



The Sex Virus

by Darrell Bain

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Dedication:

To Geoffrey Kidd, who got the ball rolling.

CHAPTER ONE

The muted ring of the bedroom phone interrupted Dee. She removed her hand from her breast where idle fantasizing had drawn it while reading a graphic romance novel; her nipple a firm mound under her tee shirt. She reached for the phone wondering who could be calling this time of day, and also why she had nothing better to do than read a trashy novel on her day off. It wasn't as if the FBI was giving her many of them lately.

She listened for a moment, grimaced, and hung up. Another telemarketer. Why couldn't it have been someone she wanted to talk to, like Jantz Preston or Mary Andrews? They were the only two at the Houston regional office she had gotten to like in the few months since her assignment. And damn the telemarketers, anyway. No matter how many laws were passed or how many barriers she put up some still found loopholes into her system. Dee picked up her book again wondering what had compelled her to seek out something like this. Her usual reading material ranged from science fiction to mysteries, with thrillers thrown in for variety.

She stretched out with her head propped on pillows allowing her thick mane of wavy black hair to spill down over her shoulders. She twirled a lock around one finger. The book cover featured the standard bosom-revealing heroine clasped in the arms of a larger-than-life, bronzed muscular man. *_As if any men looked that way, _*Dee thought, turning back to the passage, trying to recapture the fey mood that came over her more and more often lately.

...his hand stole to her breast in sneaky increments while he sent a questing tongue...

Dee again became absorbed in the lurid descriptions. Before she knew it she was mimicking the male protagonist in the story, cupping and fondling her breasts while imagining he was doing it, except that the character resembled Jantz Preston. Her breathing deepened and became more rapid. Suddenly, Dee became the person she was fantasizing about: Mary with the blue eyes and loose blond hair she saw at work, only now she was undressed, breasts swaying as she leaned over her. Dee became aware of how forcefully she responded to the fantasy, and flung the book away and rolled onto her stomach.

Her breasts flattened, her nipples rubbing against their covering causing her lower

body to react. Her hips squirmed, pressing down against the bed in frustration. She felt as if the thermostat had been turned up. She rolled back over, and closed her eyes trying to visualize Jantz in bed beside her. Damn it, what did he see in Lianne, anyway? Her hand crept down to the waistline of her white shorts. Her fingers played with the hem of her tee shirt, inching it up until she felt bare skin. But again, it became Mary she thought of and it was Mary's fingers she imagined sliding beneath the fabric of her shorts.

What on earth is going on? Dammit, I like men, not women!

Even as she tried to convince her mind to go in a different direction her hand slipped under her shorts and moved down to her mons. She felt her soft crinkly pubic hair through the thin material of her panties. Her hips moved in an upward thrust. Her thighs parted. She pressed down and stroked herself while using her other hand to play with first one breast then the other, her book quite forgotten. She was propped up enough so that she could see her image in the mirror attached to the closet door opposite the bed. Watching herself stroking herself and handling her breasts gave added impetus to her fantasies.

Dee gasped reaching toward orgasm. She closed her eyes and forced the image of Jantz to dominate her thoughts. Just as the impending climax was surging her into that indescribable out-of-body sensation the doorbell rang, shattering the illusion.

"Oh, goddammit! Who can that be?"

She thought about pretending not to be in, but her inherent honesty prevented her from playing games like that. She got up, made a quick adjustment of her clothes, and went to see who was there thinking dark thoughts at the lack of eligible men who attracted her at this new office.

Dee gave no thought to security as she crossed the den and opened the door. The big apartment complex on the northern outskirts of Houston was well protected; the tenants thoroughly screened before moving in. Besides, many of them were government agents, a fact apparently known to miscreants because she had seen no problems since renting her place.

Jantz Preston was at the entrance shifting his weight from one foot to the other when Dee pulled the door open. His pleasant countenance held a hangdog look, but Dee brightened. She liked Preston. Maybe too much. It was too bad he was taken.

"Hi Jantz. Lose your car again?"

Preston was famous for his absent-mindedness, especially when he was involved on a case requiring lots of thought.

"I may live that incident down one day, but it doesn't seem likely. No, I just drove up in my car. It's Lisanne; I seem to have misplaced her. Have you seen her?"

Dee frowned. "No, I haven't." _And I don't want to._

Jantz shrugged. "I had to stay over last night to catch up on some stuff for a court appearance. I tried calling, but no answer. And now the door is locked."

Dee grinned. "And you've misplaced your card again. Why don't you keep it in the glove compartment of your car?"

"Because sometimes I lose my car." Jantz laughed, but it was a short chuckle with no mirth attached.

Recent gossip had it that he and Lisanne hadn't been getting along. If he were lucky it would be her instead of the card that was misplaced. _And you're a bitch for thinking that._

"Well, come on in. Maybe I can remember where I keep your spare card."

Preston followed Dee inside her apartment looking embarrassed. Once he and Dee had gotten to know each other at the FBI office he had given her a spare door card to keep for these occasions. She went back into the bedroom and rummaged in a dresser drawer. While she sorted through the odds and ends she remembered her recent fantasy and her face got hot. She found the card, but waited until her color returned to normal before going out into the den. Jantz was standing there looking his usual rumpled, good-natured self. If she didn't know him better Dee would have thought he might be farmer trying to dress for a formal occasion. He was good looking despite his slightly dated suit and the need of a shave. She handed him the card allowing a momentary fantasy of them together to flash through her mind once more.

"Thanks, Dee. You're a good friend."

"Glad to help. Now, go find Lisanne, and try not to lose her again."

Jantz smiled his thanks and shuffled down the walk. Dee watched him turn the corner leading to the units where he lived then closed the door. Her comp day off for working on Sunday had been uneventful so far, but that was changing. It was late morning, but she decided on a glass of wine rather than going back to her book. She poured it, sorted some crackers and cheese, and settled back into her easy chair.

She had no sooner become involved in a downloaded movie than the doorbell chimed again. Exasperated, she told the computer to halt and went to answer the door.

Again, Jantz Preston stood in her doorway looking even more ruffled as he ran his hand through his short brown hair.

"Dee, I hate to bother you, but can I ask you a few questions?"

Puzzled, Dee led him inside. "Is it too early for a drink while we talk?"

Jantz agreed. "Damn right. I mean, no, it isn't too early. A drink is just what I need. Scotch if you have it, bourbon if you don't."

"All I have is bourbon. I'll let you pour."

Jantz followed her to the bar dividing the kitchen from the spacious den and took the bottle of Jack Daniels she handed him. Dee raised her brows as he poured a hefty dollop over a couple of ice cube, filling the four-ounce glass almost full. She replenished her glass of Zinfandel and led him back to the big lounge.

Jantz took a large gulp, and grimaced. "Lisanne left a note. She's left me, too."

"Oh, Jantz, I'm sorry. What happened-or isn't it any of my business?"

"Well ... I was just wondering ... have you seen her with any other women?"

Dee frowned. "Well, not really. Oh, I did see her at the pool last weekend while I was taking a swim. She was talking to a woman, but I don't know her name; I've never seen her around here before."

"How were they acting?"

"What do you mean?"

Jantz swallowed more bourbon. "In the note she said she was going to live with a woman. Damn, I never thought-" He shook his head and stared down at the drink clasped in both hands.

"Don't jump to conclusions. Maybe she's just staying with another woman."

"I'm not jumping to anything. She said she discovered that she prefers women. I just don't understand. I know we weren't getting along that well, but I didn't think there was that much wrong with the sex part. Listen, are you sure you don't know who that woman was? Did you maybe hear her name?"

Dee tried to be gentle. "Would it really matter? Apparently she's made a life-

changing decision and wants to be left alone."

He sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right. Hell, maybe it's my ego getting huffed up because my girl friend has run off with a woman. Not but what we wouldn't have split up pretty soon anyway. It just wasn't working." He leaned forward as if he wanted to say more.

"Is it anything you want to talk about?" Dee asked.

Jantz sighed, and leaned back on the lounge. "I don't want to bore you."

"I promise to stop you if I get bored." The day really had changed for Dee.

Jantz gave her the hint of a smile. "Thanks. You haven't gotten involved in office politics much. I like you for that. So much of the bureau is going the wrong way, seems to me. I won't play games trying to stay on the good side of Slater or Meridian, and Lisanne wanted me to kowtow like they were goddamned royalty or something."

Dee didn't like Burley Slater, the SAIC of the office, and liked Seth Meridian, the regional supervisor in Washington, even less, though she had only met him once. Slater was trying to pattern himself after the Ashcroft mold and it appeared Meridian would be content if the office spent all its time on sex crimes instead of pressing national problems.

She nodded. "I don't blame you for not liking either one of those..."

"Fanatics?"

"Yes. To listen to them you'd think the whole country wanted to spend twenty-four hours a day enforcing the abortion and pornography laws."

"And that's where the problems with Lisanne came in. Not only did she want me to suck up to those..."

"Religious nuts?"

"Yeah. They're that, too. But whenever we were around them she acted like she believed in that crap and..." Jantz stopped, realizing he might have stuck his foot in his mouth.

"Don't worry," Dee assured him. "I think it's crap, too. And a goddamned crying shame that it's so hard to get an abortion anymore. And that cloning is illegal, and stem cell research is limited, and..."

Jantz laughed and waved a hand. "Stop. We're on the same wavelength. Anyway, that's why Lisanne and I wouldn't have lasted long. We didn't seem to be on the same page, or even in the same book. But I never had the least suspicion that she had lesbian tendencies. In fact, on the only occasion the subject came up, she said something or other to put them down."

Dee formed a picture of Lisanne in her mind; short auburn hair, but that didn't mean anything. On the other hand, Dee never felt comfortable around her the few times they'd been together. She lacked sincerity, as if she were acting a part rather than relating to people. And that included Jantz. But with her looks and body, any man might be smitten. She certainly was a dish.

"I can see why you're so puzzled if she felt that way about lesbians." Dee hoped she wasn't blushing.

"Yeah, that's the kicker, all right. It doesn't make a lot of sense unless she had the genes and was trying to repress her feelings by acting out. I don't understand it."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Dee said.

Jantz's glass was empty and she held out her hand for it when she got up to replenish her Zinfandel. He handed it over and she took it to the bar. Dee could feel his eyes following her as she crossed the den and smiled in spite of herself. She often drew admiring looks from men and it didn't bother her a bit. If he only knew what had been in her mind earlier! In the meantime, it was a shame that such a nice guy had been hurt ... or had he been? She thought he looked more aggravated than dejected, and that gave impetus to a wayward thought that they might get together once he got over the shock. It should make her feel guilty, but somehow it didn't.

Jantz eyed the refill Dee handed him. "Thanks. I better make this my last one. I don't drink that much, especially this early in the day. Besides, you've probably got other things to do besides listen to me carp about Lisanne and the office."

"I haven't been here long enough to know many people, so usually I stay home and read."

"I can see that," Jantz said, looking around at several full bookcases. "I like to read, too. Another bone of contention at home. Or what was home. Lisanne would rather surf or play those silly television games."

"How on earth did you two ever get together? It sounds as if you had nothing in common."

"Sometimes you don't know how these things happen. She certainly didn't turn out to be what I thought she was. I think she might have thought it was romantic and exciting to live with a real live FBI agent, and she was even talking about marriage." Jantz laughed. "I should have told her that investigative work is much more boring than exciting. At least most of the time."

Dee chuckled. "My time here sure has been boring. I've been doing background checks so much that I'm starting to dream about social security numbers."

"Newbies always get the scut work. But we're getting in some replacements, so maybe Slater will pull you off those." Jantz sipped his bourbon. "Just hope he doesn't partner you with me."

Dee was startled. "Why on earth not?"

"I shouldn't say anything, but hell, everyone knows it. Slimy Slater has me going undercover at some of the clubs in Montrose. Talk about sleaze. I'll be damn glad to be finished with that and get back to real work. If Slater gives me any, that is. Half the population of Houston is here illegally, and half of those want to blow up something, and he has me chasing pornographers. Fagh!"

"When will you start something new, do you know?"

"Next month, or so Slater said. He reamed me out for not developing more leads, but the hell with it. I didn't join the FBI to arrest interstate pimps."

"Why did you join?" Dee asked.

Jantz shrugged. "Hell if I know. Maybe because I got a degree in a field that's being stepped on by our stupid government. No one in genetics was hiring, but the bureau was looking for bright young graduates. I thought I could keep up in the field as an agent, or maybe move into the forensics lab. No such luck."

"You're talking human genetics, I assume."

"Yeah. Since the ban on stem cell and embryonic research killed a lot of promising treatments there aren't many jobs in the field other than government labs."

"Why aren't you in the lab here with that kind of training?"

"Slater keeps telling me that's where I'll be assigned as soon as there's an opening. I'm not holding my breath."

Dee understood Jantz better now. They had gotten together several times for lunch once they discovered they lived in the same apartment complex, and Dee had been invited over to his house, but the frosty reception from Lisanne had stopped that from happening again. She smiled brightly at him.

"I hope you get what you want. I talked to Mary Andrews once when I dropped DNA swabs by for recruits. She seems like a nice person to work for."

Jantz nodded. The way the personnel at the Houston office interacted according to who was in or out of favor with the brass made friendships problematic. "Mary is good people. A good scientist, too, from what I've seen of her work."

Dee was glad to hear that. For someone new it was sometimes hard to judge. But Jantz was a winner, even if he did have to put up with Slater. "Do you have any idea what you'll be doing when you come out from undercover?"

He shook his head. "Not a clue, but I can probably forget about real work. Slater will probably have you trolling for pimps and me for candymen if I know his befouled mind." He stood up. "I've bent your ear long enough for one day. Thanks for listening."

Dee smiled. "Any time. Don't be scared to ask if you need anything."

"If we're both available for new work at the same time, would you like to, uh, maybe partner with me?" He raised his brows.

"Oh, golly, yes! Everyone talks about how good you are."

Jantz nodded absent-mindedly. "Thanks. We'll see if we can work it out."

Dee walked him to the door. "I really am sorry. It will get better, believe me. I know from experience. But let's save it for another time." Unaccountably, she leaned forward and kissed him, then turned quickly and closed the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Dee spent the next couple of days at her desk tending to the stacks of paperwork required to vet recruits, hoping that she and Jantz would soon be free to start working together. Wednesday she met Mary Andrews for lunch at the cafeteria in the same building where the regional office was located. Wednesday lunch had been a standing date with them ever since a chance encounter brought them together one day when they sat at the same table.

Mary looked like the stereotypical dumb blond with hair flowing in waves to her shoulders around a pretty face with full lips and china blue eyes. Today she was full of bubbles as she emptied her tray of plates onto the table and pulled up a chair.

"You either have a new boyfriend or some juicy gossip, or both," Dee observed from the opposite side of the table where she was seated.

"Both," Mary said, with a laugh. "I don't have the new one yet, but I dumped Larry over the weekend. That's not the real news, though. I have some juicy gossip." She leaned forward. "You won't believe it."

"Try me. I love gossip."

Mary looked around then spoke in a low voice. "This is really unbelievable, but I got it from a good source. Slimy Slater was down in the Montrose area cruising a she-male street, and apparently picked one of them up!"

Dee was sure her mouth was hanging open. Slater was so vehemently anti-gay that this news was impossible to believe. Finally she responded.

"That is hard to credit. Maybe it was someone who looked like him."

"According to my source he made an attempt to disguise himself, but the person who saw him was close enough to see through it. But to be sure he ran a check on the license plate. It was him, all right. No lie. Isn't that something?"

"That it is," Dee agreed. "But we all know he's a hypocrite, so maybe it isn't so surprising when you think about it. God, he'll play hell living this down when it gets out."

"It's already out. I can't wait to see how he handles it at the department meeting Friday, especially if someone pops up with an insinuation."

Dee unwrapped her tuna salad sandwich. "What happened with Larry?"

Mary shrugged, causing her loosely fettered breasts to do interesting things. Dee realized she was staring at them and hastily looked up.

"I just lost any feeling for him over the last week or two. And frankly, he had already lost it for me. No big deal. How's your love life? Meet anyone interesting yet?"

"Maybe," Dee said impulsively, thinking of Jantz. "But probably not."

"Are you working the weekend again?"

"No, guess I'm off that for a while. Why?"

"I don't have anything going on this weekend. Would you like to come over? We could watch a movie or go out somewhere if you'd rather."

Dee remembered her fantasies from the previous day. It seemed strange now having Mary sitting across from her with an anticipatory look on her face. She fidgeted while she waited for Dee to answer.

Dee shrugged. "Sure, why not? It's not like I have a string of men beating on my door. How about Saturday?"

"Okay, what time?"

"It doesn't matter. Afternoon? What's your apartment number?"

Mary told it to her. They lived in the same complex, but Dee had never been inside her place. She wrote it down then looked up. Mary was gathering the debris of what little she had eaten and preparing to leave.

"What's the hurry?"

"I've got a sequencer going that has to be looked at. I'll see you Saturday."

Dee thought her voice became huskier as she stood up and noticed that her cheeks and neck had a pink tinge to them. She adjusted her lab coat, smiled, and was gone. Dee finished her lunch ruminating about Mary and Jantz, but mostly Mary. And, also, there was a puzzle working its way to the surface of her mind. While not a scientist she was an eclectic reader and recognized the tugs back and forth in her mind meant something was trying to come together. It had happened before and she had learned not to force it into her consciousness; it would pop into being eventually.

It would have been amusing if Dee could have known Mary was having problems concentrating on her work because of thinking about her. So long as Mary could remember she had never been attracted to women and now she couldn't stop from bringing up images of Dee; how attractive she was with that wavy black hair, how well she filled out her blouse, and how much she liked to surreptitiously watch the curves of her body as she walked. It was very disconcerting.

"Drat!" she said, as she realized she hadn't heard the buzz of a timed analysis for daydreaming about a woman she hadn't even known a couple of months ago.

She salvaged the trays and set up the DNA analyzing apparatus again. This was the last set of embryos confiscated from a fertility lab in Houston that Slater had come down on. It was a real shame. Slater was straining the interstate commerce laws in this case, but she had learned not to let her personal beliefs interfere with her work. No matter that she thought this case was a caricature of the law; she was still responsible for accurate results. Mary was trying to match the cloned embryos with DNA from out-of-state donors. In her opinion it was going to be thrown out of court, no matter what Slater thought.

While Mary worked in her alcove in the Forensics, Crime, and Identification Lab she was vaguely aware of other technicians busy with varying tasks in similar alcoves. Chest high cabinets divided up this large room, and workstations were interspersed with safety hoods. It was a step up from the old lab in the center of Houston that required hours each day of fighting traffic on the Eastex Freeway to get to and from work. Here she was only a half-hour's drive away even when traffic was bad. It made for a lot less tension, but gave her analytical mind more time to play with thoughts other than testing specimens. And lately she couldn't understand herself.

She had never married, but had a number of satisfying relationships. But now ... Larry. She couldn't understand why he was no longer interested in her, or her in him. He was nearly everything she wanted in a lover; gentle, attentive, and with great stamina. But he had packed up and left over their mutual unresponsiveness, and frankly, she couldn't blame him. And then this unaccountable interest in women. Where had that come from? She knew that she didn't have the inclination genes, nor could she think of anything in her upbringing that might have precipitated the feelings at this stage of her life.

Like now, Julie, the lab tech assigned to her brought in a rack of specimens and chatted briefly. Mary found herself wondering what she would look like naked and turned away in embarrassment. As soon as Julie left Mary went over to one of the refrigerators and took out a coke kept there against regulations, but since she was boss of the section no one complained. She touched the cold can to her forehead and rolled it around to break up the unwanted images and get herself into working mode. After a while she succeeded.

* * * *

There was no meeting Friday. Slater had been summoned to Washington for reasons he wasn't divulging, but Jantz heard the gossip like everyone else. He thought that his venture into the rough area of Montrose in Houston must have reached Washington, and he was being called on the carpet. After his no-show Jantz called Dee before she could get away wanting to know if she would like to have a drink after work or on Saturday.

"Can I take a rain check? I have to wrap up all the reports on my recruits this evening and already have something planned for Saturday. Maybe next week?"

"Sure. I'll be in touch."

"Make sure you do," Dee said.

Jantz felt a wave of disappointment, but perked up when he thought of how insistent she had been about another time. Whistling, he closed shop and started to turn out the light. Who needed Lianne, anyway? The phone rang a summons he found impossible to ignore. Cursing, he turned back to his desk. It turned out to be an old friend, Elgin Hasting, working as one of the Public Information officers out of the main Washington office. They had gone through the academy together.

"Hey, Jantz!" he said. "Still chasing pimps?"

"Don't rub it in. At least I don't have to tell lies to the press every day. What's up with you?"

"Thought I'd give you a heads up. You're getting a new boss Monday."

"Really? Damn, that's great."

"Hell it is. I'm getting your old one."

"Slimy Slater? The way he's been acting you better get your spin machine in high gear. Have you heard?"

"Yup. But have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Slater isn't the only one I'm hiding from the press. Guess who else got caught with his fly open?"

"I hope you're talking about the monster, but surely not?"

"Merridian the Monster, you got it. He's been acting funny lately; then yesterday he went overboard at a press conference. He said that gays were being persecuted in America the Beautiful."

"Huh!" Jantz exclaimed. "The last I heard he was claiming that deviant sex, as he put it, was the prime cause of pornography, loose moral values, and moperly and dopery

on the highways."

"No more. In fact, one of the interns filed a sexual harassment complaint against him last week. He said old Seth made a pass at him."

"Him? Be goddamned. Any truth to it?"

"Who knows? It's a case of he said, he said. I doubt it will go any farther. But here's what's funny. As soon as the gossip mill spread the news about Slater Merridian changed his mind about filling his assistant slot. He dumped his prior choice and nominated Slater."

"Birds of a feather, maybe," Jantz remarked, without thinking.

"Yeah. Washington keeps getting weirder and weirder. How's Lisanne, by the way."

"I don't know. She's gone."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Don't be. Would you believe she turned into a lesbian?"

"No shit! What is this? An epidemic? God, what a waste."

"Not to other lesbians."

"You got a point. Well, better luck next time, but be careful. Seems like there's lots of splitting up and more domestic violence than usual lately. Here, anyway. I don't know about the rest of the country."

"I will be careful, El. Thanks for the update."

"Oh, hell, I almost forgot, what with the data dump about our esteemed leaders. Your new boss is going to be James Reeves."

"Reeves? Really? Hey, that's great."

"Yeah. We need more like him. Hey, I gotta go."

"Okay, thanks again."

Jantz's spirits rose. James Reeves had a good rep as a supervisor.

CHAPTER THREE

Dee found herself dressing more flattering than she usually did to go to a girlfriend's home for a movie and snacks. She wore red slacks with a white button-up top of the new synthetic silkskin fabric that molded to the body and was supportive, but pliable to the touch, the fibers 'remembering' their shape after being pressed. A bra wasn't necessary for casual dress and she didn't wear one; not that she needed one for most outfits. Her breasts weren't overly large, but they were generous enough for her slim body, and youthfully firm. She drew her hair back with a designer ribbon and checked herself in the mirror before leaving. In a way, she wished it were Jantz she was going to see rather than Mary Andrews.

Since her transfer there had been no sex at all and damn little of it in the months before. It wouldn't take much to get her into his bed, even if he had just been cuckolded and left to his lonesome. She checked herself one more time in the mirror by the entrance; told it to go back to being a picture and closed the door behind her.

It was a perfect spring afternoon in Houston with the temperature approaching eighty, but the humidity not yet so high as it would get in days to come. She strolled along the frontage sidewalk bordering the flowerbeds and turned the corner down toward where Mary lived. Other inhabitants of the complex were out, some wearing bathing togs and heading toward the heated pool; others just out for a walk. She nodded to the ones she knew. It took only five minutes to arrive at Mary's door. She rang the doorbell and Mary greeted her. They touched cheeks and Mary put a hand on her waist to urge her inside.

Dee looked around. The floor plan was the same as her unit; Mary had simply made it look different with the furniture arrangement, and framed prints doing double duty as wall comp screens. It was a trend with computer screens that could be hung in a convenient place in a home and the screen set for ever-changing, realistic views of whatever the homeowner wanted them to show when not in use.

Mary led her toward the bar where a thermo carafe and glasses were out, the carafe showing beads of icy water condensing around the top. "This is a concoction from one of the menus the labs pass around," she said, as she poured. "I hope it's good; I haven't tried it before."

"What's in it?"

Mary laughed, making her breasts move beneath the lemon colored blouse she wore with matching pants. "Basically, it's flavored rum, but I've already sampled and it's not bad, if I do say so myself."

Dee had to agree after she brought her glass back and sat on one end of the short lounge facing the wall screen on one side of the room. The punch had a piquant flavor smacking of the tropics, but she couldn't identify it. Mary sat beside her and told the television to get started.

As the screen flared into life, she asked "Anything special you like?"

Dee set her glass on the end table. "Is anything happening in the world? I like to check the news to get an analysis, and I haven't gotten around to it today."

Mary instructed the television via comp to find the latest general news program. It turned out to be one of the networks that Dee usually watched. There was really nothing unusual. The oil producing nations were still antsy about the future as more depolymerization plants turning waste into oil came online in the United States, making the prospects for near self-sufficiency in petroleum more realistic. The trials, convictions, and sentencing of the miscreants in a black market cloning scheme were over. The plaintiff in a society divorce in New York was threatening to reveal 'sexual deviations' of the defendant. Three murders had been committed overnight in Houston; all of them arising from domestic disputes.

"Turn it off," Dee said. "I've heard enough of those cases to last a lifetime-no, wait!"

The next clip described a prominent senator withdrawing his sponsorship of legislation making recognition of same sex marriage not only illegal, but subject to jail time. He said that as an honorable man he had to admit that he had made a mistake and wanted to correct it. Dee had her doubts about the honorable bit, but agreed that he had made a mistake. There was enough persecution in the world already.

"That's enough."

The wall screen went back to its beach scene with foam-topped waves curling onto a serene beach, giving out a barely discernible _shshh_ sound that was comforting, as intended.

"Does it seem like there's more family violence lately?" Dee asked.

She had wondered about it the last couple of weeks. Almost every day the local news reporters breathlessly described new scenes of wrecked homes and lives.

"Mm, now that you mention it, maybe so. I wonder why?"

"No telling. I might say stress in the illegal immigrant community from all the homeland security searches, except the violence doesn't seem to be centered there."

Mary shook her head. "There's no accounting for people. I guess that's one thing I can be thankful for. The breakup with Larry was peaceful enough."

"That's good. I hate violence."

"That from a gun-carrying FBI agent? What happens if you have to shoot someone?"

Dee laughed. "Most agents go a lifetime and never draw a weapon. I guess I could if I had to, though."

"Well, let's hope it never happens. Any particular movie you'd like to watch?"

Dee sipped her punch. She was acutely aware of how close she was sitting to Mary, and couldn't decide whether or not it made her uncomfortable. She shifted a bit.

"Why don't we just talk? Or just sit, for that matter. I'm in a mood to just relax."

"How about a swim?"

"You know, that sounds good, but I didn't bring a suit."

Mary looked at her body frankly. "We're about the same size, I think. C'mon, let's go see. Bring your drink."

Mary was upright by the time Dee picked up her glass, which she had refilled. She took Mary's hand and stood up, and Mary kept hold of it as if she needed to lead Dee into the bedroom. Dee made no attempt to loose the handhold, even though she suspected why Mary had invited her over.

The bedroom was dominated by a king sized bed with shelves embedded in the headboard and with the foot facing a wall-to-wall closet. Dee let herself be led to the large dresser. While Mary rummaged in a drawer Dee looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was flushed, but whether it was because of drink or emotion she couldn't tell. Mary handed her a bright red bikini.

"Here, put your drink on the side table and try this on."

Dee undressed in concert with Mary. This was nothing more than she'd done a hundred times in school and at the gym, she thought, as she undid her blouse and slipped it off. Mary faced her as she pulled her top off. Her lips were parted and she was breathing more rapidly than normal.

"We are about the same size ... on top, at least," Dee said, trying to sound natural.

But she didn't feel natural. She stared at Mary's firm virginal breasts with pink nipples in the process of becoming erect as if she were hypnotized. Mary trembled like a racehorse wanting the gate to drop. She took the two short steps that separated them, bringing her so close that they were almost touching.

"Mary ... what-"

"Do you really want to go swimming?"

Dee held up the parts of the suit then she saw the desire in Mary's eyes and could no longer deny what was happening. Mary took the suit from her and dropped it to the floor. She touched Dee with both hands on her upper arms and tugged gently.

"Mary, I don't know if-"

Her words trailed away as Mary's lips came close to hers. Dee felt the gentle pressure of her lips and entered into the kiss. She moved her arms up and slid them over Mary's back. Their bodies touched. She felt her nipples become erect against the pressure of Mary's breasts. She parted her lips and met Mary's tongue as it slid into her mouth. They stood together for a long moment, locked together in the kiss, bare to the waist, pressed against each other.

A tumult of emotion rushed through Dee's mind and body. She broke the kiss and leaned away, but that only gave pause for Mary to move her hands from behind to her front. She cupped her breasts and squeezed gently. It made Dee want to do the same, but she was still hesitant. It was Mary who gave her an out.

"We can stop if we don't like it." Her voice sounded strained.

Dee realized that Mary had no more experience with women than she did; she was just more forward. She took hold of Mary's hands that were still holding her breasts. She nodded, not daring to speak.

Ambient daylight seeped into the room giving plenty of illumination to admire each other's bodies as they stripped off their slacks and panties, and rolled onto the bed. Mary curled an arm around her and drew her into a heavy, open-mouthed kiss while stroking and fondling her breast. It aroused her and made her want to touch Mary the same way. The sensation of holding a woman's breast in her hand was strange, and sensual, and delightfully interesting, especially when Mary rose over her and she felt the full weight of her breast fill her hand with the hardened nipple caressing her palm. And then Mary's lips were on her breast, nuzzling and sucking the nipple, sending ripples of pleasure over

her body.

Dee pulled Mary over her wanting some weight on her, wanting to be taken. Mary settled between her legs, smothering her mouth and breasts and belly with eager kisses, moving lower until her questing tongue reached her core, making her gasp. Her hips writhed and pushed upward and then she was lost in the orgasm, remembering little until once again Mary was stretched on top of her, arms under her shoulders and moving her body between her thighs. Dee moaned and clutched at her, digging her fingers into her back and locking her into place with her legs and this time she felt Mary reach a climax with her.

Later Dee lay on her side propped on one elbow, gazing at Mary's lush body. It still seemed incredible that they had made such righteous love with each other. She ran her hand over the smooth expanse of Mary's belly and up to her breasts and toyed with them. Mary blinked lazily and turned toward Dee. The movement shifted the center of gravity of her breasts, moving them against her hand. Dee smiled at the sensation. No wonder men were so crazy over boobs. They had a right to be, if she were a judge.

Mary noticed her smile. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, I was just wondering what brought this on. You've never done it with a woman before, either, have you?"

Mary covered Dee's hand and squeezed it. "No. Now I wonder why not."

"Me, too. I know I don't have any of the inclination genes, so that can't be it."

"I don't either, or at least no one told me I had when I submitted my DNA sample. So what happened? Are there some strange pheromones in the air lately?"

"If there are they sure are potent!"

Mary thought a moment. "I don't see how that could be, but then I'm a geneticist, not a chemist. I'll think about it later, but right now let's just enjoy." She reached and pulled Dee down to her.

Dee was still willing even though darkness had fallen and they hadn't eaten. Mary got up twice to replenish their drinks, but that was all. She spent long luxurious moments of sensual kissing and exploring Mary's luscious breasts again, taking the nipples into her mouth, delighting in the sensation of them going from pebbled softness to firm erectness in her mouth. Like a man's penis, she thought, and wondered what Jantz would be like. It seemed traitorous to be doing this with Mary and thinking about Jantz, but she couldn't help herself. Eventually, though, she became lost in sensual

pleasure again. And again.

Dee ambled home along the sidewalk in the softly lighted complex. Mary had urged her to stay the night right on up until she kissed her goodbye in the doorway, but she wanted to wake up in her own bed and have all day Sunday to think about what had happened. She sensed that somehow the event had been imposed on her from outside rather than welling up from the inside. And yet, as Mary had said, how could that be? Sexual pheromones were a proven fact in humans acting on the veromonasal system, but it was usually a subconscious and very mild thing. With the evolution of self-awareness overlaid with culture the conscious mind counted for more in sexual matters than pheromones. And besides, she hadn't noticed anyone else being affected unless you could count their supervisor, and Slater probably had the genes and had suppressed them, or possibly his religious upbringing had overridden them until something happened to make him act on an impulse.

Even after Dee showered and crawled into bed her mind wouldn't shut down. She wanted a reason for this sudden attraction to women-or to Mary. A few weeks ago she couldn't have imagined having sex with a woman and yet it felt so natural, other than a clumsiness from lack of knowledge of the details. Maybe it was just because she'd been so long without a man. Lately there had been no sex other than occasional masturbation when sexual tension demanded it, but since Raymond moved out back in Virginia there had been no man she had fallen for. Raymond had refused to accept the fact that she was going to become an FBI agent. Dee still didn't understand, but it had something to do with a threat to his male ego. Whatever, they had fought and he'd moved out sticking Dee with three months to go on the lease and wondering if she would ever find a permanent mate-or find time to look for one. New agents were very busy. The last she'd heard from him was before this assignment, and that had been a drunken call one night amounting to how about a fuck for old time's sake. She had hung up on him.

Eventually Dee slept. She dreamed of one of the bloodier scenes she and Mary had witnessed on the news and woke up with remnants of it scuttling through her mind. Like most dreams it was disjointed and didn't make much sense until she thought of it again while brushing her teeth. She remembered the man in handcuffs saying something about "another woman", but it had been almost lost in the shouts of the news reporters crowding in as the police allowed. She gasped and spit out toothpaste. Could that man's wife have been seeing another woman? Like Lianne with Jantz? Like her and Mary? She wiped her mouth and made a note to ask Mary what she thought about it, then remembered that Jantz hadn't given her permission to spread the details of Lianne leaving him.

* * * *

Jantz had been restless and at loose ends all day Saturday. Knowing that a replacement for Slater was coming to Houston-and that it would be James Reeves-made him decide to skip an undercover trip to one of the strip clubs in northeast Houston to get a line on the prostitution and movement across state lines of the women. It was the men who controlled the movements he had been after, but he doubted that Reeves would be interested after he took over. He read some on a new book, made a meal from the freezer rather than bothering to cook, watched part of a ball game, read some more then tried to sleep. Finally he pulled on a pair of shorts and a shirt, slipped on his shoes, and went out for a run thinking that some exercise might be good for him and help him to sleep, as well.

A half-hour later he was breathing heavily, and decided to walk the rest of the way. His route took him past the apartment building where Mary Andrews lived. He was almost past the corner when a shaft of light attracted his attention. He saw Mary framed in the doorway with another woman. He stopped, uncertain whether to go over and say hello. While he hesitated Mary drew the other woman forward and kissed her firmly. He stared in disbelief. My God, he never would have guessed. He stood bemused as they parted feeling like a voyeur. As the other woman walked away he saw her profile. Dee Vesprie and Mary Andrews? Surely not!

While he was trying to decide whether it really was Dee he had seen the door closed. His mind shuttled around like a professor trying to write several research papers at the same time, all on the same subject. He couldn't sort out what he really thought. He had no intolerance toward gays or lesbians other than such residual cultural bias toward those who are different from the majority in some fundamental way. But he thought he had better find out what Dee was really like, if that had been her, before he let his feelings progress further in the direction they had started to go. If not, it could get embarrassing. And did it seem that the incidence of homosexuality was popping up within the bureau more than normal? Or was it just his imagination?

* * * *

Dee was so ravenous that she couldn't wait to cook anything, but took out cereal and ate while waiting for the coffee to get ready, a morning copy of The Houston Chronicle propped up by her bowl. The only unusual thing was a column noting a sudden spike in filings for divorce. There was another column concerning a slight increase in the number of colds this year, but it quoted a bulletin from the CDC stating that it was part of a cycle of the Coronoviral group of viruses which caused colds, and that symptoms seemed milder than usual despite the increased numbers.

That afternoon, after a good long nap and a run around the complex, Dee left for the mall and supermarket and a couple of other errands. When she returned she checked her

voicemail. Jantz had called and told her he had some news if she could come in to work a half-hour early Monday morning. She stuck a note next to her alarm clock to help her remember. Mary had called wanting to know if she would like to go out. She thought about accepting then remembered she had other things to catch up on. She spent the rest of the day answering e-mail and working on a graduate course she was taking on line.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jantz had fresh coffee and sourdough cinnamon rolls he'd made himself waiting when Dee arrived a little after seven, earlier than he'd asked her to come in. His face brightened as she tapped at his cubicle, then walked in.

"Good morning. Thanks for coming in so early. I really do appreciate it."

Dee smiled. "No problem. I stayed in bed a lot over the weekend."

"Have fun?"

"Yes. I mean no. I mean, damn it, Jantz Preston, you catch me all the time. None of your business; there, how's that for an answer?"

"Well, it beats slapping me with an SH complaint."

Dee grinned. "Mm. What smells so good, besides the coffee?"

"Cinnamon rolls. Have one."

Dee poured coffee, picked up a roll, and took a bite. "Where the heck did you get these? They're great?"

"Well, actually, I made them."

"You made them? Like in cooking?"

"Yup. I didn't spend as much time in bed as you did."

Dee stuck out her tongue at him. When she finished, she licked her fingers. "That was great. What else do you cook?"

"Come over for supper one evening and I'll show you."

"That's a date. Now tell me why I had to get up at the crack of dawn, not but what I would want to miss those cinnamon rolls. Can I have another one?"

"Have all you want, but fair warning: they're about a million calories each."

"Hm. Maybe I'll just have a half."

"I'll split it with you. I've already had two."

While they munched, Jantz talked. "Please keep this under your hat because it's from a source in Washington who's a good friend of mine. Okay?" Dee made a motion of zipping her lips closed. "I got the call yesterday morning. Slimy Slater won't be coming back. He's staying in Washington as the new regional assistant SAIC to Meridian. And guess what? Our esteemed regional boss seems to also be suddenly inclined towards men."

"What!" Mary felt a tingling in her spine. That odd sensation stirred again, and now she thought she knew what it was about.

Jantz looked at her, gauging her reaction. "It's not that big a deal. Those things happen, you know. Hell, he might've been gay all along and used that religious bullshit as a cover. That happens, too, as you also know if you keep up with the news."

"Well, yes," Dee agreed reluctantly. This was different from a preacher or a priest using their positions to hide their proclivities.

"Anyway, if that's the way he's swinging now I hope some homophobe out there kicks the crap out of him. I'm not usually vindictive, but he flat ran this office into the ground with his fundamentalist bullshit. Anyway, forget him. The real news is that Washington is sending us a new SAIC. Or I should say they've already sent him. He may be checking out his office right now, for all I know."

"You got me up this early to tell me we're getting a new boss?"

Jantz grinned. "Actually, I wanted to show off my cinnamon rolls. And to tell you about Reeves. Our new boss is a straight shooter, but you have to toe the line with him. He--"

Dee interrupted. "Do you know him?"

"Just slightly, but my friend knows him well. I'll bet a nickel that Reeves dumps all this sleaze crap and gives me some real work. I wanted to ask if you still want to partner with me. I mean if I ask for you, is it okay?"

Dee smiled. Jantz was acting like a young boy trying to get up the nerve to kiss a girl for the first time. It was an endearing mannerism, but one she wouldn't have expected from an agent said to be one of the sharpest to come along in years.

"You should know I would. I'm looking forward to getting a real assignment and I can't think of anyone I'd rather do it with."

"Great! I want to do it with ... I mean, that's good. Thanks."

Dee had to laugh. "It's nice that maybe we'll be seeing each other more now that you're, uh, free. You are, aren't you? Lisanne hasn't come back?"

"No, I haven't heard from her. Not that I give a damn, but she still has some of her things at my place and they're taking up room I could use for blonds or brunettes." He shrugged, as if he had never noticed that Dee's hair was black.

"You're a scoundrel and you'll come to no good end." Dee finished her coffee and stood up. "Thanks for the heads-up. I'll keep my gossipy lips sealed, I promise."

At nine o'clock there was an all-agents summons to the largest conference room. Jantz left his office and hurried to the entrance. He peeked in, didn't spot Dee, and waited until she came along. Dee pretended as if she hadn't seen him before he spotted her, mainly because she had been looking for him. She felt a little thump from her heart. Apparently the interlude with Mary hadn't stilled her attraction for men ... or this man, anyway. Both pretended they were greeting each other for the first time that morning, for appearance sake.

The conference room was like a small auditorium with rows of plush, padded seats with armrests and a state-of-the-art podium with controls for a huge computer screen used for displays. Every time Jantz saw it he marveled at how much of the money allocated for terrorist suppression had gone into trappings like this, including the new office building that hadn't been needed. However, that wasn't his business and he soon forgot it, being more interested in talking to Dee while they waited to see what the call had been for.

The wait wasn't long. A tall, athletic man with graying hair and hawkish features strode to the podium and introduced himself without preliminary. He spoke with a strong Texas twang that caused those native Texans in the audience to smile.

"Good morning. My name is James Reeves. I am replacing Mister Slater as Special Agent in Charge here. During the next few days I will be meeting with you individually and in groups. In the meantime, I expect you to carry on whatever duties and assignments you are currently involved with. Furthermore, I can tell you that I try my

damnedest to be fair and honest with each and every special agent and other personnel under my supervision, and I expect the same from you all. I don't like lies, obsequiousness, or anyone trying to spin things a certain way. When I ask for facts that's what I want, and if I desire an interpretation I'll ask for it."

Reeves spoke in a stern bass voice practically rumbling the rafters. Now he smiled, and said, "I prefer to be called Jim. Now, that's all I have to say right now. I won't go into my background and qualifications here. For anyone who's interested read the interoffice mail. In fact, I suggest you read it whether you're interested or not."

That got a laugh.

"Any questions?"

There were a few, but Reeves' abrupt manner suggested he wouldn't abide standing there for very long answering senseless queries, and they soon petered out.

"All right, then. Back to work. Have a pleasant day and I look forward to meeting and working with you. Thank you." He departed as quickly as he had arrived, leaving the agents with amused expressions on their faces.

Jantz had no sooner gotten back to his office than the red button on his phone blinked denoting a priority call. He glanced at the phone screen, saw the message, and turned back around. Reeves wanted to see him already.

Brenda Myers, the administrative assistant who had held that position through three changes in office greeted him. She was a short plump brunette, always cheerful and utterly devoted to the job rather than the man.

"Hi, Jantz. Go on in; Jim is waiting on you."

Jantz gave the door a polite tap then opened it, and stepped inside. The SAIC office was as ostentatious as the large conference room looking more like a politician's display room rather than a place to work, what with hung flags and portraits of celebrities. There were still framed pictures on the walls showing Slater with some Washington notables, none of whom would give Slater the time of day after the staged photo. Jantz suspected the decor of the office would be changed shortly if Reeves had anything to do with it.

Reeves came around his desk. His was a commanding presence reflecting his heritage as a Marine officer before going through the Academy and getting his credentials as a special agent. Jantz shook hands. He appreciated Reeves' firm grip and direct eye contact, unlike Slater's shifty gaze that he had disliked so much.

"Jantz, good to see you again. Drag up a chair and let's get started." Jantz took a seat. "All right, let's get to it. I went over most of the personnel files this weekend. I see that you asked for a transfer from your present assignment. It's approved. Take the rest of the week to finish up any odds and ends then I'll have something new for you-and I promise it won't resemble what you've been doing. With all our national problems I can't see spending time on interstate pimps and crap like that. Besides, I like your record; you've got a rep for doing good work even on assignments you don't particularly care for. No sense wasting talent."

Jantz thought that was putting it mildly, but only said, "Thank you. What exactly am I going to be doing?"

"First things first. You've been undercover so you'll need a partner. Any preferences?"

"Yes, sir, as a matter of fact. Dee, uh, Denise Andrews. She should be coming off background checks soon and we get along fine."

Reeves raised a brow. "I'll ask her when I get to her. If I remember, you're right; she is due for something more arcane. As for what you might be doing, I haven't decided yet. I still have to go over priorities and the directives from the top to see what's needed, what's wanted, and what's possible with the personnel we have. But I promise to have something for you by the first of next week, latest. If you have any spare time I suggest you use it. You may not get that much later." Reeves folded his hands together and leaned back in his chair. It whirred faintly as it adjusted to his position. He gathered his thoughts before speaking, knowing his words would be carried to the rank and file. "I don't like what was going on here, but it wasn't my call. Now it is, and I hope we can all work together as a team. Any questions?"

"No, sir. Thanks."

"Thank you for coming in."

Reeves stretched his hand over the desk and Jantz shook it. Brenda was already in the office ready to steer him to the exit. There would be another agent waiting to come in the entrance door. Reeves and Brenda both had a reputation for being efficient. Late that afternoon he hunted up Dee and found her idling at her desk, lost in thought.

"Hi, partner. I've got a spare penny."

Dee blinked, then smiled. "Don't waste your money. Did you say partner?"

"Yup. Just try to act surprised when Jim asks if that's what you want. In the

meantime, can you cancel whatever plans you might have for Wednesday evening? I've got an assignment for you if you want one."

"Wonderful. What is it?"

"I need some help in checking part of the remains from a killing."

Dee frowned. "Remains? What part? And what killing?"

Jantz rubbed his chin trying to decide if she was up to hearing the gory details. "There's this dead cow, see? And I need help deciding whether the tenderloin is fit for human consumption."

Dee blinked stupidly, then burst out laughing. "I take it this piece of the carcass from the crime is going to be part of the famous dinner you promised?"

"Why not? Crime does pay sometimes. Especially if the evidence is incinerated properly."

"All right, nut. What time?"

"Along about darkish; unless you're free earlier. I have the rest of the week off starting Wednesday."

"So do I. The replacements have arrived. All I have to do is hand over the paperwork to the new fish and spend a day orienting him, poor guy. I can do that tomorrow, though."

"Good. It's five o'clock. Let's get out of here before a terrorist shows up and ruins the day."

Dee's heart fluttered as it had before, but as they left she couldn't help wondering what Mary would think of her spending an evening with Jantz. In fact, she wondered what she would think of it herself. When Jantz came in she was going over the previous Saturday night with Mary in her mind still trying to make sense of it. She waved at him as they parted company in the parking lot.

Jantz's heart wasn't exactly still, either. Dee had acted perfectly normal, and as interested as he had hoped she would be. Maybe it wasn't her he had seen in the doorway after all.

* * * *

Mary was also trying to make sense of the incident, but she was going about it in a more practical way. First thing Tuesday morning, after arriving in the lab before her cohorts, she took a cheek swab from herself, gave it a code number rather than a name, and added it to the rack of specimens Julie had scheduled for processing on the first run of the day. Curiously, she noted another coded specimen, but dismissed it. Julie was probably doing someone a favor, a common practice she tolerated so long as it didn't get out of hand.

It wasn't that she was ashamed of what she did with Dee; she just wanted to know why! Perhaps she had the HI genes and there had been a mistake in the original specimen, a mix-up perhaps, or bad reagents, misapplication of current to the electrophoresis column: any sort of thing like that. There were supposed to be stringent controls, but as a scientist she knew that wherever and whenever humans were involved mistakes happened. And she wanted to know if one had happened with her when she submitted her employment sample, a requirement which every agent, scientist, and janitor had to provide.

All day, while Julie was running series of analyses in her usual efficient fashion, Mary was on pins and needles waiting for that first rack of specimens to come back for her to interpret. When Julie brought them into her office where the scanner and comparison computer and referral charts were kept she chatted for a moment while Mary got them set up to read.

"Do you mind if I wait and get you to look at F-8 for me?" The tension on Julie's freckled face showed plainly.

"No, not at all," Mary said. "What segments are you interested in?"

"Just tell me if the HI genes are there, and if so, how many of them."

Her, too? Mary quickly berated herself for that thought. More likely it was a prospective boyfriend she was suspicious of.

"Sure. Come on over and pull up a chair. You can squeeze in here beside me."

As she loaded the scanner with the batch of runs she became aware of how close Julie was sitting to her. And yet it had happened just like this on numerous other occasions when Julie wanted to learn how to read the more intricate portions of DNA maps, but she had never felt so conscious of her fresh young face and slim body. Julie wasn't a beauty, but red hair and freckles and a sweet smile gave her an enchanting look.

The computer program moved the scanner over the lines representing genes or gene clusters that Julie was interested in. The readout appeared on the screen quickly. Mary

heard Julie gasp and turned toward her. Her hands were clenched in front of her chin and her eyes were as wide open as a startled deer.

"That can't be. It just can't!" She stared at the screen as if it the genes for an incurable disease had popped up.

Mary patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry. It's not like it makes the person into a monster just because they have the HI genes. It's just a normal variance in the population. Seven or eight percent of the population have at least some of the homosexuality inclination genes. There are much worse things that can show up in a DNA map."

Julie took a deep breath. "You don't understand. That's my sample. My God, I've turned into a lesbian!"

"Julie, you know better than that. Genes don't change."

"They don't, huh? Do you know how many times we ran scans on ourselves as students, just for practice? I've never had any of the HI genes. Never."

"But ... it must be a mistake." Julie started to get up, but Mary grabbed her hand. "Wait. I want to look at another of these."

"What good will that do? I thought something was funny when I started to ... to-"

"To look at other women?"

Julie nodded, but she let Mary pull her back down into her chair. Mary pulled up her own reading already suspecting what she would find. The computer confirmed it.

"Another one," Julie said. "Who's that?"

"That's me," Mary said quietly. "And I never had the HI genes before either."

The two women looked at each other, subconsciously seeking an indication of the new genes they were carrying. Julie was pretending to have been changed; she had possessed HI genes from birth. Mary, with her greater knowledge, was thinking that the changes might be the harbinger of an entirely new paradigm.

"Julie, I don't think we should mention this to anyone yet. In fact, why don't you come over to my apartment this evening? We can have a bite to eat and compare notes. This is too astounding to let it get out before we know more about it."

Julie nodded, not daring to speak. She had carried off the deceit about her faked

DNA perfectly and didn't want to spoil it.

As soon as Julie left Mary dialed Dee's number. She got the recording saying she had already left. She then dialed Dee's home number, got no answer, and left a message asking her to stop by the lab first thing Wednesday morning, stressing the importance. And assuming Dee would have given her consent she looked up the recording of Dee's file DNA that all agents had to provide. It was singularly clear of any HI genes. But Wednesday morning she intended to ask her if she could run another analysis. Quickly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jantz's apartment looked different than it had the other time she was there when Lisanne gave her such a cold reception. She spotted the lack of a feminine touch in the living room, and as she helped make a pitcher of something Jantz said would go good with their meal noticed that the kitchen also seemed rather bare. Jantz noticed her scrutiny, and commented.

"Yeah. Lisanne came by Sunday and cleaned out the rest of her stuff. I hope she left me enough to cook with."

"Did you see her new girl friend?"

"Nope. But she had chopped her hair off and wasn't wearing any makeup. She must be really getting into the lesbian scene."

"You're stereotyping."

Jantz thought a moment. "So I am. Amazing, the bits of cultural baggage you pick up as you go along, isn't it?"

"That it is."

Dee couldn't help wondering if whatever had changed Lisanne was from the same cause that was affecting her, too, even though she had no desire to chop off her hair. Nor had Mary, at least so far. She was still reeling from what Mary had told her this morning. Mary's genome had changed for no apparent reason. In fact, there were only limited ways to change it: by induced replacement, elimination of or damage to genes, either by environment, which was extremely unlikely, or by induced change, again unlikely unless done in a targeted manner. She had given Mary a cheek swab and told her she would call her at work Thursday to see what the results were. In the meantime she intended to enjoy herself and try not to worry about it.

"It's early," Jantz said. "Let's sit back and relax. I'm so damned glad that Slater is out of here that you'll probably have to sit on me to keep me from celebrating too much."

"Fine, but who's going to sit on me? I want to celebrate, too."

"You didn't have to work with him that much."

"True. But I'm as glad as you are. Did you know he made a pass at me when I first reported here?"

"No lie? Why didn't you file a SH charge against him?"

"Perhaps I should have, but I was new and he was oh-so-indirect about it. I got the gist, though."

"What did you do?"

"I saw that he was wearing a wedding ring and asked him how long he had been married. Next thing I knew I was out pounding the pavements."

Jantz laughed. "Good for you."

He picked up the pitcher and their glasses and brought them into the den and set them on the coffee table in front of the lounge. They sat facing a wall screen showing monkeys playing in a jungle. It took a sharp eye to determine that the simians and jungle were animated rather than real.

Jantz glanced at his watch. "It's right about six. Do you mind if we catch the news, just to make sure we aren't being bombed or congress hasn't absconded with the national debt, or India and Pakistan haven't nuked each other?"

"Or the moon might be falling. Sure, turn it on. I'm a news junkie myself."

"Let's catch the local cast. They always have anything important nationally, anyway."

"Suits," Dee said, sipping her drink. She smacked her lips; whatever it was, it was good.

They sat together enjoying a companionable silence while the news anchor rattled on about happenings in Houston, focusing on the violent and bizarre as if that was the normal way of the world. The longer the newscast went on the more Jantz seemed absorbed, not by the snippets of world happenings, but by the local news, particularly

three separate episodes dealing with domestic violence. Two were where women committed mayhem on their husbands and one the opposite. Then there were follow-up bits from previous newscasts.

"Whew!" Jantz turned the screen off. "Elgin was right. It's happening here, too."

"Elgin?"

"My friend in Washington told me that there's been a jump in domestic violence there. I hadn't been paying too much attention, but damned if I don't think there's more here, too."

"It would be easy to find out. The police department keeps the statistics."

Jantz said, "It's not just that. I have the damndest feeling that something awfully goddamned funny is going on, but I can't pin it down. It's like people are changing somehow." He took a large swallow of his drink.

Dee held her breath. Did he know about Mary? No, he couldn't. She had told no one and Mary wouldn't talk. And would he care, anyway?

When she remembered to breathe again, she asked, with mental fingers crossed, "You're including the change in Slater and Meridian in your suppositions?"

"Yes, that too. And when I went shopping Sunday I got the feeling a lot of the people I saw were edgy, as if they were worrying about something. Have you noticed anything like that?"

Dee thought. "Well, maybe. Of course when a woman shops her mind works differently than a man. She's noticing objects and maybe other women, not people per se. For the most part, anyway. But it could have been." Suddenly she had an urge to know the results of her DNA scan. "Do you mind if I make a phone call?"

"Not at all. Do you need to use my phone?"

"No, I have mine." She took it from her purse and dialed Mary's home number. It rang several times before she answered. "Hi. What did my results show?"

"Dee? Just a moment." Dee heard a female voice in the background then she came back on. "You're the same as Julie and me. Well, not quite. Only some of the HI genes showed with you, but you're definitely different from your baseline, same as us. Dee, I'm scared. I think we need to talk to someone about this."

"I do, too. I'll call in the morning, okay?"

Jantz watched from the kitchen as Dee's body language and facial expressions underwent changes during the brief conversation. He wasn't trying to read anything into whoever she was talking to, but his training spotted her concern and tied that to their conversation. He brought refilled glasses. Dee took hers and gulped it.

"Easy, I made this stuff to sip, not drink like soda pop." Then, carefully, he added, "Is anything wrong?"

Well, if Lisanne had been part of the phenomenon, as seemed likely, then Jantz was involved, at least peripherally. But how in hell to bring something like this up to a man-and one she really liked? Would he sympathize, or laugh? Lose interest?

"You've had some training in genetics. How would it be possible for a person's genes to change?" she asked.

"Well, usually by gene therapy when attempting to cure inborn defects. You've probably heard as much about gene therapy as I have. Was that what you meant?"

"No, I mean in a more fundamental way. Like, say from blue eyes to brown?"

Jantz remembered the scene on Mary's doorstep. The more he looked at Dee the more certain he was that it was her Mary had been kissing. Was this what she could be referring to in an oblique manner?

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, there are problems. With gene therapy you're doing targeted changes, usually on a specific organ, and mostly it has to be repeated because cells that pick up the new genes die off. There's lots of progress being made, though. Diabetes, for instance. And Cystic Fibrosis. You know about those."

"Yes. The gene for producing insulin is inserted into the liver. And the treatment for Sickle cell, where the bone marrow genes are replaced. Some others I've read about here and there. But that's not it. Suppose your eyes changed from blue to brown, or your skin from white to black without having anything done to them?"

"Or like a person suddenly becoming gay, like Slater?"

"Yes, like that."

She averted her eyes knowing she was blushing. She was slightly surprised at how quickly he zeroed in on her problem. He was sharp! Jantz knew, then, or thought he did: Dee had an interlude with Mary and was worried about it.

"I doubt the genes changed. Probably he was just a latent. For something so basic, someone would have to target the sexual expression genes. So far as I know no one has even attempted anything like that. And it would be illegal, anyway."

"But what if they have? Then what?" Dee swirled the ice in her empty glass.

Jantz took it from her and stood, not knowing how to broach the subject. "Are you worried that something happened to you? Or someone you know?"

Dee looked up at his sympathetic countenance. Why not tell him? Someone needed to be told, and pass the information along if it weren't confined to a few select people in the Houston bureau-and somehow she felt certain that wasn't the case. She took a deep breath and made the decision.

"Yes, it's happened to me and at least two others I know of, not counting Slater."

"Mary?"

Dee's mouth dropped open. "Now how in hell did you know that? Are you a ... a mind-reader or something?"

"Of course not. Handsome and intelligent, but I haven't gotten into mind-reading yet. I was out running Saturday night and saw you leave Mary's place."

"Damn, you Jantz! Have you been spying on me?" She got to her feet, eyes blazing.

Jantz was perfectly calm. "Of course not. But I couldn't help but notice. Now listen, Dee, I'm your friend, remember?"

"I'm sorry. Get me another drink and I'll tell you about it." Jantz did so then sat with her. "You're right, Mary and I spent some time together, but it was the first time for either of us. In fact, neither she nor I had ever even thought about another woman that way until then."

Jantz nodded. "That doesn't mean your genes have changed. Occasionally people of the same sex attract, and it turns out that it's the person more than the inclination. Nothing you did means you've changed your orientation."

"But our genes have changed. Mary did the tests on her and Julie then she took a specimen from me this morning. She said I've acquired some of the HI genes since my baseline, just like they have."

Now it was Jantz whose jaw dropped. "All three of you? And Mary is certain about

the results?"

"Yes," she said, and sighed heavily, glad to be able to share the worrisome burden.

"Slater. Meridian. You and Mary and Julie. Increased domestic violence. Has it happened to others, I wonder? God, I need to talk to Mary about this. And then we need to see how far it's spread, if it has."

"And in the meantime, what about me?"

Jantz gave her his best smile, looking her directly in the eye. "In the meantime, I'm hungry. How about you?"

* * * *

In another part of the apartment complex, Julie was naked, snuggled into the smooth curves of Mary's body.

" 'A bite to eat', you said. 'Compare notes', you said. Hah!"

"Oh, shush. I don't know how it happened, but I can't change how I feel, and neither can you."

Julie started to say something and Mary stopped her by closing her mouth with a kiss.

CHAPTER SIX

Jantz kept it simple, grilling porterhouse steaks to go with salad and twice-baked potatoes, garnished with cheese and herbs. Dee ate hungrily, not worrying about the calories.

Taking the last bite of steak, she said, "Mm. That was good. What else can you cook?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Could be. I'm more interested in food than I should be." She stood up and collected their plates.

Jantz scrutinized her as he took their glasses for refills. "I don't think you need to

worry. And leave the dishes alone. I'll get them later. Let's talk some more. And we can finish off our wine back where we started." He led the way to the lounge.

Dee smiled. "You could spoil a woman real easy, mister man."

Now that the subject had been broached she was glad that Jantz was treating her no differently. If anything, she was a bit apprehensive that his normality was a desire to treat her as a friend and not a woman. Dee looked at her glass of wine. They were sitting close together and she was enjoying the evening more than she had with a man in a long while. Jantz, however, still seemed intent on business.

"That's what we know so far. I'm wondering how this is going to affect society, assuming it's widespread. And if it is I'm beginning to wonder whether some fanatic group or cult is responsible. You know how the belief genes work, don't you? The so-called religious genes? They give people the potential to believe all kinds of impossible things before breakfast ... and most people do."

"Uh-huh. They're certain that they're right and every other belief in the world is simply ignorance and failure to have faith in their own. Too bad someone can't invent a virus to eliminate the belief genes."

"Well, I can get along without them; in fact I'm part of the small minority which doesn't carry them, but most people seem to find them necessary to function, whether they practice a religion or not."

Dee raised her glass and tinked it against his. "Join the club. I only have a bare few. Almost all women have a minimum, but most inherit more than I did. I suppose it meets some need that mothers had back when so many children perished before reaching adulthood. Being able to think they were in a better world probably made it bearable."

She realized that he might be talking because he was scared to act. She set her glass down and took his hand. He was wearing the same boyish expectancy on his face that had attracted her in the first place, as if this might be the first time he had ever put his arm around a girl. She leaned into his embrace and parted her lips for his kiss. His arm tightened around her. She was inordinately pleased that the touch of a man's lips and hands still brought instant arousal. She had been afraid that the episode with Mary had changed her in some fundamental way. Feeling her body and mind respond thrilled her now.

"Mm," Dee murmured, as their lips parted.

His deep brown eyes drew her back. She pulled his head down and let his tongue rove freely into her mouth. His hand molded her breast sending shivers down her body.

Whatever had happened with Mary had no bearing on her actions now. She touched him feeling his hardness and stood up, eager to get to the bedroom and merge their bodies into one. Jantz led the way, arm around her as if afraid she might vanish if he didn't maintain contact.

Dee undressed swiftly and lay on the bed watching the play of muscles in his back as he bent to remove his shoes, then shucked off his trousers and underpants. He leaned back and rolled to face her. For long moments they barely touched, but kissed hungrily. Jantz bumped his palm against her hardened nipple as he fondled her. She ran her hand down along the ridges of his back then gently closed her hand around his member. The skin was so taut around its length that it felt like satin. She wanted to get closer to it.

Dee moved forcefully and began kissing his nipples, then the planes of his abdomen sliding down on the bed as she came closer to his erection. Her breasts bumped over it and then it was against her cheek. She rose up and parted her lips letting them descend over and around him. He groaned with pleasure, giving her impetus to continue even when she knew the first time would end there. It did, explosively and delightfully for both of them. And then Jantz was over her and in her, both of them moving to the same delirious rhythm, and she wondered why anyone would ever want to change something so wonderful. Then she stopped thinking at all for long wild moments where she could remember little of what happened afterwards.

Later that evening Dee was again sitting on the lounge with Jantz clad in one of his old soft shirts. She rested against his shoulder and played with the fingers of his hand while they watched a late news broadcast, both of them looking for incidents that might be attributed to an influx of HI genes into the population, but the local stations were concentrating on different subjects for a change.

Jantz shut down the sound, bent forward, and kissed her lightly. "I'm glad you came to dinner."

"I came for the snuggling, but the dinner was okay."

Jantz plucked an imaginary arrow from his heart. "No more steak for you, my lady. But if more snuggling suits you-"

It suited Dee. Jantz was a gentle, yet forceful lover. She pulled his head down for a kiss and shifted to make it easier for him to undo the top buttons of the shirt and slide his hand inside. She could hardly be still as he explored her breasts thoroughly and expertly then leaned back. Seeing assent in her expression he stood up, giving her a helping hand along the way. She hugged him tightly, just to feel the hardness waiting for her. It was all she could do to keep from running to the bedroom. By the time those few steps were

completed she was trembling with a desire for him that seemed unholy. Whatever was happening was like nothing she had ever felt before, except in a different way with Mary a few days ago. She practically ripped Jantz's robe off while he was fumbling the last few buttons of her shirt open, then she scurried onto the bed pulling him down beside her. She gasped as the length of his body came against hers. She kissed him fiercely and groped for his penis, clasping her fingers around it.

"God, Jantz," Dee breathed. "I feel like I could eat you alive."

"You'll get no argument from me, sweetheart."

It was the same as before. She wanted to feel him, to taste him, and have him in her and on her all at once. She slid down between his legs and took him in her mouth as before, even as she captured his shin between her thighs and rubbed against it while he stroked her head and neck and hair with one hand and ran his other down to caress her breast. And then she was exploding with the sound and movement of his body as he reached the climax she wanted him to, throbbing in her mouth with each spasm. Dee didn't wait until he was drained before she was on top of him, not giving him a chance to go down.

The weight of her body and the sensation of her breasts moving in his hands as she rode him kept him hard. She stretched out to allow both his hands and mouth to stimulate her breasts while she worked her hips furiously. A moment later she screamed as the orgasm lifted her into a realm of pleasure almost too exquisite to be endured. Her whole body shuddered for long, gasping moments until she collapsed full length on top of him, just as she felt him reach another peak. Dee moved her legs inside his to keep him tight inside her. She lay on his chest and enjoyed the slow coming down as Jantz murmured against her tousled hair and stroked her back.

"I must be smushing you," she finally managed to get out.

"I like the way you smush. And do other things."

"God, what you must think of me. I'm acting like a nymphomaniac."

"Not to worry. All women should act so nice."

Dee nipped his neck with her teeth and rolled off, reluctantly. Jantz took a hand towel from the lower shelf of the bedside table and handed it to her, then appropriated one himself. Dee used it.

"You're thoughtful. Were you expecting this?"

"Just hoping. Besides, I was a Boy Scout once upon a time. You know their motto."

Dee laughed. "Yes, but I didn't know it extended to sexual matters."

"Check the latest edition of the Scout Handbook. You might be surprised."

"Seriously, I've always liked sex, and I really like you, but I've never felt like a cat in heat before. Is it something in the air? Or the water, maybe?"

She was both exuberant and puzzled as if she had won a prize with a ticket she didn't know she had in her possession. Jantz stroked her until she fell asleep in his arms, but he remained awake a long time. Thinking. There was more to sexual feeling than the expression of genes.

Just before Dee dozed off with his arm around her and his hand cupping her breast a vagrant thought intruded; in the same position with Mary, her hand had been much smaller and softer, and in some strange way just as satisfying. It bothered her, but not enough to prevent her from falling asleep.

Dee left Jantz before daylight to get home and take care of matters, and get ready for another day. She leaned over to kiss him while he still lay in bed.

"Call me later?"

He touched her nose with a forefinger. "Soon as I get back from the office."

"I thought you were off?"

"I am, but I want Mary to check my DNA, too."

"After last night I don't think you have to worry. But it's probably a good idea. Bye." She felt his eyes on her all the way to the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I thought you were taking some time off. What are you doing back here so early in the morning?"

Jantz recognized Reeve's voice before he turned around from the elevator door. "Good morning, Jim. Something important came up that I needed to check on. In fact, I may come see you about it sooner rather than later."

"Oh? Nothing bad, I hope?"

"I'm not sure yet. Even if it is I don't know if we're the ones who should handle it, anyway."

"Well, let me know. My door is always open. By the way, you should talk to Ms. Andrews soon. I have you scheduled to work together next week."

"Thank you, sir. I'll surely talk to her about it. I'm glad."

Reeves smiled as if he knew how Jantz had spent his night, but said nothing as more people crowded around. The door opened and the elevator filled. Jantz knew Reeves must be wondering why he got out on the floor below the offices where the forensics lab was, but didn't think Reeves would push to find out. Mary was waiting.

"Hi Jantz. Dee called and said to expect you. Come on back."

He followed her to her section glad that Dee had paved the way for him, and that Mary didn't appear to mind him knowing that she and Julie had acquired the HI genes; otherwise it might have been embarrassing. She took a quick cheek swab and took it over to where Julie would be setting up the specimens for analysis.

When she came back, he asked, "Do you still have Slater's DNA file here?"

She grinned elfishly. "Yes, and I know what you're going to ask. It's unethical as hell, but I'll do it. Pour yourself some coffee and I'll check it right quick before the thundering herd gets here." He hadn't even finished his coffee when Mary returned. "He was perfectly straight when the sample was taken ... so far as the HI genes go. Further despondent sayeth not."

"I didn't want to know anything else. But, so long as we're being unethical, if I can get something recent from Slater could you do another run?"

"Sure, so long as I have enough to work with."

"How much do you need?"

"Damn little. Julie is a genius at sample preps."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, how would you feel about coming over to my place tonight along with Dee and Julie, so we can decide where to go next?"

"Sounds good. I'll see if Julie is free and if she is I'll pick her up. In the meantime, I

can tell you one thing I am going to do, and that's barricade myself in my cubbyhole and scan the rest of the DNA maps for HI genes so I'll have the base data. Whatever happens after that I'll be able to compare then and now, so long as I get new samples."

"Couldn't you do it anyway?"

"Maybe, maybe not. There's a reason for the privacy laws. Information from DNA samples isn't supposed to be made available except on a comparison basis, and then it's done by code until and unless a match is found in a criminal case."

"Oh. Don't get yourself in trouble, Mary."

She stared at him sharply. "You let me worry about that. Some son-of-a-bitch messed with my genome and I'm pissed off about it."

"I don't guess it could be caused by some environmental factor, could it?"

"Not a chance, and you know it. This had to be deliberate. What I want to know is how it was done. If someone could do this, God only knows what else they might try." Color rose to her cheeks, making her eyes seem to radiate anger.

"Um. I see your point. Okay, but why don't you transfer your data to a cube and take it home rather than keep it here?"

"Why? Oh. Suspicious devil, aren't you?"

Jantz shrugged. "That's how we're trained. What else can I do?"

"You can't do anything, except maybe talk to Mr. Reeves and see if he will make up some excuse to have all you agents submit samples again. I'm doing that this morning for the lab people."

"What's your excuse?"

"A research project I don't want to talk about yet. You know us scientists; very secretive. Most of them will go along without even thinking about it. What's a cheek swab, anyway?"

"Will you have any results by this evening?"

"Some, but not all. Oh, yes; I'm going to call a friend of mine at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and see if they know anything."

"Good ideas. You should be an agent. Okay, see you tonight. I'll have some snacks."

Jantz turned to leave, but on second thought stopped at his office to call Elgin. He was almost ready to hang up, figuring Elgin must be out jousting with the press, when his voice came on.

"Hey, Jantz. Saw your number pop up. Glad it's you and not one of the sharks. This goddamn place is going nuts."

"Not as nutty as us, I bet."

"Ha! I swear, there's something in the water here. We've had almost a dozen agents pop up this week with family problems and every damn one of them is either the guy or the gal coming out. Or so the rumor mill has it. The media is sensing a story, what with transfers and couples splitting up and, hey, we even had an assistant director arrested for sex with an underage kid. And here's one hot over-the-plate for you: I think Slater and Meridian have the hots for each other. Can you believe it?"

"I believe it, El. If you think you're busy now, just wait a bit."

"Do you know something I don't?"

"Maybe, but it's so bizarre I don't want to say anything yet."

"It might not affect me, anyway. I've had it with this crap. I told Slater yesterday, either give me a transfer or I'm out of here."

"Where did you ask for?"

"Houston, where else?"

"Great! I hope you get it."

"Me too. It's been a while since we tipped a few. Oh, by the way, here's another nipper for you. Linda said she saw Lisanne at the director's party last night, hanging on his arm like she was glued there. She sure didn't waste any time, did she?"

Jantz didn't say anything for a moment. In one of their last arguments, Lisanne had told him she loathed the FBI. What was she doing in Washington ... and with the director, at that?

"Are you sure?" he finally asked.

"All I can tell you is what Linda told me. Sorry, didn't mean to upset you. Hey, listen, she wasn't near good enough for my old buddy. You're well shut of her. Or am I making an ass of myself?"

"No, thanks, El. Tell Linda I appreciate it. And really, I'm not upset. Something just occurred to me, though. Hey, listen, will you be in tomorrow?"

"So far as I know. Want me to call you?"

"No, I'll get in touch with you. Thanks again, El. Hang in there, buddy."

"I'll probably just hang."

Jantz heard Elgin sneeze just as he disconnected, and thought for the thousandth time how glad he was that he so rarely got upper respiratory illnesses. He stood indecisively for a moment. All of a sudden he had two errands he wanted to complete and wondered which to start first.

* * * *

In an office in the CDC building in Atlanta Crystal Jennings was compiling statistics for the weekly and monthly morbidity and disease report, which was distributed to governments and health organizations all over the world. The morbidity report covered known and newly emerging contagious diseases. It enabled doctors and scientists to direct their medical efforts in the most efficient way, and in the case of many countries where budgets were the overriding concern, helped them use their precious resources where they would do the most good. It was vital work, but she really missed field assignments, the tracking of vectors and infections to their source, gathering specimens, and taking histories for the diagnosis of possible new pathogens. 'The chains of promotion' was the way she thought of the supervisory duties that kept her busy with the bureaucracy inherent to a large government agency. She signed off on the weekly and began perusing the monthly report, flipping pages on her computer screen with dexterity gained from long practice. Nothing really new, thank goodness. They'd had enough the last few decades to keep them busy for the next century.

Crystal caught the blinking of the red light on her phone from the corner of her eye and sighed. Always someone demanding her attention and, more often than not, it could have been handled further down the line. She froze the computer screen and turned to the phone tapping the record key automatically. At her level it didn't pay to depend on memory of past conversations. To her surprise the speaker was Mary Andrews, one of her former interns, now gone into government work herself supervising the genetics section of the regional laboratory in Houston. All she had was voice, though. So far the

government hadn't funded videophones other than for the defense department. Maybe next year. The voice was enough, though. It was pregnant with concern.

"Crystal, I need to talk to you about something very important. Is there any way you could come to Houston right away?"

Crystal laughed. "Not a chance. I don't get to leave this desk any more for anything less than a full epidemic. Why? What have you got?"

"Let me ask you a question. Have you noticed any new viruses making the rounds lately?"

"We always have new viruses. You'll have to be more specific."

"Sorry. I just don't know how to tell you what I'm looking for. Let me put it this way: have you seen any type of virus that might have been deliberately altered?"

This was getting interesting. Mary had been a very bright intern and a likable one. They had renewed their acquaintance at a seminar two years ago in San Francisco and enjoyed each other's company. But an altered virus? That sounded as scary as it was interesting.

"Can you be a bit more specific? Altered in what way? And what group would it fit in?"

"I have no idea what viral group it might be, but let me put it like this: I'm almost certain that I've discovered a phenomena where something is inserting new alleles into the human genome. An altered virus is the only thing I can think of that could do something like that."

Crystal held her breath. She was privy to reports from Homeland Security of terrorist threats from diseases like Anthrax or Smallpox, or genetically altered Polio, Plague and the like, but this was something new. And highly unlikely. But Mary was no fool. She wouldn't be calling over a chimera.

"When you say inserting, you mean actual gene loci are being targeted and foreign material inserted there, carried in a virus?"

"Not foreign material. Other human genes."

"You're not talking about some new type of gene therapy, I take it."

"I wouldn't have called you if that were the case. No, it isn't consensual. And it's

definitely a massive insertion spreading to multiple organs. It shows up in most cheek swabs right down to the basal cell level. Can you think of any other way of it happening other than a virus infecting the body?"

"No. But Mary, you're talking some pretty advanced science here. Which genes do you think are being inserted?"

"I have absolutely credible baselines, then later samples of the same person. The genes don't show up in the older samples. They do in the new."

"You still haven't said which genes. Is it something harmful?"

"Well, that remains to be seen. If you mean physically harmful, I don't think so. But if it gets to be widespread, you bet your bootie it will be harmful. To society more so than to individuals."

Vertical frown lines appeared between Crystal's eyebrows. "You're being purposefully reticent. Which genes? On what chromosome? Do you even know their function?"

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid you'd laugh if I told you, and really, it's no laughing matter. I just wanted to know if you had found any new viruses that might be capable of such a thing."

"I don't know. I can say we haven't run across anything new that has attracted much attention. Of course, that's just speaking of the CDC; I don't know what the research labs are up to. And that's not to say there isn't something out there that we might never notice unless it caused major medical symptoms. You know we're so under-funded that we have to concentrate on those that are life-threatening."

There was a silence from the other end of the line. Crystal could picture Mary's pretty face in deep concentration, surrounded by its halo of blond hair. She sounded as serious with her problem as she did when she was describing another failed love affair. What could this be? And was it real?

Mary answered her questions, partly. "I'm at a loss. We need information and you were the person I thought of."

"We? Are you working with others on this?"

"Oh, yes. It's not as if it's something I discovered by myself. An FBI agent and one of my techs are involved. And we believe there are probably more cases. I'm running some updated scans and we should know by this evening."

"Mary, I really can't help with just this little bit of data. Especially if you won't tell me which genes are involved."

"I don't want to yet. I was just hoping you might know something. Suppose I call you at home after I get the other results? If we turn up more cases I'll give you all the data. But please don't tell anyone anything, okay? If this is the start of an epidemic there's no telling what will happen. Even after we talk tonight, please keep everything secret. It might be some sort of terrorist plot, though if it is, it's the damndest way I ever heard of to attack us."

"All right, I won't say anything. What time should I call?"

"About seven? We should all be there by then. Let me give you the number."

Crystal wrote it down. They chatted a few more minutes about mutual acquaintances and where they were and what they were doing, then said goodbye.

Well, Crystal thought, _I wanted something interesting to do_. If Mary hadn't gone off the deep end this might be it. But what could 'it' be? She glanced at the time hardly able to contain her curiosity, then got back to work.

She became so involved that she didn't hear the door open and close when Jane Blevins, her administrative assistant, came in. Crystal didn't know she was there until she felt the touch of a feminine hand on her shoulder. She turned her head. Jane's lips descended onto hers and her hand slipped from her shoulder down inside her blouse. This was something that had started recently and she had no idea where it would end ... or what her husband would think if he knew.

* * * *

Jantz left the forensics lab and hurried home pushing the speed limit all the way. Once inside his apartment he began turning in circles, trying to think where Lianne might have left fingerprints on something portable. The bathroom. There was bound to be something there. He found an almost depleted tube of lipstick and a half-empty tube of toothpaste with the end neatly rolled up. Good. The rest of the tube was inflated and should be covered with prints. He used some toilet tissue to pick up the items and carried them to the kitchen for bagging, then headed back to the office. Why hadn't he thought to do a background check on her? _Hormones_, he thought, berating himself.

Bob Waldrop carried the toothpaste tube to a lighted hood with a small pair of tongs and examined it under several different frequencies of light.

"This'll do, Jantz. How soon do you want the results?"

"Yesterday?"

"How about this afternoon?"

Jantz grinned. "I can live with that." He pulled out his wallet and gave his friend in the fingerprint department a business card. "I should be at home. Call me there."

"Home, when you should be sweating with the rest of us drones? How come you rate so high?"

"Clean living?"

"Hah. Tell me some more lies. This afternoon, then. At home."

"Thanks, Bob. I owe you one."

Home again Jantz went straight to his computer alcove. He retrieved a key from its hiding place and unlocked the special compartment where he kept material he didn't want seen by anyone outside the agency ... and by few within it. Other agents kept the same sort of data cube as the one he pulled from the drawer. It contained a program that would scour the worldwide web collecting a wealth of information on a particular person: driver's license, credit history, criminal convictions and/or arrests, family history, and so on. The program delved into public databases and some private ones where the means of access had been clandestinely passed around. Jantz rarely used it, not being absolutely certain everything the program did was strictly legal, but sometimes circumstances called for exceptional actions and this was one.

Thirty minutes later he was scanning pages of information. Damn, how could she have fooled him so badly? And more importantly, why had she done it? Lianne was an acknowledged lesbian since high school days and other than her liaison with him, there was no reference of her ever taking up with a man. It had been a sham ... and still was, if Elgin's report about her being at a Washington party with the director was true. She had been busy in other areas, too, having been arrested several times during militant gay/lesbian protests. Even though the record showed her with a Masters Degree in accounting she had never worked in the field, having inherited a moderate amount of money from her deceased parents. Mostly she traveled and played using her good looks and superb body to gain access to the upper tiers of society. He was astounded at some of the people she had been photographed with, or caught on surveillance cameras with. One in particular piqued his interest: the reclusive owner of Genetechnics, the giant agribusiness firm that was branching into genetically designed drugs. And Genetechnics was listed as a possible employer. She had maintained a residence in Portland where the corporate headquarters were located. Brandon Perkins, the CEO and majority

stockholder of Genetechnics, was said to be gay although he never commented on his orientation ... or much else for that matter outside of corporate business dealings.

There was too much to read all at once and much of it was mundane scraps of knowledge mined by the program in the process of finding the gold. He saved it to a special file that was protected by a destroyer program in case of a breach by other than himself and leaned back in his chair. Did he have enough information to take to Reeves? No, not when he didn't know what Lianne's deception with him meant. Nor what she might be up to with the director. Nor what Mary's testing would turn up. Best to wait until after the meeting tonight and see what developed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After Jane left her office, and not incidentally left her breathing heavier than normal, Crystal didn't go back to the morbidity reports. She spent the rest of the day delving back through CDC archives from the last several months looking for anomalies she might have dismissed as insignificant. She kept the research to herself, remembering Mary's admonition. By the end of the day she concluded that if there was a virus making the rounds such as Mary feared it wasn't readily apparent. By the time she got home and prepared the evening meal she had almost convinced herself that Mary must be imagining things.

By the time Jantz finished preparing some finger food and made sure the bar was well stocked he was ready to relax a bit. And why not see if Dee wanted to come over early? He phoned. She did.

Dee arrived just before the evening news dressed in white pants and pullover with a thin red bolero-type short-sleeved jacket. She looked stunning, and he said so.

"Thank you. Flattery will get you anywhere. Can I sample your treats before the others arrive? I haven't eaten since breakfast and that was only some cereal."

"Sure. I'm a bad host. I should have got up and made you breakfast."

"And I might not have gotten anything accomplished today. But it's a nice thought. Rain check?"

"You got it. What would you like to drink?"

"Some of that Zinfandel we were drinking last night would go good with this whatever it is. If there's any left."

"No problem. And that 'whatever' is one of my concoctions. I call it finger food."

He filled their glasses and they retired to the same lounge where their lovemaking had begun the night before. Dee sipped her wine then set the glass down.

"Have you listened to any news today?"

"No, I haven't had time. Anything special going on?"

"The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Chanton."

"Be damned. Everyone thought it would go the other way, what with the new justices."

Dee shrugged, causing the bolero to do interesting things. "Wriggly threw in with the liberals, which should have been a headline all by itself; he's farther to the right than congress. I quote: 'So long as one state recognizes another state's traditional marriage they must also recognize same-sex marriages. Anything less would be discrimination against a particular group, which itself is illegal under many other laws'."

"I wonder-"

"Me, too. Did he catch the same disease that Mary and Julie and I did? And did it make him more tolerant?"

"Dee, it's not a disease," Jantz said gently.

"You know what I mean. And most people aren't as tolerant as you are. If this sort of thing becomes widespread there's going to be more shock and awe than the country can handle I'm afraid."

"It may not even be able to handle the shock and awe of this decision. Want to see what the pundits are saying?"

"Why not? It should make interesting listening."

She sipped more wine while Jantz found his news channel. A special had replaced the local news, which would have been on at this time. They listened.

— "...and demonstrators are already gathering in front of the Supreme Court building protesting against the ruling. The National Gay/Lesbian Alliance is hailing the decision as a landmark case in the quest for equal treatment of gays and lesbians, while the National Association of Protestants has denounced the ruling as a horrible example of

the moral decay in America. Overseas, the Pope is expected to issue a statement momentarily. We take you there now, to where our correspondent on the spot, Joel Bushwile, is waiting. A large crowd..." _

The anchor paused, a familiar expectant look on his face, but one rarely seen during a newscast. He sneezed, then apologized sheepishly and continued describing the crowd waiting for the Holy Father to appear.

Jantz muted the sound. "I guess we know what the Pope will say, huh?"

"Close enough. Sanctity of the marriage vows, edicts of Leviticus, pray for reversal of devilish ruling, et cetera, et cetera. I never have understood how a billion people can let someone else do their thinking for them."

"It's not just Catholics. Besides, you know as well as I do that a lot of it is genetic. And speaking of, did you get to talk to your friend at the CDC?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry, I meant to tell you. Crystal doesn't know anything, but I'm to call her back soon as Mary gets some results from the scans she did today."

"I'm wondering what mine will show."

"Bet?"

"Sure. On what?"

"You. I bet you come back negative."

"Well, if the change ... or insertion ... is carried by a virus, perhaps I will. I'm one of those people who never gets colds or the flu or any of those viral type infections."

"Really? Never?"

"Well, I can't recall ever having the flu and I just don't suffer from colds. I might get a sniffle for a day or so when other people are in bed for a week, but usually not even that much."

"You must have one hell of an immune system."

"That's what I think. More fingers?"

"I'll wait for the others. You can refill my glass, though." She held it out then got up with him, standing close.

Jantz leaned down and kissed her, letting his lips linger until the jingle of the doorbell interrupted. "That must be them. Get the door, please, and I'll do the honors here."

Dee saw that the curtains on the large front window were partially open. When she opened the door and saw the grin on Mary's face she knew that they must have seen them kissing.

"Hi, come on in. Hi, Julie. How have you been?"

"Great, now that we're doing something."

"Well, that remains to be seen. Mary, please tell Jantz what his scan showed. We have a bet."

"Well, if you bet it came out like ours, you lose. He hasn't changed a bit, except possibly a snip or two."

"Snip?"

"Later. Hi Jantz!" she called out, as she entered the living room and stole a sandwich wedge on the way to the bar. Julie hung back with Dee, as if afraid of interrupting a private conversation. "You can rest easy, Jantz. You're still the same old hunk you've always been. But a definite minority right now."

Jantz grinned his thanks and held up the wine bottle. Mary nodded and looked around for Julie. She mouthed a, 'yes', and Jantz poured for everyone. Once they were all seated, he spoke.

"Who wants to start? And help yourself to sandwiches. There wasn't time for a caterer so you'll have to accept the leftovers from my last party."

May rolled her eyes. "Let me. The real data dump is the results from the specimens I collected from the lab people this morning. Julie and I couldn't get them all done today, but so far we're finding that about fifteen percent of the original genomes have had at least some, and in lots of cases all, of the HI genes added since the baseline samples were obtained. Now what this means; and here I'm judging strictly on the basis of how well I remember when my, um, orientation began to change, starting with dreams and progressing to ... well, never mind. Suffice to say that as nearly as I can remember I must have picked up the virus carrying the insertion instructions about two months ago, or maybe earlier. What's more, and still going on the almost certain assumption that a genetically altered virus is responsible, it must take quite some time after infection before the body's immune system is aroused."

"Why do you say that?" Dee asked.

"Simple. The extra genes are showing up in cheek swabs. But that's not where expression of the genes originates."

"I don't quite understand."

"Okay, let me give you a quicky explanation. You have white skin, but only the genes in the skin are being actively expressed. Yet every cell in your body carries the exact same gene. Now, in our case, the HI genes we're seeing in the cells from the cheek swabs aren't being expressed there, which means the virus must linger in the body, gradually infecting more and more organs, until ultimately it gets to the germ cells and become a permanent mutation. Or the virus may get stopped by the immune system somewhere along the way, yet become permanent in the sense that it will continue to be expressed during the person's lifetime if it gets into enough cells and organs of the body. In other cases, it may become inactive for years in some cases, then pop back up again. We just don't know enough to say exactly how it works ... other than it is definitely effective."

"What she's also saying is that you may still be carriers." Jantz frowned.

"Right," Mary said, "but that's really sort of immaterial."

"Why so?" Julie asked.

"Don't you see? There haven't been any reports of a new virus from any health organization, up to and including the CDC. That means that the infection must be asymptomatic, or very nearly so. It could be spreading all over the world and no one would pay attention unless a scientist spots it inadvertently, goes to the trouble of mapping out its complete genome, and then believes the results. No, let me amend that. Sooner or later, if it is spreading at any kind of exponential rate, someone will put two and two together and start digging into the reasons for the increase in homosexuality. In fact, I'll bet other groups like ours are already working on it."

Dee's hand stole into Jantz's and squeezed it, seeking comfort. "Do you mean that the whole world is going to turn into a population of gays and lesbians? I can't even imagine what that would mean."

Jantz's face was grim. "I can imagine what it would mean while the changes were taking place: utter chaos."

"Wait a minute," Mary said. "All we've established so far is that fifteen percent of a very small group has changed. And many times, or I should say most times, as viruses

infect and re-infect they tend to attenuate, become less virulent, then finally die down until the next one with a bit of a change in the protein coating that immune systems won't recognize comes along and starts the cycle over again. That may be the case here. Of course, it may not be, either."

Jantz got up and mixed himself a strong Bacardi and Coke after the others indicated they would stick with the Zinfandel. He opened another bottle of that and put it in the cooler then sat back down. He waited until Mary had finished explaining one of the finer points of genetic expression, then offered up more facts to buttress Mary's contention that even given a rapid spread the situation wasn't quite so distressing as Dee had suggested.

"Mary's right. What she suggests might happen ... or already has happened for that matter ... isn't the end of the world. Even if a large portion of the population becomes infected it doesn't mean all of them will become flaming gays or lesbians. The HI genes are simply that; genes for an inclination toward homosexual orientation. It doesn't mean a person will be gay or lesbian if they have them. There's lots of other factors intertwined with them that matter just as much like environment, upbringing, experience, intelligence, whether suppressor genes are present or not, and in the case of induced genes carried by a virus, a person's immune system can play a big role in rejecting them in whole or part. Then there's the fact that there is a cluster of the HI genes, and other genes influence those in turn. Also, a person may have all, a part, or only a few of the genes. And just to complicate matters throw in the millions of SNPS- the single nucleotide polymorphisms. Those are variations of the three billion letters of the human genetic code. They are single changes in the arrangements of the nucleotides and they hold the key to susceptibility to some illnesses, but also may determine individual responses to environmental factors and possibly to the expression of many genes. And that's just some of the factors we know about. Others haven't even been discovered and even if they have been we're a long way yet from knowing the way everything interacts together to make a person straight or gay, or bisexual, or transgender inclined or whatever. It's all so complicated that it's still largely unpredictable."

"Whew! How do you know so much about the subject?" Julie asked.

Jantz laughed. "Sorry, didn't mean to lecture. I asked a silly question in class once and got handed a research paper on the subject. It was interesting and I did some follow-up on my own."

Dee picked up Jantz's glass and gulped down the remainder of it. The liquor bit her throat, and she coughed.

"Easy," Jantz said. "I made that drink strong. I was feeling the need of it."

"Well, I did, too. Sorry, I'm just having trouble taking this all in. How are people going to act when this gets out? Can't we develop an antidote or something?"

"It doesn't work like that. Once the CDC identifies our sexy little bug they can start working on a vaccine against it. That's for the original virus, though, if they can pin it down ... if it exists, that is ... but suppose it's like that whole slew of virus, which cause the common cold, the Coronaviruses. There's so many of them and they mutate so much that so far no one has succeeded in developing a really effective vaccine."

"Then it's like I said. Eventually everyone will be changed!"

"It won't happen overnight, and remember what I said about how the HI genes work. Besides, viruses change and mutate. This one, if it is only one that was let loose, may have already died off. And even if a vaccine can't be developed there's still an out," Jantz said.

"Like what?" Mary asked.

"Well, if one or more viruses were developed to insert the HI genes why can't another be developed to counteract it, like inserting suppressor genes to the HI set?"

"Now you're forgetting something, Jantz."

"What?"

The other women were switching their attention from Mary to Jantz and back again as they argued.

"I stay pretty well up in the field even if I am just doing forensic work. And I don't know of a laboratory in the world capable of producing the first virus, much less one to counteract it. Someone, or more likely some government or corporation, must have been working on this in secret for a good while."

"Um, yeah, I guess that is the problem, isn't it? Which means we need to put all this information together and take it to Jim Reeves so he can get every agent in the whole damn bureau to tracking down who's responsible."

"Will he believe us?" Julie asked, the freckles standing out on her face more vividly than usual.

"He will when I get it all written down so he can see how it hangs together," Mary

said.

"No!" Jantz realized he had raised his voice and softened his tone. "Sorry, but no one puts anything in writing. Ordinarily, I'm all for freedom of expression, but the longer this can be kept from the public the better off we are."

"It will get out," Mary said.

"I know; that's inevitable, but no sense hurrying it along. God knows it's going to be the story of the century as is, if the plague is still spreading. Or even if it isn't."

"I don't feel like I've caught a plague," Mary said sharply.

"Sorry, just an expression. But we have to call it something."

"Don't worry," Dee said. "As soon as the media gets hold of the story they'll come up with a nice juicy tag for it."

"We're all agreed, then? We should go see Jim with what we have?"

"We haven't heard from Crystal yet. Let me call her?"

Mary got up to find her purse, while Dee muttered, "Crystal?"

"My friend at the CDC," Mary said over her shoulder. "Whatever we do, the CDC is going to have to be in on it."

Jantz made a sudden decision. "I'm going to call Jim and see when we can meet."

"Jantz, wait," Mary said.

She dropped her eyes to the screen of her phone and began talking over the evidence they had so far. She grinned at Jantz when Crystal told her to keep everything secret until she could fly in to consult with them. They were all on the same page now.

"Crystal Jennings is going to fly in tomorrow. I think we should wait and bring her with us when we see Reeves. She will add a lot of weight to our arguments."

Jantz nodded. "Tomorrow's Friday. I'm still going to talk to Reeves and set up a meeting before he gets involved in something else. Where shall it be? Here again?"

Dee shook her head. "Maybe we ought to have gone to a hotel or something tonight. Jantz, you told us about Lisanne. Suppose she's involved with this? She might have

bugged this place without you even knowing."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth Jantz realized he had again been negligent. He should have had the place swept before their meeting. Damn it, the subconscious limbic impression of Lianne was still intact, that of a willing woman who loved him.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Dee is right. Goddamnit, I've been a fool!"

Dee put her fingers to her lips for everyone else to see then grabbed him in a tight embrace, and whispered, "If we're bugged, let it stay. We might be able to mislead." And just in case the possible bug included visual, Jantz made sure that the kiss that followed looked authentic ... not that either of them had to pretend. Breaking the embrace, Dee said, "Why don't we meet at my place next? Lianne has never been there."

Left unsaid was the fact that she could have been without Dee's knowledge. Jantz winked at the group then went into the kitchen where he kept the cradle for his cell phone. He slipped the phone into his pocket while making another drink, then excused himself as if he needed a quick bathroom break, but continued on past the bedroom and stepped outside through the back patio door. He got away from the building before he started dialing, thinking that he was acting a mite paranoid. Jantz asked the operator for Reeve's home number. Fortunately, it had gotten into the system already. He dialed and Reeves answered almost immediately.

"Jim, this is Jantz Preston."

"This better be good, calling this time of night. And you sound as if you've been drinking."

"Boss, this is better than good. Or worse, I should say. More like earthshaking. I need to meet with you, along with a few of my friends. And it needs to be away from the office."

"How soon?"

"ASAP."

To his credit, Reeves not only didn't question his motives; he simply asked when his friends would be available.

"Actually, we're all together right now. The last one of the group is flying in from the CDC in Atlanta tomorrow."

"Is he necessary? The CDC works openly."

"It's a she. And she has already agreed on the need to keep the lid on the situation as long as we can."

"All right. Is your phone secure?" Jantz started to assure him that it was, then stopped, uncertain. "Never mind. Shortly, a young lady will appear at your door asking if you know so and so who lives in your apartment complex. Listen to her."

Reeves hung up, leaving Jantz to wonder how he could arrange a contact so quickly. He soon found out. The young lady bore a family resemblance to James Reeves, including high cheekbones and brown hair. She appeared to be in her late teens or early twenties. As she asked for the spurious directions she pretended to be writing them down, but when she held up her phone for him to check for accuracy, the screen read My place, Fairmonte Greens, apartment H-12, Friday, 6:00 P.M. No wonder she got there so soon. James Reeves lived in the same complex! Or at least was staying here until more permanent quarters could be obtained. Surely no one could have bugged his place so soon, certainly not Lisanne.

As soon as he was back inside he called a huddle again in the kitchen, ostensibly to discuss what should go into the pitcher of punch he was preparing. Everyone tried not to act surprised as they read the information from the pad. Jantz was relieved. Now they could concentrate on tracking the persons who had let the presumptive virus loose, while at the same time he was sure Reeves was already acting to ensure secrecy at the CDC end of things.

When Mary yawned Jantz started closing down what was turning into a drinking party. Mary and Julie had to show up at work the next day even if they could have taken sick time. They needed to complete the processing of the specimens taken Thursday morning so that data could be brought to the meeting with Reeves.

Mary gazed at Jantz and Dee with a bit of yearning as they stood side-by-side saying goodnight to her and Julie. She wanted to talk to Dee about her relationship with Jantz, sort of like they had kidded each other about their love lives (or lack of them) before all this came up. Would Jantz mind if she and Dee got together again? It might be fun to find out. In the meantime, there was Julie.

CHAPTER NINE

After the others were gone Dee sat with Jantz on the lounge, holding hands and chatting idly. Eventually, Dee brought up the subject they were avoiding.

"Poor Mary. She sure doesn't have much luck in her love life. Did you notice the way she was looking at me?"

"You? I thought it was my stud bod she was focusing on."

"Nut. You're not the only one around here who's a hottie. I know she wants me again, but I'll bet now that she knows why, she's wondering if she can still get it on with a man."

"I hope she can. It can't be much fun having your orientation changed without your consent."

"Well, absent the consent part, I can think of a whole list of things worse than being in bed with Mary. Can't you?"

"I take it you're telling me that you wouldn't mind trying it with her again?"

"Yes. Maybe that sounds funny to you, a person resentful of being changed yet willing to explore the change?"

"It does. I have no idea of how I would react, but somehow I can't picture myself in bed with a man."

"I imagine there are any number of men facing that dilemma right now. I think it's easier for a woman. There's none of that male ego to contend with, and women hugging and kissing each other in non-sexual circumstances is already culturally acceptable. But you're missing my point here. I think Mary would like to try it with you."

"Me?"

Dee looked around the den. "I don't see your clone anywhere. It must be you I'm referring to."

Jantz was slow to answer. "And what would you think of the idea?"

"Mm, the near future would be better than later I'm thinking, before she begins to focus exclusively on women. And I could probably stand it better now than later, assuming we continue to get along as good as we did last night." She smiled up at his befuddled expression.

"Well, so long as you thought it was all right-

Dee touched his lips with a forefinger. "You're a sweetheart. I'll bet you've never

strayed from whomever you were with at the time, have you?"

"No. Not but what I could probably have been seduced if a woman went about it in a determined way, and she didn't have gremlins in the gizzard."

Dee laughed. "What on earth does that mean?"

Jantz pointed to his bookshelves, floor to ceiling, covering most of the walls in the den. "I like a woman who uses her head for something other than to hold down her neck. Pure looks can attract me as readily as it does a man who has trouble counting to ten without using his fingers. Like we've been talking about tonight: it's a genetic thing. Men are sight-oriented and a man is going to look whether he's committed to a single woman or not."

"While women aren't?"

"Oh, no. Them too. Just not as much. And some of that is cultural, I think."

"So you like Mary's looks, I take it."

"Yes'm. And yours, too."

"What if you could have us both at the same time?" There. She said it.

Jantz grinned as if he were a boy who had spotted two warm apple pies cooling on a rack. "Have you ever wondered what the most common male sexual fantasy is?"

"Not really, but I'm beginning to guess."

"Right; two women in bed with him at the same time. Preferably two women who don't mind sex with each other."

"Now why is that, do you suppose?"

"Oh, there are tons of theories out there, but I like mine best."

"Which is?"

"Men are visually oriented, which is where pornography comes from. The, uh, regular kind, not the fetish or degrading stuff. And two women in bed with you gives double the visual stimulation. Add sex to the picture and the double fun is enhanced even more. And finally, if you happen to like the two women involved, that's just icing on the cake."

"How about vocal stimulation? Does that work for men?"

"You mean like talking about it? Sure. Why?"

"Because talking about it is making me horny. Let's go to bed. And if there's a damned camera in the bedroom I want to be sure and give a show worth watching."

Dee stood up a trifle wobbly from drink, but by the time they were in the bedroom she had regained her equilibrium. She stood in front of Jantz while he sat on the edge of the bed and removed her clothes one article at a time, pausing to nuzzle and lick each new area of bare skin, giving her goose bumps and shivers. When she was totally naked, he stood up. He cupped both of her breasts in his hands, admiring their taut resilience and beauty.

"When I look at you like this I could almost believe there had to be a God who designed women. And you are the cream of the design. You are very beautiful, Dee, and you have the loveliest breasts I've ever seen. Just the right size and so firm and smooth, like they were made to be played with." He kissed her deeply, fondling her breasts.

When they broke, Dee said, "And now that I know, too, I can only agree with you. Breasts were made for more than nursing."

Dee unbuttoned Jantz's shirt and slid it off him, then lay on the side of the bed watching as he finished undressing. When he turned, fully engorged and throbbing with each beat of his heart, she was enthralled.

"Talk about visual stimulation," she whispered, touching him. "Come to mama."

* * * *

The next morning Jantz called and offered to drive Mary to the airport to pick up Crystal, and she agreed. The gesture touched her deeply. Having heard her talk about it, he was going out of his way to save her from having to drive in the traffic during rush hour, something she detested with the same intensity that fighter pilots hated surface-to-air missiles. And by all the gods and devils in the universe, the Eastex Freeway had been under construction for all of her adult life, growing wider and busier as Houston grew, but never coming even close to catching up.

Jantz thawed cinnamon rolls and they munched and drank coffee along the way. Mary admired his proficiency at the wheel. She thought it might be the result of never getting angry at events beyond his control. Regardless of the number of stops and starts, and the wild weaving of other drivers trying to gain a car length or a better lane, he kept his cool. The freeway was like a game, where points were awarded to drivers for getting

to a destination without being hit by another vehicle, shot by a driver suffering from road rage, or spilling coffee in their laps from an unpredictable stop by a car without brake lights. If it had been her driving this morning she would have come out in the negative range, so far as points went.

The main terminal at Bush International was doing its usual bustling imitation of a human beehive, making for a long walk from the parking area, then a longer one to the proper gate. They were a half-hour early, but the flight was ten minutes early, too; a minor miracle. That almost caused them to be late when they were delayed by too many spot searches by the uniformed Homeland Security guards, caused, no doubt, by a contretemps, which might have happened halfway across the continent.

"There she is," Mary said, then shouted, "Crystal! Over here!"

Her cry went unheard in the cacophony of jets, passengers, and ticket agents; all generating decibels that banged against ears without hindrance. She raised her arm and waved like a sailor practicing semaphore technique. Jantz joined in, and between the two, Crystal finally spotted them.

Mary and Crystal hugged briefly. Mary introduced Crystal as they moved to the sliding walkway. Crystal appeared surprised when Jantz robbed her of her bag, not listening to her protests. It was a welcome diversion after the crowded flight, seeing that the old southern manners hadn't quite died out.

"Do you have any other luggage?" Jantz asked, just to be sure.

"No, this is it. My return flight leaves Sunday and I wanted to travel light."

"Great. Let's head for home, then while you ladies chit chat and get caught up on the latest fashions in elephant guns and bazookas, I'll fix you some breakfast."

Jantz's chatter amused Crystal until she saw that it was the method he used to avoid stress and irritation while driving. Soon he had them both laughing as he began describing the drivers and vehicles that passed them on the freeway, paying less attention to the posted speed limits than a duck would to a desert.

"That one's a red-hatted lane-hog. You can tell by the way its crest is on backwards. And there's a cell warbling dunce-head. You can spot it by the way it uses its hands for everything except driving." Crystal laughed hysterically, making Mary join in despite being used to his warped humor by now. "And coming up behind us is a brain-damaged ... hey! Goddamn it, move over! Damn you-"

Mary watched with frightful fascination as time appeared to have slowed to a crawl.

Jantz wrestled with the wheel of the car, trying to force his way back into the outside lane of traffic against the bulk of a huge SUV. There was nowhere to go with cars behind him and the hulk banging against the side of his car with a sound like the clashing of warped cymbals. He tried to slow and was banged from behind by a similar vehicle. Someone was trying to kill them. The bridge over the San Jacinto River loomed ahead like a gigantic casket. There was nothing to do except speed up. He tromped down hard on the gas and pulled ahead. It might have worked except for an innocent driver who picked that moment to swerve around the SUV and get into the lane ahead of him, no doubt happy at acing another two car lengths ahead on the drive home.

"Hold tight!" Jantz yelled.

There was nothing to do except brake as hard as he could and damn the consequences. It all happened at once, a terrible grinding crash that snapped his body forward against the seat belt, then a long screech of tortured metal as a fender was ripped off. His car slewed sideways and was broadsided into a rollover, but then a driver unable to stop hit it again from the back. That smash kept them from tipping over, but it was little consolation, for just then he caught sight of a man in the passenger seat of the SUV, a bearded beast with a bald head and a ham-like fist holding a silencer-equipped handgun.

He whipped the steering wheel with all his strength, yelling, "Duck! It's a gun!"

Holding onto the wheel with one hand while the wreckage slowed, he reached inside his jacket for his weapon, but they were tipping up on one side and being dragged down the edge of the highway by the SUV, like a big cat bringing home a gazelle for its kittens. The only thing saving them from going off the highway and down the steep embankment was their bumper hooked onto a crumpled fender of the SUV.

Two bullet holes starred the windshield. Jantz had a chance to snap off one desperate shot from his precarious position. A hole appeared above the bald man's left eyebrow. He slumped over, pulling the steering wheel to the left and locking it with the weight of his carcass a microsecond before the intertwined vehicles would have gone off the road. It continued out into traffic, dragging Jantz's car with it. A red pickup was unable to avoid them and smashed into Jantz's car, tearing them loose from the SUV. There was a final slam, then a series of minor bumps and thumps from other impacts as the ruined vehicle ground to a halt. Finally they were still, surrounded by crumpled cars, and pickups, and outraged drivers.

Jantz paused long enough to see that Dee and Mary were shaken, but unhurt. Then he ran toward the wreck of the SUV, holding his gun and trying to loose his badge from his pocket as he went.

"FBI!" he shouted. "Stand away! Stand back!"

He held his pistol ready, but it wasn't needed. The bald thug was dead, the other occupant unconscious. He yanked at the door and surprisingly, considering its condition it opened, almost throwing him on his ass. He ran his hand quickly over both men, relieving them of their weapons. His hand came back bloody from frisking the second man. He examined him more closely. There was an entrance wound under his ribcage. Bloody bubbles popped from it. Sirens sounded in the distance, coming closer.

It took some time for the locals to get an ambulance and patrol cars through the traffic and wrecked vehicles. Jantz showed his badge to the first one through while he was still talking on his phone to Reeves. Brenda had put him through immediately.

"Both all right, just a few lumps and bruises. The shooter is dead. I don't know who got the other, but he's unconscious with a sucking chest wound. Both were armed, silenced Sig-Saurs." Jantz listened a minute, then spoke again. "Frankly, Jim, I can't figure out what in hell they thought they were up to. If they had run us off that embankment they might have been able to pass it off as an accident, but I doubt it. Too many witnesses, and some of them involved in the pileup." Another silence, then, "I agree. Tonight, for sure. See you."

A Kingwood policeman tapped him on the shoulder. Jantz showed him his badge, while simultaneously reading his nametag, "Corporal Staley. Could we get you to put the driver of that SUV under guard when he's transported to the hospital? He is a suspect in a very important case."

The officer brushed at the goatee under his lower lip. "Reckon I could, but it won't do you no good."

"Why not?"

"Because he's dead."

"Aw, shit. All right, but ask the coroner to hold off on the autopsy if you would, please." Jantz handed him one of his cards.

"You can tell him yourself. Here, I'll give you his number." The officer checked his watch while giving Jantz the Chief Pathologist's card. "He's probably at the hospital already."

"All right, thanks. One more favor: we need that SUV."

"Fine by me, but you'll need to talk to the captain." He tapped his two chevrons. "I

don't make those decisions."

Stymied on all fronts, Jantz retreated to the wreck of his two-year-old Mercury. Its heavy frame and their seat belts had probably saved them from serious injury, but it was worthless now. He stared at his former car trying to remember when the air bags had deployed. He came up blank. Mary and Crystal were standing together being questioned by another cop. Mary was dabbing at a bruise on her elbow. Crystal was shaking from adrenaline overload.

"We need to go," he announced. "Get your things out of the car and give the officer your cards so they can contact us later."

"Not so fast. We have one, and possibly two homicides, justifiable or not. You're all going to have to give statements."

"We will, but not now."

"Yes, now. Those badges don't mean nothing here."

Exasperated, Jantz got out his phone and dialed the Kingwood precinct. The officer's eyes widened as he asked to speak to Captain Webber. After a moment's wait, Jantz handed the phone to the officer.

"Here. Someone wants to talk to you."

The policeman listened while his face turned red. He subconsciously adjusted his body so that he was standing at attention. His conversation consisted entirely of, "Yes, sir. No, sir. Right away, sir."

Mary and Crystal rummaged in the wreckage of the big Mercury for their purses and Crystal's bag. Jantz retrieved a few items from the glove compartment. As he did, he finally figured out that the driver of the SUV must have been accidentally shot when his bullet hit his passenger; either that or he had fired twice and didn't remember the second shot. The officer handed the phone back to Jantz.

"Captain Webber said he would call you when you're needed. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir."

"Forget it. You're just doing your job. I would appreciate some transportation back home, though, if you can spare a patrol car."

"I'll ask the sergeant."

The officer returned a short time later with a plainclothes detective. The detective introduced himself as Frances Hodson. He ushered them out of the area of carnage and into his unmarked car.

"What was all that about?" the detective asked.

"Detective, I would really like to tell you, but Captain Webber asked me not to say anything until he authorized it."

The plainclothesman shrugged. "If it's okay with the captain, it's sure okay by me. Where to?"

"The Fairmonte Greens apartments. It's off 59 at-"

"Got it. In fact, I used to live there. Have you known the captain long?"

"He's an old friend. We had some classes together in college. It's just a coincidence we both would up in this area."

"He's a good man to ... ah ... ah-" Hodson sneezed twice in succession. "Damn cold. I caught it a month ago and been sneezing ever since."

Crystal's senses vibrated. With a conscious effort she pulled herself together. "Well, it is the pollen season."

"Naw, I'm not allergic to any of that. Besides, lots of the force have caught the same cold. You twitch for a day or so then sneeze four or five times a day for weeks."

"Twitch?"

"Manner of speaking. Just a mild fever and runny nose and it's over within a day. Not even worth a sick day. And what the hell, I have had the damned things get in my lungs and make me cough for weeks. Who cares about a few sneezes?"

"When did the first symptoms show up? Do you remember?"

"A few weeks ago." Hodson glanced over his shoulder at her. "Why all the questions? Are you a doctor?"

"Well, yes. I'm sorry, it just comes naturally. I work in infection control."

"Are you at one of the local hospitals? I know some of the nurses and ER docs."

"No, I'm just here on business. We're thinking of building a clinic north of here."

Crystal sparred with the detective over the next ten minutes, right up until he let them out at Mary's apartment. Jantz was amazed at her technique. Without ever letting on that she was after information she steered the conversation where she wanted it to go, encouraging him to talk by sympathizing, laughing at his jokes, and telling little anecdotes herself. The detective, for being that he was a practiced interrogator himself, never caught on. It didn't hurt that Crystal was both a doctor and a very pretty woman. Jantz thanked him for all of them, promising to send a written report the next day and to be available for questioning personally, if necessary.

Once inside, Mary nearly collapsed. She had been holding herself together, determined not to embarrass herself and the bureau in public. Now she could give her emotions free reign, and did.

"May I please have a drink? Something strong." She held out her hand for him to see. It was visibly trembling.

"Make me one, too, please," Crystal said.

She and Mary sank into the lounge. Jantz brought scotch and ice with a bit of water. Mary took one large sip, coughed, then drank more. She set the glass down.

"Jantz, do you know how close those bullets came? I thought he was going to shoot again and I couldn't move an inch because of the safety belt." She shuddered, remembering the helplessness she had felt.

Crystal was sipping the scotch gingerly, like a person who seldom drank. "Did you all catch my line of questioning with that detective?"

Jantz threw her a mock salute. "Did I! You ought to come to work for us. That was masterful technique. He had no idea he was under the gun."

"That's good. I hope I didn't alert him, because I just remembered. There has been a slight increase in colds since the first of the year. But when I say slight, that's anecdotal. We have so many other diseases to follow that no one pays attention to the Coronaviruses, especially when the symptoms appear milder this year. Shucks, I had something like he described myself and, come to think of it, I've sneezed at least a couple times a day ever since."

"Do you think that's what the carrier is? A cold virus?"

"It would help if I knew what kind of genes we're talking about."

Mary looked to Jantz. He nodded, and she said, "Would you believe the HI genes?"

The remark rendered Crystal speechless. The image of Jane bending over to kiss her and the thrill of her hand sliding down inside her bra was all too vivid, especially as she had never had any inklings for sexual contact with another woman until recently.

Mary noticed the reaction. "It got to you, too, didn't it?"

"Too?" Crystal whispered. "Oh, my Lord. So that's what this is all about."

"Yes," Jantz said. "Crystal, can I get you to write up your contact with the detective and summarize it so we can include that bit of data at our meeting tonight? I have a feeling we're going to become very busy very soon."

"Certainly." Crystal opened up her Palm Midget.

"And while you're doing that, Mary and I will get on my puter and write up what happened and what we know about those wise guys for the local cops. And I'll bet you both a pan of warm cinnamon rolls that they were in a hot car and weren't carrying any ID."

He and Mary went back to the spare bedroom he used as an office/library and gym. As soon as he closed the door Mary came into his arms. She hugged him so tightly that he feared that she might crack a rib. He knew what she was feeling. There was nothing so stimulating as being shot at and missed ... except perhaps shooting back and not missing. Gradually, she got herself under control. Jantz eased back from the embrace. He fished a tissue from a box on the computer desk and handed it to her. She dabbed her eyes and looked up at him.

"I haven't thanked you yet, have I?"

"You don't need to thank me. I was fighting for my own life, too."

"I know, but thank you, anyway."

She reached up and put her arms around his neck and drew his head down, opening her lips to him. It felt good to be so close, their lips locked together and bodies touching. She felt the familiar stirring in her groin and wished this were the time and place to see if the arousal she felt would extend to further heights.

"I should get in car wrecks and gun fights more often, if this is what happens."

"There's more than this any time you want it." She glanced at the closed door and

took a steadying breath. "But right now I guess we better do some work."

Jantz went into the other corner and called Reeves, giving him a description of the attempt on their lives. After that, he sat down and began cleaning his handgun. Matters appeared to be heating up.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a pleasant evening, leading Jantz to suggest that the three of them walk over to Reeves' place, and pick up Dee and Julie on the way.

"How do you know Julie will be there?" Dee asked him.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. If I were a Julie, that's where I'd be. Besides, I heard her sneeze last week."

Mary poked him on the shoulder then took his hand. She tried to figure out his reasoning about Julie, but finally gave up and just enjoyed the walk. She was wavering between being drawn to him yet still having the urge to feel a woman's touch. Would Dee mind? Probably. Her spirits fell, then fell some more when she realized that in the long run it probably wouldn't make a difference. Eventually Jantz would catch the disease and that would be that. She tried to build an image of what Jantz would be like as a gay man, but the image refused to form. She just couldn't picture it. Or perhaps, she just didn't want to.

* * * *

Dee was listening to Julie talk about her work and how the odds of matching DNA profiles, which criminal lawyers and defense attorneys used so often, like tens of millions or even billions to one, just wasn't true. Or at least wasn't true when human error was taken into account.

"No matter how careful you are, and no matter how good your quality control, mix-ups happen, specimens get contaminate, reagents go bad, and so on."

"I guess that's something that isn't publicized, huh?"

Dee had the curtains pulled back and was seated so that she could watch for Jantz's group. They had agreed to come by her place in case they needed to go over the data before presenting it to Reeves. It was them she was interested in, rather than the laboratory procedures Julie was prattling on about. She checked her watch. They were

late. If they didn't show soon she and Julie would have to leave without them. She felt apprehensive, as if the city was on high terrorist alert. She and Julie had just picked up their purses when she saw Jantz turn the corner, followed by Mary and what must be her friend from Atlanta. Dee was at the door before he pushed the buzzer.

"Jantz, come in and ... what happened to your head?"

He touched the butterfly bandage on his cheek that closed a cut from a piece of glass. "I tried to see what color bra Mary is wearing and she socked me."

"Liar. I'm not even wearing a bra, so there. Dee, he saved our lives. Some thugs tried to kill us, and he-" Mary saw the pained expression on Jantz's face and remembered that he wasn't happy to have killed two men, even though it had been necessary.

"He what?"

"Let him tell you."

"I'll make him tell me." Dee held out her hand to the other woman. "You must be Mary's friend from the CDC. I'm Deena Vesprie, and this is Julie Barnes."

"Crystal Jennings."

"It was good of you to come all the way from Atlanta for us," Dee said. What a beautiful woman Crystal was, with her short, dark blond hair and elfin face fitting with a petite, exquisitely shaped body.

"Apparently it's necessary," Crystal said.

"We were just getting ready to leave when you showed up. Shall we walk or take a car?"

"Let's walk."

* * * *

Reeves had rented one of the most spacious units in the development: a four-bedroom, three-bath layout intended for the pending arrival of his family as soon as their home in Washington was sold. He was at the door waiting when they arrived.

"Come on in and make yourselves comfortable." Mary introduced Crystal. "I appreciate you coming here on such short notice."

"Everyone keeps thanking me, Mr. Reeves. It's not necessary, and I'm used to traveling in my work."

"Fine. And it's Jim, not Reeves." He looked at Mary as he said this.

"Right."

Dee said, "I'm sorry, we got so used to calling Slater a mister that it might be hard to get out of the habit. He insisted on it. He said it enhanced the prestige of the office. If you slipped up he marked it against you on your evaluation reports."

Reeves muttered under his breath, then raised his voice. "Damned idiot. He was just trying to build his own prestige. You didn't hear me say that."

"Yes, sir. Have you met Julie?"

"Not formally. Julie Barnes, isn't it? You work for Mary in forensics, if I remember the personnel records. I have you scheduled for an interview next week."

"Yes, sir. You have a good memory."

"I try." He turned to Jantz. "Have all of you been checked by a doctor?"

"No, sir. There wasn't time. I'm fine, though."

"Ladies?"

"I'll go in tomorrow and take Crystal with me. Honestly, though, I'm just bruised and a bit shook up."

"Me, too," Crystal said.

"All right. Before we get started here, there's drinks at the bar and if you like your ethanol cold it's in the fridge. But let's all take it easy for the time being."

Once everyone was settled Jantz apologized for not having it in a more ordered fashion, but Reeves waved him off. "I think going through a gunfight and demolition derby at the same time absolves you. Carry on."

As Jantz began, Reeves took out a pack of cigarettes and shook one out. He lit up with no apology to anyone. Jantz grinned behind his hand. Political correctness had no place in Reeve's life; his house, his prerogative. Jantz looked longingly at the pack. It had been weeks since he had smoked. Not being able to light up in most buildings,

restaurants, and bars had gotten to be such an inconvenience that he had quit. Or thought he had. Reeves saw the look on his face and smiled. He slid the package and lighter across to Jantz, and he lit up.

"I don't know if the attempt on our lives was part of what we're facing or not, but I can't see any other reason why anyone would want to kill us. And if it was we're up against a wider ... more lethal conspiracy. We know for a fact that someone, or some group has released a genetically altered virus into the environment, which is infecting the population here in Houston. We are surmising that Washington DC and its suburbs, and Atlanta are also focal points of the virus. Given the large number of people who travel we must assume the virus has spread all over the world by now, although Crystal thinks it was introduced into a limited number of urban areas to start with; which ones, we don't know yet. The presumed virus hasn't been identified, nor noticed yet, simply because the symptoms are so mild. However, we also believe it lingers in an infected person, gradually introducing HI genes in the body in organs where they may be best expressed. HI is the acronym for homosexual inclination." James Reeves' mouth tightened into a grim line as Jantz ran through the evidence, both circumstantial and solid. "I haven't had a chance to get Mary's latest figures, but as of yesterday, approximately fifteen percent of her lab people who previously showed no indication of HI genes are now carrying them."

"It may be higher than that," Mary said.

"Why do you say that?" Reeves asked.

"Because all we did so far are cheek swabs. They tell us that the mucosal epithelial cells have had new genes introduced, but all we're sampling are the surface cells. I have no idea if the changes go down to the basal cells where the epithelium multiplies, and if it doesn't, then there could be some people where the surface cells were sloughed off before we took the samples, yet where the virus took hold elsewhere in the body. And we still might not catch the changes. Most of the surface cells are past the stage of absorbing new genes into their DNA; in the normal course of things, they die and are replaced by less mature cells, which die off in turn."

Reeves followed Mary's discourse, indicating a basic knowledge of genetics and human anatomy. "You look as if you want to say more," he said.

"Um, yes. Although I haven't looked further than the cheek swabs, I suspect that the virus is simply introduced as a URI-upper respiratory infection-and that the organs where the genes are actually expressed probably lie somewhere else."

"What do you mean by 'expressed'?"

"Well, put simply, a gene by itself does nothing. For instance every cell in our body has exactly the same genes, but they work differently according to which genes are active. The DNA of the active genes code for proteins, which makes the body work or causes us to feel a certain way. Like the amount of testosterone present determines the extent of the sex drive. Or liver cells producing proteins which catalyze the breakdown of other complex molecules."

"That doesn't sound so simple," Reeves said, with a grin.

"Oh, that's only a small part of it. One gene being active or inactive may influence other genes that may or may not produce proteins that activate or suppress other genes. You've read about oncogenes? Detrimental environmental factors turn them on, where ordinarily they're suppressed. Anyway, we don't need to know all that to know that a new virus is loose, one capable of inducing change in the DNA of the body; specifically, introducing HI genes that are capable of being expressed ... capable, that is, if all other factors are favorable, which they never are, not completely."

"Other factors?"

"Yes, like cultural influences may be strong enough to suppress, or at least sublimate sexual emotion of one sort or another. The brain may be wired so that it handicaps expression one way or another. And other genes are always involved in our expression of sexuality, many of them interacting, like the shyness gene for example. It is an incredibly complex process that we're nowhere near understanding yet. And let's not even get into SNPS-the single nucleotide polymorphisms. Those are variations of the three billion letters of the human genome. They are single changes in the arrangements of the letters and they hold the key to susceptibility to some illnesses, but also individual responses to environmental factors, and possibly to the expression of many genes."

"Yes, let's not get into that," Reeves said emphatically. "In fact, I suggest that we table the theoretical and concentrate on the practical. Such as who's spreading the virus, where they're spreading it, how far and to what extent it's likely to spread, and what we can do to slow it down, vaccinate against it, or counteract it in some way. And for that we're going to have to bring in law enforcement at national and state levels, get the CDC working full time on identifying the virus, and bring in the National Institute of health to help with the research."

Jantz rubbed his hands together, a telling sign that he was troubled. "As soon as we do those things there's going to be a national panic such as we haven't seen since the days of McCarthy or after the trade centers were destroyed. Hell, it will be much worse. The fundamentalist religions are already too influential in my book and this will be grist for their mill. Isn't there some way to keep a lid on it?"

Reeves shook his head. "Not on that scale. There will be too many leaks. In fact, I'm surprised the media hasn't picked up on the trends already. I've already seen a memo asking the statisticians to look into the increase of family violence. That's just a beginning. Assuming the virus keeps spreading it will be all over the map in two weeks. But best we try to keep it under cover as long as possible."

"I agree," Crystal said. "There's never been an epidemic with such psychological and political ramifications as this. And you both know as well as I do that homophobia is on the rise again. It's sad, but human nature doesn't change much. We're still territorial beasts and this sort of thing goes right to the core of that instinct. No one wants to be changed against their will, particularly if it's into a sort of behavior that's proscribed by most religions. The whole scenario is a prescription for hysteria and mob violence on a scale we haven't seen since ... since-."

"Right. There's no comparison. And that's why you are enjoined to keep absolutely silent on this subject while you're working on it. Is that clear?" Reeves said.

The others in the room nodded.

"Okay, suppose we start out like this: in addition to adding to the regular DNA data base, Mary, you're to re-run an analysis on every person who's come to work here over the last three months and check them for the homosexuality inclination genes, then run a curve and see if the percentage is increasing in relation to your base line. Also, backtrack and see if you can find out when this thing started among the general population. If you need to go back over your base data for more than a few months I can get you some help, but not right away."

"There's no need for that," Mary said. "The percentages are well known and fairly reliable right across the spectrum of racial characteristics. All I have to find is the point of departure. But Mister Reeves ... Jim ... that still might not tell us when it started, because we don't know the incubation period or how long it might be infective or whether there are natural carriers otherwise immune or-"

"I know, I know, but it's a start, and Crystal can get to work back in Atlanta, or right here if you can get a leave of absence." Reeves turned his gaze on Crystal. "Could you do that?"

"I could, but it would be better if I went back to the CDC. All of the data, base samples, and instrumentation are there."

Reeves got up to pour another drink. While tilting the bottle, he glanced up. "Can't you get a lot of that downloaded to here? I can give you computer power to spare. We're

not using nearly all the resources allocated for anti-terrorist operations."

"Well, I suppose I could, but why?"

Reeves came over and sat down facing her. "Because if you told anyone where you were going you may be in danger."

"Oh. Oh! I see what you mean." She looked at Jantz.

"Right," Reeves said. "Whoever was after you three-if it was the three of you they were after-may strike again. Until we run the chief perps down I'll be able to protect you here much better than in Atlanta."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I'm scared now," Crystal told Jantz and Dee.

Reeves had insisted on driving them back to Dee's apartment rather than let them walk. Jantz went inside with the women, not thinking of danger now. When he saw the disarrayed living room with Dee's computer missing and drawers from the computer desk on the floor he pulled his weapon. Dee was almost as quick getting hers out of her purse. Without saying a word to each other they acted as if they had trained together; Jantz stood to one side and opened the bedroom door while Dee covered him, then alternated as she sprang through the opening to one side, weapon held out from her body ready to fire. The miscreants were gone, though not before trashing Dee's bedroom in their search efforts. They returned to the living room where Crystal was nearing collapse.

Dee eased her down to the lounge, being careful to keep her pistol pointed away from her. As soon as she was down Dee put her weapon away. She and Jantz exchanged glances.

"Now I'm scared, too," Jantz admitted. "Someone is keeping track of us awful damn close. I'd better call Jim and let him know before we do anything else."

Jantz dialed Reeve's home, but got no answer. He tried his cell phone with similar results. His mouth was set in a grim line when he next dialed the office and got Night Supervisor Semmelweis.

"Has Jim Reeves been there tonight, Brent?"

"Haven't seen him. Have you tried calling?"

"Yes, but he's not answering. Can you send someone to his apartment to check on him?" He didn't want to leave the women alone, forgetting that Dee was a fully capable agent.

There was a pause before Brent answered. "What's wrong? Don't you live out there by him?"

Jantz realized he was giving away too much information. "Yes, I guess that would be quicker. Call back and leave a voice mail if he checks in. And Brent?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't say anything about this unless you check with Jim first. Okay?"

"If you say so. And how 'bout you checking back too, huh?"

"Will do. Thanks."

Jantz hung up. "Dee, would you mind staying here with Crystal and Mary? I'm going back and check on Jim."

"Why should I stay?"

"You've got a gun. They don't."

"Please stay," Mary said.

Her voice had a quaver in it. She might work for the FBI, but this wasn't what she had signed up for.

He borrowed Dee's car to make the trip in a hurry. When he got to the door the doorbell went unanswered. He turned the knob and the door opened. Jantz slid his hand inside his jacket and gripped the butt of the .45 before pushing the door open and sliding inside. Knowing he was being a fool for continuing without backup he flipped the den light switch on and dropped to the floor. He landed on top of Reeves.

Jantz rolled off of Reeves' body, listening for sounds from the interior of the house. He heard a rear door close and rushed toward the back rooms of the apartment. He made two wrong turns, cursing himself for his lack of a directional sense, before finding the patio exit. The door was open. Jantz closed the door and holstered his gun, then went back to see if Reeves was alive. He was groaning in misery from his sore chest.

"Stun gun," he gasped. He tried to get to his feet. Jantz assisted him to the nearest chair. "Did he get away?"

"Whoever it was left by the back door while I was trying to find it. Sorry."

Reeves waved him off. "Help me up, so I can see what they were after."

"Are you sure you can manage? Shouldn't I call an ambulance?"

"I'll make it. If the damn things don't give you a heart attack you recover pretty quick. I'll just have some sore muscles. Stay by me, though, just in case." He wobbled to his feet, teeth gritted in a caricature of a grin.

Nothing had been touched except the room where Reeves had been setting up his home office. "Goddammit, they grabbed my backup card," he snapped. "Fucking bastards knew just what they were after."

"If you can judge by how they treated Dee's place, you're lucky that's all they got. They took their time there."

"Dee's place? You mean they hit her, too?" His mouth dropped open for a moment. "Of course. How else would you have known to come here? Thanks, Jantz. You shouldn't have barged in here without backup, though. Poor technique." His smile belied the admonition.

"What do you want to do now?"

"There's nothing we can do tonight, other than have a drink and go to bed. In the morning I'll get a team together and go back over the backgrounds of everyone hired in the last year or two. There's a mole in our office. Has to be, and had to have been planted early on."

Jantz thought about it. "I agree, someone has to be passing information, but what do they gain from it?"

"Probably nothing other than to slow our investigation. Suppose that SUV had succeeded in running you off the road. All your information would have been lost. I'm just surprised they used a stunner on me rather than something lethal."

"Bodies have a way of bringing down a helluva lot of pressure that wouldn't otherwise be applied."

"Yeah, could be. Damn, I wish I knew whether any other regional offices have

gotten onto this situation. If I knew, I'd ask for help."

"I think it's time to ask anyway. I mean, this is like a terror attack. Get it out in the open and we'll have the resources of Homeland Security, not to mention the CIA."

"It's going to tear the country apart."

"It's going to do that anyway. Why not bring the big guns to bear right away? It might be better than waiting."

Reeves mused. "Let me sleep on it. In the meantime, I suggest that you and Dee split up the assignment, but one of you stay with Crystal, Julie, and Mary at all times, and let's all go in to work tomorrow, even if it is Sunday."

"Okay. You're sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for the concern, though. And I owe you one for coming back to check on me."

"You don't owe me anything."

"Well, thanks, anyway. See you tomorrow."

It took Jantz a while to tell about Jim Reeves' break-in. Mary was the most upset. When he related the suggestion about splitting up she spoke up immediately.

"Can I come back to your place with you? I'm afraid."

He didn't know how to reply. It seemed more natural that Mary would want to stay with her friend Crystal; especially since Crystal's things were there. Dee spoke before he could.

"Mary, you could stay here."

"I know I could. And I would, but I want to talk to Jantz about something that's not ... not related to this other mess."

"Oh." Dee was a good enough agent to spot the fib. "That's fine by me. We'll all get together again in the morning. Is that all right with you, Crystal? Julie? I have anything you need, at least until tomorrow morning."

Crystal nodded, a slight frown playing over her features. She was still worried about the day before. Julie nodded, even though it would mean a trip back to her place in the

morning, which was some distance from the apartments.

"Sounds like a deal," Jantz said. "Why don't we get going? It's late and we'll need some rest before tackling this tomorrow. I think it's safe to walk the distance back to my place. I suspect our burglars have come and gone for tonight."

Mary got her purse, avoiding Dee's eyes. The 'goodnights' were subdued, considering the circumstances.

With all the tension of the break-ins it hadn't even occurred to Jantz that his home might have been a target. His front door was still locked and he had no indication that someone might have been there until Mary was in the bathroom and he asked for his email. He got no response and felt a sense of foreboding as he rushed to his bedroom where he maintained an alcove for working online for business. There wasn't nearly the mess that had been at Dee's place, but like Reeves, the backup card attached to the central CPU was missing. A quick check showed that his whole store of data cards were gone.

"Goddamn the sorry fucks!" he exclaimed.

His shout brought Mary rushing in, refastening her blouse. "What's wrong? Is someone here?"

"Not now, curse the luck. They've gone and all my backup cards are gone with them-not that they'll get much out of them. I hadn't updated much that we've been talking about." Suddenly he grinned. "You're buttoning that up wrong."

Mary looked down. Sure enough, she had started one button in the wrong hole and the others followed. Then she realized she wasn't wearing a bra and was giving Jantz a show, which he didn't seem to mind. His grin got even wider. Mary dropped her hands to her side.

"Well, damn it, you were going to get a look anyway."

"I was?"

Mary stepped closer, and put her arms around his neck. "Yes. I want to know if I'm turning into a lesbian. There's not but one way to find out, and you're elected."

Jantz moved his hands to her waist. "You know I really like you. I have ever since I've known you, but..."

"You don't want me?" The expression on her face would have done justice to a

disappointed Bassett hound.

Jantz pulled her close. "Of course I do. What man wouldn't want you? It's just that this seems so ... so..."

"Experimental?"

"Yeah, I guess that's the term I was looking for."

"Well, let me tell you something, Mister Preston. If you hadn't been previously tied up, I would have been camping on your doorstep until you let me in. Now, I just have to know. And if you resist any longer I'm going to trip you right here on the carpet." She pulled his head down and pressed her lips to his, mouth open and willing.

"Let me make sure we're buttoned up tight," Jantz said, as soon as Mary let him up for breath.

"Don't be long."

Jantz brought his hands up to her breasts and squeezed gently, thinking what a nice fit they made. "I won't be but a minute."

Mary was already in bed when Jantz returned from setting the security system, although the intruders had handily bypassed it earlier. A look of childish anticipation played with a tinge of apprehension on her face as she watched him undress. He had a hard time getting out of his clothes while not wanting to take his eyes off Mary's luscious curves. He had never seen such a completely beautiful woman. Clothed, she was beautiful. Naked, she was nothing short of stupendous.

She came into his arms with a will, clutching him to her while their lips and tongues merged. She moved her hips against the unbendable length of his hardness, relieved at how much she wanted him inside her and on top of her. She had been afraid that she would no longer react to a man. Their first kiss had dispelled some of her fears, and now all of them were gone as she reveled in the surge of pleasure as Jantz ran his tongue back and forth around her erect nipples. Finally, when her breath came with gasping rapidity, and her body moved in uncontrollable spasms under Jantz's hands and lips she could wait no longer.

"Please, Jantz, please. Now, now!"

Jantz moved over her and she guided him inside her, gasping at the culminating sensation. She locked her legs and arms around him while he thrust into her; slowly at first, then faster in time with her reaction. The gathering orgasm overwhelmed them

both, sparking delightful gasps and moans of release from an almost unendurable intensity of sensation.

Later, lying with her head on his shoulder, Mary said, "It's nice to know that it won't just be women I like from now on."

"Just?"

Mary kissed Jantz while she turned the question over in her mind, examining her feelings. "I can't help that I have the HI genes. I can think of Dee, or Julie, or just a fantasy of an idealized woman and know that I would enjoy sex with them. And I think it would be just as intense and satisfying as with us, if that were possible."

"Strange," Jantz said.

"Not that strange. Remember how genes work? I think this is how bisexuals must feel. Dee only got some of the HI genes. I got all of them, so far as the basal cell swab can tell, and yet I haven't turned into a complete lesbian. There are just too many other factors at work. And it's still too soon to know how those of us who have gotten the full complement will feel over time. Not to mention that I'm lying here making assumptions just on the basis of my own experience so far. Bad science."

"Well, I hope you don't change."

Jantz curled his hand around Mary's breast and moved in lazy circles over the surface until her nipple became erect. He tucked it into his mouth and swirled his tongue. Mary took a deep breath, loving the sensation. When he teased his tongue up to her neck and ear, she reached down to feel his burgeoning erection.

"My turn," she said.

She rolled him onto his back and began working down his body. Soon, she had him in her mouth and it felt right and good, especially when she kept on and on until he climaxed again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Dee blinked her eyes open she felt a presence. And she was on the wrong side of the bed. She turned slowly. Crystal was sleeping peacefully, the ghost of a smile on her face. Dee remembered. Julie had volunteered for the couch, and after turns in the bathroom and finding nighties and fresh panties for the next morning they had gone to

bed. Crystal was subdued and not very talkative. Dee understood that. Not only had it been a hard day, but Crystal was sharing a bed with a woman she barely knew. She would have felt the same under similar circumstances. What ameliorated it were the strange circumstances of both of them having had their sexual orientation altered without having a say in the matter. Dee had already acted all the way on her change, but Crystal hadn't. Crystal finally brought the subject up after being unable to get to sleep and knowing that Dee was also awake.

"Dee? Have you ... um, done anything about having the HI genes?"

"What can I do about it? They're there and there certainly isn't a cure, nor likely to be one in the near future. It's just something we'll have to live with."

"I think I must have caught the virus. There's a woman back in Atlanta who ... well, she's been coming on to me and I ... I...well, we haven't done anything, or not too much, but the urge is there."

Dee heard her take a deep breath and release it, as if glad to be rid of a burden. "I know. It's happened to me."

"Have you ... I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"That's all right. I know exactly how you feel." Dee shifted her body, letting her hand touch Crystal's side. "And to answer your question, yes. And it was good, in case you were wondering about that, too." Silence. "Is it bothering you that much?" Dee tried to see the expression on Crystal's face, but was only able to discern the faint green glow of a nightlight breaking the darkness.

"It's different for you. You can do whatever you want to. But I'm married."

"Ah. And you're feeling guilty?"

"It's cheating, no matter how you look at it. But I want..."

Crystal sobbed softly in the darkness. Dee slipped an arm around her and drew her close. She let her cry while she smoothed her hands over her back and shoulders and the curve of her hip. After a while the crying stopped, but Dee continued the gentle caressing. Crystal accepted it and let Dee kiss her cheek, and neck, and hair until it seemed senseless to let her lips go untouched. And while that was happening it seemed equally senseless not to allow Dee to touch her breasts, feeling out their contours through the thin satin of the nightgown. All else followed as naturally as a new puppy wanting to be close to its human.

Crystal's eyes came open. She saw Dee looking at her partially covered body and blushed. Dee leaned down and kissed her with her lips closed.

"The time for blushing was last night, girl friend."

"I did. You just couldn't see it in the dark. Lord, what would Ron think?"

"If he knew as much about genetics as you do he would understand. Or does he?"

"No, he's an accountant. Numbers and sports, that's his interests; besides me. He's sweet, though. I love him. We were planning on getting me pregnant before all this came up."

"It can still happen." Dee glanced at the bedside clock. "Come on, we need to get going. You can have the bathroom first."

She didn't mention it at the moment, but it was very likely that she had passed the infection on to her husband.

* * * *

Reeves appeared none the worse for wear when Jantz and Mary met him in his office the next morning. Jantz had thawed his last batch of sourdough cinnamon rolls and brought them with him. Reeves already had the coffee brewed.

Jantz noticed that most of Slater's paraphernalia had been removed and the office had a bare, but definitely improved, decor. Chalk another one up to Brenda Myers. She was one step ahead of whoever held the title of regional SAIC, and her devotion was to the office rather than the man. The speed with which she had gotten the office redone made Jantz think she liked Reeves, rather than simply tolerating him as she had done with some, or actively disliking as she did with Slater. She was likely overjoyed to have someone with a head on his shoulders to run the place.

Dee and Crystal arrived shortly after he and Mary showed up. Both looked well groomed, albeit a trifle sleepy.

"Where's Julie?" Reeves asked, helping himself to a roll.

"She had to go home and let her dog out for a run, and do a couple of other things. She'll be in a bit later."

Mary looked up from her coffee. "Dog? I didn't know she had a dog."

The remark tugged at Jantz's mind, but was sidetracked by Reeves' movement. Reeves propped his feet on the corner of his desk and munched a roll. His face lit up in appreciation.

"Good," he said.

"Thanks," Jantz said.

"Yours?"

"Not only is he a derring-do, rootin', tootin' bad ass agent, he can cook, too. What's your sub-specialty?" Dee teased.

"I'm a test dummy for stun guns. Well, let's get started. Jantz, I thought over what you said about bringing in the big guns, and I'm convinced. I need each of you to document everything that has happened and everything you know about the situation, and have it ready for me to take it to Washington tomorrow."

Jantz thought about that for a microsecond. "What will Merridian or Slater ... I mean, Mister Slater, excuse me ... think about this stuff?"

Reeves shrugged. "I should hope that with all the documentation we have Slater and Merridian will act on it. Especially Merridian. I know a lot of agents don't like him because of his fundamentalist beliefs, but I don't see how he can ignore the information we have. Slater, maybe, but not Merridian."

As if on cue the terminal tied in to the encrypted message center blinked red. Reeves frowned and went over to it. Not knowing if whatever was coming down the line might be classified as 'need to know' he put up a privacy shield. A moment later he took it down with a curse.

"What?" Jantz asked.

"Merridian was just found dead in his home from a gunshot wound."

"Ah, shit. These people are playing for blood now."

"Uh-huh. From the first reports it looks like he did himself in; suicide note and all. I guess it could be staged, but probably not."

"Why do you say that?" Dee asked.

"I knew the man better than you did. He was a real pulpit-pounding believer in the

literal interpretation of the Bible. You've heard the rumors about he and Slater. I'd bet a pretty penny that he couldn't stand the guilt and saw suicide as the only way out. Well, shit, now we'll have to go through Slater. He'll be acting SAIC until a permanent one is appointed. Maybe he told on Slater in his note. Not that there's a policy against gays in the ranks, but you know as well as I do that there's a lot of resentment and prejudice against them. Slater should be willing to buck our report on up the line, if for no other reason than to excuse his own actions." Reeves shrugged. "I'll find out tomorrow. Or maybe not. Hell, there's going to be so much hoorah over this that no one is going to listen to anything else until after the funeral and investigation. Crap."

"Can we sidestep Slater? Go up higher?" Dee asked.

"We can if we have to, but then someone may be out of a job, or suspended. Like me."

"How about anonymous reports to the newspapers and television stations? That would give us all the publicity we need."

Reeves dropped his feet from his desk. "It wouldn't take three days for it to be traced back to us. I think the best thing to do is take it to Washington tomorrow, beard Slater in his den, and if he refuses to do anything we'll go from there. So let's table that and move on to the mole."

"Damn, I nearly forgotten that," Dee said.

"I didn't, not by a long shot. There's little I hate worse than someone spying on his own people."

"Who's spying?" Julie asked from the doorway.

"Don't tell me you don't remember either. Someone is passing information from this office and I intend to find out who it is. Mary, why don't you brief Julie on what's gone on? Crystal, you can go, too. The next steps don't concern you yet; you all just keep on checking the DNA profiles. Let me know when you come up with anything anomalous; don't wait until you're sure. If something is indicative bring it to me, and let me decide what to do with the data, DNA profiles, or anything else, for that matter."

Mary and Julie left, with Julie looking back over her shoulder as if she was a teenager being barred from the prom. As soon as the door closed Reeves turned to Jantz and Dee. Seeing the puzzlement on their faces, Reeves explained.

"It's not that I don't trust them, but the fewer people doing deep background checks, the better. And I'm going to put you two in charge of it."

Dee's grin could have been wider, but not by much. "Partners at last!"

"Don't get too excited. Your first assignment is to investigate those three."

Dee's smile faded as if a cloud had passed over her face. "Jim, I don't like that. Surely, you don't think any of them could possibly be your mole?"

Reeves kept his expression solemn. "I don't like it either, but you know as well as I do that any investigation has to cover all the bases. Look at it this way: once you clear them we'll never fear working together. We'll know we're all straight."

Jantz stretched to clear some kinks from the battering of the car crashes, and a strenuous night of other battering, so to speak. He yawned, and said, "I've got a question that you probably already know I'm going to ask. Who checks the checkers?"

"I'm giving you two a ride. You're the ones who reported this thing. If either of you were the mole, why would you have done that?"

"Good point."

"But I'm not giving myself a ride. Your second assignment is to do a deep background on me."

"On you?" Dee blurted out.

"On me. I want you to both know that I'm not the one." He yawned. "It's catching. All right, you know these people better than I do. Beginning in the morning start picking your team. Better yet, start picking them now and let me know so I can vet them. All other assignments are secondary. If there's something that just can't be dropped pick another agent. I want to get to the bottom of this ... yesterday."

Jantz respected him all the more for insisting that he be investigated. What he began to worry about was the possibility that he might pick the mole as one of the investigators. Dee was probably feeling the same way from her expression. Just as he thought of a solution Reeves spoke up.

"I think the way to go about this, so far as the secondaries, is to break it up into pieces. Give all your people bits of the assignments then swap the bits around. If anyone turns out to be fluffing data that should turn him up."

"Great minds," Jantz said. "I was just thinking the same thing."

"Good. Okay, y'all go get 'em, and let me get to work on how we're going to go

about the program. I need to set myself up with various contingencies in case anyone up the line tries to stop us. I've got an early morning flight to Washington and I'll try to be back by tomorrow night. You can get me on my cell phone if there's an emergency."

As Dee and Jantz left Reeves was already pulling up files on his computer. Just as they exited his office they heard a loud sneeze. They exchanged looks, with all kinds of food for thought inherent in the shared thoughts. Behind them, Reeves shook his head in annoyance that he hadn't thought of it sooner and picked up his encrypted phone to call a judge for permission to delve into background information.

* * * *

Crystal was waiting for Jantz back in his office. She was sitting in one of the visitor's chairs with her hands clasped together, lost in thought.

"Where's Mary?" Jantz asked, in unison with Dee. They grinned at each other.

"In the lab. She wanted to get started on all the projects, and start making some room for me to work."

"Right. In the meantime, tell me what you need from Atlanta and I'll see that you get it. And tell your husband that funds will be made available for him to come to Houston every other weekend to stay with you." He made a note on his PDA to ask Reeves about the money.

"Oh, Ron would like that. But I'm going to need a request from a higher up to justify me staying here so that I can expense a hotel suite, or at least a room. And also to justify downloading some sensitive information to here."

Jantz made more notes, including a reminder to arrange for security for Crystal after hours. "I can do that. But Jim may want to go public-if he can."

"It may already be public. Look at that!" Dee exclaimed.

She gestured toward Jantz's compscreen, which he kept set for breaking news. It showed a story of the assassination of the regional SAIC and two other agents at the regional office in Portland, Oregon. There was little other hard news to go with the headline, but it wasn't necessary. Dee and Jantz looked at each other, but it was Crystal who spoke first.

"Why are they doing this?" she cried. "It won't do anything to affect the plague!"

"Maybe not, but it can damn sure slow down the investigation," Jantz said.

"Apparently we're not the only agents with suspicious minds. Someone in Portland almost certainly came to the same conclusion we did."

"I wonder if they contacted anyone at the CDC?" Crystal asked.

"I don't think it matters now. Within a few days at most the whole story, or at least what we know of it, will come out."

"Then I wouldn't have to stay here to work, would I?"

"I'd still like you to work from here. We've got a good team building and it won't hurt to have separate investigations. And as soon as this perceived need for secrecy is dispelled you can share information back and forth."

"That would help."

"Of course. Now, why don't you find Mary while Dee and I do our Special Agent acts for a while?"

Crystal took the hint and headed for the elevator. Jantz closed the door. When he turned around Dee came into his arms. He kissed her then used the tip of his finger to brush away a gathering tear. She could be as tough as necessary when the occasion called for it, but right now she was a woman and her heart was going out to the dead agents, killed for simply doing their jobs in superlative fashion. Then his red light began blinking. It was another heads-up from Reeves telling him he was going to be allowed to use the 'special room'.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Burley Slater looked as if he had taken a gunshot wound to the body. His impeccable grooming had gone into hiding. His suit coat was rumpled and his tie didn't go well with the salmon colored shirt he was wearing. There were prominent bags under his eyes as if he had been losing sleep, which Reeves suspected he had. He listened attentively, though, as Reeves got into the details of how an engineered virus was almost certainly the cause of the upsurge in family violence, the assassinations in Portland, and Merridian's apparent suicide. As Reeves presented such facts and speculation as was known Slater sat up straighter in his chair and became more alert.

"You're telling me a virus is causing a shift in sexual orientation-and that it's spreading through the population?"

He looked almost relieved to hear the news. Reeves suspected that it made his change in sexual orientation easier to accept. But would he go out on a limb and take the theory to his superiors? It turned out that he would, although Reeves suspected he was doing it so that he could take credit for discovering a possible reason for the assassinations of the three agents in Portland, or at least that he had initiated the investigation. He had no idea that Slater might have a hidden agenda.

Reeves didn't mind what Slater thought so long as something got done. But there was a catch. After a day of turning it over in his mind he came to agree with Jantz about going public, and said so. Slater's countenance changed sharply.

"No, no, Jim, that won't do. We can't alarm the country with this stuff until we're absolutely certain-and have suspects, and a cure in the works. America would become the laughing stock of the world."

"What makes you think it's confined to America? By now it's bound to have spread all over the world. The sooner authorities know about it the more research can be devoted to the means and the more resources directed towards preventing it from spreading faster and farther."

Slater appeared to be only half convinced, and he wasn't going to stick his nose out any further than it took to enhance his own status. And then he surprised Reeves, by asking, "Is there a chance that this supposed virus is targeting FBI offices, and any secondary spread is only incidental?"

It was a perceptive question; Reeves had to give Slater credit for thinking of it. "I have no way of knowing yet. It's certainly worth investigating, though. Thank you for reminding me." Give credit where credit was due.

"Yes, go ahead and investigate that possibility, but I still want secrecy. Any publicity will be for our superiors to determine, Jim. You're directed to keep this whole thing under wraps until a ruling is obtained specifying otherwise. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. But you will present the information to the director?"

"The assistant director first. He knows the routines better."

Reeves sighed. Trent Barclave, a typical career bureaucrat, might mull over the information for weeks before deciding the best way to handle it. And they didn't have weeks. Well, there was always the end run. He knew one of the assistant directors who would listen to him if it came to that, but it would probably mean the end of any further advancement of his career; if it wasn't already ended. He covered his mouth as he sneezed. Slater looked knowingly at him. He probably remembered his own period of

sneezes lately, not realizing at the time what they meant. But he did now.

As he left Reeves wondered how long it would be before he started finding men attractive. He heard several sneezes before exiting the voluminous building, and imagined that several men he passed in the corridors eyed him with more than casual interest. In the taxi heading back to the airport he thought of the old Chinese curse: _may you live in interesting times._ This was certainly going to become more than a curse before long. In fact, it was already.

Burley Slater spent the next half-hour wondering if what he was thinking could be true. If so, Merridian's and his pasts were coming back to haunt them-or him, since Merridian had taken the easy way out. He intended to get a secret court order authorizing him to use the Scooper program. And then he'd know what people, organizations, and corporations to do a deep background on. He doubted there was any way he could use the information-and it might even be disadvantageous to use it at all. That would depend on how much a certain person was involved. He strongly suspected that he was. And it might be that he wouldn't want to use that information now that his sexual perceptions had changed. While the program was running he began planning the best way to approach that male rookie agent he thought might be susceptible to his charms. It took a little effort to bury the thought of how just a short time in the past he would have considered his actions perverted, but he managed, even if his charms resided mostly in his imagination.

* * * *

Jantz and Dee sat on adjoining chairs in the 'special room', which he had barely known existed until a few minutes ago when Reeves gave them authorization to use it. Dee was working on a separate monitor, but she was interfaced with his computer, splitting the searches and exchanging data with him.

Jantz was glad that he had paid attention during the boring hours of instruction in using special computer programs for background searches. It helped greatly in manipulating the Scooper program installed in the special room, accessible only by authorization of the SAIC and intended for use under court order. Reeves had gotten a permit from the tame judge kept handy for emergencies like this one. Jantz used a combination of voice and typed commands to set up the search. The program sent encrypted tentacles out over the Internet, which contained a code and password-breaking program that would have given the Supreme Court judges fits had they known how powerful it was. Dee watched to get the hang of it, then began her own searches, correlations, and follow-ups.

"Isn't it astounding how much information about a person is available when you

know how to look for it?" Dee remarked, as financial data about Reeves stacked up in a file.

"It's even more astounding that so much of it is not used for nefarious purposes."

"Most people are honest, I think," Dee said.

"Me, too, but out of a population of 300 million you can find enough blobs that will do anything they can get away with. And some things they can't. And that's just in America. And there's one more thing: most hackers don't know how to correlate the data into paths that indicate dishonesty of one sort or another. Almost anyone has filed taxes with a sharp pencil, for instance. If they knew how much of what they claimed and didn't claim was available if the IRS only knew how to find it, tax revenues would increase by 50%." He grinned to show Dee that he might have been guilty of that sort of peccadillo himself.

"That's not really dishonest ... well, yes, I guess it is. Look here. Jim didn't report a payment he got for writing an article for his local newspaper. Concealment or just a slip of the memory?"

"Let's give him the slip. That's not the sort of thing we're looking for. But this Scooper program is absolutely amazing. It's picking up stuff I wouldn't have thought would ever get into accessible files."

Dee nodded. It was scary. She was glad it wasn't her history that was being scrutinized.

By lunchtime Jantz was getting eye-weary, and saw that Dee was also. "How about lunch? Do you want to go out or give our order to the lunch run?"

The lunch run was a service the office subscribed to; orders could be given to the service and they would be delivered to the office. It was quick and convenient, even if a little pricey.

"Let's do the lunch run. What do you want?" she asked.

"You're ordering? Bacon cheeseburger and vanilla shake. Hold the onions and pickles."

"A man I could cook for. No pickles or onions. Great. I'm going to get the same thing, only a child's portion. That keeps me from overindulging."

"I should try it. Want to keep on 'til the food gets here?"

"May as well. It's getting interesting. We can rest our eyes while we eat."

By mid-afternoon it was obvious that Reeves had nothing to worry about, and Mary only marginally so. When the sexual data on her began coming in Jantz froze the program. He pushed away from the desk and rubbed his eyes.

"I feel guilty about seeing this stuff about Mary. I think that if she knew what we were doing she would be more comfortable with you going over it than me. Okay?"

Dee felt a surge of appreciation. Most men wouldn't be that considerate. "Sure. Why don't you see what's coming up on the correlations on Julie while I do that? Or better still, go find us some fresh coffee or a cold coke. Either one will do for me."

Jantz touched her shoulder and left thinking what a fine woman she was, not to mention that she was an agent with unusual promise. There was no fresh coffee to be found, but the cokes were cold. He brought them each one with napkins to set them on. Dee barely glanced up. Whatever Mary had been up to, Dee was finding it entrancing, but he kept his mouth shut. A woman was entitled to some privacy.

He pulled up the correlations on Julie and immediately found something. She had lived in Portland, a fact not noted on her application for employment. And she had been involved-damn!-with a woman who worked for Genetechnics. A woman? Mary had told him that Julie was surprised to find her DNA changed. And yet, she had what looked like a lesbian relationship with a woman. It wasn't necessarily derogatory; some women, and men, too, occasionally had same sex relationships without carrying the HI genes, as he had found out in his study, but it had to be looked into in case she had lied. Something else popped into his consciousness like the opening bell of a stock exchange; the assassinations in Portland. Could there be a connection there?

"What do you think of this?" Jantz asked, highlighting the Portland and Genetechnics connection.

Dee frowned. "A relationship with a woman when she told Mary she was straight, and the woman works for a genetics corporation? I think we better find out how far it goes. Do you know anything about Genetechnics?"

"Nothing other than what I've read. I know it's a biggie. The guy who founded it is a multi-billionaire."

"What do we know about him?"

"Hell, I can't even think of his name offhand, but Scoop can find out right quick." Jantz typed and spoke for a few moments then turned to Dee, who was watching his

screen and frowning again. _She even frowns pretty_.

"There's damn little there except his name," Dee said. "Brandon Perkins. And the company specializes in medical genetics and agripharm products."

"Agripharm? Agricultural genetics for medicine?"

"I think. We could look it up, but let's follow this a bit. Julie was with a woman who works for a genetics firm. The firm is located in Portland where the affair took place. We have a genetically engineered plague on our hands. Anything else?"

Jantz closed his eyes and screwed up his face, trying to remember an elusive fact about the owner of Genetechnics.

Dee laughed. "You look like you did that day Slater chewed you out. You ought to see yourself in a mirror!"

"Slater! That rings the bell. I remember now that Perkins testified before the committee when Merridian asked for more funds for his anti-pornography campaign. And Slater was there, feeding him his notes!"

Dee's frown changed to puzzlement. "What would the major stockholder in a genetic engineering company be doing testifying on behalf of the FBI? Does that make sense?"

"I suppose it does if you've put your own money into a program, which I remember that Perkins did. He was a heavy contributor to the Anti-Child Porn Organization if I remember right. Let me check." He typed in a few words and asked for a search. "Yup. There's the connection."

"It may be a connection, but what does it mean?"

Jantz rubbed his hands together. "Hard to tell, but I think I'll ask Mary and Crystal about Genetechnics and Perkins both. They probably know more about them than we do."

"Maybe we should get together with them tonight?"

Jantz wondered how to take that. "Okay, if they're willing. In the meantime, I've got a wild idea. Let's let the Scoop keep running on Julie while we start a new search. On _Mister_ Slater."

Dee grinned. "Wonderful! Just so long as he never gets access to our files."

"He can't. Scoop is good about that." Jantz checked his watch. Still time for a run. "Okay, here we go. I'll enter everything I can think of, since I've known him longer, but help me out if I miss something you know."

He began typing and speaking alternating, as the program accepted one or the other better. Thirty minutes later he had entered every fact and supposition and even gossip either of them had heard about Slater. Jantz typed in the key to begin and they sat back in their chairs, looking at each other with expressions that would have done justice to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn trying to outwit Aunt Polly.

* * * *

Mary picked up the phone as soon as she saw it was Jantz calling. She listened a moment. "Oh, heck, Jantz. I wish you had called earlier. Ron, Crystal's husband, decided to come down and she's left to meet him at the airport at six or seven, whenever his plane gets in. Well, we can ask her the same questions about Perkins and Genetechnics later. But how about you and Julie come by my place after work? I'll send out for pizza and I have wine or beer, whichever you like."

"That won't work either, I don't think."

"Problems?"

"Maybe. Julie left for lunch and never came back. I don't know where she went."

"Damn!" Jantz couldn't help himself. What if Julie really was mixed up in the virus problem and he had let her skip out before confronting her?

"Problems?" Mary asked.

"Like you, I don't know. Well, I'll try running down Julie. How about you? Can you come over?"

"Sure. Will Dee be there?"

"Yes. And Julie, too, if I can find her. Any idea of where she might be?"

"Not a clue."

"Okay. Six or so?"

"That's fine. See you then."

Jantz hung up the phone with a weary expression. "We can't talk to Crystal tonight. Her husband is coming in. And Julie has turned up missing."

"Missing? How?"

"She went to lunch and never came back. Well, maybe Mary can help us. If she comes up with something we have to look at right away I can call Crystal at her hotel if we need her input. She will have left word with Mary where she's staying."

"We hope."

"Yeah. Fine agents we are, huh?"

Dee smiled mirthlessly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time Jantz and Dee were ready to leave there were dozens of files they hadn't even looked at, including the search of Slater's past life. Jantz downloaded it onto a data card, made a duplicate for Dee, and they closed up shop. It was already past five. Several calls to Julie's place got only her recording and she had never returned to the lab, as Mary informed him before leaving.

Driving home he felt a building sense of events running out of control. By the time he pulled into his parking spot he was anxious to read the file on Slater and the rest of the dump on Julie. He had to force himself to tend to the kitchen first then change into casual clothes rather than booting up the computer right away. Once that was accomplished he tried Julie again; still no answer. He called the standby agent and asked him to go to her apartment in Humble, the next suburb south, and check to see if there was anything amiss. Regardless, he asked that she be brought to his apartment if she were found.

Dee arrived promptly at six, dressed in a backless short yellow sundress with crisscrossing straps in front covering her breasts. She jiggled pleasantly as she walked, and she smiled at Jantz's appreciative gaze.

"What have you got there?" he asked. She was carrying a bottle in a paper bag that was showing damp spots from condensation.

"More white Zinfandel. I'm becoming an addict."

"Never mind, it goes great with pizza and I'm addicted to pepperoni. Come on in; I'll wait on Mary before ordering."

"Any word on Julie yet?"

"Haven't found hide nor hair of her. I sent Bellinger out to have a look-see. He'll call when he finds anything. Or when he doesn't."

"Bellinger? Is that John Bellinger?"

"Yep. Have you met him?"

"We went out once or twice. A nice guy, but we didn't hit it off. He's into sports and I'm into reading. Where's your corkscrew?"

"Right-hand top drawer. If it had been me I would have taken up reading real quick. Especially if you looked as good as you do now."

"Thanks. I love flattery."

"Truth isn't flattery. Want me to do the honors?"

Before Dee could answer the doorbell rang. Jantz went to let Mary in while Dee worked the cork out of the bottle of wine. Mary was wearing loose shorts and a top with tiny buttons up the front. The colors almost matched her hair, giving her a look that the mind interpreted as nude, which Jantz imagined was what she intended. Whatever, it was striking.

"Just in time, I see," Mary said, spying Dee reaching glasses down from an upper cabinet. She admired the way the sundress crept up, showing the back of her shapely thighs, perfectly tapered and slimly muscled.

"Before anything else, did Crystal tell you where she and her husband were staying tonight?"

Mary hesitated. "Well, yes, but she didn't want to be called unless it was an emergency. She and Ron needed to talk about some things. That's why he came down early."

No one had to mention what subject needed to be discussed. Jantz met Dee's glance and they silently agreed not to call her unless something extraordinary turned up.

"Okay," Jantz said. "Let's try to give her some room to work things out. I suppose

she'll tell him what's happening and swear him to secrecy. Then-

Mary broke in. "He won't talk. Crystal hinted that he must have caught the virus and was agonizing over the changes, even though he didn't know the reason."

"Okay, though damn it, I think the time for secrecy is long past."

"We're still under orders," Dee reminded him.

"I know all too well." He glanced at his watch. "Does everyone like pepperoni? Anything else?"

"Mushrooms and sausage. Double pepperoni," Dee said.

"Suits me," Jantz agreed. "Mary?"

"Cut the mushrooms on a third of it. The rest is fine."

Jantz ordered while Dee brought the wine set in a cooler into the den. She topped off their glasses. Jantz sat down in his easy chair opposite the two women. He commanded the wall screen to tilt so that they had to only half-turn to see it. He explained to Mary what they had been up to during the day and swore her to secrecy about the contents on the computer, but didn't mention the 'special room' or the Scooper program. After that he plugged the data card into the slot on the arm of his chair and brought the file menu up for the data he had downloaded from the Scooper.

"Julie first," he said.

He scrolled through the first part of her file, pausing briefly when he thought Mary needed an explanation of some fact or another. Then the data that none of them had seen appeared. Jantz almost spit a mouthful of wine across the room. The screen showed an image, probably retrieved from a Homeland Security camera, of Julie holding hands with another woman at an airport. They were laughing and talking animatedly.

He swallowed with difficulty, and sputtered, "Goddamn! That's Lianne with her! I don't believe it!"

Dee and Mary exchanged glances. There was an immediate, silent agreement that Jantz was a nice guy who had been played for a fool by an attractive woman, a story as old as the species.

"I'm sorry," Dee ventured.

"It's me who should be sorry. Damn all, how could she have fooled me so badly? She must have been seeing Julie all the time we were together."

"When you're lonely and working too hard, you're vulnerable. Please, don't let it get to you. We need to find out what they were up to ... and what they're up to now."

Jantz took a deep breath, trying to settle down. He had paused the program as soon as he recognized Lisanne. Now he ordered it to resume at slow speed so that they could get a gestalt of times and dates. Other images left no doubt that Julie and Lisanne had been lovers, and were still in communication. Phone and mail messages culled from the Internet proved that. Although their trail had been protected, somehow. His search hadn't turned this up; only the Scooper had managed to penetrate the protective shield. The latest image had been recorded earlier the same day at Bush International Airport. She was outbound for Portland. He scrutinized the date and time. No, she had already arrived in Portland by now.

"Hold it right there for a minute," Jantz said. "I'm going to call Jim and get a pickup order out on her." He tried, but failed to reach Reeves, having to be satisfied with leaving a message. He then dialed the Portland Regional Office, got a recording and left another message, asking that his call be returned. "That's all we can do for now. Let's see what else we have."

He gave Dee a surreptitious wink, letting her know that they would put the Scooper on Lisanne the next day. The file continued pouring out data, but only one more item about Julie was of value. The Scooper had traced funds, supposedly well washed, but transparent to its encompassing grasp. The money had been paid to Lisanne through devious channels, but the Scooper left no doubt: the trail led back to a slush fund maintained at the highest corporate levels by Genetechnics.

"I will be damned," Jantz said. "Why would a big corporation like Genetechnics be mixed up in a terrorist-type viral attack on the world? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe they're not responsible for the virus," Dee said.

"Oh, no," Mary contradicted her. "They have to be! Let me put it this way: there are very few corporations that have the finances and research facilities capable of producing this virus. Someone at the top of the ladder is responsible. Maybe several someones."

"She's right, Jantz. And after this, I need some more wine."

The doorbell chimed.

"Must be the pizza," Jantz said.

It was. The aroma roused Jantz's appetite that the wine had begun to dull. Nevertheless, he drank another full glass with each of the two large slices of the heavily loaded pizza. The new revelations about Julie and Lianne affected him more than he cared to admit. He waited until Dee and Mary had munched their last bite then displayed the computer menu again.

He grinned weakly. "After that last one, I'm not sure I want to know what Mister Slater has been up to, but here goes." He told it to start.

Slater would have been sick if he knew how careless he had been with coveted information he had collected and how deeply the Scooper could delve into his life. Like Julie, he had received payments from Genetechnics, but this time the Scooper was able to ferret out the reason for the payoff. It had easily cracked the code of his personal computer where he stored his information.

Mary gasped when she saw the image of two naked men coupling. The one on the bottom had his face turned toward what must have been a hidden digital camcorder. Neither Dee nor Jantz knew why she reacted so avidly.

"Don't either of you recognize who that is?"

"No," they both replied.

"That's Brandon Perkins, the CEO and president of Genetechnics!"

"You mean he's caught the virus, too?" Jantz asked.

"No. See the date? That's from three years ago! Slater has known he's gay for at least that long!"

"It's all beginning to make sense," Jantz said. "Or at least the first part. Slater and Merridian had positive proof that Perkins is gay. They were using it to force him to support their right wing and fundamentalist religious agenda."

"But why?" Mary said. "It's not like being gay is a crime, or something people will refuse to associate with you for. Why didn't he just admit it?"

"Maybe he thought coming out would hurt the value of his company. Maybe he has a background of being abused as a child. Remember, he testified about that at the congressional hearings, right along with the FBI. Maybe lots of other reasons. Whatever, he was dancing to Merridian and Slater's tune until recently-or they were dancing to his. And maybe whatever is bugging him drove him around the bend. Anyone would have to be crazy to let something like this virus loose on the world."

"So you think Perkins is the culprit?"

"Everything points in that direction. Proving it is another matter, though."

Jantz opened another bottle of Zinfandel. He was feeling overwhelmed. Just thinking about bumping heads with a multi-billionaire wasn't conducive to relaxation. He knew how politically well-protected the extremely wealthy were.

"So what we have to find out is whether he's responsible for the virus. And if he is, maybe he has a cure," Dee said hopefully.

Mary shook her head. "It's a whole lot easier to insert genes than it is to delete them. What we have to hope is that we can identify the virus quickly then develop a vaccine to stop the spread. Or pin the virus on him and hope he already has a vaccine to keep it from spreading. Or, as you said, maybe a cure."

"Speaking of spreading, I've got a question," Dee said. "Jantz, you've been intimate with both of us. You've been around Slater, and Julie, and Lisanne, and God knows whom else, and yet you're not showing the least sign that you might be infected. Now why should that be?"

Jantz looked a little contrite, as if he was receiving a reward he had done nothing to earn. "I've got a good immune system. I've only had the flu once in my life and it was a mild case. And I just don't get colds. Everyone else can be coughing and sniffing and blowing their noses like crazy, but it never rubs off on me. I may sniff a couple of times, but that's all. And even that's rare."

A pensive look crossed Mary's face. "Maybe we should send you to Atlanta and let them study you."

"Uh-uh. There are plenty of other people like me. Let them ask for volunteers."

"I'll suggest that to Crystal, but you're wrong. Everyone I know gets colds and the flu."

Jantz shrugged. "Well, I don't. In fact, I guess I haven't ever been really sick, either, other than a mild case of measles."

The phone rang again. Jantz voiced a mild oath then remembered that he had asked Bellinger to call him.

"This is Preston," he said.

"Bell here. Jantz, your suspect is gone. The apartment manager let me in. She packed a few bags; there's stuff missing that should be here. You know, underwear and bathroom items and like that."

Jantz cut it short. "Thanks, John. I owe you one." He hung up without letting Bellinger know that he was already aware that Julie had left town.

"That was just Bellinger telling me that Julie skipped. Put me down for a bad mark on my efficiency report."

He excused himself to go to the bathroom. When he came back his glass had been topped off again. He raised his eyebrows in a parody of a comedian.

"Are y'all trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me?" In fact, he already was feeling the effects of the wine.

Dee and Mary were sitting closer together than they had been. Mary was resting a hand on Dee's thigh, inching the hem of her short dress up with her fingers. Dee leaned toward Mary and nuzzled her ear and neck.

"We decided to test you. If you make it through the night we'll concede that you're immune to the Sex Virus."

"Sex Virus?"

"That's what we've decided to call it. Discoverer's rights and all that."

Jantz wasn't the only one being affected by the wine. The third bottle was empty. "Sounds fine to me, except no one in the real world except us knows it exists."

"Beg pardon. Perkins knows. Anyway, nothing else we can do tonight, is there?"

Jantz grinned evilly. "There's plenty to do tonight; it's just a matter of who does what to whom."

Dee wobbled to her feet. "Damned if I care, so long as it's one of us. Mary, can the Sex Virus make you hornier than normal?" She downed the last of her glass of wine while encircling Jantz's waist with her free arm.

"Sure, if it affects the right SNPS it could make some people with the right combination of genes hornier than monkeys in a zoo with nothing else to do except eat, sleep, and fuck."

"SNPS?" Dee questioned.

"Never mind. Easier to demonstrate than explain."

Mary took Jantz's opposite side and put her arm around him right below Dee's. Together they urged him into the bedroom. An hour later some of the wine had worn off, but its affect of lowering inhibitions didn't matter to Dee or Mary. He watched them, with Mary's head down between Dee's thighs, feasting. Dee cried out as her whole body quivered in a long, muscle-tensing orgasm. Mary released her grip on her hips and moved up until she could kiss Dee, letting her taste her own fluids. Mary squirmed and moved between her legs until she reached her own climax.

Watching them aroused Jantz again. When they recovered Dee hovered over him, dipping first one nipple then the other into his waiting mouth while Mary was busy with him down below. And then it was him who cried out.

When he regained his breath, he said, "God, I don't think anyone could ever have a better experience than tonight."

"Every man's fantasy," Mary said.

"What?"

"Every man fantasizes about being in bed with two women. Right?"

"Right," Jantz admitted. "Thank you both."

Mary leaned over him to kiss Dee then grinned down at him. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything." She reached for her wineglass, the remnants now at room temperature. "Here's to SNPS. If you gotta have a sex virus, be glad they enhance it."

"Are you sure that's what's happening? It could just be my stud body and masterful technique, couldn't it?"

Amid the general laughter they started all over again. Jantz felt sorry for the agent stuck outside, the tail for Mary's protection, but he wasn't about to invite him inside to join the revelry.

Jantz was subjected to a bit of teasing the next morning. He was showing the effects of a man who normally doesn't drink much having made a night of it. Mary, more used to imbibing, gave him a Fiorinal capsule, which she kept for tension headaches. That and a couple cups of coffee and warm cinnamon rolls worked wonders. He was almost back to normal when Crystal and Mary came to his office, ostensibly to cadge a roll.

Crystal poured coffee, broke a roll in half, and sat down. "I'm sorry I missed you last night."

"Well, I'm sorry, too, but we had enough work to keep us busy. In fact, we stayed up pretty late sorting it all out."

Mary coughed and sputtered. "Sorry. Went down the wrong way."

Crystal gave Mary a peculiar look then turned back to Jantz. "I'm sorry, but I had to tell Ron a bit of what's happening. He's starting to, uh ... make advances toward men, and he couldn't figure it out. In fact, he was damn near suicidal, not wanting to do what he was doing, but hardly able to stop himself."

"That's all right. I understand completely."

Crystal's face colored. "I've already gotten information from Atlanta. We're not alone with our suppositions. There's a debate over what is causing the changes, and most of it favors a deliberately engineered virus. Only the fact of how fantastic the whole scenario is has kept the researchers from going in that direction. But they will soon. From what I'm getting, they suspect that the theoretical virus not only inserts the genes that code for the HI enzymes that ... well, without getting technical, the virus also uses SNPS, single nucleotide polymorphisms, to enhance the libido. Not only is sexual orientation changed, the desire for sex is increased. Poor Ron; he was ready to tell me to divorce him. But now that there's an explanation, old habits let a person still function like they used to; or maybe even better, even though they may still want homosexual sex ... and practice it."

"My word," Dee exclaimed with a straight face. "Who would have imagined? I always thought if you had the gene, that was it; you couldn't change what it caused."

"That's an outmoded concept, Dee. For something like, say, blue eyes versus brown, genes are the determining factor and nothing you do can change the fact. But for others, experience, environment so to speak, can determine the way the genes are expressed. Learning can actually switch genes on and off. It's much more complicated than we once thought."

"Well, I guess you'll find out what's going on as soon as enough researchers get to work on the problem."

"And speaking of..."

Mary and Crystal wanted to get right to work downloading massive amounts of statistical data to correlate and crunch into patterns that the CDC probably had no

inkling existed.

"I'm sorry, but we're still under a secrecy directive. Just do what you can without upsetting any sacred cows, or letting Calico cats out of the bag, or stepping on a Weenie dog's ears," Jantz said. Crystal pouted. "Tell you what; y'all go back to work and I'll move every rock I can turn over to run down Jim and get his approval for you to do whatever you want to. How's that?"

"Wonderful. Don't be long, though. This thing is spreading, and we still don't even know which class of virus it is!"

"When you find out start thinking about a cure. Mary says that won't be easy."

"It won't," Crystal admitted. "A cure will involve using the same virus or set of viruses to carry suppressor genes, or finding the right promoter to switch them off."

"Promoter?"

"A promoter switches Hox genes on and off at the right time during bodily development of the embryo, but we're learning that they may do more, like-

"You've lost me," Jantz said. "Tell you what: just start laying out several possibilities for a cure, if there is one. You, or the CDC rather, is going to have to have some reassuring information to pass out to the public when this thing breaks."

Crystal looked doubtful. "That's really not my line, but I'll see what I can come up with. What I'll wind up doing is passing all our data on to someone who is a specialist in gene therapy and gene alterations."

"That's great. Just tell them to keep a lid on it for now."

Going out the door Dee caught an expression on Mary's face; something bothered her, but she couldn't think what it could be. In a few minutes she forgot about it, and went back to looking into Genetechnics and Brandon Perkins. She was still delving into files when she got the call flagged as urgent to return to Jantz's office. She hurried back, taking the stairs rather than waiting on the elevator. The door to Jantz's office was half-open. She stepped inside and saw that Mary and Crystal were staring at Jantz's wall screen.

Without turning around, Jantz said, "The story is breaking now. We won't have to worry about secrecy any longer."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brandon Perkins used the monogrammed towel hung around his neck to wipe the sweat from his forehead that escaped from his monogrammed headband. Everything he owned was monogrammed, including Genetechnics. Its logo included his initials cleverly worked into the design, a stylized rendering of the DNA helix. Perkins slowed down the treadmill from where he was going through his thrice-weekly workout in the little gym adjacent to his office. Both the office and gym had enough space to do justice to a basketball court, not counting the shower, sauna, and well-furnished bedroom a few steps in the other direction from the back entrance to his office.

He had had just about enough for now, though. Any more and he might be too tired for Ralphie, his latest love and also boss of the tight knit research team that had concocted the sex virus. Ralph Torrison had tried to escape from Perkins' grasp now that he was off with his shares of Genetechnics-and once Perkins had let loose the virus he had created as an experimental tool-but Perkins hadn't allowed it. All it took to keep him working was to show him recordings that Waterson, his security chief, had surreptitiously taken of him admitting to being responsible for the sex virus. Perkins had reassured him that no one would know of his part in creating the virus, while at the same time making plans to remove him from the scene. He was too unstable, but his other attributes were so attractive that so far he had withheld action.

Perkins was in his mid-fifties, still darkly handsome, and just reaching his peak as he frequently expounded to his circle of friends, lovers, former lovers, sycophants, and the upper echelon of Genetechnics managers and scientists. And by damn, hadn't he proved that a gay man could beat the best of them so far as creativeness and business acumen went? He had seen early on that genetics was the wave of the future and had poured the considerable inheritance from his parents into Genetechnics. First it was genetic agriculture, creating plants that produced medicines or mixing the genes of one plant with another to produce superior and easier to grow foodstuff.

That was just the preliminary game, though; a way to amass a fortune and then move into human genetics, his real interest. To that end, he had gathered together some of the top scientists in the field-who were also homosexual men and women. From the beginning he wanted like-minded people around him, even though he had only a vague inkling of where he wanted the research to carry them, other than finding a genetic basis for the cause of child abuse. It was a pet project of his, having gone through a horrible childhood with a father who regularly abused him both sexually and physically. Though he would never admit it, much of the way his life had gone was a result of trying to forget his childhood and trying to outdo his father.

It was Merridian, Slater, and the damned FBI that finally pushed him to order his

scientific team to create the Sex Virus now spreading throughout the world. Blackmail him, would they? Well, look where they were now. He gave himself a satisfied nod as he thought of how Merridian had committed suicide, and how Slater was now in thrall to him rather than the other way around. All it had taken was showing him completing a liaison with a teenager down in the Montrose area.

Still slowing down on the treadmill he called for a check on the progress of his virus, gleaned from accounts of family upsets, divorces, increased traffic at known meeting sites for gays and many other methods. He saw from the screen display at the front of the treadmill that it was going even better than he had expected. He had targeted every regional FBI office in the nation at the same time that his carriers, some knowingly and some unaware, began transmitting the virus to anyone they came in close contact with. It was a great strategy: give the FBI problems with their personnel and they were less likely to function efficiently. And just to add to the pot he had targeted the top management at Homeland Security in Washington, and the scientists and administrators at the Center For Disease Control in Atlanta. It had stretched his resources thin and used every single carrier available, but the job was done now, or the first part of it. And so far as he knew security had not been breached. Even if it had his cover story, backed up by an impressive number of documents, ought to hold.

A simple mistake, that's all; no criminal intent. In fact, his researchers had been trying for a cure for the common cold, so far as the contrived paperwork showed- paperwork he hadn't shown to Ralphie. Who could argue with that? The only cause for concern was that some of his minions in the Spartan Society had taken his orders more literally than he intended. Slow down the FBI, yes, whenever they were getting close to deciphering what was going on, but he never intended for anyone to be killed as they had in Portland and almost had in Houston. Killings caused all kinds of complications. Oh, well, he had it under control and it was virtually impossible for anyone to know where the orders had come from. He was safe so long as the inner circle of the Spartan Society wasn't penetrated, and he doubted that. It was too much of an oddball organization for any of the security forces to bother with. In fact, it was most frequently referred to as a cult, hearkening back to the historical peak of Greek culture, when City-States reigned and Sparta was the epitome of masculine power and beauty. No culture since then had produced soldiers so fierce and dedicated ... and gay.

Perkins laughed thinking about it. It was a cult all right, but one he controlled-

And, which he intended to use more and more as the results of the Sex Virus became apparent. The Spartan Society began with little notice, as most cults and religions do. From its first inception by Marco Weese in Los Angeles late in the twentieth century it played to disenfranchised Catholics and members of other religions who keenly felt the discrimination against gays and lesbians by most religions. Weese discounted the laws

being passed in America and other western European countries giving them protection and equal status under the law. He aimed directly for the soul.

The world would only be safe for their kind, he preached, when everyone was oriented as they were. Now that cloning of humans was attainable there should no longer be need of sexual coupling of opposite genders with the consequent tragedy of hormone driven societies, completely ignoring the fact that sexual bipolarization of the species was a great part of what made humans intelligent and drove them to achievement. He was a master orator and politically savvy manipulator of opinion, and he had that last attribute that makes or breaks an emerging religion: he believed utterly in his creed and he was mesmerizing in espousing it. His flock grew because he made them believe his theory that God had ordained the development of humans to the stage where cloning and genetic manipulation of sexual orientation was possible and that He wanted those discoveries to be used to propagate the most persecuted group of humans in history, one which encompassed all races and all ethnic groups.

Brandon Perkins was his most prominent disciple and his biggest contributor, but his financial backing was incumbent upon absolute discretion, which Weese didn't like, but accepted because of the money. It was too much to turn down. That, and the fact that Perkins had somehow found out about that underage boy and had digital proof of the encounters. He had also gotten into his most restricted files and found out what the inner circle of the Spartan Society thought of women, lesbian or not. All this kept him very much in line.

Perkins stepped off the treadmill, tossed the towel toward a bin, and headed for the shower. He stepped inside and ordered the water to begin running, already set to his preferred temperature. As it sluiced over his body he sighed. Technology was wonderful! Especially when it helped men in his age group stay as sexually active as those in their twenties. He popped a pill from the dispenser as he toweled water from his hair. He didn't bother with the rest of his body.

He tossed that towel, too, missing the bin, but not caring. What were servants for, anyway? He opened the other shower door and stepped out onto the skid-proof surface on the edge of the sauna, also set to his preferred temperature. Ralphie glanced coyly at Perkins over a heavily muscled shoulder, then turned around.

"Hi Brannie. You look happy today."

Perkins stepped down into the water as he felt the first stirring in his groin from the aphrodisiac. Within a few minutes the secondary effect of the pill would kick in, giving him an erection for the next hour no matter how much he used his organ-or misused it.

"I am happy, Ralphie boy. We're clear and safe. The virus is rolling, and so far the public doesn't have a clue. Just think: in a few years the whole damn population on earth will be gay."

"Or lesbian."

"Well, yes, but we don't care about them, do we?"

"Well, I don't. Why do we have to have them around, anyway?" He moved to meet Perkins on the specially designed seat that gave the maximum effect from the churning water.

"Where else would we get babies from except women?"

"From clones."

"I've told you, Ralphie, we can't plan on the whole world cloning them. Our culture would stagnate, not to mention that we don't have the technology yet to take an embryo to anywhere near full term outside a woman's body." He put an arm around the younger man and groped under water with his hand.

"So who cares? When we die, what difference will it make?"

Perkins found what he was looking for and kissed Ralph's neck instead of answering. He wasn't about to admit that his research labs were turned to using genetic therapy to prevent aging, and possibly even to reverse the process. Besides, Ralphie wasn't going to be around much longer, though he didn't know that yet, either. And last, he already had good indications that it might be possible for a man to carry the fetus with the placenta attached to the omentum, that layer of fatty material on the inside of the lower abdomen.

Later that afternoon Perkins shoved his chair away from his desk. He stood up and stretched, wishing he could skip the meeting with Ched Waterson, his chief of security, but knowing it must be something important for him to want to meet before the normal weekly briefing. Perkins took the elevator to the basement, then pressed his thumbprint onto a key on his PDA. The elevator started up again, moving down one more floor to a sub-basement that didn't exist on any drawings or layouts of the building or in any computer file. He had made damned sure of that, and Waterson had gone over it all again before installing his department there. It was as secure as the Cheyenne Mountain defense installation; more secure, actually, since he had a contact there who passed along such information as he was interested in.

Waterson was waiting on him, doing his usual striding back and forth. The man had

a nervous habit that didn't allow him to sit still. Even sitting, he constantly bounced his foot up and down, wiggled his thumbs and fingers, or tapped on the nearest object.

"What's going on?" Perkins asked immediately.

Waterson wiped a hand over his bald forehead, mussing the rest of his hair. "Julie got found out."

"Julie?"

"Julie Barnes. Our plant at the FBI office in Houston."

"How the hell did that happen?"

"I don't know, and it's not important," Waterson said. "The thing we have to worry about is how much they've found out about her ... and from her."

"Why should that be a worry? She doesn't know anything about the Spartan Society, nor Genetechnics, either."

"She knows enough to point them in our direction. I want to dispose of her."

"Go ahead," Perkins said irritably. "You don't have to consult me with those decisions. And while you're at it, take care of Ralphie for me, too. Okay?"

Those words came out spontaneously, but he decided not to call them back. The last session with Ralphie hadn't been all that great.

"No problem, but it's always best if the boss is kept in the loop. That's why I called you down here."

"I suppose so. Well, is that all?"

Waterson wiped his forehead again. He'd just recorded Perkins agreeing to two murders and the strain was beginning to show. "That's all until the regular briefing, unless you want the details of what we've picked up from the places we broke into. I can assure you they didn't have much, though. Then we have to-"

He broke off as his desk monitor dinged and the phone blinked at the same time. He answered the phone first, listened for a moment then brought up a news program on the monitor.

"Uh-oh," he said. "The news is out. That's the head of the CDC there."

Perkins looked around for a chair, found one, and sat down to follow the story. He didn't want to miss any part of it. As he listened he hugged himself, not even trying to contain his exuberance. It felt wonderful to be responsible for such world-shaking events, an entire new paradigm was unfolding for the human equation.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The story that there was a virus that changed heterosexuals to gays and lesbians broke over a startled world like a natural disaster of monumental proportions-and scared the populace just as badly. The homosexual community had the finger of suspicion pointed at them without any proof whatsoever. Heterosexuals formed outside gay hangouts all over America. These crowds turned ugly and became mobs. Flames soon lit the skies of almost every major city in the nation, and the world. Cities like San Francisco were very nearly burned to the ground.

The Center For Disease Control attempted to put down the violence by relating raw statistics showing that less than 20% of the population was affected, and the infection rate had stabilized, if not actually fallen, and the genetic instructions were carried by a cold or flu virus. The spokesperson went on to add that simple hand washing and avoiding contact with anyone showing symptoms of those illnesses should bring the spread under control.

That did little more than make heterosexuals even more suspicious. When one in five persons had changed orientation anyone who had symptoms of a cold was ostracized, and in some cases, beaten or killed. It made for very interesting clips: seldom did gangs of angry citizens go around wearing masks, but within a day or so the rioters realized that masks made identification harder and that wearing one raised no suspicion of illegal activities at all.

The day following the initial CDC newscast the whole world was in ferment. The possibility that one's sexual orientation might be changed at a moment's notice delved into the very heart of a person's self-image, one carefully built from childhood. To think that it could be altered in such a fashion was unacceptable, particularly in light of the fact that homosexuality, even in westernized parts of the world, still carried an onus of the unnatural. And when humans cannot accept facts, they rationalize them. Even a CDC statement that a 'cure' was possible and that research would begin immediately failed to stop the uproar.

Christian religions universally praised the virus as a direct intervention from God as punishment for allowing homosexuality to flourish. Many sects commanded their flocks

to destroy the gathering places of gays and lesbians, not caring whether they were inhabited or not. Islamic nations went even further. Their mullahs also praised God for striking the ungodly with a disease that turned them into the dregs of society. A brutal pogrom began against gays and lesbians with death as the object. In many cases, it was just another excuse to rid themselves of enemies. Accusations flew back and forth between nations like missiles. Hindus, Buddhists, and others were just as judgmental, though not attributing the plague to God; their view was that bad men did the deed. Nevertheless, gays and lesbians were castigated and discriminated against more so than ever.

Politicians, dictators, and the military used the plague to purge their ranks of dissidents, sometimes throwing false accusations, knowing that in the frenzy of charge and counter charge no one would listen to denials; not when one in five persons was infected. In America, the Office of Homeland Security was called to task by congress for not preventing the epidemic. In response, a spokesperson said that the attack didn't have any hallmarks of terrorist activity, and that it was ludicrous to think that any organization would use a virus of this sort, not when they might catch it as well as the next person. Homeland Security went on to ask for more funds to fight the new plague and asked that new laws be passed, which would further undermine freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure of assets.

Portland was one of the cities that underwent violence and turmoil. This upset Waterson because the disorder caused his agents to lose the trail of Julie long enough for the pickup request Jantz sent out her to be effective. She was recognized by an alert agent and taken into custody. As soon as Jantz got the call he breathed a sigh of relief, and asked that she be ferried back to Houston on the first plane. When he got some flack Reeves backed him up.

Reeves had been gone that one night when Jantz was unable to contact him. As he explained it later he and his wife were having difficulties caused by the virus. It had infected him first and in turn he had given it to her. Unable to handle the news she had gone to stay with her widowed mother in the country where she could deny the whole thing was taking place. While relating the episode he made direct eye contact with Jantz, not trying to conceal nor deny that he now carried the HI genes and was subject to their influence.

"It makes a difference, though, knowing how the feelings came about," he said. "When you know someone engineered them it makes them easier to resist."

"That's how Crystal and Mary explained it to me," Jantz said, not mentioning that they had both acted on their newly acquired inclinations.

"How about you? Have you shown any ... um ... inclinations?"

"No, not at all." Jantz grinned. "I almost wish I had. Crystal made me sit down for an all day perusal of my personal medical history, not to mention taking about a gallon of blood from me over the last two days."

"Why all that?"

"She seems to think I have a fairly unique DNA segment, or gene, or whatever that keeps me from becoming infected. You do know that they've identified the virus? Crystal sent the data she had and they put that with what they already had."

"I heard a snippet of the announcement. Something like a mild case of the flu?"

"Yup. And like the flu it mutates and most variants die out, so according to the CDC, we should see the end of it before long."

Reeves rubbed his chin. "I guess it could die out, but what's to prevent the perps from throwing another at us? Or what if one or two variants survive?"

The idea hit Jantz like a bombshell. Talking with Crystal and Mary had led him to believe that not only was the virus dying out; they were learning enough about it to come up with a vaccine-although that was like closing the barn door after the horse was out.

"I better get back to my office, then. They're bringing Julie here as soon as the plane lands. I've got my best agents waiting to team-interrogate her if the initial interview doesn't break her. Maybe we can get an idea of where this thing originated. Or prove where it started, anyway, and maybe even confiscate the research notes to help the CDC along. So far as I'm concerned, the fingers point toward Genetechnics and Brandon Perkins. I just need the evidence to go after him."

"Can't Homeland Security help?"

"Sure. They'll walk right into the corporate offices and arrest one of the richest men in America. Don't hold your breath."

Reeves nodded. "Well, do your best. And keep me posted. This thing is tearing the country apart; not to mention what's happening overseas. Jihad is becoming the watchword, only this time, ethnic cleansing means gays and lesbians-and anyone associated with them."

"I'll get back to you about Julie," Jantz said. He started to leave when a thought hit

him. "Jim, Julie was inserted into our office here. I wonder if any of the other regional offices have moles, too?"

"Crap!" Reeves said. "Go on, I'll start the ball rolling for deep backgrounds on all recent hires at the other offices."

Jantz went back to prepare for Julie's interrogation. There was plenty of documentation to connect her to Lisanne and to Genetechnics, but not Lisanne to Genetechnics. The Scooper did intimate that Lisanne must be involved, but it hadn't yet found the pathway. Jantz hoped Julie would reveal enough to make the connection, and then he and Dee could really start working.

Thinking of Dee brought up the idea that she and Mary had spent the night together last night ... without him. It felt odd knowing they were together after he had been so intimate with both of them at the same time. Well, however it worked out he couldn't complain, but he did intend to ask Crystal a question or two the next time he got her alone. Like what progress was made on determining the factors that contributed to how the new genes were being expressed.

Dee was scheduled to meet him in a conference room converted into an interrogation facility. They intended to hit Julie with every scrap of information the Scooper had turned up then imply they had even more. That, combined with threats of indictment for complicity in the assassinations of the FBI agents in Portland, ought to ferret out some things they didn't yet know.

Dee waited impatiently for Jantz to show up. She wanted to get started, but also wanted to face him squarely about her liaison with Mary. She liked him immensely, but her feelings for Mary were growing, too, and she had thought they needed a night to themselves to sort out what they had gotten into. She smiled. She didn't know about the sorting, but the night had certainly been enjoyable. Every time she thought about her changed life she was amazed; what she was doing was far removed from anything she had ever contemplated before, and she didn't feel guilty. It seemed as normal now as heterosexual coupling.

She smiled at Jantz as he came in butting the door open with his hip; his arms full of digital display equipment and data cards. She hurried to help. She took a bundle from him, glanced at the open doorway to be sure no one was watching, and gave him a quick kiss. It brightened his countenance immediately.

"You should have told me you had all this junk; I would have helped."

"No big deal. You can help me get set up, though."

"Okay. How do you want to arrange it?"

"Let's start with that recording of her and Lisanne, then go to her and the other woman. That will tell her that we know a hell of a lot of stuff about her that she thought was well concealed. Then we'll see what develops. Help me arrange the data in order so we can hit her with it so fast she'll think we've been watching her for years. Add the possibility of indictment for conspiracy to murder and possibly treason, and I think she'll break."

"Me, too. Hell, _I'd_ break if all that were thrown at me."

Jantz remained seated as Julie was brought into the interrogation room. An agent he knew casually escorted her into the room. Dee joined them and the other agent left.

Julie looked like a scared rabbit huddled in a cage. She spoke to Dee, but Dee merely stared; part of the intimidation process. Jantz got up and prepared the recording. When he was ready he pulled out the Miranda card and read Julie her rights, starting first with the notation that this interview was being recorded.

"I want a lawyer," Julie said in a trembling voice.

"I only read you the Miranda as a precaution," Jantz told her. "We don't have to worry about it right now because I'm holding you under the Homeland Security laws, specifically the revised regulations congress passed last year. Do you understand?" Jantz saw her lips move, but if she said anything it was too quiet to hear. "All right, then. Dee, would you start, please?"

"Do you know a woman named Lisanne Mercer?"

"No," Julie said, so softly she could barely be heard.

Dee nodded to Jantz. He ran the digital recordings of Julie and Lisanne together. Julie's face took on the look of a student caught cheating on finals. She looked around wildly, apparently hoping to see some magical door she could escape through.

"Shall we try that again?" Dee asked in a harsher voice. "I might remind you that you've just committed another felony: lying to FBI investigators."

"Another ... I haven't..."

"Terrorism is a federal felony. It can be defined as aiding and abetting in the commission of a terrorist attack on America or an American citizen, or both."

"All we did was take a test ... it wasn't like you ... I mean..."

"A test?" Jantz broke in. "What kind of test? And I'm assuming you mean Lisanne when you say 'we'".

"Yes, her and others. We were all tested together to make sure we had the gay and lesbian genes. They told us it was the Spartan Society we were being tested for."

Dee and Jantz exchanged glances. "Back up a bit. Lisanne was there, along with other women. We need their names."

Julie remembered the dire threats the security chief for the Genetechnics Corporation, as well as an upper tier member of the Spartan Society, made against her family should she reveal anything about that clandestine week at the resort where she, Lisanne, and a number of other women were tested for some secretive positions with a 'major corporation'. The threats came after she was officially admitted into the Spartan Society. She was overjoyed at the time, having been indoctrinated by Lisanne into believing that the Society advocating a gay and lesbian world would produce peace and harmony all over the globe. This was the 'major corporation' they spoke of. It was a short jump from there to taking a job with the FBI and passing on information about investigations cueing in on the Spartans. It didn't seem like a crime at the time.

"I can't talk about anything else. I just can't!" She began crying.

Dee sat down beside her. She put a friendly arm around her shoulder and motioned with her head for Jantz to leave. He went out and watched through the two-way glass as Dee laid out what the FBI could do to protect Julie and her family from retribution. Eventually, she opened up, but at the end of it Jantz shook his head.

He told Dee, "She didn't tell us much. And we still have nothing to justify arresting anyone other than Julie. That security chief at Genetechnics will deny making threats. She's the only one here who's been passing information. However, we have the names of those other women ... and I'll bet a biscuit to a donut that there was a similar group of men undergoing the same indoctrination. And that both men and women did just like Julie. They applied for positions with the FBI in whatever capacity they could, and with Homeland Security, as well. And in my case, Lisanne just seduced me hoping for inside information."

Dee passed over the comment. "And I'll bet the same biscuit that the contacts for both sets of men and women were in turn passing the information up the line to Genetechnics. But how to prove it? All we have are email addresses and they're bound to have been routed through so many drops that we'll play hell finding them."

"Maybe not. We've got some world-class hackers working for us. I'm thinking of one in particular, Gene Tunectun. He helped set up the Scooper."

Dee grinned. "Let's go!"

Gene Tunectun was a pudgy man of medium height with thinning blond hair. He had the characteristic look in his eyes that made him appear to be gazing into a space no one else could see. In reality, even when not immersed in the net, his mind lived there thinking up new ways of gaining or protecting information. He came up occasionally for food, drink, and sex, then returned to the world that was more interesting than reality.

After Jantz and Dee gave him the data from Julie he took phone numbers from both of them and turned back to his monitor, keyboard, and headphones. Immediately he was deep into a world Jantz had no appreciation for, typing and speaking so rapidly that neither he nor Dee had any idea of what he was doing.

"Come on," Jantz said. "Let's go see Jim."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On the way to Reeves' office Dee spoke to Jantz in the hallway. "About last night; I'm sorry I didn't invite you; it's just that-"

Jantz put a hand on her shoulder. "You don't have to explain. You're still trying to come to terms with the change, aren't you?"

"Why are you so understanding and so many others aren't? If the rest of the people in the world had your attitude we wouldn't have to worry so much, other than the fact that no one likes being manipulated. Not to mention that it was highly illegal."

"Maybe it's because I know there's not much likelihood I'll catch the virus, even if it weren't abating now."

"Oh, yes, the man who doesn't get the flu or colds. How come no one has investigated people like you before?"

Jantz spread his hands. "Because people like me don't think much about it. And remember, it's more like hardly ever catching colds and never getting bad cases, not like being totally immune. Besides, after the human genome was mapped there were so many other fascinating lines to pursue that they took precedence. Or so Crystal says."

Reeves' office door was open. He was on the phone with someone he didn't care much for going by his expression. He slammed the phone down into its cradle.

"Hi, Jantz, Dee. I'm glad you came by. I'm going to be leaving for Washington on the next flight I can get out of here."

"What's happening?"

"Our esteemed leader, Slater. I called to see what progress they're making there and the sonofabitch gave me a stall. I think he's trying to prevent any FBI involvement with this mess. He told me that he sent a recommendation to the director to let Homeland Security handle everything."

"Why in the world would he do that?"

"Covering his ass somehow. But I don't know why."

Jantz remembered the recording of Slater in congress with Perkins. "Do you want to take along a copy of that clip with him and Perkins?"

"I hate to go that route, but yes, I do. He's holding up progress."

"We've got some other data. We need to get going on Genetechnics and Perkins. We found out that Julie was planted here by the Spartan Society. And we think that there were others assigned to other offices. All of them were probably carriers. We suspect they wanted to bollix up any investigation by infecting the FBI first, then let it spread into the population. I've got the names of the women; she didn't know any of the men."

"All right, I'll take them, too. That will help speed up our investigation of new hires, for sure. And Dee, go home and pack a bag. You're going with me and help me present my arguments to someone higher up than Slater."

"Dee? What about me?"

Reeves glanced down at his desk. "I have a note here from Crystal. Your immune status is too much of a research tool to risk your life. You're to stay here and I'm assigning agents to tail you 24/7, just in case. Remember? You mentioned that you're immune at one of our meetings when Julie was present. She might have passed it on. The other side might want you for a research specimen, too."

"Shit!"

"Sorry, Jantz. I won't risk you."

"So what am I supposed to do while y'all are in Washington?"

"You're going to sit at my desk and direct the investigation. I just promoted you."

"I'd rather go with you."

"Sorry."

"I think I'd rather stay, too," Dee said, unexpectedly. "Won't going over Slater's head get us in trouble?"

"Maybe, but I'm going to, anyway. I won't force you."

"I'll go. I just hope I have a job when I get back."

"Me, too," Reeves said with a ghostly grin.

They left Reeves' office.

"I'm sorry, Jantz. I had nothing to do with this. You should be the one going to Washington," Dee said.

"Forget it. Go ahead on home and get your bag packed."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go see Crystal and tell her I have a cold and the flu both!"

Jantz found Crystal in her office, desultorily entering data into the CDC computer. Jantz intended to give her what for, but the look on her face stopped him. "What's wrong?"

"Other than the world going to hell?"

"That's nothing new. It's been headed that way since Ug discovered a rock could bash in a man's skull as easily as a saber tooth tiger's. Everything followed from that."

Crystal grudging a grin. "Looking at it long term I suppose does makes it easier. But personally-" She covered her face with her hands, sobbing.

Jantz pulled up a chair beside her. He made no attempt to ask what was wrong. Instead, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and let her cry. Eventually, she sniffed and fished in a desk drawer for tissues.

"Sorry, I shouldn't let it bother me so much. It's not like I haven't ... never mind."

"Personal problems?"

"My husband left me. He thinks he'll be happier as a gay." She sniffed again.

"I guess it's no consolation, but everywhere in the world men and women are making that same decision. It's hard for me to put myself in their place. I can't imagine myself as gay."

"I couldn't imagine myself as a lesbian a few weeks ago, either."

"I thought you said experience had something to do with the way genes are expressed."

"It does, but it's not hard and fast. And our society was beginning to accept gays and lesbians, so when a person realizes they have homosexual feelings it's not totally foreign or obscene, like in the olden days."

"Well, any way I can help?"

"You're a good man, Jantz. Maybe we can talk later. Right now you've perked me up enough for me to get back to work. Did I tell you the CDC team in Atlanta has sequenced the virus and its variants? We can produce a vaccine against those particular ones, but whoever started this can just let some others loose. The way to stop the thing is at its source."

"And that's my job. But you've got me confined here just because I don't catch colds easily." There was a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

"I'm sorry, but you are important. And speaking of, I need some more blood from you. Atlanta is asking."

Wearily, Jantz took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. Crystal, as usual, gave his heavy .45 pistol a hard look before turning her sights to the veins in his arms. The holstered weapon fascinated her. And Jantz carried a bit of fascination himself. It seemed inexplicable that she was having such feelings just after splitting with her husband, but it was impossible to argue with one's libido, and catching the Sex Virus apparently elevated it.

While Crystal was filling vacutainers with colored tops full of his blood, Jantz asked, "How's the data collecting going?"

"Oh, most of that has already been taken over by Atlanta. The statisticians will crunch the numbers and play with correlations. The ones they can think of anyway. And they'll get some of it wrong."

Jantz put a finger over the Band-Aid-covered vein and applied pressure. "What part will be wrong?"

"I've already seen some of it. More men than women deny they have the virus regardless of what DNA analysis shows."

"Why do you say that? And what difference will it make?"

"It's male macho. Women are already attuned to hugging and kissing each other. It's not a great step to carrying it a bit further-or a lot further-as I can tell you from experience. Men, on the other hand, rarely touch any other part of a man other than handshaking. And men have a psychological hang-up that's still prevalent; gays are wimps. You know?"

Stories and jokes Jantz had heard all his life flashed through his mind. "I still don't see what it matters so far as curing the disease goes. You can't just lie away what your DNA shows."

"Well, think of two separate samples: one, actual DNA analysis of the population, and two, surveys of the population. CDC will do both of them and the numbers won't match, because people always lie about sex."

"But the DNA..."

"Every group in America will jump on the figures, especially politicians. They will use them however they choose, so long as it helps them get elected."

Jantz eyed Crystal like a gun he wasn't sure was loaded. He rolled his sleeve down and put his jacket back on. "How did you get so cynical so young?"

"It's not cynicism; it's facts. I have a degree in psychology, as well as biology."

"Hm. Well, I'd better get to work. I'd like to talk more about this with you, though."

Crystal dimpled. "Why not? It's not as if I have anyone else around right now."

"How about Mary? Aren't y'all speaking?"

"I feel sort of uncomfortable around her. She has such a high libido. Sort of like

you." Crystal didn't mention her own.

"Me?"

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? Part of the reason so many infected people go out and practice what their new genes preach is that there's another gene that's inserted as well as the HI ones. It affects the libido. And while you may not have gotten the HI genes, I'll bet you did get the ones for libido. Haven't you felt it?"

Jantz thought of the nights of revelry lately. "Maybe so, but with three beautiful women vying for my bod, who could tell?"

"I could. Meet me around five?"

"All right."

Reeves left at three o'clock. Jantz shook hands with him, still feeling like he should be going with him. Instead, he was sitting at Reeve's desk going over memos, directives, and 'interest' forms. These were notes from all over the world sent down from collection agencies concerning current events where future action might be justified. Supervisors were supposed to study them so that they would be ahead of the game should an investigation be instigated. At the present there was little other than the Sex Virus and ramifications of it being looked at. Some of them were fascinating. Already, it was almost the only item of interest. However, Jantz could find nothing indicating that the FBI was investigating. Every memo referred to Homeland Security or The Center for Disease Control. He saw several notes about the investigation into the assassinations in Portland, and one on the dead-end probe into the attempt on his life via the automobile incident.

Jantz shoved these reports aside and started in on those not yet printed out. He found items even more fascinating ... and foreboding. Agency offices in a number of countries warned that the sex plague, based on statistical sampling, was going to be blamed on America since the incidence was higher there than anywhere else. There were open calls for bans on travel by Americans and actions being planned against Americans by various governments and groups. Several leaders of Mideast countries had their Imams call for jihad, a religious war against the infidels who had infected their women with the virus. There was no mention of men being infected, as Crystal had predicted.

Jantz chuckled over that one, then let his amusement die. Sexual attitudes differed country by country, and ethnic group by ethnic group. If this thing weren't stamped out quickly-and a cure found-talk would turn into military action. And economic effects

were showing up, as well. Already, the stock market was off by ten per cent worldwide and still falling, causing agents to warn that citizens in other countries would blame America for their loss of money.

Jantz checked his watch and saw that he had enough time to go over agent assignments in case he had to sit in Reeves' desk for more than a day or two. He did that, and promptly at five put on his jacket and went to see Crystal. She had more news. After a brief dip the infection rate of the virus was climbing again. CDC scientists were trying to find out if a variant was responsible or whether a completely new one had been turned loose.

Jantz went to find Mary. She was in her office tidying up her desk. He knocked and Mary looked up at him through the large glass window fronting her office. She smiled and motioned for him to come in.

"I know what you're here for, I bet."

"If it's about statistics, you do."

"What should I do about them?"

"Start collecting samples again first thing tomorrow morning."

Mary groaned. "I'll do it, but no one is going to be happy about being asked to supply another specimen."

"Well, just get enough to be sure it's the same genes being inserted. That ought to do."

"Okay, but CDC will be doing the same thing."

"Yes, but I want to know if there's a difference in FBI numbers and national numbers like there was before. If they're targeting us again we have to start looking at our own people, and I don't want to do that unless I'm sure."

Mary sighed. "I see your point. Okay, will do. What are your plans for tonight?"

"I've got something I need to talk to someone about. I'll see you tomorrow."

Mary nodded as if she already knew who he was going to be talking to. Jantz took Crystal by her place, so that she could freshen up. On the way they passed several mid-scale restaurants and motels. He noticed that some of them displayed signs in their marquees: Gays and Lesbians Not Welcome. He pointed out one of them to Crystal.

"I've seen lots of those lately. Isn't it illegal to discriminate?" Crystal asked.

"Yup, but it's a national phenomenon. Try prosecuting a few hundred thousand cases at once. It would be like trying to stop the tide."

Crystal nodded.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Reeves finished laying out the case against Slater for stalling an investigation and concealing information to Deputy Director Morris Seagraves. Seagraves was a diminutive man, barely five-six, but his eyes brimmed with intelligence and concern. He tapped a pen rhythmically on his desktop blotter calendar.

"Jim, this is incredible. It's almost as if Mister Slater were working for whoever started the sex plague."

"I've come to believe that he is," Reeves said.

"Can you prove it?"

"Nothing that would stand up in court. And nothing that I'd like to use."

"You've gone over your superior officer's head. I understand and sympathize, but you know what's going to happen if I take action now?"

"Slater will come after me with all four feet."

"That's right-and I'll have trouble acting on your information for that very reason. If you have something else I'd better see it now."

Reluctantly, Reeves nodded to Dee. She touched her PDA that was interfaced with Seagraves' office computer. In a few seconds they were looking at Slater in sexual congress with Brandon Perkins. Seagraves stared intently as the figures continued their act until he was certain of the players then waved for Dee to cut it off.

"You sure weren't kidding. I don't like using stuff like that, but in this case I might. Stay here, I'll be back in a minute."

Reeves and Dee settled back and tried to relax while their superior was gone. Shortly, they heard footsteps as Seagraves came into the office, followed by Slater.

"What are you doing here?" Slater burst out, face flaming.

"I thought it necessary," Reeves said quietly.

"Well, guess what, Mister Reeves? I think it might be necessary to relieve you of duty. Going over a superior's head is grounds for-

"Stop it, Burley. Play back that last segment for us, please."

Smiling, Dee complied. Slater's face went from angry indignation to horror within seconds.

He stood up, and shouted, "That's not me! And you can't prove it is!"

"No one said it was you, did they?" Seagraves asked quietly.

Slater slumped back in his chair, face as red as a maraschino cherry. Abruptly he sat up again. "Hey, I just remembered. Filming a person without their consent is illegal! I'll have you arrested!"

"Film? What film? Jim, have you seen any film of Mister Slater?"

"No, nor any digital recordings, either. He must be hallucinating."

"Must be. On the other hand, I wouldn't be surprised if someone has caught him in the act somewhere. It will probably show up on the net soon." Slater sagged again. "Now then, Mister Slater, I think you had better explain what the relationship is between you and Brandon Perkins. And it had better be good."

Slater regained part of his composure. "I'm not saying a damned thing."

"In that case, I believe an internal investigation is in order." Seagraves picked up his phone.

Slater jumped up. "I'm leaving!"

"No, you're not." Now Seagraves was on his feet. "Reeves, disarm him. Now."

Reeves had his weapon out as soon as the words left the deputy director's mouth. He pointed it at Slater's chest, face expressionless. "Dee, take his weapon."

Dee slid her hand inside Slater's jacket and removed his gun. While she was doing that Seagraves speed-dialed a number and talked to his party. Within a few minutes two

surprised agents entered the office and were told to arrest Slater and hold him until told otherwise. After Slater was taken away Seagraves and Reeves went back over the information Jantz had provided, spending an hour looking at it.

"I wonder if he's ready to talk?" Reeves asked. "He's been stewing awhile."

"Let's go see."

The two agents were sitting on chairs outside an office they had commandeered. Without knocking Seagraves opened the door. Slater was sitting at the desk; his PDA connected to the office computer, busily typing away. When he heard the door open he hit a few select keys and turned triumphantly in his chair.

"What do you want now?"

"Who were you talking to?"

"No one, just playing around until my attorney gets here."

"What makes you think you're entitled to an attorney?"

"Huh?"

"I'm holding you under the Homeland Securities act. I don't have to provide you with an attorney for a long time." Slater's face fell like a runaway avalanche. "Now then, let's go over this obstruction of justice bit, shall we? Jim, why don't you and Dee get checked in at a hotel and get some rest? I'll call you with the results of our talk with Mister Slater."

Reeves yawned. "Thanks. We can use a break. I'll let you know where we are."

"Fine. You can go ahead and make reservations back to Houston, too, but don't leave until I touch base with you again, okay?"

"Got it." He and Dee left. It had been a long day already.

Without bothering to look at Slater, Seagraves called in the top computer specialist on the premises to find out who Slater had been on line with, and what he had been talking about. Later that evening Seagraves called the hotel. Reeves was sound asleep. It took a couple of minutes to orientate himself in the strange room.

"Jim, Slater talked to an extent, but he knows more than he's letting on. However, we have enough to see a judge in the morning and ask for a search warrant for Brandon

Perkins' home and the corporate lab complex. In any case, I'm keeping this as close to the vest as I can, so I want you and Dee to stay here. You'll fly to Portland with me, and a few others for the search of Perkins' home as soon as we're authorized. So you better pick up such necessities as you'll need for a few days."

"Will do. Thanks."

"Thank you, Jim. You did right."

Reeves hung up the phone and dialed Dee's room. The phone rang and rang, but there was no answer.

* * * *

Jantz was almost asleep. Only his admiration for Crystal's curves being played with by the moonlight slanting through the bedroom window kept him awake. Clouds must be coming in from the Gulf, he thought, as the light alternately brightened and dimmed, making interesting hills and valleys over the swell of her breasts, the inside of her thighs, and the side of her neck. He hadn't intended this. Crystal did most of the talking as she helped him put a scratch meal together while they killed a bottle of Berringer's Zinfandel. Later she confessed that her marriage hadn't been all that great to begin with. There had been infidelity on her husband's part while she traveled on CDC business. She had thought there might be a chance of making it work until the sex plague came along. Once the second bottle was opened Jantz knew what was coming. It was as she had said; those infected with the HI genes also got a boost to their libido. He felt mildly guilty about taking advantage of the fact, but Crystal quickly dissuaded him.

"Don't think like that. You're too good of a person to feel guilty over something you're not responsible for. Just enjoy it when it happens. Like when you kiss me, if you will."

Jantz would. Crystal slid over on the couch and into his arms as if she belonged there, offering her open lips and seeking his tongue. While the kiss was going on Jantz smoothed his hand over her shoulder and side, feeling her body under the pullover she wore. As he began to enjoy that she twisted her body, offering her breast to his hand. He felt out the firm contour and hardening nipple, exploring gently. Crystal breathed heavily. She broke the kiss and pulled the top over her head, bearing her breasts.

"You're beautiful," Jantz said, and meant it, returning his hand to her breast. Her skin felt like satin it was so soft, yet her breast was young and firm in his hand.

"Mm. I like for you to say that, but you haven't seen all of me yet."

"There's no time like the present."

Crystal slid her hand down to his firm erection. "There sure isn't." She kissed him quickly and firmly, mouth open. "Come on. Hurry."

"The rest of you is beautiful, too," Jantz admitted, propped up on an elbow and admiring the slim length of her body, totally unclothed.

He ran his hand over her belly and thighs, and his fingers through the curls of brown hair between them. It was darker than the light brown locks of wavy hair covering her head. Crystal reached over and knocked his elbow from under him.

"Come here. You've admired me enough."

Jantz complied eagerly drawing her close, feeling her erect nipples brush his chest, followed by the gentle press of her breasts flattening against him. He kissed her again, his tongue as active as hers.

Crystal shivered under the caress of his hands running over her back and flanks. She moved her lips away and guided Jantz's mouth down to her breasts, sucking in her breath as his lips closed over her nipple. It took only moments until she could stand it no longer. Urgently she pulled him over her and guided him inside, letting out a long sound of relief as he filled her as deeply as he could. The noises became louder, and shorter, and shriller as Jantz moved in and out of her until they combined into one long shriek at the climax of an overwhelming orgasm.

Later they made love again, slower and more sensuously, which Jantz loved. Crystal accepted the slower lovemaking with sighs of contentment and ascent until she again felt a climax building. This time she rolled on top, moving her hips in a circular motion, grinding into him, getting him as deep into her as she could until she gasped and went into a muscle-tightening vocal release, finally collapsing on him in exhaustion.

Jantz was now sleepily admiring her, thinking what a perfect body she had. She was small, but everything about her was proportional, like an organic equation that balanced perfectly. And there was something else that caused him to feel a little catch in his throat. He realized that he was already caught up with feelings for her, like a schoolboy with an undeniable crush on the prettiest girl in the class-a feeling that seemed to be reciprocated. He realized how long it had been since he had experienced such an emotional thrill and was thinking about how good it was to have it again. Just as his eyes closed the phone jarred him awake.

"Preston," he said, hoping it was a wrong number.

"Jantz, this is Jim. I've got some bad news. Dee has disappeared from her hotel room here in Washington. It appears as if there was a struggle, so we're going with an abduction."

"Goddamnit, I knew I should have gone with you."

"And then you both might be gone. Listen, I want you to keep running the office for a day or two. I'll send Elgin down if I'm not back by then. In the meantime, I promise I'll have the best people and the highest priority going into finding Dee."

"Damn, I want to do more than sit here like a bump on a fucking log. Dee was my partner."

"She still is," Reeves said gently.

Jantz cursed and slammed the phone down. He turned and saw that Crystal was listening.

"Is she dead?" she asked in the hushed tone people use when death has struck.

"No, or at least we don't know. She was abducted from her hotel room. Oh, damn it to hell, I knew I should have gone."

Crystal sat up in the bed, and even at this moment of despair at what might have happened to Dee, he couldn't help but admire the way her breasts moved. He shook his head, trying to think of what to do next.

"What time is it?"

Jantz checked his watch. "Almost midnight. Not much we ... I...can do now."

"I want to help if I can. I liked Dee."

Something Crystal had said wormed its way to the surface of his mind. "You have a degree in psychology, as well as biology?"

"Yes, why?"

Jantz rubbed his whiskers, thought about shaving, then decided against it. Maybe a shadowed face would make him look harder, more ready to go to lengths he ordinarily wouldn't. "I keep thinking that Julie knows more than she's let on. I'm going to go to the holding cell and question her some more. Would you like to help?"

"By all means. Let's go."

She threw the sheet off the lower portion of her body and slid off the bed to dress. Jantz got on line to the office and routed Brent Semmelweis away from his reports.

"Brent, I want you to fix me up a transfer order for Julie Barnes. Make it good for both Washington and Portland. I'll be by later to pick them up."

"You got it, boss. Anything else I can do?"

"Not now. Just have them ready."

Following Crystal's advice, Jantz re-dialed Semmelweis and had the release order sent to his apartment computer where he signed it and made copies to send back, and to carry with him. After that he quickly dressed, checked his weapon, threw on his jacket and headed downtown to the federal detention center with Crystal as his companion.

The night crew saw nothing amiss about an after-hours transfer of a prisoner. They produced Julie properly chained and wearing the standard orange jump suit. It hung on her making her, with her red hair and freckles, look like a teenager's parody of a prisoner. If she was surprised to see Jantz she didn't show it, nor did she speak to him. It was only when they were at his car and she saw Crystal inside that she took an interest in the proceedings. Even she knew that transferring prisoners usually didn't happen after dark nor did it require the presence of a CDC scientist.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To my apartment."

"Your apartment? Am I going to be released?" Her countenance brightened.

"That depends on you, Julie. Just think about what you've done for a while."

Once inside his apartment Jantz unlocked Julie's chains and helped her out of them. As pre-agreed he let Crystal take her into his bedroom to find something more feminine to wear. Some of Lisanne's clothes were still there, though there wasn't much to choose from. Nevertheless, a few moments later she reappeared behind Crystal, looking more relaxed in a pair of old jeans and a pullover, and her hair rubber-banded into a ponytail.

In the meantime Jantz had broken out his next to the last bottle of Zinfandel and set out glasses on the table next to the bar separating the kitchen from the den area. Just in case, he made sure to have Crystal maneuver Julie into the seat with her back to the bar, leaving one of them on each side of her. Julie didn't seem to notice; she was more

interested in the package of Winston Lights and glass of wine.

Crystal thought that after a couple of days in jail and a chance to think matters over a little kindness and sweet talk might accomplish what interrogation hadn't. She proved her theory within a half-hour, after Jantz told her flatly that she had been led astray. He told her that her tests had confirmed that she was a carrier and that had been her prime purpose for being inserted into the FBI office. And then he went on to tell her that he could have charges dismissed against her on his authority as acting head of the Houston office. That, and the revelation that Dee had been abducted, and three glasses of wine did the trick.

"Lisanne is the key, I think," she said slowly. "Now that I know we were used as carriers. I've always wondered what she saw in me when she could have any woman in Portland."

"Or any man," Crystal said.

"Man? Oh, no, not her. She doesn't like men."

Jantz realized that she had never caught on to the fact that he and Lisanne had lived together. He told her that.

"That can't be true! Lisanne was only interested in making the world into a better place, but she wouldn't have gone with a man to do it."

"She did. She used me and she used you."

Julie began crying. Crystal edged her chair nearer, and put an arm around her. "Honey, Lisanne used a lot of us. And we think she might be being used herself. Is there anything you can think of that might lead us to her? Or anyone else who might give us a clue to the persons who kidnapped Dee?"

Julie wiped her eyes, still terrified of what might happen should she talk, but also grasping at the prospect of freedom that Jantz and Crystal were offering. "If I tell you, will you send someone to protect my parents and sisters?"

"Absolutely," Jantz said immediately.

"Then you need to talk to Mister Waterson. He made threats against us if we didn't cooperate. Also if we ever talked about what was going on." Her voice wavered, as if Waterson might be behind the door listening at that very moment.

"Waterson? The Chief of Security for Genetechnics? All right, where could we find

him I wonder?"

Julie answered, "He was at the resort all that week, off and on, talking to us after the tests, hyping the Spartans."

"That doesn't help. We don't have a home address for him; he must live at the main Genetechnics plant. And you can bet your boots he'll have a way out if he finds we're looking for him."

"But Jantz, he might be back."

Jantz screwed up his face. "Why would he go back now that the damage is done?"

"I overheard him talking with another man about the 'next group'. They were due the first week of June. I hadn't thought about until you brought all this up."

"Next group?" Crystal exclaimed. "That's it! They must expect the infection rate will start to fall. I'll bet they have another one lined up and are getting more carriers ready!"

"Waterson may not be there, though," Julie said. "He's all the time flying around in the Genetechnics plane. He took me for a ride once."

Jantz stood stock still for a moment seeming to be in a trance. "I wonder..."

He picked up the phone and dialed the Washington office. It took fifteen minutes to track down Reeves, but he finally got him.

"Jim, could you have someone check the private airports around Washington and see if a Genetechnics plane has landed or took off lately?"

Reeves called back a short while later. "Bingo. A Genetechnics plane flew into Lexiton field last evening, and took off three hours later bound for Portland, Oregon."

Jantz thought some more. "Check some of the other regional offices. I've got a hunch that Dee isn't the only agent grabbed last night. I'll bet this is a combination warning and misdirection. None of us are going to be concentrating on much else when our people are missing."

"I don't need to check. I've already got three reports of missing agents."

It was the third of June. Jantz called Semmelweis, told him that Elgin would be in charge as soon as he arrived from Washington, and that he had an emergency. He used

his personal credit card rather than the official one to make reservations on the next flight to Portland, so that he couldn't be charged later with using FBI funds for nefarious purposes.

By six that morning all three were on their way to Portland.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brandon Perkins prided himself on having backups for everything he did and contingency plans for anything that might not work out as expected. Such as Ralphie, who was increasingly unstable as the sex virus proliferated. Such as Waterson, who knew too much and might go too far, such as trying to blackmail him by threatening to reveal the origin of the sex virus. Well, Ralphie should be resting comfortably where he would never be found. But Waterson was still alive.

Perkins had to laugh. Had it never occurred to the man that he might have more than one security organization? No, probably not. He thought linearly, not outside the box. Whatever, it was nearing the time for him to go, too. With the Spartans growing in numbers there would soon be no need of any heterosexual in his employ. Besides, he had failed badly when ordered to dispose of that Julie person. It was a good thing she didn't know much. Well, let him finish this week's indoctrination and that would be the end of Mister Waterson. Poor man; he thought he had evidence, but as quickly as he secured it his own computer specialist attached an unnoticeable wipeout virus ready to be activated at his command, which he would give at the same time as the order for his disposal. Waterson was a baby when it came to computers, for all his self-serving braggadocio.

Perkins was taking his usual lunch hour at his corporate offices, as always watching his specialized news program, collected and organized by subject. Parts of it were dull, but like being prepared, he also prided himself with keeping up with trends in the world, not just what he was most interested in. However, today, as most days lately, they coincided.

He was pleased to see a clip about the rapid growth of the Spartan Society. The public facade needed favorable publicity; he intended to use it as the underpinning for candidates for public office in the next election a year away. His clandestine operative had evidence of a past peccadillo the reporter would rather not be made public, and letting her know that had helped give the story a positive slant. In the future, it was said, the Spartan Society would keep its philosophy of equality between the sexes-so long as the sexes were gay and lesbian. Only after the Spartans gained power would the iron fist

beneath the velvet glove make its appearance. Then women would be put into Seraglios, just as the ancient Greeks did, keeping them for household chores and the bearing of children while the men courted and appreciated each other and ran the world; just as it should be.

Perkins frowned over the next item. The FBI in Houston was holding Julie Barnes as a suspect, but no other details were available. He was surprised that some enterprising reporter had gotten even that much and suspected she might be newsworthy. He made a note to see what could be done about making bail and getting her released. And this time, his other security chief would do the honors.

World news wasn't much to his liking, with the exception of France. The French were still making jokes about the virus, despite a rise in violence. Other than France, Denmark, and Sweden most of the other countries in the world were vigorously fighting the sex plague with quarantines, concentration camps, denial of rations, confiscation of wealth, forced testing for the HI genes, and in several countries really draconian methods: execution of gays and lesbians. He could stop that if he cared to. Those countries were run by dictators whom he had so much dirt on that they would do his bidding in an instant, but for now he wanted their pogroms to continue. Normal citizenry would have to sympathize with gays and lesbians under those circumstances and that was his goal for now, while the homosexual community grew in strength. Too bad that so many of his cohorts would have to die, but no great political movement in history succeeded without martyrs. So be it.

Uh-oh. A blip appeared from his prime hacker. That was almost never good news. He brought the report up. Sure enough, his line into the main FBI headquarters reported disturbing news. Burley Slater was being held incommunicado under Homeland Security provisions. The man would definitely crack.

Their brief affair, begun when he got a proscribed pheromone drug into Slater's drink at a party, was long since over, but he had used recordings of them together to induce Slater to pass information to him for the last three years, bluffing that he didn't mind if someone outted him. Of course Slater would spill his guts, but it made no difference. Preparation, preparation, preparation. He had plans for all contingencies. But best to see if Slater could be disposed of for good. It might be possible; it certainly would if he was released on bail. Nevertheless, all things considered, it might be best to retire to his safe house in the mountains, a place where he would never be traced, until enough of the population was infected with the HI genes so that it would be impossible to arrest him. He switched off the news program and pressed another button on his massive lounge chair.

An hour later he was gone. Messages would be relayed to him through an

encryption program and by such devious routing that he gave no thought to the possibility that he might be found. He had been careful for so long that every possible contingency was taken care of, right down the line.

* * * *

Jantz rented a four wheel SUV as soon as they reclaimed their luggage. He had to check a bag so that he could bring his weapons along: the big .45 for the shoulder holster, a little .24 automatic to go in an ankle holster, and two revolvers to leave with the women if he had to separate from them. He wasn't going to take any chances and revolvers were the easiest weapons for amateurs to use. The arsenal had almost caused them to miss their flight before the airline captain finally approved them as luggage.

Once in the big Charger he pulled up a map on the dash display and made reservations for the three of them at an innocuous motel on the north edge of the city. From there he intended to call Reeves and serve him up with a _fait accompli_ and request a squad of agents to go with him to the resort where Julie thought the next group of carriers were being indoctrinated. At the Holiday Inn with a restaurant and bar he opened up his bag and brought out the two revolvers. Crystal started to reach for one, but he slapped her hand.

"Naughty, naughty. Mustn't play with guns until Daddy tells you." Crystal laughed, but cut it off when she saw how serious he was. "First thing ladies, are these guns loaded?" he asked, as he strapped on his shoulder holster.

"How should we know?"

"Easy; always assume a gun is loaded. Never, _never_ point it at anyone unless you intend to shoot. And don't shoot unless you intend to kill. Understand?" Sobered, Julie and Crystal both nodded. "All right. Now, let me get this other little popgun strapped on and I'll show you how to handle the revolvers."

Both women were more fascinated by the ankle-holstered automatic than the big gun, but he ignored them until it was secured. He dropped his pants leg over the little pistol and explained how to operate, fire, and reload the revolvers.

"What if we get caught carrying these things? Neither of us has a license."

"I'll go to jail for giving them to you-if you get caught before I arrange for a license. In the meantime, I can fake you one that will pass most musters. Hopefully, neither of you will have to use them, but you never know. Now, let me see if Reeves is still in Washington."

He was. Jantz held the phone away from his ear while Reeves shouted. Nevertheless, Reeves would have to go along with him so long as Seagraves approved, and Jantz calculated that he would once he revealed that they could get enough evidence at the resort. Jantz grinned as he listened to Reeves.

"We think we might have enough evidence for a warrant already, but your proposed escapade sounds like good insurance. I'll give the go-ahead."

"No, I have to be the SAIC," he said, pronouncing it 'SAC'. "How many? Hold a sec." He turned to Julie. "How many were in your group and how many others milling around, either as instructors or whatever?" Julie told him as best as she could remember. "I want a dozen good men, no rookies. And two more to come here and watch over Crystal while we're gone."

"No!" Crystal shouted. "I'm not staying here by myself."

"Scratch that. Add them to the squad, but I want them at the motel soonest for backup tonight. Tell them to use whatever credentials, bribes, intimidation, or whatever it takes to get adjoining rooms to me, and have them bring surveillance equipment so they can wide-angle through the peephole and see what's going on outside. Yeah, that technology. And I want to be ready to go tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I'll get a fix on the place. Also, have the local SAC pick a safe house on the north edge of the city and phone the location to me." He read off his cell phone number. "I don't care whether the locals don't like the lack of planning. This is what they're trained for. We'll make it up as we go. The important thing is catching Waterson or the others who know more than we do. Damn right, that's what we're shooting for, info on Perkins, where he is, where the virus was made, what the Spartans are up to, and anything else that will help put an end to this shit. Great. Give Elgin my best. Call me back on my cell when you've got it all arranged. If by chance you can't get me on it, check back here periodically. We'll stay here tonight rather than the safe house. What? A _menage a trois?_ I wish!" He winked at the women, causing Julie to blush and Crystal to eye the king-sized bed and wink back at him.

Hanging up, he started to send Crystal to bring them something to eat, but changed his mind. Best not to separate. Instead, he ordered pizza from a place that delivered. The small refrigerator held spirits at prices inflated only a couple of times over what they should be. However, it was stocked with beer and it was cold. He popped one then hooked his laptop into a terminal and called on Julie.

They were still working when the pizza arrived. Julie had no address for the resort, but going by the general area of where she thought it was, the type of buildings compared to pictures of possible sites, the vistas, and several other ways he and she and

even Crystal thought of to narrow the search they pinpointed the location.

"Be damned," Julie said, who had some familiarity of the Portland area, "if we hadn't gone about it this way I would never have found the place. This is one of those resorts closed to the public, although I didn't know it at the time. They make reservations for conventions, corporate meetings, and parties rather than rent rooms directly. The only way I knew for sure is that I heard my sister talking about it once. She's a big sales rep for Terragene products and they deal with Genetechnics. I should have thought of it sooner."

"No problem so long as we found it," Jantz reassured her, licking his fingers and taking a swallow of beer. "Now comes the hard part; figuring out what units they may be in or whether Genetechnics has taken them all for the week."

"I think they might have. I remember a gang of men who hung together, and most didn't seem interested in any of us women."

'Ah, the other half. We thought there was probably a group of men doing the same thing as the women. That might make it harder, but I wouldn't think many of them would be armed. How about it, Julie? Did you notice any suspicious bulges under jackets?" Jantz stood up to demonstrate.

Julie shrugged and spread her hands. "I'm sorry; it's just not something I would have noticed."

"Okay, but here's something else. I've been so intent on where the carriers are being indoctrinated that I almost forgot someone who might be just as important: Lisanne. Do you think she might be there?"

"I don't know, but if she's not, I might know where to find her."

"What! Why didn't you say so earlier?"

Julie shrank back in her chair. "I'm sorry, I just thought of it. She took me to a place someone let her use when we were, uh, seeing each other. I even remember the address."

"Wonderful!"

Jantz got on the phone, and got a pickup order for Lisanne and a 24/7 stakeout in case she showed up. He grinned thinking of the prodigious way he was using up the agents from the Portland office. Capturing Lisanne would be worth it, though. She was certainly working for Perkins, although he made a bet with himself that she knew nothing of the ultimate aims of the Spartan Society.

"Thanks, Julie. Well, I guess that takes care of all the little problems. Now we have to figure out how to solve the big ones."

"What?" Julie and Crystal asked in unison.

"Number one, who gets the bathroom first; and number two, who sleeps where on the bed."

"I can sit up in the chair and doze," Julie offered in a small voice, aware that she was a quasi-prisoner.

"You can't doze in these chairs. One hour and your back starts hurting. Two hours and everything hurts. Three hours and you break it up for firewood and sleep on the ground."

"We'll manage," Crystal said. "If y'all are as tired as me, sleep is all you're interested in."

Sometime after midnight Jantz woke up and found himself spooned up against Crystal. He had his arm around her waist and bent up so that his hand was cupping one of her breasts. He noted that Julie was resting against Crystal in the same fashion and that she was cupping Julie's breast. He sensed a slow rhythmic movement and figured that Crystal must be caressing Julie's breast with gentle squeezes. With that movement deciphered he became aware that Crystal's breathing pattern was not that of someone who was asleep, and he was reasonably certain that Julie was also awake. He began moving his fingers in the same rhythm as Crystal pressing the rounded flesh of her breast as she was doing with Julie. Presently he heard giggles and became fully awake.

Crystal abruptly shifted and sat up. She pulled her nightie over her head and tucked it under her pillow then lay back, giving Jantz and Julie equal access to her. She felt first one, then the other of her nipples being sucked into a mouth, one large and one smaller. She brought her arms up around each of them and sighed. The sighs turned into gasps as Jantz and Julie's hands met at the juncture of her thighs.

"Omigod, this is too much! I can't ... can't ... stand ... it. Oh god, don't stop don't, don't stop ... oh ... oh. Oh!"

Her body surged up against lips and hands as she shook her head from side to side; unable to be still, impossible to be quiet, as one of the most delicious orgasms she'd ever had washed over her. And after that, Julie wanted to try it, and after that Jantz was bursting with the need for relief. Julie provided it with her mouth, while he sucked hungrily at Crystal's breasts. He found it impossible to stay quiet, too.

"Jesus, I wonder what those agents on either side of us thinks is going on," he said, when he could speak again.

"They probably think you're dreaming," Julie said.

"Right. Dreaming." Crystal laughed.

"Well, any time y'all want to dream some more I'm willing to go to sleep for you. Wow. That was like going off a cliff backwards. And landing in paradise."

A little later they were all really asleep. It took a phone call to wake them.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The wakeup call came a little after four. Jantz sat up in bed reaching for a glass of water to rinse his mouth. He had smoked several of Julie's cigarettes during the evening, and once he had some moisture in his throat he wanted another.

"Wait one..." he mumbled.

He switched on the bedside lamp causing Julie to squint and Crystal to roll away from the glare. He reached for the cigarette pack, cursing himself for starting again after six months of abstinence.

"This is Gregory Sternon, Mister Preston. I'm in charge of this bunch of galumphs you've rounded up. They're all raring to go as soon as you get here."

"Okay, we'll be there soon as we can get up and about. Did you find Lisanne Mercer at that address I gave you?"

"No, but we've still got it staked out."

"Stay on it. We're hoping she can lead us to an agent who was kidnapped in Washington."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Let's not go over it on the phone. I'll see you shortly."

"Fine. Last one here has to bring the donuts."

Jantz grinned and hung up, thinking he needed a carbohydrate boost after last night. He pulled on his clothes then sat down and crossed his legs, hoping he could hold out until the women were finished in the bathroom. He got his mind off the need by ringing the rooms of the agents who had been up all night guarding them. He shook hands with the two special agents and thanked them for standing duty during the night.

"I'll let you go ahead and get some sleep after you escort us to the safe house."

"No way," the larger of the two men said. "We're staying with you."

"All right, I guess one night of missed sleep won't hurt you."

"No problem. The entertainment was fine," the smaller man said, smiling.

Had they been that loud? Oh, well, times were changing. He knew that for a fact when he saw the two men kiss briefly after getting into their car. On the way to the gathering Jantz spoke to Crystal and Julie.

"I'm breaking all kinds of regulations by taking you two along, so let me tell you my explanation. Julie, you're with us to help identify anyone you've seen. And Crystal, I need you along to interpret and identify any genetic evidence we turn up."

"I've seen FBI raids on television so much that I'm anxious to see if the reality matches the depiction," Crystal said with enthusiasm.

Jantz smiled grimly. "Keep wondering. You two are going to sit in a car away from the action. I'm not going to put you in the line of fire. No way."

"Rats. What if we follow you?"

"Remember those big huskies from the motel? They're going to be in a car next to you. Sorry, I'm already in enough trouble as it is if this doesn't pan out."

The safe house was a semi-mansion, single floored, built on a slope, giving it multiple levels. It had been confiscated from a drug kingpin and kept for gatherings like this. It was screened from nearby suburban homes by several acres of trees and shrubs.

Jantz stopped for breakfast rolls and donuts, and many big containers of coffee. Gregory Sternon welcomed him and offered to help carry in the goodies, even though Jantz could smell bacon frying. He asked about it.

"Oh, there's food in the fridge, but not much variety, and we've run out of coffee. If this goes on very long we'll have to restock."

Gregory was short and cherubic, the antithesis of an FBI agent. However, he had a firm manner and the men and women under him spoke to him respectfully. Once everyone was gathered in the huge den Jantz interfaced with the computer. The monitor changed from a picture of Dumbo flying with biplanes to the heading of his cover file. He stood beside the screen so that he could see everyone, carrying his coffee and hoping he could keep from yawning until it took effect.

"In case anyone missed the introductions, I'm Jantz Preston," he began. "I know this is short notice, but we have a chance to crack the source and individuals responsible for the sex virus, or sex plague. Not only that, one of my cohorts here thinks the individuals we're hopefully taking into custody are the harbingers of a newer virus they want to insert into the population in case the original mutation becomes impotent. Our job is to stop them before they can disperse." He waved down a couple of raised hands. "Yes, I know it's possible that you could get infected during the festivities. All I can offer is rubber gloves and masks for those of you who are free of the virus. For those who have already been infected, and are no longer contagious, you can relax. So far this is more or less the same virus, just encapsulated in a different shell. You might catch it, but you won't notice any difference. What will happen is that you'll go into quarantine with the detainees at the CDC facilities in Portland."

Jantz grinned at the groans.

"Relax, I'm told on good authority-" he nodded at Crystal "-that the CDC has designated a special wing for quarantine. It has all the recreational facilities you can want and your only duties will be to guard the detainees, if there are any. Think of it as a three week vacation, if that's how it works out."

Having dispelled most discontent Jantz clicked on the map of Petersburg Palace, the private resort. The name at the top of the layout drew laughs and guffaws, as Jantz figured it would. While they were settling down he nodded for Julie to join him up front. She did, rather apprehensively.

"Folks, this is Julie Barnes. She is a former Spartan Society member and has been through the same indoctrination as the ones we're going after today. She is cooperating with the federal government voluntarily. Feel free to question her on any aspect of the plan as I lay it out, bearing in mind that she was confined to one half of the Petersburg area. For some reason neither she nor I really understand, men and women were separated during the week they were there."

One of the agents spoke up. "I've got a brother who has belonged to that outfit since it got started. They separate men from women because the men have a philosophy that would segregate and confine women like the old Greeks did."

Several of the women agents muttered. Jantz wondered if they were infected, then decided it didn't matter one way or another. It took the rest of the morning for a complete plan for the raid to be hammered out, and agents assigned specific roles. Jantz hoped his assumption that hardly anyone at the resort would be armed proved right. If not, lives could be lost and his career would be over. It might be over anyway. Seagraves and Reeves were going along with him right now, but that could change if he came a cropper.

Gregory sent out for a smorgasbord of sandwiches and drinks for lunch, and an evening snack. Jantz suggested that everyone try to get some rest during the afternoon. The raid was scheduled to take place during the hour that Julie said everyone should be gathered in the two separated conference rooms for the evening briefing. Jantz had seven agents to cover each room. That should be enough.

Gregory assigned him a bedroom. He took Julie and Crystal inside with him, ignoring both smirks and frowns. Once inside he went over their placement that he had omitted from discussing generally.

"Both of you are to stay together, and stay in the car. You'll be parked inside the entrance after we go through. We need all the agents so you'll be alone, but it should be safe. Just wait for me to call. When I do you'll know it's okay to come on up. Julie, that's when I'll need you to identify anyone who was there when you were, particularly Waterson. Somehow he's managed to cull the net of any pictures of him. No one on the raid but you will know him."

"How about me?" Crystal asked.

Jantz felt a little catch in his chest at the thought of leading Crystal into danger. "When we're ready for Julie it ought to be safe enough, so come along with her. We'll be watching for your car."

"Good. Can we take a nap now?"

"Just a nap?" Julie twitched her nose, making her freckles seem to move around on her face.

Jantz shook his head. "Maybe we ought to let the virus infect everyone, then everybody would spend their spare time in bed instead of out creating mischief."

"I can think of worse ways to run the world," Julie said. "If I had known..."

Crystal put an arm around her. "Forget it. Everyone makes mistakes. You're getting a chance to rectify yours."

There were two beds in the room. Jantz took the smaller. The last thing he remembered hearing was the sound of feminine voices talking in whispers, interspersed with stifled giggles. He was too sleepy to wonder what they were talking about, or why it was amusing.

The plan was to have the lead van in the convoy of seven vehicles overwhelm the guard shack at the entrance to the resort before they could contact security at Petersburg. Another car would be parked at the road entrance with the two agents Jantz had told Crystal and Julie about; they would make certain no one came along after the main party entered, and be near enough for Crystal and Julie to honk and attract their attention if need be. Jantz, as SAIC of the operation, left that to four specialists trained to deceive, decoy, and capture.

According to Julie there would be two guards, one inside the shack while the other went outside when vehicles approached. One of the specialists had set up the decoy: a cable attached to the valve stem on one of the front tires. As the driver of the van approached the valve stem would be pulled out, giving an instant flat tire. The driver would time it so that the guards could hear the bumping begin, then grow worse. This would give the driver an excuse to get out of the van. As soon as he was standing, complaining over the flat, another agent would hack into the guard shack computer preventing it from communicating with anyone. While the inside guard was trying to figure out the problem the outside guard would quietly have a pistol stuck in his ribs and be asked to lead the agent inside. A few seconds later, the other agents would explode from the van for backup.

Jantz waited tensely in the lead vehicle parked out of sight, having driven the last mile without lights. Gregory involved the local police without letting them in on anything material, simply calling in a favor and having two patrol cars at the last intersections east and west before the road leading into Petersburg Palace to prevent any local patrols from interfering. Crystal gripped his hand tightly, excited at being a part of a FBI action. It seemed to take forever before Jantz heard the muted ring of his phone. He punched the talk button, missed in his eagerness, and had to do it again. He listened for the voice of the lead agent.

"Guard shack secure. No casualties. Come on in."

Jantz let out a huge breath of air, squeezed Crystal's hand, and started the van. He turned on the parking lights, a signal for the others to get started. He waited a moment to allow them to get ready then drove forward.

The resort consisted of three buildings; a small central administrative unit that separated sprawling, one-story residence units on either side. The convoy split in two,

three vehicles going to one side of the administrative building, three to the other. Julie and Crystal were transferred to the van with the flat tire, which had been rolled to the side of the road. The car Jantz had hitched a ride in pulled into the canopied driveway followed by the other two. As if they were a group of arriving guests Jantz and the two agents with him walked through the front entrance, quickly followed by those from the two other cars.

"May I help you, sir?" the attendant at the reception desk asked Jantz.

Glancing around, Jantz pulled his weapon. The clerk backed away while making shoving motions with his hands, as if to ward off what he assumed was a homicidal robber.

"Don't move, and don't talk," Jantz said softly. "Berlantz, you keep this gentleman company. The rest of you follow me. Keep your weapons handy, but out of sight."

Jantz led his team down a long hallway. It ended at an intersection, then went left and right. Jantz took the right turn, counted four doors and paused. Voices and laughter were coming from inside. He motioned to the two agents designated to go through first then drop back to each side of the door ready to cover the other four agents as they came in. Weapons came out, and Jantz gave the signal.

The first two agents pushed open the double doors, stepped aside, and shouted, "FBI! Freeze!"

One man reached inside his jacket and ran jerkily towards a rear door. One of the lead agents fired, aiming low. The man went down, but was still combative. He got to his feet and raised his handgun, teeth clenched in a grimace of pain, and aimed at Jantz as if knowing he was the instigator of the raid. Jantz had no idea whether it was his shot or those of two others that dropped the man, a bullet hole in his head and another in his chest. It didn't matter, as he was dead before he hit the floor.

The rest of the operation was anti-climactic. Two other men were disarmed. Some of the dozen men appeared puzzled at the sight of masks and rubber gloves. The two who had been armed did not. Jantz signaled them out as Spartan Society indoctrinators. The others probably didn't know they were carriers of another sex virus.

It took some time to get the body searches completed and more time to organize the bundling of the papers. Two of the agents who were computer specialists determined what needed to be taken from the hand-held laptops, and in-house computers. Jantz called the team that had gone after the women's group. They had less trouble; only two women were armed and neither of them tried using their weapons. He punched Crystal's

phone number to tell her and Julie to come to the administrative building where the captives would be sorted. He got a 'number not available' message. Puzzled, he tried again. An eerie sense that something dire had happened rushed through his mind. Damn all, he should have left those agents with them, not down the road.

"Thomas! Come with me! Hurry! The rest of you, get these slug-uglies cuffed and into the admin building."

The first agent followed him down the hall. Fortunately, the keys had been left in the lead vehicle. Thomas managed to slide into the passenger seat just as Jantz burned half the rubber from the rear tires.

"What is it?" Thomas yelled, over the squeal of tires trying to gain traction. He slammed the passenger door shut, almost catching his fingers in it as the vehicle accelerated.

"The women. They're not answering my call."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ched Waterson was having a drink and quietly congratulating himself over the abduction of Dee, as well as the other rookie agents grabbed at regional offices by his trusted crews. The Fibs would move mountains to find their young agents using time and manpower that could have gone into running down the purveyor of the sex virus. He led the operation in Houston, feeling that it was the most important. That damned Preston was way in front of either Washington or the regional offices in working out what was happening, as he confirmed from Dee. He had her drugged and was about finished with her, other than a last bit of fun. He started stripping her when he heard the muffled sound of gunshots coming from the conference room. He knew immediately what it meant. Somehow the Fibs were onto the location of the Petersburg Palace. He grabbed Dee's arm and yanked her upright.

"Come on, bitch. You're my hostage. Damned if I'm going down without a fight."

He took his laptop and pulled her along, not caring that she was clad in a bra and ripped skirt. He wasn't sure he would need her, but if not she could be disposed of easily. He visualized the back way out that would lead him to the guard shack to come up unseen on the vehicle and agents that should be there blocking egress from the resort.

Dee regained some sense of what was happening, but was still unable to think. She stumbled along with Waterson yanking and pushing to keep her moving. Somewhere in

the recesses of her mind a fear for her life made itself felt like a bad dream. She had little memory of the abduction other than trying to reach for her handgun on the bedside table. She couldn't get loose from the strong arms of a man who had gotten into her bedroom without waking her, and she couldn't scream for the wad of chloroform cloth covering her face. After that, she was only vaguely aware of being in a car, then a plane. She knew she was drugged, but it didn't matter. Then the questioning began. And when that was finished, and after being left alone for some time, the man she knew must be Waterson began to disrobe her. He was just getting started when the shots sounded.

Waterson was very quiet as he approached the guard shack from the brush-concealed trail. He could tell that Dee was shaking off the effect of the drugs. Before she could gather her senses he pulled out the bottle of chloroform he had brought along. He took his handkerchief, doused it good, and covered her mouth and nose. She struggled for a moment then relaxed. He eased her to the ground and sneaked closer to the car, coming from one side, staying in the shadows to avoid being lit by the same full moon that had highlighted Crystal's body for Jantz the previous night. As he got closer the light was good enough for him to recognize one of the women in the front seat. Julie Barnes was chatting with the other woman just as if she had never been arrested.

* * * *

It was a muggy night and Crystal rolled the window down to get some air while they waited. Julie was nervously verbose, questioning her about what might happen to her-as if a CDC scientist would know that-and saying how sorry she was for everything, and how if she saw Lisanne again she would wring her neck.

Crystal quit listening. She was familiar with the odor of chloroform. It was a constituent used for many laboratory procedures, and the sultry breeze wafting the scent into the open window was incongruent. Her hand stole to her purse and slipped into the pocket that held the revolver Jantz had given her. Her body trembled as her fingers curled around the butt of the gun and eased it out. She wished that Jantz would come back. Or that any of the agents would return. She didn't know if she could shoot anyone, and she was dreadfully afraid that she was going to have to make that decision in a very short time. Jantz had told her that Dee had been taken with a chloroformed rag. It had been found in her room.

* * * *

Waterson had to act before he wanted. It could be only a matter of minutes before the women were called to the buildings or someone came to get them. He had to gain access to the car and get away, but he took a few seconds to open his laptop and press that special combination of keys. It gave away Perkins' location and the password for access

to his hidden location to a special person. It also sent along a recording, just to make things interesting. If he didn't get away, neither would Brandon Perkins. He stood, got his bearings, and rushed forward, weapon ready. He didn't notice that the vehicle he intended to hijack had a flat tire.

* * * *

Crystal had not voiced her concerns to Julie, fearing she might inadvertently tip off whoever was sneaking up on them. She was watching around without trying to be obvious. The rearview mirror gave her warning. She saw a dark figure rise into a crouch, then dash forward. No agent would act in that manner. She held the revolver in her lap, still trembling. Julie caught the movement, and her mouth dropped open. At the same moment the dark figure was at the driver's door where Crystal was sitting. He intended to put the fear of God into the woman first, and use his weapon next if he had to. Crystal used hers first.

As Waterson yanked open the door, yelling bloody murder, Crystal pointed the short barrel of the .38 at his stomach and pulled the trigger. The recoil was startling; the noise even more so. Waterson stood for a second, a look of utter surprise on his face as he crumpled to the ground. Crystal had raised her aim as she pulled the trigger and the shot took Waterson full in the chest. She stared down at him lying on the ground giving out his last gasping gargles, shot squarely through the heart. It was impossible for her to believe that she had killed a man.

Julie screamed, making Jantz think she and Crystal were in dire straits, especially after the gunshot. The thought of Crystal being hurt overrode any thought of caution. He jumped out of the car while it was still moving, looking for opponents. Crystal saw who it was in the bright moonlight.

"Jantz! Oh, God, help!"

She scrambled from the vehicle still holding her pistol, and nearly got shot by the agent with Jantz. The next moment Crystal dropped her gun and was in Jantz's arms sobbing either from relief, terror, or simple after-action funk; she had no way of knowing. Just then, the two agents who had been guarding the road drove up. Jantz went to the open window very carefully, not showing a weapon in case of mistaken identity.

"They're okay. You two may as well go on up to the resort and help out."

The driver nodded and they left, still showing only parking lights.

* * * *

Lisanne was only a few moments behind Waterson and her escape followed his almost exactly. She passed the recumbent figure of Dee with hardly a glance figuring Waterson had killed her before he captured the car. She stopped as the gunshot resounded in the night. She thought of retreating, but a quick consideration told her that the vehicle ahead in the moonlight might be her only means of escape. She berated herself for letting Waterson talk her into coming to Petersburg Palace to help with the new carriers. She should have gone to her hideaway, knowing that she was on a wanted list. Too late for recriminations, though, but give her a chance and she would be on her way. And it looked as if her chance might come.

Walking lightly in a crouch she recognized Jantz and Julie. There was another woman with her. Jantz and the unknown woman were engaged in an embrace while Julie looked on with an amused expression on her face. She froze as a car with two men drove up, paused to talk with Jantz, then went on their way. As soon as they were out of sight Lisanne advanced, holding her .22 automatic close to her chest. When Julie spotted her, she went into a shooter's stance.

"Freeze!" Lisanne yelled.

She wondered why Julie was no longer a prisoner, but she took no chances. Seconds later she was glad she didn't. Julie's trembling hand betrayed her as she tried to draw her revolver from her jeans pocket where she had tucked it. With cold-blooded determination Lisanne fired two shots and hit Julie, one in the neck and one in the left chest. She gave a truncated scream as blood flooded into her lungs and deprived her of air. She collapsed almost on top of Waterson.

There was nothing Jantz could do, except glare and hope Lisanne would leave he and Crystal alive until relief came. He cursed himself for hugging instead of watching. And for not having an agent stay behind. The moonlight glinted from the dark pools of Lisanne's eyes, the evil calculation showing plainly. She would leave no witnesses. Jantz put his body in front of Crystal; knowing death lurked in the silvery glint of the gun Lisanne pointed unwaveringly at his chest.

"A nice gesture, but I have four bullets left. Move over, I don't want to risk hurting the car's engine."

"No, damn you. If you knew how well you've been played for a sucker, you'd be hunting Perkins, not me."

"I'm not hunting you; you're just in my way. Why do you say I've been played for a sucker, big boy? You're the one who got played. By me."

"Come in with us and I can show you files from the inner council of the Spartan Society. If they gain power women are going to be treated worse than dirt, just like in the old Greek days. You didn't know that, did you? Perkins kept it a secret."

Jantz was trying to keep her talking-and not shooting. He still didn't know the ins and outs of the relationship between Perkins and the Spartan Society. But he had rung a bell.

"Liar! You're making that up!"

"No, I'm not. Kill me and you'll never find out."

"Get out of the way or I'll shoot."

"I can't," Jantz said. He felt himself trembling, unable to help it.

"Then die," Lisanne spat.

Her fingers tightened around the gun. But before she could get off a shot a jagged, fist-sized rock hurtled out of the darkness hitting Lisanne in the back of her neck. At the same time a feminine voice screamed an unintelligible imprecation. The impact of the rock caused her hand to jerk and the gun to fire, but the missile spoiled her aim. Rather than hitting Jantz in the chest the bullet gouged a furrow inside his forearm. Before she could fire again another weapon discharged with an orange flame streaking up from the ground. Julie used her last breath to bring her gun, held in both dying hands, up far enough for the bullet to hit Lisanne in the neck, severing her carotid artery and cutting her spinal cord. She fell and bled to death as Jantz and Crystal watched.

Dee stumbled into the clearing by the guard shack. She mumbled incoherently as Jantz let loose of Crystal to keep her from falling. He knew Dee had saved their lives, even though he had not seen the rock thrown in desperation after returning to consciousness.

Gregory roared up in a car with two other agents, but it was over by then. Julie was dead, Waterson was dead, and Lisanne was dead; a complete sweep. It only remained for them to see what could be gleaned from the conference rooms and interrogations of prisoners. Hopefully, some bits of data would give sufficient reason for warrants to be issued for searches of Perkins' home and Genetechnics' labs.

In the meantime, Jantz held Crystal close enough to come near to crushing her. The brush with death made him shudder, and also made him realize that he was in love. Even standing among the carnage it was the most wonderful feeling he could imagine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The three week quarantine would have been boring but for the presence of Crystal and Dee, and the opportunity to participate in net conferences with Seagraves and Reeves and, once, the director himself. Reeves was peeved with him, but couldn't argue with results, and there had been results aplenty unhampered by lawyerly obstructionism. Ordinarily, Jantz felt Homeland Security laws went much too far in restricting the rights of citizens when threats to the nation were involved, but the lack of defense lawyers greatly speeded this investigation.

Searches of Waterson's and Lisanne's rooms at the Petersburg yielded less than it should, but a canvass of the grounds surrounding the guard shack turned up Waterson's laptop and that contained a wealth of data, including places where there were hidden recordings. It took the talents of Gene Tunectun to crack the laptop drive that gave them access to the security files at Genetechnics. Lisanne's computer files were found at her hideaway when a warrant was obtained to search it.

It took time to sort everything out, because every bit of data was buried in files that were disguised, hidden, and ingeniously encrypted, leading investigators to names and addresses of perfectly innocent citizens. Contacting them and finding they knew nothing took more manpower and time, which was intended to theoretically give the top guns time to go into deep hiding. There weren't many of them, and they were hard to identify, but after three weeks warrants were obtained and raids planned on Brandon Perkins' main home, Genetechnics laboratory, and the homes and offices of top men and women from the Spartan Society and from the ranks of the executives who ran Genetechnics.

Jantz sat in one of the rec rooms in a wing of the CDC at Portland, complaining to Dee that Reeves was paying him back for his unauthorized operation by not releasing him from quarantine in time to get in on the raids.

"I should think you had enough action at Petersburg," Dee said. She patted his leg then wrapped her arms around her chest in a reflex when she thought of how close to death they all had come. And how Julie had indeed died.

"I would like to be in on the busts going down tonight. If it all works it should put an end to the sex plague. We've got the goods on the top scientists Perkins used. Did you know that he had a lab fixed up just for them where they produced the virus?"

"How about a cure?"

"I haven't a clue," Jantz said. "You'd think some of them would have worked on one,

or at least a vaccine. Tunectun found files showing that every single one of the scientists there was either gay or lesbian. That wouldn't have left much of an incentive for a cure. We may just have to live with the virus and hope it doesn't pop up again."

"It's already doing that," Crystal said, from behind his back.

Jantz looked over his shoulder. Crystal bent down and stole a kiss then came around to sit on the arm of the little lounge, resting her arm on Jantz's shoulder.

"Please don't say that," Dee said. "It's already caused enough problems and then some. Did you hear the Pope? He's issued an encyclical. Anyone catching the virus is assumed to be in cohorts with the devil and excommunicated."

To Jantz, who thought religious theory as screwed up as the tax codes handed down by congress, it made as little sense as the sacred cows of the Hindus or the twisted logic of Marx and Lenin. Nevertheless, he had to ask.

"Why did he do that? Catching the virus is no one's fault; it just happens."

"According to the Pope it's God's way of sorting out the sinners from the faithful. For a change the Baptists and Catholics agree on something."

Dee moved over to give Crystal room to scrunch in on the other side of Jantz. She wished she were sitting next to her, but it wouldn't matter much if she was. Jantz and Crystal were obviously a couple despite Crystal having acquired the HI genes. They requested a room together. Dee spent a couple of nights with them, but she found herself wanting more contact with women and less with men. Crystal welcomed her into their bed and Jantz voiced no objections, but Dee felt like an intruder. She found herself thinking more often about Mary, but it would be a few days before they could get together. In the meantime...

"Crystal, have any of us shown positive for the new virus those nuts were ready to release?"

"Not so far as I know. But I do have some news, which is what I came from the conference call to tell Jantz, then got distracted by his stud body and handsome face and forgot to mention it." Jantz whispered something in her ear that Dee didn't catch. "Ha!" she said. "Just for that, I hope you come down with both varieties." Jantz whispered something else. "Oh, all right. I like you the way you are. Were. Will be. Can be." She kissed him on the cheek.

"You're embarrassing me," Dee said.

"Sorry, but it's been almost two hours since we've seen each other."

"Well, you should be caught up now. You were saying?"

"Oh, yes. Atlanta says they have a vaccine for the original virus and a team watching for variants and twitching the vaccine each time the virus wiggles. It's not a perfect solution, but anyone who wants to stay straight can do so with weekly shots."

"Great!" Jantz said.

"You shouldn't worry," Dee said. "You never did catch the original, did you?"

"No, but I don't catch much of anything except crooks and beautiful women."

That remark got him a rib tickle from both women.

"There's more," Crystal said, seriously. "There's a cure in the works, too."

"Another virus?"

"Yup. Once we saw how the original one was designed the folks in Atlanta figured out the engineering sequence. They're going about it in several directions, but the most promising one is inserting the JRF gene into a retrovirus and infecting recipients. Guess what the JR stands for?" She paused, grinning. "Don't bother. JRF is the brand new acronym for the Jantz Resistance Factor."

"You mean I've got a gene named after me? Can I patent it?"

"Ha. You can't even sell it; we're giving it away. Besides, that's only one avenue. Others are thinking that the HI genes can be replaced, or suppressed, or a combination of both. At any rate, the public is clamoring for a cure so it will be available soon. The pressure is going to be so great that at the first sign of success it will be made available without the usual long term testing."

Dee frowned. "The public wants a cure? Is that the straight public or the public that has been infected?"

"Most of the uninfected want the cure now and given forcibly, if for no other reason than to get the stock market out of the doldrums. That portion of the population that is infected is divided. The ones who have immersed themselves in their new, um, lifestyles are content. Others are ambivalent, and still others want the cure as soon as it's available."

"It sounds like interesting times are ahead," Jantz said.

"You don't think they're already interesting?"

"Oh, sure. Just more so. I think I'm ready for a nap."

"You're always ready for a nap," Crystal responded, but she wasted no time getting to her feet.

Crystal took Jantz's hand, then winked at Dee. "Want to come along? Old stud body here really does nap in the afternoon."

Dee rose to join them. Later, Dee went back to her room, and Crystal and Jantz sat propped up in bed watching the news and each other. Crystal ventured an opinion about Dee.

"I'll bet she doesn't take the cure. If it weren't for you, I know she wouldn't."

"Maybe I shouldn't ask, but how about you?"

Crystal slid her hand under the sheet. "I like myself the way I am now. I love you, but the right woman is nice, too."

"Funny that the genes work that way in you and not Dee."

"Genes are funny, period. We'll be another hundred years correlating all the interactions of environment and heredity, even after determining what each gene on the chromosomes are for. In the meantime, my heterosexual genes feel like they have an urgent need to be expressed."

"Be my guest," Jantz said, laughing, and gathered her to him.

The next day Jantz was invited to participate in an encrypted conference via the net. He asked Crystal to leave at the behest of one of the deputy directors who was so rigid in his thinking that he refused to proceed with a non-agency person listening. Once settled down, and after introductions, Seagraves spoke.

"The top men in the Spartan Society cracked. They implicated Brandon Perkins, but we still don't know his whereabouts. On the other hand, it appears as if Genetechnics was only marginally involved with engineering the sex virus. The scientists working on it were Spartans and their department was compartmented off from other research and funded by Perkins through a couple of devious routes. The attorney general, with the consent of the president, has agreed to divulge the inner workings of the Spartans and

their prospective future society where women would barely be allowed to speak, much less have a role in running the country. The two Spartans agreed to talk in return for partial immunity." Seagraves let a disgusted grimace show on his face. "This was a political decision. The president thinks that when women-read women voters-hear the Spartans' plans that will be the end of them, and a reconciliation of some segments of the population where ... um ... disagreements have occurred."

"Disagreements?" another deputy remarked, her thin lips drawn in a line across her face. It was plain that she didn't equate riots, mobs, and concentration camps with 'disagreements'.

"Whatever," Seagraves continued. "That's what the boss wants and that's what he'll get. Now let's move on. I have it on good authority that by this time tomorrow one of our computer experts will have located Mister Perkins' hideaway. He is following a thread that he tells us is genuine."

Jantz knew that would be Tunectun. He made a note to himself to thank the man when all this was over-and to never get on the bad side of him.

"And I have some good news. Apparently the new virus Perkins and his minions were planning to release was contained. The carriers are in quarantine and none of the agents who came in contact with them have tested positive. Therefore, on the advice of the CDC, I'm releasing the team that did such a fine job on the Petersburg operation so that they can get ready for the new operation to capture Mister Perkins. I'm putting Special Agent Jantz Preston in charge of readying this same team for deployment. He has been promoted to assistant deputy director for the Houston office and will assume his duties there in the near future. For now he is the SAIC of the Perkins detail. Gregory Sternon will be the assistant SAIC. He is responsible for equipment and air deployment, fixed wing and rotary, ready to go anywhere, any time. We want this man."

Jantz couldn't help but grin, although he tried to conceal it from the cam. Hell, right now the whole world wanted Perkins. Seagraves wasn't fooled, but the deputies were muttering among themselves at their conference table in Washington and it passed them by. Jantz's happiness wasn't so much for the promotion as for the chance to finish off Brandon Perkins, the man responsible for so many deaths and so much unhappiness.

* * * *

Perkins had built his retreat in the Cascade Mountains by flying in material and workmen from other parts of the country and not letting them know where they were. So far as he knew, it had worked; otherwise he would be in government hands by now. As it was, he had a half-dozen true fanatics and Spartan adherents with him. These would

defend him to the death should he be tracked down, allowing him to set other plans into action. Always have a contingency for every possible setback. It was a motto that served him well.

Besides the armed men Perkins had for the last three weeks been worked on by a renegade plastic surgeon. He disliked changing his appearance so drastically, but better to be safe than let some casual passerby identify him. The one thing he hadn't been able to do was crack the FBI deputy directors' encryption system. It left him with a hollow feeling, like a void where a tooth once was. Failing to know their plans all he could do was prepare and hope he would have just a little more time. Most of his money was in the Cayman Islands where he already had another lab waiting.

* * * *

It felt great to be free of the quarantine. Jantz and Dee accepted transportation from the hospital back to the same house where the bust at Petersburg palace had begun. It was like returning home, especially since he brought Crystal with them. He hadn't mentioned that to Reeves or Seagraves. When Dee looked askance at him for bringing an outsider into a dangerous assignment, he grinned. Again, he used the excuse that Crystal might be needed to identify or interpret biological materials. The excuse wasn't that far-fetched and Dee agreed, more or less. She agreed even more after Crystal invited her to join she and Jantz that night. Crystal was trying to decide whether she would take the cure and she wanted to make love to a woman again before deciding. Unknown to her, Dee was thinking the same thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Late the next day Tunectun found the end of the thread he was following. It had split into two pathways. He followed the most probable, confirmed the location, then went back to check the other, which had gone to an improbable recipient. Improbable, that is, until he opened the file and saw what was in it. Gene Tunectun cared little about the normal workings of society unless it impacted on him. And in this case it had; he had caught the sex virus early on and hated what it had done to him-even as he found himself powerless to resist the homosexual urges he was subject to.

It almost cost him his job. After the virus settled in he had no idea how to go about meeting those of like desire other than the Internet. This led him into the Montrose section of Houston and involvement with a boy who was underage, but hadn't looked it. Jim Reeves intervened after his arrest and made all references to the incident disappear. He didn't forget it, though. Now that Perkins had been identified as the instigator of the

sex plague he intended to have his revenge. But perhaps this Waterson had sent that last file to take care of it for him. At least he was heading in the right direction.

* * * *

Perkins was nothing if not thorough. Unknown to the residents still with him he had the house rigged with a viral time bomb. The new virus was contained by the damned FBI. But what if no one knew they had contracted it, like the last time? The vial of concentrated virus was set to release into the air conditioning vents as soon as the Fibbies busted into this place. He had left another vial in the vents at Genetechnics set to go off two days from now. Between those two, his fortune in numbered accounts in the Caymans and Switzerland, and his changed appearance he would succeed in changing the sexual orientation of the world, even more so than he had already done.

* * * *

"We're a go!" Jantz exclaimed, punching off his phone.

He turned it back on to alert his team. Fifteen minutes later they gathered in the rec room where a huge wall screen displayed a mountain home located halfway down a canyon hidden by surrounding firs. A smaller screen was set up beside it, displaying what Tunectun had said was the likely floor plan. He had culled enough architectural data to be reasonably sure of the layout. He still did not mention that there was another party who already knew where Perkins was-and who might beat them to the location.

Plans were made on the assumption that Perkins would go to ground in a private home he owned, but was not listed on any tax rolls. That proved to be the case, but Jantz hadn't anticipated what a booger it was going to be to storm the place. He was reduced to two choices. The first was to go overland and sneak down the canyon walls and attain complete surprise, but this would take several days. The second option was a helicopter-borne assault, a functional plan already in place and which would not be a surprise because of the sound of the helicopters, but they could go within twelve hours. He opted for the second, not wanting to give Perkins more leeway to either escape or produce more mischief. Six hours later the two choppers rose into the air and headed north.

* * * *

The password was given and confirmed by the computer, showing him to be one of Waterson's operatives. The man was allowed to pass and given directions to the trail leading down. He looked much the worse for wear claiming to have been on the run since the Petersburg bust. The guard saw no reason to doubt the story since one other scientist had also made his way to the canyon home since they had arrived. Two hours

later, well past the time the man should have been met by Perkins, the guard heard the sound of approaching helicopters. He called Perkins to give warning, but there was no answer. He had no time to call again; night vision scopes gave away his position, as well as the guard on the canyon floor. He died seconds after raising his automatic rifle and firing at the chopper.

Jantz's ears echoed with the thunder of the door gunner's machine gun fire. He stared at two small holes in the side paneling over his head. Six inches lower and he would have ceased to care about the mission. He glanced around to see if anyone was hurt and got a thumbs-up from everyone. The chopper hesitated in midair then dropped rapidly. Jantz's stomach protested and his ears popped, then they were on the ground. He jumped out, leading his team to the house.

A half hour earlier, Brandon Perkins was calculating how long it would take the new virus to spread given the limited method of dispersal. The algorithms he used were not much help; too many variables. Frustrated, he decided to have a drink while checking the news one last time before he left the next day. Everything he could do was done, and staying would only increase the risk of capture. Better to get on his way and get established in the little village his money would control. From there he could access his funds in the Caymans and the lab he had set up there. He was paying attention to new statistics being released by the CDC, and didn't hear the door to the den open. He did hear the booted footsteps, though.

Perkins whirled around in his chair. The man standing in front of him pointed a heavy automatic pistol at his belly. He punched a button on his PDA. It began speaking, "..._ while you're at it, take care of Ralphie for me, too."_

"Ralphie! I ... don't believe th-"

"Did you really think I would live as a criminal hunted by the governments of every nation while you got away clean? Waterson kept me out of sight, but now he's gone. And now you're gone!"

Perkins heard the explosion at the same time the impact from the hollow point .45 slug hit him in the solar plexus; tumbling and expanding as it tore through his body. The exit wound was much larger than the entrance. Ralph left him lying in a pool of blood, still alive but wounded so grievously that he would die soon, and suffer horribly before he did.

"Bastard," Ralph said, wiping prints from the gun and placing it in Perkins' dying hand.

He cared little about what would happen next; he had no desire to spend his life in prison or face execution. He was simply going through the motions. He never heard the shot from one of Perkins' guards that killed him quickly and cleanly.

As word of Perkins' death spread among his cohorts, resistance ceased. By the time the sporadic return fire was suppressed, and Jantz's team rappelled down from the helicopter there was no fight left in the opposition. The men who had vowed to die before surrendering were cuffed and led away, all except the one who had killed Perkins' former lover. He was shot trying to escape.

Once the place was secured Jantz called in Crystal and other CDC scientists, and a contingent of specialists to probe into the computer hard drives and backups scattered around the house. Most of them belonged to the guards. Perkins' personal computer died with him, blown up by a charge of C4, the explosion triggered when his heartbeat ceased.

A day later the bleary-eyed Jantz and Crystal climbed into a helicopter ready to get back and catch a good night's sleep. As he buckled his seat belt Jantz felt a tickling sensation in his nostrils. He sniffed, sucked in his breath, and let it out in an explosive sneeze. At the time, he thought nothing of it.

THE END

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