes up with the money they figure we owe 'em. No way that's going to happen, except in some sort of *structured* manner because we don't have eight billion to give back. At least not *their* eight billion."

Harbinger shrugged. "Everything's negotiable." He smiled. "Remember when we discussed that contract for Medico Internaciónál?"

Williams thought for a moment. "Yes. French pharmaceutical company as I recall."

Harbinger nodded his head once. "One of the senior board members is Iranian. We've only spoken a couple of times, socially I mean, but I had the distinct impression his family was quite influential back home. Might be worth pursuing the contact, who knows, could be he, or his relatives, might serve as go betweens, interlocutors, I believe is the term. If you were credited for facilitation of such contact for Mr. Reagan's advance people, you could write your own ticket."

Harris Williams raised his eyebrows, and thought for a moment. "Perhaps, if such a scheme were to actually work. Downside is, if it fails, I'm hung out to dry."

Raymond Harbinger shook his head. "We keep your name out of it altogether until after the event. Then quietly let the right people know, make certain they understand the quid pro quo we expect."

Williams shrugged. "Might be worth a phone call, I suppose."

"Maybe even a visit." Harbinger paused for a moment, thinking. "It would make it a lot easier if I could bring my Iranian friend something tangible to show our sincerity."

Harris Williams tilted his head to one side. "Tangible, as in an exclusive supplier contract?"

Harbinger swept his cigar hand to one side, a trail of aromatic smoke followed. "Oh not necessarily *carte blanche*, but maybe, one or two of Medico's products. Just to show good faith." He smiled magnanimously.

Williams thought for a moment, then seemed to change subjects. "You know Raymond, if I'm to run for Senate, or even just get more involved in politics, I'm really going to have to relieve myself of some of this responsibility." He made a wide sweeping gesture with his hand.

Harbinger nodded his head slowly in agreement.

"I've been thinking about selling off my share." Williams took a sip of cognac, and noted the look of surprise on Harbinger's face. He also noted how his eyes seemed to burn with an inner fire, already it appeared his mind was beginning to glimpse the implications of what he'd just heard.

"Really?" Harbinger said. "And what do the folks at Langley think about that idea?"

Williams remained nonchalant, it was of course the appropriate question. "Oh I'm sure we can work something out." Williams replied. "The key will be finding the right buyer, one who can be fully vetted."

Harbinger said nothing for several moments, but Williams noted his fingers turned white as his grip tightened around the Old Fashion glass he was holding.

"Maybe we should keep it in the family." Harbinger said softly.

Williams raised an eyebrow. "What did you have in mind?"

Harbinger smiled. "First option of refusal, vetting shouldn't be a problem."

Williams smiled broadly in return. "I should think not."

May is perhaps the most beautiful of months in Washington D.C.. The sun is warm, but not too warm. Trees and flowers are in full bloom, and the summer crowds have yet to arrive. Elmo Jefferson and Dr. Richard Holt sat side by side, on a bench that over looked the reflecting pool of the George Washington monument.

The obelisk, among other things, represented the perennial and near timeless nature of the Intelligence community, its administrators, officers, and operatives who endure from season to season, from administration to administration, keeping the continuity of purpose for which the people of the United States elect, and maintain at great expense, the country's governing bodies.

The politics of the day might change, but the *community*, like the monument, remained a focal point of continuity. Its only goal: The preservation, and enhancement, of the sovereignty, strength, and dominance of the United States of America.

Dr. Richard Holt, his eyes closed, face turned up towards the sun, contemplated how to deal with the rapidly growing problem of CIA's largest domestic proprietary.

"How is Harris Williams coming along with resolving issues at Caring First?" Holt asked.

"The first phase has been implemented, " Jefferson replied. "Bob Jacobson has begun selling certain Caring First properties. While Don Dancing has quietly transferred all field operatives to a variety of other proprietaries, under guise of down sizing International to improve profits."

Holt thought for a moment. "What does the rumor mill have to say?"

Jefferson smiled. "Rumor has it that Harris Williams is selling off portions of the company to generate capital for a run at Congress, and ultimately President. So we're in good shape there."

Holt nodded his head once. "And Raymond Harbinger?"

"As you anticipated, he has shown great interest in putting together a consortium to purchase Caring First."

Holt's blue eyes twinkled. "You know how they catch monkey's in Malaysia, don't you?"

Jefferson grinned, and nodded. "They tie a narrow mouthed cookie jar to a tree. The monkey reaches in, grabs a fist full of cookies. He can't pull his hand back out while it's balled around the cookies, but he won't let go of the cookies, even when his captors are walking up to grab him."

"Exactly," said Richard Holt. "But are we sure Harbinger will bring Roget Akhondan in on the deal?"

Jefferson nodded. "Raymond mentioned to Harris Williams there was a possibility his Medico Internacionál contact might assist with resolution of the hostage crisis."

Holt raised one eyebrow skeptically. "Do we have anything on that possibility?"

Jefferson shrugged. "Nothing solid. Roget Akhondan's uncle made an enormous amount of money in oil, when the Shaw was in power. In the past, the family has always been influential, secularly at least. How much influence they'll have under Khomeini is anyone's guess. But certainly it should not be ruled out."

Holt frowned. "I suppose not." He thought for a moment. "That attack on Harris Williams, did we ever figure out who was involved, which group was responsible?"

Jefferson shrugged. "Never determined why the attack was ordered, nor the true names of those involved. The mind readers figure Khomeini, vis a vis Islamic Jihad, who of course claimed responsibility, was sending us a message. Letting us know they were aware of the true nature of Caring First's operations. And at the same time, showing how deep into our territory they were capable of striking, thus strengthening Khomeini's position to negotiate the return of Iran's funds. At least that appears to be their thinking."

"Possibly," Holt agreed, then changed the subject. "Have we determined the identity of Nelson Banderhof's contact yet?"

Jefferson shook his head. "No." He sighed heavily. "We tried to place someone inside that answering service out in Hollywood. No luck. They hire strictly on personal referral from clients known to the principals, getting someone in there is tougher than penetrating the National Security Agency."

Holt laughed once. "Maybe they're one and the same."

Jefferson smiled. "Unfortunately, no. Already tried that route."



"Then I'd say the usefulness of Banderhof's duplicity has run its course. Let's pull him in, see what we can ring out of him."

Jefferson did not respond immediately. He looked off into the distance for several moments, then looked over at Richard Holt. "CIA Charter states we've no authority to arrest domestically, we have to bring Justice in on it. Which, obviously, would let the cat out of the bag, something I believe we're trying to avoid." Jefferson added a bit sarcastically.

Holt shrugged. "So send him out of the country on a bogus courier run. Then bag him in Bangkok, or some such place."

Elmo thought for a moment. "Actually I have a better idea, one that might even give us the information we need concerning his contact."

Holt turned his head slowly towards Elmo Jefferson, whose lips now wore a Cheshire cat grin.

"I know *exactly* what you're thinking, we've discussed it before. And as I said then, about the only thing we'll learn by that approach is how Mr. Banderhof looks floating face down in the Potomac."

Jefferson raised one eyebrow in mock surprise, but then his eyes turned cold, and his face went expressionless. "Well as you've just pointed out, he really is of no further use to us."

#

June 1980

Raymond Harbinger was flat worn out, he'd been back and forth across too many time zones. This week it was France. He shook his head. Hell of a deal. Even when the *Frogs* spoke English, they were impossible to understand. At least he'd traveled light, wouldn't have to decipher all those silly pictograms in order to find the baggage carousel.

Outside the airport, he managed to find a taxi driver willing to admit he knew some English, and to drive him, more or less, directly to his hotel. It was five in the evening, when he finally settled in his room, glad he'd decided to have Myrna Foldenstein reconfirm his reservations with the hotel manager before he left New York. Summer was not the time to travel on the word of a hotel clerk, or a travel agent.

His room on the twelfth floor was a mini-suite. Twilight was beginning to settle over the city. He picked up the telephone, dialed the Concierge to arrange

for a car and driver, one that spoke English. He'd not wanted anyone to meet him at the airport, as that would have involved a six by ten piece of cardboard with his name printed in block lettering. He certainly didn't need to advertise his arrival. He had no reason to believe he'd be under surveillance, but then again no reason to think he wouldn't be either. He found the thought of evading prying eyes rather titillating. Even though it had been a pain in the butt in Switzerland, it had also been rather easy. Here in France, he'd need to be more careful, as the French were a nosy bunch of bastards in any case.

#

Bob Spencer rather liked France. He spoke the language well, and had been to Paris on several occasions. That, and his inherent ability to blend in, always made for a pleasant trip.

Bob Spencer and Frank Prescott, another of Sheffield's squad members, had flown over to Paris eight hours ahead of Raymond Harbinger, leaving Vince Morris, the last of their team, to shadow Harbinger from the moment he stepped out of his limo at New York's JFK airport.

They were not happy with the assignment, Steve Sheffield had ordered them out of Iran as soon as he'd learned Dessert One failed. Elmo Jefferson had reassigned them to baby sit Raymond Harbinger. And though they understood the need, it did not make it any easier to leave Steve and Ross behind enemy lines, while they kept themselves out of harm's way.

The telephone on the night stand next to Spencer's bed *burred* twice, it was the hotel Concierge.

"*Monsieur* Lewis?"

"*Oui*" Bob Spencer replied.

"Monsieur Harbinger, who speaks not a word of French, has requested I find him a car and driver who speaks English. The driver will not be difficult, I don't know about an English speaking car."

Spencer laughed heartily. "*Merci beaucoup, por le informacion*. Can you arrange a Mercedes 500 SEL for me to drive?"

"Does it have to speak English?" The Concierge asked dryly.

"Not necessarily, German will do." And then they both laughed. Spencer was still chuckling to himself as he hung up the receiver. It never ceased to amaze him, what a few American dollars would do in the right hands.

#

A black, Mercedes 500 SEL was waiting at the curb outside the hotel for Raymond Harbinger, when he came down from his room. He tipped the Concierge and thanked him, "Mercy Boh Ku."

The hotel's doorman opened the right rear passenger door on the Merz. Harbinger slipped into the seat, then acknowledged the doorman with a nod of his head as the door was closed.

Bob Spencer turned slightly in his seat, and looked over his shoulder at Harbinger, "Bon Soir" he said.

"Ah...yes of course, good evening to you." Harbinger replied. "Do you speak English?"

Spencer smiled his warmest smile, though his eyes remained as dark and cold as the waters of the Seine River just across the street. "I speak English well, in fact you might say I'm an expatriate."

"Thank goodness." Harbinger said, relief in his voice. He reached into the pocket of his jacket, and withdrew a slip of paper. Then handed it forward to Spencer. "Do you know this restaurant?"

Bob Spencer looked at the name and address, it was within walking distance of the hotel. He looked up at Harbinger. "This is a small bistro, just down the street. I'm happy to drive you, but you certainly don't need a car to reach this place."

Harbinger smiled and nodded. "I know." He was silent for a moment. "You seem like an honest fellow. How long have you been in Paris."

Spencer tilted his head to one side. "Oh not that long really. But long enough to know my way around. Fell in love, as they say, and stayed."

Harbinger nodded his head in understanding, and smiled in a distant sort of way. "I was here when I was about your age. The liberation of Paris. We fought our way through the Germans, lost some good men along the way. Seems the French have a shorter memory than I."

Spencer looked at Harbinger in silence for a moment. He knew the man's war record, and the commendations he'd won. Yet now he was under a cloud of suspicion, conspiring with the enemy, for truly that was what Iran had turned itself

into. "Yes, a short memory where Americans are concerned." Spencer replied. "It is a fault of the French, most especially the Parisians I'm afraid."

Harbinger shrugged, and shook his head. "I want you to drive me around the city for an hour, then drop me off at Le Bistro Monceau. And while we're driving, please let me know if anyone appears to be following."

Bob Spencer nodded his head once. "I will let you know, and you can tell me if you would like me to politely lose them. The traffic in Paris can be most disconcerting at times."

Harbinger smiled. "What's your name?"

"Bob...Bob Lewis." Spencer replied.

"Well, Bob, I think we're going to get along just fine."

Spencer eased the 500 SEL away from the curb to blend smoothly with traffic.

As the black Mercedes pulled away, a man stood in the shadow of a service entrance. He was dressed entirely in navy blue, all the way down to the crepe soles on the canvas boat shoes he wore. The man stood right at five foot, ten inches. Built like a gymnast, his muscularity clearly evident through the turtle neck sweater he wore. Its collar concealed a length of wire running from a tiny ear piece down his back to the newest Motorola transceiver available only to the military.

Vince Morris stepped out of the alcove, but made certain he remained in the hotel's shadow. Where the service alley met the sidewalk he halted, then carefully peered around the corner of the building to observe the Citroen, driven by Frank Prescott, take up pursuit of the Mercedes. He remained in position, listening to transmissions emanating from a similar transceiver carried by Bob Spencer, its microphone clipped to the rear edge of the driver's seat, clearly picking up every word uttered by Raymond Harbinger. As Vince Morris listened, he carefully monitored the street to see if anyone other than his teammate followed. Assured there was no one else in pursuit, he raised his left wrist to his lips and whispered into the voice-activated microphone clipped to the inside of his sweater.

"No tails. Have destination. Will surveil."

Inside the Citroen, Frank Prescott, clicked his lights off, then on, once. Were someone following, he would have hit his high beams and left them on.

When the transmissions faded to static, Vince Morris pulled the ear piece from his ear, and slipped it under the collar of his sweater. Then glanced at the standard issue Swiss Army field watch strapped to his wrist, nineteen hundred hours. It would be at least another hour before Spencer and Prescott, were again within range of his transceiver.

He stepped from the shadows of the building, and turned right heading for the restaurant, where Bob Spencer was to deliver Raymond Harbinger. It took less than five minutes to reach the Bistro. Morris stood across the street, and observed the restaurant for several moments. Its entrance was squared off at the southwest corner of the building. Windows faced the intersecting streets. Gathered curtains pulled to the side allowed patrons within to see out, those without to see in. There was a small area, wrought iron enclosed, with five tables on the main thoroughfare, where the sidewalk was wide enough to allow such accommodation.

From where Vince stood, it appeared all tables, both inside and out were taken. His gaze moved to the second floor. There were several windows, all dark except one. And though the curtains were closed, shadows cast upon the translucent fabric indicated someone was moving about the room. He noted a table cloth tossed open. Then the silhouette placed two chairs opposing each other. Next, table settings were placed before each chair. Finally, a vase of cut flowers. When the silhouette was finished, the lights were dimmed to an appropriate level.

Vince Morris crossed the street, continued along the thoroughfare, glancing surreptitiously through the street facing windows, focusing on the Maitre' D, servers, and bartender. All appeared to be of middle eastern heritage.

He turned right, up a service alley that ran behind the building. At a rear entrance the aromas of fine food wafted, and a man, also middle eastern, leaned casually against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He wore light wool slacks. A dark silk shirt open at the collar, and a sport coat lighter in shade than the rest of his outfit. Even in the dim light of the alleyway, Vince could see the clothes were expensive but fit the man badly. Because he was so over-developed across the shoulders, off the rack attire would always stretch in all the wrong directions.

Vince Morris continued up the alley, head down, walking with a slight limp, giving the appearance of infirmity, which implied weakness. The gorilla at the back of the restaurant eyed him suspiciously, but did not alter his position in the slightest. Perceiving no threat, he continued to smoke in the same insolent manner he'd shown when Vince first noticed him.

Vince Morris continued along the alley, sensing the watcher's eyes upon him. At the corner, he turned left. To have turned right might have made the lout

suspicious, as it would have implied he was circling the restaurant. Morris stopped, waited ten seconds, then ever so carefully peered around the corner of the alley. When the watcher dropped his cigarette and looked down to step on it, Vince crossed the alley's entrance like smoke on the wind, to continue his circumnavigation of the building.

He recrossed the street. Then made his way back to the hotel, where he returned to his room. Going straight to an aluminum Haliburton suitcase, he spun the combination locks, then opened the lid. Inside, snugged into polyurethane foam, was a variety of surveillance and communications gear. The latest and most compact available. He transferred several pieces of gear to a black leather attaché case. Then closed and locked the Haliburton.

The second floor of the hotel housed banquet rooms. Vince Morris stepped from the elevator, then walked to one of the rooms at the end of the hallway, directly across the street from the restaurant. He glanced at his watch, it was nineteen-forty hours. Time was getting short, though there was still enough left to set and calibrate the gear.

There were three meeting rooms at this end of the building, two large and one small. One of the large ones was in use. He checked the smallest of the three, empty. He stepped in. Closed, then locked the door. There were two windows at one end of the room, directly across, and at the same level, as the second floor of the restaurant. Unfortunately, they were fixed, and could not be opened.

He eased a curtain to one side. Then removed from the attaché case a diamond tipped stylus about the size of a dental probe. Using a coin as a template, he deeply scored a circle in the lower right hand corner of the glass, just above the window sill where it would normally be concealed by the curtain that bordered the window.

When the scoring was complete, he reversed the stylus, and struck the window once sharply, directly in the center of the scored circle. A penny size piece of glass popped out, was caught by the breeze, and fell to the pavement below. The tinkle of its landing inaudible to Vince's ears.

Next he removed three sections of hollow aluminum tubing, each the circumference of a ball point pen. Threading wire leads through all three sections, he screwed a bullet shaped, highly directional, microphone to the end of the tube. And screwed each section of tubing together until it reached its maximum length of three feet. The microphone's leads were plugged into an amplifier the size of a cigar box. A patch cord connected the amp to an audio filter, which looked like a thin rectangular scarf box, with tiny toggle switches along one side, this was in turn connected to a small audio tape recorder.

Next, he plugged a universal bus bar into the wall outlet, and set the voltage to match local current. Power cords were run to the bus from the amplifier, filter, and recorder. Finally, he plugged a pair of headphones into the recorder. Then very carefully slipped the bullet shaped microphone through the hole he'd made in the window.

He set the gain control and adjusted the frequency filters, until all extraneous noise outside the window was eliminated inside his headset. At that moment, Bob Spencer pulled up in front of the restaurant in the black Mercedes Benz.

Vince Morris noted the same man he'd seen in the alley behind the restaurant, step from the doorway and cross the side walk to the big sedan. The man opened the rear door of the Mercedes, Raymond Harbinger climbed out.

Bob Spencer waited until Harbinger had entered the restaurant, then drove off. Frank Prescott remained with the Citroen, parked in the shadows a half block up the side street.

Vince Morris saw the vague silhouette of two men appear on the translucent window curtain, then resisted the urge to move suddenly away from his own observation point, when the curtains across the street parted, and he saw the face of the bodyguard appear.

Had Vince not resisted his urge to hide, his sudden movement would most likely have drawn unwanted attention. As it was, the man looked in his direction but noted only the dark, blank windows of the hotel, and then turned his attention to the sidewalk below taking time to assure all appeared secure. He let the curtains return to their normal position. Morris exhaled, unconsciously he'd been holding his breath. He watched the bodyguard's silhouette leave the room, presumably to stand watch in the hallway.

By feel Vince Morris adjusted the toggle switches on the audio filter until the conversations within the room above the restaurant, transmitted via vibration of the window glass at which the microphone was aimed, came clearly to his headphones.

"Raymond my friend, how good it is to see you." Roget Akhondan said.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

As had become their custom, business was not discussed during their meal. Rather they spoke of neutral subjects. After the place settings had been cleared, with a fine Napoleon cognac and coffee at hand, they at last got down business.

Raymond Harbinger looked up at the ornate ceiling embossment, momentarily wished for a cigar. However, he knew his host did not smoke, more importantly had no appreciation for the aroma of a fine cigar. Well, there would be plenty of opportunity later to indulge the habit. He lowered his eyes, and looked across the table at Roget Akhondan.

"I believe our patience in the matter of Caring First is about to pay off in a completely unanticipated way," Harbinger said. "There have been a number of significant developments since our last meeting."

Roget smiled warmly. "I'm glad to hear that, Raymond. I was beginning to wonder if we'd ever have the opportunity to implement the plans we've made."

Harbinger tilted his head to one side. "What would you say if I told you an opportunity has arisen to purchase Caring First?"

Roget sat in stunned silence for several moments. "I...I would say *fantastico*. But I'm confused, why would your Mr. Williams want to sell his company?"

Harbinger smiled. "He's decided to become President of the United States. To fulfill that desire, he must raise a large amount of cash."

Roget frowned. "But isn't that normally done through, how do you say?" He paused for a moment. "Fund raising?"

Harbinger nodded his head once, and smiled. "Yes. Particularly if the candidate has no money of his own, or does not want to commit his own personal funds." He took a sip of his cognac. "But you see Harris Williams is not afraid to commit his own money. Once he's decided to do something, he always takes the shortest route to attaining that goal. And he has decided the course of the United States needs to be changed. Lack of leadership from our current President has damaged our prestige. Our influence in the world is waning. And then there's the state of our economy."



Roget nodded. "Sad to say, my friend, but it is true. Even I, who admire your country so very much, must admit in recent years, I've wondered: What is becoming of the world's greatest nation?"

The corner of Harbinger's mouth turned downward cynically. "We've forgotten that it's not enough to talk about the principals we stand for, we must act upon those principals."

Roget swirled the cognac within the crystal snifter he held in his left hand, the stem of the glass between his second and third finger. "It seems to me Mr. Williams may be a little late with his effort. There is no way he can be in place for the next election. And if your President Carter is re-elected, well there may not be a country left to lead."

Harbinger chuckled. "Oh well, it isn't quite that bad."

"Isn't it?" Roget asked. "Ashamed though I am of the event, do you think my country would have had the audacity to make hostages of your embassy personnel if our leaders believed your President was strong, your country not poorly led?"

Harbinger sighed. "Your point's well taken, but we're not fools, Roget. President Carter will not be re-elected."

Roget Akhondan shrugged. "In any event, it is too short a time for Harris Williams to be elected President."

Harbinger smiled. "It's not his intent to run for President at *this* time, rather he'll do everything in his power to assure Ronald Reagan is elected, then ride the grateful wave of the Republican Party into Senatorial office. There he will develop the political following needed for a successful Presidential campaign, four to eight years from now."

Roget was silent for a long moment. "What do you make of this Ronald Reagan, a movie actor before he became, what? A Senator?"

"Governor... of California," corrected Harbinger. "Twice actually. A state, which has a gross annual product greater than many nations."

Roget thought about that for a moment. "What kind of a President will he be?"

Harbinger raised both eyebrows. "Well no one really knows for certain. In California he was a strong leader who balanced the state's budget. When he

left office there was a large surplus in the state's treasury. He's a man who understands money, that much at least we can be sure of."

It was Roget's turn to wear a cynical expression on his face. "Then perhaps he will understand why the hostages were taken by my country."

Harbinger took a sip of cognac. He held his glass before him, looking over the rim in silence at Roget for several moments before he spoke. "I'm sure Mr. Reagan will understand the issues of concern. And as a businessman, he'd know exactly what to do to resolve the crisis. Unfortunately, once he's been elected he'll be forced to act not as a businessman, but as President of the United States. As such, he will not be able to negotiate with your leaders as long as they continue to hold our people hostage."

Roget shook his head with irritation. "It's all *so* stupid. I'm ashamed as much for my country, as I am sorry for the predicament of your people held against their will."

Harbinger nodded his head slowly, gravely acknowledging Roget's thoughts. Then he said, softly. "I've been thinking of something that perhaps we might be able to do to help resolve this crisis, and put us all back on the right track. And I'm sure a grateful President, just coming into office would not forget those who assisted him to start off on the right foot."

Roget frowned. "I do not understand you, Raymond. What could we possibly do to help the situation."

Harbinger smiled. "Until Mr. Reagan becomes President, those who are his advisers, and who will be members of his Cabinet when he's elected, are in fact nothing more than private citizens. Just as you and I are nothing more than private citizens. But we are not common people. Are we, Roget?"

Roget shook his head. "No we certainly are not, my friend."

"We have power and influence." Harbinger continued. "Commensurate with our wealth. If I were to pick up the telephone and call one of Mr. Reagan's advisers, that call would be answered. If I were to make a suggestion of strategy, my suggestion would be taken seriously, given fair consideration."

Harbinger took another sip of cognac. He watched Roget's eyes, and it occurred to him, Roget was beginning to get a glimmer of the direction the conversation was headed. Raymond Harbinger set his crystal snifter down on the table.

"You see, a narrow window of opportunity exists when we may be able to change the future, alter the collision course our countries are on. And do so precisely because we are private citizens. If channels of communication could be set up between the Ayatollah and a member of Mr. Reagan's closest advisers, it might be possible to resolve this crisis in a manner acceptable to all parties concerned."

Harbinger turned his palms upward on the table. "Think of it, Roget. If we were to facilitate such communication. And the announcement of the hostages return was to occur immediately after the new President took office. Would we not be in a position to accomplish anything we might desire?"

"Might not Harris Williams be assured of support for his bid to the Senate? Might not your application as a member of Caring First's Board meet no resistance, even if some regulations were in need of bending?"

Roget raised an eyebrow and smiled. "What makes you think I would have any means of carrying an offer to the Ayatollah Khomeini? He's not of a secular bent, and I am clearly not a religious man."

Harbinger smiled warmly. "My friend, you do yourself an injustice. Please accept this observation from a man who has been in this world for many a year. There is no country on this planet, where a man of wealth cannot exert a degree of influence. At the very least, if you call a close associate of the Ayatollah, you will be taken seriously."

Roget shrugged his shoulders in a noncommittal way. "Let's pretend you are right, though I am not convinced you are. What am I to say? That Mr. Reagan would be prepared to return the money the United States owes Iran, as soon as he's elected?"

Harbinger shook his head several times, and held his hand up palm outward. "No, no. Nothing so direct. It would certainly not be believed in any case. Rather you would simply indicate you have, through a normal business contact, met someone who has the ability to reach Mr. Reagan's staff. All we will do is facilitate communication, start the ball rolling. It will be enough I promise you."

Roget did not respond immediately. He poured himself a bit more cognac, silently offered a pour to Harbinger, who silently declined. Then sat back in his chair. At last he said: "What you are proposing is possible for me, yes. I will see what I can do. It will be mutually beneficial for us both."

Harbinger smiled broadly. "Wonderful. I was confident you'd feel the same as I."

Roget nodded his head slowly in agreement. Then his face turned even more serious, and Harbinger expected he'd ask for the pot to be sweetened with a contract for Medico.

"I...I must ask you a question." Roget said. "Several weeks ago, gunmen entered your corporate headquarters. I've heard rumors these were Palestinian terrorists seeking revenge for the murder of one of their religious leaders by the Israeli Mossad."

Harbinger raised his eyebrows in surprise. "There was an attack, yes. Or at least gunmen did try to get into our executive suite. However, it's my understanding one of them was a disgruntled employee seeking revenge for the loss of his job. But if what you've heard is true, why would Palestinians target Caring First?"

Roget frowned, and shook his head. "I don't know for certain. These are only rumors, but as I understand it the Palestinians somehow believe a Caring First doctor, knowledgeable of the fact a Palestinian mullah was being treated at the Caring First facility in Amman, Jordan, passed this information on to the Mossad. In fact, made it possible for Mossad agents to disguise themselves as medical personnel to carry out the murder."

Raymond Harbinger was genuinely shocked, and his face showed it. "Good lord, why that's preposterous."

Roget nodded his head up and down in agreement. "It's ridiculous, I agree. But this is the state of the world, impatient people involved in rash decisions."

"Good Lord..." Raymond Harbinger said again, still flustered.

Roget continued. "I'm just so glad your courageous security people were able to stop them. That's what happened isn't it?"

Harbinger was quite flustered by the whole discussion. He knew International was involved in espionage stuff, defections and such, but never a hint of political assassination. His mind reeled at the concept. He wondered what kind of nonsense might be taking place over at International. He'd need to look into the allegation thoroughly with Harris.

In the back of his mind he heard Roget's question with regard to who had so courageously stopped the attack on the executive suite, and although he knew a cover story had been given to the news media to prevent them from

interviewing the person, in his flustered state he did not think to adhere to that story, since its reasoning did not apply to this situation.

"No," he said absent mindedly. "It was the mail room Supervisor. Happened to run into the bastards with the mail cart. Somehow in the confusion he got a hold of one of their guns, killed them both. Bloody mess of a job, bullets all over the place. Lucky no one was hit by strays."

Harbinger reached for his cognac. He did not notice how intently Roget was staring at him.

"Really, that's amazing. A mail clerk?"

Harbinger downed the remainder of his drink in one swallow. His voice raspy from the alcohol when next he spoke. "Yes, amazing. I never would've thought he had it in him."

Roget smiled magnanimously. "Well I certainly hope he got a promotion out of it."

Harbinger shook his head, as he cleared his throat. "Damn fool quit. Said he wanted to be a country music star. Can you believe that?"

Roget grinned. "Really? Well what's his name? Maybe he'll be famous one of these days."

"Oh hell I don't know...ah... Ocean I think, Jimmy Ocean." Harbinger put his glass back down on the table with a resounding thud. "Jesus, Roget. I feel like an idiot. Here I am asking you to invest your money in Caring First, and you think it's a front for the Mossad."

Roget laughed, and shook his head. "No, no my friend you misunderstand me. I know it's nothing like that, such an idea would be silly. How could they keep it a secret? Ridiculous idea." He laughed again. "It's just one of the many rumors that are rampant though out the Middle East. Everyone is jealous of, and distrusts, the United States. And they are a little afraid too. So rumors and wild stories spring up everywhere. But that's why your suggestion to take this opportunity to open up communication between your country and mine is so important. Of course we must."

#

Nelson Banderhof hooked up his scrambler device, and dialed the familiar number. He had little to report this week. In fact, he was beginning to suspect he might be under surveillance as he'd not seen anything of interest in over two

weeks. For the past year, there had always been something he could identify as related to Caring First, but now it seemed there was hardly anything at all.

#

At the CIA's communications intercept center, Phillip Auralhost diverted the signal from Banderhof's telephone to a communications board set up in "the box". The room completely isolated from any possibility of outside interference.

#

He made his living as an entertainer, with two comedy albums to his credit. Television shows were in the offing, if he could just find the time and energy to fit the taping sessions into his schedule. And then there was this, a contract he'd had with CIA ever since his days as a G-2 Intelligence Officer in the United States Army.

The CIA contract work didn't pay much, certainly nothing compared to the money he made working Las Vegas. But then it was with the assistance of his CIA handlers, he'd been able to make the step from one night stands impersonating the voices of famous celebrities, to the big time venues of the world gambling mecca.

#

Nelson Banderhof waited the obligatory six rings, then hung up the receiver. It was not the first time he'd been unable to get through. The contact plan was slaved to a certain hour of the day relative to specific phases of the moon as reflected in the Potomac Basin Tidal chart. In this way, it was not necessary to develop a contact scheme that required a new set of messages being transmitted to him to assure a rotating call schedule. He simply consulted the tidal chart thus avoiding habitual routine.

Banderhof flipped open the current chart and noted his next contact could not be made until tomorrow evening at nineteen hundred. Unfortunately, he'd be in his cubicle at Langley at that time. He turned the page and found the next available time slot. Seven-fifteen the following morning. He shrugged. Oh well, there wasn't anything important to transmit anyway. Tough shit for his contact, he'd have to monitor the connection through one whole cycle without receiving a call. Served him right for missing today's time. Banderhof disconnected his equipment, and stored it away under the sink in his bathroom.

#

Wayne Generette sat in the metal chair beside the masonite and metal folding table, reading the final pages of *Love's Desire*. The intensity building to its inevitable climax, he absent mindedly hoped the moment would not be interrupted by the goddamn telephone. The thought had no sooner passed through his mind when the bastard cut loose, its cacophony bouncing off the bare walls and echoing through the empty house.

#

The impressionist heard the line connect. And knew somewhere deep within the bowels of Langley, tape machines were turning, recording his and every other conversation generated from within the complex. He gazed at a picture of Nelson Banderhof. Composed himself to create a state of mind that allowed him to virtually step inside the body of the person he was about to impersonate. His facial features even changed subtly in the process. Then he began the words he'd so carefully memorized from the script he'd been given. And to everyone's amazement, except his own, it was impossible to tell that the voice on the telephone line was not Nelson Banderhof.

#

Wayne Generette picked up the receiver. "Hello." He frowned, Banderhof had not begun with the customary phraseology they'd agreed upon long ago. It was poor trade craft, though not the first time he'd made the mistake. But there was no doubting the voice, he'd heard it so many times. But something was wrong, the man sounded desperate.

"Calm down, my friend. Everything is under control. All right, all right. We'll take care of you."

What in the hell had happened, Generette glanced at his watch. Shit. Banderhof had blown right through the three minute time frame set for all their contacts to assure any trace would be futile. He continued to listen intently, his wrist raised to eye level as he watched the seconds tick down towards three and a half minutes. At three minutes and forty-five seconds, he interrupted Banderhof.

"All right, that's enough I get the picture. Calm down. You've already exceeded our time limit. I can't listen any longer. Destroy your equipment and activate the predetermined exit plan. You'll be met at the appointed place, with tickets and money. Relax, this contingency was planned for from the beginning. You've done excellent work for us, and will be richly rewarded. Good-bye for now."

#

Phillip Auralhost removed the headset, and turned to look at Elmo Jefferson. He shook his head. "Not long enough, but at least we're in the general vicinity. That idea of Dr. Holt's was a good one. By attaching an electronic I.D. to our signal, we were able to pick it up again on its way out of the answering service's switching system. Unfortunately, the connection was broken before we could get an exact location. Still we're several steps closer. Maybe even close enough."

#

Wayne Generette hung up the receiver. He sat staring at the equipment on the table for several minutes, contemplating all Banderhof had told him, and silently fuming at the fact he'd broken protocol, spoken beyond the envelope of time allotted. Generette shook his head. It always happened that way, guy in the field starts feeling a little pressure, the next thing you know the whole operation comes apart.

He packed up the gear. Carefully wiped his finger prints off the table and chair. Then went around the house doing the same to all the hard surfaces he thought he might have touched. He worked quickly, allowing himself only ten minutes to complete the task, he could not afford to take longer. If Nelson Banderhof was right, and his cover had been blown, then Generette knew it might be only a matter of minutes before someone showed up to check out the building.

Outside the air was warm and humid, too warm for mid-June. Clearly this was going to be a long, hot summer. He stood on the porch and looked carefully up and down the street, trying to determine if a watcher were already on post. He saw nothing unusual.

June in Nashville was well into the tourist season, the street was bustling. A deep contrast to Winter. Tourist buses cruised slowly along, the drivers describing to their gawking *loads* the history, or supposed history, of each music house. And anyone on the street dressed in western apparel was presumed, by those inside the buses, to be famous, or at the very least about to be.

And there were many people walking along the sidewalk, carrying tapes and guitar cases from house to house. Pitching tunes in the hope they'd be one of the lucky few. Each year thirty thousand people came to Nashville in the hope of finding fame and fortune. And each year twenty-nine thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight left in discouragement, and poverty. Of the remaining five hundred and twelve, three would see their dreams come true. Of those three, two would learn the price of fame and fortune was more than they were willing pay. Burning out in a flash of glory, usually accompanied by copious quantities of alcohol, or some other controlled substance.



Generette looked at the passers by, and gave not even a passing thought to their futures, his only concern was whether or not one of the people on the street might be a watcher.

#

The night vision spotter's scope was ruggedly designed for use in the field. Its self leveling tri-pod stood on top of a wooden table. The scope designed for sniper teams, allowed the spotter to confirm kills, as well as look for other targets.

Steve Sheffield took a break, night vision equipment was hard on the eyes. It wasn't wise to spend too much time at the eye piece. As Sheffield stepped away, Ross McIntyer slipped into position, thus uninterrupted surveillance was maintained.

The scope was aimed at the front of a villa, a half mile away, occupied by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Personally, Sheffield wished the scope was mounted atop a fifty caliber rifle, but taking out Khomeini was not one of the options his orders had provided. Surveillance, and social intelligence, was why he was in Tehran; and executing the exit plan for Bob Jacobson's people. In fact, all but two had been exfiltrated through Turkey, one of the staunchest allies the U.S. had in the region.

Khomeini, of course, denied any involvement in the U.S. Embassy take over, though no one back at Langley believed him. Nothing of any significance took place in Iran, let alone Tehran, without Khomeini's knowledge, and at the least tacit agreement.

The tack he'd taken since coming to power had surprised many of the *mind readers* at CIA. After all, *the company* had initially been in favor of the expatriate's return. But Khomeini was Muslim, something they'd failed to consider when signing on to the plan of his return.

He'd seemed a moderate, while in exile in France. Clearly, it had all been a ruse to improve his chances of return, when the Shaw inevitably lost power. As it turned out, Ayatollah Khomeini was anything but moderate.

Sheffield poured himself a small cup of the thick rich coffee Iran was famous for, the stuff went down like molasses but put a razor sharp edge on the mind.

Muslims against non-Muslims, the fundamental bias that for hundreds of years underlay problems between western Europe, and those of the middle-east.

A problem that was gradually spreading world wide, as Muslim religious growth outpaced Christianity.

Sheffield recognized the rift between Muslims and non-Muslims, yet he could not understand it. Perhaps because he was not himself a deeply religious man. Still, it seemed to him the fundamental foundation of both religions was synonymous. Both taught the same values. Each was founded upon the teachings of a man who roamed the desert at around the same period of time. Each performing deeds of good will, remembered long after their lives had ended.

Steve Sheffield drained his cup, and pondered the tragic irony: Each founder had taught tolerance and grace towards all persons. Each recognized God the Father as the single source of all energy and life. But this great truth seemed lost on most religious leaders, though they professed to walk in the foot steps of their founders.

"Psst" Ross called to Sheffield in a stage whisper, the window was open to assure maximum available light entered the scope. "Take a look at this."

Sheffield slid over to the scope, and peered into its lens. A sedan had pulled up to the front of Khomeini's villa. Two of his security guards had taken the car under control, aiming AK-47 assault rifles at the driver, and at the rear compartment, while a third stepped to the curb, and leaned into the open rear window. Sheffield surmised identity papers were being checked, faces verified.

A moment later the rear door opened. Sheffield adjusted the spotter scope, using the zoom feature to bring the image as close to his eye as possible. As the passenger emerged from the vehicle, he looked to his left, giving Sheffield a clear view of his face. It was Roget Akhondan, the man he and Ross had observed in Geneva meeting with Raymond Harbinger.

Sheffield quickly stepped back from the scope, to allow Ross to take a look.

"Shit, I wish we had a bug in that place." Ross whispered.

"Or an asset." Sheffield made note of the time. He wrote it down in pencil on a sheet of dissolving paper. Later, when Roget left, he'd note that time as well. The paper with all of the observations made by he and Ross since the last exfiltration of one of Jacobson's assets, would be sent out on the next outbound trip. It was the only means they now had of exporting intelligence they developed.

Dissolving paper had been around for years, yet still served a valid need. As the name implied it would dissolve almost instantly, whether flushed away, or eaten, then washed down with a glass of water. It's major draw back obvious, a

good soaking of rain, or a short swim would render the document useless in less than thirty seconds.

In the movies, the foreign agent gobbles a wad of ordinary paper just as he's being taken prisoner, thwarting the enemy from obtaining the intelligence he's carrying. In real life, the poor bastard foolish enough to try such a tactic would be instantly gutted. The paper retrieved, long before it could be digested, usually with sufficient integrity to be immediately read without any special processing.

Sheffield found it darkly humorous that instructions could be sent to him via satellite burst, piggy backed on a television broadcast. Yet the only way to get intelligence out, was via methods used as far back as the crusades.

#

July 1980

They were in the back seat of Jefferson's Lincoln, the glass partition raised between themselves and his driver. It was blistering outside in the sun, at least the air conditioning inside the car made the meeting bearable.

"You were right." Elmo Jefferson said. "Banderhof's body was found in the ally behind The Key Hole. Lethal injection of nicotine."

Dr. Holt nodded his head once. "Yes, the flaw in the plan was Banderhof would fail to make his prearranged exit point, since he was unaware of the instructions. His control would suspect he was losing his nerve, and his faith. That being the case, termination was their only option.

"We're your people able to get anything at all? A description of who he'd gone there to meet, perhaps?"

Elmo shook his head. "Fraid not, he'd given them the slip earlier in the day. We should have arrested him as soon as we'd pinned down the address of his contact."

Dr. Holt shrugged. "Would have only made everyone go squirrel anyway. The Key Hole? Gay nightclub isn't it?"

Jefferson nodded. "I know what you're thinking, surprised the hell out of us all."

Dr. Holt lifted and lowered his eyebrows, then grinned. "Thought you had him all figured out did you? Well, don't be too tough on yourself. He may not have

been in the closet, as they say. Could be whoever pulled his plug was gay. Any unknowns in the club that night?"

Jefferson laughed. "You kidding? Saturday night, downtown Washington, D.C."

Holt chuckled, then thought: Always the odd stuff that's overlooked. You tail a *straight* with a heterosexual watcher. *Gay* on gay. Even if they'd managed to keep Banderhof in sight, the watchers would have stood out like a blue veined dildo, once inside the Key Hole. "Well no point crying over spilt milk," Holt said. "It was a risk calculated from the beginning. Did we manage to get the location of the receiver?"

"More or less," Jefferson replied. "An old house, rented on music row in Nashville."

Jefferson sighed. "Unfortunately, the quarry had already left by the time we arrived. The space completely empty, except for a folding table and chair."

"Anyone assigned to follow up, do some local snooping?"

Elmo turned his palms upward. "The chase team did a cursory check immediately, but came up dry." Elmo paused for a moment. "Actually, I was thinking of assigning Jim Richards. See if he can come up with something."

"Richards? I thought he was back in San Francisco." Holt said in surprise.

Jefferson shook his head. "Decided to stay in Nashville awhile longer. Personal stuff with his wife. He's also screwin' around, writing country music. Matter of fact, the publishing company he's writing for is right down the street from the location."

Holt was a musician himself, an accomplished pianist, though classical music was more to his liking. He grinned, then his face turned serious. "This business with the wife has been a double edged sword for us since the beginning. Are you confident he's the right choice this time?"

Jefferson scowled. "Well it's the best choice we've got right now. The Director has every available man working the hostage crisis. Even if I wanted to assign someone else, it wouldn't be approved. Besides, this is still an InSec investigation as far as I'm concerned, and Jim Richards has the background on the Caring First affair. He'll do fine, never has let us down, though there have been occasions when I feared he might."

Dr. Holt stared out the window in silence for several moments, then turned his head to look at Jefferson. "Jim Richards is a paradox. I've been studying him, on and off, since we first met back in 1965. Ran him through a slew of psychological tests over the years, under the guise of general research. He's a borderline multiple personality with the ability to compartmentalize his emotions so thoroughly he can actually appear to be an entirely different person, depending upon the circumstance he finds himself in at any given moment in time.

"When I look at the profiles I've developed on him over the years, I see someone whose mind is composed of rooms, each containing a separate disguise. He's able to move from room to room, cognizant of the personality he's wearing, and the ones he's temporarily left behind. And that is all that differentiates him from the insane. A fascinating case." Dr. Holt signed. "The danger, of course, is one day he'll become stuck in one of those rooms, unable to open the other doors. If that happens, the other personalities will call to him like voices from the grave, and he'll have no idea who, or what they are; Schizophrenia is what it's called."

Jefferson frowned. "Jesus that's a grim picture. I mean we all wear different faces."

Holt nodded his head in agreement. "True enough, but I suppose it's a matter of degree. Jim Richards is like a method actor, he becomes the character of the moment. Works well on short assignments."

Elmo Jefferson looked sidelong at Dr. Richard Holt. "You know something? I don't give a shit how many personalities he's got, just as long as he keeps on getting the job done for us when we need him."

Holt shrugged. "Well that's the whole point isn't it? What I've failed to discover in all the years is how many rooms there are. And whether or not there's a monster hiding in the attic."

Jefferson chuckled cynically. "There's a monster in everyone's attic, how else could we draft callow young men, and turn them into soldiers willing to kill on command?"

Holt smiled sardonically. "Well in the case of military recruits, we hold the key to their attic. And we open the door when we deem it appropriate. With Jim Richards, he's the one with the key. And he opens the door when *he* deems it appropriate."

Jefferson mouth turned downward. "And he closes it again without remorse. How many boys conscripted and sent to commit the horror of war, can you say the same about."

Holt stared at Jefferson for a long moment, blinked once, then turned his face away to gaze out the window. He had no answer to Elmo's question.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

July 1980

Anna Medal-Soam's office, on the second floor of the Liberal Arts building at the University of Tennessee, was no more than seven feet wide by ten feet long. Just enough space to locate a small desk directly in front of the door. There was a steel framed window behind the desk, and a secretarial chair in front. The desk was metal, sprayed black. Chrome feet stood on a floor covered in green vinyl. The drawers creaked and groaned when opened, and howled in agony when closed. In fact, it was a pile of junk that should have been remanded to a metal shredding machine for recycling. But U.T. meted out its meager budget in the most cost effective way possible, which did not include upgrading perfectly useful desks.

Misti DiMartine took the chair across from Professor Medal-Soam, an injection molded, stackable chair with chrome legs that matched the desk's feet. The chair itself was bright orange, which did not coordinate with anything in the office except perhaps on Halloween.

To the left, a bookcase protruded into the space between the wall and one end of the desk, leaving fifteen inches of pass through to access the business side of the work surface. The bookcase was filled with titles on psychology, including a few on human sexual relations thrown in for good measure.

To the right, the desk abutted the wall, leaving no more than an inch of space for power and data cords to snake down into electrical receptacles. The wall itself was decorated with various academic degrees and certificates of affiliation, placed, Misti supposed, with the intent to indicate that the person whose name appeared thereon was a highly intelligent and respected member of the psychology profession.

Anna Medal-Soam was thirty-five years old, with long blonde hair. And a body men would die for, and women would immediately hate. She considered her appearance a double edged sword, both a benefit and a burden. A burden because men tended to dismiss her intellect, making professional progress much more difficult.

She and Misti had been drawn to each other by the burden of their beauty, and the fact they shared a mutual disappointment. Each had married a man who'd fallen short of their expectations.

Anna Medal-Soam uncrossed her legs, she'd been sitting with her chair tilted back listening to Misti discuss her plans for summer. Anna leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk. "Have you definitely made the decision?" Anna asked.

Misti nodded her head up and down. "Yes. This past weekend I was over at the house, and we sat down to talk. I told him I wanted a divorce, and that I'd spoken to an attorney."

Anna tilted her head to one side. "Good for you. I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever take the step. Clearly, you were unhappy. You've given your marriage a fair chance." She paused a moment. "So how did he take the news?"

Misti frowned. "Surprisingly well, actually. Except he indicated he didn't want to bring third parties into the issue, wanted to know if we could wait until we got back to California where we could handle it ourselves under a simple dissolution of marriage."

Anna shook her head cynically. "Oh boy. He is a *controller* isn't he? Get you back among your old friends, then turn on the charm. And before you know it, you've lost all the ground you've gained. How did you deal with his request."

Misti looked past Anna, at the view of downtown Nashville beyond the window. "I told him I wasn't planning to go back to California for a long time. That I wanted to get things settled as soon as possible, so I could get on with my career. Pretty much the way we rehearsed it." Misti smiled spontaneously. "How did you know he'd take that line of defense."

Anna Medal-Soam took on a worldly countenance, then smiled deprecatingly. "As I said: He's a *controller*, that's what they do. Now, the next step is to make certain you get everything you're entitled to out of the split. You've invested a lot of time in this marriage, and you're entitled to *your* fair share: House, car, and some support until your career gets going."

Misti shook her head. "I won't do that, this is not a vindictive thing."

"Well no, of course not," Medal-Soam quickly agreed. "But that doesn't change the fact you're going to need an income. You've got another year, at least, for your Masters. And that's the minimum requirement to hang out a shingle."

Misti shrugged. "I can take care of myself. Besides we really don't have anything to split. The house and everything in it is rented. He said he'd pay off the



car, and I was welcome to whatever was in the checking account. Matter of fact, he said he'd open one of his own, and not draw anything more from ours."

Anna sighed. "Oh but that's peanuts. Of course he pays off the car, and of course you get the checking account. But think about the future. What happens if he turns your divorce into a hit country song? Do you have any idea of what kind of money your walking away from? And what about his assets in California. Good grief, at least have your attorney run a full financial check. There's no telling what he might be hiding from you back there."

Misti shook her head. "I came into this relationship of my own free will. And I'll leave it in the same manner. Look you said it yourself, the only way to be my own person is to get completely away from *his* influence. Taking alimony and assets will only keep me tied, keep me dependent."

Anna smiled cynically. "Oh but it's part of getting even. When I caught my husband cheating on me, I wouldn't give him a divorce at first. Then when I did, I made certain he paid the full price. Part of gaining your independence is doing what's best for you, not what's best for him. That's the whole point of breaking away."

Misti didn't want to argue, Anna Medal-Soam was, after all, her professor, and there were still several classes and projects she would have to complete that would require Anna's approval. On the other hand, she was firm in her desire to make the break cleanly. There was no point in dragging out the pain unnecessarily. There were no children involved, no real need for financial or emotional ties. And he'd never cheated on her as far she knew. It was just something that hadn't worked out. Still, when it had worked it was the best. The fact was she still loved the man she'd thought he was, not the one he'd become of late. At least with a clean break, with time, the bad memories would fade and she'd be left with the sweet times they'd shared in the beginning.

Misti compressed her lips, then smiled. "I'll give your suggestions serious consideration. But right now I'd like to talk about the opportunity you mentioned yesterday, the internship."

Anna Medal-Soam knew when to press an issue, and when to let it drop. She was proud of the progress Misti had made, taking suggestions and acting upon them. And she was proud of herself for recognizing a vulnerability, and addressing it appropriately. After all what was the point of knowing why people acted as they did, if one did not use that knowledge for their benefit? So she dropped the subject of Misti's personal life, and turned to the issue of mentoring a fledgling psychologist.

"Green Acres Convalescent is both a convalescing facility for people with long term rehabilitation needs following injury or illness, and your typical nursing home for the elderly. Recently they added a dementia wing.

"The study you'll be involved in is designed to determine if depression is a purely psychological response to circumstance, or if there's a physiological basis separate and apart from the circumstance issue."

Anna Medal-Soam looked up at the ceiling for a moment gathering her thoughts. "Depression presents identical symptoms regardless of the apparent conditions conventional wisdom might attribute as cause. A young person suffering from depression, exhibits the same symptoms as an elderly person awaiting inevitable demise, or a patient of any age convalescing from a disabling injury."

"The study will look at a group of patients with a wide variety of circumstantial cause, including age, and divide them into four groups. The first group will be treated exclusively through psychological therapy. Another group will be treated only with pharmacological intervention. A third group will receive both psychological and drug therapy. The fourth group will act as a control receiving no therapy at all.

"The internship will last until December, then all participants will be tested for progress. In addition to receiving a salary, you'll receive a full semester of credit towards your degree." Anna Medal-Soam looked across the desk at Misti, and smiled. "Of all my students, you are the only one I've recommended for this study. I really think you have the inherent skills, not only to participate successfully but to actually have a positive affect on the patients."

Misti blushed, she was flattered but a little apprehensive. "Thank you for your confidence, Anna. I appreciate that."

"No, no. Don't thank me. I'm not doing you a favor. You really have the talent, and deserve the opportunity."

Misti smiled, then asked. "Who's funding the study?"

Anna Medal-Soam thought for a moment, then said: "Caring First. I believe you mentioned you once worked for them as a temp."

Misti nodded her head up and down, a serious expression etched on her face. "Yes, that's correct."

*The papers came right on time.*

*They said what's yours, and what was mine.*

*I signed half my heart away, and set you free of me today.*

Jim Richards reached out and wrapped his fingers around an Old Fashion glass filled half way to the top with Johnny Walker Black. The yellow pad rested comfortably on one leg crossed over the other. He sat on the love seat, out on the screened porch. A Hurricane lamp burned softly on the redwood picnic table, enough light for his needs. He took a solid pull at his scotch, then penned a couple more lines.

For the past few weeks he'd written a song nearly every day. And with every passing day, he seemed to delve deeper into emotions he'd suppressed all his life. The feelings his songs expressed were painful to him. Certainly, there was no joy in his life, none of the essence that once drove him to succeed in the wilderness of mirrors where so many others had failed.

Yet he felt he needed to confront his pain. To open the closet in his mind where it had been stashed for so many years. Painful memories piled one on top another, as from time to time he'd open the door a crack, heap one more on the pile, then slam the door shut again.

Of course, the process was totally unproductive. Rationally he knew that to be the case, a self-indulgence really. Like a drug one took because one craved the effect it gave, all the while knowing it was inevitably debilitating.

A routine was established, or perhaps more correctly a ritual. Each day he'd rise late in the morning, have a strong cup of coffee. Then head down Music Row to *pitch* his songs, taking them around to studios listed on a weekly recording schedule, published by a firm that catered to producers, and publishers. Then in the afternoon, he'd head back to the house to record a demo of his latest inspiration. Ending the evening deep in the process of another would-be hit, another painful memory pulled out of the closet.

Then there were the nights he made the party rounds, occasionally ending up in the arms of some impressionable young thing who found his music deeply moving, and wanted only to take his pain away. But the trysts led only to more songs rattling down the causeway of his mind, to leap upon the stage of his psyche, and out the tip of the ball point pen he held in his hand.

And then there were the dreams, one in particular had come on more than one occasion. In it he wandered down the hallway of some darkened recording studio, or so he supposed it to be, to stand in front of a door, slightly

ajar, which led into a room where music played no part. He was drawn to open the door, yet he loathed to find what was beyond the threshold. He'd reach his hand out to push open the door, only to awaken in a cold sweat.

*But I'm still married to your memory*

*It won't ever set me free*

*The lovin' times don't leave easily*

*I'm still married to your memory.*

He knew he should find a way to control the craving that locked him in the cycle he now pursued, because in that portion of his mind that still thought clearly, he recognized that sooner or later he must return to the profession he'd chosen so many years before, or perhaps it was the profession that had chosen him.

A telephone rang, somewhere deep in the bowels of the house. It had a distinctive muffled *brrr*. Originally, that particular telephone had been silenced, only the answering machine to which it was linked could respond to it's beckoning. But since Misti had left, he'd turned the ringer on, though he hadn't consciously made the decision to do so. There was only one person who'd ever call him on that line.

Jim Richards arose from the love seat, disturbing Alexander in the process. The dog lived with him now. And they walked together in the woods each day when Jim Richards returned from Music Row. Chet and Marsha had moved away to Atlanta, did not feel the environment of the city would be the best choice for Alexander. Their decision had been hard on the kids, and Jim Richards suspected equally as hard on Alexander. Though he gave no apparent outward sign.

Richards paced the darkened hallway. Then turned left into his studio-office, he picked up the receiver before the answering machine kicked on.

"Hello, Ty."

"Hey, Jim. Would you switch on the scrambler, please."

Richards reached over to the control console, he flipped a switch upward.

"Okay, Tyrone, you got Donny the Duck here five by five."

Harding laughed at the other end of the line, his chuckle coming back to Richards like something off Saturday morning television. "Sorry, Jim, I know how much you hate this thing."

"Oh hell," Richards responded. "I don't hate it. I just can't understand why the stupid bastards can't come up with something that doesn't sound like Daffy Duck on helium. So what's up, my friend. I take it the game's a foot, or Uncle Sugar's finally copped to all those undocumented business deductions, you and the mind readers force me to report every year. Least you could do is dummy up a few client dinners for me."

Harding chuckled some more. "I see you're in rare form tonight. Been writin' another one of those comedy tunes of yours, or just dancin' with Johnny Black?"

"Maybe a little of both," Richards replied, his voice suddenly serious. "What can I do for you?"

"Got a call from our friend Elmo, this morning. Seems they finally traced the line on Nelson Banderhof, but came up dry. Thought you might be able to help out. At the usual fee, of course. I figured the well might be gettin' a little dry for you back there. Or have you hit the top ten?"

Jim Richards smiled cynically to himself. "They say its about twenty-three million to one, gettin' a hit single. But I always did like the long odds."

"Is that a yes, or a no, on the assignment?"

Richards looked around the dimly lit studio, then shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, all right. I'll check it out. Anything else they want me to do? Maybe visit Allen Maxwell, and yank his chain."

"You're still convinced he's dirty?"

"Haven't come up with anything to convince me otherwise."

Harding was silent for several seconds. "The assignment is to check out the location Nelson Banderhof was calling. I'll overnight the dossier to you. This is strictly a sneak and peek. If you identify the receiver, get the information back to me immediately so I can keep Elmo apprised."

Richards fiddled with the switches on his recording console, thinking about how much time he'd have to devote to solving the puzzle, probably not much. The whole thing sounded rather boring actually. "No problem there, Ty.

But make sure you give me everything they got from their interrogation of Nelson Banderhof, might be a clue in his statement that was overlooked."

"Fraid not," Harding replied. "Banderhof took a shot of pure nicotine in the butt, before they could haul his ass in for questioning."

Jim Richards suddenly became more interested. "Well that does alter the equation a little doesn't it? Banderhof must have had something important on them. Otherwise, why kill the goose that laid the golden egg? Maybe we're closer to the crux of this whole problem than we think?"

"Maybe," Harding said. "In any case watch yourself. You're back there on your own, half in the bag, trying to make like Hank Williams. Remember there's no one around to save your bacon if you screw up."

Richards scowled. "I prefer to think of it as traveling light. Usually things get done quicker that way."

"You keep in touch, anything at all you come across, call me."

"Deal." Richards hung up the phone.

He turned off the light in his studio, then made his way back down the hall and out to the screened porch. He sat down on the love seat, picked up the pad of paper and read the lines he'd just written. He tried to put himself back into the state of mind he'd been in before the telephone had interrupted his thoughts, but somehow the process eluded him. It was almost as if someone else had written the words.

#

Roget Akhondan's Gulfstream II swung low over the Mediterranean, then landed at Al Jaza'ir International Airport. The sleek executive jet taxied to transient parking near the executive aircraft FBO.

Roget descended the steps, and was immediately struck by the intensity of the Algerian heat, emphasized by the humidity coming in off the sea. He crossed the tarmac. Was greeted cordially by three men, whose appearance and demeanor signified they were members of Islamic Jihad's hunter-killer teams. Or Allah's Militia as they preferred to think of themselves. The four then walked over to an old gray Mercedes-Benz, parked in the shade of the hangar.

Tom Singleton quickly snapped a photo of the Gulfstream, making certain he framed the tail number in his view finder. He'd already taken a shot of Roget,

though he had no idea of who he was, or why he'd come to meet with the three Jihad killers.

Earlier in the day, he'd managed to get a shot the three assassins at a distance, then followed them to the airport.

Photographing Jihad members, and noting the flights they took out of Algiers, was basically his whole assignment lately, though, of course, recruiting the contacts to assist him in the identification process was a job in itself.

Singleton watched the Mercedes drive off, then set about finding out who the Gulfstream belonged to, where it had come from, and if possible who the person was who'd flown in to meet with three killers.

#

The gray Mercedes wound its way up a steep hill, driving slowly along cobbled streets to a walled villa that over looked the city of Algiers. The estate was well guarded. Wrought iron gates would be opened only to those who knew the appropriate pass word, and who were known to those within.

The villa was an example of classic southern Mediterranean architecture. Brilliant white plaster walls, domed roofs, and open balconies that overlooked a landscaped courtyard.

The Mercedes came to a stop next to a pond, in front of the main entrance to the villa. The four men climbed out, then passed through the front door into the coolness of the interior.

On the heights of Algiers the temperature was a little cooler, and the humidity considerably less. The thick clay walls acted as an insulating barrier to the day's heat. As Roget stepped into the entry hall of the villa he was met by a tall thin man who held himself with military bearing. "Praise Allah. Welcome," he said reaching out to take Roget's hand in friendship. "I am Arak Massaoud."

"Praise Allah, God is great" Roget replied. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

Massaoud bowed ever so slightly. "Your brother was one of us, a fine man who died with honor in the ageless battle against the infidel."

Massaoud led Roget from the entry way to a table in the shade of one of the villa's balconies. A table laden with sweet fruit, tabouli, and yogurt.

"Please sit. Enjoy. May I pour you a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you," Roget replied.

"I am told you have been in the presence of our spiritual leader. How is his health?"

Roget smiled. "He is well. And sends Allah's blessings for the work you've done against the infidel."

Massaoud acknowledged the compliment with a nod of his head. "We've been successful only because it is Allah's will."

"Allah be praised," Akhondan said. "I've been asked to deliver this message to you: Soon we will be in a position to bring the wrath of Allah on the Great Satan."

Massaoud raised his eyebrows. "Then the atomic weapons program has come to fruition at last?"

Akhondan shook his head slowly, then smiled. "No, something much more effective and subtle."

Massaoud gazed at Akhondan skeptically. "Delivery is still the issue."

"Not anymore," Akhondan said.

Massaoud plucked a date from a porcelain bowl, popped it into his mouth, and savored it for several moments. Then said: "I hope that day will come soon."

"As soon as Allah wills," Akhondan replied.

Massaoud gazed at Roget Akhondan for several moments, then asked. "Is there any special training I need to provide my people?"

Roget shook his head. "No. When all is prepared, I will teach a trinity unit how to handle and place the weapon. They will each in turn teach three followers. Three, nine, twenty-seven, eighty-one, two-hundred and forty-three."

Massaoud grinned broadly, clearly enjoying the potential envisioned. Then he frowned. "How will we move so many warriors to America, without U.S. authorities catching on?"

Akhondan smiled slowly, malevolently. "We cannot. Fortunately there's no need. One trinity seed team is all that's required. There are many disgruntled groups in the United States, each with its own contingent of fanatics willing to



perpetrate misery for their own gain. These individuals are in touch with others of similar mind." He took a sip of sweet coffee. "And, the American company I'm about to buy, shall play an unwilling part when the time is right."

#

The Soviet Union had its own version of *the box*, the sound and electronic surveillance proof room used for conferences at CIA's Langley, Virginia headquarters. In fact, virtually every embassy, of every country in the world, had such a room.

Viktor Koroleva, and Andre Skorshinsky, his KGB control, met inside the box at the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' Embassy in New York city. Andre Skorshinsky was a heavy set man. His face had the slightly over weight, jowly, appearance common to men in their fifties, who have spent too much time behind a desk and at the dinner table. The fleshy set of his round face tended to make his dark brown eyes look small and beady, rather reminiscent of a reptile, a Cobra perhaps.

"It's too bad about Mr. Banderhof," Skorshinsky said. "How much of the operation is compromised?"

"We're in good shape, Comrade." Koroleva replied. "Nelson Banderhof was not essential to its success, he only provided early warning on internal security investigations that inevitably arise from time to time."

Skorshinsky showed no sign of pleasure at the report, he was a man skeptical of everything except results. "Then our level of penetration remains acceptable at Caring First?"

Koroleva nodded his head in affirmation. "Yes. Our asset is well placed and continues to provide excellent intelligence. However, his luck in getting a hold of the Histoplasmosis accelerant was extraordinary."

Skorshinsky shook his head in wonder. "I'm amazed the Americans have not made any attempt to pursue that issue. I was certain, after the deaths of those Kurds, there would be a full blown investigation."

Koroleva shrugged. "Actually it does not surprise me in the slightest, the Americans had purposely degraded the security to allow the accelerant to be transferred to the U.S. Army for medical testing, all without leaving a paper trail. Consequently, when Army researchers found one of the vials they received lacked any accelerant at all, they had no way of tracing the shipment. Therefore, they simply assumed one of the vials was sterile, not all that unusual with a new substance."

Skorshinsky thought for a moment. "So we have their newest biological weapon. Now all we need is the antidote."

Koroleva compressed his lips, this was of course the crux of their problem. Normally when a new biological weapon was developed, an antidote, or vaccine, was concomitantly developed. Releasing a biological weapon, especially one capable of mutation such as Histoplasmosis, was extremely dangerous. "I'm sure we'll have our own vaccine soon enough. In the meantime, there's little chance the Americans would be tempted to use it. We have allowed them to learn we have a similar weapon. So another MAD scenario arises, mutually assured destruction, should either of us use the weapon against the other."

Skorshinsky scowled. "I'd feel more confident if we had Yuri Sosyka back at home, working on the problem. It is his field, you know? The accelerant will require a genetic fix, as it is a fungus."

Koroleva nodded his head in agreement. "We're making good progress. Our asset at Duke University has become Myra's lover, and is passing high quality data to us already. Yuri is definitely working on the counter accelerant issue. Myra will let our man know when he's close to success, then we'll arrange to break the news to Yuri about his wife's unfaithfulness. And that her lover is an American intelligence officer.

"Handled properly, I'm sure he'll return to the Soviet Union, bringing his knowledge with him. Then we'll have the counter-measure, and the weapon.

"I'm afraid the Americans will be in the unfortunate position of having a weapon they cannot use, ever. Yet as you know, we're not the only ones in possession of their accelerant."

Skorshinsky smiled cynically. "The United States will spend many, many years trying to contain that Genie. Long after you and I have retired, my friend, they will still be trying to figure out what to do."

# Chapter Twenty-Four

August 1980

The woods were dense and quiet. A warm, humid day in Nashville. Jim Richards made his way, stealthily, through the undergrowth, using deer trails and dry water courses. Alexander was just ahead on point. Together they were a perfect recon team, each with his own inherent skills in compliment of the other.

Marsha had not felt comfortable in the neighborhood after MacKenzie's violent death. She was alone when Chet traveled. And became more, and more nervous about living so close to the woods. Even with Alexander on guard, she was anxious. She'd grown up in Boston, where streets were lighted, and police patrolled neighborhoods. But Fischer Court had only one street light, and it was a block away from their house. County Sheriff's patrols were infrequent at best.

Four months after MacKenzie's death, Chet secured a transfer to Caring First's quality control facility in Atlanta. Marsha would be more comfortable there, a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated city than Nashville. The only thing she needed to worry about were the *normal* threats to life and limb in any big city. But they, at least, were identifiable and expected. If only because they were featured each night on television news.

Jim Richards smiled to himself at the irony behind his neighbor's relocation. The environment they'd moved to was far more dangerous than the one they'd left behind. He was reminded of a comment his friend, Matt Harding, had once made as they came out of the water at Monterey, following an exquisite early morning dive. "*The shark in your head, is worse than the one in the water.*" In answer to a question about fear of sharks, from a tourist dressed in Bermuda shorts.

The image of the blue Pacific Ocean, as seen from the steps at Lover's Cove, suddenly filled Jim Richards' mind. The scent of the sea seemed to come to him. He could taste the salt water. See harbor seals basking on rocks, and sea otters cavorting in the giant kelp beds. It was at that moment he realized he needed to wrap things up in Nashville. He vowed to himself to never again accept a long term undercover assignment.

The sound of a car door being shut, broke his reverie. It came from beyond the edge of the woods, in the direction of his house, which was less than

three hundred yards away. He glanced at Alexander, who stood in a classic stance, nose pointed towards the house.

Jim Richards moved forward, using the dry stream bed as a highway back to the neighborhood. Just before breaking out into the open, he stopped to observe his house. Immediately, he recognized Misti's car in the driveway, an insurance replacement for the one totaled.

He glanced at his watch, 22:00. She had probably come over to do her laundry. He hesitated, most likely she expected him to be down on Music Row. She didn't know of the training regime he'd instituted with Alexander. Jim Richards pondered whether or not he should enter the house. It was Misti who usually initiated their contact, coming over on a weekend rather than during the week when he was unlikely to be there. However, since he'd signed the divorce papers, their contact had become less and less frequent.

Richards shrugged his shoulders, in reaction to his own internal dialog. What the hell, the separation was as amicable as any could be, and the only reason he was still hanging around was to complete the assignment Ty Harding had given him. One that was proving more difficult than he'd expected.

He arose from his hunkered down position, and stepped out of the woods. He walked along the embankment of the wet weather stream, then crossed over the railroad tie bridge opposite the end of the driveway. He entered the house via the garage. Misti was at the washing machine, loading clothes. She turned towards him, startled at his unexpected appearance.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Alexander bounded over to her, and Misti squatted down to pet him. He licked her face, she laughed then stood up wiping her cheek with the back of her hand. "I wasn't expecting you to be home, or I would have called."

Jim Richards smiled at her. "You're always welcome, you know that, or I hope so anyway. How about a cup of coffee?"

She nodded her head.

They sat out on the screened porch, drinking *café con leche* from oversized mugs. As comfortable together as they ever were, at least it seemed so to Jim Richards. In some ways it made the inevitable permanent separation harder, in others infinitely easier. A line from a tune he'd thus far failed to finish came to mind: *There ain't no easy way to say good-bye.*

"Did I mention my psychology professor, Dr. Medal-Soam, recommended me for an internship?"

Richards smiled at the irony of her professor's name, he wondered how great a role the woman had played in assuring their separation progressed quickly to the formality of divorce.

"As a matter of fact, no. What type of program is it?" Richards asked.

"It's at Green Acres, you know the facility Allen Maxwell owns."

Richards frowned. "You're not concerned about working for Allen Maxwell again?"

Misti made a brush-off motion, sweeping her hand to one side in mid-air. A gesture he'd not seen her use before, and he wondered where she'd picked it up.

"Oh I don't work for *him*," Misty said. "In fact, I don't think he's even aware I'm there. The place is just an investment for him, you know? Actually, the University's running the study. I report directly to the doctor in charge."

Jim Richards nodded his head up and down slowly, but made no comment. A moment, or two of silence passed. In the background, the constant hum of cicadas became apparent. It crossed Richards' mind, the sound they made had an eerie, almost alien quality. The pitch and timber, reminiscent of B grade horror movies just before the monster strikes. Maybe it was the cicadas that drove Marsha away. As this thought flitted through his mind, Misti took up the conversation again.

In the old days, before their separation, he'd have probably missed the first five words of her opening sentence. But now as he made a best effort to keep what little they had in common from slipping away entirely, he was acutely aware of every nuance in her voice, and did not fail to note a conspiratorial tone to it.

"Allen Maxwell's gay, you know?" She said in an off-hand manner.

Jim Richards took a pull at his coffee, then set the cup down on the redwood picnic table. He'd heard the same opinion from Lilly, up in communications, right after Misti was fired. "I thought he was married?."

Misti shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think so. The other night, Anna and I were out to a couple of clubs, just to kind of unwind after class. We were

walking along Fourth Street, just up from Broadway. I saw Allen Maxwell come out of *The Village*, which *everyone* knows is a gay hang-out."

"Maybe he was just slumming, or whatever you call it." Richards said with a chuckle in his voice.

Misti smiled. "I would have thought so too. Except he was with Wayne Generette."

Richards eyebrows went up. "Who?"

Misti's tone of voice switched from conspiratorial to gossipy. "Wayne Generette, he's Director of Patient Services out at Green Acres. And everyone at the facility knows his persuasion, he makes no bones about it. Classic voice and mannerisms, makes me feel like I'm back in San Francisco," she laughed, "you know, the Castro District?"

Richards shook his head and chuckled. "Irony isn't it? Caring First's ultra-conservative, the entire fifth floor is homophobic. You know that yourself."

Misti nodded her head in agreement. "And Maxwell was right in there with the others, coming up with some of the *best* basher jokes. But the guy's in the closet."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, then shrugged. "Hey, you know I'm the first one to want to lay some kind of bad *juju* on ol' Maxwell. But there are alternative explanations."

Misti gave Richards one of her, *boy are you a dummy*, smiles. Then said: "It's funny, Anna said that's exactly how you'd respond."

"Anna? Anna Meddlesome, your mean?"

Misti scowled. "It's Medal-Soam." She sighed, the way one would in the presence of a wayward child. "Actually, to be completely honest, she was talking about the boys on the fifth floor at Caring First. She said: If I told anyone up there about Allen Maxwell they'd refuse to believe it, because it's so out of character. More importantly, it would be a threat to their maleness."

"Oh come off it, Misti." Richards said derisively.

"No really," Misti continued. "To accept his being gay, threatens the invincibility of their prejudice. Yet if they could be convinced, they'd turn against him in a heart beat. But convincing them would be nearly impossible, because to

allow such a chink in the armor of their camaraderie would open the question of who else on the fifth floor, or in the company, might also be in the closet.

"Don't you see, the good ol' boy network of invincibility would crumble. As each looked at the other with distrust."

Jim Richards shook his head. "Whoa, that's a mouthful of psycho-babble." He raised his hands palms outward. "Look, I'm only saying that seeing two guys together, coming out of a gay club, doesn't mean they're both homosexuals."

Misti nodded her head once. "Agreed. The thing is, they got in this black Mercedes, Maxwell's I suppose. Anyway, Maxwell slides in from the driver's side, you know like your high school girlfriend might. Wayne slips in behind the wheel. From where we were standing across the street, they looked like two teenagers on a date in Daddy's car. Anyway, as Wayne is closing the door, he leans over, and gives Maxwell a big smooch."

Richards laughed at that one. "Come on Misti, it's night. How the hell can you see what's going on inside a car, across the street, in the dark?"

"Okay, okay. Have it your way. Fact is we saw the smooch, clear as day 'cause the door hadn't shut completely on the first try."

Richards eyes narrowed, "So the interior light was on."

"Exactly."

#

Jim Richards wiped the oversize coffee cups dry with a dish towel. The house was quiet, *empty* with Misti gone. He closed the door to the cupboard, then shook his head and sighed. He needed to take his mind off his own domestic problems, so he could concentrate on his assignment.

The telephone trace had led to a house on Seventeenth Street South, but that's as far it went. Clearly, Nelson Banderhof's contact was a professional who knew how to cover his tracks well.

Jim Richards walked down the hallway to his studio office. He pulled the audio control panel away from the false wall in the closet, to allow himself access his file cabinet. The cabinet was a heavy fireproof affair, with concrete siding, and a solid combination lock. Inside, he kept a film reader and strips of developed film. To keep storage space to a minimum, and enhance concealment for transport, all the intelligence he'd gathered since coming to Nashville was kept on film.

Jim Richards often depended on his intuition to track a target down. His ability to think as his quarry might was of great benefit. As he slipped a film strip into the reader, he felt a familiar *tickle* at the back of his mind. He consciously relaxed and let his mind free associate, allowing his sub-conscious to reveal insights his conscious would otherwise overlook.

Several thoughts seemed to converge at once: *Allen Maxwell was the mole inside Caring First with whom Nelson Banderhof was communicating. But it was unlikely Maxwell would jeopardize his position by receiving the calls himself. He'd need an accomplice, someone he trusted completely. Perhaps someone with whom he already shared a secret.*

*Then an image of a black Mercedes came to mind. It was a sunny day, yet there was no warmth in the sun. In his mind, he saw Seventeenth Avenue South. He was crossing the street. Why? Because he'd seen a black Mercedes parked on the other side. He'd continued to obsess about Misti's near fatal accident for months. He'd determined someone driving a black sedan had forced her into on-coming traffic.*

Then Misti's voice was in his ears, their conversation earlier, *"The thing is, they got into a black Mercedes."*

He rotated the feeder knob on the film reader, then scanned the contact dates listed by CIA listeners who'd spent so many frustrating months trying to trace Banderhof's calls.

Next he stepped over to his desk. Jim Richards kept a journal of the producers and record companies he visited when pitching songs. With nearly thirty songs in circulation at any given time, he had to keep a detailed log to avoid taking a song to the same producer twice, or worse forgetting to check to see if they were interested in one he'd left with them earlier.

It was bitterly cold on the day he'd crossed Seventeenth Street South to see if the black Mercedes exhibited any sign of damage to its left front fender. He brought his journal over to the reader, and began to compare dates. Half way through he hit a match.

Jim Richards sat back in his office chair, and thought for a moment. There had been a man standing near the Mercedes, he'd nodded to him. He tried to visualize the man, but could not, he'd paid little attention once he'd noted the car was undamaged.

He continued to free associate, the name Wayne Generette immediately came to mind. Made sense, assuming Misti's observations were accurate.



Generette and Maxwell already shared an important secret, at least important from Allen Maxwell's point of view.

Jim Richards jumped up from his chair. Put away the film and the reader. Repositioned the control console in front of the false wall. Then grabbed his camera. He made certain it was fully loaded with film, and had the long lens attached.

#

Green Acres Convalescent was located on the north side of the Cumberland River, in the old Inglewood section of Nashville. The property, once part of a pre-civil war plantation, had been subdivided many times until a five acre parcel was all that remained of the once grand estate.

The old plantation home, a classic antebellum mansion, now served as the Administration building, and dominated the property. It stood on a low hill. Its presence emphasized by the slope of the terrain, and the fact all the other structures were single story.

There were five buildings in all, built at angles to each other, giving the impression they were added one at a time as need for living space evolved. The property was well landscaped, with gravel pathways between mature trees, draped with copious quantities of Spanish moss. An air of mystery, verging on the sinister, attended to the property as a result.

Flower beds were sprinkled here and there. A wet weather creek meandered along the west side, emanating from a pond somewhere beyond the Administration building. Jim Richards made these observations from a perch he'd climbed to, in the upper limbs of a tall magnolia tree. It occurred to him, the landscaper responsible for Caring First's campus had a hand in the design of Green Acres as well.

The property was completely surrounded by a stone wall, nearly six feet in height. Over grown with kudzu, a large leafed Ivy-like parasitic plant that grew throughout the south. The Department of Agriculture had conducted a search to find a plant that would grow with little or no active cultivation, and also be a source of nutrition for deer and cattle. A group of biologists had hit upon the idea of importing kudzu, as it met all of the requirements.

Unfortunately, there were two considerations they'd failed to account for: One, the prodigious growth rate of the plant. And two, whether or not, deer and cattle would find it tasty? They did not, and refused to eat it regardless of how it was processed, or packaged. With no natural predators, kudzu was rapidly taking over the entire southern United States.

Jim Richards aimed his long lens in the direction of the Administration building. He scanned the automobiles parked in an area he presumed to be set aside as employee parking. Misti's Olds was readily evident, in fact, he took several pictures of her as she walked from the building to her car, opened the door, and slipped into the driver's seat. Like a voyeur, he snapped a shot of her long, beautiful legs, skirt hiked up, as she swiveled in, and closed the door.

Jim Richards glanced at his watch, 18:30. He'd been in the tree since three that afternoon. His legs ached from the effort of using the fine muscles of his calves, and ankles, to remain on balance. He'd hoped to get a picture of the Director, Wayne Generette. He had no idea of what he looked like, so he'd planned on taking photos of any male who appeared to be in authority. What the hell, keep it simple was always the best plan.

Later, he'd confirm, with Misti, which photo was indeed of Generette. She'd probably wonder why he was interested. And he'd explain he'd done an insurance inspection. He'd already told her he did a few property reports, to keep his head above water financially, while he was *pitching* his songs. Nothing unusual about it, he'd used the same *manuscript* back in the bay area, to get past her questions about his work at Ty Harding International.

Just as Jim Richards was about to call it a day, and climb down from his perch, the door to the Administration building opened. A man appeared on the porch, dressed in tan slacks, a navy blue shirt, and burgundy hush puppies. Through the long lens, Jim Richards noted he was fastidious about his appearance.

The man had sandy blond hair, razor cut, sprayed to remain perennially neat. It occurred to Richards, the guy must see his hair dresser weekly. His clothes fit him well, and he appeared to be in excellent shape. He had Nordic features, high cheek bones in a perfectly sculpted face, the face of a model. And though Jim Richards could not see his eyes, he assumed they'd be an opalescent blue.

He took several photos of the man, as he descended the steps of the mansion, to walk over to a black Mercedes near the end of the employee parking area. Jim Richards considered the possibility of following Wayne Generette, but decided to save that exercise for another day. He'd never reach his Bronco in time, as it was parked 300 yards down the road. So he remained where he was, and kept the long lens trained on the Mercedes as it made its way down the meandering driveway.

He'd hoped to get a better look at its occupant, as the car drew closer, but the setting sun's reflection off the windshield blocked his view. As the

Mercedes approached the gates, Richards noted the security guard stationed in a glass enclosed guard shack, came to attention and stepped outside the shack. He waved a sort of haphazard salute to the driver of the Mercedes, then made a notation on his clip board. It appeared the facility maintained a modicum of security, at least to the extent such amenities might entice the relatives of those interred within, to believe their loved ones were safe and secure.

As Jim Richards walked down Hillside Road toward his Bronco, he glanced back at the old mansion on the hill. The setting sun cast a golden glow over the stately home. But as the shadows deepened, the sinister appearance of trees draped with Spanish moss altered the prior kindly image, and Jim Richards felt a shiver run down his spine. He shrugged it off. Then reminded himself that in the *field* it was important not to let one's imagination run away with one's mind, or be mistaken for intuition.

#

The home in the Belle Meade section of Nashville was built entirely of brick. Although architecturally uninteresting, it nevertheless gave the appearance of having the capability to withstand a thermonuclear attack. At fifty-five hundred square feet, it was large even by Belle Meade standards.

Allen Maxwell swung a midnight blue, Lincoln Mark VI into the home's driveway, then motored slowly up to the round about before the double wide, nine and a half foot high oak doors.

He slipped out of the driver's seat, then walked around the front of the Lincoln, and up three wide steps of the front porch, to press the door bell. While Maxwell waited for the door to be opened, he turned to look down the driveway, and sniff the evening air.

A shadowy figure, seventy-five yards away, centered the targeting circle of a two hundred millimeter night-vision lens, on the bridge of Maxwell's nose. Then gently squeezed the shutter mechanism of a single lens reflex camera. The watcher managed to take two photos of Allen Maxwell, before the seemingly brilliant light of the home's interior flowed out through the opened front door to overpower the night-vision's capacitor.

#

Allen Maxwell stepped into the entry way of Raymond Harbinger's home. The housekeeper closed the front door, then guided Maxwell along a hallway, past a wood banistered staircase, to a study at the back of the house. She swung the door open, then stood aside to allow Maxwell to enter.

Raymond Harbinger was seated in a walnut colored leather chair, smoking an after dinner cigar. A snifter of cognac stood on a low table near at hand. He did not get up to greet his guest, they were too familiar with each other for such formalities. Rather, he simply waved in the direction of a humidor that stood on the side board, adjacent to a built-in wet bar. "Help yourself, Allen. There's cognac over there as well."

Maxwell nodded his head once, as he stepped in the direction of the bar. "Thank you, Raymond. Don't mind if I do." He helped himself to an imported Cubano, toasted it to life, then poured three fingers of cognac into a Waterford crystal snifter. He then walked across a one inch deep, oriental carpet to one of three empty chairs, arranged about a low coffee table of polished English walnut.

"You've not been by to visit Sylvia, lately. She misses you. I've noticed her caressing her ample breasts, when she thinks no one is looking. And murmuring, Raymond where are you?" Allen said, a mischievous look in his eye.

Raymond Harbinger shook his head, and chuckled. "Ah yes, I've been neglecting my duties. There's been so much to do to bring our plans to fruition. I've not even thought about dear, sweet Sylvia. I'm sure she'll be in need of a good spanking, when next I come to her."

Raymond thought about the immigrant Hispanic, Allen Maxwell had arranged for him to indulge in, whenever the mood came upon him, infrequent though it now seemed. When he was younger, his sexual desire was insatiable. Now it came only occasionally, though no less compelling. And Sylvia was always a willing consort. If only because she was so afraid of being arrested, and permanently deported. It gave him a great sense of power to know he held her fate in his hand. Soon, he would go to her, and exercise that power.

Harbinger continued. "I've been recalcitrant in my duties. But I will soon rectify that." He felt his face flush with anticipation, or perhaps it was only the cognac.

"Don't you mean *rectumfy*?" Allen Maxwell said, sarcastically. "In any case, she'll be ready for you." And then he laughed lasciviously.

He then changed the subject. "How are our plans progressing? Are we still on track? Does Harris still intend to give up the reigns, and pursue a political career?"

"Oh yes, most definitely. In fact, he's more committed than ever." Harbinger took a sip of cognac. "I've secured the financing we need. As soon as the stock transfer is complete, we'll move in, and take over the entire Caring First operation, domestic and International."

Allen Maxwell frowned. "How will the Board react?"

Harbinger smiled. "Oh, I'm certain Harris will endorse the entire effort. I'm about to hand him a plum that will catapult him into the political arena in a very big way. You see, our benefactor in the bid for financial control comes from a very influential family of Iranians. So influential, I can almost guarantee the hostages will be released just in time for Ronald Reagan's inauguration."

Allen Maxwell raised one eyebrow, and smiled conspiratorially.

Raymond Harbinger continued. "After all these years, I'm almost afraid to believe we'll, at last, control management of nearly every major hospital in the United States. Not to mention International's holdings, and the flow of pharmaceuticals."

Maxwell took a long pull at his cognac. "Raymond, do you realize we'll be two of the richest and most powerful men in the world?"

Raymond Harbinger nodded his head sagely. "Indeed I do, and who better to wield it?"

#

The steam baths of the Heronimus Men's Club were very private. And though the wooden, slat benches were large enough for six people to sit comfortably, there were seldom more than two, at any one time, in the rooms. Wayne Generette and Boris Lubakov sat a short distance from each other, on separate benches. The volume on the piped in music, a bit too loud.

Boris Lubakov was decidedly uncomfortable, meeting his agent in the steam room of a gay health club. Nevertheless, he knew it was an ideal location. The Nashville gay community was inherently secretive. Unlike San Francisco, New York, and other major metropolitan areas, Nashville was still small enough to support a significant anti-gay population, primarily composed of fundamentalist Christians, who had no qualms about running a *faggot* out of town, if one were in *their* neighborhood.

Consequently, anyone attempting to snoop around the health club, would be suspect. Other members, or even club management, would warn Wayne Generette of any inquiries.

With the steam on full, and the music turned up, there was no way the FBI, or CIA for that matter, would ever successfully bug the place. All Lubakov and Generette needed to do, to assure their privacy, was exercise normal caution

in setting up the dates of their quarterly debriefs of the intelligence Wayne Generette gathered from his conversations with Allen Maxwell, and the late Nelson Banderhof.

"We're pleased with the way you dealt with our unfortunate friend Mr. Banderhof." Boris Lubakov said. "His failure to follow instructions, then adamant denial of ever receiving them, only added proof to your intuition that he'd lost his nerve, and was a prime candidate to be flipped to a *double*." Lubakov shook his head in irritation. "Have there been any inquiries with regard to the location of the telephone used to receive his calls?"

"Possibly," Generette responded. "About a week ago, someone asked about the availability of space in the house on Seventeenth Street. The inquirer indicated he was a writer, looking for office space close to music publishers. He asked if there was any way he could reach the lesser of the space, since it appeared not to be in use. He was given the name of a corporation, whose telephone number is answered by a reception service. His call was not returned. Thus far, there's been no further inquiry. However, there's one anomaly I'm curious about."

Lubakov raised an eyebrow.

"You'll recall my concern about Allen's secretary rooting around in the files, over at Caring First, then getting caught?"

Lubakov nodded his head. "You were worried she'd defend herself by making Allen Maxwell look as if he'd used her as his personal mole, thus causing CIA to turn their scrutiny on him, ultimately curtailing his level of access."

"Exactly." Generette agreed. "Well a strange coincidence occurred. As you know, she was fired from Caring First. Apparently, she went back to school to pick up a Masters degree in Psychology from the University of Tennessee. The University is conducting a study at Green Acres Convalescent, Misti DiMartine is one of the student interns assigned to the study."

Lubakov frowned, "Allen Maxwell's former secretary?"

Generette nodded his head slowly. "Exactly."

Lubakov scowled as he sat back to stare up at the ceiling for several seconds. "Not good. She's married to that mail clerk at Caring First as I recall. The one who stumbled into the assassination attempt?"

"That's right," Generette replied. "However, Misti has indicated to one of the members of my staff that she's in the process of a divorce, interlocutory stage, finalizes in December."

"But her husband's still at Caring First, correct?" Lubakov asked.

Generette shook his head. "No. Allen said he quit to play music."

Lubakov's eyes went wide. "What? What are you talking about."

Generette shrugged. "According to Allen, Caring First offered him a step up to any position he desired, because of his intervention in the attack on their Executive floor. He turned them down. Said he wanted to pursue a music career."

Lubakov was silent for several moments. Then looked intently at Generette. "Remember that information Nelson Banderhof passed to you, what was it? Two, two and half years ago?"

Generette frowned. "He passed a hell of lot of stuff to me, what in particular are you referring to?"

"That CIA Internal Security plan to place a watcher inside Caring First, under cover in some menial position...an orderly at Parkview, something like that. Remember?"

Generette was still frowning, shaking his head. Then a glimmer of recall shown on his face. "Shit! Your right. Later, we got a call from Banderhof indicating the plan had been canceled."

Lubakov smiled cynically. "We've been had, Wayne. The investigation was never called off. That insertion was consummated, only the point of penetration was changed." Suddenly Lubakov chuckled, then shook his head. "Nelson Banderhof *was* compromised. Only much sooner than he ever suspected." He thought for a moment. "Think with me on this, Comrade. CIA Internal Security fakes the mission cancellation, instead places their insert at Caring First's corporate headquarters, as a nobody mail clerk, with free run of the floors"

"He and his ol' lady are a team." Generette continued with the thought process. "She's sitting right there on the Executive level, passing everything she sees, and hears, back to him, when they get home at night. How sweet it is: No contact difficulties, no secret codes. Just a little debrief, before they play hide the sausage."

Lubakov lifted his chin, then dropped it. "Exactly. Everything's under control until the assassination attempt. The mail room guy stumbles into the mess, and deals with it, then realizes his cover's blown because no one's gonna believe a mail clerk has the skills to deal with two armed killers."

"Which may be why they played it down to the press. Made up the story about their head of security giving his life to stop terrorists," Generette said. "When everyone on the floor knew Monty Regadet had been killed without firing a shot. Harold McFarland must have convinced them to put out the story, while he ran a more thorough background on the mail guy."

"Correct." Lubakov said, then let out a sigh, and shook his head. "It definitely appears CIA was on to Mr. Banderhof, long before his panic call. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they precipitated the call precisely in the hope he'd blow through his time allotment, and give them enough headroom for a complete trace. Which means they are now on to that service we set up out in Hollywood. Too bad, those goof ball producers were always getting leaked intelligence, as premises for their action films. You'd be amazed at how much we gained from that scam." Lubakov chuckled derisively.

Generette leaned against the steam soaked wall at the back of the bench, then let out a long sigh. "So everything he gave us for the past two years was manuscript?"

"Most likely," Lubakov said.

Generette looked positively glum, as he realized all the time he'd wasted, waiting for Banderhof's calls. All the disinformation he'd meticulously archived, then passed on to Lubakov. "What you're telling me is CIA most likely knows the role I've played?"

Lubakov shook his head slowly. "No. They only know there was a *cut out*. Someone to whom Banderhof passed his information. They've yet to figure out it's you, because they had no leads. No way of tracing the calls past the service we used in Los Angeles.

"That's also why they purposely panicked Banderhof, hoping he'd make some operational mistake that would give you up. If they were unsuccessful in tracing the call, perhaps he'd lead them to you through personal contact, once he feared for his own well being. But you handled his resolution masterfully, something I'm sure they weren't expecting. Now they have no pipeline to use for their disinformation, and no way to identify you."

Generette shook his head slowly. "But Misti DiMartine is working at Green Acres, clearly she's not there by coincidence."



Boris Lubakov smiled. "You're forgetting something, my friend. We now know she's an insert, and we also know the identity of her team mate. The divorce she's going through is a sham, an attempt to make it seem as if she's a non-player. But you see, the mere fact both assets were pulled out of Caring First, yet tenaciously remain in the area, tells me something important: They've fallen prey to a deadly error, *Operational fixation*."

Generette frowned. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Misti, and her husband, must have at some point targeted Allen Maxwell as the prime candidate for a security leak at Caring First. Now they're trying to follow the leads they think they've developed, from the files Misti copied while she was at Caring First, which would include Allen Maxwell's ownership of Green Acres.

"But CIA trusts Allen Maxwell completely, he's been in the trade his entire career, a part of their old boy network. And he's successfully passed all the polygraphs, and PSI tests they've ever put him through. His only deception is his relationship with you.

"My read: CIA Internal Security is completely disappointed with the results of the Caring First investigation, and have pulled Misti and her husband, off the case."

Generette frowned. "So what the hell is she doing at Green Acres? And where is that mail guy now? Jesus, I wish I could remember his fucking name. Allen mentioned it to me at some point I'm sure, though it didn't seem important at the time."

Lubakov smiled. "Relax, Wayne, it doesn't matter, whatever he called himself is not his true identity."

"So what *are* we going to do about Misti DiMartine?" Generette asked, his voice tinged with desperation.

Lubakov's voice took on a deadly tone. "I'm almost positive those two are operating on their own, hoping to prove the blind alley they've been running down for the past two years has a pay-off. Very dangerous trait. Their egos have overpowered their good sense.

"Where ever Misti is, her partner's not far away, because he's her only back up. And we already know, from the way he handled the two terrorists on the fifth floor, he likes to play hero."

A flicker of understanding began to show on Wayne Generette's face. A sinister chuckle involuntarily escaped his lips as the implications of the opportunity presented gradually dawned on him.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

The two video surveillance specialists were perspiring, though it wasn't particularly warm. Their faces flushed with excitement, almost as if they'd been the one's engaged in the steamy sex they'd taped in the adjacent room.

Gene Vicariant carefully withdrew a small fish-eye lens from a hole he'd drilled through the wall. His partner, Loren Spendini, was busy packing up the audio equipment, which included a pencil sized, wide spectrum pizeo-electric pick-up inserted through a similar hole in the same wall.

They'd been hired by the Larson Detective Agency out of Durham, North Carolina to film the infidelity of a client's wife. Not an unusual assignment. Anytime a nasty divorce was in progress, one side always tried to improve their position by developing evidence of infidelity. And based solely on the tape they'd recorded earlier that morning, this case was going to be a slam-dunk for the cuckolded husband.

Once their equipment was packed away in a pair of hard-shell suitcases, Spendini and Vicariant set about accomplishing one of the more difficult parts of their assignment. Refilling the holes they'd drilled through the wall. It wasn't simply a matter of stuffing the hole on their side of the wall with spackle, it was also necessary for one of them to get into the room next door to repair that side as well.

When an assignment took place in one of the better hotels, getting into an adjacent room was sometimes challenging. However, here at the Sunset Motel, just off campus from Duke University, access to the room proved extraordinarily easy. The adjoining entry door had been inexplicably left unlocked, most likely by a member of housekeeping after the rental of both rooms to a family of four. Loren Spendini smiled to herself as she opened the door. She wondered how many nights, or weeks, it had remained unlocked, unnoticed by casual transients too tired to think after a long day on the road.

The patch-up took less than ten minutes, there was no expensive wall paper to repair, no custom paint to match. Just a plain *egg shell* wall, decorated sporadically with silk-screened prints of Duke University's campus.

Gene Vicariant glanced at his watch, a fake Rolex Perpetual with a Julian band, twelve noon. He'd be back home in an hour, making copies of the tape, the

rest of the afternoon off. Nothing sweeter than *filming* a late morning tryst between two chippy lovers.

Vicariant couldn't help but conjecture on the nature of the relationship whose privacy they'd invaded. The man was young, a stud, at least in his own mind, servicing a woman several years his senior. An attractive woman, with eastern European features and a body built for comfort.

*He* was most likely in his early twenties. *She* her mid-thirties. Based upon their conversation, following the main event, he was a student at the University. She, a research assistant to her husband, who Vicariant guessed was several years her senior. Always a bad combination, Vicariant thought, working with your mate after too many years of marriage.

Then there was the young guy-old guy factor. Usually the old guy ignored the situation, and after a fling or two the young guy became bored, and moved on. The wife embarrassed. Later coming to the realization she'd threatened her own security for nothing more than a kid with a rock hard woody.

Usually the wife returned to the bored security she'd chosen years before, only to face the inevitable pay-back her husband would extract downstream. Vicariant shook his head cynically. Apparently, *her* husband was not playing the game in the usual manner. Perhaps it was not her first fling, or perhaps there were deeper problems to their relationship. In any case, the action filmed presented him with a reasonably inexpensive way out of his nuptial incarceration.

Loren Spendini stepped through the adjoining door. She turned to look at Vicariant. "Are we all set?"

Gene Vicariant closed and locked the suitcases. "We're outta here," he said in reply, as he hefted one of the hard-shells off of the bed. Spendini grabbed the other, they both stepped towards the door. Vicariant placed his hand on the door knob, turned it and swung the door open wide. The bright noon sunshine flowed into the room.

Black out curtains had remained drawn during their assignment, the sun momentarily dazzled them both. Gradually their eyes adjusted, it was then they noticed their way was blocked by a man who looked like a football linebacker, and behind him, to the right, another of even larger proportions. They both wore very serious, no nonsense expressions.

Vicariant's heart seemed to free fall into his stomach, as he noted the man had his left hand raised. In it he held some sort of ID, with an official looking badge. He could not tell for certain what government or law enforcement agency

it represented, because the man did not hold it up long enough to really get a good look. No matter, Vicariant gave no thought to resistance. He'd been at the video surveillance game too long not to know that sometimes things went awry, which was why he always worked with an *agency* that had *juice* with local law enforcement.

"Please step back into the room." Ordered the man with the badge.  
"Keep your hands where we can see them at all times. And please don't make any sudden movements."

They back pedaled to the middle of the room.

"My name's Special Agent Smith. And you are under arrest for interrupting an investigation of vital interest to national security. You have the right to remain silent, and you have the right to an attorney. On the other hand, should you decide to cooperate with us completely, we might just forget all about the felonious activity you've most recently engaged in." He smiled broadly. "The choice is entirely yours."

#

Jim Richards shuffled slowly through the photos he'd taken at Green Acres. He'd developed them in his garage the night before. Then let them hang overnight to assure they were completely dry.

He analyzed each photo carefully, using a powerful magnifying glass. Looking for anything of interest in the background. He studied the security cameras set up around the perimeter of the buildings. Some were on the buildings themselves, others located in trees, and some at ground level.

He also studied another building, barely discernible behind the old mansion. It was a rectangular cinder block affair, concealed in the trees at the back of the property. He'd not given much thought to the building when he was taking the photos, because the focus of his attention was on the main house and the people who came and went from it.

The design and construction of the block building was such it appeared to be almost an afterthought, something built well after all the other structures were in place, nothing to do with the day to day operations of the facility.

As he continued to study the photos, it became clear through analysis of viewing angles and paths of approach, the camera placement was primarily to assure the security of the building in the trees. That was definitely of interest to Jim Richards, it was an axiom in his line of work that no one attempted to protect

something of no importance to them. And clearly it was not the residents of Green Acres that were of importance.

Richards returned to scrutinizing the people in the photos. Over the course of the afternoon, he'd photographed five male employees. Three were clearly orderlies, or male nurses, based upon their age and uniforms. The other two were obviously Administrative personnel, one of whom was most likely Wayne Generette.

Jim Richards' problem was not only to determine which of the two was the Green Acres' Director, but whether or not he was, in fact, the man who used the house on Seventeenth Avenue South to receive Nelson Banderhof's calls.

Richards glanced at his watch, 15:30. Misti would most likely still be at Green Acres. He wondered when she normally returned to her apartment. Probably not until twenty-two thirty, or twenty-three hundred, if she had classes.

He looked through the photos one more time, choosing two that would fit the story of an insurance inspection. *He'd just happened to catch the men coming out of the house as he was photographing the buildings.* Hopefully, Misti would not be aware they'd left at widely separated times, or she might begin to suspect he had motives other than making his report as complete as possible by identifying the people who'd *inadvertently* appeared in the photographs.

He set the photos aside, then filed all the others away except the one with the clearest view of the building in the trees. He glanced absently at his watch again, then made the decision to go over to Misti's apartment around twenty-two thirty that evening.

Having nothing more urgent to do with the rest of his afternoon. He turned on his recording equipment, picked up his guitar, and began to work on the demo tape of a song he'd written earlier in the week.

#

Misti DiMartine stepped out the back door of the old mansion, that served as the Administration building for Green Acres, she stood for a moment on the rear porch, gazing across the manicured lawn towards the cinder block building partially hidden by the grove of trees within which it was built.

It was a warm September day, the last week of her internship at Green Acres, the last week of summer vacation for the students she'd teach in the coming fall semester at the academy.

She walked down the wooden stairs, and stepped onto Kentucky bluegrass, glad she'd decided to wear flats today. The air felt soft, as it caressed the bare skin of her arms and legs. She longed to lie on the grass, and bake to a golden brown in the warm sunshine.

She'd elected to wear a sun dress, it was a bit risqué for office attire but the day was just too beautiful to cover herself completely. It made her feel sexy, knowing underneath she had nothing on but a pair of bikini panties.

As she crossed the lawn towards the cinder block building, she was curious as to why Wayne Generette had called to ask her to bring the file on Tommy Downs, the teenager she'd been working with for the past three months.

Tommy had a severe case of free floating anxiety that made him suicidal. He was kept under medication while in the therapy associated with the university's grant program. The problem for Misti was that, in her opinion, the medication exacerbated his problem, it had a rebound effect that required an ever increasing dosage.

Due to contraindications of the medication, it was necessary to cut his dosage back for two consecutive days each week, usually Saturday and Sunday when he went home to visit his parents.

Misti was fearful he'd lose control while away and do something irrational, such as throw himself out the window of his parent's high rise condominium in downtown Nashville. Unfortunately, the physician in charge of the grant program, Dr. Passoff, didn't share her misgivings. And gave no credibility to her recommendations to take him off the medication when he was at Green Acres, where he was under professional care. Rather than at home, where he was not.

The physician had the exact opposite opinion, primarily because he was more concerned about issues of professional liability than patient welfare. At home, Tommy was the responsibility of his parents. If he chose to test Newton's theory of gravity there, that was their problem. If on the other hand he did something self-destructive while at Green Acres, up went the cost of Dr. Passoff's liability insurance.

As Misti approached the cinder block building, she felt a shiver go down her spine. Which seemed particularly strange considering the temperature outside was in the low eighties, without so much as a breeze to disturb the blades of grass over which she trod. Nevertheless, Misti felt a distinct chill and realized there was something about the building that seemed foreboding.

She glanced over her shoulder towards the Administrative mansion. It was such a contrast, so architecturally interesting with warm wood and ornately carved cornices, as compared to the starkness of the drab cinder block structure used as an annex. At least, that's how Wayne Generette described the building when Misti first inquired as to its purpose.

As she stepped up to the door, she pushed the anxiety out of her mind. Too many long days had conspired to trigger a twinge of free floating concern. Not for the first time did Misti wish she'd allowed herself a couple of weeks to relax, before going on to full time teaching. Too late now. The portion of the study in which she was involved would end next week, and she'd immediately transfer her time and attention to her students at The Christian Academy of Brentwood.

Misti reached for the door knob, but it moved away from her suddenly as the door swung open. Generette stood before her, one hand on the inside door knob, the other concealed casually behind his back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said. "Please do come in."

Misti stepped across the threshold. Generette swung the door closed behind her. The abrupt change, from bright sunlight to near complete darkness inside, was momentarily disorienting, and Misti stood perfectly still to get her bearings. In that moment, she felt a damp cloth clamped over her nose and mouth. Her immediate reaction was to turn her head, but Generette had hold of her in such a way she could not move so much as an inch. He seemed incredibly strong, maniacally so. Much stronger than she'd have ever expected considering his size. In *her* mind, the fact he was gay meant he was also weak, in the way some mousy women were, but nothing could have been farther from the truth.

The cloth had a pungent odor, medicinal perhaps, like ether only stronger. She did not want to inhale the substance, and struggled to free herself. First she tried to twist her head from side to side. Finding that impossible, she attempted to force an escape from his grip by heaving her body left and right. All to no avail.

And then she remembered defensive moves, Jim had taught her, in the event she was ever mugged. A clear picture of his face came to mind. And she wished he was there with her, because she knew he'd protect her, that none of this would be happening if he were with her right now.

She stomped downward with her right heel as hard as she could, trying to judge the location of Generette's instep. Her heel slammed heavily onto the concrete floor, pain shot up her ankle and into her leg. Undaunted, she kicked her right heel upward, hoping to contact Generette's groin, but only succeeded in kicking herself in the butt. How was it possible for him to hold her so tightly at arms length?



Finally she attempted to drop limply from his grip, and almost succeeded. The cloth slipped away, and she gulped a breath of fresh air then screamed for help. But she felt Generette fall with her to the floor, pinning her legs. His full body weight on her upper torso. The cloth again clamped tightly across her nose and mouth.

She continued to struggle, writhing this way and that. She tried to scream, but heard only guttural grunts and muffled cries emitted past the cloth pressed to her face. Gradually without making a conscious decision, she felt herself breathing in the pungent substance. At first it burned her lungs, but then she felt an overwhelming sense of peace and relaxation flow through her body. And though her mind told her to fight to the death, her body had not the will to do so. In a matter of moments she went completely limp. Her vision narrowed to pure black, like the shutter of a camera closing down following a glorious moment of exposure.

Boris Lubakov stood in the hallway of the cinder block building, staring down at Wayne Generette, as Misti DiMartine finally ceased to struggle. "Well, my boy," he said. "It's a good job that wasn't her husband you were trying to subdue."

"Oh shut up." Generette replied, his voice tinged with irritation. He stood up pulling Misti's limp body vertical, and letting it fall across his left shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Next time, do the job yourself. See if you can do any better."

Lubakov laughed good naturedly. "Oh, now don't get your feathers ruffled. I'm only being facetious. Here bring her this way, and we'll put her where she won't be a bother."

#

David Shane walked across Parking Lot C at Duke University, toward a dark green, 1975 Fiat Spyder. He was feeling particularly good about himself, having *boffed* Myra Sosyka earlier in the day. There was a cocky spring in his step that said to the world: *Damn I'm good.*

He carried a pair of books and a binder in one hand, the binder resting against his hip the way the jocks transported their books. There was no need for a back pack because he only took the minimum classes necessary to allow him access to campus.

It had taken him longer than he'd expected to seduce Myra, but eventually with persistence he'd been successful, and it had been well worth the effort. Not only was the sex great, but she was a wealth of information about the

research projects she and Yuri were working on. Though she had no idea the information she was casually conversing with him about was beginning to add up to a significant treasure trove for the KGB. Soon, however, he was going to need to have her provide hard copies of the research findings that would inevitably come from the work Yuri was doing, and he wondered what excuse he would use to convince her to pass those copies to him.

His control, Victor Koroleva, had suggested good old fashion black mail. Certainly an option at this point in their relationship, especially with the tape made this morning. But Shane wanted to try a softer approach first. He just needed to come up with the right reasoning. Based upon the successful expansion of sexual experimentation he'd convinced Myra to try, he felt certain convincing her to do just about anything for him was entirely feasible.

David Shane reached the driver's door of the Fiat. He unlocked it, tossed his books onto the passenger's seat, climbed in, and inserted the key into the ignition. The engine turned over several times, but refused to start.

"Damn," he muttered to himself as he climbed back out of the vehicle to open the hood, and see what was wrong this time. The little Spyder was a boot to drive, but temperamental at times, and he was glad he was a half way decent mechanic every time the bugger let him down. Probably the coil wire popped off, or something equally silly.

He opened the hood, and peered around inside. "What the hell," he said to no one in the particular, as he realized the goddamn coil wire was completely missing. He pulled his head out from under the hood, and looked around as if he expected to find someone standing right there with the wire in their hand. To his great surprise, three people stood in a semi-circle around him, blocking any possible route of escape. The three were very large men, one of whom held the coil wire, slapping it up and down, softly on the palm of his hand. A shit eating grin on his face.

#

Jim Richards glanced at his watch, 00:30. He'd been sitting in his Bronco, backed into a visitor's spot at the complex where Misti's apartment was located, since 22:30 that evening. He had no idea of what sort of schedule she kept, but suspected she'd be home at a reasonable hour considering it was the middle of the week, and she had her internship to go to in the morning.

He really had lost track of her in so many ways. He let out an audible sigh. Relationships were odd that way, he thought, when they were working it seemed each partner knew exactly what the other was thinking without even speaking, and then one day it was over and they were strangers again.

She probably had a late night conference with Professor Medal-Soam, Richards thought, as he activated the Bronco's ignition. The powerful engine started immediately then settled into a throaty idle. Jim Richards shifted the transmission into low, then drove slowly out of the parking space, turning left up the entrance drive.

He didn't even want to consider the other possibility of why Misti had not yet returned from her night classes. Of course, the harder he tried not to think of it, the stronger the thought became until it hovered ominously at the back of his mind. *She'd found a lover, and was spending the night with him.*

#

Misti DiMartine gradually came out of unconsciousness. She opened her eyes, but found it was pitch black. Not dark, the way it is when you turn the lights off at home, but impenetrably black. A terrifying thought crossed her mind, whatever had caused her to fall unconscious had also rendered her totally blind.

She attempted to raise her hand to her face, to see if perhaps she were blindfolded, or if she could, at least, see her hand in front of her nose. Immediately, it made contact with a hard surface. She slid her hand up and over her torso, tracing a curved surface. She was lying prone on her back. She attempted to move her leg to the right, but contacted the same hard surface. To the left the same thing happened. Panic began to overwhelm her. She lifted her knee too quickly, it crashed with a dull thud against the under surface of the cover.

Her heart began to beat wildly. Her breathing rate went up instantly. Feeling all about her with both hands, she came to the totally terrifying conclusion she was inside a coffin. She began to scream at the top of her lungs, calling for help. Over and over until her voice was hoarse from the effort.

She said an audible prayer to God, that she was not buried alive. Why had Wayne Generette done this to her? What had she ever done to him?

She pressed upward on the lid. Pounded on its under surface. Tried to dig into it with her finger nails, which was completely impossible as it was perfectly smooth and apparently made of some sort of painted metal, or perhaps hard plastic. At least that's what it felt like to her.

She wriggled her arms over her head, felt for the end of the coffin, and pushed, causing her body to slide a few inches until her feet made contact with the other end. Raising her knees the few inches she could, until they made contact with what she supposed was the coffin's lid, she kicked out striking the

end wall, hoping to break it outward. Maybe they'd not actually buried her yet. Maybe she was in a funeral home somewhere, and if she kicked hard enough she'd be able to escape. She continued the futile effort until her feet were bruised, and every additional thrust sent needles of pain up her legs.

Exhaustion set in, she ceased all effort, as if someone had simply thrown a switch, and shut off the power to an electrical device. Misti lay in the dark. Her muscles shaking from their effort, and the after affect of being overloaded with adrenaline. Her adrenal glands had pumped out the equivalent of twelve hours of hormone, in a matter of seconds, to power levels of muscular effort she'd never before experienced.

Gradually her heart rate lessened, though it remained above normal. She felt a tremendous sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Despair enveloped her, as she realized there was no escape. And no one would come to rescue her.

Jim Richards face seemed to float above her, and she reached her hand out to it, but only bumped against the underside of the lid. She murmured his name, then began to sob quietly. Hoping death, would at least come soon, and take the terror away.

#

Wayne Generette sat on a laboratory stool his back ram rod straight, his feet resting on its circular foot brace. Boris Lubakov sat slumped against the back of a similar stool, one elbow resting on a Formica counter top.

The room they were in was sparsely furnished. There was a laboratory work surface with a sink. At one end of the room was a table with electronic equipment placed on it. Data wires ran from the equipment to a black cylindrical object that rested atop a stand custom made to support it.

The object resembled an hermetically sealed coffin, but was made of fiberglass, primarily to reduce its cost and weight. Three hoses ran from the underside of the object, one to a compact water softener mounted adjacent to the sink and tapped into its water system, another to a pipe vented outside. The third fed purified air, silently into the sealed chamber.

The room was dimly lit with soft, indirect lighting. Although task lights stood on the counter top and the table, these were not turned on at the moment. There were no windows in the room. In fact, the cinder block building had only two windows, both on the side of the building seen from the grounds.

Wayne Generette looked at his watch then said in a stage whisper, "Two hours and twenty minutes, she's a hearty one, isn't she?"

Lubakov shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, speaking in a stage whisper also, to assure Misti would not hear their conversation. Though it was entirely unlikely, considering the sound proofing layered between the outer and inner shells of the *coffin*.

"Just give her the drugs, and let's get this over with quickly."

Generette held up one forefinger, and wagged it from side to side. "Psychoactive drugs must be administered carefully. Corticosteroids dilute their effect. We must first make certain her adrenaline is, at least temporarily, deactivated. Repetitive stress, the terror she's now experiencing usually works wonders."

Lubakov threw up his hands. "I haven't got all night, you know?." He looked at his watch. "How long is this going to take?"

Generette scowled at him. "Quite literally all night. Maybe longer, depending upon how strong her will is, how dedicated she turns out to be. So why don't you just toddle on home, or where ever it is you go at night, and let me handle this my way. Just make certain your boys outside don't go sleepy times, waiting for her *ex-husband* to show up."

Lubakov shook his head. "They'll get the job done." Lubakov slipped off the stool. "The men outside are trained professionals."

Generette looked over at Lubakov. "You've identified him have you?"

Lubakov dropped his chin once. "Our ID section ran a full comparison check of all known CIA domestic field operatives that fit his operational profile. Came up with a positive match in under six hours.

"His name's Jim Richards, aka J. Robert Bushman, Jimmy Ocean, and a dozen other aliases. Been a thorn in the side of KGB before, though he hasn't turned up on anyone's dossier for quite some time. New York office figures he's been working Internal Security past five years, probably why he hasn't pissed anyone off for awhile. That and being married, tends to take the hot doggers out of circulation."

"And you figure she's still squatting his rod? Bogus divorce?" Generette asked.

"Yeah, that's what I figure. Anyway, his MO's always been the same: Gets a wild hair up his butt, and heads off in some completely unexpected direction. Like I said, operational fixation. And this time we're ready for him."

Generette raised one eyebrow skeptically. "Just make sure you take him down clean, I want a crack at him right here."

"Oh yes, most definitely. This is one spook we want to see drained dry... to the bones."

#

Generette listened to Lubakov's footsteps retreating down the silent hallway until he heard the door at the end of the building open, then close again. He looked over at the equipment on the table, and noted Misti's heart rate had slowed considerably, though it was still elevated higher than he would have preferred. He thought about the situation for a moment or two, then stepped over to the *coffin*.

As with a true casket, there was a hinge that ran its entire length to allow the lid to be tilted back so a person could be easily laid inside. At one end of the lid was a small access port, to enable the person on the outside to converse face to face with the one inside.

#

Misti stared straight up into blackness. She wondered how many inches of dirt lay above her, or if she were still at rest in a funeral parlor somewhere, or perhaps in the cinder block building itself. She wished she could see her watch, at least then she'd know the time. She reached over and felt her left wrist with her right hand, found her watch missing.

"Oh no," she groaned desperately. Somehow the thought of never again knowing the time, how much had passed, how much was left, seemed overwhelming.

Suddenly a section of the coffin's lid slid open directly above her face. She gasped, then cried out as loudly as she could for help. The lid was immediately closed again. She reached up, and tore at the section, which had been momentarily opened, again her finger nails could find no purchase. She pounded on the underside of the lid. Punching it with closed fists until her knuckles burned from the pain of impact. She called out repeatedly for someone to let her out. After several minutes, she stopped, exhausted from her second futile effort to escape. Her spirits rose a little, she knew she was not buried alive. At least not yet.

During the brief moment the lid had been open, she'd not been able to see anything definite. Had no idea of where she was, but somehow sensed she'd not

been moved far, and was most likely still inside the cinder block building. Which meant she was still at the mercy of Wayne Generette. As if to confirm her very thoughts, she heard his voice coming to her from outside the space that confined her.

"Now Misti, my dear." He said. "I'm going to open the little window once more, so that you can see you're quite all right. But only if you promise not to start carrying on like a petulant child. Do you promise?"

Misti swallowed, her throat felt dry. "Yes," she said in a tiny voice.

The lid slid back. Misti started to lift her head, although she did not believe the opening was large enough to even allow her that much freedom. Suddenly, Wayne Generette's face filled her vision, inches from the window, inches from her own face. She gasped, and dropped her head back down onto the floor of the coffin. It hit with a hollow thud that momentarily took her breath away.

"There, there now. No sudden movements, no silly attempts to climb through this opening. It's too small in any case, even for someone as svelte as yourself." And then he giggled in an odd high pitched manner, as some silly school girl might at a sorority sex toy party. And Misti had the distinct impression that somehow Wayne Generette was quite titillated by the idea of holding her captive in a narrow closed box.

The thought crossed her mind that perhaps he was a member of some sort of sadomasochistic club, and she was about to become the main entrée. She'd heard about such clubs in San Francisco, though they were not admitted to by the gay community. SM didn't fit the *wholesome* image they preferred to present. The SMs were an embarrassment, and in truth represented a very small percentage of gays, or straights for that matter. Of course, that statistic was of little solace to her at this particular moment.

"Why are you doing this to me?" She asked, a quiver in her voice. Though she tried to make it sound as normal and reasonable, as possible. "Why am I in this casket?"

Wayne Generette's face again appeared at the small window. But this time it was not inches from her own, rather it appeared he was standing on the floor adjacent to where she lay.

"Casket? Oh goodness gracious no. Where in the world did you get such an idea?" He said in a lilting voice, as if such a concept were inconceivable. "Is that why you are so upset? Oh good grief, I'm so sorry, my dear." He put his hand

to his chin, the way Jack Benny would when he wanted to look particularly perplexed.

"Didn't anyone warn you? Oh goodness gracious, I'm so sorry." Generette looked away for a moment, he appeared to be gathering his thoughts. "You're not in a casket, Sweetie. You're in a sensory deprivation tank. Part of the experiment, the grant you've been working on."

Relief flooded Misti's consciousness, followed by anger. She felt her face begin to flush, yet she couldn't quite seem to conjure up the degree of indignation she wanted. Rather she just felt all squeezed out. Tears came to her eyes. "No one said anything to me about participating in a sensory deprivation experiment." She said in a small voice.

Generette's voice changed again, back to its normal tone, the one he used around the office. "Well be that as it may, we'll nevertheless proceed. But since you were not informed ahead of time, I will break protocol, and explain to you what you may expect.

"First the tank will be partially filled with water that is kept at exactly ninety-eight point eight degrees, which, as you know, is your normal body temperature. All external stimulation will be withdrawn, you will hear, see, smell and feel nothing from outside your restricted environment."

Misti had already decided her only hope for escape would be to relax, and go along with the program, though intuitively she felt certain Generette was not telling her the whole truth. Clearly, no such legitimate experiment would have included the physical abuse to which she'd already been subjected.

"How long does the experiment last?" She asked in the steadiest voice she could muster.

"That depends on each individual," Generette replied. "Usually no more than eight hours, but it is best if you don't try to guess how long it's taking, as that seems to only prolong the time."

"May I go to the bathroom?" She asked.

Generette smiled. "Certainly. The water is continually circulated and your bodily functions are monitored. It's all part of the experiment. You've probably already noted that you're not wearing any clothing."

Misti felt her face flush with embarrassment. Actually she hadn't noted her lack of clothing. Lack of sufficient air, entombment, death by slow suffocation alone in the dark, were the thoughts that had occupied her mind.



"Now," Generette continued. "The normal stages you may expect to go through are *expectation*. That is waiting for something to happen, the experiment to end for example. Then sleep, awakening, followed by brief disorientation. This series is repeated until you reach a kind of waking REM sleep, where ideas free associate. You may speak out loud, or believe you are hearing voices. You may believe you have questions you must answer, and may respond to them vocally. The sooner you give in completely to the process, the sooner the experiment will be concluded."

Misti swallowed, her throat felt dry. "I'm very thirsty. May I have a drink of water?"

Generette hesitated. "Normally we don't allow that, you absorb all the fluid your body needs from the water circulating in the tank. But in your case, I will make an exception. Your passage through the first stage of disorientation was made more difficult because, apparently, Professor Medal-Soam failed to warn you of the experiment. I must talk with her about that in the morning."

His face disappeared from the opening, and Misti heard water being run in the back ground, and what sounded like a glass of liquid being stirred. Then Generette was back, he held a glass laboratory beaker in his hand, a long plastic tube snaked from the beaker. With his free hand, he passed it to Misti's lips.

"Now just a few sips, its luke warm. We don't want to drop your body temperature."

Misti allowed him to place the end of the plastic tube to her lips, she was not afraid of being poisoned, if he'd wanted to kill her outright she'd already be dead. She drew a mouthful, swallowed, then another. Before the tube was withdrawn.

"There you go. Now I must close you up, and begin the experiment."

He began to slide the window closed.

"Wait," she said, anxiety tingeing her voice. "What is the purpose of all this?"

He smiled unctuously. "It's a learning experience, my dear. You will have moments of great insight. And will be surprised at how much you're willing to tell... yourself that is... before this is all over."

The window closed with a resounding thud. Misti's heart began to race again. Before today, she'd not realized how very claustrophobic she was. Even

clinging to the false hope the experiment was in fact legitimate, that everything was under control, failed to lessened the fear and near panic she felt.

Suddenly a feeling of light headedness came over her, and she realized she was falling into unconsciousness again. "The beaker," she thought. "He'd been stirring something..."

# Chapter Twenty-Six

Jim Richards finished his morning coffee, then picked up the telephone, and called Green Acres. He asked to speak with Misti DiMartine, but was told she was not scheduled to work. He hung up, then dialed her apartment. The phone rang several times, no one answered. He went out for a run with Alexander. Then took a shower before heading downtown to Music Row. As he cruised by the house where Nelson Banderhof's calls had been relayed, an idea came to mind.

Finding a place to park, he back tracked on foot, then climbed the stairs to the front door. Just inside was a small music production company. He'd dropped by on several prior occasions, and spoken with the owner. It was a one man operation. The guy was either in or out, made things simple that way.

Jim Richards stepped into the producer's office. It must have been a parlor when the old house was still a home. It had a bay window to the right of the entry door, with a selection of potted plants. And a sleepy tabby cat that came and went as she pleased.

To the left, an antique oak desk. That looked as if it had been liberated from one of Nashville's original banks, during a renovation project. Jim Richards had the feeling it had been around since Davy Croquette plied the Cumberland River.

The walls of the room displayed sheet music and publicity photos of artists the owner had recorded, published, or simply admired. Requisite decor for anyone in the music business.

Seated behind the desk was a man in his early forties. Hair down to his shoulders, full beard, neatly combed. He was dressed in a pair of blue jeans, and a western shirt. He sat, tilted back in his chair, feet propped up on the corner of his desk, reading Billboard Magazine.

As Jim Richards stepped through the doorway, the man looked around the edge of the eleven by seventeen glossy. "Jimmy, what's happening man. You got a new tune for me today?"

Richards grinned, then slipped into a wooden arm chair that stood on the visitor's side of the desk.

"Hey, Dusty, who's hot and what's not?" Richards asked.

"Well you gotta love the categories ol' Billboard keeps comin' up with," Dusty replied. "Seems like they got a new one every week. Cracks me up." He closed the magazine, and tossed it face up onto the surface of the old desk. "Used to be," he continued. "You had your Pop, your Country, your Rock & Roll, your Rhythm and Blues, Jazz, and Classical." He shrugged and grinned.

"Now you got your Black Oriented Soul, your Rock a Billy - named after the President's brother no doubt. Your Adult Oriented Rock. I mean give me a break will ya? It all sounds like Bull *Oriented* Shit to me."

He dropped his feet to the floor.

"You know pretty soon every new song comin' out's gonna have its own category." He thought for moment. "Hey, maybe that's the key. You come up with a tune needs a new category. Guess what? Got to chart number one, cause there ain't gonna be no competition." He grinned broadly again. "So like I said when you came through the door, what've you got for me?"

Jim Richards let out a long, hearty laugh. "You know Dusty, you're the only guy on the street that can bring me out of the dumps when I come in here with my ass draggin', and no good ideas for hit songs."

Dusty Pickom smiled, then shrugged. "Well that's fine, least I'm good for something."

Jim Richards laid two photos out on the desk. "You recognize either of these two guys?"

Pickom leaned forward, stared at the photos, tapped one. "This guy." He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then looked across the desk at Richards. "Might be mistaken, but it looks like the goofball down the hall." Pickom looked into Richards eyes with a steady gaze. "So who are you, Dick Tracy?"

Richards grinned. "Nah, just trying to locate whoever rented the space at the back. Tried the building's owner, but it was like pissin' up a rope. Gave me some corporation to call. Went by their offices, guy wasn't there. But his name's all over the place - Wayne Generous. Guess he like's pictures of himself too. Half dozen on the walls, stuck up on the bulletin board an' everything.

"So I asked the receptionist if they were pictures of the boss? She said: Yeah. So I grabbed a couple, when she wasn't lookin'. Figured I might see the guy 'round town, ask him if he wanted to sub-lease the space.

"Course, when I get out to my car, and I look at 'em, I find out I copped one picture each of two different guys. Thought maybe you might know which was which."

Dusty nodded his head up and down. "Damn straight, don't miss nothing goin' by my door. Which is easy, cause he's the only one, and that's damn sight almost never. Strange dude, I'll tell you what. Definitely looks fruity to me, but hey," Dusty held up his hands palms outward. "Everybody's got to do their own thing, you know what I mean?"

#

Jim Richards cruised by Green Acres, the slope of the hill blocked his view to the employee parking lot, and he didn't want to hassle with the gate guard right at the moment. 14:30, she should be there. Maybe he was mistaken. Maybe her internship ran out, though he thought she had another week to go. Maybe her new lover took her someplace. *Maybe he'd better quit makin' himself crazy.*

He headed back to Brentwood, then cruised by the private school she planned to teach at in the coming year. The parking lot virtually empty. He did not see Misti's car in it.

Next, he headed out Old Hickory Road, then turned down the driveway. Pulled the Bronco into a visitor's spot, got out, walked across the driveway to her building. Up one flight of stairs to her front door.

Jim Richards knocked twice, then listened for the sound of approaching footsteps. Nothing, not even a radio came from within. He used his spring metal credit card to defeat the single cylinder door latch, surest sign Misti was not home because she always used the dead bolt.

He closed the door softly, listened for any sound that might indicate someone was in. Perhaps she was taking a nap, or not feeling well. Richards stepped forward. Just beyond the short entrance wall on the left, was a kitchen. He turned into it, looked around. There were dishes in the sink. A pot of re-warmed coffee on a cold burner. Judging from the condition of the residual food on the plates, she'd not been in the apartment for at least two days.

He took his time, moved through the apartment slowly, carefully. Where ever she was, she'd not planned on spending the night. After years together, he'd come to learn many of her habits. He found her make up kit on the vanity in the bathroom, its contents haphazardly placed about the sink. Her make up was never left behind when an overnight was contemplated, of that he was certain.

He went to her bedroom. The bed unmade. Dirty clothes tossed into an open hamper, some on the floor. He rolled aside one of the mirrored closet doors, found the overnight bag she always used for short trips, which reconfirmed his previous impression. By the time he'd completed his recon, he was certain she'd not planned to spend the night out. And equally certain she'd not returned even to change clothes.

These anomalies could be accounted for, he rationalized. She'd met someone, became so enthralled she'd failed to show up for work. Then failed to stop by for a change of clothes. Certainly within the realm of possibility, but highly improbable, not her style at all.

#

Jim Richards sat in his Bronco, thinking about the alternatives. He had no particular feeling one way or the other about Misti's welfare. She'd been changing almost before his eyes since they'd separated, divorced to be completely accurate. Interlocutory, but why split hairs.

So what the hell. If she wanted to spend two days with her latest flame with no change of underwear, what business was it of his? None, as a matter of fact. But the goddamn irritating thing about it was, he needed a little more information on Wayne Generette, before he sent his report in to the *mind readers* at the Fort.

The photos he'd taken were sitting on the passenger's seat. The one of the cinder block building was on top, it caught his eye. He stared at it for several seconds, what the hell was a building like that doing half hidden in a grove of trees? It wasn't a landscaper's barn. That stood to the right of the old mansion, its architecture in keeping with all the rest. And the cinder block structure was much too large to simply be a storage shed. Laundry facility? Possibly.

Jim Richards took a deep breath, let it out slowly. He stared out the front window of the Bronco at a small creek that meandered by the apartments. What the hell, he thought, one way or another, someone was going to have to get onto the grounds of Green Acres, and do some rooting around. See if Generette had foolishly stored evidence of his activities there. Elmo would probably want him to take a stab at it anyway. Jim Richards glanced down at the photo on the seat next to him. Maybe that was what it was all about. Maybe Wayne Generette operated out of the unidentified structure with the complete knowledge and approval of Allen Maxwell. Only one way to know for sure.

Jim Richards reached for the ignition key, then kicked the three-fifty-one over.

#

Lubakov glanced at his watch. "It's two-thirty in the afternoon, Wayne. You've been at this all night, and now nearly all day. And you still have nothing?"

Misti lay face up in the sensory deprivation tank, floating in a foot of salt water, warmed to the temperature of her body. Her eyes were open. She stared blankly at the ceiling as a corpse might, but she was not dead, at least not yet. A intravenous tube snaked from a plastic bag into her arm.

Wayne Generette looked over at Boris Lubakov, with eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. "You're wrong, Boris. I've obtained all she has to give, unfortunately it doesn't coincide with your preconceived notions. She's not partnering with Jim Richards. She's quite simply divorcing him, or rather J. Robert Bushman, aka Jimmy Ocean, because she believes he's a loser who worked at some menial job, putting in hours and hours of overtime for no apparent reason.

And she suspects their life together in the San Francisco bay area, such as it was, since he was gone most of the time, was a sham as well. That he most likely worked at some menial day job there, then played music in bars at night just to make enough to appear successful to her on those occasions when he came home claiming he was returning from a business trip. The move here exposed his charade. It's that simple."

Lubakov shook his head vehemently. "Ridiculous. J. Robert Bushman is Jim Richards, a contract field operative for CIA. He's clever, cunning, and extremely tenacious."

Generette sighed. "I'm not doubting your information, my friend. I'm simply telling you what she believes to be true, once you strip away all her polite, socially acceptable defenses. *And* she's never been involved in espionage."

Lubakov was unconvinced. "I don't believe a word of it, you've failed to give the level of medication needed to break her."

Wayne Generette shook his head. "You forget, Boris. I've used this pharmacological concoction on many people. The old. The infirm. Delved the secrets of their minds. Then used the information to assure we obtained every penny of their assets, before ending their miserable lives."

Boris Lubakov's mouth turned downward. "Maybe you've miscalculated with her, she's neither old, or infirm."

"Then where is her back up? No one's attempted to rescue her, Boris."

Lubakov closed his eyes for a moment, he really had no answer to Generette's question.

"All right, let's suppose for the sake of argument, you're right. What are we to do with her?" Lubakov asked. "I wanted her mostly for bait, the intelligence was only a bonus."

Generette smiled slowly. "When I've finished with her, she'll remember nothing. It will be as if her mind were a black board, and we have simply erased it. Then she'll be turned loose in Parthenon Park, wearing that flimsy little dress she had on yesterday.

"The winos, and derelicts, who haunt the park will have their way with her, for awhile perhaps. Or if she's lucky, she'll be found by the police, or some good citizen. It will soon be apparent she's completely lost her mind, fairly typical of drug addicts that hang out in that park.

"She'll become a ward of the state. They'll put her into restraints, and treat her as they would any other useless piece of life's flotsam. As her mind begins to return, the memories will be sporadic, incomprehensible to anyone but herself. The state will disbelieve her rantings, and medicate her to their convenience, which will of course deepen her paranoia, increase her frustration, and agitation. So the state will increase her medication, until she's fully cooperative from their point of view. After all, the limited time of their overworked staff does not allow for the resolution of lunatic delusions.

"Soon after, hastened by the compliance medication given, and a complete lack of emotional support, she will, in fact, become the paranoid schizophrenic they believe her to be. And remain institutionalized for the rest of her miserable life."

Lubakov frowned. "Why not just terminate her, and be done with it?"

"Oh but that would be no fun at all." Generette replied, a manic tone at the edge of his voice.

Lubakov shivered suddenly. "I was told by my superiors you were more dangerous than you seemed, now I understand."

Generette welcomed the acknowledgment of respect from his KGB contact, though he did not fail to see the loathing in the other man's eyes. "You know Boris, you should simply pay Mr. Richards a visit at home, then bring him to me before he suspects something has happened to her."



Lubakov shook his head. "There are certain protocols resident foreign agents must adhere to, invading the privacy of an opposition's home within their own country, is unacceptable. Jim Richards has been a member of the intelligence community too long for us to attack him openly, even if assassination were the option of choice, we would need to use a proxy. You see, once the protocol is broken, its open season for both sides. In the end, everyone loses more than they've gained. Home invasion is not an option. We must lure him to us, the way a spider snares a fly."

Generette smiled cynically. "You never cease to amaze me, Boris. They fed us all that same bullshit in G-2, Army Intelligence. I never believed a word of it."

"Well now you know." Lubakov sighed, then looked over at the sensory deprivation unit. "How long will it take to scramble her memory?"

Generette smiled, and tilted his head to one side. "Oh, another night should do it. It's simply a matter of turning up the drip a little, and leaving it there for a few hours. Then gradually tapering off." He raised one finger, and spoke in a conspiratorial tone of voice, as if he were imparting a great secret to a prized student. "The clincher is a few minutes of sub-fatal electric current, applied through the saline solution on which she floats."

He rubbed his hands together slowly. Hunched on the laboratory stool, in the semi-darkness, he looked, to Lubakov, to be the image of some large insect combing its antennae.

"It should all be over and done with by two A.M. tomorrow." Generette said. "Leaving plenty of time to get her delivered to the park. And then we can both wash our hands of the affair."

Lubakov shook his head skeptically. "The risk she might regain enough memory to pose a threat to us is too great to indulge your personal pleasure, Wayne. We'll wait until midnight tonight. If Jim Richards hasn't come into our web by then, kill her and be done with it."

#

Allen Maxwell and Raymond Harbinger rode in the back of Harbinger's Mercedes-Benz sedan. Walt Washington was at the wheel, as always. The big sedan turned into the driveway, then passed through the gates of Green Acres. It motored slowly along, coming to a stop directly in front of the steps to the Administration building.

Washington climbed painfully out of the driver's seat. The arthritis in his lower back was killing him tonight, probably because of the thunder storms forecast for later that evening. The distant thunder reminded him of cannon fire, which in turn reminded him of the wounds he'd sustained on behalf of Major Harbinger, so many years before. The memory reinforced by the arthritic pain, a sort of invisible battle souvenir. He opened the left rear door for Mr. Harbinger. By the time he'd hobbled around to the other side, Allen Maxwell was already out. The two Caring First executives climbed the wide front steps, pausing for a moment at the top, before continuing inside.

The first floor of the mansion was set up to house the administrative offices. There was an Admittance counter in the entrance hall. To the right, Human Resources and Accounting. To the left was Medical Administration, where therapists and nurses had their offices, as well as, the cubicles assigned to the University of Tennessee Clinical Depression Study.

Lights on the main floor were turned down low. There was no one in attendance at the counter, it was not staffed after hours. Wayne Generette ran a bare bones crew at night. Each residential building had three caregivers on duty to cover twenty residents from ten in the evening until six in the morning when the morning shift of eight arrived. Eight were cut to six at two in the afternoon.

At night there was one skilled nurse on duty, who rotated from building to building, administering injections and medications as needed. When someone passed away, as often happened at night, there was a Caring First doctor on call to handle the formality of a death certificate.

In addition to the care staff, there were two security guards day and night. One in the shack at the entrance, the other roaming the grounds. They rotated duties every hour, keeping in touch via transceiver.

Inside the concrete block building, a bank of videos recorded the events monitored by the exterior and interior cameras. However, unlike Monty Regadet's system, the tapes were erased at the end of each week, unless an event was reported for which retention of video was necessary for future review and documentation.

Maxwell glanced up at a camera positioned high on the wall to the left of the counter. He was surprised Wayne Generette was not there to greet them, as he'd called ahead to let him know they were coming out, and to make the appropriate arrangements. It was unlike Wayne not to be there when they arrived, usually he'd greet them outside.

A wide sweeping stair case flowed down from an interior landing on the second floor. It ended just behind the Admittance counter. Passage ways on

either side of the stairs ran to the back of the house, where the employee lounge and a commercial kitchen were located.

The rear porch had been fully enclosed as a dinning room that over looked the manicured grounds on the backside of the building, for those residents able to make the trek to communal meals. Those who could not had the option of ordering from a *room service* menu.

Allen Maxwell and Raymond Harbinger walked around the right hand end of the Admittance counter, then climbed the stairs to the second floor. To the left, a hallway ran back to interview rooms where families could sit comfortably, and chat with Green Acres personnel about their loved ones, or about the facility itself, should they be in the process of choosing one for themselves or a family member. To the right, the hallway led to private rooms, once the mansion's bedrooms.

As the two Caring First executives reached the second floor landing, they heard the screen door at the rear of the house slam shut. Soon, Wayne Generette appeared at the base of the stairway. He looked towards the front door, then turned and gazed up the stairway.

"Up here Wayne," Maxwell said. Just as the Green Acres Director looked in their direction.

Generette waved in a light hearted manner. "Hello there Mr. Maxwell, and Mr. Harbinger." He began to climb the stairs, springing from one step to the next. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here to greet you properly when you drove up." He was nearly up to their level. "I've been working on a little project out in the annex. My *dungeon* as the staff likes to call it." He gained the landing, stepped past the two older men, then turned to face them as a master of ceremonies might.

Wayne Generette took on the air of a host, an owner of a palatial estate escorting his guests to the evening's entertainment. He stood before them, posture very correct, one heel against the instep of his other shoe. His left hand thrust out, palm turned upward, fingers pointing in the direction of the private rooms down the hall.

"This way Mr. Harbinger. I have made all the arrangements. But I'm afraid I must pull dear Allen away from you for just a bit this evening, as a rather difficult situation has come up." And then his voice dropped a tone or two, as if what he had to say was meant only for Raymond Harbinger's ears. "Then again, perhaps you'll find our absence more suitable to your *needs* this evening."

Harbinger face flushed with excitement, and he grinned broadly from ear to ear. "Yes, perhaps you're right."

As Harbinger walked down the hallway towards a room with which he was only too familiar, Generette and Maxwell shared a knowing look.

#

Jim Richards parked the Bronco down one of the side streets, well out of site of the Green Acres grounds. He waited for several minutes inside the cab, allowing his night vision to fully develop. He wore black jeans. Black high top tennis shoes, the white rubber borders painted black. A black turtle neck.

He pulled a black Lycra hood, with one long horizontal slit through which to see, and a breath hole for his mouth, over his head and face. Then slipped out of the Bronco, having earlier yanked the fuse for the interior lights. As silent as an owl in flight, he crossed the road that paralleled the western edge of the Green Acres property, then slipped over the kudzu covered wall.

He hunkered next to a magnolia tree, glanced at the stainless steel dive watch strapped to the inside of his wrist, 20:45. He planned to hug the perimeter, circumnavigating the property until he reached a point that would allow him to proceed directly to the concrete building, under cover of the woods behind the residential complex.

#

A second shadowy figure slipped over the kudzu covered wall, not far from where Jim Richards had previously come over. The dark shape moved forward into the shadow of another magnolia tree. As soon as the first figure settled into position, another slipped over the wall as well. It did not join its team mate, rather it turned to follow the route Jim Richards had taken.

#

Jim Richards hunkered down under the shadows of the cypress grove that grew on the backside of the property. He sat perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the night - cicadas, crickets, and frogs. Off in the distance a Lark sang its ever changing song.

Richards glanced at his watch. 21:30. It had taken him nearly an hour to traverse a few hundred feet, one careful step at a time. The cameras he'd noted in the photographs, were undoubtedly adequate in daylight. But at night, they were totally dependent upon movement, a shadow moving across deeper shadows, to create an image that would draw the attention of whoever was assigned the duty of watching the monitors. Of course, the flood lit areas around the residences, and

the Administration building, would allow direct viewing of even the most stealthy intruder.

The concrete block building had only minimum illumination, three incandescent lights. One at each end, and one incongruously mounted in a tree midway between the building and the old mansion.

Jim Richards was now within one hundred feet of his objective. This would be the most critical hundred feet of the entire night, because it was likely to be the most carefully monitored. Yet with luck, and skill, he'd reach the building before twenty-three hundred. Earlier he'd seen Wayne Generette leave, and cross the lawn to the mansion. When the door to the block building had opened, only darkness flowed out. It did not appear anyone was on duty inside.

He'd come onto the property with virtually no pre-entry reconnaissance, and absolutely no back-up. His plan was to move forward very slowly, leaving a route of escape along every inch of his initial approach, one of several reasons he'd chosen to follow the perimeter.

Each step forward was both a step closer to his goal, and a modicum of additional reconnaissance. If, at any point along the way, he felt the task too difficult, the goal too well guarded, he was free to withdraw. After all it was an assignment he'd given himself, there were no lives at stake. It was a simple mission of information gathering.

He'd come onto the property armed with only a Gerber boot knife, clipped inside his waist band at the hollow of his back, and though its five inch blade was razor sharp on both sides of its stiletto point, it was no substitute for his forty-five autoloader. He'd made the decision to insert with minimal weaponry, for the simple reason he could not be certain he'd be successful at evading detection. If he were caught, and subsequently turned over to the police, he'd face nothing more than trespassing. And since he had no prior record, he'd get off with a slap on the wrist. On the other hand, caught with a loaded firearm, well that was another issue entirely.

Jim Richards shook his head and smiled cynically to himself, the problem with the Caring First assignment from the beginning was the way it seemed to gradually escalate into greater, and greater exposure. With no line to delineate the boundary between simple observation, and the need for deadly force.

Who'd have expected a terrorist attack on the fifth floor of a corporate office in Nashville, Tennessee? And at the outset of his mission, who could have anticipated he'd need to use covert insertion techniques to penetrate the grounds of a long term care facility designed to house the infirm and elderly.

#

Raymond Harbinger was childishy proud of himself for managing to sustain an erection for nearly thirty-five minutes. But who was he kidding, he thought, at his age sustaining an erection wasn't all that difficult, it was finishing up that always proved a challenge. In his younger days he'd come, two, sometimes three times in one session, with only a few minutes T and T, tongue and tits, in between to allow his semen reservoirs to recharge.

Now he was lucky if he got off once. He had Sylvia bent forward face down on the old four poster bed, one hand on the nape of her neck to keep her where he wanted her. The other reaching around to grasp one of her ample breasts, while he stroked his member in and out.

He knew exactly where to place the tip of his penis to give her wave after wave of pleasure. She moaned with every near withdrawal, and gasped with every thrust, though sometimes he could not hear her over his own involuntary grunts. Now he felt the waves of tension building within himself, if he could only sustain his concentration long enough to feel the exquisite spasms of orgasm.

#

Allen Maxwell sat in an upholstered arm chair, the back of his head pressed into the chair's cushioned backrest. His neck muscles rigid, the sinews standing out like knotted ropes. His eyes bulged with pleasure and excitement, as he stared at the pornographic action not more than ten feet away on the other side of a one way mirror. He was amazed at how long Raymond Harbinger had been balling Sylvia, and how many positions he'd used during the act.

Maxwell's legs were thrust out in front of him, his shoes kicked off, toes curling and uncurling involuntarily. His slacks down around his knees. Wayne Generette sat beside him, stroking Maxwell's swollen member, his hands slathered in warm coconut oil. He also watched the action on the other side of the mirror, and timed the up and down motion to Harbinger's thrusts. The pressure of his fingers subtly varied to assure Maxwell repeatedly approached orgasm but failed to go over the top.

Maxwell groaned softly, and begged Wayne to finish the job, while Wayne soothed him with words of encouragement spoken softly in his ear, all the while reminding him how powerful and fulfilling his ejaculation would be, if he delayed it until the very last moment.

Generette's other hand was deep inside his own pants, and he wondered if he dared come as well, when Maxie could take no more. Even as he contemplated his own pleasure, he heard the crackle of a transceiver's transmit

button clicked twice, through an ear piece connected by a wire that ran down the inside of his shirt to a receiver at the small of his back. It was a signal agreed to by the watchers Boris Lubakov had assigned him, indicating an intruder.

Damn, he thought, could the timing have been any worse?

#

Jim Richards crossed the narrow space between a group of cypress trees and the door to the block building. He had no way to know if the door was alarmed, but that was just another risk in a night of risky business. He tried the door knob, it turned easily in his hand. This would be his last opportunity to withdraw from his self imposed mission. Once inside, he'd cross the line from simple trespassing to intrusion. The door opened effortlessly, he checked its edges for alarm contacts, found none, then stepped inside.

He closed the door, locked it. The ploy would only momentarily delay Wayne Generette, should he return. But it would hopefully provide a moment or two of warning. Enough to close whatever drawer or closet, he might be perusing, and prepare some sort of appropriate greeting.

He stood perfectly still, listening for the sound of anyone inside. The only thing he heard, was the soft hum of an electric motor vaguely reminiscent of an aquarium pump. He remained immobile for several moments, using his eyes to scan the darkness, searching for the tell tale red diode that signified the presence of an infrared security alarm. He found none.

He expected the interior to be pitch dark, and it was nearly so. However, some light reflected through a window. Spill-over from the lights outside. He was at the end of a long hallway, with doors that apparently led to rooms on the right. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he noted a door ajar, midway down the hall. A cold, dim blue light seemed to emanate from the room, along with the hum he'd noted earlier.

He wondered if someone might be at work in the room. And was also curious to learn the origin of the light. And though he needed to look into each room along the hallway, he thought it prudent to first determine if perhaps there was someone else inside the building.

#

As Jim Richards entered the building, a shadow deeper than the shadows created by the night and the trees, seemed to arise out of the ground, not far from where he'd passed through the grove of trees on his route to the block building. The shadow moved to the edge of the tree line, as it crossed the space to the

corner of the building, a second shadow arose from the ground, and scurried to edge of the tree line to act as a back up.

#

Jim Richards began a slow, steady pace down the darkened hallway. He moved with precise stealth, cat like, feeling the flooring with the ball of each foot, then gradually transferring his weight from one foot to the other. As he approached the door, a feeling of deja vu seemed to come over him, and he remembered the dream he'd experienced several times.

He paused, as if standing in the hallway and peeking through the space between the door and the door-jam would be all that was required of him. He felt the same trepidation and anxiety that had always accompanied the dream.

He slipped his hand around the hollow of his waist until he grasped the haft of the knife he was carrying, ready to draw it if necessary. With his other hand he slowly swung the door open, until he was sure it was in contact with its stop. He pressed his back against the facing, leaned back, felt the door handle contact the wall under the pressure of his effort, thus assuring there was no one hiding behind.

The light inside the room was very dim, yet with his night vision fully adjusted, it seemed quite satisfactory to him. He was easily able to see and identify the room's contents. He took a small step further in. To his left, a laboratory work surface with a sink midway down from the door. In the center of the room, a black cylindrical object that reminded him of a single person recompression chamber, except it appeared to have no pressure door at its end, nor was it made of steel. In fact, the more he looked at it, the more it reminded him of a sarcophagus.

The dim light emanated from diodes associated with electronic instrumentation. And although these sources were of several colors, the blue squiggly lines of an oscilloscope were by far the brightest element in the room.

Wires ran from the equipment to the object in the center of the room. Two tubes ran from what appeared to be a water softener connected to the warm water line at the sink. An IV stood next to the object, its tube snaked down into the cylinder.

Jim Richards moved closer, as he did so he could see the lid was not solid as he'd originally thought. There appeared to be a window cut into the top, and it was open. As he drew ever nearer, a chill feeling of dread came over him, and he silently chastised himself for allowing childish imagination to affect his perception.



Visions of some shriveled mummy, alive and waiting for him to come with in its grasp flashed across his mind. He found himself involuntarily approaching the object in a circuitous manner, actually delaying an almost impossibly slow approach even further. He closed the last three feet, to the point where he would be able to peer through the open window in the lid, to see with his own eyes exactly who, or what was inside.

As Jim Richards covered the last few inches necessary to view the interior, he found his vision focused on the lid so intently it was as if he were a film camera gliding in for a tight shot, the edge of the window appeared to be the side of a vast chasm, over which the viewer was about to peer.

He knew he should pause for a moment. Gather his thoughts. Assure his *six* was covered. Had he heard the door open at the end of the hall? Yet, he could not pause, not now, it was as if he were hypnotically drawn to discover the object's contents, and nothing else in the world mattered in the slightest. Not his life. Not the sunrise to come tomorrow morning. Not even the self imposed mission that had brought him to this unanticipated juncture.

At last the edge of the window, which had so perfectly obscured his vision, passed below his point of view. Jim Richards froze in his tracks. His eyes flew open wide, as if he'd been struck in the pit of his stomach by a blow so forceful it had the power to stop his heart. And then he gasped. He felt blood pounding in his ears. He shook his head violently, hoping the involuntary spasm would clear his mind of the vision. But as the full realization hit his consciousness, he felt a level of despair and anguish beyond any emotion he'd ever experienced.

Misti lay on her back, apparently on the floor of the casket. Yet when he looked more closely, he saw she was floating in a few inches of water. Her hair drifting to each side of her beautiful face, which bore no expression. Not of pain, or pleasure. Nor fear. Nor expectation. Her eyes were open, unblinking. There was not the slightest hint of life within.

Jim Richards raised his eyes to the IV bag that hung from the stand adjacent to the coffin. He could not read the words printed upon the vinyl bag, nor see the chemical name of the fluid contained within, but there was no doubt in his mind, she was in the final stage of embalming. Which would account for the sound of the pump.

He staggered backward, away from the object until his buttocks made contact with the edge of a table that stood along the far wall of the room. He reached up, and pulled the Lycra hood off of his head, then let it fall to the floor. Heard his own voice involuntarily escape his lips, "Oh no... Oh no."

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Not quite what you expected to find, now is it Mr. Richards?" Generette stood at the entrance to the room, one shoulder leaning casually against the door jam. A thirty-eight caliber, snub nose, revolver waist level in his right hand.

Jim Richards seemed not to hear him, his head slightly bowed, shoulders sagging. He stared blankly at the obscene cylinder that held Misti.

Generette stepped into the room, then eased to the left placing the sensory deprivation unit between himself and Jim Richards. "She's not dead you know?"

Richards' head snapped up, he blinked away the tears that had formed at the corners of his eyes.

Generette grinned maliciously. "Not yet at least." He began moving again, inching slowly around the end of the cylinder where Misti's head rested.

Richards followed the movement, the way a cat watches a bird hop across a lawn. He pushed himself away from the table, and swiveled his whole body towards the approaching figure.

"Easy now. " Generette said, as he raised the thirty-eight, pointing its ugly snout directly at the center of Jim Richards' chest. "Don't make me shoot. It might due more than simply end your miserable life." He made a gesture with his head towards Misti. "She's in quite a delicate situation you know? A sudden noise, a flash of light, might be all it takes to push her over the edge. Besides, you don't think I stumbled in here alone do you? We've been expecting you. Though frankly I'd about given up hope." He smiled. "But here you are at last," he said in a lilting voice.

"Make no mistake," Generette voice returned to its normal tone. "My back-up is just outside, making a quick phone call to someone who very much wants to meet you."

"Why are you doing this?" Richards asked gesturing towards Misti. "What did she ever do to you?"

Generette shrugged. "As it turns out, nothing. But we didn't know that at the beginning. And it was prudent to assume she was working with you."

Generette shook his head sadly. "It's really quite unfair, what you did. You know? Dragging her into this whole mess, and not even having the courtesy of warning her that if she hung around you long enough, she'd probably forfeit her life."

Jim Richards tensed his body, prepared to spring the moment Generette came within range. "You son of bitch!" He spat out the words. "If you knew of my presence all along, why not just deal with me? Why drag an innocent into this?"

A look of admonishment came over Generette's face. "No, no, no. Don't try and throw the blame on me, Mr. Richards. This is your own doing, using your wife as the vanguard of your little penetration scheme." He scowled at Richards. "Whose brilliant idea was that, by the way? Surely you didn't think it up all by yourself. Surely you don't think it was only coincidental her first job in Nashville was at Caring First? Oh, how easily we are fooled." He chuckled derisively.

"My silly boy, it must have been a set up from day one. Even I could glean that from just the limited conversation she and I had today. I mean, do you know how many people apply to Caring First for a job every day? Why it's the most sought after place to work in Nashville. Wonderful benefits, nice environment,...caring people. Well at least the name would imply that, now wouldn't it?

"Of course, she wasn't aware of our conversation. Wasn't aware how easily her slightest musings could be interpreted. But then that's the nature of the drug, anything and everything imagined, or known, just slips right on out. A sort of cerebral suppository." He rounded the end of the cylinder, and stood not more than seven feet from Jim Richards.

Richards relaxed a little, hoping the gesture would make Generette a little less wary, lull him into believing he was in full control of the situation. "I suppose it could have been a set up, as you say." Richards said, a hint of cynicism in his voice. "Wouldn't be the first time. But that's water under the bridge, now. Your revelation does tend to make me want to cooperate." He sighed, and shook his head. "What is it you want from me?"

Generette inched a little closer. "Oh just a little information, that's all."

Richards leaned back against the table, resting both hands on its edge. Giving the impression he was acquiescing, while at the same time placing his right hand a little closer to the knife at the small of his back. "I'll tell you what," he said. "You let Misti go. And I'll give you everything you want."

Generette smiled sadistically. "You poor boy, you still don't realize the predicament you're in, do you? Of course, you'll tell me everything I want to

know. That's a given, whether I let the silly twit go, or not. Who do you think you're dealing with? Some rag tag roust about, the type you usually go up against."

"I wasn't implying..." Richards began.

"Oh, shut up," Generette cut him off. "I'll do the talking." He raised the gun, pointed it menacingly at Jim Richards' face. "This isn't a solo deal here, you piece of shit. You've walked into a carefully prepared trap." He stepped a little closer, then lowered the gun back to waist level. "Though I must say if you'd managed to show up a little sooner, your ol' lady here would be in whole lot better shape." He shook his head slowly.

"Oh but I *forgot*, she wasn't actually working with you. They set her up without your knowledge, and you just happened to drop by in the middle of the night to pay a *social* call." Generette laughed, an odd high pitched giggle.

He looked at Jim Richards, his eyes bright, excited by the ease with which he'd snared him. "Okay, let's just pretend she wasn't your partner, willing or otherwise. And she wasn't the reason you showed up." He raised both eyebrows for emphasis. "So what was your reason?"

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "You were the relay for Nelson Banderhof's data. The end recipient, Allen Maxwell." He shrugged his shoulders, and shifted position slightly. "I put two and two together, then came to see what sort of incriminating evidence I might find in your office. But I never expected ..." He looked sadly at the sarcophagus.

Generette nodded his head. "Makes sense, as far as it goes, which isn't nearly far enough. What makes you so sure Allen's my client?"

Richards frowned. "I don't follow you. If Maxwell isn't the recipient. Who is?"

Generette giggled again. "You really haven't a clue, have you?"

Jim Richards shook his head, shifted his weight, and let his arm slide behind his body until he felt the handle of the Gerber knife cold against the skin on the back of his hand.

"Tell me, Wayne. What's in this for you? Are you working for Caring First's competition?"

"You might say that," Generette replied. Then added, "money... always money." The look on his face, sarcastic mockery, changed to deadly serious. "Revenge too." Then in a softer voice. "Revenge mostly."

Jim Richards changed his expression from one of anger, to sympathy. Softened his voice. "They hurt your feelings, Wayne. Embarrassed you? Tell me about it."

He looked warily at Jim Richards for several seconds, gave no reply.

"Who hurt you, Wayne?" Richards asked softly.

Generette sighed. "I had an Army career. Loved the uniform, the discipline, all those virile men." He giggled again. "From the time I was a little boy, really. Military school. Then on to West Point.

"Commissioned in 1972, assigned to G2 Intelligence. That's where I first met Allen Maxwell. Intelligence Medical Unit, Biological Warfare. We were discreet, Allen and I." He sighed heavily.

"But then I was transferred, ended up under General Francis Wright. He hated *weenie washers* as he called those of us who were gay. And sexual deviates, which in his book was anyone who enjoyed sex in any position other than the missionary with their wife."

Generette shrugged. "I was careful. But there were rumors. Always are. You know how that goes." He was silent for a moment. "Then one day, General Wright called me into his office, after I returned from two weeks leave. Said I'd been passed over for a spot at the Pentagon.

"When I asked why, he pulled out some eight by tens, shoved them across the desk at me."

Generette's countenance went from sad, to vengeful in a heartbeat. "I couldn't believe my eyes. The shit. Only way he could have obtained those photos, was if he'd had a camera mounted over my bed."

Generette took his eyes off Richards for a moment, glanced up at the ceiling. His face growing more distorted as he remembered the moment.

Jim Richards withdrew the knife from its sheath.

Generette looked back at Richards. "I resigned my commission on the spot, intent on suing the United States Army for invasion of privacy, harassment, and any other charge I thought I could make stick. Of course, that's impossible

once you've signed the Official Secrets Act, as you well know. Uncle Shithead owns you lock, stock, and barrel, as my first KGB contact explained. Then he explained another way I might get even."

Jim Richards heard the door open at the end of the hallway. Generette, lulled by their conversation, instinctively looked toward the sound, the way anyone would under normal circumstances. "That'll be Boris, " he said conversationally. "He'll want to talk..."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sudden movement Jim Richards made, pushing away from the table with both hands. He pulled the trigger on the pistol once. The muzzle blast momentarily lit the room, like a camera's strobe.

But when Generette had looked away, he'd unconsciously shifted the barrel of his gun off target. The bullet nicked the edge of Richards' shirt, level with his gut then slammed harmlessly into the wall behind.

In one smooth movement, Jim Richards clamped his left hand over the top of the thirty-eight snub nose, making certain his third and fourth fingers slipped behind the hammer, preventing a second discharge. His right had swung upward in a vicious arc, burying the blade of his knife up to its hilt in Generette's solar plexus.

Generette grunted, his eyes bulged wide, as if he'd been startled by some unexpected sight beyond his comprehension. Jim Richards rocked the blade left and right, in an attempt to cut the aorta, but could not be certain the depth of penetration was sufficient.

Generette tried to pull the pistol from Richards' grasp, pulling the trigger repeatedly. Richards could feel the force of the hammer against his fingers. In their struggle, the two men bumped into the black cylinder in which Misti lay, nearly knocking it over.

Jim Richards swung Generette around, away from the casket. He pulled back on the knife as hard as he could, felt it pull away accompanied by a sucking sound, and another groan.

Richards raised the knife, his elbow parallel with the floor. Then thrust it forward into Generette's left eye. The scream that accompanied his thrust nearly deafened him. Still gripping the pistol with his left hand, he slammed the palm of his right into the end of the knife's handle driving the entire blade, and half of the handle completely through the eye socket. Generette let out a deep guttural moan as he crumpled to the floor, releasing his grip on the pistol.

Jim Richards right hand dropped to his left, he transferred the gun to his shooting hand, and pivoted towards the door. Too late. The man he'd heard come through the front door earlier, was upon him.

Jim Richards' out stretched arm had not yet completed the arc required to bring the target within his sight picture. He felt a powerful hand clamp over his own preventing him from discharging the weapon. He expected at any moment to feel the searing burn of a bullet passing through his body, or perhaps the cold, stinging cut of a combat knife skewering him just as he'd dispatched Generette.

"Easy, Jim. It's me Vince. Vince Morris."

Jim Richards found himself standing inches away from a stocky man, about five foot ten in height. He was dressed entirely in black, wearing a Lycra hood with an eye slit identical to the one Richards had worn earlier. The man reached up, and pulled his hood off. Jim Richards could not believe his eyes. His whole body began to shake as the rush of adrenaline sought a route of escape.

Vince Morris asked: "What the hell's going on here, Jim?"

#

Richards disengaged himself from Vinnie's grip. "We've got to help Misti." He reached towards the cut off valve on the IV tube, intent on stopping the flow of whatever was going into her veins. Again, his wrist was caught in a powerful grip, as Vince Morris stopped the motion of his arm, and eased him back against the lab table, nearly stumbling over Generette's twitching body in the process.

"Whoa, easy there," Vince said. "We don't know what they're pumping into her. Pulling the plug suddenly may not be the best thing to do." He pressed himself against Richards' chest until he relaxed.

Jim Richards looked like he was in a daze, unable to comprehend what was going on about him. Slowly, his countenance began to change back to its normal alert appearance. Vince watched him closely, ready to intervene again if he made a sudden move. Gradually Richards came back to full reality, he looked steadily at Morris. "What are *you* doing here?"

Vince shook his head, irritated with Richards. "You *solo* guys take too many chances. You especially." He sighed, and stepped away, then turned his head to look over at Misti. "Then suddenly put his hand to his right ear, pressing the ear piece of his comm system a little tighter into his ear. He then responded to the transmit from Bob Spencer, who was outside the building. "Yes we're secure

here. All right, but we've got a problem with an innocent, we're gonna need an evac."

He turned to look at Richards, then answered the questioning look in his eyes. "We've been surveiling Raymond Harbinger for quite some time. Our orders were to make no contact with you unless there was a direct interface with our assignment. Don't ask me why, 'cause I've no idea."

Richards nodded his head. "Tonight...?"

"Coincidence. Frank Prescott's tailing Maxwell. Spence, and I, leap frogging the vehicle tail. Harbinger and Maxwell arrived together. Prescott went over the wall near the main gate, watched them enter the big house. Spence and I came around on the flank. We noticed your Bronco over on Morningside, saw you go over the wall.

"Your friend here," he nodded towards Generette's body. "Had two guys outside with silenced autoloaders backing him up. They won't be a problem anymore either." He turned back towards Misti. "Let's take a look at what we've got here."

Vince Morris pulled a red filtered mini-light from a pocket in the black jump suit he wore over his street wear. He shined it on the IV bag, then read the label. "Okay, we've got a combination sedative and hallucinogenic going here. Looks like an eight hour bag with about three left to go."

Richards listened intently to Vince, who was also a SEAL EMT - Emergency Medical Technician - having replaced Dave Wilcox in that position. Though the entire team knew battle first aid, Vince, like Dave, had been through pre-med before joining the teams; figured on going back to school one day when he was tired of jumping out of perfectly good aircraft, and deploying from warm and cozy submarines.

"Just as well you didn't shut it off, this stuff needs to be tapered." He thought for a moment. "We've got to get her to a hospital within an hour." He stepped away from the black cylinder, then spoke into his mouth piece. "How's it looking out there?" He listened to the reply. "All right, we'll do the prep work here."

Vince Morris looked over at Richards, who'd backed away from the cylinder also, and was again leaning against the table. "All right, we're in good shape. Bob's found the master cable to the camera system, where it enters this building. As soon as we're ready in here, he'll cut the breakers, and we'll move Misti out.



"Company's got *beaucoup* medical assets in Nashville, training at Caring First facilities."

Richards nodded in the direction of the black cylinder. "What have they done to her?"

Vince looked at Misti lying catatonic in the box, then chose his words carefully. "Sensory deprivation interrogation, enhanced by hallucinogenic drugs. Fortunate actually, usually leaves a hell of a hangover but no lasting damage. She should be fine, providing we can get her into a facility for the *rebirth*, as they call it. Sort of a slow detox protocol, takes a day or so."

Vince looked around the room, gathering his thoughts. "We'll drain the water off, then get her covered with a blanket, towel whatever we can find. As soon as we're ready, we'll retrace our steps around the perimeter. Then you'll park the Bronco over by the wall. We'll slip her in the back. You transport her over to Parkview Hospital. Spence will make the necessary calls while you're in transit. Just drive right up to the emergency entrance, a Company physician will be waiting for you."

"What about Maxwell, Harbinger?"

"Sooner, or later, they'll leave. Hopefully, they're not planning to come on down and join the party..." Vince lifted his hand to his ear piece. Then spoke into the microphone. "Roger that, we'll be ready in five." He spoke to Richards. "Looks like it's gonna be sooner. Frank reports they're coming out of the mansion now. Let's get rolling. Soon as you're on your way, Spence and I will come back to clean things up, see what we can learn. You take care of Misti."

"We'll make contact tomorrow, next day at the latest. Meantime, you'd better get a hold of Ty Harding. Clearly tonight's events will alter the game plan."

Jim Richards smiled cynically, his sense of irony returning after his anxiety was relieved by Vince's prognosis of Misti's full recovery. "I didn't know there was one."

Vince chuckled. "Oh yeah, definitely. It's just that it changes from moment to moment."

#

Boris Lubakov waited impatiently next to the telephone in his room at the Days Inn, on the east side of Nashville. He'd tried to read a book, but found he couldn't concentrate. Why hadn't Generette called? He switched on the television, and tuned in Johnny Carson, just to have something to watch.

He looked at his watch for the hundredth time that evening, 12:30 A.M.. His thoughts were interrupted by the jarring ring of the telephone, which sat on a night stand affixed to the bed's headboard. Lubakov switched off the television, then picked up the receiver on the third ring. A code word was spoken into his ear. He felt the blood drain from his face, as he listened to the terse report. Then the caller clicked off at the other end of the line.

He looked around the room, there was nothing he needed. He shut off the lights. Stepped over to the window, barely moving the curtain aside to peer into the night. The view was limited, and he cursed himself for not choosing a room that had a more expansive view, or at least a second route of escape. He stood at the window for several moments, thinking about what he must do. Assuming he made it to his rental car in the hotel's lot without being arrested, he'd need to make his way back to the Russian embassy, any embassy would do, but New York or Washington, D.C. were the closest. Should he fly, or drive? Public transportation would be watched, he'd drive.

Lubakov let the window curtain fall shut. All right then, he'd need to change license plates; no problem there, as several other cars were parked in the hotel's lot. Get to Highway 40, then head east. With any luck at all, he'd be at the Embassy in Washington, D.C. within thirty-six hours.

He'd made a terrible mistake, there'd been no operational fixation as he'd thought. Fortunately, he'd had the foresight to post a third watcher at Green Acres with orders not to engage the enemy if things somehow turned out other than expected.

He shook his head. He'd read Jim Richards' dossier. Knew he was not to be underestimated, but even the analysts back in Moscow had not foreseen the possibility he'd use his own wife as a *goat*, my God. Yet by doing so, he'd entrapped and neutralized two of KGB's best resident field operatives. And now, he apparently had Wayne Generette. There was no doubt in Boris Lubakov's mind, that Jim Richards would soon have Wayne singing like a bird.

#

Just as Boris Lubakov stepped from his motel room in Nashville, Steve Worthington, transitioned from Interstate 85, to Interstate 95 south of Richmond, Virginia, also on his way to the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C..

He'd always known his cover might come to an abrupt end, but as the years had slipped by uneventfully, the possibility of such a turn of events seemed more, and more, remote. Still he was surprised by the bitterness he now felt towards Victor Koroleva, whom he blamed for the bad luck that placed him on

the road fleeing for his life, or at least his freedom. Had Koroleva not insinuated David Shane into his operation, everything would have continued as safe and smooth, as ever.

Shane had been arrested. Then Worthington had been contacted by Koroleva, and told to prepare himself for a possible emergency departure. But then he'd heard nothing more, had begun to relax. After all, he'd told himself, one could not be a spy in a foreign country, even one as ridiculously open as the United States, without occasionally having a klong, or two, just to get the heart started.

Steve Worthington had not learned the reason for Shane's arrest, not that it would have made any difference. Then investigators had shown up at Happy Times Convalescent, with a search warrant. Had asked to look at the facility's files. His wife had been outraged, called their attorney, but there was nothing he could do, the warrant was legal.

As soon as they'd left, Worthington called Koroleva, and was told to take emergency leave without delay. The reason obvious. Once FBI scrutiny began, it was only a matter of time until they discovered holes in his manuscripted background. Then the coincidence of David Shane's employment, would suddenly be recognized as no coincidence at all.

He'd kissed his wife good-bye, saying he needed to make an emergency trip north. It never rains but pours, he'd said in reference to the FBI visit, and the sudden emergency.

But now as he drove relentlessly through the night towards a rendezvous with Koroleva, and ultimately a one way trip back to Russia, he realized how accustomed he'd become to life in the United States, and how bitter his leaving would really be.

Yet there was no other course of action. To throw himself upon the mercy of U.S. Intelligence would only result in his death at the hands of Soviet agents, sooner or later. He was not a defector, not a political refugee seeking asylum, but a spy who'd grown so accustomed to an easy life that being sent home was almost as bad as going to prison.

Worthington sighed. Well not quite. And then his mind began to work on ways in which he might one day return. Not to his wife, which he could always replace, but to another assignment in the United States. He simply needed to bide his time, and play the role of a good intelligence operative. Another opportunity would come, after all he knew the ground, and was very experienced.

Walt Washington guided the Mercedes sedan through the gates of Green Acres, nodding to the guard at the entrance.

The guard made a notation on an entry-exit log. Then turned to step back inside the guard shack, as he did this, the bank of monitor screens caught his eye. They'd all gone blank. Damn he thought, now what the hell has happened. He looked around outside, then back at the hooded lamp over his work surface. Not a power outage he concluded.

He reached for the transceiver that rested in a square holster at his hip. "Base to two, do you read?"

The receiver belched a packet of static. Then his partner's voice came over the speaker. "Two to base, what can I do for you? Over."

"Goddamn monitors have crapped out all of a sudden."

"You're kiddin? All at once?"

The guard nodded his head as he spoke, gesturing the way he would if the person to whom he was speaking was standing right in front of him. "Damn straight. Whole bank's darker than Aunt Jemima's butt."

"Terrific, must be a problem down at the Annex. I'll make my way over there, and see what I can find."

"Ten-four. Base out."

The guard in the shack shook his head, then went back to reading the sports section of the Tennessean, which lay spread out on the work surface.

#

Jim Richards and Vince Morris gently slid Misti's comatose body into the back of the Bronco. Vince glanced at his watch. "Parkview's about twenty minutes from here, you know how to find it?"

"Yes."

Vince nodded his head once. "Good. Dr. Sather Friendly will meet you at the emergency entrance, just drive right up where the ambulances go." He slapped Richards on the shoulder. "Get going. We'll be in touch."

#

The guard, on patrol around Green Acres, ambled along the pathway towards the Annex building, the beam of his flash light swinging from one side to the other as he moved along the poorly lit path that ran from the back of the old mansion. He wasn't too concerned about the loss of video, it had happened before. Usually nothing more than blown circuit breakers.

The humidity was thick as cotton wool, and he was sweating like a stuffed pig in an *imu* by the time he reached the door of the Annex. Thunder still rumbled, now and then, off in the distance. He almost wished it would go ahead and rain, nothing worse than the stifling air just before a thunder storm comes through. Of course, they'd probably lose power for sure, making his entire trip down to the Annex a complete waste of time.

He eased the door open at the end of the building, then snaked his hand around to flip on the lights. His fingers found the switch, and popped it upward, nothing. Well, shit, he thought to himself, whole damn panel's off. No wonder the cameras don't work.

He swung the door open, then aimed his light down the hallway. It was empty. He stepped inside, leaving the door open, and proceeded down the hall towards the breaker panel mounted on the wall at the far end.

As he passed one of the rooms to his right, the edge of his flashlight beam nicked something on the floor, caught his attention, tickled his mind as being out of place. He swung the light right, and shined it into the room. The sight it revealed took his breath away. "Oh, sweet Jesus." He said out loud.

The bodies lay on the floor next to each other in one neat row. One was clearly Wayne Generette, the handle of a boot knife protruding from his left eye. The others appeared to have no injuries at all, though it seemed there was a thin line of dried blood around the throat of one of the dead men.

The guard staggered backwards momentarily stunned by the carnage. He seemed to bump into the wall, and it occurred to him the hallway was suddenly much more narrow than he recalled it being.

Almost at the moment his brain realized the ludicrous nature of that thought, he felt something tighten about his neck. Instantly, both his hands shot to his throat, an involuntary reaction to save himself by grabbing, and stopping, whatever was constricting his air pipe. He slapped himself in the jaw with the flashlight, knocking it out of his hand. The flashlight clattered to the floor and blinked out, accompanied by the sound of tinkling glass.

He felt his body being bent backward. He tried to twist away to one side, but it was as if he had no strength. Suddenly his hands dropped limply to his sides. His legs turned to rubber. The last thought he had, before he blacked out, was how strange it was to feel pins and needles inside his brain.

Bob Spencer lowered the guard's body to the floor. He removed the cap from a syringe, and plunged the needle into the man's thick neck, as close to the carotid artery as he could estimate in near complete darkness. He then checked the man's pulse, it was slow but strong.

The guard began to moan as blood returned to his brain, but he did not struggle. The sedative was taking hold fast. Spencer unwrapped the nylon strap he'd used to cut off blood flow to the guard's brain. Had he held it taught a few moments longer, permanent brain damage might have ensued, awhile beyond that came death. But the guard was an innocent, as far as Spencer could tell, and they were not in enemy territory, nor was their mission profile supposed to have included wet work.

On the other hand, the bodies in the other room were definitely not innocents. Their silenced weapons, at the very least, delineated the difference, and in any case it was clear from the way they'd shadowed Jim Richards, during the final hundred yards of his approach, they were professionals.

Bob Spencer walked to the end of the hallway, closed the door, then locked it as Richards had done. He then walked to the other end of the hallway, and turned on the master panel.

There was no flood of light inside the building, as the lights had not been on in the first place, but all of the other equipment, save the video screens which had been cut from outside returned to life.

#

In the guard shack, Frederick Settenweight looked up from his newspaper at the bank of blank monitors. He glanced at his watch, fifteen minutes had elapsed since his partner, Mike Loukanzie, had indicated he was on his way down to the Annex to check out the problem. Frederick reached across the top of his work surface, and grabbed the transceiver placed there when he sat back down.

"Two, this is base. Do you read? Over." He waited a couple of seconds. "Ah Mike, this is base. What's your location? Over." There was no response.

He stood up and stepped outside, turned to look in the direction of the main building as if somehow that might reveal something more than he already knew. Every now and then, one of the transceivers went out, and if that were the

case, Mike would probably come straight back to pick up a fresh one, before completing his rounds. Frederick stood there in the middle of the driveway for several seconds, straining to see if Mike were heading in his direction. Then he turned around to step back into the guard shack, procedures called for him to use the telephone to notify his supervisor if communication was lost.

As Frederick turned, Vince Morris stepped from around the far side of the shack. In one swift motion he slipped a lead weighted, leather wrapped, spring metal *slapper* from a utility belt around his waste. With rapid strokes that mimicked someone in throes of swatting a particularly annoying mosquito, Morris slapped Frederick Settenweight silly, with blows to each temple, and to the point of his chin. Followed by three rapid thumps to the top of his head.

He then gave Settenweight a solid shove in the chest, sending him back peddling into the guard shack, where he stumbled over the threshold, and fell with a thud to the floor. One more quick rap to the top of his noggin for good measure, and it was all over, except for the duck tape, and plastic lock ties. Settenweight would have a hell of a headache in the morning, but what the heck, Vince thought, much better than the usual alternative for perimeter guards.

#

Bob Spencer leafed rapidly through the file cabinets located in Generette's office. He was amazed at the amount of data he was finding, far more than he could even begin to photograph. And it was all *enclaire*. Generette must have been an egotistical bastard, Spencer thought, it never occurred to him, he might get nailed one day. Or perhaps he hadn't cared. Much of the data was in the form of notes, carbon copies actually. Addressed to someone he'd routinely passed information to, probably via a dead letter drop. According to the brief account Richards had given, Generette was on the KGB payroll, revenge for forced retirement from the United States Army. Perhaps eventually getting caught, and revealing all he'd done was just another way to rub it in the Army's face. The vengeful are never satisfied with silent pay backs.

Suddenly Spencer's fingers froze, as his eyes scanned down one of the documents. He lifted it out of the file, and took the time to read it carefully.

*May 1978*

*Dear Friend:*

*Maxie brought me a treasure today. Seems he's been told to steal some of that Histo accelerant I've told you they're working on down at the lab, and get it over to U.S. Army Biological Warfare, our old stomping*

*grounds. Guess they want to work on an antidote before slipping it into the BioWep arsenal.*

*I managed to replace one of the vials with some solution of potassium chloride we keep around here ,to send the little old dears on their way to a better place ,when the money looks about ready to dry up. Anyway, my friend, I'm sure you'll find a good use for it..*

*Have to run now, got someone under a drip ready to chirp. Don't forget our last conversation, I need to see a little more money from you, or else no more goodies. Okay?*

*All ways, W*

He heard the transceiver crackle in his ear. It was Vinnie.

"Hey, Spence, you ready for a look see at the main structure?"

"Where you at?" Spencer asked.

"Back side. The rent-a-dog at the front gate's sleepy bye in his little house. Mansion looks empty, but we won't know till we look."

"Be right there."

Spencer pulled out the entire file folder that contained Generette's hand written notes, then slipped it inside his jumpsuit, into a large pocket sewn to the right front panel designed for carrying documents.

He killed the lights at the breaker, then made his way outside. He glanced at his watch, zero one hundred, the night was getting on. He crossed the back lawn to the rear door of the mansion, making certain to stay within the shadows for general practice. He felt the first big drops of rain, blown forward of the approaching line of thunder storms forecast for the night.

Vince joined him at the rear steps, and they leaped frogged their way stealthily around the first floor. It was clear. Then upstairs. Spencer broke left, Vinnie right.

Bob Spencer had just finished clearing the rooms to the left of the landing when the transceiver crackled once more in his ear. "You'd better join me," Vince said. "This is unbelievable."



#

Spencer stepped through the doorway into the room Allen Maxwell had occupied earlier. He looked to his right, Vince was standing at what appeared to be a picture window that looked into the adjacent room.

On the other side of the glass was a luxurious four poster bed. A young woman lay stark naked in a contorted position. The top half of her body lay flat, face down. Her hands balled into fists gripping the down comforter in which her face was buried. Her lower half drooped toward the floor, legs spread, soles of her feet turned towards the one way mirror, the tops of her feet preventing her body from sagging to the floor. A wet sticky substance oozed down the inside of one thigh.

Spencer glanced around at the chair in front of the window, clearly someone had sat in it, and watched the action on the other side of the glass.

"Man this is sick," whispered Spencer.

#

"Oh Jesus, oh Jesus. What have I done?" Harbinger moaned. He hugged his stomach, and rocked forward and back ever so slightly in the rear of the sedan. The glass partition behind the driver's seat closed. "I didn't mean to kill her, Allen. It was an accident. I...I just lost control, that's all. Didn't realize I was holding her head down so hard, not letting her breath. I was just trying to come, that's all. But oh shit, oh dear, I didn't mean to kill her."

Maxwell laughed, and shook his head. "Calm down, Raymond. Don't give it a second thought. She died happy. Hell, she was thrashing about, gruntin' for all she was worth, comin' like a whore in heat. Nothing like a little oxygen deprivation to heighten the orgasm. Trust me, she died a happy cunt."

Raymond Harbinger stared blankly at Allen Maxwell, his mouth opened and closed twice but no words came out. Then at last he seemed to find his voice. "If the police get wind of this, I'm finished...You're finished. Oh Jesus, I've really screwed up."

Allen Maxwell patted Harbinger gently on his thigh. "Don't be silly Raymond, no one's ever gonna know but you, me, and Wayne. He'll clean everything up, probably already taken care of things even as we speak. Hell, we deal with death all the time around that place."

Harbinger calmed down a little. "What about her family?"

Maxwell laughed. "What family? They sold her for a few pesos years ago. Fuck, don't worry about it, plenty more where she came from, more than willing to do anything to get into the United States."

Raymond Harbinger pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

Allen Maxwell pulled a flask out of his coat pocket, filled its silver cap with cognac, then handed it to Harbinger. "There's one thing, Raymond. When you consummate the deal for Caring First, I'd sure like to be named President."

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

A black Crown Victoria with *Security Now* stenciled on its side, pulled up to the Green Acres entrance. The driver, a heavy set man with a Sundance Kid mustache, climbed wearily out of the big highway cruiser. Rain drops, the size of Kumquats, pelted down intermittently from a thunder cell passing nearby. Roscoe Fortunado waddled around the front of the sedan, then walked wearily up the driveway to the guard shack. He expected to find his guard asleep. Freddy had failed to report on schedule. As he peered into the shack, Roscoe first saw the security monitors were black, and then Frederick Settenweight, trussed up like a calf in a cutting contest.

#

Elmo Jefferson, Richard Holt, and Bob Jacobson sat around a small conference table. The Center for Personnel Development was a wholly owned non-profit subsidiary of Caring First International, located at Vanderbilt University. The second floor conference room looked out over a landscaped common in a quiet corner of the campus. It was not a secure room, on the other hand, sometimes the most secure settings were those where no one expected matters of great sensitivity to be discussed.

Richard Holt shook his head, and sighed. "We're too close to closing the hostage deal with Iran to allow this kind of problem to interrupt the process. Roget Akhondan has kept his end of the bargain. Our Embassy people are to be released upon the inauguration of the President, if we can provide Iran a guaranteed method of repayment. The details are being hammered out, as we speak, by the negotiating team.

"And it's a complex pay out," Elmo Jefferson interjected. "The United States cannot appear to have bowed to pressure, and paid a ransom. Here's the break down: Iranian frozen assets equal twelve billion dollars. Of the twelve, three and half currently secure bank loans to third world governments, and can't be called without upsetting global trade.

"One and half goes into escrow to assure the return of our people without condition. Three gets paid directly upon finalizing the agreement to show good faith. Leaving four, to pay out over time, via a pipeline still under negotiation."

"Exactly," Dr. Holt concurred. "We've proposed, via Roget Akhondan, to have the funds channeled through Caring First. With Akhondan on the Board of Directors to assure continued payment over the agreed period."

Bob Jacobson frowned, then made some quick calculations on a note pad. "Let's assume a ten year pay out. Caring First would need to pipeline four hundred million dollars every year. How would they explain that kind of cash flow to shareholders?"

Holt smiled. "A merger will occur between Akhondan's company, and Caring First. Akhondan will use a letter of credit, guaranteed with oil revenues generated by his family's oil wells, as his apparent consideration. Actually no money would change hands. The infusion will come out of treasury funds, covered under the intelligence budget.

"Next a new public offering will be issued, of which fifty-two percent will be subscribed to by Raymond Harbinger's company, Global Assurance. The result will effectively cover cash flow, by virtue of the time it will take auditors to fully assess the assets, and liabilities, of the entities involved. While they're busy with past financial history, a back channel will be developed within the shell of the new company to funnel agreed upon payments, disguised as asset infusion, into hospital and pharmaceutical enterprises within Iran.

"Basically, the shell game continues until Iran has been fully paid. At which point, Akhondan spins off his company. We do another public offering, and a whole new round of auditing begins.

"Meantime the normal growth of Caring First and Global Assurance combined, overtakes the deficit that would otherwise show up in the earnings. Ten to fifteen years downstream, the auditors, who of course won't actually be the same individuals who started the process, due to attrition and promotions, will finally begin to realize there was an earnings shortfall. However, Caring First will simply write it off as an undiscovered accounting error incurred at time of merger.

Due to the growth of the company, no real damage occurred. At worst it'll show up as a blip on the price of individual shares. A little fall back in the common stock price. Easily handled by Caring First's PR team. A buying opportunity for the individual investor." Holt paused. "All this assumes, of course, that Green Acres doesn't blow up in our face."

"Actually that investigation is resolving quite nicely in our favor," Bob Jacobson said, in reply to Holt's concern. "Nashville Metro's Homicide Division is in charge of investigating the deaths.

"Bob Spencer and Vince Morris managed to torch the Annex with everyone inside, except the security guard. They made it look like a lab accident. Bunsen burner left on, natural gas explosion when the main breaker was reset after the power outage."

Jacobson smiled. "Security guard doesn't remember diddly. Spencer injected him with the same shit used on Jim Richards' wife. All he can remember is going in to look for a blown circuit breaker." Jacobson turned his palms upward. "Sheriff figures someone inside got to the breaker just as the guard opened the front door."

"At least we won't have the Bureau nosing around, looking into the death of those Ruskies." Elmo said with a wry grin. "But there's still the girl to contend with, the illegal."

Jacobson dropped his chin once. "Suspicion is being directed towards unknown intruders. I'm doing what I can to assure the investigation keeps going in that direction. Unfortunately, as you know, I'm scheduled to make one last foray into Tehran. So the ball will be back in your court, to keep the police moving in the right direction to suit our needs.

"The basic manuscript I've put together describes a burglary gone bad. Two perpetrators involved. One ties up the guard at the entrance. Both proceed to the house with intent to steal cash. They come across the girl, probably in the kitchen.

"According to statements from other employees she often went up to the main house at night." Jacobson shrugged. "Piece of luck, that. Anyway, they take the girl upstairs, one or both rape her. One watches from the chair in the room next door. The explosion spoils their fun, so they bug out without the cash they came for in the first place."

"Fits well enough," Elmo agreed. "The events take place after Allen Maxwell and Raymond Harbinger left the building, security log shows their departure time. Girl's got no family to raise a stink. Homicide's happy to solve the case."

Jacobson looked out the window, to the quiet beauty beyond the room. Then returned his gaze to the table. "But *we* know that's not how it went down. Whole thing's on the video tape Bob Spencer retrieved before they torched the annex."

The room was silent for several moments. Then Dr. Richard Holt's gaze swung from Bob Jacobson, to Elmo Jefferson. "It would be prudent for us to do a thorough debrief of all parties privy to the affair at Green Acres. Make sure we

understand all the angles before we launch the manuscript beyond recovery. Could be there's a way to kill two birds with one stone. Keep the cops off the scent until the hostages come home, then let Harbinger, and Maxwell, hang themselves."

Jacobson snorted, then grinned. "Figuratively speaking, I presume you mean."

Dr. Holt shrugged. "Either, or, makes no difference to me."

#

Jim Richards awakened with a start. He'd nodded off, slouched in an arm chair in the corner of the glass enclosed Intensive Care room. He looked at his watch, 07:30... 19:30?. Morning he supposed. There was no window to the outside, no change in the intensity of light to trigger the brain's awareness of time passing. Two days, three? He wasn't sure how many since he'd brought Misti to the hospital. Only the agonizing wait as the monitors tracked her vital signs, and the I.V. gradually dripped a formula into her veins to sustain her, as well as, gradually counteract and purge the hallucinogenics from her system.

Now and then she'd awaken and look at him with eyes that held no recognition, but also, at least, no fear. She seemed to have no concept of where she was, and apparently no concern about that lack of knowledge.

At 09:00, Dr. Sather Friendly came into the room with the nurse assigned to Misti. And another man, who appeared to be a physician as well. Dr. Friendly spoke to Jim Richards in a calm, quiet voice. "This is Dr. Lawrence Berne, a psychiatrist. Why don't you go down the hall, and freshen up. We're going to check Misti's vital signs, then begin the process of waking her up. I must warn you, it's doubtful she'll recognize you."

Jim Richards nodded his head, indicating he understood. He arose from the chair, left the room, then headed down the hall to a private bathroom reserved for family members of those in Intensive Care.

When he returned - face washed, teeth brushed, having used a disposable toothbrush provided by the hospital - he found Misti raised to a semi-seated position.

Dr. Berne was speaking to her softly, she was frowning, shaking her head. A look of confusion on her face. As Jim Richards entered the room, she looked past Dr. Berne towards him. He smiled at her, and she returned his smile. Reflex reaction, there was no recognition in her eyes.

Jim Richards stood to the back of the room, too far away to hear what Berne was saying to Misti. She looked confused, frightened. The lids of her eyes began to droop. Dr. Berne patted her hand. Jim Richards could barely make out his words: "Sleep awhile longer."

Then he nodded to the nurse, and to Dr. Friendly. He looked at Jim Richards and motioned with his head towards the door. The nurse remained behind to tend Misti's covers, make certain she was comfortable.

Jim Richards followed the two physicians down the hallway to another room, a sign on its door said: Families. Richards suspected it was the room to which families were brought for news of their loved ones, bad news. Dr. Berne held the door open. Jim Richards, and Dr. Friendly, stepped through, then Berne followed.

The room was sparsely furnished. A high frosted glass window near the ceiling let in natural light. There were two, camel toned Naugahide sofas, set in an L on a blue Berber rug. A coffee table, no magazines. Jim Richards surmised *families* did not spend a lot of time lounging around the room, reading magazines, or engaging in nonessential banter. In one corner, a small table with several boxes of facial tissues. A waste basket next to it.

Dr. Berne gestured to Jim Richards to have a seat on one of the sofas, he and Friendly took the other.

"Mr. Richards, let me first put your mind at ease," Dr. Berne said. "Your wife, or former wife I should say, will be fine...eventually. But she has a long road to recovery ahead of her."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, then nodded his head up and down, as if the words he'd just heard were exactly what he'd expected. But in the back of his mind, he caught himself thinking he'd somehow acquired Misti's nervous habit, the thought tugged at his heart.

"What exactly do you mean by a *long road*?" He asked.

Dr. Berne thought for a moment. "A year, maybe two."

The blood drained from Richards' face, his eyes opened wide, eye brows raised involuntarily. "What have they done to her?"

Dr. Berne raised his hand palm outward. "Physically, nothing. She's a perfectly healthy, young woman. Her only affliction is complete amnesia."

"But she'll eventually recover her memory." Richards said, more a question than a statement. "A little rest, TLC..."

Dr. Berne shook his head slowly. "Not without assistance. The drugs used on her have the effect of erasing near term memory, and totally rearranging long term."

Richards frowned, "I don't understand."

Berne made a teepee of his fingers. "Think of long term memory as a series of photographs chronologically arranged to tell a story. The story of her past. Then the chronology is shuffled, until no apparent relationship exists between the photographs.

"For example she may recognize your face, but not associate your personality. Or sense familiarity, but have no idea of why. If she does remember you as her husband, the events of your relationship will be sketchy, mixed up."

"Left to her own devices, her mind would eventually build a completely plausible history, however, without guided input that history would be convoluted and fictional." Dr. Berne held Jim Richards' eyes for a long moment, before continuing his explanation. "Eventually, such fictional memory begins to break apart, because the glue that binds real memories together, multiple interrelated connections, is lacking."

Dr. Berne shook his head sadly. "The degradation leads to free floating paranoia. Later schizophrenia, as the patient tries to hang on to the fictitious memories by generating internalized voices that repeat over, and over, events of the fictional past, in an attempt to stop memory degradation. Eventually, the voices take on a ritualistic significance. Without the voices, the patient believes the past will be lost.

"In the final phase there are no future events, only a fractured fictional past, linked to a repetitive internal dialog that never ceases. At that point institutionalization is the only recourse."

Jim Richards arose from the sofa. He paced the length of the room. Then turned to face Dr. Berne. "And if you guide the input of past memory?"

Dr. Berne smiled. "If we can learn of the major events in her life. Place her in close proximity to her birth family, while gradually allowing her awareness to reform in a controlled, comfortable manner, the prognosis for her full recovery is quite good."



Jim Richards thought for a moment, he stared perceptibly at Dr. Berne. "There's something you're not telling me. What is it?"

Lawrence Berne glanced over at Sather Friendly, then took a deep breath. "The scenario I've laid out works best if the memory of the event that brought the patient to this juncture is allowed to remain inactive. In other words, we bring her gradually forward through time, carefully inserting very select fictional events that divert her mind along a pre-determined parallel pathway, past the traumatic event that triggered the amnesia."

Richards frowned. "Won't that trigger the scenario you previously described?"

Dr. Berne shook his head. "No. The period of fictional history is very short, and well manuscripted. Not formed by random internal reactions to indecipherable pieces of past recall.

"From Misti's perspective, awakening at a point in time with, let's say, a car accident as the reason for her memory loss, her mind will willingly accept that which we suggest to it. Because she will be able to fall back on actual memory inserted through gradual re-enlightenment. And, of course, future memories as they develop."

Jim Richards shook his head skeptically. "What about Delayed Stress Syndrome. Something that triggers the release of the suppressed traumatic memory, within the parallel time frame you've bypassed?"

Dr. Berne shook his head. "Not a problem, we'll treat those episodes as they occur. Misti will be warned of their likelihood during the initial treatment. Gradually she'll work her way through each occurrence, believing them to be nothing more than an aberration of the trauma induced amnesia, suffered as a result of the event we've manuscripted. Remember in my original scenario, I was talking about a patient forming entirely non-guided fictional memory.

Dr. Berne smiled. "All memories fade, details become obscured. Even to some degree fictionalized, by each individual's propensity to recall only that which was enjoyable, while selectively *forgetting* painful, or upsetting details. Which is why old lovers are remembered fondly." Berne paused again, and gazed sagely at Jim Richards for several seconds before proceeding.

"In our treatment of Misti, it's a matter of guiding her through the near term period, until the old memory is fully assimilated, and carved into a scenario acceptable to the mind's normal optimistic view of life. As long as the actual event is never revisited, a revised memory always satisfies the mind." Dr. Berne

sighed. "That's why old fishing holes are so wonderful to remember, so disappointing to return to."

Jim Richards pursed his lips. "I see your point. But what would happen if she were guided carefully through the actual event, the interrogation, and so forth?"

Dr. Berne was silent for several moments. Then gazed at Jim Richards. "It could be emotionally devastating. In order to re-live the event, Misti would have to feel as if she were again losing her mind. I cannot even begin to predict the outcome. She might emerge on the other side a stronger person, or a blithering idiot."

Dr. Berne lifted both hands, held them as if they were a pair of balance scales. "On the one hand, we have sufficient experience, working with traumatized amnesia patients, to predict an acceptable outcome through the scenario I've proposed. On the other, we've no idea of what may happen."

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Then I suppose there's only one choice to take."

Dr. Berne took a deep breath. "In my opinion, yes. But now we come to the most painful choice, at least for you. Under the scenario I've proposed, you will be a quasi-fictional memory through which she will pass. Her memory of you close to the event, must be left erased. As it could trigger a cascade of actual memories that would drive her directly into confrontation with the moment of interrogation."

Jim Richards frowned. "Then my vigilance at her side, for the past two days, may not have been wise?"

Dr. Berne sighed. "I was not assigned the case until this morning. This is not my residence, I normally treat patients in the D.C. area, at Bethesda. Had I been on the case from the outset, I would have limited your presence, somewhat." He was silent for a moment. "However, that said, Misti is recovering well. It remains to be seen whether, or not, she recognizes you, and what she remembers of that recognition. Her response will guide our treatment plan. You must be prepared to adjust to any scenario we devise. The choice is yours, however. I can only give you my best opinion, based upon my experience, and the circumstances of this particular case. Please understand I have great empathy for the dilemma you face."

"Then I should not see her?" Richards asked.

"That would be best. At least not until she asks for you, or at least about you. Your role, if any, in her future must be dictated by two important issues: Her memory of your relationship. And her desire to have you in her life." Dr. Berne thought for a moment. "If I have understood correctly the briefing I was given, your divorce was Misti's choice."

Jim Richards looked away, then returned he gaze to Dr. Berne. "That's correct."

Dr. Berne said nothing, only raised an eyebrow.

Richards swallowed, his throat dry. "Love and sympathy are very strong emotions. Not easily forgotten, or set aside."

Dr. Berne's gaze remained steady. "Love and sympathy *are* very strong emotions, often confused. Love is for the exclusive benefit of another. While sympathy mostly serves its provider."

"Perhaps this is an opportunity for a new beginning for us," Richards said. "An opportunity to correct past oversights."

Dr. Berne smiled patiently, letting Jim Richards consider the words he'd just spoken. "Perhaps. Though in my opinion, it would not be best for Misti. Your continued close proximity on a day to day basis, would greatly reduce the likelihood of successfully by-passing the portion of her past history critical to the success of her treatment. It would greatly increase the possibility of her reliving the trauma of losing her mind. Again, I must say, I cannot predict the outcome of such a passage."

The room was silent for several seconds. Then Jim Richards said: "I'll abide by your plan of treatment, Dr. Berne."

Dr. Berne dipped his head once. "It is the best choice, I can assure you."

Dr. Berne reached into a deep pocket, on the right side, of the pure white lab coat he wore for his morning rounds, and withdrew a small voice activated dictation recorder.

"I'd like you to take this home with you. Sometime, in the next twelve to twenty-four hours, work your way backward from present time through the main events of your relationship with Misti. You do not need to go into details, or describe any activities that were not directly tied to your relationship."

Jim Richards shook his head. "Let's do it right now, that way if you have questions at a particular point, you can ask me to elaborate. I'm used to debriefings."

Dr. Berne glanced at his watch. "All right, let's see how far we can get in the next hour or so."

#

Dr. Berne shut off the recorder, slid back a small metal lid to expose the mini-cassette, then removed the third tape used for that morning's session. He stared at it in the palm of his hand, for a moment or two, then said: "I'll listen to these tapes carefully, if there are areas that need revisiting, we'll schedule another session."

"The *Company*, has arranged for ExcujetWest to transport Misti to Oregon as soon as her recovery allows. Most likely, within the next three, or four, days. I'll travel with her, handle the initial course of treatment. Someone under my direct supervision, will continue to treat, once she's past the critical stage. Have no fear, she'll receive the best of care."

Jim Richards nodded his head once.

"You must be a rather important person in the hierarchy," Berne said in an off hand manner. "My orders have come from one of the top people at Langley. In fact, I can't recall ever being given such an assignment in the past."

The look in Jim Richards eyes turned icy cold. He leaned forward moving his face, and upper body closer to Dr. Berne, resting his forearms on his knees. An involuntary shiver ran through Dr. Berne's body.

"It's not I who is of import, Dr. Berne, but rather *your* patient. And though she may be only my *former* wife, I hold you responsible for her well being from this point forward." He paused a moment. "If anything ever appears to be in the slightest way not to Misti's complete benefit, with regard to *anyone* at Langley, or otherwise, I expect you to make certain I'm the first to know." Richards held Dr. Berne in his gaze for a moment longer.

"Yes, of course." Dr. Berne agreed, almost too quickly.

Jim Richards dipped his chin once, rose from the sofa, then stepped over to the door. But he did not immediately open it, rather he stood for a moment hesitating. Deep down he wanted to ask if there wasn't some other alternative. Perhaps a recall path, where he was remembered as her truest love. But he did

not express the thought, for that would truly have been self-serving. Jim Richards swung the door open, and left the room.

#

The automatic doors at the entrance to Parkview Hospital sighed open as Jim Richards approached. He passed through to the sunshine beyond. The air warm, and humid, though he gave no thought to it, as he patted the pockets of the light cotton golf jacket he was wearing. He found his dark green aviators, then slipped the gold wire loops over his ears.

He crossed Leslie Avenue, heading towards the hospital parking lot where he'd left the Bronco. When he reached the sidewalk, on the other side of the street, he turned right, and continued south for a quarter mile until he reached Centennial Park. There, he found an empty bench that overlooked the reflection pond, east of Parthenon pavilion.

Jim Richards lowered himself, wearily, onto the bench, then stared with vacant eyes at a flock of ducks that foraged about the pond. He felt completely drained of all emotion. Over the past forty-eight hours he'd vacillated between extreme anger, and utter despair, at the part he had played in placing Misti in harm's way. He'd been so careful through out so much of their relationship to assure she was never exposed to the potential retribution his work could bring upon them. And yet in the end, he'd failed to protect her. His duplicity had contributed to the destruction of their relationship, all for naught.

Dr. Berne's formula for recovery had not taken him by surprise, it was one scenario he'd considered, as he sat, hour after hour, next to Misti's bed, hoping beyond hope, she'd awaken and recognize him. In those hours, he came to the realization he'd lost her, just as surely as if she'd died at the hands of Wayne Generette.

He'd learned long ago, revenge never made up for the loss sustained, but at least it brought closure. He'd killed Wayne Generette in defiance, when he'd expected to be captured, or killed himself. It had not been an act of revenge, as much as a necessity of the moment, and it had not brought closure.

He sat for awhile longer, gazing at the pond, until he felt the unmistakable tickle at the back of his neck that signaled he was being watched. He looked around surreptitiously to his right, as he arose slowly from the bench. Near a cluster of trees, he spotted a man dressed in a business suit, gazing casually in his direction.

He turned to his left. Dead ahead another man dressed similarly to the first, came towards him. Also to his left, a third man. There was the unmistakable

air of a *professional* about all three. They would be in his line of work, for whom was yet to be determined.

There was no thought of flight, the option did not exist in his present circumstance. He was hemmed in by the pond, and all other routes were covered. He was unarmed, but even if that were not the case, there was little chance he could reach a weapon in time, or take all three, while standing in the open without cover. Nothing to do for the moment but remain in place, as one of the men continued his approach.

The man rounded the end of the bench, then stopped directly in front of him. He had short, very dark hair. Clean shaven. Physically fit. His suit jacket was in need of a good press, which told Jim Richards, he'd traveled some distance. It seemed odd for all three men to be wearing wool suit jackets, on a morning as warm, and humid, as the day portended to be. The only possible reason would be to conceal a shoulder holster. Jim Richards gaze dropped to the space below the man's arm pit, he saw the coat was cut a little more full than normal.

The man took off his dark glasses. His face was familiar, though Jim Richards could not immediately place where he'd seen it before.

""Morning, Jim. My name's Bruce Smith."

Richards cocked his head to one side. "Smith?... Right."

The man smiled, then handed Richards a business card. It had his name, a telephone number with a Virginia area code, and the CIA seal embossed on its face. Richards glanced at the card, then returned his gaze to the man who'd presented it to him.

"Elmo would like to see you."

Richards thought for a moment, he remembered where he'd seen the man before, it was outside the banquet room at the Marine's Memorial Club, in San Francisco, on the night he'd learned of the Caring First assignment.

He could refuse to accompany the body guard, but there was no reason to do so. Ultimately his report, to Harding, would reach Elmo anyway. "Sure. Why not?"

#

Bruce Smith turned the rental sedan into a driveway that ran next to an old, shingle sided, house in the Berry Hill district of Nashville. The car pulled to a

stop behind the house. Smith's back up team, parked their vehicle on the street. Then took up surveillance posts at the front and rear corners of the single story residence.

Jim Richards climbed the stairs leading to the rear porch. More often than not, CIA safe houses were in quiet, older, neighborhoods. The kind of places where homes had been turned into investment properties, sprinkled amongst residences still occupied by their original owners sliding quietly into their twilight years. Such neighborhoods had sufficient tenant turn over, the oldsters barely paid attention to new comers, as long as they kept to themselves, and were quiet.

The old houses exuded a kind of perennial charm that brought to mind grandma's place. And the attendant memories of fresh baked cookies, carefree days of play when school was out. The contrast to reality brought a thin smile to Jim Richards' lips.

He passed through the back door, and into a kitchen that seemed rather large for a house of its size. But then, the kitchen was always the focal point at grandma's house, wasn't it?

Elmo Jefferson sat in a plain, wooden, straight back chair at the head of a rectangular table that stood to one side of the kitchen. There was just enough room between the wall, and the far side of the table for another chair, and it surprised Jim Richards to find Dr. Richard Holt seated in it. In fact, it so surprised him, he stopped dead in his tracks, and stared at Holt for two, or three, seconds. His mind raced back to nineteen sixty-four, his days in college, and to Tracy who'd originally recruited him into the wilderness of mirrors. In that moment, an epiphany occurred to Jim Richards. With complete clarity, he suddenly realized the degree of influence Dr. Holt had upon the course of his life. Almost simultaneously, the fact was accepted, and in the course of the moment it seemed completely natural that Dr. Holt should be here, though no mention of his attendance had been made, or even alluded to, by those who'd brought him to the meeting.

Dr. Holt's attendance signaled a level of involvement much higher than normally attached to his assignments, and while this peaked his curiosity, it simultaneously elicited a sense of wariness.

Jim Richards smiled broadly, as he glanced from Dr. Holt to Elmo Jefferson, then back to Holt. "This is a pleasant surprise." He reached across the table to take Holt's hand, as he partially arose from his chair.

Dr. Holt beamed, his blue eyes sparkling mischievously behind round wire rim glasses. "Good to see you Jim, after so many years. Your looking as trim and fit as ever."

"There's coffee in the pot on the stove," Jefferson said. Motioning with his head towards an old gas range that stood next to an equally decrepit refrigerator, though it hummed along quietly in the corner as if it were brand new. Jim Richards poured himself a cup, then sat down in the chair across from Dr. Holt, with Jefferson to his right.

"Jim, the reason for our meeting is to conduct a thorough debrief of your activities since your last contact with Ty Harding." Elmo reached down into a legal size brief case that stood on the floor next to his chair. He withdrew a voice activated cassette recorder, then set it on the table. "Go ahead, Jim, we may as well get started."

Richards cleared his throat once, then began. As his speech pattern fell into its normal rhythm, Elmo adjusted the volume control on the recorder to maximize the quality. By the time Richards had finished relating the events that had transpired, an hour had passed.

Elmo took a breath, and let out a long sigh, shaking his head slowly. "I'm so sorry about what has happened to Misti. You must be terribly angry."

Jim Richards held Jefferson's eyes with a steady gaze, one eye brow raised.

Elmo smiled sardonically. "I wouldn't blame you one bit, if you were thinking about placing Allen Maxwell in your gun sights."

Both of Richards' eyebrows went up. "I'd like nothing better than a sanctioned shot at Maxwell."

Elmo dropped his chin once, a serious expression on his face. "Though it's not really your line of work. In fact, as I recall you specifically turned down the option of transferring into the Executive Action section some years ago."

Jim Richards smiled cynically. "Perhaps it's never been this personal before. I've always abhorred violence, resorting to it only in self defense, preemptive though it may have been on occasion." Richards glanced away from Jefferson for a moment, to look across the table at Dr. Holt, who's expression remained neutral.

Jefferson continued: "There's another reason I asked you to meet with us today. This operation's gone in directions never anticipated, or intended. Your initial findings confirmed our original concern about a leak at Caring First. However, the revelation of Raymond Harbinger's involvement in a plot to take control of the company was quite unexpected." Jefferson took a sip of coffee,



then continued. "Raymond Harbinger, and Allen Maxwell, have each committed serious crimes. Unfortunately, we cannot turn them over to the authorities without compromising our operations."

Richards scowled. "So in the end they both go unpunished?"

Elmo shook his head. "Not necessarily. But we must exercise patience at this juncture."

He glanced over at Dr. Holt, almost as if he were looking for confirmation, or permission to continue. Holt's expression remained non-committal, as it had from the beginning of their meeting.

"Allen Maxwell's crime of treason was one of omission not commission. He did not steal Histoplasmosis accelerant with the intent of passing it on to our Russian friends. He stole the accelerant from the Caring First laboratories, to pass it on to the United States Army's Biological Warfare Defense Program."

Richards eyebrows went up involuntarily.

"You see," Elmo continued. "Caring First's laboratories developed the accelerant to be used as a medium for monitoring growth, and diversification, of fungi with the ability to mimic viral activity. The papers associated with the development of the accelerant were readily available to any university with access to the Internet."

Jim Richards frowned. "Internet?"

Jefferson nodded. "A world wide link of university main frame computers via telephone lines. A way for universities to share research information. The military has a similar system known as Milnet." Jefferson looked over at Holt. "Perhaps you could fill in the essentials"

Holt bobbed his head up and down, then began speaking in an animated fashion. "A couple years ago, an astronomer out at U.C. Berkeley noticed unknown persons accessing the Internet via back door passwords, codes left in place by researchers who wished to access the university's system from home, or elsewhere, as a way to avoid on-line congestion during normal business hours. It was a breach of system security, but seemed harmless enough in view of the serious time-share issues impeding the free flow of information.

"At first, only scientists, and computer nerds, played the game, as no one else understood the system well enough to break through its nominal security locks. But as we should have anticipated, inevitably foreign intelligence operatives recognized the value of the data available, then used a series of educated guesses

to access the system via the proverbial *back door*. Once in, their nefarious excursions were not limited to unclassified data."

Dr. Holt tore a blank sheet off a yellow note pad on which he'd been taking notes, then drew a quick diagram. "You see," he spun the pad around for Jim Richards, and pointed to the lines and squares he'd drawn. "It's possible to cross over from the Internet to Milnet, and vice versa, once you've entered the correct area of either system. All of a sudden, data normally secure on Milnet, becomes terribly vulnerable."

Jefferson picked up the story. "To combat the exposure, until we could positively secure the system, the intelligence community returned to the use of couriers for passing sensitive research data on to the military.

"As I said earlier, Histoplasmosis accelerant was not developed as a weapon. However, once the genie was out of the bottle, it became ominously clear, the substance had weapons potential. Since basic research on the substance was available to all universities on the Internet, we knew it was only a matter of time until the Soviets, or some other nation, recognized its implications."

Dr. Holt stepped back into the conversation. "In the old days, before we realized, or rather our astronomer friend realized, the vulnerability of the Internet-Milnet connection, we'd have simply posted our findings, and sent a few vials of accelerant over to the Army for testing. Meanwhile, Caring First would have developed an antidote, and sent that along as well. But with the system as transparent as it was, we elected to send both the research data, and the accelerant, via courier."

"Allen Maxwell?" Richards asked.

"Exactly," Jefferson replied. "And when we learned, only five of the six vials delivered to the Army's lab contained accelerant, we became suspicious one of the vials had been diverted. Initially, Allen Maxwell came under suspicion, however, our subsequent inquiry cleared him of culpability, finding the shortfall attributable to an unfortunate oversight, a mislabeling of containers. Not that unusual an occurrence in a working laboratory actually."

Dr. Holt bobbed his head up and down. "Meanwhile, your inquiries inside Caring First, brought us the revelation that Raymond Harbinger was consorting with an Iranian national, later determined to be Roget Akhondan, to acquire Caring First's assets." Dr. Holt's face took on a disgusted expression. "If that weren't enough, Allen Maxwell's been supplying Raymond Harbinger with young nubile from his stable of illegal workers, one of whom died during a rather brutal sexual liaison while you were confronting Wayne Generette."

Jim Richards countenance immediately reflected his disgust.

"But hey, let's not be satisfied with that." Jefferson picked up the thread. "Maxwell's been, systematically, shortening the lives of many of the elderly under his care, when their ability to pay for service runs out. He'd then continue to claim the deceased patients on his Medicare billings. A little icing on the cake."

Jim Richards eyes turned cold. "If you've known this all along, why haven't you taken action? At the very least, an anonymous call to the civil authorities?"

A cynical smile came upon Elmo's face. "First of all we didn't have the complete picture, until we perused the files Bob Spencer was able to liberate, before he destroyed the Annex out at Green Acres. However, even if we had, there's still the matter of the hostages."

Jim Richards frowned. "Hostages?"

"American hostages held in our embassy in Tehran. You see, Raymond Harbinger managed to extract a quid pro quo from Roget Akhondan, whose family is very influential in Iran. The agreement: Akhondan assists Harbinger in the take over of Caring First. In return Roget Akhondan gets an exclusive contract to supply meds to Caring First facilities, as well as, a seat on Caring First's Board of Directors. Akhondan in return convinces Ayatollah Khomeini to release the hostages."

Jim Richards sat back in his chair, a look of complete cynicism etched on his face. "When will the hostages be released?"

"When the next President of the United States is inaugurated," Dr. Holt replied.

"And what do you want me to do in the mean time?"

Elmo Jefferson responded in an even tone. "We have no intention of letting Allen Maxwell, or Raymond Harbinger, go Scot-free. Nor do we intend to compromise the arrangement that has been worked out with the Iranians.

"We will deal with Harbinger when the time comes. It's Allen Maxwell who presents a problem for us. He has been careful to position himself in such a way that if we were to pressure him at all. Or, if he were to feel threatened by us, he would immediately negotiate a deal based upon his knowledge of Caring First's ties to covert operations."

"Exactly, " Dr. Holt agreed. "Our only hope of his facing justice, is for something to develop independently out of his Green Acres operations. For example, proof he shortens the lives of residents nearing the end of their financial capabilities. Or, of his defrauding of the Medicare system."

Jim Richards scowled. "Why not just sanction a termination, and be done with it."

Jefferson shook his head. "No can do. The crimes he's committed are outside the guidelines of executive action. He's not knowingly compromised an operation, or participated in any plan to neutralize one of our operatives. Nor, has he knowingly passed classified material on to the opposition that resulted in any of the above consequences. As onerous as his activities are, they're not, strictly speaking, within our purview.

"If you want to see him go down, you're going to have to develop the evidence, or, at least, get the authorities moving in the right direction." Elmo paused, a Cheshire Cat grin spreading across his face. "And do so without revealing you're the source."

Jim Richards shook his head, and lifted his hands in mock surrender. "How do you propose I do that?"

Dr. Holt replied: "By recruiting someone on the inside. Amongst the staff, there is undoubtedly someone suspicious of how the residents are treated. Someone who'd be willing, or could be convinced, to go to the authorities. Once an investigator has been assigned, and the process has been started, I can promise you, when the time is right, we'll make certain it continues to move in the right direction."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Allen Maxwell wearily closed his eyes. He tilted back his burgundy leather desk chair, for a moment's respite. Arson investigators were focusing on a short circuit at the breaker panel, as probable cause for the devastating explosion that destroyed the annex at Green Acres.

The police were non-committal concerning Sylvia's death. However, his sources at Nashville Metro assured him the murder investigation was focusing on robbery, as the proximate motive for her rape and murder. But he knew the focus of their investigation was flawed. And it might be only a matter of time until investigators suspected a different scenario. However, for the time being, he and Harbinger's community stature acted as a shield to even the slightest suspicion.

In the past, Wayne Generette had always assured their privacy by cleaning up the rooms following their recreational activity. But Wayne had been summoned to the annex midway through Harbinger's prurient performance.

Sylvia was the first girl used more than once by Raymond Harbinger. Others before her had been paid off, sent away to another of his facilities out west, with an explanation given to fellow staffers that an opportunity for betterment had come along.

Allen Maxwell wished he'd stuck with the original plan. He'd never expected Raymond to take a shine to one girl in particular, as variety seemed to be what he craved. Against his better judgment, Maxwell had allowed repeat liaisons. Now he could not be certain Sylvia had told no one about her extra curricular activity. One credible leak would be all required to refocus the investigation, especially with the volume of bodily fluids, and hair samples available at the scene.

Even if they managed to beat a murder rap in court. Using the fact security guards were neutralized after he and Harbinger left Green Acres, giving strong support to a robbery motive. Press coverage would ruin their careers, and reputations.

Maxwell felt a twinge of pain deep in his stomach, his old ulcer flaring up again. Obviously, he'd need to conduct a discreet investigation of his own into potential witnesses, those on staff to whom Sylvia might have confided. But without Wayne Generette to assist, such inquiry would be somewhat hampered. Direct interviews were out of the question.

Of the bodies found inside the building, none were readily identifiable except Wayne's, by the gold identification bracelet on his wrist. The one Maxwell had given him for his birthday. Dental records would soon confirm identity. But who were the others? Friends of Wayne's, waiting for him to get off work? Arson investigators had determined a Bunsen burner had been left open, a spark ignited the built up gas. Maxwell shook his head sadly, he was going to miss Wayne; he'd not be easy to replace.

Then there was the call he'd received from Anna Medal-Soam, asking about Misti DiMartine. That had come as a shock, he'd no idea she was interning at Green Acres. Had he known, he'd never have allowed it. But he was careful not to reveal his sentiments to the woman at the other end of the line. A real ball buster, he sensed it in her voice.

As soon as he'd said good-bye, he placed a call to his Staffing Supervisor, Gretta Bosanvich, out at Green Acres. It seemed Misti had indeed disappeared. According to Gretta, Mr. Generette had sent for Misti around four in the afternoon on the day before the fire. "And come to think of it, she'd not been seen since." Gretta had said.

What the hell would Wayne have wanted to see Misti about?

Perhaps she'd died in the fire? Maxwell thought about that tantalizing prospect for a moment or two, then rejected it. The Coroner's preliminary report indicated only male bodies were found amongst the rubble of the annex, there was no mention of any female victims, other than Sylvia. Maxwell let out a long sigh. He'd have to discover the truth about the fire, and Misti's disappearance, he felt certain the two were somehow related.

#

Jim Richards struggled to awaken, he'd taken a no-go pill as he'd promised himself, and slept like the dead for fifteen hours straight. Now his head felt as if it were filled with cotton. He thought he detected the aroma of fresh coffee brewing, but decided it must be some trick of his mind, a chemical anomaly left over from the military grade sleeping pill taken the previous afternoon. He positioned his left wrist in front of his eyes, 0600, *too* early.

Jim Richards forced his eyes open again, as they'd involuntarily closed for a moment, or so he thought. He looked at his wrist watch, 06:45, he'd apparently slept another forty-five minutes. He took a deep breath, rolled onto his side and out of bed. Heading straight for the bathroom.

By the time he'd taken what seemed like an interminable piss, then splashed cold water onto his face, he was convinced the coffee he'd noted brewing earlier was real. Pulling on a pair of blue jeans, and a T-shirt, he padded down the hallway. Turning left into the family room, he found Vince Morris sprawled casually in one of the club chairs, reading the morning paper.

"Good morning," Vince said, as Richards entered the room. "Gonna have to call you Sand Man from here on out, 'stead of Ocean Man."

Richards grinned. "Any of that nasty Navy coffee you boil up, left?"

Vince pointed his thumb towards the kitchen. "There's a cup, or two. Some doughnuts as well. Wanna make sure you get your *four* food groups: Fat, salt, sugar and preservatives."

"And caffeine," Richards laughed.

"Oh yes, most important."

Jim Richards poured himself an oversize cup of dark black coffee, then grabbed a cinnamon crumb doughnut. Vince extracted himself from the leather chair, and joined Jim Richards at the circular glass table in the kitchen's dining nook.

"How you feelin'?" He asked.

"Much better than yesterday afternoon. Couple of loops around the neighborhood to get some oxygen back in my body, and I should be all set for another one of your fine adventures. Let's see maybe we could hit Tehran over the weekend, extract the hostages, assassinate Khomeini, and make it back here in time to catch it all on CNN. No better yet, Nightline, give Ted Kopel something to talk about besides what *isn't* happening with the hostages."

Vince chuckled, then impersonated Kopel's familiar voice. "We'll be on the air until this crisis is resolved. Well, okay... We'll be on the air every night with up to the minute reports, until this crisis is resolved. Okay, we'll just be on the air." Vince shook his head.

Richards smiled. "At least he's kept the hostages in the public's eye, otherwise they'd have been forgotten by now, swept under the carpet like every other failure of the current administration."

Vince smiled. "I take it your looking forward to the change everyone's predicting. I mean what the hell, best role Ronald Reagan ever landed."

Richards shrugged. "Who knows, maybe he'll turn out to be the best we ever had."

"Maybe so, could sure stand an upswing."

Richards gazed out the window, summer was winding down, fall coming on fast.

He returned his gaze to Vince Morris. "I'm concerned about one detail on that Green Acres incursion, Misti's car."

Vince smiled. "I've taken care of it, it's in storage for now." He dug his hand into the right hand pocket of the blue jeans he was wearing, pulled out a receipt, and a set of keys, then handed the items over to Jim Richards. "How's she doing?"

Richards related all he and Dr. Berne had discussed.

Vince shook his head sadly. "Never seen that severe a reaction before, possible though. That stuff Generette used was potent."

"What's the story on Harbinger and Maxwell?" Richards asked, his voice tinged with disgust.

"Nada. I imagine they're gonna lie low 'til things cool down." Vince replied.

Richards scowled. "So you're stuck with baby sitting for the duration?"

Vince shook his head. "Jefferson's made other arrangements. One of the reasons I came by this morning, besides making sure you got your sorry ass out of bed that is. We're shipping out to Turkey, for an *infil* into Tehran. Link up with Steve and Mac, make certain there are no slip ups with the release. Wouldn't put it past those assholes to try and hold a couple of our people back, just 'cause they can.

"Might want to do a little snatch ourselves, to assure everyone comes home as promised. Otherwise, if all goes well, we exfiltrate after the event. So you're on your own, buddy. I won't be hiding out in the bushes for any more impromptu back-ups. You keep your nose clean."

Richards nodded his head, solemnly.

"I mean it Jim, keep a low profile and your eyes open. I don't want to come back from the land of Camel dung and oil wells, to find you've been



*wasted*. Meanin' I don't get to kick your butt anymore at our semi-annual training reunions in Monterey." Vince said with a grin.

Jim Richards laughed. "I'll be careful, 'cause you know how much I hate to disappoint you."

#

Anna Medal-Soam would not give up. She'd called every hospital emergency room in the Nashville area. Then questioned each Admissions Supervisor about recent admissions. Narrowing her search to three potential locations. Parkview was the last on her list.

The Emergency Room was unusually quiet when she showed a photo of Misti to the clerk at the desk. The clerk, a young black woman, nodded her head. "Miss Jones, at least that's how we have her listed. What did you say her name was?"

"Misti DiMartine."

The clerk turned to the file cart that held patient records, then frowned. "Odd I could have sworn I saw that clip board earlier this morning." She arose from her chair, then went into her Supervisor's office for assistance.

Sheila Stern stepped out of her office, and strode with determined steps over to Anna, her hand extended. "Ms. Medal-Soam, my name's Sheila, a pleasure to meet you. I'm the Emergency Room Nurse Supervisor. Miss Walters tells me, you believe one of our patients is a friend of yours?"

Anna Medal-Soam smiled in a business like manner. "Yes, that's correct. She indicated my friend, Misti DiMartine was here under your care."

Sheila frowned. "Misti DiMartine? I'm afraid we have no one under that name."

Anna glared at the Supervisor, as she handed her the picture she'd shown the Admittance clerk. "Of course you don't, she was apparently admitted under a pseudonym. Perhaps she lacked identification at time of admittance?"

Sheila gazed at the photo for several seconds. Then looked directly into Anna's eyes. "I'm sorry I can't help you, Ms. Medal-Soam. I must admit this photo bears a striking resemblance to a patient we admitted earlier this week. However, I cannot state for certain based upon the photograph alone, that our patient, and the person in your snap shot, are one in the same."

"Well then there's a simple solution," Anna Medal-Soam said, the twinges of frustration edging her voice. "Allow me to see Miss Jones, and I'll confirm her identity. Indeed, if she's the person in this photograph, she's a student of mine who disappeared from an internship at Green Acres Convalescent. There was a fire there five nights ago."

Sheila smiled in an understanding way, but remained resolute. "Yes, I remember seeing the report on television. And I appreciate your concern for a missing friend. But I'm afraid I can't allow you to see Miss Jones. She's in guarded condition, visitors are only allowed upon approval of her doctor."

"But if it's of any comfort to you Miss Medal-Soam, Miss Jones was not burned, nor does she show any signs of having been affected by a fire. No smoke inhalation, or that sort of thing. Also I have *no* reason to believe Jones is not her true name." Sheila sighed, a look of concern came over her face. "Look, I've already said too much. Perhaps Dr. Berne can help you, he's the lead physician on her case."

Anna Medal-Soam considered her options, there was no point in becoming indignant. It would have no effect on the person who stood before her. "How may get in touch with Dr. Berne?"

Sheila smiled. "He's expected on rounds in about a half hour. Why don't you wait in our lobby, and I'll come and find you when he arrives. Or, if you prefer, come back in about forty-five minutes. I'll have had a chance to talk to him by that time."

#

Jim Richards stepped out of the shower. He'd taken a run around the neighborhood, looping back through the woods. Then stood under a tepid shower to cool down. As he toweled himself off, he heard the telephone ring. He stepped from the bathroom to answer it. Dr. Berne was on the line.

"There have been a couple of complications," Berne said.

Jim Richards felt his heart skip a beat, his breathing increased "Has Misti taken a turn for the worse?"

"No, in fact, she's doing much better than expected."

Richards smiled involuntarily.

Berne continued, "A woman by the name of Anna Medal-Soam has been asking to see her."

Jim Richards shook his head. "That's not good. I had Misti admitted under a pseudonym to avoid anyone locating her."

"Do you know this woman?"

"Yes. She's a psychologist, a professor at the University of Tennessee. Misti looks upon her as a mentor. She's the person who placed her at Green Acres. Some sort of research program. If she's allowed to see Misti, it's quite likely it *will* bring back a flood of memories associated with her ordeal." Richards paused for a moment, then continued. "Dr. Berne, it's imperative we not allow Medal-Soam access to Misti."

"I agree. I'll leave orders to that effect."

Richards scowled, typical doctor, his *word* was all that was required. His mind shifted into crisis mode, his whole demeanor changed. "Not good enough. You don't understand the tenacity, and influence, of the person you're dealing with. If she's convinced Misti is in your hospital, she'll have access to her within an hour, two at the most. I've already looked into her background, she's a good friend of T. Harris Williams, President of Caring First."

Richards heard Dr. Berne sigh at the other end of the line.

"Is Misti in any shape to be moved?"

"Physically, yes. Psychologically, I'm not sure."

"Well that's your bailiwick, Doctor. Make sure she can handle it. We need to move her immediately."

"I can transfer her to another hospital, if we can find a bed available."

Richards scowled again. "That won't keep Medal-Soam away. Here's what I want you to do: Check her out of Parkview immediately, and transport her to the airport. There's a hangar on the far side of the field, an FBO, Rossmore Aviation. They have an air conditioned *quiet room*, pilots use it to catch a little shut-eye on a short turn around. I'll call and make arrangements. I'll also arrange for a jet to transport you, Misti, and whatever support staff you need out to Oregon."

"It's risky," Berne said, skepticism tingeing his voice.

"You already said that," Richards replied, "but not as risky as keeping her here in Nashville." He paused, Dr. Berne voiced no further objection. "You said there were a couple of complications, what haven't you told me?"

"She's been asking for you."

#

Anna Medal-Soam was absolutely livid, when Dr. Berne personally refused to allow her to see Miss Jones. She sensed intuitively, that Miss Jones and Misti were one in the same. And she was not about let any snotty nosed Doctor of Psychiatry stand in her way. Medal-Soam stormed out the front entrance of Parkview. She glanced at her watch, it was nearly noon. With any luck she'd catch Tommy Williams out for his noon run around the Caring First campus, twenty minutes away in Brentwood. There was no point in trying to telephone, Tommy had a bad habit of only answering calls that related to whatever issue he was currently focused on. One of the reasons he'd been so successful, Anna thought, in business at least. He never let anything, or anyone, break his concentration.

#

"I'm sorry Anna, Mr. Williams is not in, matter of fact he's scheduled to be out of town for the rest of the week." Mary Foldenstein maintained a neutral gaze, as she looked at the women who stood before her.

Anna shook her head, then smiled in a friendly conspiratorial way. "I don't suppose it would do any good to beg you for a number where I could reach him immediately?"

Mary returned her smile, and shook her head slowly. "No. But if its important, I'll do my best to reach him personally, and request he call you back as soon as possible."

"Please," Anna said, "let him know it's *very* important." She thought for a moment. "Which of your top executives has authority over Parkview Hospital. I'm having some difficulty getting in to see a friend there."

Mary thought for a moment. "Actually the executive in charge of domestic hospitals is on the third floor, John Brown, but really anyone up here could assist you. Let me see, I think Mr. Maxwell is still in, he often takes a late lunch. Shall I buzz him?"

"Yes, please do. I'd like to meet him in any case."

#

Allen Maxwell put on his most charming smile, as he motioned for Anna Medal-Soam to take a seat, in one of two arm chairs that stood across from his desk. While he took the other, to be less formal, and to appear as friendly and helpful as possible.

"Well it is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Anna. You have a lovely voice on the telephone, which is enhanced by meeting you now in person. So often the image conveyed by voice alone is deceiving."

He smiled unctuously as Anna bowed her head momentarily in acceptance of his compliment.

"So you feel you've located, Misti. That is wonderful. Is she all right?"

Anna sighed. "That's exactly what I am trying to determine, but I'm getting zero cooperation from the Parkview staff."

Maxwell raised his eyebrows. "Really? That's quite unusual. Parkview is one of our favorites, because it's the one we started with first. And we always receive such compliments on their courtesy, service, and professionalism. What exactly is the problem you're having?"

Anna Medal-Soam explained her experience at Parkview, going into each conversation's detail, and repeating what she believed to be the word for word responses she received from each staff member, at times almost mimicking the tone of the speaker's voice.

Allen Maxwell sat, and listened patiently, nodding his head slowly now and then, while maintaining a look of concern on his face. All the while thinking: *Please get to the point. Why do women always feel they have to repeat every word and nuance in a conversation in order to get a point across.*

Finally, Anna came to the end of her story.

"This is most disconcerting, Anna. May I call you Anna?"

"Yes."

"I know Mr. Williams would be quite upset if he knew anyone had been treated in this manner. I can't imagine his reaction if he learned this incident had happened to you. Sometimes there are protocols doctors must follow to protect their patients, but this is certainly uncalled for. Let me make a quick telephone call."

Maxwell arose from his chair, and stepped around his desk. Anna Medal-Soam observed him with a benign smile on her face, while thinking: You reek of mendacity. I'd have more trust in a rabid Rottweiler. But perhaps you have just enough wit ,and organizational clout ,to get me in to see Misti, and right now that's all I am concerned about.

"Hello, Mary, would you get the Administrator of Parkview Hospital, David Welch, on the line for me, please."

Maxwell returned the telephone receiver to the console, folded his hands and rested them on his leather desk pad. He looked across at Anna. "Your call this morning came as quite a shock." He paused for a moment to observe Anna's reaction, see if she might respond in some way that would indicate she were aware that Misti had worked for him at one time. Reveal how much Misti might have told her.

Anna cocked her head to one side, questioningly.

"Misti worked for me at one time."

Anna maintained a neutral expression, but her mind went back to an incident she'd forgotten about when she and Misti were out for an evening together. She remembered Misti pointing Maxwell out as he climbed into a car, saying she'd worked for him at one time.

"Really?" Anna said casually. "Misti never mentioned that to me. I was under the impression she was a teacher here in Brentwood."

Maxwell nodded his head. "Yes, but prior she worked as a temp, right outside this door, actually." He paused, and smiled. "So you can imagine how surprised I was by your telephone call this morning. In fact, as soon as you said good-bye, I immediately started calling local hospitals to see if she'd been admitted following the fire we had at Green Acres. But I was unsuccessful in locating her, of course, I didn't think of the possibility of a pseudonym."

Just then the telephone *brrred* on his desk. Anna listened to the one sided conversation, then waited for a full explanation when Maxwell hung up.

Maxwell frowned, then sighed. "I'm afraid I can't be of much help, Anna. The *Miss Jones* you referred to has been released. And Dr. Berne is apparently..." Maxwell paused mid-sentence. He picked up the telephone, then dialed a four digit number.

"Hello, this is Allen Maxwell up on five. Who am I speaking to? Judy, would you do me a huge favor. Take a look at the mailing roster for Parkview Hospital. I'm looking for a Dr. Lawrence Berne. No I don't recognize the name either. That's right, we do kinda keep tabs on the staff there. Judy? Would you check that list for me... now. Thank you."

Maxwell stared down at his desk top. His shoulders became a little hunched as the seconds slipped by. He straightened them suddenly.

"Really? You're sure? Thank you, Judy."

Maxwell hung up the telephone, then stared across the desk at Anna Medal-Soam for several moments before speaking. It occurred to Anna the look of concern apparent on his face was the first genuine expression she'd seen from him thus far.

"That's odd," Maxwell said. "We have no Lawrence Berne listed as a physician at Parkview."

#

The red and white ambulance drove through a service gate at the Nashville Metropolitan Airport, it turned right, driving between a row of parked vehicles at the rear of aircraft hangars, along the eastern perimeter of the airport, across the runway from the main terminal.

When the ambulance reached Rossmore Aviation, it turned left, using an alley between the hangars to access the aircraft parking ramp. Several business jets were tied down, along with light twins, and single engine aircraft.

The doors, which at night sealed the cavernous entrance to Rossmore's hangar, were open. The ambulance driver carefully maneuvered the vehicle inside, rolling slowly to the rear of the hangar, careful to stay well clear of parked aircraft.

Jim Richards watched as the driver swung the ambulance around, then deftly backed up, so the double doors at the rear faced the entrance to the pilot's quiet room.

He'd called Matt Harding at Execujet West. Matt assured him he'd have a Gulfstream II on the ground in Nashville by three o'clock that afternoon. He'd personally fly it. Richards glanced at his watch, 13:45. Only an hour and fifteen minutes to wait.

#

Allen Maxwell stared across the surface of the Parkview Hospital Administrator's desk, completely non-plused. He'd listened patiently to David Welch's account of his follow up to Maxwell's call around noon that day.

"Let me make certain I understand this completely," Maxwell said. "You're telling me, not one, but two physicians, plus a Nurse Supervisor, treated a patient in this hospital, and none of them were actually employees of Parkview?"

David Welch compressed his lips, and swallowed. His throat felt dry, his stomach tight from anxiety. He'd always received the highest praise for the care and service provided by his facility, while at the same time keeping staff costs down to an absolute minimum. No one at corporate headquarters ever questioned how the results were obtained. Now, all of a sudden, Allen Maxwell, a Senior Vice-President was in his office asking questions. Worst of all, Welch did not know if Maxwell was in fact entitled to the answers.

"David, I'm waiting for an explanation. How is it possible for three non-employees to work in this facility, even act as Supervisory staff, and not have other employees question their level of authority?"

David Welch took a deep breath, and sighed. "With all due respect, Mr. Maxwell, I think you need to take this matter up with John Brown over at corporate. He's the one in charge of our supplemental staffing program."

Maxwell frowned. "Supplemental staffing? What are you talking about? I've seen nothing in your budget reports that refers to supplemental staffing. And John Brown is a mid-level facilities manager. He has no discretionary authority over budgets, or staffing. What in the world are you talking about?"

Perspiration began to form on David Welch's lip. "I'm sorry, Mr. Maxwell. You really need to take it up with John. Shall I call him for you?" Welch asked as he started to reach for the telephone on his desk.

Maxwell's anger flashed suddenly, he was not in the habit of having his questions parried, or his authority questioned. "Touch that telephone, David, and you'll be on the street before the day is out. How dare you speak to me in such an insubordinate manner. Who the hell do you think you're talking to anyway? John Brown is two floors below my level, he reports to me, goddamn it! Now I'm only going to ask you one more time, and you had better be entirely forthcoming, or I swear I'll have your ass canned before this day is out."

Welch's face turned red, he'd never come up against this kind of a situation before, no one from corporate had ever questioned the arrangement.



And nothing in his direct orders addressed the possibility of a VP from corporate questioning Parkview's practices.

David Welch quickly reviewed in his mind the organizational chart of Caring First's corporate structure, as best he could remember, and though he could not recall Allen Maxwell's specific authority, he did recall Maxwell was one of their senior executives, and certainly well above John Brown.

"I'm sorry Mr. Maxwell, I didn't mean to be insubordinate. I was just following the orders given to me by my superior. But you are completely right, they were not designed for someone of your level and authority, rather for outsiders."

Maxwell softened the expression on his face, to take a little pressure off Welch, he didn't want him so nervous he'd forget something important. Clearly he was about to open up. Maxwell raised one eyebrow, and cocked his head to one side, waiting for Welch to begin.

"We have what is called a Supplementary Staffing Program, it's completely off our regular budget. There's a rotation of personnel from other Caring First hospitals who work with our regular staff, or handle special cases that require greater service than we'd normally have available. Though the rationale has never been explained to me, I suppose the purpose is to assure Parkview remains a highly profitable facility without sacrificing flagship service. After all this is the hospital *corporate* always uses as an example when drafting hospital management proposals to owners of other facilities. It wouldn't do to have service complaints on file with state agencies."

Maxwell frowned. "You mean anyone pretending to be a nurse, or doctor, can just walk in here and start providing medical services?"

"Oh heavens no," Welch exclaimed with a nervous laugh. "Rotational staff come to us with special ID cards. A magnetic strip on the back, encoded with their professional data. We have a reader that scans the strip. It's all coordinated out of John Brown's office, I really don't know the details."

Maxwell nodded his head slowly. "All right. Now tell me, in regard to the patient you identified as Miss Jones, did her treating staff just suddenly appear?"

Welch shook his head. "No, not entirely. Dr. Sather Friendly, and Sheila Stern, the Nurse Supervisor have been members of the rotational staff for the past five months. Dr. Lawrence Berne, however, arrived the day after Miss Jones was admitted. After you called earlier, I decided, out of my own curiosity, to run a check on the rotational staff roster to see if it included Dr. Berne, and it did. The odd part was that Berne, Friendly, and Sheila Stern have all been

transferred off staff effective noon today. Miss Jones was discharged at noon also."

Maxwell took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "Do you have any idea of where Dr. Berne, and the others, went?"

Welch shook his head. "No, we never do know."

"Sudden departures are the norm then?" Maxwell asked.

Welch shook his head again. "No, not like this. Usually, we receive notice of an anticipated staff change.

"Another unusual aspect of this case, is all the patient records for Miss Jones are missing. I asked one of our regular staff, Miss Walters, about that, and she said: Ms. Stern handled the Jones file herself. And then Miss Walters opined that she was surprised Miss Jones was discharged, because in her opinion she was not ready to be released."

Maxwell frowned. "What was she being treated for?"

"According to Miss Walters, she had total memory loss from drug over dose." Welch paused for a moment. "If you'd like, Mr. Maxwell, I could ask John Brown for more detail on the backgrounds of the rotational employees involved?"

Maxwell did not respond immediately, he seemed lost in some other thought. When he did respond, it was in an almost off hand manner. "Oh, no need to bother John. I'll ask him myself, when I see him over at corporate. And I apologize for getting so upset with you." He smiled in plaintive sort of way. "Let's just keep this conversation between ourselves, shall we?"

David Welch smiled warmly, instantly relieved because Allen Maxwell had just assured him his job was not in jeopardy. And in any case, now he had something on Maxwell, a favor of sorts, deliberately *forgetting* Maxwell's prying into procedures obviously not within his authority. If they'd been, he'd have already known about them.

"Certainly, Mr. Maxwell." Welch said with sincerity. "Our conversation will not leave this room."

#

Inside a nondescript building, in a light industrial park outside Alexandria, Virginia, row upon row of reel to reel tape recorders, hummed and turned, stopped and started. Each slaved to telephone lines that transmitted sound

patterns from repeaters linked to microphone transmitters placed in sensitive locations where that which was discussed might be of import to national security.

The last sound the tape recorder slaved to extension 15044 picked up before shutting down until the next transmission restarted it, was the sound of David Welch's office door closing as he accompanied Allen Maxwell to the front entrance of Parkview Hospital.

#

Jim Richards sat beside Misti, holding her hand. She was frightened, but tried to maintain a brave front.

"Oregon. Is that really my home?" She asked.

Richards nodded his head. "Yes. Your folks, mom and dad are there. Also a sister and brother. Dr. Berne says just being in their presence will help you begin to recall all you've forgotten."

She smiled, but her eyes remained skeptical. "Right now, the only person I have any recognition of is you. I remember each time I awoke you were sitting by my side. At least I know someone cares that much for me."

Her words pierced Jim Richards' heart, he swallowed hard keeping his emotions in check. His decision to let her go was made in her best interest, and no matter how difficult, he'd abide by it. He, and Dr. Berne, had quickly put together a scenario that fit the circumstances of her ordeal, he was allowed to tell her only so much.

"I know your name is Jim, and that seems familiar to me, but you still haven't told me who you are, or why I meant enough to you to be by my side all this time?"

Jim Richards took a deep breath, he had to be very careful how he phrased, and delivered, the next few minutes of information. "My full name is James Robert Bushman. I write music, and sometimes perform."

Jim Richards paused for a moment. Misti gave no indication this first revelation sparked any memory at all. He continued. "You and I were married for awhile, we lived in the San Francisco bay area, Marin County to be exact. But our goals began to go in different directions. We divorced amicably, and have remained friends through out. You came to Nashville, because you wanted to be a teacher." He paused again.

"Why Nashville? How long have I been here in Nashville?"

"About two years. You came because there were opportunities for you to teach, which did not exist in California. At first, you stayed at my place. But old disagreements surfaced."

Tears came to Misti's eyes. "Was it my fault? I have the feeling I can be...selfish."

Richards squeezed her hand, and smiled. "No nothing like that." He thought for a moment. "When we were first married, I had an entirely different career. Suddenly I changed direction, started playing music for a living. Music had been a hobby of mine. You wanted children, I didn't. You wanted a normal life. I wanted no responsibility."

Misti frowned. "I think I remember seeing you perform." She beamed. "You were very good."

Jim Richards smiled broadly. "You see, already it's beginning to come back."

"Don't stop, please go on." She said enthusiastically.

"All right, but Dr. Berne says we have to go slowly."

Misti lifted both hands in a gesture of excitement. "Dr. Berne isn't here right now, and he's so stuffy. Please tell me as much as you can before he returns."

Jim Richards smiled, and shook his head as if any resistance to her request would be futile. "Okay, but why don't you ask me a question, because I'm not sure where to go from here."

Misti thought for a moment. "What happened to me? I've asked that question several times of Dr. Berne, but he refuses to tell me."

Jim Richards sighed. "Okay, but stop me at any point if it's too difficult for you."

Misti nodded her head, her eyes bright, yet wary.

"Five nights ago you had an automobile accident. Your car went off the road into the Cumberland River. Fortunately, it went into the shallows, so the roof and rear remained above water, leaving just a small space of air to breath."

Misti face went pale, and Jim Richards almost called for Dr. Berne. But then her color returned, though a frightened look remained in her eyes. She began to speak slowly, having difficulty expressing her thoughts. "I remember being in water. Trapped, thinking I would die, that no one would find me. And voices, arguing. Loud noises. Being questioned."

Richards nodded his head in agreement. "You were hypothermic, core temperature way below normal, which under some circumstances creates strange hallucinations, dream like, nightmarish perhaps. The noises were undoubtedly the sound of the rescuers. They used the jaws of life to open the top of your car, to get you out. Lots of banging, and popping. They had to shout above the din to be heard."

Misti was quiet for several moments. "How did they find me?"

Richards looked away for a moment. "I found you entirely by chance. I came by your apartment, you weren't home. Coincidentally, I must have followed the same route you took into town. I saw a break in the guard rail, something made me stop to see what might have happened."

#

Allen Maxwell strode down the semi-circular driveway outside the front entrance to Parkview Hospital, when he reached the end, he turned left, then left again, skirting the side of the building, following the alley that led to the emergency entrance. The automatic doors sighed open, and he stepped through. Displaying Caring First identification to the security guard posted at the door, which also served as the employee entrance, Maxwell admitted himself to the dispatch office.

Parkview, unlike most other hospitals, maintained its own fleet of ambulances, staffed twenty-four hours a day with full time paramedics.

Inside the dispatch office, Maxwell identified himself to the Dispatcher on duty.

"I'd like to see the dispatch log for today," Allen said.

The Dispatcher reached across her desk for a clip board that hung on a tea cup hook. She handed it Maxwell. "Can I help you find something?" She asked in a polite tone.

Maxwell ignored her offer, scanning down the roster, his finger tracing the hand writing, entries by various drivers. Ten minutes after Noon, he noted, Ambulance 3 was checked out, no destination noted in the log. And if he

questioned the crew, there was no doubt in his mind, the only thing he'd learn from them, was they'd violated rules and taken the damn thing to McDonald's for lunch.

#

Dr. Berne came through the door. Misti's eyes followed him warily as he moved a metal chair out of the corner of the room, and placed it across from her, then sat down.

"Misti, the jet has arrived to take us to Oregon. Sheila, and I will be accompanying you. Your parents will be at the airport when we arrive. They said, Olaf has been acting strange all week. He must be anxious to see you too." Then Berne smiled broadly.

Misti frowned. "Who is Olaf?"

"Your dog, a great big mutt according to your mom."

Misti immediately looked from Dr. Berne to Jim Richards, seeking reassurance.

He squeezed her hand, then released it. "You'll be fine, Misti." He leaned forward, and kissed her gently on the forehead. She hugged him tightly, he had to remove her arms from about his neck.

Tears came again to Misti's eyes.

"Please don't cry he said, things will be good again. You'll regain all you've lost."

Her lower lip trembled, and she shook her head. "I don't think so. I think I've lost you forever. Something *I* must have done when we were together, and I'm *so* sorry."

Jim Richards took her hand again. Using every ounce of will to keep his emotions under control. "Misti, please believe me when I say, whatever went wrong between us was my fault, not yours. But it's too soon to revisit those emotions. Someday, it will be clear to you, I promise. Someday you'll have all your heart desires."

#

Jim Richards watched the Execujet West Gulfstream lift off, climbing into a clear blue sky. A single tear welled up, then rolled down his face into his closely

trimmed beard. He knew deep down inside, he'd never hold her in his arms again. But that alone was not what pained him most. It was the knowledge that he'd always have the memory of their sweet times together, while she might never again recall all the love they'd shared. Not that is, if all went according to plan, and the *mind twister* assigned to her case did his job properly.

# Chapter Thirty

Jim Richards poured himself another three fingers of Johnny Walker Black. Then settled down on the love seat out on the screened porch, to watch the sunset fade. Out west in San Francisco, the colors he now gazed at were yet two hours away. But in his mind he saw the twin towers of the Golden Gate Bridge, behind which an orange ball of light sizzled into the Pacific Ocean. He and Misti had stood on the skirts of Mount Tamalpais many an evening, watching the splendor of such sunsets. Never imagining a day would come when they would not walk together, whenever the whim struck them, to revel in its glory.

The sound of an automobile's engine, motoring slowly down the driveway broke his reverie. He looked in the direction of the sound. Alexander was already through the acrylic two way pet hatch, Richards had placed in the screen door. He rounded the corner at the end of the house, stopped, lowered his head, sniffed, then wagged his tail. *Well, it was not an unwelcome guest, at least,* Richards thought. And then Anna Medal-Soam appeared around the end of the house. *Maybe Alexander wasn't such a good judge of character after all.* Jim Richards arose from the love seat. Then stepped to the rear door, and held it open.

Anna Medal-Soam was dressed in a short, navy blue, business skirt that flattered her long shapely legs. She wore a thin cotton T-shirt, with a V-neck that revealed a discreet hint of cleavage, firm full breasts. She wore no bra, Jim Richards noted her nipples were slightly erect, and wondered what that meant: Excitement or fear? One or the other, for it was too warm an evening for any other explanation.

Although he held the door open, a gesture inviting her in, she stopped short. Glaring at him for a moment.

"My name is Anna Medal-Soam. Is Misti here?" She asked, without preamble.

"No," he answered curtly.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"Are you waiting for me to say: Enter freely, go freely?"



She laughed suddenly, the tension unexpectedly broken. Then cocked her head to one side. "Dracula?"

"Bram Stoker, actually." He smiled disarmingly. "Please come in."

She stepped past him, then turned. "I..."

"Drink? You look like you could use one."

"No... Well yes, I could as a matter of fact."

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Scotch and soda?"

She smiled quizzically. "How did you know?"

Richards strode towards the kitchen. "Just a lucky guess." *And one night's surveillance*, Richards thought, *when you and Misti could have cared less who might have been observing.*

He returned with Anna's drink. Then motioned her towards the love seat, while he sat at the far end of one of the picnic table benches, his back against a roof support. "Now tell me: Why in the world would you suppose Misti would be here with me tonight?"

Anna Medal-Soam took a pull at her drink. "Desperation I guess," then she laughed nervously. "She seems to have disappeared."

Jim Richards expression remained neutral. "Really? Have you been by her place?"

Anna nodded her head. "It's empty. The manager said movers came late this morning, and packed everything up."

Jim Richards shook his head, and sighed. "This may come as a shock to you, Anna. But Misti is very impulsive. It's not the first time she's done this sort of thing, in fact, it's the reason we came here in the first place."

Anna stared at Jim Richards, openly skeptical, "I don't believe you."

Jim Richards smiled. "And I don't blame you. I wouldn't believe me either, if I were you. Nevertheless, it's true."

Anna frowned. "But why? I've seen nothing in her personality profile to support such a premise."

Jim Richards looked away for a moment. "Did Misti ever tell you about the game we played, when we were married, and living in the bay area?"

Anna thought for a moment. "She said you traveled a lot, that when you came home, you made it seem as if it was always the first date."

Jim Richards smiled sardonically. "I see...well I suppose that would be one way of looking at it. Actually, I suspected all along, the only way I could keep her interested in me was to pretend to be someone new and different, so the excitement of that first kiss would never wear off.

"But then one day she left me. Just disappeared. But she also left a note, it said: *When I was a little girl I used to play hide and seek. I would hide where I knew the others would eventually find me. I think it was my first erotic experience. As the others got close, I would actually wet my pants. Can you find me?*"

He proceeded to tell a story about how he'd followed clues to her location. How he'd watched her for a week or so, leaving hints, here and there, that he was near. Then the rapprochement. How they'd agreed a change in their lives was needed. A move, a new career. Teaching for her. Music for him. As Jim Richards spoke, he allowed his voice to gradually deepen, until it took on the sonorous note of a radio announcer telling a compelling story. He spoke rhythmically at times, creating an hypnotic atmosphere. As the twilight faded and darkness came on, he moved closer to Anna until they were face to face, he on the near end of the bench, she leaning forward in the love seat.

The story was not spontaneously constructed. From the moment Dr. Berne had indicated Anna Medal-Soam was inquiring about Misti, Jim Richards knew he'd have to come up with something to dissuade her from further investigation. The last thing he wanted was for either she, or Allen Maxwell, to discover where Misti had been taken. By the time he'd completed telling the story, including all the details that led up to the final seduction, Anna Medal-Soam was breathing a bit more rapidly than when she'd first arrived. A hint of perspiration had broken out on her upper lip.

Several moments of silence passed, then Anna said huskily, "Did she leave a note this time?"

"No." Was all he said. Her moist, slightly parted lips were only inches away. He let the moment pass, then moved back to his spot at the far end of the bench. He did not desire her, though he would perform if it came down to it. It

might be important to play the part of someone who was willing to move on to other romantic adventures.

Was she a player? Perhaps, she'd come in the hope of bedding him? Another notch on her bed post. Another way of getting even for the wrong done to her by her *chippy* husband.

Jim Richards had done his homework long before the crisis at Green Acres ever occurred. From the moment he'd learned Misti was being mentored by a Psych. Professor at U.T., he'd set about discovering Anna's background: Using basic surveillance, local networking, and clandestine perusal of personal data, readily available via Ty Harding International's access to various files, and data bases.

There was nothing personal in his inquiry, just a matter of being prudent. A requisite for someone in his line of work. After all, she'd be in a position to glean information from Misti about him, insights only a wife could reveal. Weaknesses a good psychologist could use, or share with others to his detriment.

Suddenly, Anna stood up. She stepped towards the door, then stopped, and turned towards Jim Richards, who'd arisen himself, though he made no move towards her. She seemed to gather her self together, as if it were important not to leave like a titillated school girl. "If you hear from Misti? Please let me know." She said in a matter of fact tone of voice.

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Likewise, if she should contact you." He gazed at her evenly. "Though I've ceased to play her game, it doesn't mean I no longer care." Anna's face seemed to soften for a moment, perhaps he'd dissuaded her from any further search. At least he hoped so. "Good night, Anna."

She looked at him for a long moment, he felt her gaze in the semi-darkness running the length of his body. "Good night, Jim."

#

Anna Medal-Soam sat at her desk, in the tiny cubicle she'd been assigned at the University of Tennessee, and thought about the story Misti's ex-husband had told her. She reviewed the psychological tests Misti had taken, as well as, reminiscing the times they'd spent together. No matter how open minded she tried to remain, there was no indication Misti had the personality required to simply disappear. On the other hand, when she'd finally been able to speak directly to Harris Williams, and he had subsequently looked into the issue of the woman at Parkview, who had so closely resembled Misti, he was able to assure her,

notwithstanding the apparent similarity of appearance, the woman in question was definitely not Misti DiMartine.

Nevertheless, the only way a scenario such as the one described by her ex-husband could possibly be supported, was if Misti were an undiagnosed schizophrenic with a multiple-personality disorder. Yet if that were the case, there was not even the hint of such a problem in any of her tests, nor in the way she conducted her day to day life.

Anna Medal-Soam gave no credence to multiple personalities so compartmentalized they'd not show up as inconsistencies in personal preference testing. If Misti were in fact such an individual, her case was rare indeed.

The scary answer to the paradox, was her ex-husband might not be telling the truth, convincing though he certainly seemed. Perhaps his story was meant to conceal the true reason for her disappearance. Anna chastised herself for not being more incredulous at the time, pressing forward with insightful questions that might develop inconsistencies. Instead she'd nearly been dissuaded from further inquiry.

If he were hiding the truth, it could well be he'd participated in her disappearance. But why? Was he jealous? Angry he'd lost control? Those were certainly valid possibilities, and would fit the personality of someone who needed to control, and manipulate, another person with whom they had a relationship.

Hadn't he attempted to manipulate her? Oh for Christ's sake, why not admit it. He had manipulated her. Even to the extent she found herself indulging in a sexual fantasy about him that very night as she drove home. She shook her head, and sighed, she had to admit she found him attractive in spite of the preconceived notions she'd developed about him based upon her conversations with Misti...and her own cynicism, she had to admit that.

He was much older than she'd expected, at least six years older than Misti, of that she was sure. Yet the impression she'd had from Misti's description, was he was her age, or even a little younger. Certainly his features, and fit physique, gave him a youthful appearance. Anna Medal-Soam sighed once more. She needed to continue her investigation. It was the only way to resolve once and for all, what had become of Misti.

#

Jim Richards measured the cedar *one by ten*, then set the plank on a pair of saw horses. He cut the board to the length measured. It would become the top step, of three that led onto the rear deck. Dry rot was a constant battle.

He needed to be prepared to leave Nashville at a moment's notice, which meant getting the house into shape so it could be placed on the market.

Jim Richards took a breather, sweat poured down his face. He glanced up at the sun burning through the leaves, and branches, of a young elm tree. It was still quite warm in the second week of October.

#

Allen Maxwell left work early. He climbed into his Mercedes, and made the half hour drive to Green Acres. He wanted to think, and did not want to be disturbed by decisions attendant Caring First's operations. He parked in the employee parking lot, adjacent to the main building, got out, then walked around to the back of the building, and climbed the rear porch steps. As he approached, he glanced to his right at the empty space where the Annex had once stood. Inside the mansion, he was greeted by Gretta Bosanvich.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Maxwell. This is a pleasant surprise, we so seldom see you here at Green Acres. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Maxwell smiled pleasantly, Ms. Bosanvich was one of their best employees. "No thank you, Gretta." He shook his head and smiled. "I just needed to get away from the office, and go some place where I could sit and think, without telephones, or personal interruptions.

Gretta nodded her head once. "I understand completely, I'll see to it you're not disturbed. The police have allowed us to clean up the rooms. You'll find your office as nearly back to normal as possible."

"Thank you," Maxwell said.

Gretta continued, as if she needed to express something that had been on her mind for awhile. "You know, Mr. Maxwell, when the workmen first installed that one way mirror. What was it? Three, no three and half years ago. For the sleep deprivation experiments we were to conduct. Well, I had this terrible feeling that something bad was going to happen. And then when so much time went by, and we never used the damn thing, I sort of forgot the premonition. I wish we'd never installed it."

Maxwell let a kindly smile form on his face. He placed his hand gently on Gretta's shoulder. "I know what you mean. As a matter of fact, I'm going to have it removed, and walled-in again. Sylvia was a wonderful caregiver, she will be missed. I don't want that damn mirror there to mar her memory either."

Gretta nodded her head again. "Thank you, Mr. Maxwell. I guess you saw my meaning right away."

She watched as he slowly climbed the stairs, and thought to herself: *What a kind man. Such a shame to have lost his friend Wayne ,as well.* And then she returned to her duties, cross checking patient charts to assure each caregiver had kept up with patient needs.

#

Allen Maxwell closed the door to his office. He looked around the room. The red velvet curtains that hung before the one way mirror were drawn shut. The chair that once stood before it, had been returned to its proper position, next its mate near a round walnut table.

Maxwell crossed the room, and sat down on the love seat that made up part of a conversation area. He sat for several moments without any conscious thought, then gradually his mind began to mull over the issues that needed to be resolved.

He'd surmised Misti DiMartine had been transported to Oregon, her home state. He'd found her parent's address in personnel files, under "Who to call in case of Emergency". The next step had proven more difficult. He'd assumed she'd be taken to a Caring First facility, before being released to her parents' care, but a telephone check of all their facilities failed to uncover anyone admitted who fit Misti's description, with or without amnesia.

Which left two possibilities, either she was well enough to go home immediately, or she'd been transferred to another aircraft, and taken to a *safe* location. The second possibility was of greatest concern. If she were taken to a safe location, it would indicate whoever was in charge of her care had anticipated she'd be tracked. The only question was whether or not, her caretakers had anticipated it was he who'd track her? He'd been low key about his inquiries, but they were not conducted in a truly clandestine fashion.

#

Anna Medal-Soam pulled her silver Honda Prelude into one of the visitor's parking spaces at Green Acres. She left the sun roof open, and the doors unlocked as she stepped away from the car, to climb the stairs leading to the front porch. As she did so, she glanced over at the employee parking area. Misti's Oldsmobile was not there. She'd not expected it would be. Still if it had been, then it might have been an indication she'd gone off with someone, perhaps her ex-husband, and not returned.

Anna stepped through the wide screen door into the foyer of the old house. Directly in front of her was a semi-circular counter, behind which sat a woman who looked to be in her fifties. She seemed engrossed in paper work, failed to look up as Anna approached.

Anna stood at the counter, politely waiting for assistance from the woman whose name tag read: Gretta Bosanvich.

"I'll be right with you," the woman said without looking up.

Anna Medal-Soam glanced around the foyer, letting her gaze pause, now and then, on fine art prints depicting the plantation era. One in particular appeared to be of the old mansion. It was not the first time Anna had been to Green Acres. Dr. Passoff had given her a tour, during the formative stages of the intern program she'd put together for him.

Earlier in the day, she'd conversed with Passoff over the telephone, but he was of no help. He said it had been two weeks since he'd actually spoken with Misti. He'd been off to a conference in Chicago at the time of the fire.

"Can I help you?" Gretta's voice broke into Anna's thoughts.

Anna smiled, "I'm Dr. Anna Medal-Soam." She liked to use her full title whenever she wanted to establish control at the outset of a conversation. "I'm looking for whom ever would be in charge of operations since the tragic fire that took the life of Mr. Generette."

Ms. Bosanvich looked Anna up and down. It appeared she was in the process of deciding whether or not to respond to the question. Then her countenance softened slightly, as it seemed she recognized Anna from her prior visit. "You're with the University of Tennessee," she said. A statement, not a question. "I remember now. You helped Dr. Passoff set up the intern program."

Anna nodded. "That's correct."

"Well I suppose, " Gretta continued, "I would be the person you are seeking. At least, until Mr. Maxwell finds a replacement for poor Mr. Generette. Officially, I supervise our caregivers." She paused, sighed, and shook her head in frustration. "We're a little understaffed at the moment, so I'm handling the front desk. Recent events have been unsettling, there's been some staff turnover."

Anna gave Gretta an understanding smile. "I'm trying to locate one of our interns, Misti DiMartine. Have you seen her recently?"

Gretta Bosanvich thought for a moment. "Why no. Come to think of it. Not since the day before the fire."

"Did you happen to notice when she left that day. Did she leave alone?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't see her leave, which would not be unusual. Normally, I'd be either in my office in building three, or performing my rounds." She paused for a moment. "Has something happened to Misti?"

Anna turned her palms upwards. "That's what I'm trying to find out. I've not heard from her in two weeks. Usually, we chat at least once each week. When I learned of the fire, I immediately tried to call her, but was unsuccessful in reaching her ."

Gretta Bosanvich's jaw dropped momentarily. "Oh my God. She placed her hands on both sides of her face." Then she lowered her voice as if she were afraid someone might overhear their conversation, although there was no one else in the immediate area. "The afternoon before the fire, Mr. Generette summoned Misti to his office. I didn't see her again after that. To be honest, I presumed she'd been fired."

Anna's surprise was evident by the look on her face. "What in the world would lead you to believe Misti had been terminated? Was there some kind of problem with her work? If so, I was not informed as I should have been."

Gretta glanced around the room, again as if she were afraid of being overheard. "I'm not quite sure how to put this, but, well Misti was a bit of a flirt, especially around Dr. Passoff. She'd sometimes come to work in rather provocative outfits, and Mr. Generette didn't approve." Gretta pursed her lips. "On the day he called her into his office, she'd worn a short, little sun dress. It *was* a very warm day, but the dress was really not appropriate." Ms. Bosanvich glanced away, then looked sidelong at Anna. "Frankly it seemed as if she had nothing on underneath."

Anna was truly shocked, she reflexively put her hand to her mouth, as if she were covering a yawn. "Oh my goodness," she said. "I had no idea. Why didn't someone call me."

Gretta shrugged. "You know, frankly I could have cared less. The patients adored her, not just the ones assigned to her, but all of them. She was so bright and bubbly. Everyone just thought she was so cute and coquettish, reminded them of their younger days." Gretta smiled warmly. "I may not have personally approved of her attire, but I can only praise her good work."



Anna nodded her head, then frowned. "But Mr. Generette felt more strongly about the attire?"

Gretta shrugged. "Wayne was one of *those* boys, you know? Very prim and proper. Fastidious I would say. No, he did not approve."

Anna took a deep breath, she was no closer to solving the mystery of what had become of Misti. However, it did appear there was more credence to her ex-husband's story than she'd been willing to accept.

Gretta began to speak again, as if to herself. "The fire, and all the goings on that night, really turned things upside down here. We've lost patients. Families fearful for their well being, withdrew them from our care. Police and fire personnel everywhere. I hadn't even thought about Misti in all this time." She looked at Anna Medal-Soam for a long moment. Then suddenly her expression changed. Her mouth dropped open as if she'd seen a ghost.

Anna was amazed at the transformation, she glanced around behind her to see if someone, or something shocking had entered the room.

"Oh my God. Oh no. It can't be." Gretta Bosanvich moaned, as she grasped the edge of the counter for support.

Anna instinctively reached across to comfort her, covering the older woman's hand with hers. "Easy now. What has come to mind."

Gretta Bosanvich dark brown eyes displayed fear, and dismay. "Misti's car was parked in the employee parking lot the day after the fire. Then late that afternoon, a man came by to pick it up. He said he was from the Tennessee Department of Motor Vehicles. He showed me his identification, said the Department was impounding the car as part of the on going investigation."

Anna's face turned cold. "What did this man look like?"

"Oh I don't know," Ms. Bosanvich replied absent mindedly. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Except he seemed very fit. Dangerous. You know, like one of those SWAT team types."

"Tall, dark eyes, a neatly trimmed beard?" Anna asked.

Gretta Bosanvich did not answer immediately, it was as if she were in a daze. "A beard?" She repeated Anna's question. "No, not very tall. And he didn't have a beard." She stared at Anna, as if she were just not getting *it*. "The man's not important, Miss Medal-Soam." Gretta said with finality in her voice. "Don't

you understand? If Misti's not been seen since the fire. And her car was here after the fire..."

Gradually it dawned on Anna. "Then she too must have perished in the fire?"

Gretta Bosanvich's answer escaped her lips as a moan. "Yes, there's no other explanation."

#

Jim Richards took off the headphones and set them down on the work surface that held his recording equipment. The red light that silently informed him when the telephone was ringing, blinked angrily from its console. Richards reached over and picked up the receiver. Anna Medal-Soam was at the other end of the line. She wanted to see him as soon as possible. He offered to come over to her place, but she said she preferred to come to him if he didn't mind.

When her lights illuminated the driveway, he shut down the studio, and walked the length of the hall. They both reached the front door at the same time, and he opened it just as she was pressing her index finger against the door chime.

Jim Richards held the door open, she entered. She was dressed in a pair of tight fitting blue jeans, a pink cashmere sweater, and a pair of Espadrilles.

"Drink?" he asked. "You seem even more frazzled than the last time you dropped by unexpectedly."

"No... no thank you," she responded, her voice strained. She glanced around the living room, noting by the light cast from the entry way, there was no furniture. Only a selection of thriving plants, and a large bean bag chair.

Jim Richards read her thoughts. "The plants love the afternoon sun. Come this way, there's furniture in the family room."

He led the way. They each sat in a leather club chair. Anna curled her feet under her, then looked at him pensively, as if she were reticent to tell him what was so important it could not wait.

He sat patiently, said nothing. At last she began.

"Jim, I've some very disturbing news. Bad news really." She paused a moment. "I believe Misti was killed in the fire that destroyed the annex at Green Acres."

Jim Richards took the bombshell without overreacting, though he allowed concern to appear on his face. "What makes you think so?"

Anna told him of her conversation with Gretta.

"Have you spoken with the police, or fire investigators?" He asked.

She nodded her head emphatically. "Yes, but they were not at all helpful. They said they couldn't give me any information, because the investigation was still on going."

So I called a colleague at U.T., who does some occasional forensic work for the District Attorney's office. He made some inquiries. When he finally got back to me, he said the police were holding something back from public dissemination. But he was able to confirm that of the bodies recovered that night, one was female."

Jim Richards said nothing, he only stared at Anna allowing an expression of shock to slowly form. His mind immediately shifted into high gear. In all the news reports he'd read, no mention was ever made of the deceased caregiver. At first, he'd wondered why this fact had been withheld, but the more he pondered the question, the more it became clear, the police were using the information as a means of screening potential suspects.

According to Elmo, the premise of the investigation was a robbery gone bad. The police believed the person who'd killed Sylvia, had been interrupted during her rape by an accidental explosion in the annex. However evidence since discovered, indicated the explosion was intentional. That others, possibly accomplices of the rapist, had gone into the annex, where they'd surprised Wayne Generette, subsequently killing him. Then attempted to cover up their crime by torching the building, using the Bunsen burners as a source of ignition. Unfortunately for them, the explosion had gone off prematurely resulting in their death.

The police were optimistic they'd eventually arrest the party responsible for Sylvia's death, and intended to hold back some of the details from the press until they had a likely suspect under lock and key.

Jim Richards continued to stare at Anna Medal-Soam for several long moments, then rose suddenly from his chair and walked into the kitchen.

Anna had not known what to expect, what kind of reaction she would get. Clearly, he was shocked, yet his self-control was amazing, in complete agreement with the personality traits she'd already identified.

Jim Richards returned from the kitchen, a glass of Johnny, Black in one hand. Another mixed with soda in the other. He set her drink down. "In case you change your mind." He said in a husky voice.

Anna resisted the temptation to reach for the drink, she wanted to study his reactions with complete clarity of mind. His face was flushed, the whites of his eyes red. The edges of his eyes revealed tears, hastily wiped away with the back of his hand. He must have lost some of his control while pouring the drinks. She felt sorry for him, he was not a man who would ever want to show even the slightest hint of weakness.

Jim Richards took a solid pull on his drink. He stared at the carpet speaking as if to himself. "I should have paid more attention to what she'd said to me the last time we saw each other. She always claimed I never listened to her."

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, forcing another crocodile tear to emerge. He knew Anna Meda-Soam would never guess he'd downed a shot immediately upon entering the kitchen, causing his face to flush. Nor, that he'd sprayed a misting of ammonia cleanser towards the ceiling, then opened his eyes under the falling micro droplets, receiving the minimum amount necessary to redden them, though it stung like crazy until tears flowed freely to wash the substance away.

Anna reached for her own drink, took a pull, then said. "It wasn't your fault, Jim. There's nothing you could have done. If anyone has any blame its I, after all I placed her there."

Jim Richards raised his gaze from the carpet, and looked directly into her eyes. She expected to see anger, but instead saw a kind of compassion she'd not expected.

Yes, she *was* partially responsible, he thought. Not for killing Misti, but for placing her where Wayne Generette could easily lay his slimy hands on her.

He'd already tried to warn Anna off further investigation. Yet she continued to pursue her single minded purpose. He did not think she would be satisfied, until she had a complete explanation. She'd continue to network, to learn why Misti was in the Annex at the time it was blown up. In the process, she'd learn about the rape. And that the female body her colleague referred to, had not been found in the Annex. And there was no possibility it was Misti.

Many thoughts flitted through his mind, as the Johnny Black burned its way down. Among them: *Enter freely, go freely.* And, *curiosity killed the cat.* She was definitely curious, as fit her name. Sooner, or later, she'd discover the truth. For all concerned, it would be best if it were later. Perhaps there was a

way to use her innate curiosity to complete his assignment, while concomitantly buying time to develop a fool proof manuscript to assure she'd never find Misti.

"You misunderstand me, Anna." He sighed audibly. "Misti was convinced something odd was going on at Green Acres."

Anna frowned. "What do you mean?"

Jim Richards shrugged. "I don't know for certain, because I failed to give credence to what she was trying to tell me."

"She never said a word to me," Anna said. "What exactly did she tell you?"

Jim Richards took another pull at his drink. "When we first moved here, one of our neighbors told us about the old couple that used to own this place. They ended up at Green Acres, that's where they died.

"But Misti found them... well he, was still listed as a resident there. She thought perhaps our neighbors had been mistaken about his death. That only his wife had passed away. So she tried to locate him, she wanted to tell him of our life in their old home. How much we enjoyed it, that she'd come to visit him often. Misti was sweet that way, she'd lost her grandparents when she was very young. I think she sort of wanted to adopt Mr. Henderson."

"Henderson?"

"That was the name of the old couple who were here before us. Anyway, she went to Green Acres to see him. This was way before things fell apart for us, and we were still happy together." Richards fell silent, staring blankly into the space somewhere beyond Anna.

"Was she able to find him?" Anna asked gently after a few moments had passed.

"Uh? Oh, no. In fact, she was told he'd passed away sometime before."

Anna frowned. "If the neighbors knew he'd died, how did Misti get the idea he was alive?"

Jim Richards smiled cynically. "I suppose you know she worked for Allen Maxwell at Caring First?"

Anna nodded her head. "That's what Maxwell said."

Richards raised both eyebrows. "And what did he tell you?"

"Only that she worked as a temp for a short while. Then began teaching at The Christian Academy."

Richards scowled. "Truth is, Maxwell asked her to copy some records for him pertaining to Green Acres. They were Medicare records. Mr. Henderson was listed as alive and well."

Anna's eyes opened wide with astonishment.

Richards smiled at her reaction. "Get the picture?"

She nodded her head. "Oh yes. Misti goes out to Green Acres, finds he's not there. And confronts Allen Maxwell."

"Who justifies it as a typographical error, then arranges to have her fired."

"On what grounds?" Anna asked.

"A permanent position didn't come available as expected."

"Wasn't he afraid she'd blow the whistle on him?"

The cynical smile returned to Richards' face. "Afraid? Of what. She had no *hard* evidence. I mean come on, Anna. Ever heard of a *shredder*?"

"But she agreed to intern for my program?"

Richards nodded her head. "Of course, you were her mentor. She admired you, wanted to do well for you. No way she'd have turned the position down. She knew from working for Maxwell at Caring First, that Green Acres was nothing but an investment for him. He almost never went out there, had no direct interest in the day to day management. So she figured he'd never know she was there. In fact, she found the irony of it rather humorous. That is until she came across more Hendersons."

"More Hendersons?" Anna asked.

Jim Richards nodded his head. "Yeah. More bogus Medicare patients."

"But why in the world didn't she report her findings?"

"Because when she tried to tell me about what she thought was going on, I laughed at her. I mean let's face it, Maxwell makes too much money, enjoys too

*fine* a community reputation, to risk getting caught bilking Uncle Sam for a few bucks." Richards took a pull at his drink.

"I told her to forget it." Jim Richards looked away, and his face turned ugly with anger. He downed the rest of his Johnny, Black. He looked at Anna, fire in his eyes. "That was a week before the goddamn fire." He balled his fists, pounded them on the arms of his chair. "I'll kill the son of bitch! I swear it."

Anna uncurled her legs, and slipped to the carpet, grabbing Jim Richards by both wrists. "Easy, Jim. That's not the way."

He looked down into Anna's blue eyes. Real tears of anger, rimed his own. "So what am I supposed to do, let him get away with murder? Don't you understand, the evidence was most likely in the annex building."

Anna did not let go of his wrists, she gripped them tightly as her own anger began to rise. "There's another way. My intern program is still on going at Green Acres. I have no replacement for Misti, and I'm eminently qualified to do the work myself."

She relaxed her grip on his wrists, then took both his hands in hers. "Maxwell may have destroyed hard evidence, however, he may have only destroyed that which he believed Misti might have seen. This kind of a scam cannot be run unassisted, others on staff know what he's been doing.

"They may be looking the other way, because it appears to be a white collar crime that hurts no one except the government, who can waste more money in one day than Green Acres pilfers in a year. That will be the justification.

"But there's always a guilty conscience, someone who's put off, or disgruntled, and I'll find them. Then you, and I, will go to the authorities. And believe me, when it comes right down to it, I do have some clout in this town. Allen Maxwell will not get away with this, his *fine* reputation and money be damned."

#

Jim Richards watched the tail lights of Anna Medal-Soam's Prelude fade away down Fischer Lane. He stepped back through the front door, closed and locked it. Then padded down the hallway towards the master bedroom.

He stood before the bathroom mirror, and stared at his reflection. Suddenly through some inner sight, unbidden, he saw something other than the two dimensional countenance of his reflection. Something he'd become as a result

of compromises he'd made in his life. And he did not much like the image he now saw looking back at him.



# Chapter Thirty-one

October 1980

They arrived separately on commercial flights from various cities in Europe, carrying passports whose countries of origin were not held in disfavor by the current rulers of Iran. Each spoke the language, wore the clothes, and carried personal effects fitting their apparent country of origin.

They did not look like U.S. Navy SEALs, at least not the image found on recruitment posters. Or in the hearts of the impressionable young women who combed the bars along Coronado strand across the bay from San Diego, hoping to meet a newly graduated Frogman.

Vince Morris' beard, though only a few days old, was already filling in nicely. Fitting a man who hailed from Sicily. Frank Prescott carried a passport indicating he was from the town of Ratigan, Germany. And Bob Spencer made a quite passable Frenchman.

Each would make his way independently about the city, gathering intelligence, learning the lay of the land, and making certain they were not being surveiled. Three days after their arrival, they met Bob Jacobson, then proceeded to link up with Steve Sheffield, and Ross McIntyer. Then for the first time in nearly a year they were again a full team. Albeit without Dave Wilcox, making it a bitter sweet reunion.

#

October is the most pleasant time of year in Nashville, the days are warm with low humidity. The nights cool and invigorating, reminding Jim Richards of California. He sat out on the newly finished deck at the rear of his house, and read for a second time the letter he'd received from Ronald Reagan. He smiled, then shook his head at the irony. The letter was written to J. Robert Bushman, thanking him for a song recorded by Jimmy Ocean in support of Mr. Reagan's Presidential campaign in Tennessee. Dusty Pickom had called in September, saying he'd had a request for a song to run behind a local radio spot in support of Ronald Reagan's election. The thing that amazed Jim Richards, was the date on the letter: October 18, 1980. Mr. Reagan had taken time in the middle of the busiest period of his campaign to write a thank you note. Jim Richards picked up his Gibson J-45 and began to sing:

Once there was a time, when kings ruled our lives.  
They believed they held the keys to destiny.  
We sailed into the west, our ships failed not the test.  
To America the land of liberty.

We found a land so great, a century of fate  
Would show us only half there was to see.  
And with our courage high, we severed all the ties  
That bound America the land of liberty.

Working alone, we forged from wood and stone.  
A nation that would stand with dignity.  
We gathered the best, they came from east and west.  
To show the world the strength in being free.

And here we are today, the first to lead the way  
The first to lend a hand to all who need.  
A guiding light to see, the hope of peace to be  
We're America the land of liberty.

A guiding light to see, the hope of peace to be

We're America the land of liberty.

Jim Richards held the last note, then listened to its fading echoes carom off the walls of his house, and out into the woods behind. And then he laughed out loud. It struck him as terribly funny: No one would ever know who actually wrote the song. Or, that the writer himself was a *cold warrior*, who'd enlisted *for the duration* so many years before.

*Cold War*, an odd name. It certainly didn't seem cold in the heat of battle: On university campuses during the sixties. In the jungles of Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Or in Vietnam where *cold* had turned full *hot*.

And it wouldn't seem *cold* to the field operatives who'd lose their lives when the information gathered by Wayne Generette, trickled down to the KGB agents, who'd then carry out *executive action*, quite likely preceded by excruciating torture.

Generette, or *degenerate* as Jim Richards preferred to think of him, had garnered his compromising information through the application of the oldest espionage technique known to man, sex. And if it were not for the perverted proclivities of Allen Maxwell, Generette might have failed in the execution of his personal vendetta.

How many more Wayne Generettes were out there? Mean spirited *little bastards* of every gender and persuasion, who blamed their own short comings on everything and everyone, except themselves. Who, because of their own failure to capitalize on all that America had to offer, had decided to *get even* and sell out their country?

Jim Richards sighed audibly, it was likely the *cold war* would long outlast himself. Yet it was worth the sacrifice. If only to honor the memory of all who'd fought and died in countless battles the world over so the United States, *his* country, could remain: The home of the brave, and the land of the free - America the of liberty.

#

The one way mirror between the two rooms had been removed, the space walled over. Allen Maxwell and Raymond Harbinger sat in the conversation area of Maxwell's office at Green Acres.

"I'm worried, Allen." Raymond Harbinger said. "Officially there have been no reports of Sylvia's death, and no suspects either. How long has it been? Six, eight weeks?"

"Eight," Maxwell responded. "But in this instance, no news is good news. My sources tell me the investigation is still focused on a burglary gone bad, but their not releasing that information to the media, in hope of picking up discrepancies during interrogation of suspects." He took a sip of cognac. "That's the way it usually goes, you know? Everyone has this image of police investigations following some sort of scientific pattern. Fact of the matter is, it's mostly luck. They start with family, then move onto friends and acquaintances, hoping to pick up a lead that will take them one step closer.

In Sylvia's case, there's no family to interview. No friends, other than her co-workers here at Green Acres. And she was very discreet about her liaisons with you, because she didn't want anyone to know about the extra money she made *servicing* you."

Harbinger, scowled at Maxwell's phraseology.

Maxwell continued. "She figured the extra *dinero* was her ticket out of here." Maxwell chuckled, and took another pull at his drink. "What the hell, might of worked out that way if you'd gone a little easier on her."

Raymond Harbinger's face took on the worried look it often had since the night of the girl's death. "Please don't make a joke of this Allen. It was an accident. I had no intention of hurting her."

"Of course you didn't, Raymond. Look you're taking this much too seriously. The whole thing's simply going to go away. The police have no leads, in fact, my sources say they've pretty much put it on the back burner."

Harbinger frowned, his face showed skepticism. "Why would they do that? The case isn't that old."

Maxwell guffawed once. "Not that old? Are you kidding me. Any idea how many homicides take place within the purview of Nashville Metro every day?" Maxwell drained his glass. "See that's the thing, if they don't get leads right away, their attention diverts to more recent cases. They look for patterns. Could another homicide be linked to this one? Can they get some bozo to confess? Get two cases off their *open* board at the same time."

Harbinger began to look a little more relaxed. "I hope your right, Allen."

Maxwell grinned. "Hell yes. Look, the cops went through our records. Did a thorough back ground on her. What did they find? *Nada*."

"Then they went to immigration, ran a routine check, and found out she's illegal." Maxwell threw up his hands. "Who'd of known? We did our due diligence. She had all the papers. Looked good to us." He smiled sardonically. "So right away her worth goes down in their eyes."

"If she's illegal, who knows what else she was into: Drugs? Theft? *Casing* families for wealth, so her cohorts could take down the house, while the youngsters are here visiting Granny?" Maxwell waved an arm in the air. "Shit like that happens all the time. Matter of fact, I read about one of those deals just last week. Out in Hendersonville."

"So what the hell, Raymond. Nothing to worry about. Unless, of course, something or someone comes out of the woodwork, and starts prattling on about you and her having a good time thing. But that ain't gonna happen. So we're in the clear."

Harbinger immediately felt his stomach turn over. "Are you sure she confided in no one?"

"Well my friend, if she did, they haven't said a word to anyone. And the police have interviewed the entire staff."

Harbinger nodded his head skeptically, then took a long pull at his drink. At last he said: "Well there is *some* good news. The Caring First deal is on track. Although, Harris Williams threw me one hell of a curve when he decided *not* to run for congress as we'd discussed. Said he'd prefer some sort of appointment by Ronald Reagan, Ambassador perhaps, or special envoy."

Harbinger shook his head, and took a pull at his cognac. "I thought for sure he'd nix our deal with his change of heart at a run for senate. But no, he still wants to go through with the merger. Though, now it must include a spot for himself on the Board. And he's keeping a fair number of shares to boot."

Allen Maxwell frowned. "Is that going to be a problem for your Iranian friend?"

Harbinger shrugged, and shook his head. "No not at all. Surprised the hell out of me. As long as Harris is willing to go along with the pharmaceuticals agreement, Roget Akhondan is happy as can be. In fact, he said Harris Williams' experience and prestige would be value added to the deal."

"And my promotion?" Maxwell asked.

"No problem, Allen. Matter of fact we've discussed it in general terms, neither he nor Harris had any objection. They're both pleased with the solid profits your division has developed over the years. So don't worry, the deal's as good as done."

#

December 1980

Jim Richards followed the young hostess to a private dining room he'd reserved at the Opryland Hotel. The hostess held the door open, gesturing with her arm extended palm turned upward for Richards to enter. Anna Medal-Soam had arrived earlier, and was already seated.

Two weeks had passed since Ronald Reagan's election to President of the United States. A mood of euphoria still hung in the air. Jim Richards could sense it in the looks he'd observed on the faces of patrons in the main dining room, and in the snatches of conversation caught as he passed by.

The lithe hostess directed him to a comfortable, custom dining chair, across the table from Anna. Richards nodded, a *thank you*, then accepted the menu she handed him.

Anna Medal-Soam looked up and smiled as Jim Richards sat down. She seemed amused at the outfit he was wearing: Blue jeans over Tony Llamas boots. A denim coat, cut in the western style. On it's back, in rhinestones, was the name: Jimmy Ocean.

"Nice outfit." She opined sarcastically.

As he'd entered the restaurant, a couple of tourists had taken his picture. A few words of their conversation drifted to his ears. "Oh you know. He's the guy that sings: *You Supply the Holster, I'll Supply the Gun.*"

"Really?" One giggled. "Well he can put his gun in my holster anytime."

Jim Richards had to chuckled to himself at that one.

He smiled at Anna, then worked his dark eyebrows up and down. "Well, you know, it goes with the territory."

"How's your record doing?" She asked.

He shrugged. "It's been charted in England. *And* Seattle of all places. Other than that, I guess I'm shootin' blanks." Then he laughed at his own pun.

Anna smiled, shaking her head. "Are you ever home? All I get is an answering machine, day or night. Though, I must say, you're prompt with the call backs."

Jim Richards glanced out the window to his left at the gardens that surrounded the swimming pool within the central courtyard of the Opryland Hotel, then looked back at Anna. "Well you know, the life of a busy entertainer is, well, socially involving."

A thin smile formed on Anna's lips.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Actually, I'm thinking about going on tour... to Florida. You know, play *Seniorland* instead of Opryland." He did a little pantomime of playing his guitar, then sang a couple of bars. "You supply the holster, Honey. I'll supply the gun. You supply the place to play, I'll supply the fun."

She smiled almost condescendingly, and shook her head.

Jim Richards said: "Your message indicated you've learned something important."

Anna did not respond immediately, then she said: "You are a most interesting subject, you know? Misti always portrayed you as someone who seemed to have no concrete goal. Yet you seem quite focused, whenever *we* meet."

Jim Richards looked at Anna for several seconds, then smiled charmingly. "Perhaps you just bring out the best in me."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm beginning to think this whole *struggling songwriter* persona you portray, is nothing more than a well orchestrated act."

Richards raised one eyebrow.

"I mean let's face it. Every time we get together, I leave with another insight into the continued pursuit of *our* investigation, as *you* put it, or of Misti's disappearance as *I* prefer to think of it."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, studying Anna for a moment. It came to him that she *had* learned something significant, something that conflicted with the

scenario he'd successfully guided up to this point. "I notice you're once again referring to her death as a *disappearance*. What has prompted the change."

Anna smiled, then wagged her finger back and forth. "Oh, no you don't. Let's not divert this conversation so quickly. You've already used that technique on me once too often."

Just then a waiter came into the room, interrupting their conversation with a discussion of the evening's specials. As they went through the ritual of ordering, Jim Richards mulled over how he should respond to Anna. There were in fact a number of options he'd already considered, having looked ahead to the likelihood that at some point she'd come to the conclusion Misti had not died, but rather disappeared as she'd originally thought.

He ordered New Orleans shrimp jambolai. She, red snapper. As the waiter left with their order, he found Anna staring at him rather intensely, a thin smile on her face that reminded him of his sixth grade teacher when she'd caught him looking over the shoulder of Missy Grant during an arithmetic test.

"I'm waiting," Anna said, an upward lilt in her voice.

"For dinner?" He responded.

"For an explanation of who you really are?"

Jim Richards smiled broadly, then allowed a serious countenance to gradually form. "I'm exactly what I appear to be. A guy with a talent for words and music. A guy who grew tired of the life he'd led in California, and decided to take a shot at something... a little more creative."

A skeptical frown formed on her brow.

He held up his right hand, palm outward, "Am I not Jimmy Ocean? Do I not have a record charted? Have I not performed in night clubs locally?"

She shrugged. "I've no idea actually, though you do have the appearance, at least, of someone in the business. But that doesn't explain your persona when we meet to discuss Misti's disappearance."

"Now there you go," he said. "Taunting me with that word, *disappearance*. You were the one who came to me, and told me *you* believed she was dead. Burned to death as a matter of fact. Do you have any idea of how that *hit* me?" His face took on a grim expression. "Now you suddenly begin talking about a disappearance, as if there might be a chance she's alive."



Anna's expression softened, she nodded her head. "All right let's discuss that first. Yes, I believe she may very well be alive after all."

Jim Richards raised both eyebrows. "And what has led you to that conclusion?"

Anna glanced out the window for a moment. "You'll recall I said a colleague of mine did some forensics work for the District Attorney's office. When he and I first talked about the deaths at Green Acres, and he mentioned the death of a female, I assumed he was talking about loss of life due to the fire exclusively. And I assumed the female victim he referred to was Misti, since it was known she'd been summoned to the Annex by Wayne Generette. However, I've since learned there was another crime committed that night, a care attendant was raped, and murdered."

Anna watched Jim Richards eyes for any sign of astonishment at the information she'd just conveyed, she found none. Though he feigned a feeble attempt.

Richards frowned. "Really? How did you come to this conclusion?"

"Again, my colleague. We happened to speak in passing yesterday, he asked me how my work was going at Green Acres? How the staff and patients were handling the death of the attendant? I asked him: What attendant? He said: The one who was raped. It was then, in the course of his elaboration, I realized the mistake I'd made."

Richards frowned again. "No one's mentioned this to you in conversation at Green Acres? I'd think that would be topic one."

Anna brushed her hand across the top of the table cloth. "There was a skeleton staff on duty the night of the fire. The body found by a single police officer who'd gone up stairs looking for someone of authority. He immediately secured the scene. The supervising detective arrived soon thereafter, and made the decision to suppress the information, hoping to ferret out knowledge of the killer amongst the staff.

"All of the staff on duty the night of the murder have since left Green Acres, transferred to other facilities with a promotion thrown in. The Attendant Supervisor, Gretta Bosanvich is the only employee now on duty aware of the attendant's rape and murder. And she did not volunteer the information in any of our conversations. Nor, in fairness, did she deny it. I just never asked until today."

"And she believes Misti is alive?"

Anna shook her head. "No. She believes Misti died also. However, I know for certain from my forensics contact only one female body was found."

Jim Richards said: "Then she must be alive, the question is: Where?"

Anna turned her palms upward. "You tell me."

Richards shook his head, and shrugged. "How would I know? I told you in our first conversation she was a *game* player."

Anna voice turned severe. "And I told *you* it did not fit her profile. It still doesn't. And once again, you've avoided answering my question. So let me rephrase it: Who are you, and just what the hell are you *really* doing here in Nashville?"

Jim Richards raised both hands in the universal sign of surrender, and ducked his head as if dodging a blow. "All right, all right." He smiled suddenly. "I'll tell you as much as I can. But first, you tell me something: Is Allen Maxwell clean, or dirty?"

Anna Medal-Soam laughed out loud. "Dirty?" She said, her tone mocking Richards' question. "The guy's dirtier than an old Hoover bag. I ran an Internet Medical Records check, using our system at U.T. His patient ratio of deaths to last reported condition of health is way out of line. Patients have died from causes for which there was no diagnosis prior to passing. Very suspicious. An occasional unexpected death is normal, but Green Acres' ratio is outrageous. That on top of the Medicare fraud we already suspected."

"Yet no one's questioned this? Families? The State?" Richards asked.

Anna shook her head. "He has legitimate death certs, and closing files. All properly filled out by attending physicians. He's even done a couple himself, after all he is a doctor too."

"Well that makes me feel all warm and fuzzy," Richards said sarcastically. "Surely, someone around there is suspicious?"

Anna shook her head slowly. "It seems Wayne Generette handled all patient records before the fire. Of course, they were all destroyed. Consequently, the records had to be re-created before Green Acres could continue to receive payments, Medicare, and so forth. Since the re-creation, there's been a whole lot less cash flow."

Jim Richards grinned. "Guess ol' Wayne was padding the living with the dead."

Anna nodded her head. "That's how I'd read it."

"Who brought the cash flow issue to your attention?"

Anna held up one finger, and shook her head slowly. "This is as far as I go, until you answer *my* question. Who the hell are you?"

Jim Richards sighed. "How much did Misti tell you about the work I did when we lived in the Bay Area."

Anna thought for a moment. "Very little, as a matter of fact. Come to think of it, she wasn't at all clear on what you did for a living. Something about being a management consultant."

"An investigator actually," he said abruptly.

"Private investigator?" She asked.

"Commercial is the correct terminology. I specialize in fraud. Insurance fraud. After pay-out follow up, to be specific."

Anna frowned. "After *pay-out follow-up*? What are you talking about?"

Jim Richards smiled, but the mirth his eyes often reflected was missing. He looked deadly serious. "You'd be surprised how many individuals, even top company executives attempt to defraud insurance companies. And the company is not about to kill the goose that laid the golden egg over a minor issue that amounts to less than ten percent of premium earned. On the other hand, they don't exactly turn the other cheek either.

"My job was to ferret out fraud, then make certain the insurance company received all the information it needed to accomplish two goals: One, charge an appropriate premium increase at renewal. Two, assure when possible, via a back door approach, the executive perpetrating the fraud had their employment terminated, without ever knowing the true reason."

Anna frowned. "But why? Surely they'd want those executives to amend their ways, to know they'd been discovered?"

A cynical smile crossed Jim Richards' face. "In your opinion, if we were to confront Allen Maxwell with incontrovertible proof of the fraud *he's* committed. Would he amend his ways?"

"Never." Her response was reflexive, but no less accurate.

"Exactly. Criminals never amend their ways. They just get smarter. They learn from their past mistakes, and apply the knowledge to future crime. Thus becoming even more difficult to catch."

"But surely if an insurance company had the evidence, they'd want to prosecute, or seek restitution at the very least." Anna said.

Jim Richards nodded his head. "One would think so, and sometimes it works out that way. However, more often than not the perpetrator is someone like Allen Maxwell. Wealthy, well respected, and politically connected.

The local District Attorney is generally reticent to go after *white collar* crime without an airtight case, which is nearly impossible to provide because the investigator operating undercover invariably violates the accused's right to privacy in the process of gathering evidence. Consequently, nine times out of ten the crime, if its prosecuted at all, is plead down to *nolo contendere* - no contest. A slap on the wrist. Sometimes full restitution and a fine. Bottom line, the guy walks with an education for future reference.

On the other hand, if we cause him to be cut lose, then watch for him to show up down stream. Bingo. We know his *modus operandi*, and that's when we nail his butt. You see insurance companies have very, very long memories. And they all use the same commercial investigation firms. There's only a hand full in the whole world. Those firms maintain huge data bases. And, occasionally," he winked his eye in an exaggerated way, "they share pertinent information."

Anna Medal-Soam nodded her head slowly. "So Allen Maxwell was your target at Caring First."

Jim Richards paused for a moment, then nodded his head.

"You son of a bitch!" Anna spit the words out. "You used Misti to penetrate Caring First. And now you're using me."

Jim Richards lifted his right hand palm outward again. "No, that's not true. Misti's employment at Caring First was purely coincidental. And *you* chose this gig yourself. In fact, I tried to talk you out of it the *first* night you came to see me. But you wouldn't give it up."

Anna was still livid. "You bastard, you knew he was dirty all along. Had the evidence from his activity at Caring First. That's what you've just told me. That's how your sick little insurance club works."

Jim Richards shook his head. "I didn't have the evidence, Anna. Only the suspicion. As far as I could tell he was as clean as a scalpel where Caring First was concerned. And I haven't been inside Green Acres."

Anna shook her head skeptically. "Well I have...Just tell me one thing, Jim. Is Misti dead, or alive?"

He looked her directly in the eye. "She's alive."

Anna looked as if she'd been drained of all emotion, except complete relief. "Thank God. Where?"

Without the slightest change in his expression, or tone of voice, he said: "I don't know. Something spooked her, and she ran. She called me in a panic the night she disappeared. Said she was in trouble, but she didn't elaborate. And wouldn't answer any of my questions. I asked where she was going, but she wouldn't tell me. Then she hung up.

"I've made a best effort to find her through my resources, but so far I've not been successful. She abandoned her car because she couldn't afford the payments. The man claiming to be from the DMV, repossessed the car for the finance company. Her apartment furniture was rented, and she was behind on its payments as well. I can't explain the disappearance of her personal effects, but most likely the apartment manager liquidated them to reconstitute himself for back rent. He just won't admit it.

"I'm truly sorry, Anna, for letting you continue to think Misti was dead. I was only trying to protect her. I didn't want you to try to find her. And in so doing, lead Maxwell to her. Whatever it was she learned at Green Acres that spooked her, you can be sure he was involved."

"And you knew about the attendant all along?" Anna asked.

Jim Richards shook his head. "Not until just this past week."

"How?" She asked.

"Because Maxwell had taken out life insurance policies on certain employees at Green Acres. Last week he submitted two claims: One for Generette, the other for the attendant. Cause of death on the second claim, homicide."

Allen Maxwell swiveled his chair away from his desk. He sat for several minutes staring out the window from his fifth floor office at Caring First. He'd been working late, going over duplicate records kept by the Accounting department for him on the Green Acres property. Unbidden his mind drifted back to Misti DiMartine, and the fire at Green Acres. Wayne must have caught her snooping files, then attempted to deal with the situation himself, Maxwell surmised.

She'd snooped files at Caring First too, when he'd sent her down to Accounting to make copies of records for him. Monty had brought that to his attention, even shown him stills pulled off the security tape. Stills like the ones later used to assure Misti's termination of employment, after her *unauthorized* access to records in Bob Jacobson's office.

Maxwell reached over and picked up the Waterford pen lying on his desk pad. Then fiddled with the mechanism as he continued to think.

If Wayne had put Misti under the drip, how had she contrived to escape? And then the epiphany hit him. He recalled the terrorist incident outside the executive suite, forensics determined Monty Regadet had no chance of getting off a shot. In fact, Jimmy Ocean had intervened opportunistically. He'd was the one who'd saved them all.

Maxwell remembered how that news had surprised him, when it finally made its way down the grapevine. Like everyone else, he considered Jimmy Ocean a humble, if unlikely hero. And was as grateful as anyone for the action taken on their behalf.

But now he saw the event in a harsher light. Jimmy Ocean could not have pulled off the heroics without prior combat experience. Yet when Howard McFarland had run a background check, he'd found no military record on Jimmy Ocean. He'd even brought that very point up at a meeting, when the issue of Monty's replacement had been discussed, and someone had suggested Jimmy Ocean.

Of course, Jimmy Ocean had no military record, Maxwell now realized, because his name probably wasn't Jimmy Ocean. He wasn't a wannabe country singer, and he sure as hell wasn't a five-fifty an hour mail room guy. He was a field operative who'd penetrated Caring First on behalf of some Federal agency, or directorate, charged with oversight of Caring First's clandestine business, and most likely, he and his ol' lady were a team.

Allen Maxwell smiled ironically at his own stupidity. He'd inadvertently thrown a monkey wrench into their investigation by getting her fired. Which

undoubtedly pissed her off. And if she and her husband weren't already investigating him, they'd certainly decided to do so thereafter.

Clearly, she'd contrived to get inside Green Acres, unaware of Wayne's talents.

He continued hypothesizing: Jimmy Ocean must have been backing her up. Keeping Misti under protective surveillance, when she hadn't come out of Wayne's office by night fall, he'd gone in after her.

By then, Wayne would have already started the drip. The same formula used on the *prunes* who were running low on cash. Jimmy Ocean must have interrupted him. A struggle ensued. One of the Bunsen's got bumped in the struggle. Ocean prevailed, killing Wayne. The Bunsen kept on putting out gas, while Ocean ran his ol' lady over to Parkview. A spark, maybe the fool rent a cop on his rounds...Kaboom.

It all made sense. Except for the other bodies found in the Annex, they were unaccounted for. Could Jimmy Ocean have had back-up as well? Perhaps they went in too, screwed something up while perusing the place after Ocean had taken Misti to the hospital. That made more sense.

The records, the complete records. The ones that delineated between dead and living patients. The ones that tracked *all* moneys due. They were also destroyed in the fire. Leaving Jimmy Ocean without a case. Even if Misti suspected something, she wouldn't have had the evidence. Even if she told her story, it would not be verifiable.

What then? Jimmy Ocean would hang around, look for another opportunity. Maybe use someone else to penetrate Green Acres, someone who could continue his wife's work. Who?

A vision of Anna Medal-Soam came to Maxwell's mind. She'd taken Misti DiMartine's place in the grant program out at Green Acres, rather than simply replacing her with another intern. Why? The work was way below her level of expertise. It *was* an intern's job, and there were plenty of other interns available in the U.T. Psyche program. Her direct involvement was unnecessary, and inefficient. But she was as curious as the proverbial cat.

#

"He carries life insurance policies on some of his care attendants?" Anna was incredulous.

Jim Richards nodded his head slowly. "Only on the one's without any family to question their death. To qualify for an insurable interest, he lists certain care attendants as key employees. Gives them some sort of special function on the application."

Anna nodded her head slowly, considering the implications.

Jim Richards asked: "How do you think he, and Caring First for that matter, manage to turn a tidy profit in a business with notoriously thin margins?"

Anna Medal-Soam looked totally perplexed. "Medicare pay-outs on non-existent patients?"

Jim Richards shook his head. "That's just icing on the cake. Employee costs are the big factor, wages and benefits. Keeping those costs below the competition widens the margin. It's how Caring First keeps its costs down on all their long term care facilities, the only difference is they don't carry bogus patients on their books. But cheap labor - illegal immigrants - done all the time.

"It started with the wives of itinerant farm labor. Hispanics and Filipinos are naturals for elder care. In their country it's a requisite, not an option. And their culture venerates elders, matter of fact most cultures do. Except ours, of course.

"Caring First's most profitable units are in Texas and California, coincidentally high immigrant farm labor states. Allen Maxwell took a proven formula to the extreme, smuggling his own illegals rather than simply taking advantage of an existing opportunity."

Anna was amazed as she pondered the implications. "But if he carries life insurance on them, it implies..."

"He's expecting some to have short careers," Richards said.

"But surely a pattern would develop, I mean if he's collecting a number of full pay death benefits?"

Jim Richards smiled cynically. "I didn't say he has collected on many, so far only two actually. Not counting, Wayne Generette and the attendant, whose death benefits have not yet paid out."

At that moment their waiter came into the room. He noted neither had eaten much of the meals ordered. He asked if everything was cooked to their satisfaction? Did they want a take-out container. Jim Richards declined his offer, and asked for the check.



As the waiter walked off to tabulate their bill, Anna Meda-Soam said: "This monster has got to be stopped, Jim."

Richards nodded his head in agreement. "Absolutely."

Anna continued her train of thought. "Harris Williams' family: His mom, dad, and my parents, are very good friends. He was like an older brother to me when we were growing up. I'll go to him, tell him what I've learned. I won't involve you. Together, he and I, will go to the D.A.."

Jim Richards made no comment at first. Only a couple more weeks, he thought, till the inauguration of President Reagan, and the release of American hostages. Somehow, he had to keep Anna under control a little longer. And then she could be turned loose to have at Allen Maxwell in any way she wished.

"Anna, if you go to Harris Williams, he'll have no choice but to shine you on. Don't you understand? Allen Maxwell set up the illegal alien plan for Caring First. Long term care is the purview of his division. To involve Harris Williams in the investigation would drag he, his family, all of Caring First into it. And while what Caring First is doing is not legal, it's not murder either. Allen Maxwell, and he alone, is responsible for what has been going on at Green Acres."

Anna glared at Richards. "Then I'll go to the District Attorney myself."

"With what?" Richards asked. "The most damning records were destroyed in the fire."

The corner of her mouth turned downward.

"Hey," Richards gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "A fact of life." He thought for a moment. "You need a credible witness to take with you to the D.A., someone at Green Acres who'll support your findings on the death ratio you referred to earlier."

"Also if the dead girl was raped? What time did it happen? Any connection to the fire? These may be important issues to kick start the D.A. in the proper direction."

"And then there's the *timing*."

Anna tilted her head to one side. "Timing?"

"Timing," Richards repeated. "Christmas is less than a month away. The Presidential inauguration's close on the heels of New Years. Nashville's the state capital of Tennessee, a lot of local dignitaries will want to attend the inauguration."

The D.A.'s a political position, only thing on his mind will be getting a free ride to the celebration, maybe even an introduction to Ed Meese, or the President himself.

"This case, as heinous as it is, will be just another sordid murder investigation in his mind. He'll assign it to a deputy, easily intimidated by Maxwell's prestige and connections. But after the inauguration. After Ronald Reagan's acceptance speech, which I can assure you will be patriotic and rousing, your D.A. friend will return with a renewed sense of duty. And when you bring him that witness, even if everything they say is circumstantial, I guarantee you he'll listen, and he'll respond."

Anna turned her head, and looked sidewise at Jim Richards. "I hate to admit it, but I do believe your right. One more question: Where *did* you get *your* psychology degree?"

Jim Richards smiled sardonically. "I attended the University of Greed and Avarice. Thing is... I failed to graduate."

# Chapter Thirty-Two

December 23, 1980

Allen Maxwell sat at his desk, in the upstairs office at Green Acres. He turned a pen over in his hand several times, looking at it carefully before setting it down on the leather writing pad that protected the polished, rosewood surface beneath. It appeared to be a common ballpoint pen with a plunger on top for extending and retracting the tip.

Near at hand, but not immediately adjacent, was another identical looking pen, which he picked up, and slipped into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Maxwell rose from his chair, then walked around to the far side of his desk. He spent several seconds looking at the way the pen and papers were laid out, making certain everything looked as if casually left by someone interrupted from work in progress.

Satisfied, he stepped over to the door, then out into the hallway. He walked with deliberate steps along the hallway. Pausing for several moments at the point where the passage opened up, to look down over a balcony into the foyer below.

He glanced at the solid gold Cartier watch strapped to his wrist, seven-thirty in the evening. The Green Acres annual Christmas party was in full swing. Residents, their families, and staff, were enjoying the festivities in the main dining area. A wet bar had been set up just outside the dining room. A number of people, drink in hand, socialized in the foyer. Some leaning casually against the Admittance counter. Others, in groups of two, or three, stood about the perimeter of the room conversing. He noticed Anna Medal-Soam over near a portrait of the Green Acres mansion, talking with his staff Supervisor.

Gretta Bosanvich had kept him informed of her conversations with Anna Medal-Soam. Gretta was a loyal employee, put off by Anna's questions about the number of residents who'd past away in the last two years. This, coupled with recent security tapes he'd reviewed that showed Anna surreptitiously looking into resident's files, reinforced his belief she was working undercover, following in Misti DiMartine's footsteps.

In fact, he was no longer concerned about anything Misti could have uncovered. The only files she might have perused were destroyed in the fire.

Allen Maxwell smiled to himself. He'd hired a private detective out in Portland. His report indicated Misti DiMartine was indeed living at home with her parents. Discreet conversations with neighbors revealed she'd had a serious automobile accident that rendered her totally amnesiac, therapists were trying to gradually rebuild her memory.

Maxwell had to suppress a chuckle, even if she regained total recall, no court in the land would convict, hell even indict, on the testimony of a witness recovering from clinical amnesia.

But Anna Medal-Soam's meddling was another issue altogether. Her professional credentials alone made her a serious threat. And if she gathered personal medical information on current residents that contradicted future death reports. Well that would certainly prove problematic.

Maxwell chose a moment when he was certain no one would notice him stepping out of the shadows, then continued along the hallway to the stairs.

#

Anna Medal-Soam looked to her right, her peripheral vision caught movement on the stairway. She raised her gaze, then noted Allen Maxwell coming down the stairs.

He was dressed in a navy blue three piece suit, and descended the stairs exuding the air of a man who felt completely in control of his domain. And why not? He controlled the end costs of every resident in his facility. No need to worry about last minute expenses that might muss up his orderly profit plan.

She'd been trying to get a moment with him, to ask some pointed questions. She wanted to put him on the defensive, see if she could identify some quirk of personality to later take advantage of, maybe force him to make a mistake. Her investigation had revealed a pattern related to the deaths of his residents. He was quite clever, always making certain they had funds sufficient at the time of their passing to assure it would not be obvious they'd been culled to avoid becoming a burden to the bottom line.

The pattern she'd uncovered had to do with the lead time built into the euthanasia process prior to fund exhaustion, usually ninety to one-hundred and twenty days.

Jimmy Ocean, as she thought of him, though she knew his real name was J. Robert Bushman, had volunteered the resources of an unnamed company he claimed to have once worked for in San Francisco. The resources were valid at least. And she was able to review the finances of current Green Acres residents.

As a result, she'd identified two potential victims whose funds were sure to run dry before summer. She'd then formulated a plan to shift these two residents into her Age Related Depression study. Protecting them, while at the same time developing a medical record separate from the ones kept by Green Acres.

As Anna watched Allen Maxwell wend his way across the room, stopping, now and then, to smile and chat, she could not help feeling a tingling at the base of her spine. She thought perhaps it was the same feeling a hunter gets when he has game in the cross hairs of his rifle.

"Good evening, Miss Medal-Soam," Allen said as he approached, his hand extended. "I'm so pleased you could make it tonight."

They shook hands. Anna smiled, and said nothing, letting the silence hang, just to see how Maxwell would handle it. Social greetings were well established rituals. One was expected to respond in certain ways, when one did not, the other party often felt a bit off kilter. If so, Allen Maxwell gave no indication. Rather, he continued to smile, holding her eyes with his gaze for a moment. Then looking around the room, before speaking, as if her lack of a return greeting was perfectly normal.

"You know it amazes me how many guests attend our Christmas parties each year. Which, of course, is very gratifying. Christmas is such a difficult time for our residents. Don't you think, Anna?"

Anna tilted her head to one side. "Christmas is difficult for many. But why do *you* feel your residents find it difficult?"

Maxwell smiled benignly. "Spoken like a true Psychologist." And then he laughed. "Oh well, you know, Christmas brings so many memories of times gone by, loved ones lost, and so forth." He sighed. "I guess that's why I'm always happy when these parties are well attended. Somehow it seems to be easier for the residents to get through the season, when there's a lot of activity." He looked away for a moment, then back at Anna. "I expect the research you're doing might confirm that very idea?"

Anna nodded her head in agreement. "Perhaps it will." Then without pausing long enough to allow Maxwell to move off, or ask another inane question, she said: "You know, Allen, I've been trying to sit down with you for a couple of weeks. To get some insight concerning the residents with whom we're working."

Allen Maxwell smiled, and bowed slightly one side. "I know, and I'm so sorry. It's been a hectic time. Christmas always is. I'll tell you what, if you're prepared, let's sit down right now. No one's going to miss me tonight. And we

won't be interrupted, I promise you. Come up to my office, and I'll answer any question you have."

His offer caught her off guard. "Oh... Well I suppose now is as good a time as any."

"Good. Come this way. We'll go up stairs to my office."

#

They sat in the conversation area. Maxwell was surprisingly open. She was amazed at the depth of understanding he seemed to have for those who required long term care. She found it difficult to reconcile in her mind how someone with such an understanding of elder need could be responsible for their early demise.

Yet, perhaps it was his thorough understanding of residents' anxieties that gave him *permission* to *put them out of their misery*. That was, at least, the usual justification offered by others - serial killers in hospitals, and nursing homes, who'd followed the same course of action as Allen Maxwell.

Anna decided to broach another subject, to see what sort of response it might engender. "Allen, I greatly appreciate the time you're spending with me, but there's one area I'm still in the dark about: The relationship between your caregivers, and the resident's families. Would it be possible for me to interview the staff, one at a time, to gain some insight into their perception of how the families relate to their loved ones here at Green Acres. You see I'm beginning to form a hypothesis that includes the concept of *abandonment*, that age related depression has more to do with abandonment than any other single factor."

Maxwell thought for a moment. "Yes, that could be arranged." And then he paused, he seemed to be pondering the idea further. Anna expected he'd come up with some seemingly valid reason not to let her interview the caregivers.

"In fact," he continued, "what you really need to do is review the *personal* notes our caregivers keep on each patient, notes about themselves."

Anna raised an eyebrow. "Themselves? I don't understand."

Maxwell thought for a moment. "You see the caregiver-resident relationship is an evolving dynamic. For some caregivers, it's an evolution into an understanding of the greater meaning of life. An understanding that there is more *out there* than we are able to perceive at this level of existence."

Anna was caught completely off guard. Maxwell was hinting at an afterlife philosophy. It was the last thing she'd expected. This might very well be how he justified his actions. It was important for her to determine the justification he held in his mind, as it was an essential ingredient she'd need to pass on to the District Attorney. Knowing the justification, empathizing with it, was the key to ultimately eliciting a confession from Maxwell, which was the only way of assuring a conviction.

"I'm not following your train of thought, Allen."

Maxwell smiled, his eyes held a look of condescension. "It's very difficult to care for the dying, Anna. Let's face it, that's what we are really all about. Except for the few young people here for your study, there's not one resident who comes to us who expects to leave in any manner other than horizontally." He chuckled. "Pardon my flippancy, it's just that after awhile you need to look upon it all with a bit of humor."

"I understand completely," Anna said evenly. "Please go on. You were describing a dynamic?"

"Yes. You see the caregiver also knows the inevitable outcome of any resident's stay with us. Some are able to develop a philosophy of care that assists the patient to prepare for their *journey*. Others cannot cope with the constant reminder of their own mortality. Therefore, we encourage our caregivers to keep notes of their feelings. When we see a caregiver is unable to cope, we arrange for their transfer to a Caring First facility where people do recover and go on with their lives. On the other hand, those who are able to develop the *preparation for a journey* philosophy, I mentioned earlier, are well suited for the work we do here. Do you understand, Anna?"

"Completely." She replied in an even tone of voice. A shiver went down her spine. And she perceived Allen Maxwell now in an entirely different light, even the form his presence presented to her had changed in her mind's eye, and it was more horrible than she'd ever imagined. It was almost as if she were looking at the embodiment of Satan.

He'd laid it all out for her as plain as day, and it *was* chilling. Yet, the explanation was so simple. Maxwell had assured only those persons completely callous to death would remain employed at Green Acres. And none of them would ever question the timing of a resident's death. It was expected that each and every resident would die; *when* was not of importance.

"Now," Maxwell continued. "I've been giving some thought to your study. It is possible that those of our employees unable to cope with the inevitability of

the situation, pass their despair, subliminally perhaps, on to our residents. Thus greatly contributing to the nature of the depression you are studying."

Anna nodded her head once in agreement. "Quite possible, yes."

Maxwell continued. "If you read the notes of past and present caregivers, it may provide you with enormous insight. Don't you think?"

Anna made no reply, but gazed evenly at Maxwell, hoping the silence would cause him to reveal even more than he already had, but as had occurred downstairs earlier, her silence seemed to have no effect.

"All right then," Maxwell went on as if no reply were expected. "I will provide you with the notes, but first I must ask you to sign a confidentiality agreement. It's a matter of right to privacy. Do you have any problem with that?"

Anna shook her head. "No, not at all."

"Good." Maxwell smiled at her, then arose from his chair. He stepped over to his desk, and made a show of looking through some papers. "Ah, here it is." He said at last.

She watched, as in a distracted manner he looked for a pen, finding it on his desk. He crossed the room to where she was seated, then handed her the agreement.

She read it quickly, it was a standard confidentiality document. She started to look in her purse for a pen.

"Here you go," Allen said, as he handed her a retractable ball-point.

She accepted it, automatically depressing the plunger. She felt a sharp pain in her thumb, as if a needle had penetrated it.

"Owe!" She exclaimed. Dropping the pen onto the carpet. She looked at her thumb, a tiny drop of blood appeared, oozing up through the puncture. She put her thumb to her lips, and sucked on it for a moment. She tasted salt from her own blood, and something else, something slightly bitter.

Allen Maxwell immediately bent over, and picked up the pen. She looked up at him, her thumb to her lips. He seemed to be rubbing his own thumb over the plunger of the pen he'd just picked up.

"Oh!" He exclaimed. "Anna, I'm so sorry," he said. "There's a damn sharp spot right on this plunger. Manufacturing defect I suppose, he deftly tossed



it into a waste basket that stood next to his chair. Then reached into his coat pocket and withdrew another pen identical to the first. Extending the tip himself, he handed the pen to Anna.

She accepted it warily. Looked carefully at it, before proceeding to sign the document, using the adjacent cocktail table as a work surface. She then handed the document, and the pen, back to Allen.

He accepted both. "Thank you. How's your thumb."

She glanced at it. The blood was gone, as was the pain. In fact, it felt a little numb, which she attributed to a counter reaction of the sudden minor trauma. She'd managed to stick herself on more than one occasion with a needle and thread. It was no worse, and no more to worry about.

"Oh it's fine." She shook her head. "We really need to improve our manufacturing standards, but that's a whole other discussion for another day."

Allen laughed and nodded his head. He raised his drink in silent toast to Anna. "Tomorrow is Christmas eve, but immediately after Christmas, I'll have Gretta provide you with the caregiver notes on your current patients. Whenever you're ready, you can request any others you would like to review." Then he glanced at his watch. "Look, I'd love to continue our conversation, but I really should get back to my guests."

#

Jim Richards pulled his Bronco to a stop in the driveway outside his house in Brentwood. He climbed warily out, placing his feet carefully onto the concrete surface. It had not yet snowed, but the nights had turned cold, the outside temperature below twenty-degrees. It was not unusual for a thin layer of glaze ice to form on the driveway.

He entered the house through the rear door, crossed the concrete garage floor, passed through the laundry room, and into the kitchen of his home. The house seemed warm and cozy, compared to the temperature outside, even though he kept the thermostat set to a crisp sixty-degrees at night.

Alexander was not there to greet him, the shepherd was spending more and more time with neighbors across the street, since Jim Richards was seldom home anymore, and the nights turned cold. Richards was glad Alexander was gradually adopting the neighbor family. Inevitably, he would have to leave the dog behind when the assignment finally ended, and he returned to San Francisco. Perhaps Alexander sensed the end of their time together was drawing near.

Nevertheless, it was lonely to come home to an empty house. Alexander had always been happy to see him, and that was a comfort.

His thoughts turned to Misti, and he remembered how much in love they'd been in the early days. Jim Richards sighed. He looked to his left, a half filled bottle of Johnny Walker Black stood on the kitchen counter. The amber liquid back lit by the soft glow of a forty watt appliance bulb over the stove. Richards shook his head, not tonight. It was becoming too easy to take a drink, he needed to watch that.

His paternal grandfather had been an alcoholic. Jim Richards felt certain the predilection was in his genes, and consciously fought to avoid falling into the same trap. In his line of work, any sort of addiction was lethal, not only from the chemical destruction done to one's body, but equally from a mind too hindered to respond to the challenges of field work.

In any case, he'd had enough alcohol for one evening, having made the rounds of the Christmas parties down on Music Row. Keeping up the image of Jimmy Ocean, in preparation for a spring tour to support his blossoming recording career.

He and Dusty Pickom had formed an interesting partnership. He'd confided to Dusty that he'd burned out on music performance. Ironical though it might seem, considering his recording, *Turn to me*, on the flip side of *You Supply The Holster* was beginning to move up some of the regional charts. Richards had intimated he really only wanted to be a writer.

Dusty proposed a partnership, and a solution. He would interview performers, nearly three hundred a month came to Nashville seeking their shot at fame and fortune. Amongst the many, would be the one that looked and sounded enough like Jimmy Ocean to actually become the performer the public expected from the music heard over their radios. Pickom proposed they put such a performer under contract, as the *new* Jimmy Ocean.

The idea fit perfectly into Jim Richards' plans, his only condition was they hire an independent auditor to assure the books were accurately kept. Dusty was a bit put off at first, but Richards soon persuaded him that it was in all of their best interests. If they truly hit pay dirt with a *top ten* song, the money would be flowing in so fast they'd need an independent auditor to assure taxes were properly paid, the bane of so many music people. Of course, the statistics were not encouraging: A one in twenty-eight million chance of writing, producing, and distributing a top ten song.

Jim Richards passed through the family room, then down the hallway towards the master bedroom. As he passed his study, he noticed his message

machine blinking in the dark. There were two messages, both from Anna Medal-Soam.

The first: "Hi, Jim. We have *got* to talk, call me when you get in, no matter the time. I've some unbelievable news to tell you."

The second: "Jim, disregard my first message. I'm really not feeling well. Flu bug, or something. I'm so tired. Going to get some sleep. Call me in the morning."

Her voice sounded weak. Jim Richards replayed the first message, then the second. There was a major difference in the strength of Anna's voice. He looked at his watch. No point in calling her now. Whatever it was she wanted to tell him, would keep until morning.

#

Anna did not believe it was possible to feel so sick. She'd never had flu like this, maybe it was food poisoning, something she ate at the party. Her mind did not seem to be functioning well. She wanted to call a doctor, but didn't think she could make it to the telephone. Every time she tried to raise her head, wave after wave of nausea would assault her. She'd already thrown up till there was nothing left, but dry heaves. *Oh god*, she thought, *have to get to the telephone*. She struggled, lifted her head, then dry heaved again. No use, I'll just lay here awhile longer.

#

Jim Richards awoke suddenly. He felt afraid, the way he did as a child when his mother turned out the lights, and the closet door was ajar. He'd had a dream, a nightmare actually. Something to do with Anna Medal-Soam. He lifted his wrist, stared at the illuminated numbers on the face of his dive watch, 05:30. Should get some more sleep. He rolled onto his side, closed his eyes, but couldn't drift off. Anna's second message kept playing in his head. He rolled out of bed, and padded into the bathroom, and a hot shower.

#

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Jim Richards turned into Anna Medal-Soam's driveway. She owned a townhouse, where she lived alone. It was a two story affair with a garage out front. Jim Richards looked through the garage window, her car was inside. He followed a concrete sidewalk to her front door, then rang the bell. There was no answer.

He then retraced his steps, walking around to the other side of the garage where a wooden fence enclosed a patio. He opened the gate, then proceeded to the sliding glass door that looked out onto the patio from a dining nook.

The slider was locked. It took him only a moment to pop it open. He entered the house, crossed the kitchen to a hallway that led to stairs up to the second floor. As he climbed the stairs, he noted a sour smell hanging in the air. It seemed to flow down the stairs, becoming stronger as he drew closer to the bedroom. He called out Anna's name. There was no answer.

He found her on the bathroom floor, lying with her back against the wall. The room smelled of vomit, and feces. There were drops of bright red blood splattered on the toilet basin, and the tile floor.

The white terry cloth robe she wore was open revealing a pale naked body. Dried blood, and feces, were smeared down the inside of her thighs, and onto the tiled floor. Jim Richards felt bile rising in his throat, he suppressed an urge to vomit himself.

His first thought was she'd been attacked, but she didn't appear to be shot, cut, or stabbed. There were no bruises on her body, no sign of a struggle. Her message had said she thought she was coming down with the flu. He wondered if it was contagious, and the thought crossed his mind he'd probably already been exposed.

She was alive, he could tell by her shallow breathing. He placed two fingers on her carotid artery. Her pulse was weak, barely discernible.

She felt his touch and stirred, then moaned. "Please help me, I think I'm dying."

Jim Richards quickly rolled up a towel, and placed it under her head, she immediately retched, though nothing but a dribble of saliva was produced. He did not try to move her again.

"Easy, Anna" he said, stroking her hair gently. "Hang on, I'm going to get you to a hospital. There was no response, no indication she'd understood what he'd said.

#

For a second time, Jim Richards sat in vigilance over a women fighting for her life. The paramedics had arrived within fifteen minutes of his call. They'd started oxygen, an I.V. of saline solution, and administered an injection of anti-nausea medicine. By the time they'd reached hospital's emergency ward, Anna

seemed to be on the road to recovery. Some color had returned to her face, she opened her eyes and looked at Jim Richards.

"Where am I," she asked in a weak voice.

"St. Thomas Hospital."

She frowned. "How did I get here?" And then she seemed to remember. "Oh God, I'm so embarrassed." Tears came to her eyes. "You found me on the floor of my bathroom, didn't you?"

Jim Richards took her hand in his, and gave it a little squeeze. "Tell me what happened, where were you last night?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, and he thought she'd drifted off to sleep. She would be exhausted from the physical effort of trying to rid her body of whatever had invaded it. He looked down at her hand resting in his own, palm upward. She had long shapely fingers that complimented her lithe body. But something else caught his eye, and he looked at it more closely. There was a circle of white tissue on the pad of her thumb, a perfectly round circle with a small dot in its center. Could she have been bitten by some sort of poisonous insect?

Anna's eyes opened, and she responded to his question as if no time had passed since he'd asked it. "I went to the Green Acres Christmas party last night. Met with Allen Maxwell. He told me everything."

"Everything?"

"I know why he does it. How he gets away with it."

Jim Richards frowned, a feeling of fear began to creep up his spine. He looked down at her thumb. "Anna." Her eyes were closed again. "Anna, wake up." Her eyes opened suddenly, as if she'd been called to order by some authority. "Anna, what happened to your thumb?"

Her eyes started to flutter shut. Then she opened them again for a moment. "His pen had a sharp edge to it."

"Pen? Whose pen? Anna?"

Her eyes were closed again. She spoke softly, almost in a whisper. "Allen's. It was his pen."

Jim Richards felt his heart drop into his stomach, a *klong* of fear surged through his body, the taste of copper in his mouth. Allen Maxwell had poisoned Anna, there was no doubt in his mind. He was familiar with the weapon used, similar to ones he'd used himself on other occasions. In this case, the needle used to inject the poison was imbedded in the pen's plunger. When the victim depressed the plunger to activate the pen's tip, they forced their thumb down onto the needle aimed upward through the hollow center of the plunger.

The weapon constructed in such a way the victim finds the plunger a little stiff, as sometimes occurs with ordinary ballpoints. Their response is to press down harder on the plunger thus assuring the needle is driven deep into their thumb. The poison is forced upward by compression, the victim injects themselves. When the plunger is released, a heavier than normal spring, which is the cause of the plunger's initial stiffness, rapidly withdraws the syringe back to its fully retracted position, sheathing the needle. Depending upon the nature of the poison, the victim dies within seconds, or days of the injection.

As these thoughts whirled through his mind, a doctor came into the room.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Stone. Is this your wife, Mr. Ocean?"

He'd not yet given his name to anyone. He'd called the emergency number at Ty Harding International immediately following his call to the ambulance. Harding must have relayed the message back to Langley, and they were able to get one of their doctors over immediately from Caring First.

Jim Richards shook his head. "No she's a *Friend*", using the euphemism applied to agents recruited in the field. "And I'm fairly certain she's been poisoned." These last words were whispered into Dr. Stone's ear, he did not want anyone to overhear them, especially Anna. He motioned for Dr. Stone to look, then pointed to Anna's thumb.

Dr. Stone quickly began his examination, checking her vitals. He took two vials of blood from her arm, then motioned for Jim Richards to step outside the room with him. They spoke in the hallway.

"Any idea of the type of poison used?" Dr. Stone asked.

Richards shook his head. "No. But it was delivered via the plunger of a common ballpoint, so the dosage would not be large."

"What were her initial symptoms?"

"I wasn't with her at the onset, " Richards replied. "I received a message on my answering machine. She said she thought she was coming down with the

flu. That was at two this morning, I've no idea when the message was actually left.

At seven this morning, I found her lying on the floor of her bathroom. She'd apparently been vomiting, and evacuating her bowels, most of the night. There were splatters of bright red blood around the toilet bowl. The paramedics cleaned her up on the way over. The I.V. they started seemed to help."

Dr. Stone nodded his head once. "The I.V. relieved the dehydration." He looked at the paperwork on a clip board he was carrying. "The anti-nausea helped too. But it's temporary. We've got to figure out what she's been given, and see if there's an antidote, or she a gonner." He paused for a moment, thinking.

"Did you clean her bathroom up?"

Richards shook his head. "No, I came along with the ambulance."

"Good." Dr. Stone thought for a moment. "Look I hate to ask you this, but I need a sampling of the feces, and vomitus residue."

Richards nodded his head without hesitation, then started for the door.

"Ocean Man."

Richards stopped, then turned back towards Dr. Stone. If there had been any doubt in his mind about the legitimacy of Stone, use of the nick name given to him some years before by Steve Sheffield, and the other SEALs in his squad, erased it. "Yes."

Dr. Stone reached into a cardboard box that stood near-by on a counter, he pulled out a pair of surgical gloves then tossed them over to Jim Richards. "Wear these."

Richards caught them in mid-air, then turned, and headed for the door.

#

Elmo Jefferson sat at the desk in his office at CIA headquarters Langley, Virginia. Spread out before him were several photos taken of three Algerians, by a variety of watchers at widely scattered locations. Below each photo was a single page report describing the time, date, and location, where each photo was taken, as well as any other pertinent data gleaned. All three terrorists were headed for Montreal, and thence, he supposed, to the United States.

Elmo Jefferson picked up a ten page briefing, developed through information received over a period of months from Tom Singleton, their man in Algiers. The briefing indicated Roget Akhondan had engaged the services of the men in the photos, that they were on a mission of revenge. However, Singleton was unable to develop the name of their target.

Jefferson sighed, no matter, they'd be placed under surveillance when they arrived in Montreal, followed closely once they entered the United States, sooner, or later, their movements would reveal who they were after. Unless, of course, they managed to evade the surveillance net. They were not traveling together, which might indicate they intended to meet later, or alternatively were on independent missions.

Jefferson pondered the fact that his only truly effective tool against terrorism was surveillance, then deterrent action once it was determined who, or what, the target was to be. It was an effective approach, as long as the number of people sent against the United States was relatively small. A concerted effort involving several hundred illegal entries would be nearly impossible to counter, and he wondered how long it would be until some terrorist group figured that out.

#

Jim Richards used the main blade of his Swiss Army knife to scrape up the samples Dr. Stone requested. He placed them in a pair of plastic food storage bags, found in Anna's pantry. He then proceeded to swab down the bathroom floor, toilet, and fixtures, with a heavy mixture of Clorox and water, using a sponge mop he found hanging in the garage.

#

It was early afternoon when the test results came back. Dr. Stone found Jim Richards by Anna's side, she'd slipped into a coma. He came into the room, checked her vitals then motioned for Richards to join him outside in the hallway.

They went to a room similar to the one over at Parkview Hospital. They did not sit down. Dr. Stone walked to the center of the room, then turned around to face Jim Richards. "Look, Jim, I'm going to give it to you straight, and hard. She's not going to make it."

Jim Richards felt his legs go weak, he stepped over to one of the sofas, and sat down. "Why?" His voice small and plaintive. "Surely there must be an antidote. I mean it's only common sense, if the perpetrator accidentally sticks himself?"



Dr. Stone shook his head. "Only the maniacal, or fanatical, would ever use this stuff. It's called Ricin, from the plant *Ricinus Communis* to be exact. And there's no antidote. In fact, it's virtually untraceable. I'm basing my diagnosis on symptoms primarily.

"*Ricinus Communis*?" Richards asked.

"A very common plant, grows throughout the temperate and tropical zones of the world." Dr. Stone replied. "Also known as castor bean. Castor oil comes from the bean, during processing its heated to high temperature which destroys the toxins.

"However, ground up raw, Ricin is profoundly toxic, even in as low a dose as a hundred milligrams. The poison initially causes blood platelets to clump together, then over the course of four to eight hours individual blood cells begin to lose their integrity, breaking apart. Once that process starts, there's no stopping the end result. Usually the kidney's fail first, followed by the liver."

Jim Richards frowned, he refused to believe there was no hope. "Surely, Maxwell could not have injected a hundred milligrams into her thumb. The initial pain would have caused her to drop the pen immediately. At best twenty, maybe twenty-five could have been injected."

Dr. Stone nodded his head once in agreement. "True. But if he created a tincture, using some sort of solvent to concentrate the toxins, a twenty-five milligram dose directly into the blood stream would be more than sufficient."

Richards refused to accept the prognosis. "If kidney failure is likely, what about dialysis to purify the blood?"

Dr. Stone shook his head. "Based on our tests, Anna has already suffered renal failure. She'll be dead within six to eight hours. Dialysis would only prolong her agony. Internally her organs are already in the process of complete deterioration, nothing we can do will reverse the process. All we can do is keep her sedated, and as comfortable as possible, until her brain and body, give up the fight."

Tears welled up in Jim Richards' eyes. Dr. Stone stared at him momentarily, surprised at his reaction. He'd been informed by Langley that Richards was one of their most experienced field operatives, that no personal relationship existed between he and Anna Meda-Soam. Perhaps that information was not entirely accurate. Dr. Stone stepped over to the sofa, then sat down. He put one arm around Richards' shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

"Easy, Jim."

A moment passed, then Richards sat up straight taking a deep breath. "I should have gone over to her place as soon as I received her message."

Dr. Stone shook his head, as he removed his arm from around Jim Richards' shoulders. "You told me earlier, you picked up your telephone messages at two this morning."

Richards' voice held a plaintive tone. "Yes, but two would have given us a few hours head start on this thing."

"Believe me, Jim, it was already too late. Perhaps if you'd been able to bring her here immediately, say within an hour of the injection, we might have been able to use dialysis as you've suggested. By two AM, the damage was irreversible."

Jim Richards rested his head in his hands, elbows on his knees. When he spoke his voice was muffled. "Has her family been notified?"

"No. It would be best if we deferred notification until after she's passed. The medical records will show death by sudden onset of pneumonia, due to a flu like virus of unknown origin."

Jim Richards stood up, drawing himself to his full height. It seemed to Dr. Stone he'd aged twenty years in a matter of moments. There were dark circles of stress under his eyes. He had the hollow expression of a man defeated by forces beyond his control.

"I'll sit with her to the end," Richards said. "At least she should not die alone."

Just then the door opened, the nurse who'd been monitoring Anna's vitals at the intensive care kiosk, when Dr. Stone brought Jim Richards to the *comfort* room, stepped inside closing the door behind her.

She stood with her back to the door, both hands behind her still grasping the door's handle. Both, Dr. Stone and Jim Richards, looked at her in silence. She just shook her head. There was no need to state the obvious.

# Chapter Thirty-three

January 1981

The day was cold, even for winter in Washington D.C.. Roget Akhondan shivered, though his alpaca overcoat was more than enough for such temperatures. His body's thermostat had not yet acclimated to the cooler climate of the United States. Sitting to his right were several guests from Caring First. Akhondan had decided to come to the inauguration, because it would provide him an opportunity to meet T. Harris Williams, as well as, other senior executives from Caring First in a non-confrontational atmosphere while everyone was caught up in the good will of positive political change.

The gala parties that would take place that evening, wherein liquor, and tongues flowed freely, would give him a chance to glean intelligence. Who knows, Roget Akhondan thought to himself, he might even have the opportunity to speak with Ronald Reagan. After all, he'd played a small, but significant, roll in both the timing and release, of the American hostages, thus benefiting the start up of Mr. Reagan's Presidency.

#

Jim Richards sat in front of a portable color television. President Ronald Reagan was midway through his inauguration speech. Richards slumped in one of two leather club chairs in the family room. He watched the CNN telecast of the Presidential inauguration, more out of curiosity than interest. Curiosity and the need to fill empty time. *Slow time* as his late friend, George Johnson, would have called it.

Jim Richards felt the twinge of a bitter sweet memory. George had tended bar at the Red Roof Restaurant in San Francisco until a pair of *nogoodniks*, KGB proxy assassins from Cuba, came around looking for Jim Richards. George couldn't really tell them anything, but they killed him for good measure anyway.

At this moment in Jim Richards' life, memory of the price George had paid was a poignant reminder of how hazardous an undertaking it was for anyone to be his friend. The lines of a song he'd been working on for George came to mind:

When I used to get around and drink a little myself.  
I had a place to go with my favorite call on the shelf.  
And before I'd get two feet inside the door.  
He'd have my bottle out with a smile, and be startin' to pour.

Now this life of mine has taken me far and wide.  
I've drunk with the best and drifted with the tide.  
And every now and then someone would pour me short.  
And I think about the times *he'd* say: It's on me, Sport.

He was a hard drinkin', long pourin', funny son of a gun.  
But he always had the time to help you find some fun  
He could brighten up your day like sunshine on the grass.  
Help you find a way to make the slow time pass.

Jim Richards shook his head sadly. One of these days he'd have to finish the tune for ol' George, if not for himself. He glanced at his watch, 13:30 Nashville time. What the hell too early for a sip of scotch anyway. Richards hovered on the edge of despair, a condition he'd been battling for the past few weeks, since Anna Meda-Soam's death. There were times when he'd actually contemplated suicide, putting his old forty-five auto loader to his temple, ending the guilt.

He'd never before experienced such remorse and self-admonishment. If he'd not recruited her, she'd be alive today. That recurring fact would not leave his mind. It was there first thing in the morning when he awoke, and again before he fell into a restless sleep late at night, when his mind and body finally gave in to the physical need for rest.

Not that sleep brought much succor, he seldom made it through the night without at least one nightmare. Sometimes it was Misti, though more often Anna. Both taunted him with the question: Why? What had been so goddamned important, he should place them in harm's way?

As he mulled these negative thoughts over in his mind, his attention was unconsciously drawn to the images on the television screen. The camera operator was in the process of slowly panning the audience, Jim Richards recognized T. Harris Williams, Michael Fitzgerald, Allen Maxwell, and Raymond Harbinger. He thought it ironic they should appear at that very moment on his television screen. In fact, he had to blink twice to assure himself he wasn't just imagining their presence.

He pointed his index finger at Maxwell, as if it were the barrel of a gun. He was about to drop the hammer of his thumb, when the camera moved off to a middle eastern businessman, or perhaps diplomat, seated on the other side of Raymond Harbinger.

Jim Richards frowned. The man's face looked familiar but he couldn't quite place where he'd seen it before. His mind began to run through its data base of faces and events, clearing billions of bits of information in seconds, searching for a match.

Before the camera moved off to another section of the audience, two matches sprung into his consciousness: One was a photograph discussed at a meeting with Elmo Jefferson in Florida two years prior. A name came to mind: Roget Akhondan. The second was the face of one of the terrorists he'd shot and killed, on the fifth floor of Caring First. Yet that image was not a perfect match. Could it be they were related in some way? A cousin perhaps? Or brother?

Jim Richards leaped from his chair, and jogged down the hallway to the secure line in his studio. Then dialed Ty Harding International. He began the conversation without preamble when he was put through to Harding. "Are you watching the inauguration?"

"Yes. And by the way, we just got official confirmation, the hostages have been released. They weren't kidding about the timing."

"That's wonderful, " Richards responded without enthusiasm. "They were panning the audience earlier, did you happen to catch it?"

"More, or less. Why?"

"Well apart from our two favorite people in attendance, Roget Akhondan is seated next to Raymond Harbinger."

"Interesting. Probably wants to ingratiate himself with the troops, see who's going to be a problem at the changing of the guard so to speak."

"No doubt, though I still find it hard to believe we're going along with the deal. Anyway, that's none of my business, and not the reason I called. Remember the two terrorists I took out on the fifth at Caring First? Well I'm certain one of them was related to Akhondan, a cousin, or maybe even a brother."

Harding was silent for a moment at the other end of the line. "If you're right, then it might be best for you to pack your things, and head back here as soon as possible."

#

The sun set quickly, too quickly for Jim Richards. A trick of the geography at the west end of the valley in which his house was located. The sun seemed to go down more quickly in the Winter. The hills created a false horizon. Jim Richards reminded himself the sun had not really set, that wouldn't occur for two more hours, beyond the Golden Gate Bridge.

He sat alone in his living room surrounded by a jungle of house plants, and watched the colors in the southwestern sky fade slowly to gun metal gray. This was the most difficult time of day for him.

He took a solid pull at his first scotch of the evening. Another day was ending, another lonely night beginning. His blood sugar was down, which increased the pain of his mental suffering. Soon images of Misti lying in the deprivation chamber, and Anna lying on the bathroom floor, would float before his eyes in the darkness.

Eventually the scotch would numb his guilt, the alcohol would temporarily pick-up his blood sugar. His stomach would remind him he was hungry. And he'd take the Bronco over the hill to find something to eat. Usually a hamburger at McDonalds, or a quick bite over at Denny's near the on-ramp to I-65.

As he reclined against the fabric of the oversize bean bag chair, an overwhelming sadness came over him. He no longer saw his life as a series of adventures with the high minded goal of protecting the freedom so many took for granted, but rather a series of errors and omissions that propelled him from one crisis to the next. Mistakes that cost others their lives, symbolically in Misti's case, or actually as with Anna, George, and too many others. While he stumbled forward blithely, unscathed. Perhaps, it would be best to let it all end, to simply offer himself as a target when the next opportunity presented itself.

As he pondered such morbid thoughts, he heard the sound of a door being tested. Then the scraping of wood, which seemed as if it emanated from the rear deck. A reflex surge of adrenaline pumped through his body, momentarily countering the sedating effect of the alcohol he'd consumed, while simultaneously purging any thoughts of self-annihilation from his mind. Where a moment before his mind was morose and sluggish, it was now crystal clear, focused.

He rolled to his left, slipped his right hand under the bean bag chair until it contacted a .380 autoloader he kept hidden there. In fact, there were weapons hidden in every room of the house.

The living room offered no cover substantial enough to stop a bullet. So he chose the darkest corner he could find, behind a potted Ficus. Whoever had entered the house was extremely stealthy. Even though he held his breath, he heard no footsteps. Yet he sensed someone, or something approaching. His eyes darted, left and right. His senses acutely attuned to the slightest change in his environment.

In his line of work, from time to time, he became the target of someone's malevolence. It had happened before, many times before actually. And though he'd always prevailed in the past, that fact was of no particular value. If anything, it dulled the edge he needed to survive. It had the potential to provide a false sense of security. The *it will never happen to me* syndrome that ultimately cost more than a few of his colleagues their lives.

As these thoughts hovered at the back of his mind, Alexander appeared around the corner of the hallway. Richards laughed out loud. The animal looked towards the sound of Richards' voice, then bounded over whimpering and licking his face. They rolled around on the floor for awhile, then settled into the bean bag chair together.

Alexander laid his large, furry head in Richards' lap, and Jim Richards proceeded to tell him his life's story. He told him all the secrets he could never reveal to anyone. He talked of his fears. His successes and failures. His strengths and weaknesses. Truths and lies. It was 22:00, and pitch dark when he finished. Strangely, he felt better for it. Notwithstanding, a slight hangover, the result of a failure to refill his drink during the one sided conversation.

"So what do *you* think, Alexander? Shall we get that Big Mac?"

"*Grummf.*"

Jim Richards figured that meant *yes*.

The Execujet West Lear touched down, its thrust reversers roared in protest. Jim Richards pulled into one of the parking spaces adjacent to Ross Aviation. The little blue and white jet eased to a stop out on the tarmac. Richards strolled over, reaching the aircraft just as the door on the forward port-side popped open. Ty Harding climbed out, and shook his hand.

#

They sat in his Bronco at the approach end of the field. It was a secure place to confer, while they watched inbound aircraft make their best attempts at the always elusive *greaser*, the perfect landing.

"The committee has approved executive action."

Jim Richards nodded his head once, but made no comment. He'd given all the information he had on Allen Maxwell to Harding, as well as, his report on Anna's death. Apparently his recommendation on executive action had been agreed to, though he doubted he'd be allowed to be the instrument of its consummation. He wanted to feel happy his original opinion about Maxwell had been validated, but strangely there was no feeling at all. Just the knowledge a decision had been made, action would be taken.

Harding raised an eyebrow. "You're uncharacteristically blasé, Jim. Or have you already done the deed? And we've simply not yet been informed."

Jim Richards chuckled. "Am I that unpredictable?"

"At times," Harding said, "especially when revenge is at issue."

Richards shrugged, then shook his head. "I seemed to have lost the capacity for emotion. For weeks now, I've endured a nearly incapacitating sadness. Depression I suppose its called, but it has passed. And has been replaced by a sort of cerebral barrier, behind which reside emotions that once caused me pain. Perhaps, I've lost a capacity others cherish, but gained in the exchange a freedom I've never experienced before." He paused a moment, let out a long sigh. "Frankly, I don't care who resolves the issue, or how its done." There was a look of cold ice in his eyes.

Something told Harding, Jim Richards was speaking the truth. And while on the one hand it pleased Harding that Richards had been set free from the fetters of emotion. On the other, he was saddened. His friend had lost a human capacity necessary to experience joy, the other side of sadness. You cannot lose one without losing the other.



A turbo-twin commuter passed overhead, they both watched it touch down.

"It will take a little time to make the necessary arrangements. CIA's Covert Action Directorate will execute the mission."

Jim Richards nodded once. "Fair enough. I'll remain in Nashville, until their deaths are confirmed."

Harding shook his head. "Come on home, Jim. There's no point to it. I'll keep you informed. You'll be the first to know when it's finished."

"Too many slips twixt the cup and lips, Ty. These are powerful men, at least in this community. Men with tales to tell. If either suspects their fate, they'll leverage their lives with the secrets they hold. That *would* be unacceptable to me."

A small trainer flew overhead, wings wobbling in the thermals. Its wheels touched down several times. The aircraft wandered left and right on the wide runway before lifting off again for another *go-around*, another try. Probably a student pilot.

Harding sighed, in frustration at Jim Richards' stubbornness. "It may be unhealthy for you to stay. I asked the computer dweebs at Langley to run everything they had on Roget Akhondan, which included *cointel* with the French. Your intuition was correct. He did have a brother as you surmised. The operative word is *had*.

"Rashad was his name. Immigrated to France a year ago to work for Medico Pharmaceutical. French intelligence kept a watch on him, as he'd been previously identified as a trainee in one of the camps run by the Islamic Jihad. Long story short, he disappeared shortly before your action at Caring First, and hasn't been seen since. Langley's sent forensics photos to the French so they can close their files if it's a match. We'll know for certain in a day or two."

Richards nodded his head. "Oh it'll be a match all right."

"Most likely," Harding agreed. "Which brings me to another piece of news. The *Company's* man in Algiers, ID'd Roget Akhondan enroute to a meeting. Shortly thereafter, a three man hit team was observed departing for Germany. German intelligence determined they were bound for Canada, and we notified the Mounties. Instead, they made their way into France, and slipped their tails."

Richards shrugged. "Since located?"

"No."

"Let me know when they are."

Harding sighed. "Jim, I can't order you back to San Francisco. Well, I can, but what the hell good would it do me? And I can't provide you with any backup. Yet there's a damn good chance that hit team is already here the United States, possibly in Nashville. And their target is you."

Jim Richards stared off into the distance. Several long moments passed. Harding did not interrupt his friend's thoughts. At last Richards said. "They're not looking for me, to be exact." He turned to gaze directly at Harding, a look of cynicism on his face. "They're looking for Jimmy Ocean."

#

Vince Morris and Bob Spencer stood on the upper level observation deck of Tehran's Meherabad International Airport. Their flight was not due to leave for another hour. The release of the U.S hostages had gone exactly as agreed upon. The contingency plans they'd drawn up with Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer had not been needed after all.

At the airfield, civilian aircraft shared the runways with Iran's Air Force. Military aircraft were parked on the far side, perhaps a half mile away from the observation deck. Bob Spencer rested his forearms on the deck's railing, and gazed across the runway at the military side of the field. Vince Morris stood with his back to the rail, watching their *six* in a casually alert manner.

Their cover was holding up well. Once they'd connected with Bob Jacobson they'd exchanged their entry identity packets for a more complete ensemble, fitting movement about the city beyond the usual five day stay of the typical visitor.

Bob Spencer frowned. "Odd," he said. "There's a Swissair cargo jet over on the other side of the field."

Vince craned his neck around, and glanced across the field for a moment or two. Then returned to scanning the observation deck, watching the doors to the terminal. "Probably off loading medical supplies for the military."

"Maybe," Spencer replied. "Cover me for a moment."

Bob Spencer stepped to his right, and bent his knees slightly, while Vince Morris moved into the space previously occupied by Spencer shielding him with

his body. Spencer slipped a palm size prism telescope from inside the pocket of his jacket, and put it to his eye. He focused it using the thumb and forefinger of the hand that held the telescope. Then observed the activity across the field for no more than thirty seconds, before slipping the scope back into his pocket. He then turned to lean against the railing, searching the people on the observation deck for anyone curious about his activity. There was no indication anyone had noticed.

"Strange," Spencer said after a moment, or two. "The cargo wears a red cross. I could just make out the word *Medico* in bold print on their sides. But their on-loading, *not* off-loading."

Vince Morris frowned, he glanced over his shoulder at Spencer. "That *is* odd, wonder where that freighter's bound?"

"And why the Iranians would need to ship medical supplies out of the country?" Spencer added.

#

They made their way down from the observation deck to a bank of telephones located in the main lobby of the airport. Bob Spencer dialed the international operator, then placed a collect call to his *office* in Paris. It took fifteen minutes for the call to go through.

While he was engaged in this irritating ordeal, his team mate Vince Morris flipped through a copy of a popular novel they'd picked up at the duty free store. American books were banned in Iran, but editions printed in Great Britain were not. As he thumbed through the book, he'd stop, every now and then, select a word, then write a series of numbers on a small pad he carried.

The problem was lack of secure communications. The call Spencer placed would arrive at a computer sales and service firm in Paris. Upon the expression of a code word, he would be transferred to a CIA communications unit within the building. There the call would be digitized and compressed, burst transmitted to a satellite, then bounced down to Langley.

He expected their conversation to be monitored by Iranian and French intelligence. It was now that the cover they'd converted to would prove most valuable. Their visas indicated they were service technicians. Iran had a serious computer maintenance problem since the taking of hostages, and the ensuing goods and services embargo. As long as their conversation appeared to be technically oriented to computer service issues, no one would concern themselves with the content. At last Bob Spencer got through to Elmo Jefferson.

"Eloise. Jacques Malnueve here." He said in French.

Jefferson pressed the record button on his telephone console. Though he spoke French fluently, he'd want their conversation reviewed by an expert to make certain he'd not misunderstood any nuance of dialog.

"*Bonjour*, Jacques. How are you doing this fine day. Will you be returning soon?"

"But yes," Spencer replied. "We are at the airport even as we speak. However, I wanted to get those figures to you on the UNIX 500 system. Perhaps you can run them while we're in transit."

"But of course, *bon ami*. Give them to me right now."

Bob Spencer rapidly read the figures off the sheet Vince had prepared.

The first series contained the ISBN number on the title page of the book they were using. From this, Elmo would quickly locate a duplicate copy. The next series of numbers, given in uninterrupted sequence represented: Page, paragraph, sentence, and word. Though cumbersome, it was a completely unbreakable code, unless of course the opposition figured out the name of the book used, or caught you with it in your possession.

As Spencer read the figures, Vince disposed of the book. As soon as the message was transmitted, Bob Spencer stuffed the note into his mouth. Not bad he thought ruefully, but then it was *rice* paper.

#

Elmo Jefferson stared at the dictated figures, they were meaningless to him at the moment. He dialed an interoffice extension, the agency's librarian answered.

"Ruth? Elmo here. Can you check an ISBN for me?" He gave her the number, within moments she had the book's title. "Do we have a copy on hand?" Elmo asked. "Excellent. No that's all right I need the exercise. I'll be right down."

#

It took Elmo Jefferson several minutes to transcribe the message: *Swiss aircraft parked secure side of field. Military loading Medico cargo. Destination? Reason? Contents? Expect arrival Paris early this evening.*

Jefferson sat in the quiet of the library for several moments, considering the message. He then returned to his office, where he made three telephone calls. The first was to CIA's air transportation division, where every single flight in the world was monitored. Within five minutes it was determined the Swissair freighter, on-loading in Tehran, was destined for Paris, France. The second call was to Frank Prescott, already in Paris, having left Tehran ahead of the others. The third was to Dr. Richard Holt.

#

The board room at Caring First was set up for the first full executive meeting of the new year. The silver coffee urns stood on the sideboard, along with fresh Danish pastries. Seated at the table were nearly all of the company's senior executives, with the exception of T. Harris Williams, Raymond Harbinger, and their newest addition. In fact the purpose of the meeting was to formally introduce Roget Akhondan.

The pre-meeting banter was unusually subdued, and completely without substance, a few light comments about the *super bowl*.. The usual arm chair analysis, and twenty-twenty hindsight.

Although some of the meeting's attendees had met Mr. Akhondan at the President's inauguration in Washington, others had not. Those who had, did not seem inclined to share whatever insights they might have gained, rather they preferred to enjoy the appearance of special knowledge.

In fact, everyone at the table was a little nervous. They each knew the simplest way for a newcomer to show the stock holders their prowess at improving profits, was to slash a few jobs, lop a couple heads. Not even senior executives were immune to the possibility of job insecurity.

Allen Maxwell sat in his usual spot midway down the conference table. He was completely relaxed. Confident in the knowledge he'd soon reach a high point, if not the pinnacle of his career. He'd been assured by Harris Williams, he'd be named President of Caring First. Just as he and Raymond Harbinger had planned. Rumors to that effect had already begun to creep through the company.

As a tangible token of his soon to be announced promotion, he'd acquired, at long last, his own personal secretary. Not someone he'd have to share with Michael Fitzgerald. She'd come over from International, one of the few who'd elected to stay with the parent company, rather than accept assignment to some other part of the world. International had been broken up, its assets sold, or were in the process of being sold off.

Her name was Melody Mortaire. Every morning she had his coffee ready for him, the moment he walked in the door. One of the first things she'd done, was to go out and buy a personal coffee maker for him. It sat on his credenza, where he could reach it whenever he wished. But the first cup she always graciously poured, sweetened exactly the way he liked.

And never mind the restaurant blends used by their executive chef, and served to the other executives from the silver earn that stood near the entrance to the executive suite. Melody bought fresh ground, gourmet blend, each Monday morning.

And though she fit the image of a corporate executive secretary perfectly, from her elegantly coifed hair, to her Gucci shoes, she was not at all prudish, and enjoyed an off color joke as much as he did.

The door to the executive conference room opened. All conversation in the room stopped, and all eyes looked at the three men who entered. First came Raymond Harbinger dressed in a three piece, navy blue, pin stripe suit. He was followed by Roget Akhondan, who also wore a finely tailored navy blue suit. Though his bore no striping. Finally, Harris Williams in gray flannel.

Normally, the meeting would be shirt sleeves but fortunately everyone had the good sense to realize today's meeting was special. Each had likewise worn a suit jacket, though no announcement had been made one way or the other. Such was the way of corporate culture, one was just supposed to know what was appropriate, and when.

The chair at the head of the conference table was reserved for Harris Williams. He motioned Roget Akhondan to take the one to his right, while Harbinger sat to his left.

Harris Williams looked at each of the executives in turn, before he began the presentation he'd prepared. When he gazed at Allen Maxwell, there seemed to be a look of question in his eyes, that for a moment made Maxwell decidedly uncomfortable. But then Harris smiled warmly, and his gaze moved on around the table.

Allen Maxwell shrugged the moment off, put it down to his own excitement, the knowledge his promotion would soon be announced. Still the look Harris Williams had given him, was the look a doctor reserved, and Maxwell reminded himself Harris was indeed a physician, for a patient with a terminal illness. The look held both pity and hope, suddenly replaced by resignation. As a doctor one did not get involved emotionally with one's patients.

Even as Maxwell pondered this thought, he realized Harris Williams was speaking, and so he brought himself back to the here and now to listen.

"...changes must occur in our corporate structure, if we're to remain a viable company, continue to grow, continue to be as competitive as we have been to date.

"Mr. Akhondan brings to our structure a synergy, and product recognized through out the world. The economies of scale we'll realize from the discount we'll receive as a partner in the manufacture of the pharmaceuticals our facilities use, alone is enough to justify the merger we have just this week completed."

#

The warehouse was located in an industrial park, not far from Orly International Airport. Bob Spencer and Vince Morris had observed the arrival of Swissair, Flight 122, inbound from Iran one hour behind their own Air France flight to Paris.

They surveiled the off loading process at a discreet distance, using a Quastar spotting scope, from the roof of a building just outside the air field's security perimeter. As a result, an accurate count was obtained: Three hundred cartons, each approximately the size of a case of long neck beer, had been transshipped from Tehran.

Timing their departure to instructions broadcast from Prescott's observation post, Vince Morris and Bob Spencer leaped frogged a tail of the aluminum sided, Renault cargo lorry, to an industrial park not far from the airport, a warehouse only recently leased by a subsidiary of Medico.

Another red flag, thought Bob Spencer, as they listened to Frank Prescott's come-back on the building's tenant. Medico had a large facility just outside Paris, not more than a half hour from the industrial complex where the cargo from the Swissair flight had been taken.

Why would they need additional space? Surely there was enough room at their main facility to accommodate the relatively small shipment.

Another anomaly, the cargo had taken less than three percent of the space available inside the aircraft, generating a huge air freight bill. If the shipment was contracted to fill an emergency medical need, the cost would be justified. But that didn't appear to be the case. Except for having emanated from a secure location in Iran, the shipment had been handled in a most casual manner.

Which raised another red flag in Vince Morris and Bob Spencer's mind. The most sinister undertakings are always cloaked in apparent normalcy. Subterfuge is a far better security, than armed guards and complicated routes of transfer.

Vince Morris slipped into a pair of blue coveralls, using the back seat of the car he'd rented at Orly. The patch on the coveralls indicated he was a building inspector, as did one on the baseball cap pulled low on his forehead.

One of the advantages of operating in a friendly country, the local CIA station had all the conveniences of home. The sunglasses he wore contained a tiny amplifier in the left hand ear piece, while a thin microphone cable snaked from just under the sleeve of his coveralls to a transceiver clipped to his pant's belt at the small of his back under the coveralls.

He carried a clip board, and a wheel type measuring device. Walking in the studied fashion of an inspector conducting a routine survey, he positioned himself diagonally across from the roll-up entrance to the warehouse, where the Medico truck had stopped.

As he took measurements and wrote figures on note paper, he surreptitiously monitored the off loading process. Several items observed bothered him: First, the warehouse appeared to be nearly empty. There were no storage racks erected. There was no equipment installed. And there were no employees, other than the one who'd opened the roll-up door, and now assisted the driver in the manual off loading process.

Through the open door, Vince Morris counted thirteen cartons of similar size to the ones being unloaded, stacked to one side of the warehouse. In the center of the concrete floor, maybe ten feet back from the entrance, was a single work surface that appeared to be at least fifteen feet in length. The newly delivered cartons were stacked in equal numbers on both sides of the table, leaving space for a dozen workers between the cartons and the table.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Vince continued his survey. He ignored other tenants of the complex, who looked in his direction momentarily questioning his presence. No one asked any questions, his uniform, and clearly evident survey activity, told them everything they thought they needed to know.

He returned along the opposite side of the driveway that divided the complex, arriving at the Medico space just as the sole employee rolled the door down with a clang, then the delivery truck pulled away. He was nearly to end of the driveway when he heard the walk-in door bang shut.



He was tying his shoe, head down, face obscured, when the small Fiat driven by the receiving employee left the driveway, turning right towards the main boulevard bordering the complex.

#

Bob Spencer ran the magnetic detector around the perimeter of the skylight, the reading was negative. Working carefully, inch by inch, he scrutinized the skylight through a pair of night vision goggles. There was no sign of an alarm system. This, however, did not eliminate the possibility of motion detectors inside. But motion detectors were seldom used as a primary system, normally they were a back up to mechanical perimeters, especially where skylights were concerned.

They'd accessed the roof using a rope and grapple. Frank Prescott remained on guard at the street, Vince Morris at the perimeter of the building. It was 23:30, there had been no activity around the complex for over an hour.

Bob Spencer was beginning to have some misgivings about the importance of the shipment, normalcy was one thing, but there should, at least, be a rudimentary security system installed. The warehouse had been leased only the week before. Time enough to install a system, unless the tenant was completely certain the length of exposure would be so short, or the goods contained therein of so little value, there was no need for even the slightest precaution. Not likely the latter, therefore the former. Whatever work was to be done within, would most likely occur in the nearest future.

Spencer concluded they'd best make their entry, and survey immediately. No sooner had this thought crossed his mind, he heard the crackle of his transceiver's ear piece. It was Prescott.

"Heads up, I've got a half dozen vehicles coming this way."

Spencer took a moment to think. His first inclination was to join Vince Morris at the parapet. However, if he exercised that option, there would be no chance to learn what was taking place inside. Prescott would keep them apprised of any activity outside the building.

Instead, he immediately removed a small hand drill from the light backpack he'd worn to the roof. Using the drill quickly, but with care, he drilled a hole in the translucent plastic skylight large enough to insert a flexible viewing device. Originally, he'd planned to use the device to survey the underside of the skylight for a security system undetectable by exterior observation. Now the device would be his only means of observing activity within. A small fish eye lens in the viewer, would give him a twenty foot circle directly below the skylight.

Next he plugged one of two listening tubes from a stethoscope into his ear, then placed the amplification end flat on the skylight's surface. From below, if seen at all, it would pass for bird excrement on the outer surface of the skylight

He then lay on his side next to the skylight, to assure no shadow would be cast across its surface when the moon rose as the night progressed.

His ear piece crackled again, it was Prescott. "You've got twelve targets closing on the space. They show no weapons, nor any indication at all they're concerned about security." There was a moments silence. "Target number one is opening the walk-in door with a key."

Spencer heard the scrape of the key, the turning of the tumbler, the squeak of the doors hinges. Suddenly, bright light flooded the area below the skylight, fortunately all the lights shined downward, and were hung well below the ceiling.

As Spencer watched, twelve people came into view, ten split up, and went to opposing sides of the work table. Two stepped over to the wall, where other cartons had been stacked prior to today's shipment.

The workers at the table began opening the cartons received off Swissair, each contained what appeared to be a standard aerosol container of the type that might contain hair spray, or some sort of disinfectant. Each carton contained twenty-four such containers. The workers removed each container, one at a time, examined it, then either returned it to its compartment, or set it aside on the work surface. The empty space in the carton, was then filled with an identical container, obtained from one of the cartons stacked at the far side of the warehouse.

Spencer did a quick calculation in his head, three hundred cartons each containing twenty -four containers, total seven thousand, two hundred. If one container was removed from each carton, they would need to replace three hundred, which would require twelve and half cartons of identical product. There were thirteen cartons stacked on the far side of the warehouse.

Spencer surmised the scheme was quite simple. The shipment was a product frequently imported by Medico. French customs officials were used to seeing the product pass through their port of entry. Of seventy-two hundred containers shipped, only four percent were contraband. It was unlikely custom inspectors would actually test any of the containers to assure it contained the product listed on the manifest, however, even if they did, there was only a one in twenty-four chance they'd choose the container with contraband.

It was 02:15 when the workers completed the first phase of the operation. Three hundred aerosol containers stood side by side on the work surface. Three hundred cartons were sealed, and stacked near the roll-up door. Twelve additional cartons were completely empty.

As Bob Spencer observed the operation, he listened to the conversations of the men working below. They conversed in French, though all of the men appeared to be from the middle east. Spencer surmised they'd been living so long in France, the language had become more comfortable than their own native tongue. This was quite unusual, middle easterners as a rule were very nationalistic, tending to retain as much of their own culture as possible, especially language when amongst themselves.

Certainly, if all were involved in some sort of contraband plot, they would speak in their native tongue. In the fifteen, or so, years he'd been working special operations, he'd yet to surveil a cell that did not use their own language, when preparing equipment, or matériel for a strike.

This anomaly told Spencer that most, if not all of those involved, were not privy to the contents of the containers, or the operation. Most likely they were either employees of Medico, or temporary workers hired to reorganize a shipment. Probably under the guise a defective product had been packaged, and was then recalled for replacement before reshipping. None of the workers would question the use of an off-site warehouse. Segregation of defective product, and convenience would be the reasons that immediately came to mind.

When the work was completed, the men left the warehouse. Oddly the product removed from the cartons was left standing on the work table.

Another anomaly, Spencer did not hear the tumbler lock the door when the last man left the warehouse. He smiled to himself. If the idiots left the door unlocked, he and Vince might have an opportunity to enter without going through the hassle of climbing down through the skylight.

His ear piece crackled. "Steady up there." Prescott's voice whispered in his ear. "Twelve targets are getting into their vehicles. Headlights are coming on. They're pulling away. Six vehicles coming down the drive way." He paused. "Wait a moment, one vehicle is hanging back. Definitely stopping. It's reversed direction. Stopping in front of the walk-in." Another moment of silence. "The others are continuing on their way." Another pause. "Okay we've got three targets getting out of the vehicle. Two are going into the warehouse. The third one has crossed the driveway, he's taking a position in the shadows on the other side."

Bob Spencer returned to the eye piece he'd been looking through for the past two and a half hours. At least, he'd had a chance to change positions, something he'd been unable to do during the entire initial surveillance period because the gravel that covered the roof would have transmitted the sound of any movement above to those below.

Again he heard the door open, then close. This time it was locked from the inside. Then the overheads came on again. Two men came into view. Each carrying a large duffel bag, they spoke briefly to each other in Farsi. Spencer spoke the language a little, but could make out only a word or two, as a result of the rapid exchange coupled with the limitations of listening through a stethoscope.

Each man set his duffel bag down on the table, unzipped it, and removed a bio-hazard suit. The two men quickly climbed into the suits, then assisted each other with donning self-contained breathing apparatus, and snapping the breathing hoses onto nipped connections at the back of each other's helmet.

They then walked half the length of the table, one on each side, carrying their duffels with them. They stopped when they reached the aerosol containers previously left standing on the table.

The men removed small power drills from their duffel bags. Each unit had a cutting disk attached. With care they proceeded to carefully remove the bottom end of the aerosol cans, revealing a small chamber in a false bottom.

So that was the how Roget Akhondan assured beating the odds, Spencer thought, for he was certain Akhondan was ultimately behind the shipment. He was the only Medico executive with the clout necessary to warrant the cooperation of the Iranian military.

The upper portion of the container held whatever the standard product was they were shipping. If removed and tested, French customs would not have found anything suspicious. Unless, of course, they were to cut open the container, something they'd not have done to a routine shipment not suspected of containing contraband.

Spencer watched as the men removed from each of the containers a small cylindrical object. The object looked identical to CO2 cartridges used to power a variety of consumer items: Pellet pistols, seltzer bottles, wine openers. The two men handled the cartridges with extreme care, placing them carefully side by side on a contoured foam pad inside a tool box that appeared to be made of high impact plastic.

The aerosol cans with the false bottoms were placed neatly into the cartons that had previously held the aerosol containers used to fill blanks in the original shipment.

As Bob Spencer watched the operation unfold below he continued to consider the options available to him. U.S. Navy SEALs were authorized to use deadly force anytime a threat to United States security was uncovered. However, in this situation they had no idea if the United States was in fact threatened, and could only assume the content of the cartridges was lethal, based upon the attire the men below were wearing. Unfortunately, at this point such circumstantial evidence did not merit deadly force. Their best option was to take the men alive if at all possible, then transport them to a secure area for questioning while the cartridges were analyzed.

The men below were clearly professionals, there was no idle chatter between the two, therefore, no hint as to the ultimate destination or use of the material smuggled.

The men in the bio-hazard suits had nearly completed their work. There were less than a dozen aerosols unopened. Spencer glanced at his watch, 04:30. Another hour of work-time was all that was available to them, before other businesses in the complex began to open.

Small business owners were notoriously early risers. And if it was the intent of the men below to use stealth as their greatest security, they would want to be well away from the complex before the first of the business owners arrived. Based upon the number of containers left, they would finish with little time to spare.

Just as Spencer came to this conclusion, he noticed that one of the workers was having a difficult time getting a cartridge out of one of the containers. All of the previous cartridges had dropped out of its container, after it was given a sharp rap on the open palm of the worker's gloved hand. But this one refused to come out.

The worker attempted to reach inside the container with his thumb and forefinger, to grasp the cartridge, but his bio-hazard glove would not allow this option. He started to remove the glove, but the other worker stopped him, shaking his head, and saying no, apparently it was too dangerous to risk handling with unprotected hands.

The second worker then took the container from the first, and attempted to grasp the cartridge with a pair of long nosed pliers, to no avail. The pliers repeatedly slipped off the cartridge. He tried rapping the container several times on his hand, each attempt harder than the previous. Then he began to strike the

top of the work surface with bottom of the container, but still the cartridge refused to come out.

Next he retrieved a screwdriver from inside a tool pouch he'd earlier removed from his duffel bag. Using it as a prying tool, he worked his way around the inside of the container. As he was doing this, the first worker leaned this way and that, attempting to peer down into the opening, all the while making encouraging comments.

Suddenly, there was pop. The first worker's head jerked back, his neck arched until he was staring straight up at the ceiling. A muffled scream came from within his helmeted suit. A spray of mist seemed to explode outward.

Bob Spencer reflexively jerked his head away from the viewing scope, even as his brain told him what had happened. The second worker had broken the sealed cap at the end of the pressurized cartridge in his attempt to pry the thing out. The suddenly released pressure, propelled the cartridge out of the container like a mortar out of its firing tube. It slammed through the first worker's face shield, glanced off his forehead, then ricocheted around inside the helmet.

The second worker stared in shocked astonishment at the marionette-like paroxysm of his co-worker. His screams replaced by a gurgling, gagging sound. The first worker staggered around, attempting to tear his helmet off. His body convulsing. His feet hopping up and down on the concrete floor in a kind of dance reminiscent of native Americans around a camp fire. Then his arms began to jerk spasmodically. The entire sequence reminded Spencer of an ant hit with a direct blast of insect poison.

Meanwhile the second worker seemed frozen in place, immobilized by the shock of it all. He stood staring in disbelief at the agony of his compatriot.

Almost as suddenly as he'd started, the first worker stopped moving entirely. He remained standing for a moment or two, arms rigid at his sides, knees locked. Then he began to topple over backwards, slowly at first, but gradually faster as gravity pulled him towards the floor. He slammed down hard onto the concrete, his air tank hitting first with a loud clang.

His co-worker backed away from the table, started towards the door. Then looked back at the tool box filled with the cartridges, already removed. He glanced at the now rigid, immobile body of his compatriot. Then stepped over to the table, closed the lid on the tool box and turned towards the door.

Bob Spencer had only one option left. They could not take the man alive because the exterior of his bio-hazard suit was now contaminated with a clearly

lethal substance. Nor could they allow him onto the streets of Paris, carrying a Pandora's box of misery and death.

He whispered into his microphone. "Vince take the watcher. Frank we can't allow anyone out of the warehouse." A pair of double clicks in Spencer's ear piece acknowledged his transmission.

Vince Morris raised up, then rested a fully silenced CAR 15 on the concrete parapet that surrounded the roof. He peered through a sniper's Starlight scope, immediately identifying the watcher across the alley. The watcher was peering towards the end of the driveway, in the direction from which Frank Prescott would be coming. The watcher's hand slid smoothly under the lapel of his wind breaker.

From Vince Morris' perspective, the watcher appeared to be reaching for a weapon, most likely carried in a shoulder holster under the windbreaker. He squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession, and looked with an unblinking eye through the viewing tube of the starlight scope, as the watcher slammed back against the concrete wall, then crumpled to the ground.

Morris put three more rounds into the upper torso of the prostrate form, just for good measure. No way he'd leave the kill to chance with his team mate fully exposed, running at full tilt to reach the door of the rented space, before the worker inside came out with his deadly cargo.

Frank Prescott closed immediately on the walk-in door to the warehouse. He positioned himself upwind, but remained in the shadows. When the door opened there would be some escape of contaminants, that could not be helped.

A black seam appeared around the access door. The man inside opened it only enough to peer through the crack, to see if there was anyone outside. Then the door opened a bit further. Finally he swung it wide, intent on leaping through, and running as fast as the bio-hazard suit would allow, directly to his vehicle.

Prescott squeezed the trigger of a nine millimeter H&K autoloader three times, the muzzle blasts suppressed by a Sionics silencer.

The access door was just out of Spencer's view, he manipulated the viewing scope, finally getting it into the correct angle of sight, just as Prescott's rounds struck home. The worker staggered backwards, dropping the tool box. A muffled grunt, followed by a moan, emanated from within his bio-hazard suit, as if the suit were protesting its demise. The man's legs buckled under him, and he collapsed to the floor. Then twitched spasmodically in the final throes of death.

The automatic door closer, slowly closed the walk-in door, concealing the horror within, from those soon to arrive for work in adjacent commercial spaces.



## Chapter Thirty-Four

Allen Maxwell rode the elevator to the fifth floor. His first official day as President of Caring First. His promotion no longer a rumor. Already, he was being treated with the deference he'd always felt he deserved. Colleagues called him *Mr.* Maxwell, instead of Allen, even if in the past they'd felt his equal. The only thing left to do was to make certain he secured Bob Jacobson's office. Rumor had it, Jacobson would not be needing it since the downsizing of International. Well, hell, why not call a *spade* a spade, since the *elimination* of International.

Of course, Roget Akhondan might want Bob's office, though it was unlikely he'd need it. From the looks of things, he'd have his hands full just keeping Medico up to speed. Maxwell smiled cynically to himself. The raghead had probably bitten off more than he could possibly chew. Medico Pharmaceuticals had never supplied an account as vast as Caring First's. The possibility of Medico's failure to perform intrigued Maxwell. A number of Caring First's current suppliers were going to be *hurtin'* when they found out they'd lost their largest account. There might even be an opportunity for he and Raymond Harbinger to increase their personal fortunes, if Medico later proved unable to meet demand.

The elevator doors sighed open. Allen Maxwell nodded to the armed security guard, now posted in the hallway on the fifth floor. One of the precautionary changes made after the terrorist attack, Jimmy Ocean had thwarted. The guard held open one of the oversize doors that led into the executive suite. As Maxwell passed inside, he noted the deferential look Mary Foldenstein gave him. Even the old *battle ax* had a different attitude towards him now. Yes, thought Maxwell, I *am* going to enjoy my new position, perhaps even more than I'd imagined.

Melody Mortaire arose from her desk as Allen Maxwell approached.

"Good morning, Mr. Maxwell."

"Yes it is, isn't it?" He replied.

Melody smiled graciously, dutifully following Allen Maxwell into his office. She took his overcoat and suit jacket. Carefully placed each on its own wooden hanger, then onto a coat tree that stood in the corner. She then stepped behind Maxwell's chair. His morning coffee had just finished brewing on the credenza behind his desk. "Would you care for a cup of coffee, Mr. Maxwell?"

"Yes. Don't mind if I do." He replied.

Melody took a gold rimmed, china cup from a silver tray at the end of the credenza, then poured Maxwell's coffee. She added sugar only, as it was his first cup of the day. Later he might want cream as well.

"I took the liberty of having the shop grind something special for you," she said sweetly. "In honor of your first day as President. If you don't care for the flavor, just say so, and I'll brew a fresh pot of the regular blend."

She placed the cup in front of him on the desk pad, then unfolded the Wall Street Journal, so he could glance over the headlines while he enjoyed his coffee.

Maxwell raised the cup to his lips, and took a careful sip. "Um," he said. "That *is* good, a hint of almond I believe."

"Yes, Mr. Maxwell. It's called Via con Angelicas. A custom blend."

Maxwell took a deeper sip. "Excellent. Good choice, Melody."

"Thank you, Mr. Maxwell. I'll close your door now. So you won't be disturbed until your coffee has hit the spot, as they say."

Maxwell made no reply, he was already engrossed in the morning newspaper. He scanned the front page. Then the column delineating important articles to be found within, half wondering if his promotion had made it onto one of the back pages. As he glanced through the paper, turning the pages slowly, an small article caught his eye.

#

"Paris, France - French investigators are looking into the mysterious deaths of three workers at an industrial complex near Orly International Airport. The individuals were apparently involved in some sort of smuggling operation. The industrial park and the surrounding area were cordoned off. Sources close to the scene indicate the release of some sort of hazardous substance may have contributed to their deaths. However, French authorities are making no comment at this time.

The deceased men worked for Medico Pharmaceutical. What connection, if any, Medico may have to the incident has not been determined at this time. A spokesperson for Medico indicated the deceased workers were laboratory technicians who'd recently taken a leave of absence.

Medico Pharmaceuticals is owned by Roget Akhondan, a wealthy Iranian from one of the few ruling families to retain influence following Iran's recent revolution."

#

Allen Maxwell finished his coffee in one deep swallow. Indeed, it *was* quite good. He swiveled his chair around, then reached for the pot. But found he had to grip the edge of the credenza for support.

He leaned back in his chair, and took a couple of deep breaths. His head felt light, as if he weren't getting enough oxygen. Suddenly he became frightened. He couldn't seem to get his breath. Inhaling deeply seemed to do no good at all. A sharp pain shot down his left arm. His chest felt tight, as if an elastic band were wrapped completely around it.

Reflexively he reached for the knot of his tie, tugging to loosen it. Then his fingers scrabbled for his collar button. Such a simple thing, he thought, yet so difficult. He called for Melody, or thought he did though his voice seemed distant, weak.

He didn't recall bumping his head, or falling from the chair. Though he must have, since the only view he now had was of the ceiling.

Where the hell was Melody? Couldn't the silly twit hear his cries for God's sake? She must have heard him fall to the floor? Oh God, don't let me die. Not like this. All alone. The coffee? Via con Angelicas? Go with angels. Oh my God. Wayne... Wayne. You always called them little angels, just... before... you...

#

Harris Williams placed two fingers to Allen Maxwell's carotid artery, then arose slowly from one knee. As he stood, he gazed at the small group of people gathered in the doorway. He shook his head, then said: "He's passed on to a better life. Heart attack, I'm afraid."

There were murmurs from the group, a shaking of heads as they moved away from the doorway.

"I've called an ambulance, Mr. Williams." Mary Foldenstein said, from somewhere beyond the knot of people.

Harris Williams spread his arms wide ushering the group farther away from the door. "Let's leave him in peace."

Outside Maxwell's office he paused for a moment. "I know how upsetting this sort of thing is. If anyone would like to go home, please feel free to take the rest of the day off." He shook his head. "Allen was with us almost from the beginning, and he will be missed."

The executives, and staff, turned away. Words of condolence were expressed to each other, or to no one in particular. Melody Mortaire remained just inside the door to Maxwell's office. She stood erect, no sign of emotion on her face.

When the others had dispersed, Harris Williams turned to Melody. "Just close the door, Miss Mortaire, until the paramedics arrive. I'll act as the physician of record, if anyone inquires." He started to turn away then stopped himself. "Oh, don't forget to discard that coffee. I don't think anyone else needs to have any, do you?"

Melody nodded her head once in acknowledgment. "Perhaps it was a bit too strong?" A gallows smile hinted at the corners of her mouth.

"Quite possibly. " Harris replied, then turned away.

#

The sun settled behind the wooded hills west of Percy Warner park. Raymond Harbinger sat alone at his desk. A half finished bottle of Napoleon Cognac stood on the leather desk pad, along with a Waterford snifter only recently emptied. To the right of the snifter was a crumpled piece of plain brown wrapping paper. Bits of string, cut to allow access to the package's contents, trailed off in opposite directions.

Don Dancing, the new head of Corporate Security and Executive Protection, had delivered the package earlier in the evening. It contained a VCR cassette, which Dancing suggested he review at his earliest convenience.

Raymond Harbinger picked up the rectangular plastic cassette and turned it over in his hands. He read the label for the umpteenth time, as if the repetitiveness of the act alone would somehow give him more agreeable information. The label read: Security Tape, Camera 8, Green Acres Convalescent (Copy 1).

He arose wearily from his desk, the joints of his knees crackled and creaked. He felt all sixty-eight of his years bearing down on him like a block of concrete. His first attempt at inserting the cassette failed, and it fell on the floor. The effort to pick it up seemed almost overwhelming.

His second try was successful, though he fumbled with the Play button and Channel selector. By the time he'd managed to get everything coordinated, the tape was five minutes into its program.

He hobbled back to his desk, sat down wearily in his chair, then watched the program unfold. At first it was difficult to determine what he was looking at, apparently the camera had been mounted at a high angle, probably in the corner of the room near the ceiling. But as he continued to watch the action on screen, he realized he was watching a tape of himself the night of Sylvia's death.

Harbinger's heartbeat accelerated. His breath came in short gasps. His head whirled. And he averted his eyes from the screen in disgust. My God, he thought, where had the tape come from? Allen Maxwell had assured him the security cameras were deactivated whenever they were in the *private* rooms.

Raymond Harbinger leaped out of his chair in anger, moving more quickly than even he imagined possible. He strode over to the VCR, punching the eject button so hard he actually felt a sharp pain along the length of his index finger. He ripped the tape from the machine, and tossed it towards the fireplace. It bounced once on the stone hearth, then ricocheted into the flames.

Harbinger returned to his desk. With trembling hands he poured another cognac, nearly filling the snifter, then drank half of it off in one swallow.

He sat down heavily. Stared at the brown wrapping paper still resting on his desk. It was then he noticed for the first time a piece of neatly folded, beige note paper. He unfolded the note, immediately recognized Harris Williams handwriting.

As he read the note, it occurred to him that Allen Maxwell's death might have been almost too convenient. He read the note twice, hoping his first impression was inaccurate. It said: *Do the right thing, Raymond. And all your good works will be remembered.*

#

Officer Buford Taylor of the Tennessee Highway Patrol, pulled his cruiser to a stop on the shoulder of the meridian, twenty-five feet behind the black Mercedes sedan. He climbed out, setting his foot down carefully on the icy ground.

As he approached the vehicle, his highly polished uniform boots crunched the frozen gravel along the shoulder of Interstate 65, seven miles south of Nashville. He noted tire tracks in the thin layer of glaze ice that covered the

roadway. How they curved off in a smooth trajectory, an indication the driver made no attempt to swerve back onto the highway.

The metal of the big sedan creaked, groaned, and ticked. Steam rose in small billows from the front of the vehicle. Coolant sizzled, as it trickled onto hot manifold pipes. In the cold night air, these sounds came to Officer Taylor's ears in staccato bursts that seemed isolated from the source that produced them.

The black sedan was hard against the center, concrete support pillar of an overpass that crossed I-65. Taylor found irony in the fact that of all the places along the highway where a vehicle might drift off the road, it so frequently happened right where an overpass was located. Almost anywhere else along the highway, such an unfortunate incident was completely survivable, particularly for the occupants of a Mercedes sedan. As he continued to approach, the beam of his cruiser's search light cast his shadow across the remains of the vehicle. He silently prayed he'd not find an entire family.

The front end of the car was telescoped upon itself. The engine block had driven the steering column through the front seat. Officer Taylor fully expected to find the driver impaled, but to his surprise found only the bottom half of the driver's left foot there. The rest of the driver had ejected partially through the windshield. Had his foot not been caught by the steering wheel, his entire body would have been thrown forward into the concrete pillar. No matter, the driver was just as dead.

Taylor found it morbidly fascinating the way bodies, and items, came to rest following catastrophic impact. One would expect everything not solidly tied down to end up completely out of the vehicle, perhaps hundreds of feet away. Frequently, that was the case. But just as frequently, items remained in, or on, the vehicle itself. In this instance, it was as if someone had arranged everything perfectly to assure his initial investigation was as simple as possible.

The driver lay face down across the portion of the hood that had remained relatively flat. His face turned away from the direction of Taylor's approach. Just as well, Taylor thought, as its appearance would not be pleasant. Standing upright on the dash was a bottle of fine cognac, completely empty except for residue at the bottom. The bottle appeared to have been carefully placed, where, in fact, it had landed by chance. The driver's arms were thrust out ahead of his body, his left hand appeared to be reaching for a billfold that lay on the hood just beyond his finger tips.

Officer Taylor removed a flashlight from his utility belt, then shined it directly onto the billfold. It did not surprise him to find it lying open, the driver's license readily visible. He leaned closer to read the name on the license: Raymond Harbinger.

#

Jim Richards turned the front page of the morning paper back to its original position, then carefully folded it into the identical throwing condition it had been in earlier, when he'd picked it up from his neighbor's driveway, at five A.M. that morning. He'd discontinued his own paper. His neighbors never managed to make it out to their driveway before eight A.M.. Hence the unspoken arrangement.

The Tennessean had done a nice job of recapping Raymond Harbinger's life. His war record. The success he'd found as head of Global Assurance. And the significant part he'd played, guiding Harris Williams' efforts at building Caring First Inc.. No mention was made of the incident at Green Acres, nor of his attempt to usurp control of Caring First away from Williams.

Jim Richards walked through the garage to the rear door, opened it, then tossed the paper expertly across the fifteen yards of space between his garage and the neighbor's driveway. It landed with a slap and a bounce, coming to rest against the bottom landing of the front steps. Richards smiled, a world class paper toss. The morning paper boy seldom got so close to the front steps, throwing the newspaper from a moving vehicle, driven by his mother each morning.

Richards chuckled to himself, as he pictured in his mind's eye, his neighbor's future trek up the frozen driveway to where the morning paper would lay, all the while wondering, why in the hell it never made it to the front steps anymore.

Jim Richards swung the door closed, then walked back towards the family room, grabbing a second cup of coffee on his way through the kitchen. The house was nearly empty. The rental furniture returned. Everything else packed up and shipped to San Francisco. The only items remaining: The oversize bean bag chair that now served as his bed. And the old redwood picnic table. The temperature, outside, was around twenty degrees Fahrenheit, a little brisk for alfresco dining. So he'd brought the thing inside.

Allen Maxwell and Raymond Harbinger had met the fate they deserved. He had no idea of how the events had been contrived, a heart attack, and a car accident. Oddly he didn't care. As far as he was concerned, his assignment was over at last.

He sat down at the picnic table. He'd been sorting through a box of snap shots the night before, keeping some, discarding others. Several were scattered on the table. A half dozen of Misti, when they'd first arrived in Nashville. Others, as their time together eroded. Then, the one he'd taken with the long lens when he

was on surveillance at Green Acres. He'd caught her just as she was getting into her car. Her long legs seductively displayed as her dress slid upward momentarily.

She was looking back towards the camera, though she could not have seen him. The angle of the sun was just right, allowing him to take the perfect picture. She looked as glamorous as a super model. And as she gazed unknowingly in his direction, it was as if she were saying good-bye.

To the right of Misti's photos was one of Alexander, taken in October. He was sitting in the neighbor's garden, next to a huge pumpkin the neighborhood children had carved into a Jack-o-Lantern. It was a warm afternoon. Alexander's tongue was hanging out. And he seemed to be smiling. As well he might have been.

These were the images Jim Richards would take back to San Francisco, the ones he'd want to remember.

*So I packed up all my memories, and I shipped them to the coast.*

*And I closed our empty house, locked away love's living ghost.*

*Then I drove away in style, said good-bye to all our friends.*

*But like that autumn pumpkin's smile, there's only emptiness within.*

Just then the telephone rang. The only phone left in the house was in the kitchen, it was not secure. But then he'd not expected he'd need one. After all, officially his assignment had ended several weeks before. He'd only stayed on for his own peace of mind. He reached the telephone on the third ring. Ty Harding was at the other end of the line.

"Morning, Jim.

Richards glanced at his watch. "Hey, buddy. Up a little early aren't you? Got to be oh five-hundred dark, out there in the land o' the fruits and nuts."

Harding chuckled. "Listen, I know we're not secure so this will be a little round about. Do you remember our middle eastern friend? The one whose brother you said good-bye to awhile back? Well it seems he's been planning a little surprise for us. Vince and Bob came across a couple of his friends with



biologicals, outside Orly. You might have seen something about it in the paper, though its been down-played by the French."

Richards frowned, then remembered the article. "Yes, I do recall something to that effect, month or so ago. About the time Allen keeled over."

"Exactly. Well the mind readers back at the *Fort* figure that stuff outside Paris was actually shipment number two."

Richards craned his neck, looked up at the ceiling. "Don't tell me they've lost track of Raji, or however the hell you pronounce *Roget*, over there." He could visualize Harding nodding his head up and down.

"Fraid so. Could use a little help, if you're up to it. At least, until Steve and his team arrive. Want to keep the Bureau out of it, if at all possible. Last thing we need is a leak on the hostage release, and Roget's connection."

#

Memphis, Tennessee

April 1981

*You know I'm the kind of man that must be satisfied.*

*And I don't want no part time love just hangin' at my side.*

*Happy is as happy does, so let's just get it done.*

*You supply the holster Honey, I'll supply the gun.*

The corners of Roget Akhondan's mouth turned downward, as he gazed at the reflection of Jimmy Ocean in the mirror behind the bar. He was younger than he'd expected. Typical cowboy singer American girls went for, and there was a whole bevy of them around the stage staring up into his crotch.

Akhondan could not believe this was the man who'd killed Rashad. In fact, if it weren't for the security archives he'd perused at Caring First weeks before, he'd have found it totally incredulous the fellow on stage was capable of anything more than singing to a bunch of drunken whores. But security photos

didn't lie, even if stage lighting and make-up created the illusion of a younger, more callow person than Roget Akhondan had expected.

Akhondan downed the drink he'd just ordered. He'd dogged Jimmy Ocean for weeks now, always a step behind. Each time learning he'd already moved to his next engagement. Yet Roget continued his pursuit, undaunted.

Earlier in the month, he'd cleared out the storage locker. The first shipment of aerosol's had been stashed there by Arak Massaoud's people, before they returned to France. Where fate, or bad luck, caught up to them in a warehouse set up to receive the last of the aerosols.

Akhondan signaled for another whiskey on the rocks. Now he too was a hunted man. Word had reached him, via a loyal member of his Medico staff, that Massaoud believed he was a traitor to their cause, notwithstanding his reputation in Iran.

Akhondan shook his head, then swallowed off the rest of his drink. He didn't need to see a pilfered CIA *finding* to know the agency had planted disinformation.

Unfortunately, he was in no position to dispute such lies. In fact, the only way he'd ever convince Massaoud of his sincerity was to execute the biological attack as planned. Do the deed himself, then make his way back home where he'd be received as a hero. But first he'd avenge his brother. That could not be done anonymously. It wouldn't be good enough to know Jimmy Ocean was among the many who'd die. He should know why he was to die, and do so in the slowest most excruciating way possible.

Akhondan pushed himself away from the bar, then walked a little unsteadily towards the front door. As he passed the end of the bar, he nodded almost imperceptibly to a heavy set, swarthy man who leaned casually against the leather padding of the bar's bumper.

#

The abandoned warehouse seemed cavernous. Built on the west side of Memphis, near the river. It had the musty, decaying smell of a structure left unoccupied for too long. Once it held dry goods, shipped south via the river. Now it held only memories, and rats. The structure was three stories high, though there were only two levels inside. The second floor ran around the inside perimeter, which left a fifty foot gapping space in the center above the debris covered concrete floor.

Jimmy Ocean sat buck naked, bound to a steel framed chair. Its wooden seat partially broken out, as if someone had purposely put their foot through it. His testicles, and penis, hung down through the hole in the seat. His face beaten. Bruises and welts had already developed. Blood dribbled in a thin trickle from the left nostril of his broken nose.

The bright white beams of two rectangular, multiple battery flashlights were aimed directly at the man in the chair. Roget Akhondan stood, legs spread approximately shoulder width apart. He held a portable butane torch in one hand, a flint igniter in the other.

"Oh Jesus, no." Ocean begged. "Please don't."

Akhondan shook his head slowly, a leering, sadistic grin etched on his face. The maniacal look of a fanatic in his eyes. "Do not beg, *Infidel*.. It will do no good. I will be avenged of my only brother's death."

The man in the chair frowned, though the effort caused him to grimace with pain. "What are you talking about, I haven't killed anyone."

"Liar!" Akhondan struck his captive viciously across the face, using the back of his left fist. The edge of the igniter sliced across Jimmy Ocean's forehead, opening a one inch cut that immediately bled freely.

"Do not lie to me, bastard. I've reviewed the security tapes at Caring First, and I know you are the one who killed Rashad."

Jimmy Ocean stared at Roget Akhondan in disbelief. "What? Caring First? I've never heard of such a place. Look man, I'm just a musician. I've told you, already. I'm not even the real Jimmy Ocean. It's just a gig I was paid to do."

At that moment there was the sound of a thud, as if someone had fallen against the wall outside. Akhondan turned away from his victim, and looked into the shadows behind him. He nodded in the direction of an open door that led onto the interior landing. "Go and see what caused that noise. Most likely, Abdul as had to deal with one of the homeless bums who use this place for shelter. See if he needs assistance dealing with the body. There may be others. They're all vermin, deal with them accordingly."

A deeper shadow moved out of the corner and through the doorway. Stealthy footsteps faded off into the darkness beyond.

Akhondan turned back to face his victim. He slowly rotated the control knob at the base of the torch's brass regulator. A hissing sound filled the small, filthy, second floor room, followed by the slightly pungent odor of propane.

Akhondan brought the igniter to within one half inch of the torch's brass nozzle. He squeezed the wire handle, generating spark as the flint was scratched across the rough surface of the igniter's metal cup. There was a soft popping sound, then a blue flash as excess propane cooked off. Akhondan adjusted the flame to a needle sharp, deathly blue, one inch long tongue.

"First I will cut off your tiny little worm of a cock," Akhondan sneered. "But that will not kill you, as the heat of the torch will cauterize the wound even as it mutilates you."

Jimmy Ocean moaned, and immediately evacuated his bowels. A watery, noxious soup was projected through the hole on the chair's seat. It was accompanied by a rumbling expulsion of stomach gas that rose towards the ceiling, only to burst into a momentary flash as it passed through the tongue of blue flame emitted from the torch.

In that instant, the room was fully illuminated. To the young man in the chair it was an image of hell. Before him fully revealed for the first time was his torturer. Clearly, insanity personified. And near the door, another man who had no face. And then all was dark again, except for the two brilliant beams of light directed towards him beyond which he could see only impenetrable darkness.

Akhondan laughed psychotically, even as he turned his head away momentarily to avoid the flash of ignited bowel gas. Then said: "They will find you with your eyes burned clear through to the back of your head. Neutered like a eunuch. You miserable, piece of..."

"No they won't."

Akhondan spun towards the voice in the darkness. It came from the direction of the doorway. As he spun around he threw the flaming, cutting torch directly at the point where he perceived the sound had emanated, then dove to his left lunging for the table on which one of the flashlights rested. Next to it, a MAC 10, 9mm sub-machine gun.

Jim Richards dropped to a crouch at the base of the door frame. The cutting torch passed well above his head, clearing the doorway, then the balcony railing, to clang and clatter onto the concrete floor below.

Richards aimed the barrel of an Ithaca auto loading shotgun directly at Roget Akhondan. As Akhondan leaped to his left, Jim Richards shifted his sight picture, tracing exactly his enemy's movement. Just as Akhondan slapped his hand down onto the cold, steel surface of the MAC 10's grip, Jim Richards opened fire.

Two rapid blasts from the Ithaca filled the room with ear splitting resonance, and strobe light illumination. Each blast signaled the propulsion of a projectile tightly wrapped in thin rice paper. As the packet left the Ithaca's barrel, the muzzle flash of hot gases burned away its thin, paper sheath. Unleashing, in a tightly controlled pattern, twenty-five scalpel sharp, surgical steel, fleshettes.

The first grouping entered Roget Akhondan's body just below, and forward of his right arm pit. They sliced away his entire arm, and most of his shoulder, while the impact spun him slightly to the right, presenting a full on target for Jim Richards' next round.

The second grouping took Akhondan in the upper torso, slicing through his lungs, heart, and both kidneys, before exiting the back of his torso. Spraying the far wall with blood, flesh, and steel particles.

Roget Akhondan remained standing. Fleshettes lacked the impact of double-O buckshot, or elephant slugs. He stared with disbelief in Jim Richards' direction. A look of complete shock etched on his face. He knew he was dead, yet had enough life left to realize he'd made a terrible mistake. That he'd somehow completely underestimated the nature of the enemy he'd chosen to attack.

Jim Richards squeezed the trigger one more time, felt the big gun's heavy recoil against his unpadded shoulder, then watched as Roget Akhondan's headless form, slowly collapsed upon itself, then toppled backwards to the floor.

Danny Brown, traveling the country music lounge circuit as Jimmy Ocean, stared at the apparition that arose from a classic one knee shooting position. Jim Richards was backlit by the yellow light of flames, beyond the doorway, licking the far wall of the warehouse. Apparently, the torch Akhondan had thrown had set debris inside the warehouse afire.

As the apparition came forward, it was fully illuminated by the stark white light from one of the two flashlights that had rotated on its axis. And as Danny had seen earlier, it was a man with no face. Or rather one completely hidden by a nylon stocking.

Jim Richards strode purposely over to Danny Brown. He drew a razor sharp, combat knife from a sheath at his belt, the blade already stained with blood. He cut freed Danny with two quick slashes, then hauled him roughly to his feet.

"Let's go," Richards said.

"My clothes..."

"There's no time." Even as he spoke these words, and pushed Danny towards the open door, Jim Richards leaned over and swept a pair of pants off the floor.

They scurried along the upper balcony, then down a flight of stairs. At the bottom, one of Akhondan's bodyguards lay at an odd angle.

The center of the building was fully engulfed in flames. Together, they made their way to the rear door and out into the night, skirting another building, until they were in the clear.

#

Danny Brown climbed out of Jim Richards' Bronco, they'd stopped in an alley behind Memphis Memorial, a Caring First Hospital. He looked back at the driver, who still wore the nylon stocking under a navy blue watch cap.

"What do I do now?" Danny asked, shivering in the cold night air.

Jim Richards looked straight ahead. "Go into the emergency room. Tell the Admitting nurse you were mugged, thrown into the trunk of a car. Taken to the outskirts of town, then beaten and robbed. Tell the nurse you were walking back, when I picked you up. I wouldn't give you my name. Drove off, after dropping you at the hospital.

"And the police? What do I tell them?"

Jim Richards slowly turned his head until his featureless countenance looked directly at Danny Brown. "Tell them the same story. And if I were you, I'd not volunteer anything more." He paused several moments to emphasize his sincerity. "This is one of Caring First's hospitals. You'll be well treated, better than you might imagine. Providing you keep the details about tonight to yourself.

"It was a case of mistaken identity, that's all. You're a very lucky young man, though you may not believe it at the moment. Saving your ass was not part of my assignment. It just happened to work out that way. Much smarter for me to have waited a few minutes longer."

Danny sighed, rested his head wearily against the cold metal frame of the Bronco's side window. "I owe you."

"No you don't," Richards said. "Just take my advice. Keep your mouth shut. Stick to the story. The police will not question it. Happens all the time. Bunch of drunken rednecks take out their frustrations on some lounge singer,

'cause their girlfriends were hangin' around the stage, instead of paying attention to them."

Danny nodded his head slowly. Then said: "Before he started in on me, he was talkin' crazy like. Somethin' about spreading a sickness, killing thousands of people."

Jim Richards shook his head slowly. "Forget about it Danny, that's the best advice I can give you. There are some things in this world it's best not to know about. The threat is over to you personally, and to the population at large. That's all I can say."

Jim Richards paused for a moment, thinking. "Get on with your life, your career. Maybe it's time for Danny Brown to become a *star*. Anything's possible, you know? You keep your end of the bargain, things will start comin' your way.

"In *my* line of work," Richards continued. "We call it *Bonus Time*. The life you live, after the one you *were* living should have ended."

Jim Richards shifted the Bronco into drive. "Get yourself inside, before you catch a death of cold."

#

It was much later that evening as he lay in a private room, having been assured his treatment was covered under an insurance policy he didn't even know he had, that it came to him, almost as an impersonal sort of knowledge to be filed away for some future time: He'd never given the man with no face his name. How did *he* know he was Danny Brown, not Jimmy Ocean. And with that soon to be forgotten epiphany, he fell into a deep, restful, intravenously medicated sleep.

# Epilogue

June 1983

Jim Richards stood in the shade of a western cypress, at the edge of a verdant lawn sprinkled here and there with clusters of wild daisies. In the distance, Mount Hood towered above the Columbia River east of Portland, Oregon.

Misti DiMartine stood not more than twenty-five yards away. She wore a pair of khaki shorts and a polo style shirt with the logo of the school where she now taught. A chrome plated coach's whistle, attached to a leather lanyard, hung around her neck. She was supervising a game of girls soccer, running back and forth with the waxing and waning of play between the two teams. Now and then, she'd raise the whistle to her lips, signaling the interruption of play to assess a penalty, or reposition a ball that had been kicked out of bounds.

On one such occasion the ball rolled over to where Jim Richards was standing. He picked it up, then tossed it to her. She caught it, looked at him to wave thank you, stared for a moment or two, a frown etched upon her face, then turned back to continue her role as referee.

After awhile she looked at her watch, then blew the whistle three times. The girls, who appeared to be twelve to fourteen years of age, as far as Jim Richards could tell, immediately stopped their play, turned, and ran towards the school's locker rooms. As they dispersed, Misti looked in Jim Richards' direction, then started walking towards him, the soccer ball tucked under one arm. They met midway across the distance.

"Jim?!", she smiled warmly. "This is *such* a surprise. We didn't know you were in town."

Jim Richards smiled. He wanted to hug her tightly, but restrained himself. "Just passing through actually. I'm glad to see you're well."

"Oh yes. Well you know me, I always bounce back. Opening this school was the best cure in the world."

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.



"Listen, why don't you come out to the house tonight. I know Larry would love to see you."

Richards turned his palms upward. "I'd like that, maybe another time. I just wanted to make certain you were looking well, and you are. Time has been a friend to you."

She laughed. "I don't know about the *looking*, she gestured to her coaching attire. But I am feeling well. Thank you for caring. And thank you again for saving my life." She laughed a little nervously. Looked away for a moment, then back at Jim Richards "Never thought I'd end up married to a therapist. Guess you'd call it classic *transference*."

Jim Richards smiled as sincerely as possible. "Yes, that might be one way of describing it."

"And yourself?" She asked. "You're well?"

"I am. Out of the music business. Decided to get back into my old line of work."

Misti nodded her head slowly, a quizzical look on her face. "Management consulting?"

"Yes."

She glanced at her watch. "I've got to go supervise the little darlings. Give us a call sometime. And do come by one of these days, won't you?"

He nodded his head. She started towards the school, then stopped. "Oh, I've never thanked you for making certain I got that insurance check. Never expected so much. I mean for a faulty guard rail. But it came just in time, so I could close on this building." She gestured towards the school behind her, the name on the awning over the door read: *Misti's Middle School For Girls*.

Jim Richards nodded his head, smiled. "Don't mention it, least the manufacturer could do."

She smiled and waved, then jogged off towards the locker rooms. Jim Richards watched until she disappeared inside. Then sighed and said to no one in particular: "Least *I* could do..."

The End