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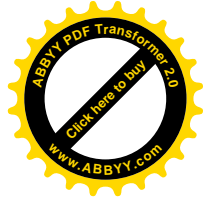
To Lida Quillen. Thanks for all the support and help.

CHAPTER ONE

It could have happened to anyone. I just happened to be on duty in the lab that night when the accident victim came in.

"Laboratory. Mister Brandon speaking," I said very correctly, when the phone rang, already guessing what it would be. Most calls to the lab at that time of night were from either the emergency room or the intensive care unit and I had been to intensive care already just a few minutes ago. The blood from that patient was already in the chemistry unit being analyzed.

It was the Emergency Room. I picked up the tray containing all the phlebotomy supplies by its handle, automatically checking to be sure I had enough of everything; needles, vacutainers, syringes for hard to get veins, special needles for the syringes, alcohol sponges, cotton balls, band-aids and so forth. Everything was there, as I knew it would be. Checking the phlebotomy tray was always the first thing I did when coming on duty; that and getting a fresh pot of coffee going. I'm a caffeine addict.



Most small hospitals try to have the lab and X-Ray departments close to the emergency room but with Lamont Memorial in Lufkin, that wasn't the case. The building had grown in fits and starts as medical care changed and technology advanced. The lab was up on the second floor and down a long hall from the elevators. Most of the time I didn't wait on the elevators; I was getting old and needed to exercise. Taking the stairs when I got called was one way of getting it.

"Hi Mike," Sandy Jervis, the charge nurse said. "Room one."

"Thanks," I told her, not bothering to ask what the problem was. It really didn't matter to me. As long as I had been in the game, I had seen it all. Or thought I had.

The patient was lightly strapped to the gurney, with the ER doc and another nurse busy working on him. Carla, one of the nursing students, handed me the lab request forms. I glanced at them, then at the patient, and wondered what they wanted me for. The man on the gurney looked as if he were already dead. His face had that whitish gray pallor of death and I couldn't see his chest moving. His clothes had been cut away and a bloody sheet was pulled back up onto his chest, showing a massive trauma to both of his legs, as if he had been run over by a vehicle. The doc and nurse both had blood on them, a no-good way to be working in this day of AIDS, Hepatitis, Avian Pneumonitis and God knows what else the terrorists might be cooking up. The wounds had stopped bleeding and simply gaped open. I could see both the tibia and fibula, the lower leg bones of one of his legs. Both were shattered like someone had gone in with a big nutcracker and purposely crushed them.

"Is he still with us?" I asked.

"Barely," the doc said, then looked puzzled. "It's not typical shock trauma, but damned if I can find anything else wrong besides his legs. Witnesses said it was a high speed vehicle accident." I didn't know the doctor's name. The hospital used contract docs for the ER and they came and went oftener than new Medicare regulations.

Looking at the patient, I doubted there was much blood pressure and figured his veins would be hard to get into. I decided to go with a 20 cc syringe and 21 gauge needle rather than vacutainers or a butterfly. Hardly any of the younger techs even know how to use a syringe, but I think I mentioned earlier that I wasn't a youngster, not by a good many years.

The patient's vein popped up when I put the tourniquet around his



arm, much more visible than I had expected. I had just gotten all the blood I needed and withdrawn the needle when the patient gave a sudden spasm. Both of his arms jerked upward at the same time as his feet began thrashing, as if he wanted to run somewhere. The leg with the broken bones bent at an angle that was normally impossible, making it look like it had been torn off and stuck back on with glue-but I wasn't noticing that. His forearm hit my hand where I was still holding a piece of gauze on the puncture site and knocked it up into my other hand, the one holding the syringe of blood. I felt the prick of the needle entering my wrist.

"Oh Goddamn!" I cursed loudly, jerking my hand away. The needle pulled out of my wrist but it was already too late, of course. If the patient had an infectious disease that could be transferred by blood, I probably had it now too. I had been holding the damn syringe at just the right angle for the force of the patient's arm to cause me to press on the syringe plunger, injecting a bit of his blood into my system.

The doc and the nurse were busy trying to keep the patient from falling off the gurney and at the same time realigning the broken leg with an air cast. They couldn't spare me a glance and I knew they were assuming my curse was simply a reaction to the sudden movement of the patient.

It had been a long night. I was tired and my feet were hurting and I didn't feel like filling out an incident report with all the time and paperwork it would entail. Besides, paperwork wouldn't do me a damn bit of good if I had caught something. I quickly transferred aliquots of blood to three different vacutainers, then removed the needle from the syringe, all the while concealing the dot of red on my wrist where the needle had hit me. I dropped the used needle into the disposal box, stripped off the disposable gloves and got out of there still cursing but silently. It had been a long while since I had gotten stuck by a contaminated needle, but it certainly wasn't the first time. That sort of thing is an occupational hazard for a lab tech, and a very dangerous one in this day of AIDS and Hepatitis C and all the other deadly diseases, but I'm a fatalist; I figured if I had caught anything, filling out an incident form wasn't going to make it go away. Later on I could run some tests on myself and see whether I had lucked out again-or hit the bad end of the jackpot.

*** * * ***

Back in the lab, I set up the runs for a blood count and a chemistry panel on the patient with two of the tubes of blood, dropped one in a rack to begin cross-matching some blood for him and set the last one, the spare, in a rack in the back of the big refrigerator. The panel would take a while, but the blood count was finished in only a minute



or two, a far cry from the old days when I was a youngster. Back then instruments were already in labs that did the numerical count of red and white blood cells, but the techs had to stain a slide and examine it under a high power microscope to differentiate the white blood cells into separate categories that told the doctor whether and what type of disease might be present. That was hardly ever done these days except when the instrument gave odd results. Like right then.

The blood analyzer dinged and flashed a light at me while it printed out the results. Not to get technical, but the counts were all screwed up, red and white blood cells alike. None of it made sense to the electronic sensors. The results didn't make sense to me, either.

Either a cold agglutinin or advanced leukemia of some sort was my first thought. I glanced at my watch. It was almost time for the morning shift to begin showing up, but I still had time to make a slide and take a gander at what the blood looked like to the human eye. I began the preparations and that's when all the weirdness started.

I heard the entrance door swing open and almost immediately there was a shout. "Stand where you are! Don't move!"

I moved of course. When I turned around there was the ER doc, being shepherded by two grim looking men in suits. One of them wore a thin little mustache that didn't match the shade of his blond hair. The other was dark colored and had black, swept back hair. Both were wearing suits but what they also had in common was a scared but determined look on their faces.

"Where's the blood? We want it, right now!"

I had no idea what in hell was going on, but the muzzle of the gun one of the men was pointing at me got my attention quicker than seeing one of the nurses walk in naked would have.

"What blood?" I asked, rather inanely, then said a little more forcefully. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Are you Michael Brandon? The lab tech?" The guy with the gun asked.

"That's him," the other one said after glancing at the name tag on my jacket. He was gripping the upper arm of the doc with a pressure so tight I could see him grimacing, but he wasn't making any attempt to get loose. As a matter of fact, he looked as scared as a whipped dog. For all my bravado, I probably didn't look much different.



"The blood, mister. We want that blood you just drew in the Emergency room."

"Give it to them!" The doc said. "They're from the government." His voice trembled, matching the quiver of his body.

I didn't see what that had to do with it, not then, but I wasn't going to argue with a gun. "It's in the rack there," I told them, pointing to the rack by the blood counting instrument.

Still keeping me covered with his weapon, the putative government agent strode over and plucked the tube of blood from the rack. He checked the name on it and dropped it into his pocket. "Is that all?"

I walked over to the chemistry analyzer and gave him that tube of blood, too. "What's wrong? Does that patient have some bad disease?" I was remembering the needle sticking me in the wrist and felt my heart skip a beat.

"None of your business," the one holding the doc said. He turned to his companion. "We'll have to have these machines sequestered as a precaution. Get the results, too."

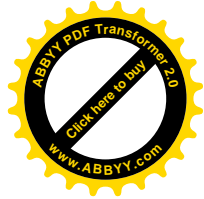
I didn't wait. I picked up the card with the weird results from the counter where I had dropped it and handed it to the armed man. Just then, the chemistry run printed out and I gave him that report, too. I also asked again, "What's wrong with that patient?"

"He's a terrorist," the other agent, the one holding the doc said. "That's all you need to know."

That was enough. If he was a terrorist, and given those badly abnormal results, along with the totally paranoid actions of the government men, it followed that he must be infected with a communicable disease and intended to spread it as far and wide as possible. I felt my heart jump again when I reached that conclusion, knowing that whatever he had, it was almost certainly a very bad bug- and now I had it, too.

I think that the government men were planning on taking me into custody or question me some more. As vulnerable as I was feeling at the moment, I probably would have gone along with them, but just then one of their phones rang. The one with the gun pulled out his phone, thumbed it, listened for a minute, then cursed heatedly. "Come on!" He yelled to his companion. "That fucker got loose again!"

The doc was shoved out of the way so rudely that he fell to his hands



and knees. Both men rushed out of the lab, leaving me staring down at the doc and wondering whether I was having some kind of bad dream. Right then *I wanted* it to be a dream, believe me.

I reached down and helped the doc to his feet and asked him "What in hell was that all about? Was that patient really infected with something?"

He shook his head. "Damned if I know. Three of them burst into the ER and said that patient we were working on was an escaped terrorist and that they were taking him into custody. When I told them he was too hurt to move and that we were doing some blood tests on him, they grabbed me and manhandled me down here." He shook his head. "They're lying. You don't take a man hurt that bad into custody; the most they would do is make us isolate him until he was stable, no matter what he had. I think he was zonked on something too, and that's what caused him to crash his car." Then he got a puzzled expression on his face. "But they just said he got loose. I would have given odds that he couldn't have walked, much less gone anywhere."

I remembered how he had spasmed when he knocked that blasted needle into my wrist. And I guess the doc either wasn't very analytical or maybe he was just tired from the tag end of his twenty four hour shift. What they had said was that he had gotten loose *again*. That told me he had already been in their custody. But what the doc said gave me a bit of hope. If he was all doped up, maybe that was why his blood count was so badly skewed from normal-though I didn't know of any drug right off hand that would cause the type of abnormalities I had seen.

"So what happens now?"

"I've got to go report this to administration if the nurses haven't already. Can you believe it? Pulling a goddamned gun on us?" He left, building up a good mad to berate someone with.

I could believe it about the gun. In these times, with all the anti-terrorist legislation on the books, the government had gotten arrogant believing it could do almost anything it wanted to. That has its ups and downs. If those guys had acted a little less imperious, I might have volunteered to give them that other tube of blood I had stuck in the back of the cooler once I remembered it. Ordinarily I discarded them within a day or so, usually sooner. Once a patient is admitted and on the wards or in a unit, there's not much call to save extra blood unless it has been drawn for a transfusion, which is a different matter and wasn't applicable in this case; I already had other blood set aside for the cross match.



I guess I don't have to mention that I was very late getting away. Some more government men arrived, purportedly from the office of Homeland Security. They questioned me but there wasn't much I could tell them, and by then I had almost forgotten about being pricked by that needle. I did mention that I had gotten some strange results on the blood count but none of them seemed to care about it. One of the Homeland Security guys tried to fob it off as a reaction to the disease they claimed our patient had been trying to spread around but I didn't believe that for a minute once I had time to really think about it. You don't get results like I had seen from any contagious disease I had ever heard of.

I never mentioned that spare tube of blood to anyone during the questioning. Having a gun pointed at me had gotten my dander up and I was sleepy and hungry and just wanted to leave. Besides, I intended to do some tests on it myself as soon as I got a chance. But first I needed to go home and eat and rest.

Home at that time consisted of an apartment out on the south loop that led back to Highway 59 and the route on down to Houston, a hundred miles or so further south. It was a two bedroom unit. I used the spare room for my books and computer desk and to store things in boxes that I had never unpacked after my last divorce. The little kitchen was separated from the den by a bar in the standard pattern of most apartments built for people who never intended to stay there permanently. The first thing I did was take a bottle of vodka from the cupboard and mix two good shots with orange juice, my standard come-down drink when I got off in the morning-except that my watch was telling me it was already afternoon. My stomach was telling me the same thing, only it was practically yelling. I scanned the fridge after downing about half my drink, looking for something quick and easy to do me until I could cook a full meal, or more likely, get some takeout and bring it back to eat while reading. An exciting life it wasn't. I didn't have a current girl friend, and truth to tell, sex had begun to drop way down on my priority list, such list as I had.

Just about the time I decided to just scoff down a bowl of cereal and was reaching for the milk carton, I began feeling woozy. I stood there for a moment but the sensation didn't pass; it got worse. I barely made it to the bed in time to kick off my boots and collapse on top of the bedspread while the room began spinning in dizzy circles around me.

CHAPTER TWO



I don't remember much about the next couple of days. The dizziness passed but I was only half-conscious, if that much. I saw the bedroom as if through a film of gauze. I could feel my heart beating. It sounded as if my pulse was very slow but I couldn't rouse myself enough to check it. I could barely feel my chest move when I breathed, and I thought the intervals between breaths of air were far too long. Several times I heard the phone ring, then my recording went into its spiel because I didn't feel like answering it, and probably couldn't have managed even if I did. I was neither hungry nor thirsty and even though I was aware of time passing, I don't think I ever went fully to sleep-nor ever came fully awake. And not once during that time did I feel the need to get up for a trip to the bathroom. That was strange enough in itself, because like many older persons, I usually had to get up and out of the bed two or three times during any given night.

I think it was sometime during the second day that I began to think I was dying. I knew my bodily demands should have been urgent by that time and I knew that I had lain there going on a day and a half, barely moving other than to languidly shift positions slightly every hour or two. With that realization, I tried to make myself get up, or at least reach for the phone to call for help. It was no use. I simply didn't have either the strength or the ambition. By morning, the thought of dying passed, mainly because I didn't feel all that bad other than being almost paralyzed and unable to comprehend anything other than the most basic sensations.

I thought for a while that maybe some of whatever drug the doc suspected that patient had been zonked with had gotten into my bloodstream from the needle prick. With my mind unable to reason except very slowly, it took hours before I reached the conclusion that I could not possibly have gotten enough of a drug from that little bit of blood to affect me, assuming he had been drugged at all, by no means a certain assumption.

By that night the slow turning of my mind led me to think that I had almost certainly caught a disease from that injured patient through the bit of blood I had inadvertently injected into myself. It wasn't a happy thought because I again began to believe I must be dying. I still felt no urge to relieve myself and that couldn't be good. And I still couldn't move much, other than to blink my eyes and twitch my body enough to relieve pressure on one part or another. Curiously, the thought of dying didn't upset me; it was simply a fact that the molasses-like processes of thought brought to my attention from time to time. There was none of the panic that a dying man ought to feel. I thought I would simply drift into a deep sleep and not wake up. Eventually someone would find my body, probably when I didn't return to work after my normal week off, which had fortuitously



started the morning after the emergency room fiasco. I was working a seven-on, seven-off night shift, which suited my reclusive nature. I wondered idly who would find my body without really caring. I felt very sleepy. And then I did go to sleep.

*** * * ***

The phone woke me. I came awake instantly and reached for it.

"Hello."

"Mike? This is Gloria. Hey look, I have to go out of town overnight again. Would you feed Bomber for me?"

"Sure," I said, momentarily forgetting about how sick I had been. Gloria lived upstairs and a few units over. Bomber was her fat neutered tomcat. Gloria and I had dated once or twice but nothing ever came of it and we were just friends now.

"Thanks. You're a doll." She hung up abruptly, like always.

And suddenly I realized I was sitting up in bed, awake and fully alert. Not only alert, but I felt good, as if laying there in bed for two days had allowed me to save up all the energy I would normally have expended during that time period. In fact, I felt better than I had in years. I swung my feet over the edge of the bed, ready to fight wildcats or anything else that got in the way of a good steak.

Or had the whole thing been a dream? No, my bedside clock told me that it hadn't been. Besides, I was still fully dressed except for my shoes. Three different urges were suddenly vying for my attention. All at once I felt the need to relieve myself; I was as hungry as a starving mountain lion; and I wanted to change clothes and take a shower. Competing with those urges was a roaring curiosity about what kind of disease had made me lay in bed like a corpse for forty eight hours then wake up feeling great.

The bathroom won. I expected to have to piss for ten minutes after all that time but it was just a normal stream. The hunger was something else. I nuked a full size pizza and ate it with more than a quart of milk, all that was left in the jug. While I was eating, I was thinking about my illness, or whatever the hell it had been, and the contrast with how good I felt now that it was apparently over. It was like those few days had shaved five years off my life. It made me want to get out and do something for a change instead of staying home and reading or spending countless hours on the computer, corresponding with people I'd never met, surfing for the odd pieces of information in the science and technology fields I liked to read about or just wandering



randomly around the web.

I showered and dressed as if I were going out for a drink but first I decided to see what had been happening in the world while I was in bed. No, first I needed to check my voice mail. There was nothing important there. One old girlfriend had called asking about a mutual acquaintance. Marsha Pells, a busybody from the lab was wanting the full story about what I had fallen into and there was one call from a local television station asking for an interview. I didn't return any of them.

The sense of well being continued. At first I was constantly aware of it like the feeling I used to get back in the days when I had occasionally sampled speed, before figuring out that it is an insidious killer. After a while it retreated into the background and was absorbed into all my other sensations and ruminations. Yet it persisted in the sense that I knew I had more energy than normal and felt more alive than I usually did. It is really hard to describe to someone twenty or thirty years younger than myself-I can plainly remember always feeling like I did now back when I was that age, barring a hangover or illness. But in those days, it was such a normal part of the self that I never noticed. It's only when the aches and pains of advancing age start creeping into the crevices of your body that you begin to remember what you had-and will never have again.

The local news station didn't mention a thing about the contretemps in the Emergency room, much less the lab. I wondered why, then remembered that it had occurred three days ago. Damn! I needed to get caught up in the world. I switched over to national news on one of the cable networks. Nothing there either. Last resort. I turned my desktop computer on and began searching. Finally I found it, or what I thought was it. Just a simple few lines about an escaped terrorist who had been captured at "a local hospital" and then had escaped again. It didn't even give a description, which I thought was awfully funny. On the other hand, I was already beginning to suspect a cover up of some kind, and that would fit in with the lack of details in the story. I didn't worry about what the government might be trying to conceal. Ever since 9/11, what little honesty was left in government had mostly disappeared in my opinion. And nothing I could do was about to change anything. Frankly, I just didn't want to get involved. If I harbored a disease that was going to kill me there was little I could do about it. At my age I was looking forward to retirement and had already given notice at the hospital that I would be leaving on my sixty third birthday. After that, I didn't know what I would do. Maybe try one more time to write a novel, an on-again, off-again prospect I had harbored most of my life. After a while I put the computer to bed and went out for the afternoon, not sure what I wanted to do but knowing



I needed to stretch my legs a bit and get out of my apartment for a while.
* * * *

A quiet bar is always a good place to sit and think. I went to my usual watering hole, a place that played old time rock and western songs, but not loudly. I took a table in a corner and tipped the bar tender to bring my drinks when I signaled and otherwise leave me alone. For an hour or two I had a serious debate with myself. Should I turn myself in and find out if I was contagious? I didn't want to spread a disease around if I had one, and the reaction of the government agents certainly indicated something of the sort. On the other hand, no one had specifically told me or anyone else that what he had was contagious; rather, they had acted more as if the *blood* from that patient was something to fear, and if that were the case, I couldn't hurt anyone but myself. The liquor seemed to go down better and rest easier once inside me than usual, which made me drink more than I normally would have. After a certain point, it affected me hardly at all and after finishing my third strong rum and coke I began to wonder. Ordinarily, I would have had a buzz on; possibly enough of one to boost my courage enough to approach one of the two likely looking middle aged women sitting on bar stools. Sex might not be my top priority any more, but that day I caught myself taking an interest.

I ordered one more drink, hoping it would lower my inhibitions a bit more. It didn't. I still felt the same. Diluted liquor? It happens some times. A bartender will grab a shot from a bottle while the boss isn't looking and replace it with an equal measure of water. As long as you don't trade more than two or three shots per bottle, it's usually not noticeable. I should have felt something more than I did though, even if I was drinking from a diluted supply. I gave up and started to leave.

What occurred next was my first inkling that whatever had happened to me had produced a change, a striking one that I wouldn't have believed had someone told me in advance.

As I passed the blond sitting at the bar nursing a mixed drink, I got a sudden impression of disappointment, like the realization that an item on a shopping list had somehow been overlooked. It was vague but definite enough to make me hesitate, wondering whether it was something that had popped into my mind or had come from an outside source.

"Leaving so early?" The blond asked, somewhat wistfully. Her voice was husky but pleasant. She was a little overweight but not bad looking other than a tiredness in her face, maybe from playing the dating game too many times and suffering too many disappointments.



She wasn't even much beyond normal in the weight department considering her age, somewhere in the forties I thought. She was wearing green slacks and a lime colored blouse one size too small. Her breasts pushed at it, probably the effect she intended.

"I was thinking about it," I said in response to her question about leaving.

"Sit down and have one more with me." It was as overt a provisional sexual invitation as you can get without coming outright and asking directly.

I could sense her interest in me. It was like a very fuzzy picture in my mind, but definite for all that. *Was it coming from her?* No, I didn't think so. I was imagining it. Or maybe those four drinks were having an effect on me after all. I decided that staying for one more wouldn't hurt. It wasn't as though I was over the hill or that bad looking myself for my age. I still had most of my hair even if it was gray. Most of my teeth had grown there naturally and the lines in my face weren't too bad yet.

Her name was Margie-Sue or something like that, one of those female double names that are typically southern. I don't even remember now. I sat and talked with her for an hour. She made it pretty obvious that she was interested in more than conversation and my body was certainly urging me to do something other than talk, but in the end I couldn't make myself do it, not after remembering the way those government guys had gone crazy over the blood, and after thinking about how ill I had been. There was just too much of a chance I might be passing on something I would be sorry about later. In the end I paid for our drinks and left without even asking for her phone number. Even if whatever I had gotten could be passed only through blood transfer, I still couldn't be that blasé about the possibility of giving someone else a disease—if I had one that is. Right then I felt fine, but HIV patients felt fine too, until they began having symptoms sometimes years later. Well, if I had something, it was too late to worry about it now. I turned to another concern.

I thought I could sense changes taking place inside my body and mind, changes that upset me and roiled my imagination like an overload of good pot, not that I had smoked any for more years than I cared to admit. And I began connecting the dots too. The sick man in the ER, the accidental stabbing of my wrist with the syringe filled with his blood, highly abnormal results from the blood cell counter and last-and most bizarre-the remembrance of those Homeland Security Agents bursting into the lab with drawn weapons. Now that I looked back on it, I knew what had been bothering me about them. They had



been in a goddamned all-out panic! I had no doubt now that they would have shot me down in cold blood if that was what it took to get that blood back. I drove back home and said a bad word because someone had my parking spot and I had to drive back to the visitor's area before finding a space for my car.

The next morning I got up, still feeling great. I showered and dressed while drinking my first cup of coffee. I decided to go out to eat somewhere rather than bother cooking just for myself. I carried my jean jacket with me and put it on while walking toward my car, hoping I could remember where I had parked.

No problem. It was just where I thought it was, another unusual occurrence. I am notorious about parking somewhere then being unable to find my car again. I have no sense of direction, or to put it in the new parlance, I'm "directionally challenged". I got into my car, took my little Glock forty caliber automatic out of the glove compartment and shoved it into the side pocket of my jean jacket. I had gotten a license to carry ten years ago and picked the cut down version of the Glock .45 chambered for .40 because it fit so conveniently in the side pocket of a jean jacket, my normal attire, worn over a western shirt and jeans and low heeled boots. I pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the nearest McDonald's. I was as hungry as a Kodiak bear at the start of the salmon runs. McDonald's may not be the best, but they're fast and that was what I was after.

CHAPTER THREE

The new sense of well being not only didn't wear off, it grew more intense slowly but surely. A youngster probably wouldn't even have noticed because they feel like that all the time as I well remembered, but it was new all over again for me. It got me to thinking of my retirement. Maybe I would do some more traveling while I still could. That was odd in itself because I had lost interest in seeing new places years ago, unlike my younger self.

Back then I always had itchy feet, perhaps inherited from some pioneer ancestors who kept moving ever farther toward the west back when the continent was still largely unexplored. That probably contributed to my two divorces. I was always wanting to move on to another job or to a different part of the country and neither of my ex-wives liked to travel. There was no issue from either marriage and I had reached early retirement age this year so there wasn't any reason I couldn't quit work if I wanted to. My social security check, supplemented by the retirement check from spending twenty years in the army would support me without a lot of difficulty. I had some



savings, though nothing to brag about. I even kept some cash and gold hidden in my apartment, probably a bad idea but I did it anyway. The terrorist war wasn't getting any better and nothing much was being done about some of the Muslim countries that were developing or already had nuclear weapons. I had read that the terrorists even had cyberweapons, an even scarier thought in a way. It was enough to impel me to keep some of my savings at home rather than in a bank. If a cyberweapon ever took down our financial house of cards, I wanted to be able to lay my hands on some money right then because I would head north immediately, into the mountains of Arkansas where my folks originated from. My brother and I still had a little land up there, inherited from Mom and Dad.

The way my body seemed to have more energy and fewer aches and pains made me briefly consider postponing my retirement, but it was only a thought. By the time I finished the other few days of my week off and got ready to start the week on, I had made up my mind. One more week and I was gone. I might not have gone back at all except that I wanted to have a look at that blood I had tucked away in a rack in the back of the cooler. It should still be there. It took an act of congress to get that damned fridge cleaned and certainly no one on the opposite shift ever did it. And in the back of my mind was the thought that I should do nothing unusual, nothing that would draw the attention of those government agents. I didn't want to be quarantined. Besides, I wondered if they were really from Homeland Security. They had acted more like some of the military spooks I had run across in the army, field agents of the kind who had authority to settle situations without referring to the home office. Whatever, I didn't want to tangle with them again.

*** * * ***

"Hi, Mike," Cindy Crawford (and boy didn't she take some kidding about that name) greeted me when I came in that night.

"Hey, Cindy. How's business?"

"Quiet, for a Saturday. So far. But you missed all the excitement while you were off. Homeland Security came in after you left and made us sterilize the whole lab, including the lines and tubing of all the instruments. What a mess. We got so far behind that all of us had to work overtime two days in a row. Maybe you'll get lucky and have a quiet night and not cause us any more trouble like that." She threw the last remark at me with a friendly grin.

I laughed. "Not likely." Business would surely pick up before the night was over, what with the drunks all trying to drive home with one too many under their belts, or more likely, more than one too many.



And then would come the family violence from hubby spending the paycheck on booze and gambling. You could almost predict a wreck or a stabbing or shooting and having to cross match blood for a transfusion as a result, on any given Friday or Saturday night. It was all part of the job though, and my decision to retire made the anticipation nothing to worry about.

Cindy was the holdover from the dayshift who covered until I came on, a duty taken in rotation by the day crew. I would then take it until morning. She left as I was setting up the coffee pot. After a quick check of the lab to see what was pending and to make sure the instruments had been calibrated and that I had plenty of supplies of various sorts to last the night, I headed for the cooler. I was anxious to see just what was in that damned blood.

It was still there, just as I expected. I took it from the rack, double-checked to be certain it was the one I had saved and walked over to the hematology island where the blood counter and other paraphernalia of the hematology department lived. I didn't bother with the counter; I already knew how weird those results were. What I wanted was to see the little red and white blood cells under a microscope.

It took only a few minutes to make the slide, let it dry, and set in the automatic stainer. After that I waited impatiently while it slowly wound its way through the staining process. It only takes a few minutes but it seemed like forever before it was finished. In general the red cells usually all look more or less alike, barring a really bad blood dyscrasia, but the white blood cells come in five special classifications. The proportion and maturity of those cells can tell a doctor (or a lab tech) a hell of a lot about what is going on in the body.

As soon as the slide was ready, I placed it on the microscope stage, gave it a drop of immersion oil and focused in with the high power lens. I had to blink and look again to be sure I was seeing what I thought I was. Every one of the red blood cells had two nuclei! Or were they nuclei? No, after examining a range of them I decided all the cells must contain a parasite of some sort like malaria. But if that were the case, it was like no parasite I had ever seen. Besides, red blood cells don't ordinarily show a nucleus in peripheral blood. They are manufactured in the marrow and by the time they begin circulating in the blood stream, the nucleus is gone. They are the one cell in the body that loses its nucleus as it matures and still functions as it is supposed to, carrying oxygen with its hemoglobin molecules. But here…all of the red cell stared back at me with two little eyes. Well, not really eyes, but they contained two little purple circles with a bright red dot in the middle, like a carnivorous animal's eye



staring from the dark, red as fire.

I couldn't make out exactly what they were and it really didn't matter because then I saw something else: All of the white blood cells contained those two little spots too, although they were a bit harder to detect because of similar staining characteristics of some other parts of the white cells. The spots were offset from the nuclei of the white cells and stared back at me with their little red dots, just like the ones in the red cells. Now that was unusual! I had never heard or read of a parasite that invaded both red and white blood cells, every single one of them, and not only the white cells but every one of the five general types of white cells!

I got up and walked around, trying to make sense of the matter. I knew for certain that this was like nothing I had ever seen or studied or even heard about. It was new, as new as a freshly minted coin. But what did it mean? Not only for that patient, but for me? I wondered—and couldn't stand not knowing. Before I did anything else, I stuck my finger and made a slide of my own blood.

I think I already knew what I would see before I even looked. I was just as infected as that patient had been. All my blood cells had those two spots of new material in them. I think I had known, but seeing the evidence with my own eyes made my heart begin to beat faster. What was it? Was I going to die? Should I report it? Images of those two government agents snapped into my mind and I decided right then that whatever other action I might take, I wasn't going to tell anyone about this. Not unless I started feeling worse than I had before the infection. And right now, I felt great physically. Mentally was a different story. What I had seen meant that every cell in my body might be infected with the same little organism as my blood cells, a phenomena so far removed from the possible as to be out there in the realm of science fiction. Parasites just can't do something like that, nor can poisons, nor anything else I could think of. For all I knew I could be dying and just not feel it yet.

I discarded the slide, then on second thought fished it out of the disposal box. I might want to look at it again later, or maybe show it to someone else. I took it and the spare slide I always routinely made and stuck them, along with the tube of blood, into my inside shirt pocket. Just then the phone rang for my first callout of the night. It was the emergency room of course.

"Hi Tanni," I said to the charge nurse when I bumped my way past the swinging doors to the ER. "What are you doing here?" I was surprised to see her. Usually she worked surgery and we met only occasionally.



"Filling in until they get a replacement. Or haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Oh, my. It's the best gossip we've had in years." She told me about it while I was drawing blood from a very pregnant woman who wasn't paying attention to anything but her labor pains and asking how much longer it was going to be.

"Margie and the new contract doc, the one that was on duty your last night here, have run away together."

"Huh? Are you sure?"

"Well, the newspapers are saying they both left notes behind. I guess that's about as sure as you can get. It made the news because neither of them showed up or even called on the night they were supposed to be work. We had some bad cases that we had trouble handling and a reporter got hold of it. Boy, that must have been a real quick romance unless they were seeing each other before he came to work here."

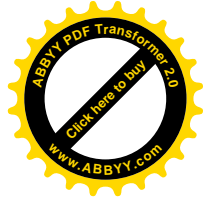
I felt my blood run cold-if what I had circulating in my veins could still be called blood in the conventional sense of the word. Quick romance, my fanny. I remembered seeing blood on both the doc and the nurse and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the Homeland Security agents almost certainly thought there was a high probability that they had been infected-or maybe they simply weren't taking chances. They had been grabbed and put in isolation somewhere; that was the way I saw it. Then I remembered how panicky those agents had been. Maybe the doc and nurse weren't in isolation; maybe they were dead. And of course Tanni didn't know what I knew. The problem now was deciding whether they would think the same thing about me. Should I take a chance that they wouldn't-or run now and confirm their fears, but at least not be around for an "accident"?

"What's wrong Mike?" Tanni asked as I picked up my tray and headed slowly toward the exit, my mind whirling with possibilities and fears. Was I being paranoid or were they really out to get me?

**I stopped and looked at Tanni. Her dark face showed concern.
"Sorry, what did you say?"**

"I asked what was wrong. Did you know either of them real well?"

"No, it's just a shock," I said. "Who would have thought they would be



up to something like that?"

"Yeah, you never know, do you?"

"No," I said. "I guess I haven't been keeping up with the news lately. What else has happened?"

She shrugged. "Isn't that enough? And you know, I never heard a thing about whether they recaptured that terrorist who got away while they were up in your place recovering the blood you drew. What a bunch of clowns!"

I left it at that, letting her think whatever she pleased. But I didn't believe for a minute that those men were clowns. They had simply gotten too excited and carelessly left their prisoner unguarded, thinking he couldn't go anywhere. Of course if I had been in their place, I wouldn't have thought he could go anywhere either, not with his injuries. I wondered how he had managed it. However he did, it must have been very painful. And he must have been goddamned determined to run, what with those injuries I had seen. Which brought on another thought. What kind of accident had he been in? Or did anyone know? I decided not to ask.

Cross matching two units of blood to have ready for the pregnant lady in case they ran into problems with her C-section was such a routine procedure that I didn't have to spend any mental effort on it. Instead I tried to decide on a course of action that wouldn't make Homeland Security suspect I was infected. I sure didn't want to die in an "accident", or be stuck away in some isolation ward for no telling how long. Especially since I felt fine.

By the time my shift was over, I thought the best course of action would be to go ahead and retire just as I had planned. That might cast some suspicion on me, but just cutting and running would be worse. And I had already given my notice. I could just stay on of course, but I doubted that would work for long. While I was shaving before coming to work that morning I had suddenly noticed that I looked better than usual-that there were fewer lines in my face. The skin on my face seemed to have tightened up, and appeared healthier. And my morning erections were appearing oftener and becoming firmer and longer lasting, like I had been given a shot of testosterone. Shucks, until this happened, I had hardly noticed them even when it did happen. If I stayed around, sooner or later someone was bound to notice that I not only looked a bit younger, but that I was acting younger as well, though I doubted anyone but me noticed as yet. That thought brought it all home to me.



Whatever it was that I had caught appeared to be doing some minor (or perhaps not so minor) repairs on my old body. And occasionally I was having fuzzy images coming to me from people I was very near, similar to what had happened with the blond in the bar. Already this particular night a couple of disconcerting incidents had happened. Once I had caught a fuzzy sexual image from a nurse while we were taking a break together during a quiet time and spilled coffee in my lap. The image wasn't even about me, but it was so startling that I tried to bring my hand up to my head to shut it out-while holding my coffee in the same hand. She gave me a very peculiar look but I laughed and did my best to make her think I had just intended to rub some sleep out of my eyes and forgotten that I had a cup of coffee in my hand. A little later I told one of the nurses in intensive care that I hoped her baby got better before I realized she hadn't told me her daughter was sick; she had simply been thinking about her and worrying herself into a state about her child's illness and I had gotten a vague sense of that worry. Fortunately, we were both busy working on a terminally ill patient at the time and I suspect that she imagined she had spoken her thoughts out loud without realizing it.

It's hard to convey just what it was that I was experiencing. I certainly wasn't reading minds, like the science fiction telepaths. In fact, I wasn't even certain I was doing anything out of the ordinary. I might be imagining it all, courtesy of those little whatever's running around in my blood. That made me wonder some more about them, an almost continuous process at first. Were they parasites (if that's what they were) just in my blood cells or in other cells of my body? I decided to see. The easiest way was through a cheek swab, though that wouldn't necessarily prove anything. Skin cells (and the lining inside our mouth is simply a specialized form of skin cell) function by dividing in the basal cell layer and new cells work their way to the surface as the outer ones age and are sloughed off.

The next break I had I took a quick swab and stained it. The proper stain for those type of cells wasn't around in the main lab, but if you've looked at as many epithelial cells as I have, most any kind of stain will do. All you need to see is a contrast. I made a slide and stained it. The organism was there in a few cells, but not many. Nevertheless, that told me something. Most of the cells you get from a cheek swab are already dead-and why would a parasite invade dead cells? I probably hadn't dug deep enough with the swab to get more than a few live cells but they were there, all right. Still, I felt fine. I decided to ride with whatever was happening for a while, and rested easier after that. Until I got home.

CHAPTER FOUR



Maybe I'm cynical by nature. After having my usual getting off drink, I didn't stop to eat but went to my hiding place and took half my gold and half the cash out of the cubbyhole I had cut into the wall then repaired and painted over. I took half of it out and went down and locked it in the trunk of my car, in a space behind some loose upholstery.

Crazy? Sure, but every time I thought of those government goons pointing a gun at me I got antsy. The car could have been stolen and I would be out several thousand bucks, but on the other hand, I had a good alarm system on the car and our apartment complex kept a security guard on duty so it wasn't really likely. Whatever, it made me feel better. I slept well that day and woke in the evening as ready for work as I had been for years. Physically, I was still feeling great. Mentally, the thought of being infected with an unknown bug, and one that the government obviously was determined to control by any means up to and including murder was a constant drain on my emotions, like a loved one being tried for a murder you knew they couldn't have committed.

I was just pulling out of the parking lot when three cars in a row drove in, each of them occupied by a couple. Ordinarily that wouldn't have been cause for worry, except that the first vehicle had someone in the driver's seat I was very familiar with. You're not likely to forget a face that you've seen behind the barrel of a gun pointing at you. It was my old friends from that remarkable night when a patient with two mangled legs managed to somehow get up and remove himself from a gurney while they were confiscating the blood I had drawn from him. Most likely his partner was riding shotgun, but I didn't get a clear view of the other occupant. Luckily, they both had their eyes on where they were going rather than on me, and I wasn't close enough to draw a glance from them anyway.

It was stupid of me. I shouldn't have even taken the chance, but I had to see what happened. My apartment was barely visible from the edge of the parking area. I nudged the car back and got farther away, but found a better vantage point where I could see exactly what was going on, even from a distance.

It appeared as if they rang, then knocked and when that got no response the one pounding on the door was shoved aside by another. He pulled out some sort of gadget and began poking around at the lock. In two minutes flat, he had somehow bypassed the dead bolt and the door swung open. I could see the drawn guns as three men and a woman charged inside. That was enough for me. I got out of there while I still could.



Again, it was sloppy work on the part of the government agents that let me escape. If they had bothered to check my schedule at the hospital, they would have arrived an hour earlier and been certain to have captured me. As it was, I made a clean getaway. The only problem was, I didn't have any idea of where to go or what to do next.

* * * *

I was as badly in need of a drink as I was of my usual caffeine fix that time of night. I took care of both pressing needs at the same time by stopping at a combination bar and grill. I noticed the *Houston Chronicle* news rack outside and felt in my pocket for change while checking to be sure it was the latest edition. It was. I took my paper inside and ordered a cup of coffee with a shot of brandy added to it, declining the offer of whipped cream topping. When I want a café royal, it's the kick I'm after, not the embellishments.

The story featured on the inside of the front page caught my interest immediately.

RUNAWAY LOVERS IN FATAL ACCIDENT.

A physician and nurse from the Lamont Memorial

Hospital in Lufkin who disappeared together, leaving their families behind, were both killed when the car they were driving failed to navigate an exit on I-35 north of Dallas.

Doctor—

The article went on to give some of the lurid details of their “Clandestine love affair” and segued on to reactions of their families to their deaths. The imaginary “details” almost certainly had been planted, as it cited an “unnamed source”, but the “accident” was certainly not imaginary. Nor were those agents I had seen bursting into my apartment with drawn guns accidental. I noticed that my hands were trembling and clinched both of them into tight fists several times until the shaking stopped. But that still left me with no good ideas about what to do with myself. All I knew was that if I wanted to remain a free man-or even stay alive-I had better find a hole to crawl into.

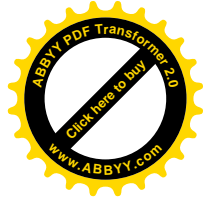
By the time I finished my drink I felt better and made up my mind. I didn't know yet how hard the search for me would be pushed, but judging from events so far, they damn sure weren't going to just shrug their shoulders and tell their boss I had gotten away.



Dallas was a bit over three hours north. I couldn't do anything about the license plates on my car except maybe daub it with some dirt, enough to make it harder to read but not enough to get me pulled over by a state trooper looking to make his ticket quota for the month. I took care of that as soon as I got to the car, being careful to smear the mud while no one was observing. After washing my hands in a puddle, I hit the road, very carefully driving just at the speed limit. First though, I took the little automatic out of the glove compartment and shoved it into the side pocket of my jean jacket. I had been careless lately about not carrying it on my person but that was going to change quickly. Whether or not I could use it against an agent who was simply doing his duty was another matter. I had killed in one of the two wars I attended while in the army, but those were the enemy, fanatical Islamic terrorists trying to bring down America. I had no bad memories at all about them. The possibility of killing a government agent was a different matter altogether. I didn't like to think about it.

I took Highway 69 northeast from Lufkin, the easiest route to I-45 North and thence on to Dallas. I chose Dallas because I knew my way around that city even better than I did Lufkin. I had worked in a hospital there for ten years before moving to Lufkin after my last divorce. Not that I would look up any old friends. In the first place, I didn't have any close friends; I've always been pretty much a loner. And in the second place, I wouldn't trust them if I did, not on something like this, and even if I did I wouldn't drag anyone I cared for into this mess. I had a brother still living in Dallas that I would trust utterly, but I didn't give any thought at all to contacting him. I had read enough mystery and detective novels in my life to know a lot about police procedure. They would be watching my family, such as I had left.

All the way to Dallas, my thoughts ranged out ahead as I thought about what I could do to hide myself from the feds. That brought back memories of a very interesting patient I had met at Charleston Hospital there. He was an ex-con, just recently free on parole from a five year sentence and unfortunately, had forgotten a lot about operating a motor vehicle, especially someplace like Dallas. He had a wreck the second day after getting a car. It broke a lot of bones and damn near broke his head, but he survived. While he was recuperating, I drew blood from him every other day or so. Most patients are eminently forgettable, but Manny struck a chord with me and apparently I with him. I have always been fascinated with atypical criminals, the ones like Manny who could have made it without turning to crime any time they cared to. In return, he was interested in what the military and the wars I had been in were like. We talked a lot.



He had operated scams involving Identity Theft, and now that he intended to go straight (or so he said), he told me all sorts of stories about how easy it was to forge new identities and steal old ones and sometimes merge the two. He even kidded me about changing my identity because of the impending divorce and gave me some clues on how to go about finding the real artists in that specialty. I intended now to see if he knew what he was talking about. And after that, I needed to dispose of my car without having the transaction traced, but I had already figured out how to do that.

I thought I had a couple of days before an all-out alert would go out for me and I hurried. First thing, I rented a room in the northeast section of the city where illegal activity was as much a part of life as a beer after mowing the lawn on a Saturday morning in the suburbs. I gave a fictitious name and address of course, and wasn't asked for any identification. Hell, even a high class hotel doesn't do that if you pay in cash. The room was about what you would expect for that part of town. A queen sized bed with sagging mattress and threadbare spread, a battered table with two drawers, only one of which would open, and a chair designed by the usual gremlins who have a vendetta against comfortable seating in motels regardless of room cost. The bathroom tile was broken in places, a legacy of couples who took their antagonisms into the shower. The sink was stained and the mirror was peeling. About all I could say for it was that it was serviceable, if you didn't mind hand towels and wash cloths worn so thin that you could have run them through a printer.

After washing some of the road sweat off, I hit an after hours-bar on the street Manny had told me about. It wasn't hard to locate; they had a sleazy looking woman in a tight skirt and overlarge breasts right outside the door practically dragging customers inside. She didn't mention the big man in jeans and tank top right inside who intimidated anyone into contributing ten bucks in order to take the stairs up to where the action was.

I almost left, mainly because it was so damn dark that I could hardly see, but after a minute my eyes began to adjust and I could tell that the place served primarily as a last resort for second rate men who still hadn't gotten enough liquor into the third rate women to get their clothes off. And if it still didn't work, there was a sprinkling of rather obvious prostitutes who were waiting to take their place.

I picked one of the prostitutes who looked to be in her late forties to start a conversation with. I figured one of the older ones would be able to steer me to someone who dealt in ID's, but I didn't know exactly how to get the ball rolling. As soon as I seated myself beside



her on the bar, she surprised me.

"Hello. I'm Mona. You can sit here and talk if you like but don't expect anything else."

Then what was she doing here? She was attractive enough that I didn't think she had to shop for men in a place like this. I tried the age-old gambit.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Why not?" She had a pleasant voice, low but not husky.

I pulled out money from the pocket of my jeans, suddenly wondering if she might work at the place. If so, the "drink" would be either disguised tea or Seven-Up, one imitating whiskey, the other champagne, and the lady would get a kickback in either case. The bartender gave me a swift appraisal while he took the order, a beer for me and a brandy for her. I winced at the charge for both drinks but didn't argue. It was information I was after and the drink she got was real; I could smell the aroma of the brandy.

Mona wasn't as shopworn as I had thought at first after I took a second look. It seemed almost as if she were deliberately trying to make herself look older by wearing her dark hair in an unfashionable bun and using way too much makeup. She also appeared to just be going through the motions with me while waiting on something or someone, but she wasn't hard to talk to. When I told her I worked in a hospital she really seemed interested, but prostitute or not, I got the idea she was after money. She had certainly eyed my roll with interest. She told me that she wasn't working anywhere at the moment, but while she was well dressed, her clothes didn't have that chic look of apparel bought from boutiques; they were strictly department store, like my own. I kind of liked her. She wasn't obviously trying to separate me from my money; not so far at least.

Finally I bit the bullet. It was getting late. I not only needed a place to stay, I still needed some new identification.

"Would like to go somewhere else?" I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

"What did you have in mind?" She asked, raising a cynical eyebrow.

"Um, I need a place to spend the night where I won't be asked questions. And my wife has left me."



"Uh huh." She glanced at my finger, perhaps searching for a ring. I could sense that she didn't believe that one; she must have heard it a thousand times before.

Abruptly, I changed tactics. "Sorry, that wasn't true."

"So why can't you go home?"

"It's a long story. Uh, I'd kind of like to stay with you." I said. "I could sleep on the couch, if you have one." I guess you can tell that I wasn't very familiar with this kind of negotiation. What I really wanted was someone familiar with this area who could steer me in the right direction for the fake ID and not pull a scam on me.

Mona eyed me like I sometimes did doctors I knew to be incompetent. "Let's walk," she said.

I paid for our drinks, one for her and two for me. I pulled the money from my wallet rather than my pocket as I had done before, purposely letting her see how full it was. I think that convinced her more than anything. Anyone planning violence or real kinky sex probably wouldn't be carrying that much money, or so I deduced.

Outside (after tipping the inside guard and the lady tending the door), we walked down about half a block to the next intersection. She stopped under the street light and folded her arms across her chest.

"Who are you? The law?"

I guess I didn't fit in with the after-hours crowd as well as I thought I had. "Uh, no. But I need something, some information."

"Sorry, try the library." She started to walk away.

"Wait! I can pay!" I practically shouted at her, not wanting her to get away, not after investing the time I had spent with her.

She stopped but didn't come any closer. "I'm not a snitch. Nor a prostitute, if that's what you're thinking. I told you all I was interested in was talk."

"I didn't think you were a snitch. Anyway, it's not people I'm after."

She glanced at her watch. "Look, it's late. Tell me what you want."

"Some identification?" I said hesitantly.



"You're with vice, aren't you?"

"No."

She started to walk away again. Suddenly I had a bright idea, the first one since hitting this street. "Have you ever heard of Manny Allred?"

That stopped her. "Manny? Last I heard he was doing a nickel at Huntsville."

"He's out now. Last time I saw him was when he left the hospital."

That got her attention. She took a few steps back toward me. "What was wrong with him?"

"An accident. He forgot how bad Dallas traffic is when he started driving again. He's okay now though, or he was last I saw of him."

"So what's he doing?"

"Going straight, so he said."

That intrigued her. "Really? That's good." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, trying to make up her mind. Money wasn't the problem; she knew I had money. It was whether or not to trust me. Finally, she said, "Come on. I'll put you in touch, but I charge a commission."

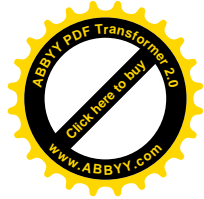
"Good for you. Where to?"

"I've got a place. I'll need two hundred up front and more later."

I paid, drawing the first smile from her. It made her look much younger. I could see remnants of what must once have been a very pretty, perhaps beautiful woman, with thick black hair and high cheekbones that went well with her smile. It made me wonder, as I had in the past, what drove some women into this kind of life. I knew better than to ask though. If she wanted to talk, she would. And after all, it was some new ID papers I was after, not her life story.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two blocks from where we had met was an old hotel, similar to the one I was checked into but even more rundown. I think it had once been a two story department store or something like that, then converted. A long time ago.



Mona led me up a flight of stairs and down a hall, with a track plainly worn into the carpet from a million footsteps trodding the same path year after year. She unlocked her door with an old fashioned key, dropped it into her purse and pulled the door closed.

Before doing anything else, she went to the bed, felt way back under the mattress and pulled out a vial of pills. She shook a couple into her hand and closed it back up and put it away, then tossed them into her mouth and swallowed them with a gulp of water from the glass sitting on the stand beside the sagging bed.

That explained a lot, though she offered no apologies. I knew it had to be some sort of narcotic by the way her hands had begun shaking before taking the pills and the way she breathed a sigh of relief at getting them down, even before they began taking effect. Not that she got high or crazy or anything like that. Long time addicts keep taking their poison, not to get high but to avoid the excruciating symptoms of physical withdrawal. I offer this little scene as a good example of how wrong assumptions can be.

"Have a seat," she told me. She lay down on the bed on her side facing me and took a modern cell phone from her purse. She thumbed in a number while I sat down on the only chair in the room. The seating gremlins had been there too. It hurt my back and dug into my thighs but I sat still while she talked, using the esoteric street language of the identity dealers. I couldn't understand most of it. Eventually she interrupted the conversation and turned to me. "You want a passport too?"

"No, but I would like a concealed weapons permit."

A few more quick words, then, "The identity will cost you a K. Driver's license and social security card. Another K for the permit."

I nodded agreement, even though that would leave me with less than a thousand on my person, along with ten one ounce gold pieces. She spoke again, then put her phone back into her purse. As she did, she flinched, then drew out her hand and shook her forefinger.

"What happened?" I asked.

She laughed. "Stuck a straight pin in my finger. I knew the damn thing was lost in there; I had just forgotten." She wiped her finger on the bedspread, leaving a small red stain to go with numerous old ones that hadn't washed out.



"You'll need to give Burt your old driver's license," she said.

"How about just the picture?"

"That'll probably do. He'll be here shortly."

I thought a minute. "How about you giving him the photo and the vital statistics? I'll wait in the bathroom."

"If I had known you were that hot, I would have asked for more."

"I couldn't have paid much more," I admitted.

"No problem. Give me the money, and another two hundred for me. That's my commission."

I let her have the money and borrowed a razor blade from her to cut the photo off the license. I wrote down my right birthday, a younger age, my same first name since it was so common, but listed Cronkite as my last name. I retreated to the bathroom when the knock came on the door. It hadn't been much more than ten minutes.

I could hear a muffled conversation taking place behind the wooden door to the bathroom. I hoped I had picked right in coming here with Mona and she and her cohort didn't just walk away with my money. I thought I had, and a few minutes later, she knocked on the door proving me right.

I came back into the room and sat down again on that tortuous chair. We talked desultorily for a while. She told me her last name was Terrell and that she had been born in Woodville in east Texas. She granted me another of her rare smiles when I told her I had been born on a farm right near the Indian reservation and that my folks had moved to Lufkin when Dad went broke farming. The reservation is near Woodville and only about fifty or sixty miles from Lufkin. We didn't go much further with that. Neither of us was giving away much personal information; we were just passing time. To her, I was probably just a con on the run and she most likely thought the best thing about me was that I hadn't tried to include sex with our deal.

"I can loan you a razor if you need to shave," she offered.

I felt my chin, wondering how a beard would look. I hadn't worn one in many years. But then, the photo on my new ID wouldn't match. On the other hand, a mustache wouldn't hurt and might help. May as well get started now; it would give me something to do while waiting on the ID.



"Thanks. I'll take you up on it."

She followed me into the grungy bathroom and leaned on the jamb to watch me shave, using a bit of her shampoo for lather. I handled the razor gingerly, not being used to it. I've always used an electric razor to shave with.

"Growing a mustache, huh?" She asked when I had finished.

"Uh huh." I glanced toward her and promptly cut myself. "Ouch!" I said.

"Sorry. Guess it's a bit dull. She reached over and wiped at the bit of blood on my cheek with her finger.

I stopped what I was doing and stared at her. She had wiped at the blood with the forefinger of her right hand, the same one that she had stuck with a pin only a few minutes ago!

"What's wrong? You look like you just ran into a stun gun."

I wiped at my face with the old washcloth while trying to recover. Good God, what if I had infected her?

"What is it?" Mona's voice was insistent. I guess I still had that stunned expression on my face.

Without really thinking about it, I reached out and took her hand and led her back into the room. What to do, what to do? I could tell that she already sensed something out of the ordinary had just happened but she didn't know what. That changed a second later when I sat down in the chair. She caught me staring at her finger.

"What-oh, Goddamn! You bastard, have you given me AIDS!" Her face convulsed in an agony of disgust, like she had just opened the door to her refrigerator and gotten the smell of rotting meat in her nostrils. "Oh, shit, all this time as a shill and being raped and never a dose of anything and now a goddamn straight pin kills me!" When I didn't respond, she began crying.

Reflexively, I went to her intending comfort, but she turned her back. "Get away from me! Damn it all to hell, why didn't you tell me you had AIDS?"

As if anyone carrying that virus would go around telling people they had it. She was just upset and not being logical. I can't say that I



blamed her. Put me in her shoes and I would have been tempted to shoot the other person, not just cry.

"I don't have AIDS," I said.

She turned to look at me. Her face was streaked with tears and her expression hovered between hope and disbelief. Just as she was about to reply, there came a knock at the door. She brushed at her eyes and went to see while I retreated to the bathroom again.

A few minutes later I heard the entrance door close again and I came back out. Wordlessly, she handed me my new cards. I examined them quickly then tucked them away in my wallet. Before leaving here, I would destroy every other piece of paper or card I had that gave my real name. From now on I was Michael Cronkite. I put my wallet away and looked up.

Mona was staring at me, wanting an explanation. I wanted one too. What had she said? All the years as a shill? And being raped? Now what did that mean? I had first taken her for a prostitute, then as a shady character trolling for customers interested in ID fraud and most likely additional illegal endeavors. Well, I suppose enticing men into scams would probably have involved some sex along the way, where it was necessary to reel the sucker in. Probably some of them had managed to catch her unaware, and knowing she couldn't complain, used the opportunity for rape. It was none of my business, even though I was curious. Shilling didn't appear to pay very well, not when considering her current living conditions. Anyway, that could be put on hold for a bit; she was still waiting for me to tell her what kind of problem I did have if it wasn't AIDS.

"Let's sit down," I said, motioning her over to her spot on the bed. She sat down on the side of it rather than laying down like before. She was looking at me expectantly while I debated furiously with myself over whether to tell her there was a good chance that I had infected her with some weird organism that I couldn't identify, or to try passing my reaction to the cut on my face after she touched it to something else, maybe some harmless, symptomless disease. The problem was, I didn't know a single thing that the general population was aware of that could be passed by blood contact and was at the same time harmless. Also, now that our gaze was locked to each other, I could see the gleam of intelligence in her dark brown eyes, competing with an overlay of cynicism concerning men in general. At least that's what I thought I saw, and I decided quickly that she wouldn't be easy to fool.

What finally decided me was that I intended to leave Dallas as soon as



I disposed of my car now that I had a new identity, and it wasn't likely that she would spill the beans, not after I told her how frantic Homeland Security was acting about whatever it was I had.

"I've got to tell you something Mona," I said. "But do you have anything here to drink first?" I was feeling the need.

I guess she was too. I hadn't noticed the bottle of cheap brandy sitting behind the coffee maker on the old vanity. I waited while she made coffee and poured us a shot into two Styrofoam cups. "I have a drink sometimes when I'm hurting," she said while the coffee was brewing.

"Hurting?"

"I've got SLE. It's at the stage where the pain gets bad sometimes."

It took a moment to register. SLE. Systemic Lupus Erythematosus. "Oh. Sorry, I didn't know. I thought—"

"I saw your reaction. You thought my pills were dope. They are so far as that goes, but they're a legal prescription and I don't have to take them all the time, just when it gets real painful, like it was when we came in. And I use enough makeup to mask the butterfly pattern when it shows up real bad, like it's doing now." She poured for us, added a shot of brandy to each cup and fetched mine to me while I was reviewing what else I knew about Lupus in my mind. It is one of those autoimmune diseases and afflicts more women than men. The symptoms vary from person to person and from mild to severe, causing doctors to confuse it with other diseases and making it hard to diagnose. The rose colored butterfly pattern she mentioned appears off and on across the nose and cheeks. So I thought she isn't an addict after all, at least not in the classical sense.

I began my story. "You said I was hot and you're right, but it's not the law I'm running from, it's Homeland Security. I was drawing blood from an injured patient at the hospital in Lufkin where I worked and got stuck with a needle. The same night, Homeland Security agents or someone masquerading as them, burst into the lab and confiscated all the blood I had drawn, except some I had saved. While they were doing that the patient I drew the blood from escaped. Later on the doctor and nurse who had worked on him were murdered by those same agents, I think. They didn't come after me at first and I had a chance to look at the blood I had saved. The patient was infected with something weird, something I've never seen in all my years in the lab. When I looked at my own blood, it turned out that I'm infected with the same thing."



"And now I guess I am too. Oh, goddamn, what next?" She expressed her feelings as though this were just another catastrophe in a long line of disasters in her life.

"The disease may not be as bad as the rest of it," I said. "I barely escaped being picked up. As I was leaving Lufkin, I saw a squad of agents breaking into my apartment with guns drawn. I don't know if they would have killed me then or not. Probably not. The doctor and nurse reportedly died in a car accident, and a fire afterward that burned them beyond recognition. Hell, it might not even have been their bodies for all I know, but I suspect they were and the accident was staged. I think they would have taken me away and killed me later, after finding out everyone I had been in close contact with."

I paused, waiting on her reaction. "And you got infected by just a needle stick?"

"Yes."

"How come they didn't grab you right off?"

A very astute question. I smiled grimly. "Because I didn't tell anyone. I figured if I had caught something like AIDS, reporting it wouldn't have helped me anyway. Not right then at least."

"All right, now tell me whether we're going to die or not. From the disease, I mean."

"I haven't got a clue Mona. I feel fine right now; in fact, I feel better than I have in a number of years. But if you got infected from that trace of blood you wiped off my face, and you react like I did, then pretty soon you're going to go into sort of a coma. I couldn't move out of bed for two days, but after that I felt fine. In fact, I still do."

Mona shifted her position on the bed and glanced at her watch. "Who took care of you while you were ill?"

I explained to her how I had not actually felt all that sick, but had simply been in a semi-conscious state and unable to move from my bed.

"Who took care of you? Your wife?"

Whoops! She remembered that I first told her about a wife and she was still suspicious even after my retraction. "I'm divorced," I assured her. "When she left, she left for good."



"Not to change the subject, but would you mind telling me why?"

I shrugged. "Probably as much for reading at the table as anything else."

Mona forced a smile. "Well, I've been guilty of that myself. So, didn't two days in bed leave sort of a mess, or could you manage that much?"

"No, I couldn't do anything except breathe. I could barely move, but I never felt the urge the whole time I was in bed."

"That's hard to believe," she said.

"Yeah, I'll grant you that. I can't explain it, but that's how it happened. However, that was just my reaction. You might have different symptoms altogether for all I know-or maybe none at all. You can't generalize from one occurrence."

"Spoken like a scientist. All right, you've scared me, but you've been straight with me so far. How about sticking around just in case I get sicker than you did?"

I wanted to get the hell out of Dodge, but I felt a responsibility for her since I was the one who had infected her. I really didn't know how I could refuse her. However, the feds were still after me.

"How about a compromise?"

"Like what?"

"I'll stay with you, but let's go somewhere else, just in case I was traced to Dallas and then to here."

"Deal. How about Cedar Hill? Do you know where that is?"

"Sure." Cedar Hill was a small city on 69 South, about fifteen miles below Dallas. I knew the area pretty well because my sister had lived there for a long time before her stroke. She went into a nursing home and died from a second stroke a year later

"I have a little place there," Mona said. It's not much, but it should be safe."

I hesitated. "I'm not sure that's any better than here. If they've traced me to Dallas, they'll find out we left that bar together and who you are. After that, it will be just a matter of getting your address in Cedar Hill." I decided not to ask what she had been doing in a dirty bar in



Dallas trolling for customers looking for fake ID.

She grinned, and a shadow of the little girl she once was showed through it. "Yes, I'm sure they could find us if the place was under my right name, but it isn't. I used an alias and paid cash for it. So far as that goes, Mona isn't my real name either. It's Molly, but don't use it in public okay?"

"I like Mona better anyhow," I said, and meant it. Stranger and stranger. I was finding odd depths to Mona I hadn't expected, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Besides, I owed her. "Okay let's go, but there's one other thing I want to do on the way out of Dallas."

"What's that?"

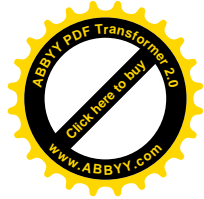
"Dispose of my car so thoroughly that it can't be found. It won't take long."

CHAPTER SIX

I took down Mona's address in Cedar Hill in case we got separated, then she followed me as I drove south. I then took an exit from I-35 that led into the heart of Oak Cliff, a city in itself and ninety per cent peopled by blacks and Hispanics. I simply parked the car in a poor, drug ridden neighborhood, left the keys dangling and walked away from it. In a very short time, it would either be stripped down to the frame or taken whole and shipped south to Mexico. Either way, it wasn't likely to be traced. And if Mona were telling the truth, we wouldn't be either, not for a while. For the first time in over a week, I felt relatively safe.

Mona's place was a duplex, not too run down yet, but heading in that direction. I wondered why she had been staying in Dallas when she owned a home here and why she had bought the little place under an alias and how she had come by the money to do so, but all those questions could wait; besides I knew for sure she was at least marginally involved in the forged identity industry. Anyway, by now it was almost dawn and I was ready for a drink and some sleep just as if I were coming off my night shift. I imagined Mona was ready to pack it in too, depending on when she normally retired.

I carried her small amount of luggage inside. I had very little to bring in, just what I normally kept in my car for emergencies, such as a change of clothes, a poncho and windbreaker and so forth. It sure wasn't much. I would have to go shopping before long.



Mona pointed me to a room at the front. "This is the guest bedroom. You'll find an extra comforter if you need it. Bathroom right next to it. You can find things to eat or drink if you like. Right now, I'm sleepy. Anything you need, look in the kitchen. Knock on my bedroom door around ten if I'm not up."

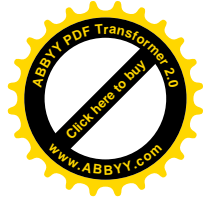
"What if you pass out before then?"

"Oh yeah. Here. Just in case anyone comes calling, this is my name here. She scribbled on a piece of note paper. "I'll leave the bedroom door open. It's back behind the kitchen and laundry room. Check on me once in a while, and I'll try to call out if I start feeling funny." She waved casually at me and headed off to bed. I looked at the note. Her alias was Betsy Collier.

The kitchen was separated from the den by a bar running halfway across the room. I walked around it and rummaged around in the refrigerator and pantries and shelves until I found some canned juice to go with a shot of vodka from an opened bottle. I took my drink back to the den and looked around, searching for something to read. There was a fair selection; a lot of best sellers, some histories and historical novels, reference books, several stacks of Discover Magazine and Southern Living, along with books in accounting and business law, a whole shelf of past issues of PC Magazine, an old set of encyclopedias and a shelf of science fiction. There was a state of the art PC in an alcove. I ran my eyes over some of the fiction titles of the genres I liked to read. They were mostly hard science fiction, i.e., that subgenre where the author actually tries to provide the reader with plausible science so far as the story line will allow. The historical fiction and nonfiction were by authors I had mostly read and liked. There were no fantasies or space opera, but there were two stacks of popular science fiction magazines. I had just picked one up, intending to find a short story to read with my drink when I heard her call. I ran to her room.

Her reaction to the infection came much sooner than mine, and was much more severe. She was already in distress, but her last words to me before she became unable to talk were "Whatever you do, don't send me to a hospital." Her eyes tracked me as I moved, her gaze still sharp even when she couldn't move any other part of her body. I could swear she was using them to plead for me to follow her request. Whatever or whoever she was hiding from it had obviously scared her almost as badly as the Homeland Agents had me. I guess we made a good pair.

Mona suffered chills and fever, first one then the other. Her face



became very flushed and the butterfly shaped rash, the stigma of SLE, spread across her nose and cheeks. I couldn't get her awake enough to give her aspirin or Tylenol for the fever. It spiked very high, as near as I could tell by feeling her forehead, but fortunately it never lasted long. When I noticed how much she was sweating and felt the heat from her forehead, I pulled back the bed covers and swabbed her neck and shoulders and arms with some alcohol I found in the master bathroom.

After that first round of fever I left her long enough to get some coffee going; it looked as if I were going to be awake a good long while. That's exactly what happened. By that evening I was reeling, but then she became violently ill and I couldn't take time to rest.

She hadn't the strength to sit up. I had to pull her upper body up on two pillows and turn her on her side so that she could empty her stomach. I brushed her lips with water but didn't dare let her try to drink; she might have strangled. I knew that much from my own experience. As soon as she settled down a bit, I moved the chair in the bedroom over beside her bed and took her hand in mine so I could stay in contact with her when I dozed off, as I inevitably would even with the coffee.

Sometime during the night I came abruptly awake. She was squeezing my hand but the pressure was very weak, more like a touch than anything. I had kept the bedside light on and could see twin tears trickling down her face. Her lips worked, twitching uselessly. I knew she wanted something but couldn't figure out what. Then I saw beads of perspiration pop out on her forehead. I felt it; she was burning hot again. I peeled back the bed covers. I stopped with them down to her waist and looked at her. I think she tried to nod. I peeled the covers completely off her and amazingly, she managed a smile before her eyes closed again. I swabbed her neck and arms and legs again with the last of the alcohol. If her fever spiked again, I would have to use ice water.

I poured myself more coffee from a carafe I had found and filled to keep it fresh and sat back down, knowing that soon she would become chilled again and I would need to cover her. Waiting, an oddity stuck me; her body didn't appear nearly as old as her face. She was carrying very little excess weight and her breasts weren't trying to slide off her chest as they would have in an older woman. Be damned. She was probably only in her thirties; it was just the ravages of the Lupus that was making her face look old. I wondered idly whether the weird disease I had infected her with would affect her skin like it had mine and make her look a few years younger—and feel even younger than that, but very shortly I became unconcerned with that aspect of it; I



was wondering if she would survive at all. Whatever it was I had passed on to her, the Lupus was obviously making her reaction to it much worse than mine had been. Or maybe females just reacted differently to it. Hell, I didn't know. I didn't know anything about it other than it hadn't killed me yet and that Homeland Security was being very nasty about trying to contain it.

The next twelve hours were very bad. She went into convulsions several times and I had to hold her down. The fever came back, higher than ever, then violent shivering from chills and followed again with fever. Her muscles twitched in odd motions as if her joints were hurting. Probably they were, but I had nothing to give her for pain that she could swallow and I'm not sure she could have tolerated it if I had because her breathing was already slow and irregular. The ice water I used to bring the fever down increased her respiration rate a bit, but is soon slowed again and then stopped completely.

I think that if the phone had been on my side of the bed and if I had had the time to dial 911, I might have done so a couple of times despite her orders. But I was far too busy pounding on her chest and trying to clear her airway to even think of it. She had periods of retching after I got her heart to beating again. She became very pale, then almost blue as her heart stopped for the second time. When I finally got her going yet again, she took in a great breath of air, let it out and finally began to breathe almost normally. That was enough for me though. I went around the bed and reached for the phone. Something stopped me from picking it up, an impulse of some sort. Or perhaps I heard a very thin cry, like that of a newborn kitten, but I'm not sure of even that. What really stopped me was that when I looked down at her, I saw the barest of smiles play across her moist face, like the faint shadow of a thin cloud passing across a meadow. I decided to wait. While I was waiting, I fell asleep.

It was her voice that woke me, weak but definite.

"Mike? Mike, wake up please. I need help."

I started and jerked my body upright.

"Mike?"

I looked down at her. Her nightgown was soaked for about the tenth time. It stuck to her like a transparent film, leaving nothing to the imagination. She raised her head slightly and I came to my senses. I reached an arm under her neck and shoulders and helped her sit up. She tried to speak again. Her voice came out in a croak this time. She licked her lips and it finally got through to me. She was thirsty.



I poured water for her and held it while she drank.

"Enough. Let me lay back down."

I eased her head back down onto the pillows. She closed her eyes and drifted off.

I wanted to change her nightgown and the bed clothes but she was too far gone, not so ill now but more like I had been, simply unable to move. I watched her for a while then went out to make more coffee, leaving the bedroom door wide open. I got the coffee going quickly and came back to the bedroom while it was brewing. Afterward, I sat beside her, dozing off then waking up and checking her pulse and respiration before sipping more coffee and dozing off again. Twelve hours later she came out of it completely, sooner than I had, but she had experienced a much rougher time of it than me.

I was awake when her eyes blinked open. She smiled widely while reaching for my hand. She squeezed it hard and said "Wow, watch out for that first step; it's a booger!"

I grinned back at her, vastly relieved. "How are you feeling?"

She didn't answer for a moment, obviously taking stock of herself. "Be damned. I feel pretty good actually. Did my heart really stop or was that a dream?"

"It stopped twice," I told her.

"Lord. I'm glad you stayed with me. Thank you."

"No thanks necessary. I'm the one that got you in this fix to begin with. I'm just glad you pulled through."

She laughed. "So am I." She sat up without effort and swung her feet over the bed. "Right now, I'm going to get a shower. If you don't mind, wait here until I'm finished, just to be sure."

"I will." I figured that she wouldn't have any more problems if my experience was a guide. Once I came out of the illness, I felt fine. No long recovery period necessary. Nevertheless, I waited.

She walked to her closet and grabbed some clothing and disappeared into the bathroom, leaving the door partially open. Presently I heard the shower going. With nothing else to do but wait, I stripped the bed of the wet sheets and covers and made a pile of them at the end of the



bed, dry parts down. I felt the mattress cover and of course it was wet too. I pulled it off as well. Surprisingly, there was some plastic sheeting beneath it on the side she must customarily sleep on so the mattress was dry. Probably something to do with Lupus, I thought, but I wasn't up on all the symptoms and as I remembered, they could vary tremendously anyway.

I knew where the utility room was but I couldn't leave to start washing the bedclothes, just in case she wasn't as fully recovered as she thought.

She was though. Shortly, she reappeared with a big towel wrapped around her. She started toward her closet then saw the heap of wet bed clothes.

She smiled, making her look very young now that all the makeup was gone-and there was no sign of the butterfly pattern. "Thanks. I should have done that first, but other matters were a bit more urgent. You can go ahead and get cleaned up now if you like. I'll be fine."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I took my spare set of clothes into the other bathroom and showered and washed my hair, using a little bottle of hotel room shampoo she had left for guests. The shower made me feel better but what I really needed was something to eat and some sleep. My eyes were trying to close and my stomach was rumbling.

Mona may as well have been reading my mind because when I got out of the bathroom, clean and dressed in fresh clothes, she had bacon, toast and scrambled eggs waiting. I barely remember eating, but I believe I thanked her before I collapsed on the bed in the guest room, stopping only long enough to remove my boots. That was the last thing I remembered for a while.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I woke up, I had no idea whether it was daylight or dark, and I had lost all track of time. I didn't even know what day of the week it was. I remembered Mona's illness vividly, though. I switched on the bedside lamp, dimly visible in the faint glow of a night light. I sat up and pulled on my boots and went out to face the day-or night, whichever it was.

It was morning. Mona was sitting in the little den, reading a Dallas paper. She looked up when she heard my footsteps.



"Hi. Welcome back to the world."

"Thanks," I said. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Just made it. Sit down and I'll get you some. How do you take it?"

"Just coffee, but you can put it in a big cup if you like."

"I can manage that."

I seated myself on the couch. She brought my coffee and a cup for herself, then sat down on the other end of it. For several moments neither of us said a word. Frankly, I wasn't sure what either of us should say. Should I apologize to her for giving her a disease that damn near killed her? Should she thank me for saving her life during the illness? I was still pondering when she broke the silence.

"I guess I owe you a bit of an explanation, huh?"

I was itching to know more about her but didn't intend to push. Her past was her own business. "Whatever you feel like telling. I should be asking your forgiveness for getting you into this mess though. I'll leave if you like."

"No."

I was pleased that she didn't hesitate.

"I let the past take care of itself," she said. "There's never any sense in wishing for what could have been. I know you're probably thinking I'm some nefarious character on the run from the law, though. Right?"

"Well, an alias—and dealing in identity forgery. Yeah, it gives the impression." I tempered my words with a grin. "I'm not complaining, though. You provided what I was after, and at a reasonable charge."

Mona shrugged. She was wearing jeans and a pullover. The shrug practically begged me to notice that she hadn't bothered with a bra. I looked back down at my coffee cup, not wanting to stare.

"So now what?" She asked.

I returned the shrug. "I'm fresh out of ideas, other than getting a long way away from Dallas."

"From what you told me, I don't blame you. Look Mike, I know what



you must think, but I'm not a bad person, not really."

"You don't have to explain."

"I know, but I want to since it appears that we're both in the same fix. You see, it's not really the law I'm running from. It's some very bad people in New York that my husband got mixed up with. He was in finance and talked them into investing a lot of money in a fund to keep his own thefts from showing. He was a compulsive gambler and got in way, way over his head. He sweet-talked me into putting my name on a bunch of documents that showed I was CEO of companies that I found out later didn't exist. Hell, I didn't know any better; I was in love with the jerk and he fooled me for years." Tears began trickling down her cheeks.

"You don't have to go on," I told her.

"Let me finish." She brushed at her face and continued. "The upshot was, his sleazy lawyer got him a quickie divorce and then he turned state evidence-on me. I got five years in prison. He went into the witness protection program, I think. That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. Those gangsters in New York were waiting on me when I got out. The ones who served time because of his testimony were very angry. They also wanted their money back and they thought I might know where my ex was. Of course I had no idea where the bastard went and certainly didn't care. As for the money, I think I finally convinced them that I didn't have any of it."

"So what was the problem?"

Her lips pressed together in a grim line. "They expected me to pay them back. I was still very pretty back then, and for six months, I was raped and beaten and forced to serve them and their customers as a— a sex toy. Then one day they got careless. I was around one of the bosses when he had just gotten in a load of money to launder. I got him drunk, took the money and ran. I didn't really give a damn if they caught me or not; I just wanted an end to that life."

I nodded sympathetically. "I don't blame you. And I suppose that's where the cash came from to buy this place?"

"Yes. There's still a bit of it left, but not much. Right about then, I was diagnosed with Lupus. The treatment had to be paid for, but I couldn't use my own name for fear Tormanza—that's the big boss in New York— would track me down. But I had to have some identification to get treated; you know how hospitals and such are; you've worked in them. You have to have all kinds of ID and Social Security numbers



and so forth. I had learned about the false identity business in prison. I made some contacts and got all the documentation I needed for treatment. This disease is expensive though, and it just goes on and on, especially with a really bad case like I have. I had to go to work, but again I couldn't use my name for fear of being traced." She shrugged. "I already knew the ID business. One thing led to another and I wound up trolling for customers in Dallas five days a week."

"That sure seems like a hard way to make it," I said.

"What would you have done, Mister Brandon?"

I didn't answer for a moment, running her story through my mind. Finally I met her gaze. "Probably the same thing you did. Damn, you read about stories like yours but—"

"But you've never crossed paths with someone who's actually lived it, huh?"

"No. Other than the army, my life has been pretty tame. The most exciting thing that ever happened to me was an argument with my wife over how many books I would read instead of entertaining her."

That got a chuckle from her. "I can relate to that." She pointed to her bookcases but then she grew serious again. "So we're back to the original question. What now?"

I rubbed my chin and ran both hands through my thinning hair then stared at them from force of habit. Usually there would be a few strands of gray or brown stuck to my palms but for a change they were clean. "This complicates things for both of us. You've got the mob after you and I've got Homeland Security after me and both of them want our hides for doormats. I think we had better move on, though I'll be damned if I know where, or what we would or should do somewhere else."

"You don't think we'd be safe here? I was careful with my new name."

I sighed. "If it was just the Mob or Mafia or whoever those people you were involved with are, I'd say we probably were, or at least you probably would be. But Homeland Security has all the resources of the government to call on and they've already shown me they will stop at nothing to find me. And I don't want to even think what will happen if they do."

Mona got up to refill our coffee cups. Now that I could look at her in daylight, standing, without other immediate worries distracting my



attention, I could see that she was smaller than I had thought, probably not much more than a couple of inches over five feet. I had already seen her breasts; they were more than ample. Her backside left nothing to complain about either. Suddenly I remembered the disparity in our ages. I was at least twenty five years older than her, maybe more. I shook my head to get my thoughts back where they belonged. Hell, old as I was, she wouldn't give me a second thought so far as sex was concerned.

Mona brought our coffee back and sat down again. She crossed her legs and leaned back. She tilted her head back, as if reflecting on our conversation. She spoke toward the ceiling. "You don't seem overly disgusted at my past. Why not?"

I had to think about that one, but not for long. "Seems to me you've managed better than most people would have under the circumstances. Most women who went through what you have would have either turned hard and completely amoral, or just given up and gone with the flow. Or committed suicide. But even with the Lupus to put the icing on the cake, so to speak, you've kept trying. That speaks volumes for you."

She nodded. "Thanks. I did get into dealing with stolen identities for a little while, but I couldn't live with it, thinking of all the misery it must be causing innocent people. Forged identities, on the other hand, are usually bought by people who want to work and can't, or in some cases, by those who want to stay here in the country with their families. You can say all you want to about illegal immigrants, but damn all, at least they're not scared to work."

She was right on that score. For all the shouting by Homeland Security, most illegal aliens were here because they wanted to better their status and care for their families. It was a subject that interested me ever since running into those types at hospitals where I've worked. Most of them won't come to an emergency room unless they're damn near dead for fear of being found out and sent back to Mexico, or wherever they came from.

"Well, be as may, I think we'll be safe here for a few days anyway. And the Homeland Security guys have no idea you're infected. From the way they've acted so far, I think they believe the infection can only be passed through transfer of blood. As it stands, you might be better off without me." I hated to say that; no one likes to be totally alone with dire problems, not even types like me who don't socialize much, but I felt obligated to point that out to her.

Mona didn't hesitate. "I think we had better stick together. Suppose



one or the other of us has another episode of sickness where we're helpless?"

"Good thought, though I have to tell you I feel fine. In fact, I feel better than I did before catching this bug."

"You look fine too. Maybe older people endure it better?"

"That's not the way diseases generally work. The older you are, the harder your body has to work to combat them."

"Yes I know that, but didn't you say this is like nothing you're ever seen?"

I laughed. "What I saw under the microscope shouldn't even be possible. Forty five years in the business and nothing I've seen or even read about even remotely compares."

"Did you say forty five?" She acted surprised.

"Huh? Yeah, about that. I joined the army when I was eighteen, spent twenty years as a medic and lab tech and stayed with it after I retired."

She mused. "That would put you in the sixties. You sure as hell don't look it."

"Thanks." I stretched. "I have to admit, I don't feel like it now either, though I sure as hell felt my age before I caught whatever the heck the bug is."

"Something's funny. If it makes you feel better, why should Homeland Security get so agitated about it?"

"I don't have a clue. All I can figure is that sooner or later there must be something else it does to you, something so bad they are willing to murder innocent citizens to keep it from spreading."

"Is it like something that's been genetically engineered?"

"Mona, I simply don't know. Whatever it is, it invades our blood cells. No, take that back. I suspect that's what it does, but it's possible it may be localized and just be producing some substance that's taken into the blood cells. There's also a possibility that the bug infects all the cells of the body but I'll have to have a microscope before I can say for sure, and may not be able to tell even then. It may infect some cells and not others." I spread my hands. "All I can say for sure is that



some government security agents are awfully damned upset about it."

"Hmm. Know something? I feel better than I have for years myself; maybe it's working on my Lupus. Now why should they be so damned scared of this thing?"

I got up and paced, the way I usually do when I'm running something through my mind that doesn't fit. "I've got another question, one I haven't really thought about since this whole thing began. Where did that first patient come from? He was obviously running from Homeland Security-or whoever those guys were, but from where? It's not like Lufkin is a big city."

Mona didn't seem worried about that. "I think it's much more important to find out why he was running rather than from where. And I would certainly love to know what the final effects of this bug is going to be. Is it going to eventually kill us or turn us into a Hobbit or what?"

I laughed. "A Hobbit! I like that. Well, I did have some of that patient's blood at my apartment, but I guess it was confiscated when I got away. On the other hand, all I need is some vacutainers and I could draw some from us, then find a lab to analyze it better than I can."

Mona looked pensive for a moment, then brightened. "If we can stay here for a few more days, that shouldn't be a problem. I've got some contacts."

"I have too, but none I could trust with something like this. No, wait-I do know one person. He may or may not be able to help. It depends on how he's feeling."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He has cancer. He's been fighting it for years." I hesitated, then said "You'll have to be the one to contact him though. I'm afraid they might be watching anyone I've ever known well."

"I don't mind. And while I'm thinking about it, your other clothes are all clean. I washed them while you were asleep."

Suddenly I thought about my little Glock that I had left in my jacket. "Did you find—"

"The Glock? Uh huh. Nice piece. Its twin lives in my bedside drawer."



I was liking her more and more. "Why not your purse?"

She sighed. "My record, remember? I can't carry a weapon any more. Suppose I were in an accident? It's bad enough having a record to begin with, but the penalties for an ex-felon carrying a weapon are just too much to risk."

"If you know how to use it, I think I'd start carrying it now," I said. "We're worrying about more than just you going back to jail."

Mona mused for a moment, then nodded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

James Shell was a very old friend from my time in the army, a retired pathologist I had worked with during one of the wars. Given the divide between officer and enlisted men, we had never socialized much while in the service, but we each respected the other's abilities and I had probably saved his life once during a suicide attack on our unit. At least he thought so, and maybe I had. At any rate, I had killed two of the attackers who were heading for his hooch. We had kept in contact and visited with each other on occasion. We still corresponded by email and phone calls. I thought back and decided he must be pushing eighty by now. I hoped he hadn't died since the last time we exchanged notes.

Mona made the call, pretending to be a home health nurse after I coached her a bit. Sure enough, he was still alive and kicking, though from where I was listening on the other extension, he sounded very weak.

We headed back to Dallas that evening. Mona checked us into a second rate motel near the same section of the city where we had met. It had an underground parking lot where we could leave the car. She also left me to sit and wait while she rounded up the phlebotomy supplies and a jacket and bag similar to what home health nurses were equipped with, as well as a disposable cell phone. It took her much less time than I had thought it would. While she was gone I used up several sheets of paper writing out all the details of the situation as I knew it so far, and urging Colonel Shell to practice the utmost secrecy; and to have whoever he farmed the work out to do the same. I also implored him to have the work done as quickly as possible, citing the murderous way Homeland Security was acting. And finally, I asked him to have the specimens destroyed when he was finished with them. When Mona got back, I wrote down the number of the cell phone and times for him to call, times I intended for us to be well



away from Mona's place so that it couldn't be traced to there.

After that I drew blood from Mona, then had her handle the tourniquet while I took my own blood. I tilted the tubes that had anticoagulant in them to be sure they were mixed and labeled them each with the fictitious names I had told the colonel we would be using. I also took a couple of cotton balls she had brought to thoroughly swab the inside of each of our cheeks until they were raw, then dropped the saturated cotton balls into one of the plastic glasses furnished by the hotel and rubberbanded the seal back over the top to keep them from drying out. It was the closest thing I could come to a cheek swab short of having a slide and applicator stick. I still couldn't remember how long it took the basal cells to work to the surface but I had been vigorous while obtaining the specimens. I figured I had gotten a ways below the surface cells that were in the process of sloughing off, so maybe it would show for certain whether the organism was invading all the cells of our bodies, as I strongly suspected it was.

"I guess that's everything," I said, munching on some snack food Mona had brought along with the other supplies. "By the way, you make a nice looking nurse."

She stuck her tongue out at me. "You may as well go on to bed if you're tired. It's a ways out to Shell's place and I may be a while. I want to convince him of exactly what he's getting into-and what we're already into. By the way, is he married?"

"His wife died a few years ago. He lives alone."

"Okay. See you later. Don't wait up." She surprised me by kissing me before leaving. I watched from the front window as her car pulled away, wondering what it meant, if anything. Finally I decided it was just a friendly gesture and quit rubbing my lips. I hoped I could keep it at that. She certainly couldn't have any romantic notions about someone as old as me. On the other hand, she had taken a room with only one bed, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. We might not stay if she got back soon enough, or we might decide to stay in Dallas until we heard something. We really hadn't gotten that far yet. The room was just in case, and to give me a place to park while she ran the errands.

*** * * ***

I was sound asleep when Mona returned, laying on top of the bed covers with my boots off. Her touch woke me. I sat up and looked at my watch. It was past midnight.



"How did it go?"

"He's a nice old man, even if he is sick. He asked a lot of questions I couldn't answer, but even the way he feels, he was intrigued. He said to give him three days for some preliminary results and a week for anything that needs to be followed up."

He would need the week, for sure, according to what I had seen. "He agreed to the secrecy, I hope?"

She yawned. "Oh sure. He had some bad things to say about Homeland Security, but mostly he seemed to just be fascinated with the disease we have. If it is a disease. He said it might be a benign parasite of some sort, given that we're both feeling fine right now. Anyway, I'm tired. Let's stay here, okay?"

I hesitated, glancing at the lone bed in the room.

"Mike, stop worrying about offending me for goodness sake! You act like I'll break if you touch me."

"I never wanted to have anyone think of me as a dirty old man. You're thirty years younger than me."

She sighed as if I were dense as a doorknob and headed for the bathroom. She might even be right, considering what followed.

I undressed down to my shorts and crawled under the covers. A few minutes later the bathroom light went out, leaving our room in shadows, lit only by the outside lights filtering through the thin drapes. Nevertheless, it was bright enough to see how thinly clad she was, wearing a nearly transparent nightgown. I realized I was staring and turned my head. Dirty old man, all right. But I didn't feel old, not like I had before becoming infected.

"G'night," Mona said, sliding under the covers. She sighed at the comfort of the bed and was asleep almost before I could answer.

I wished that I could doze off again. It had been awhile since I shared a bed with a woman, not even counting our odd situation. Even with my eyes closed I could sense her presence and it was impossible not to have some erotic thoughts, even if I didn't intend to try carrying them out. I was past the stage where I thought I was still attractive to women that young. As a poor method of sublimating sexual desire, I turned back to thoughts of the-let's call it the bug-we had acquired. That didn't get me anywhere either because it was completely outside my experience, and before I knew it, sex was on my mind again. I



**cursed silently and rolled over to face completely away from her.
Eventually I managed to drop off, but it wasn't easy.**

It was the old married feeling that caused me to wake up, the sensation of a warm body cuddled against me. I could feel the yielding firmness of Mona's breasts pressing against my back. Her hand was stroking my chest when I first became aware of her, but after she knew I was awake her hand moved confidently lower, already certain of my response. I surely didn't disappoint her. I rolled over and gathered her into my arms, wanting her with an urgency that I hadn't felt in years. Our lips met and our tongues wound against each other in a dance that was as old as time and as fresh as a bright spring morning.

My erection was unbelievably hard and acutely demanding, like nothing I had experienced for a long time. Even Viagra, which I had tried on a couple of occasions, didn't compare with this. Apparently Mona was feeling much the same thing. By the time we had the covers thrown back and were completely naked, our bodies were responding like teenagers, sending and receiving signals that bypassed the brain completely.

Mona's breathing became heavy and rapid. She pulled at me, urging me to hurry and I did, entering her just seconds later in one easy thrust that brought a long ecstatic sigh of pleasure from her-and from me. I began to move, slowly at first, wanting it to last and that's when it became something different than ordinary sex, no matter how good.

I can only describe it inadequately as a merging of our desires. It wasn't like mind reading but nevertheless, I could sense her emotions and could feel her bodily sensations-and I knew she was experiencing exactly the same thing with me. I could tell exactly when she was approaching her orgasm, just as she knew when I was coming close, and—well, you know how it feels, the mounting tenseness, the exquisite, almost unbearable expectation. Think of that and multiply it by a factor of your own choosing, but make it a big one, and then multiply that again for the moment of release, like a pent up dam of boiling, passionate, utterly intense desire bursting from your body and mind with all the power in the universe and sweeping you up and over a precipice of infinite enjoyment, and all the while feeling the same thing happening to your partner, as if you were Siamese twins co-joined the whole length of your bodies.

That's what it was like, and more. I had actually felt, or thought I felt, the twin areas of acute pleasure spreading in waves from her torso as the erectile tissue of her nipples rubbed against my chest and the mounting, almost desperate drive for release emanating from the friction of my body between her thighs-and at the same time those



sensations heightened my own response in a feedback that reached heights of pure, burning pleasure that I didn't know existed or ever could exist. It took a long, long time to come away from the place where we had gone together and to regain our senses. I was collapsed on top of Mona with my elbows under her, taking some of my weight while her arms and legs still held me in their grip, though not nearly as fiercely as they had just moments ago. I realized with an acute sense of happiness that I felt closer to her than I ever had with any other woman.

She spoke first, her voice hoarse from the frenzy of her orgasm. "Oh my God Mike, what happened? What was it?" happen

For a moment I had disbelieved that it could have happened as I remembered it, but she renewed my faith in my own mind. It had indeed taken place and she had felt it as intensely as I had. And as much as I would like to believe it was the result of a newly discovered true love, I knew it had more to do with the bug than anything else. Not that I didn't care for her very much already, even as short a time as we had been together, but a really deep love has to build and develop over time. At least I guess it has to; I had never experienced it, not in marriage and not before or between marriages. Maybe I would find out what it was like now, if the sex and the sensation of closeness were any indication of the future.

"Mona sweetheart, whatever it was, I think it would kill us if it happened too often."

"Never. Nothing that beautiful could grow old. But—" Her voice trailed off, unable to analyze what had just happened.

"But where did it come from?"

"Yes." She ran her hands up and down my back and finally let her legs fall away, freeing us to roll onto our sides, but still staying connected-something else I hadn't managed for longer than I cared to remember. It felt wonderful.

"The bug," I said. "That's the only thing I can think of. Mona, I haven't even been much interested in sex the last few years and now—"

"Whatever. If that's what it was, I'm glad you infected me. But also if it was, why on earth would the government try to suppress something so great and beautiful?"

"Don't want the proletariat to have it?" I suggested, then immediately discounted that idea. "No, the drugs for erectile dysfunction all made



it to the market, even when they knew they would be used by normal folks too. It has to be something more than that." I ran my hand over the curve of her waist and down the length of her thigh, enjoying the smoothness of her skin and the way she responded by pressing close and trying to keep us connected.

"Mike, now that we've cooled off so to speak, think about what happened. Were we—were we reading each other's mind? That's almost what it felt like."

I considered. "Well, we were certainly aware of each other's sensations and emotions. That's pretty close to mind reading. It's—for the first time in my life, I can appreciate how a woman feels having sex. It stimulated me even more than I already was. It was sensational, except that's too mild a word."

"Uh huh." She pulled at me again, keeping our bodies together. "So maybe that's it. Maybe it will go beyond sex before it's over."

That made me remember the occasions at the hospital where I thought I had sensed the nurses' thoughts on two different occasions, but then I discounted the notion. But what if it were true? I didn't like the idea and said so. "I don't know if we're ready for our thoughts to be read. Everyone has their own private world they wouldn't want anyone else to enter, not even someone they loved."

"True. Well, I guess all we can do is wait and see."

"Yup. Now I've got another question. How the hell did you know I was even able?"

"Easy. I saw the way you looked at me. A woman can't mistake that. And Mike, you keep worrying about your age. Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

"Maybe we both ought to," I said.

We needed to get up anyway. And then we stood side by side, examining our reflections in the mirror over the basin and counter. I guess I had been trying to deny the obvious, not wanting to believe it and then be disappointed. Before, I had looked all of my sixty some years, if not more. Now I could easily be taken for a man in his early fifties. My skin was healthier looking, not as dry or lined, and I could swear there wasn't as much gray in my hair as before. Were the brown hairs replacing the gray as they naturally fell out? My paunch, the one that older men almost invariably get had almost disappeared, though I hadn't had that much of one to begin with, having always



been naturally slender. And my muscle tone, while hard to see, felt more like a younger version of myself, say about a dozen years younger.

Mona ran her hands over her arms and chest. "I did have red lumps scattered over my body from the Lupus and I've had to wear makeup to hide the butterfly pattern for several years now. It's gone. My face looks like it used to. And—" She cupped each of her breasts. "See? Hardly a bit of sag now, and they were beginning to droop, partly from simply aging I guess, but also from the Lupus. There's more too. Systemic Lupus does horrible things to you that aren't usually obvious to anyone else, but a person with the disease knows. My joints and internal organs were in bad shape, or so I was told last time I was examined and I'm sure it was true. Some days I could barely get around without pain pills. I guess it could be just a surface phenomena but I feel different inside, like I'm—younger and healthier I guess. Does that make sense?"

I couldn't answer for a moment for admiring her reflection. Her breasts were firm and more than ample, but as she said, they stood out proudly like a teenager's might and were tipped with rosy brown virginal nipples that drew my gaze like a little boy in front of a candy counter. She was beautiful, one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen with her dark hair no longer put up in a bun but tumbling in waves past shoulders and framing a face with such finely chiseled features that they immediately made you think of those regal, larger than life princesses of storybooks. I could find no fault at all in her. My only problem was wondering what she saw in me.

"It makes sense to me. I feel that way too."

"It's real, isn't it?" Mona whispered. I could tell how desperately she wanted to be free of her disease and be normal again.

"At least for now. I just hope it lasts. And Sweetheart—this may be one other reason the government wants to suppress the bug. Can you imagine what it would do to the world if everyone started getting younger?"

"The government couldn't suppress it for long, not if some politicians knew. They would almost have to try to use it to get votes. It's just their nature. I think it must be one of the agencies, maybe not even Homeland Security; they could be dupes for a false story. Possibly the military is the culprit and they're trying to pass it off as a terrorist thing to avoid suspicion of what it really is."

"You're cynical for someone so young, but I agree with you. A



politician could no more keep something like this secret than a banker could resist an increase in interest rates during inflation. But there's still more to it that we haven't figured out."

Mona put her arms around me. "You said you haven't been very interested in sex lately. Neither have I, not since I got Lupus, and not much before then, not after what happened in New York. Shall we see how long it takes us to get caught up?"

"I'm willing," I said, "But can we get something to eat first?"

"Men. They always want someone to cook for them." But she laughed as she said it.

CHAPTER NINE

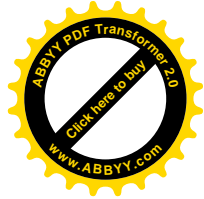
We showered together, then Mona went out to get us breakfast. I still thought it was best for me to stay out of sight. She brought back sausage biscuits and rolls and coffee, which I would almost have killed for by then. We had forgotten to bring anything to make coffee with, and this particular hotel didn't provide. She also brought back a morning paper.

One of the front page stories told of an escaped terrorist who had been killed "resisting arrest". The parentheses are mine. The paper played it straight, but give them the benefit of the doubt; they may not have known. That poor man with the mangled legs from the emergency room was undoubtedly dead by now. Chalk up one more for their side.

*** * * ***

We spent the next three days more in bed than out of it, truth be told. It was like a honeymoon where a couple love each other so much they can hardly bear to be separated, even for a minute. Or I suppose it was like that. Neither of my marriages had been that good, but if it were possible, this is the way I would have liked them to be. Better late than never.

The sex couldn't have gotten any better than the first time I thought, but it turned out that it could. Anyone who has lived with a lover, whether married or not, knows that you gradually find out each other's likes and dislikes in bed, even without much experimentation. I'll confess, I've always been a bit reticent about sex, but the way our minds meshed (and that's the only real way to describe it) compressed the learning curve by magnitudes. The only reason it didn't go even faster was the inherent limitation of our bodies,



particularly mine being male. Even so, Mona had no reason to complain. I managed as well as I ever had as a younger man, helped along by her attitude I'm sure.

Once when we were simply lying in bed, propped up on our pillows, I asked her what it was about me that attracted her; a stupid question I suppose, but I couldn't help it. She was beautiful and thirty years younger than me. I'm not bad looking but certainly no Adonis nor Hercules either. Even if part of it was due to the bug, there had to be something else.

"Mike love, you make me wonder why any woman would ever divorce you."

"Really? Why?"

"Women like honesty and you've got that. You're not a controller like a lot of men. You didn't try to push yourself on me, and if you've got a line of blarney, it's so subtle I haven't caught a hint of it."

I chuckled mirthlessly. "You know, I've always kind of envied those type of guys in one way. They can talk women into bed with hardly any effort and it doesn't seem to matter whether they're sorry bastards or not. You know why my first wife wanted a divorce? She said I didn't excite her like I should, that I just wanted to work and stay home and be a dull old husband. And all the time, I thought that was the idea."

Mona rolled on to her side and put her hand on my chest. "That's the instant gratification syndrome. A lot of women want to be wooed over and over again. I guess there's nothing wrong with it, but I like something deeper in a man. The way you took care of me when I was sick, and the way you offered to separate to make it safer for me when I know you wanted to stay; things like that mean a lot to me. And there's other little items I could mention if I wanted to, like being a reader and being considerate, but really, I like you for the very reasons that a lot of women wouldn't. They're the ones who wind up getting divorced because they thought they wanted excitement in a man, then find out that exciting men are usually too full of themselves to make good husbands. And believe me, that's something I learned the hard way."

I kissed her and told her I shouldn't have brought the subject up and that I was sorry if I had brought back bad memories. She told me to shut up and make love to her again. I told her she was so beautiful I was scared she would break and she told me—well, use your own imagination. We got to know each other really well in just a few days and I found myself in love, really in love, for the first time in my life.



* * * *

I rode out with Mona one morning, waiting until most of the commuters had left for work and even then we went out the back way where she had parked in the alley, just to avoid questions from any nosy neighbors that might still be around. Ten o'clock was the first window I had given in my letter to Colonel Shell to call us. Mona drove back toward Dallas then east on I-20 to get well away from her home. Even disposable phones can be traced if an agency wants to put enough effort and manpower into it.

I let Mona answer, then leaned in close so both of us could listen.

"Hi Injun," he said, a code phrase I had asked him to use. We had kidded each other for years about our common Cherokee Indian ancestry. "Listen up. Your friend is the damnedest thing I've ever run across, just like you said it was. It's a parasite, or perhaps a symbiote in some cases. First run on human cell cultures showed it multiplying extremely rapidly, then killing the culture, every time. Same for other mammalian cultures. The type of cell didn't appear to make any difference. It also killed all the mice that were injected with it very quickly and the post on them showed it invading other organs from the initial blood infection that we started it from. I told the lab not to try it on any other animals yet. In the meantime, how are you feeling?"

I decided to speak up, getting real close to Mona to be sure he could hear me. "Like I'm ten years younger, Jim. And I've got another bit of data. It appears to either have cured or is in the process of curing a case of advanced SLE." There was only so much circumlocution we could use and I felt like that was important information.

"Be damned. Tell me, do you look as young as you feel?"

I glanced at Mona and grinned like an idiot. "He looks a dozen years younger. So do I, almost," she said.

"Well, that makes sense. Whatever it is invades every cell of the body in humans, like it did in the mice, if the male cheek swab you sent is any indication. The female shows a few infected cells but most of the basal cells probably haven't worked far enough up to show up in her yet." He was talking about the fictitious names we had labeled our specimens with.

"We suspected as much," I said. "Anything else?"

"Nothing, other than it's hard to kill, but not indestructible." His



voice was fading. I thought it was the phone and asked him to speak up.

"Sorry, I'm weak. Mi-Injun, I'm going to try it."

I knew what he meant. "You're sure?"

I heard him start to laugh then it cut off abruptly. He gasped, then apologized. "Sorry. Damn, I can't even laugh any more without it hurting. Yes, I'm certain. I have nothing to lose."

I didn't try to dissuade him. As he said, he wasn't risking much. And perhaps it would help. I certainly hoped so.

"You don't need to call again, Jim. I think we've got what we need. And I think it would be a good idea if you made sure all the cultures and samples are destroyed. You can always get more from us if needed."

"I'll take care of it, Mike."

"Okay. Thanks, and good luck."

"Us Redskins are so sneaky we don't need luck. Take care."

Mona turned the phone off.

"Turn it back on then pull over and I'll chunk it in the ditch," I told her.

"Good idea."

At the first exit, we tossed the phone onto the edge of a drainage ditch in a patch of weeds and headed back to Cedar Hill.

"What was all that Indian stuff about," Mona asked.

"Huh? Oh. The colonel and I are both one quarter Cherokee Indian. We used to joke about it a lot."

"We have something in common then. I'm part Cherokee."

"I'll take your word for it. You look more like a princess than an Indian, though I believe I have heard you yell like one."

She laughed. "You made noises too mister, if memory serves, and it does. Not that I minded," she added, reaching over to poke me in the



ribs. "Anyway, I take after my mother, mostly." She turned serious then. "Your friend said it killed the mice and the cell cultures. I wonder why it's not affecting us that way?"

"I don't know." I thought a moment. "I don't suppose both us both having Indian blood has anything to do with it?"

"Why not?"

"There's just not that much genetic difference in races."

"Couldn't it be some sort of recessive gene that doesn't show up often?"

"I guess it could be," I admitted. "Whatever, just be glad we're not mice."

"In more ways than one," Mona said, taking her eyes off the road long enough to throw me a smile.

I couldn't have agreed more.

*** * * ***

We hadn't left anything worth bothering to return to the hotel for. Instead, we went straight home. To Mona's home that is, although I was already starting to think of it as ours, which was careless of me, but I've always been easy going. With no immediate danger threatening, I had relaxed. I turned on the news while she began fixing us a meal. There was nothing interesting going on. I turned it off and circled around the bar to the kitchen to see if there was anything I could do to help. There was. She sent me to the store for milk.

I took her car and left. Just as I was turning the corner, I saw two cars coming from the opposite way. They both turned into our street, driving slowly. Though they were different colored, both had tinted windows and had the undistinguished look of government vehicles, bought in quantity. I was suspicious enough to circle the block and come back around.

Mona's house was about three down from the corner, close enough for me to see one of the cars parked at the curb. Our front door standing open. It looked as if it had been forced, though it was hard to tell from where I was. Damn all, we had stayed here too long. I felt an adrenaline surge, telling me to run, that there was nothing I could do now except get myself captured and probably killed along with Mona. I couldn't make myself do it, even though I was as scared as a rabbit



with a fox's head already in its cage with its jaws open. I felt my heart beating wildly and my mouth went dry with terror at what was happening. I think the only thing that kept me from running was having been in combat, albeit briefly. It isn't courage that keeps you going in those situations, it's loyalty to the others in it with you.

Without even knowing what I could do, and without any real hope that I was going to live through the encounter, I drove back around and into the alley, hoping that I might be able to go in that way and rescue Mona. The first thing I saw was the other car parked beside hers. Of course. They would have covered both exits. Nevertheless, I pulled my little Glock forty and thumbed off the safety while I steered the car one-handed for a moment. Then I got smart and stopped, turned around and backed down the alley. Just in case it turned out that I lived through what was coming, I would be able to take off quickly.

I stopped again and got out of the car. I was just in time to see Mona burst out the back patio door, then stumble and fall. She kept her hold on her pistol even as she went down. There was already a little circle of blood on the back of her blouse. I was so revved up that I barely heard the gunshot that felled her. I crouched down and braced the automatic on the hood of the car, partly to help my aim, but mostly to still my shaking hands. I was just in time to catch two of the same men who had been at the hospital by surprise as they came rushing out in pursuit of Mona. I recognized that thin little mustache on one of them at any rate. I fired four times as fast as I could pull the trigger and got both of them, shooting for the head rather than the chest when I saw that they were wearing armor.

I came around the car holding the Glock out in front of me. I figured there were still at least two more men inside the house, probably more, but I didn't give a damn right then. If they had killed Mona I was going to go in after them. When I stopped beside her, she began struggling to get to her feet. I helped her up.

"How many more inside?" I asked, backing toward the car, holding her up with one arm and trying to wave my gun in three different directions with the other.

"Three. T—two of them are d—dead. Help me to the car then go get the other one."

I didn't know what she was talking about, getting the other one. All I wanted was to get the hell out of there so I could take care of her. I pocketed my weapon and picked her up bodily, then managed to support her weight with one arm momentarily while I unlocked the



passenger side door, cussing myself for not thinking of it earlier. I got her into the car and ran back to the driver's side. I started to get in, but Mona was insistent.

"Mike, please. The other one. He's alive. I saw him moving as I left. He—he'll call this in. You have to—don't worry, I don't think he—can hurt you."

She was thinking clearer than I was, even being hurt, and she was perfectly right. If we left any one of them alive, they would be hot on our tail in minutes, even if we did get away momentarily.

I ran back to the back door and entered cautiously despite Mona telling me not to worry. I did worry, but as soon as I saw him, I saw that she was right—and I was just in time. He had crawled to the phone, leaving a trail of blood from his mangled hands as well as bloodied scalp and was using a pen held in his teeth to try to dial, probably 911.

I kicked the phone away from him, then when he tried to grapple with me, I kicked him under the chin, sending him tumbling backward. I aimed the Glock at his head, intending to kill him, then hesitated. Goddamnit, I was tired of being chased and harassed and being on the other end of rude men trying their best to kill me, and now Mona. While he was still groggy, I reached down and removed his backup weapon, riding in an ankle holster, then grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him to his feet. I could feel the bullet proof vest under his shirt. Off to the side I could see the two others who had come into the house with him. They were both dead from head shots. I figured Mona must have fired for the chest with her first shot and hit this one's hands as he was holding his gun in front of him, crippling and numbing both of them, then realized instantly that they were wearing armor and shot for the head. I noticed then that it wasn't a chest wound he was bleeding from, but a bloody scalp. Mona's aim had been a bit off, but not by much.

The only way I could figure that she got all three of them was either total surprise from them not expecting her to be armed or perhaps not being trained really well. There were lots of Homeland agents who had come from the immigration service rather than being opted from the FBI or CIA. Or heck, they might not be from Homeland Security at all. Not that it made any difference now. I just wanted to get out of there and take that dude with me and try to get some answers. I could always kill him later, I thought brutally. He tried briefly to resist but I stuck the barrel of the Glock under his chin and growled savagely, "You can come along quietly or I can put a bullet in your brain right now. I really don't give much of a damn which."



That got his attention. He came. I got him quickly out to the car and made him crawl into the back from the passenger side so that his head and torso would be behind me as I drove. I reached in across Mona and flipped the seat dividers down so that she could see him clearly. I didn't even have to say anything; she had already guessed my intentions. She had her weapon out and pointed at him. He shrank back against the corner of the seat when he saw the hatred in her eyes.

I ran around to the driver's side and got in.

"Keep him covered and if he so much as moves his mouth wrong, shoot him," I told Mona. "And if you feel like you're going to pass out before we get somewhere we can stop and bandage your shoulder, shoot him anyway."

The agent cringed enough so that I thought he was thoroughly cowed. I don't know what he could have done with those hands anyway. One was a bloody mess with at least one finger missing and the other hung askew from where the bullet had shattered the bones in his wrist. He was still bleeding but I didn't give a damn. Let him bleed.

CHAPTER TEN

Amazingly, no one had come to see what the shooting was about. I guess most of the neighbors were at work and any others stayed huddled inside, not wanting to get in the line of fire. That was probably a good idea on their part. The way I was feeling right then, with the rage to fight still coursing through my body, I probably would have gunned down anything that moved. As it was, I drove away without any problem and just hoped like hell no one had been peeping through a window and gotten our descriptions and license plate number.

As soon as I had driven a few blocks away, I pulled over intending to see how badly Mona was hurt.

"Go! Don't stop Mike!"

I did as she said. She seemed to have regained some strength once she was off her feet. With my side vision I could see her fumbling for the glove compartment latch while still keeping our prisoner covered. She grimaced as she moved her wounded shoulder the wrong way, but that was still a hopeful sign; if she could move it at all, the slug couldn't have hit the joint at least. When I saw what she was after I



almost burst into hysterical laughter. But really, what better type of bandage can you use to plug a bullet hole than a clean tampon?

But she didn't try to tend to her wound then. She dropped the package to her lap and reached inside again and came out with a vial of pills.

"My pain pills," she explained. "I keep some in the car in case the Lupus gets real bad away from home. Can you twist the top while I hold?"

I could and did, though with some difficulty. Fortunately, it was one of the easier child proof caps. She shook out a couple of pills and swallowed them dry.

I had a sudden thought. "Give our guest back there some too, if you can spare them," I said, turning my head toward her long enough to wink.

She caught on. Maybe they would make him more inclined to talk, especially if he weren't used to them. She shook out three more and stuffed them into the mouth of the wounded agent while he leaned forward.

I was driving right at the speed limit in the neighborhood, wanting to get the hell out of there but not wanting to get stopped either. I passed a section on one street with two vacant lots side by side and screeched to a halt. Again, Mona caught on before I could say anything. While I kept our prisoner covered, she unbuttoned her blouse and removed it and her bra, then put the bloody blouse back on, leaving it unbuttoned and hanging loosely, down almost to her waist. She tore the wrapper off a tampon and tried to use it to plug the hole in the front of her shoulder. It was too large. Instead, she just pressed it to the wound and the tacky blood held it there.

When she was finished with her front, she turned away from me. I could see the exit wound, just under her armpit. The skin was flayed back in strips from the explosive exit of the slug but it wasn't bleeding much. I took out my handkerchief and pressed it down over the wound after pulling the skin flaps that were hanging from the wound back into place as best I could. I held it there while she pulled her blouse back up and buttoned it again. She leaned back against the seat to hold it in place, hiding most of the bloody sections of it. She picked up her gun again and I put mine away and got the car back onto the street and continued on our way.

It wasn't until she was finished that I realized that I hadn't told her



what I was doing; she seemed aware without me saying a thing. It wasn't much and I didn't think of it again until much later. At the moment, all I could keep my mind on was how to get a long way from the area without getting caught, and in the meantime figure out some way to have Mona's wound cared for without alerting the law. I wasn't encouraged by the prospect of either action succeeding, but what I did was head back toward Dallas. I figured that if a chase got organized, there would be road blocks up on all the roads and highways leading away from the city.

On the way, Mona talked to me. Her voice was shaky at first but gradually became stronger.

"They knocked first, but I had seen them drive up and knew what they were after, and I was right. After one knock, they simply battered the door open. I ran back to the bedroom and got my gun. I—I read a lot. I knew how they would work it from reading mysteries and thrillers.

One would stay beside the door while the other burst through. As soon as the first one came rushing in, I..I fired right through the wall where I thought the first one would be standing, then shot the other one in the back of the head before he could turn around. At least I tried to shoot him in the back, but my hands were shaking so much it got him in the neck. And the one that had been by the door—that shot went low. It hit him in the groin. He was moaning, but still alive."

She paused for a moment and I could sense that the next part was hard to relate. "Mike, he was still alive and still had his gun in his hand. I—I shot him in the head, even though he wasn't aiming it at me. He may even have been unconscious. I almost got killed while doing it, because just then the guy in the back seat there came at me." She shuddered. "The only thing that saved my life was because he was so excited he shot wide. I should have tried for his he—head since I knew by then they were wearing vests, but I was so scared I just shot straight a—at him. He was holding his gun in both hands and—and I guess you can see what happened. My shot hit his hands. But then I panicked. I should have stopped to kill him d—dead but I just wanted to get away and find—find you. Oh God, Mike, why is this happening? I never wanted—to—to kill anyone." She began crying, but she kept her gaze on the agent in the back seat.

My God, she was complaining and she had done better than I ever would have in the same circumstances, even if her encounter hadn't gone down exactly like I thought it had. She had even steeled herself to finish two of them off, realizing that we couldn't leave any of them alive and still stay free ourselves. I felt my heart go out to her. I reached over to pat her leg. I would have worried if she hadn't shed tears. It isn't easy to realize you have killed someone. "You did what



had to be done, sweetheart. They would have disposed of us as casually as stray cats. Whatever the ultimate reason, they aren't going to let this thing we have spread. I'm sorry as hell I got you into this. But I'm glad you didn't kill this one. Maybe we can find out what in hell is going on now."

"Quit apologizing. You didn't buy my gun and you didn't force me to pull the trigger. And you certainly didn't infect me deliberately. Do—do you think we can stop at a convenience store?"

"It should be safe enough for right now. Tell me what you need and I'll get it."

"Buy me a package of tampons. The brand doesn't matter. And some sort of bandages."

"Are you sure you can watch him while I'm gone?"

"If I can't, I'll just shoot the son of a bitch."

Just those words were probably enough to keep him quiet.

I pulled off at an exit in one of the little communities at the very south edge of the Oak Cliff section of Dallas and parked as far from the entrance as possible. We had filled the tank on the way home so that wasn't a problem yet.

"Get the little bag from the trunk and hand it to me before you go in."

I popped the trunk, found what she had asked for and handed it to her.

"Okay, go ahead. I'll be fine." She winked at me and smiled as if she were on a Sunday outing rather than running from the scene of a gun fight with a grievous wound in her body. I think she was already much calmer than I was. My hands were still trembling slightly and I could feel my pulse, still running fast.

All I could find in the way of first aid supplies were some stretch bandages, some topical antibiotic ointment and a pack of variable sized adhesive bandages. I got those and the tampons, and while I was at it grabbed a couple of souvenir tee shirts. I figured Mona could change into one of those to replace her bloody blouse. I bought a six pack of bottled water and some snack food while I was at it, not knowing when we would have a chance to stop again. Wherever it was, I wanted to do something about Mona's wound. It didn't appear to be bothering her too much now but I knew it would as soon as the



shock wore off. It really needed a surgeon but we didn't dare go to a hospital or doctor, not for a gunshot wound. They would report it, first thing.

Mona had already anticipated what the sight of a woman in a bloody top would stir up if anyone noticed, and used the time I was inside to dispose of her bloody blouse and pull a windbreaker on, somehow keeping the prisoner under control while she did it. Zipped up, no one would notice anything untoward now, and the blood wouldn't soak through the waterproof outside of it and show. Smart, but she thanked me anyway for the tee shirts.

"Hon, I wish to hell we could take you to a hospital. You must be hurting, but we just don't dare have a professional look at you. They'd call the cops in a heartbeat."

"I know. Open one of those water bottles. I'll take another pill now that you're back."

"I'm sure glad you have them," I said."

She laughed, then winced when it hurt. "Yes, me too. I always keep a few emergency supplies of this and that in the car. I guess I've been scared I'd have to leave home without warning. Mike, I don't even have any fake ID now. I do have a spare clip and a partial box of bullets in the glove compartment, though."

"Great. That's more than I have. What's in my gun was it. Hell, I should be taking lessons from you."

"You are. Where are we going, by the way?"

"If you can stand it, I'm going to find a side road and park until dark. And it would help if you have a screwdriver and a wrench or two. Otherwise, we'll have to take a chance on stopping somewhere else."

"There's a tool kit in the trunk."

"All I saw was a pink case of some sort."

"Well? Can't a woman have a pink tool kit if she wants one?"

*** * * ***

The pills had Mona a little woozy by the time I found a place to park where, if we were disturbed, I hoped we would be taken for a couple of clandestine lovers. As soon as I killed the engine, I had Mona remove the windbreaker. Surprisingly, there was hardly any blood



marring the inside lining. I removed my soaked handkerchief and looked closely at the exit wound. It was still gory but it wasn't bleeding and the skin flaps appeared to be firmly back in place. I used my pocket knife to cut two strips from a hand towel Mona must have retrieved from the little bag I had gotten for her. I saturated both with the two tubes of antibiotic ointment I had bought at the store.

When I removed the tampon lying on the entrance wound, I could see that it was simply a pucker in the skin and it wasn't bleeding now. Just in case, I had her hold my makeshift bandage with the antibiotic on it in place there while I did the same in back, while awkwardly managing to get the stretch bandage going, and all the time one or the other of us had a gun pointed at the back seat. I wound the bandage around her shoulder and crossed it under her arms. It brought back memories of having bandaged a similar wound back in the war, but then I had been able to clean the wound with something besides water.

The bandage wasn't long enough to do as good a job as I wanted. I should have bought two of them, but what I had would have to do. After that I got out of the car and used tools from her pretty pink tool kit to loosen the front and back license plates so that they would come off quickly when I wanted them to. By the time I had that finished, Mona was leaning against the door frame with her eyes almost closed, pretty well out of it from the pain pills. Fortunately, our prisoner was, too, but I got his eyes open by speaking sharply to him. Mona sat up straighter to keep from dozing off and missing what he said.

"Listen up, shithead.!" I don't curse unless I really have a reason to, but I wanted to make him believe I was the meanest mother in the valley right now. A few vulgarities couldn't hurt.

His eyes blinked open.

"Start talking. What the devil is this infection we have and why is the government trying to kill every one who has it?"

He opened his mouth then closed it again without speaking. He was trying to be a hero.

I thought for a minute. "Listen closely, motherfucker. We want some answers and we want them now. You've got about 30 seconds to make up your mind, then guess what?"

He didn't say anything.

I took out my pocketknife and opened the big blade. "See this? Start



talking or I'm going to slash the nerves and tendons in both wrists then put out both your eyes. After that I'll just dump you here. How would you like to live the rest of your life blind as a bat and having to get help to wipe your ass?"

That did it. Some men and women can face death with hardly a quiver, but very few of us are able to resist pressure of that type. He began talking.

"Give me another pill first, please. My hands are really hurting and I don't feel very good." I could see he was telling the truth. His face was white and he was shaking.

"Okay, but remember what else is going to be hurting if I catch you in a lie. One eye for the first lie. No mercy for the second. Got me?"

"Yes, sir."

By God, he was totally cowed! I got out two more pills and helped him swallow them with a drink from the water bottle.

He leaned back. "I don't know exactly what you've got, honest. My bosses said that everyone who gets it dies."

"How about that patient who wound up in the hospital where I worked? He wasn't dead. For that matter, neither are we."

"He was one of the others. All the federal prisoners died, though."

"Prisoners?"

"They were using federal prisoners to experiment with, ones on death row with nothing to lose. All of them are dead, I think. The others—" He stopped talking and stared into space. He appeared to be rambling. Others?

"All right, but where did the bug come from in the first place? And who or what are the others?"

"They told us that terrorists were spreading it." He got a puzzled look on his face. "I don't believe it, though."

Now that was interesting. Even the agents were being lied to.

"Why not?"

"I overheard a couple of the scientists, or maybe they were doctors.



Anyway, they were saying that they couldn't figure out why the others weren't dying."

"What others?" I asked again, insistently.

He tried to shrug, doing a poor job of it. "I don't know. I guess they were talking about the ones they captured. There were more, but some of them escaped."

"But who are they? What country are they from? Are they Arabs? From the Mideast?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. The whole thing is being kept quiet. We were all sworn to utmost secrecy and still not told much. Bastards—"

"You're talking about Homeland Security?"

"Yes. No, not—but—I—military types in the compound, too. I don't—"
He got a puzzled look on his face, as if something wasn't right.

"Compound? Where is it?"

"I don't know. Agents like me were always taken to and from the place blindfolded and—car with windows we couldn't see out of."

"Is it underground?" I was thinking of Cheyenne Mountain or some such.

"No, I don't think so. I think it's—" His voice was becoming weaker. Maybe I shouldn't have given him those other pills.

"All right, let's get back to the others, you said. How many escaped. Do you know?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe three or four—a dozen, though. I think—Oklahoma—one of them said—Ri..mountain—"

His eyes closed and abruptly, and like a stalled car, he stopped breathing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I should have twigged to the signs that he was going into shock. I had certainly seen it often enough in patients, but I had been so intent on getting information out of him that I ignored everything else. It didn't



sound as if he knew much more anyway, except-what had he said? Oklahoma? And something about a mountain? Well, whatever, he wasn't going to ever kill any more innocent men or women.

I got out and opened both side doors to let the stink of death out of the car. Mona opened her door too, but held on to the door handle in case I had to take off suddenly. I pulled the dead agent out of the back seat and dragged his body down a little slope to a big drainage ditch.

Have you ever tried to stuff a body into a culvert? Believe me, it is a hard job, even when the opening is two feet in diameter. I was exhausted by the time I got him far enough in so that he couldn't be spotted from the highway. If a hard rain didn't come, the body probably wouldn't be discovered for several days.

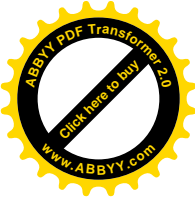
I got Mona to drink a whole bottle of water to replace the fluid loss from her bullet wound. She even managed to get down a few bites of cheese and crackers. She wanted to stay awake and help watch, but I told her to rest while she could.

After that it was simply a matter of waiting until dark and hoping for the best. I kept the car radio on at low volume, tuned to an all-news program. It was well into the afternoon before the story broke and even then there was very little to it, just a simple report of gunshots at a "residence in Cedar Hill" where a DEA agent had been "wounded in a brief fight with drug dealers". Well, the fight had been brief, anyway. That much of it was accurate, but the rest of it was obviously an attempt to play the story down, almost certainly by request of some Homeland Security spokesperson-or maybe the military. There was no mention of bodies or a missing agent.

That suited me, especially if local law enforcement officers hadn't been notified. I thought there was a good probability that they hadn't been, considering how the story of our fight had been downplayed so much. From what the agent had told me, they were obviously trying to keep a lid on the bug story. No, more than that; they were disposing of anyone they thought had contacted it. Which gave me some hope that we still had a chance to get away yet, if I worked it right. Homeland Security is a huge agency but they have a lot of ground they have to cover, and they couldn't be everywhere. Even if they were working for the military, their resources weren't infinite. I hoped.

*** * * ***

I checked us into a motel on the outskirts of Dallas after it was fully dark, asking for a room toward the back to 'keep traffic from bothering us'. I paid cash and wrote down a fictitious license number on the registration card. The clerk didn't bother checking. They never



do.

I waited until late that night, then went out and removed the plates from our car. In that same back corner of the motel parking lot, I took the plates off a car of the same model as ours and put ours on it, then quickly put the stolen plates on our car. That should keep us relatively safe, especially since my mustache was coming along nicely and I planned on having Mona cut my hair once she felt like it. I wasn't too worried about her appearance. Women can do the damndest things with makeup and hair styles when they take a notion to change their looks.

Mona was sleeping. She had eaten some more, drank some more water and appeared to be resting easily, sleeping on the side away from her wound. The bullet had gone into the upper slope of her breast and exited right under her scapula. It might even have chipped or broken it, but I didn't think so. My main worry was infection. Bullets always carry a lot of debris from clothes into the wounds they make. If she didn't get an infection, and if the muscle tissue wasn't torn too much, she ought to recover without too much of a problem. Big ifs. I was still worried.

I tried to be quiet when I came back in, but then Mona flicked on the bedside light.

"Where have you been? I was worried," she said.

I came over and sat down on the bed beside her. "Sorry, I was trying to let you sleep. I was out being a crook."

"How so?"

"I switched our license plates with someone else."

"Won't they report them stolen?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I mean, who ever looks at their own license plates? It might be months before they discover it, especially since I was careful to switch Texas plates. How are you doing?"

"Okay, I think. You could fill my water glass though, please."

I did and she sat up long enough to swallow another of her pain pills. I didn't know what they were. I hadn't ever had to use scheduled analgesics often enough to recognize the brand.

"Thanks. I believe that's the last one I'll need. I'm feeling much



better. Now as long as we're both awake, what do we do next?"

I had been thinking about that. "Tomorrow, or possibly the next day, depending on how you feel, I'd like for us to head north toward Oklahoma."

"Why-oh. I remember now. That agent mentioned Oklahoma didn't he? But he also said something about a mountain. Are there any mountains in Oklahoma?"

"No big ones, I don't think. Anyhow, that's not the reason I wanted us to go there. And we may not go at all. I'll have to risk calling Jim again before we do."

"Jim? Oh, your colonel. Why?"

I took her hand. "Listen to me, making plans as if you aren't equally a part of this. It's just that he's a real old friend. After we both retired and there wasn't the social divide between officer and enlisted, we got to be pretty close. I want to see how he made out with the bug, but also, he had a little hidey hole I'll tell you about later. I want to find out if it still exists. For now, trust me; no one in the government will know about it. We can lay low there for a while until the heat dies down a bit and your arm heals. That's if you agree, of course."

"Oh Mike, of course I will. If you wanted to storm the White House, I think I'd follow you." She grinned. "I hope you don't though. I doubt we'd get away with it."

I leaned over to kiss her, being careful not to jar her arm. Then I got undressed and crawled under the sheets. Suddenly I was very tired. It had been a long, rough day.

*** * * ***

I woke up first, much later than I normally would have and hit the shower, while wishing I had at least some clean underwear and a toothbrush. We were going to have to go shopping as soon as we left here.

Mona was awake and waiting when I came out, sitting in one of the chairs and not looking very comfortable. It had been visited by the hotel chair gremlins, as usual.

As soon as I opened the bathroom door, she said "Mike, come here and look at my back please. It feels funny."

Uh oh. "Is it hurting?" I asked.



"No, more like a tickle, as if little insects were crawling around in it."

That didn't sound good. I got behind her and she leaned forward and sideways to give me a good view. I didn't say anything for long moments, just stared.

"What is it, Mike? Is it infected?"

"No, more like you were shot by a pellet gun than a pistol bullet. There's no sign of infection at all. And those skin flaps that were hanging loose-I can barely see where the tear marks were now. And the wound is smaller already, like it's healing about five times faster and cleaner than normal."

I came back around in front of her, looked at the other gremlinized chair and sat down on the bed. "Mona honey, I think our little bug is at work again. What I'm seeing isn't normally possible I don't think. Can you move your arm?"

"Sure." She demonstrated, raising it then moving it in slow circles while holding it upright. "There's some twinges, but not enough pain to matter. I could probably even wear a bra, if I had a bra to wear."

"You don't need one anyway, but if you think you do, and you feel well enough to travel, we'll stop in Dallas and buy you one."

"Among other necessities," she reminded me, and headed for the bathroom while I went out and rounded us up some coffee and a pastry from the lobby. A half hour later we were on our way and shortly after that, I swung into a Walmart I remembered from the last time I had been up this way visiting my sister.

I gave Mona my sizes in clothes and let her shop on one side of the big store while I ran through the grocery section and picked up some staples, enough to last a while. We met back up front and were on our way within the hour.

The Dallas traffic was worse than I remembered, even though the morning rush was long gone. It kept my mind occupied with trying to stay in the right lanes until we were finally past the downtown section and on the road to Plano, an upscale city northeast of Dallas. The city went on and on, but the driving was easier from there and we had time to talk.

The first thing I did was get Mona to dial Colonel Shell's home number. There was no answer. I delved into my memory and finally



came up with his cell phone number. I dialed it.

"Hello," he said simply.

I recognized his voice. It wasn't much stronger than the last time we had talked, but at least he was still alive.

"Glad to see you're still fishing," I said.

"They're biting slow, but I may catch one yet. Must be the bait."

"I'm heading to the fishing hole myself," I said. "Why not meet me there?"

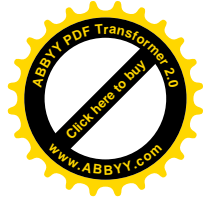
"That's where I am." The phone went dead. He was being every bit as careful as I was. I rolled down the window and tossed the phone, one of several disposables we had bought.

As soon as I had the window back up and Mona could hear without the roar of the wind interrupting, she spoke up. "You can explain now. I'm as curious as a cat touring a puppy mill. Fishing?"

"Sort of a code word we used to use," I said. "Remember, James Shell is part Cherokee. In fact, while he was still in the army, he married one of the chief's daughters. They had one child, a daughter. She's married to a Marine serving overseas now, I think. Anyway, I told you his wife had died. What I didn't tell you is that she was his second wife. His first was his one true love. I believe he and Doris, his second wife, married more for companionship than anything else. At any rate, I'm sure he would never have told her about the little place the chief gave him as a wedding present for his first marriage. It's a cabin way back in the boonies and not even on the ledger of any land office. It's hidden and the location has been passed down from generation to generation. He and Keena, his first wife went there when they wanted to get away from the world. Not often. And I think I'm the only other person he's ever let in on the secret. He invited me up right before I moved down to Lufkin and we spent a week there, just talking over old times, telling war stories and stuff. He never did that while I was married; I guess he knew better than I did that neither of my ex's were right for me. Anyway, that's where we're going."

"You didn't mention me. Suppose he thinks I'm not right for you?"

"He's too smart to think that. And don't you tell me you're not right for me or I'll drive over the first cliff we come to. Besides, it sounds like we saved his life. Remember?"



"Oh my God, yes! He injected himself with the bug! I wonder if it will cure his cancer like it did my Lupus? Or like I think it has, anyway."

"He didn't want to stay on the phone. We'll just wait and ask him. By God, I'm glad to hear the old bastard might make it. He's just about my only true friend in the world, other than my brother."

"And that makes three of us."

"Three? Oh, yeah. All of us with Cherokee ancestry." I thought a moment. "That agent said it killed everyone they tried it on, but obviously it doesn't kill everyone. Think we have a trend here?"

Mona laughed. I was glad to hear the tinkle in her voice again rather than the trace of pain that had tinged it the day before. "Maybe." Then she veered off to another subject. "Mike, how did they trace us to my house? I could swear I didn't leave any tracks when I bought the place."

*** * * ***

For a long time there was only the noise of the tires humming on the asphalt as we both began trying to untangle the puzzle. It was finally Mona who spoke first.

"I think they traced you first and then found us through me."

"How the devil did they do that?" I couldn't see it.

"Just think a moment. The government has enormous resources when they want to use them. I suspect they figured you would head to Dallas where you had lived before for so long, and they had to know you would probably try to get some new identification papers. There's enough people on the street who knew everyone dealing in bogus ID's, including me. Once they got the names, they simply followed up on all the ones they could grab. Fortunately, we were already gone by then, but remember all the computer power they have access to when they're trying to find a certain person. They would have tracked down my name and found someone who knew the general area where I stayed. Then when they pinpointed it, they got my prints."

"And after they knew who you really were, they probably turned up the fact that the people in New York were still looking for you over the money you took," I said.

"Uh huh. They would have put pressure on them, and from there they started searching files, trying to find the one dealer in ID who was missing from the street. All they really had to do then is find someone



who had either deposited a large amount of cash, was spending more cash than they made or paid cash for something big, like a house. Then find out if that person resembled me. Rats. I guess I wasn't as smart as I thought I was."

"It makes sense, but don't knock what you did. If I hadn't come along, you would probably never have been found."

"And I would probably have died of Lupus soon, too. I had a really bad case of it. Damn it, why do they make cars where you have to sit so far apart? I feel like being cuddled. And Mike-whatever happens, I wouldn't trade what we've had in this short time for anything in the world."

"Me either," I agreed. I pulled over to the side of the highway. We loosened our seat belts and simply held each other for a long while.

"Holding you is better than sex with any other woman," I whispered into her ear. And I meant it. Being close to her like that made me feel as if our very minds were interlocked. A gestalt of our bodies pressing together formed and hovered in my mind like one of those dreams you have where your sense of happiness and everything being right with the world is so strong that it's like a physical loss when you wake up. I thought Mona was envisioning exactly the same thing, but—no, we couldn't be reading minds. Besides I didn't feel any thoughts from her, just a sense of goodness and contentment like I had. But even so, I thought. Save that until later, when we have time to explore it. And wouldn't that be great!

"You didn't put on your new bra," I said when we finally separated.

"You're the one who said I didn't need it."

"So I did. And you don't." I winked at her and we got on our way again.

Farther along the way, Mona brought up a subject I had been mulling over in my mind and found no answers for.

"Mike, have you come to any conclusions about how this all got started?"

I was driving but I took my eyes off the road for a moment to glance at her. "I keep thinking about what that agent said. 'Others', as he put it. Whoever they are, I think that must be where it began. But how and why? I haven't got a clue. Not that I can see where it matters to us. I just want them to leave us alone."



Late that evening we crossed the Red River and entered Oklahoma and passed on through Durant, heading east. Remembering what the dead agent had said with his last words, I hoped I wasn't leading us from something bad to something worse. On the other hand, I didn't see how our situation could get much more dangerous than it already was. We were murderous felons on the run, carrying a disease that killed everyone the government had tested it on except those possibly mythical "others", and if we were caught we would probably be shot on sight. Or worse. Nevertheless, we couldn't help but look over at each other occasionally and grin with happiness at just being together and being alive. To hell with the government. With Mona looking at me like I was some kind of Adonis, and with my body and mind functioning better than they had in a dozen years, I felt like I could take on a regiment of Marines and beat them off with a popgun if I had to.

*** * * ***

Later that day I steered us around Broken Bow lake and then onto secondary roads, and I do mean secondary. I thought I remembered the way but I got us lost as a goose and we had to retrace a large part of the previous route to get me back on track. Getting lost resulted in us having to spend the night at a roadside park, one of us sleeping while the other stayed awake, though frankly, we may as well have both got some rest. If we were found out here on this stretch of highway, the best we could do was run for the woods, and even then we would be tracked down by helicopters equipped with infrared and agents with night vision headgear. The only reason we didn't both sleep at once is that we discussed the matter first, and we both agreed that we would not go quietly if they caught up with us. If we were to die, we wanted to take an honor guard along. A big one.

The park where we slept had no facilities. We had to use the bushes. A hell of a lot of people had done the same in the past and you had to watch your step very carefully. As soon as we finished those necessary chores we go on our way again. Mona insisted she was perfectly able to drive now. I took her word for it, merely asking her to pull over at the first place that sold gas and coffee. That turned out to be only a half dozen miles farther on, at a little Mom and Pop store that looked like it had been there for a century. I filled the gas tank and we left with much happier and alert man than when we stopped. I'm a coffee addict.

While Mona drove I did something I should have taken care of long before. No excuse, I just wasn't used to being a fugitive who might have to fight at a moment's notice. I took Mona's box of cartridges from the glove compartment and filled the clips of both of our guns



back to capacity, ten rounds for the little Glocks. After that, I took a quick look at the weapon I had confiscated from the agent's ankle holster. It was a .25 automatic that held only five rounds in the clip and one in the chamber.

"Do you have someplace you could carry this? Or do you want to?" I asked, holding up the little automatic for Mona to see.

"Sure, I've got a perfect place, except you don't like me wearing a bra."

I laughed. "Smarty."

Mona glanced at me for a moment, giving me as much of that wonderful sweet smile of hers as watching the road would allow, a smile I was coming to love. It turned her from a merely very pretty woman into an exceptionally beautiful one. She was wearing a hint of some makeup she had bought at Wal-Mart, lipstick and a bit of eye shadow I thought, but it was minimal and as far as I was concerned, she didn't really need it. She looked like a young woman in her twenties rather than the mid thirties. I had examined my face in the mirror this morning as well. I was looking younger too. It had to be the bug. Either it or love. Whatever, I didn't want it to go away.

Before long we came to the old gravel road I should have taken the day before, the one that led to the part of Oklahoma adjoining Arkansas, in the eastern fringes of the Ouashata State forest, a wild area rising to good sized mountains the farther north and east you go. I knew part of the area, having relatives in Mena, a little city-town, really-that was near the Oklahoma border about halfway up the state, but it was more of a general rather than a specific knowledge.

I turned the wheel over to Mona then so that I could watch for landmarks. I got us lost one more time but caught it early for a change, and then I thought I knew how to go the rest of the way. "It's still a bit farther and the road only gets rougher," I said. "Tell me when you're ready for a break."

She laughed. "We're on a road? I'm glad you told me. I've never been in this part of the country before. I didn't realize there was so much wild country in Oklahoma."

"We may be in Arkansas by now for all I know. The boundary has never been marked very accurately because it is still wild. Lots of forest, small mountains, deep ravines, and lots of rocks. The slate and flint outcroppings used to fascinate me when I was a kid and we visited up in Arkansas."



"I imagine. What's the cabin like?"

"It's not really a cabin. More of a cave and the living facilities are built into the side of a mountain. They'd call it a hill out west of course, but it's a mountain to me. We can drive all the way up and even hide the car. There's room."

"What if the colonel has his car there?"

"There's room for two. And his name is James-Jim. He doesn't use rank any more. Anyhow, wait til you see the cabin. It was built by an old recluse who wanted a place to get away from the law and Jim's in-laws expanded it. It's fixed up to where it's hidden real good. I'll show you how it's done when we get there. I just hope I can remember the rest of the way better than I have so far."

I did, but we had to stop one more night by going back and parking off of an old state road that had deteriorated since I had been up that way last. I knew better than to try finding the cabin after the sun set. It was going to be hard enough in daylight.

By the time we got going the next morning, we were both itching to get out of the car and to someplace where we could get cleaned up. And I wanted to wash those stiff new jeans I was wearing about five times in a row. "Wash the new out of them", as Mom used to say when I was a kid. We could do it there, though I hadn't told Mona how running water could be managed in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to show it to her.

*** * * ***

By mid-morning we were jolting along an old overgrown logging trail that switchbacked up the side of the mountain, making me wish we were in a jeep. We were going to be lucky if we didn't wind up with a broken axle. Maybe the old road was used during deer season but even then probably not very much. Twice I had to just drive over large saplings and hope I didn't hang up. Things had changed so much that I missed my turn on the first pass and had to go on for a mile and a half until I found a safe place to turn around. On the way back I drove very slowly until I spotted my landmark, a massive old pine that Jim and I had named the "Cactus Tree" because some accident in the past had caused it to spread abruptly into four separate trunks about twenty feet up from the ground, making it resemble a giant Segura Cactus. Nearby saplings had grown up so high that they had hidden the forks from my gaze. Good enough; the last stretch would be hidden from other eyes as well.



We hadn't run into any traffic for several hours and I didn't expect any, not this time of year, and not on this path that might have once been a logging road but wasn't much more than a passage between big trees now. We wouldn't see anyone unless we got unlucky and crossed paths with some naturalist out exploring, or a geologist or such doing research for a thesis.

The turn for the last stretch was well hidden, disguised by thickets of huckleberry and other undergrowth. It was just barely possible to tell that someone had preceded us not long ago. I hoped it was just Jim. If it wasn't, we were in trouble. I patted the pocket of my jean jacket automatically. The feel of the forty riding there reassured me somewhat, but I doubted it would do to fend off Homeland Security agents again. They must realize by now that we weren't pacifists, not by a long shot.

I told Mona to stop about a quarter of the way to the cabin.

"Someone's been here before us," she said.

"Yes. I'm pretty sure it was only Jim, but I need to go back and bend the saplings and brambles back upright. If the bad guys are waiting, they've already heard us, but watch real careful anyway."

"But Mike-if someone does come toward me, how will I know whether it's Jim or not? I've never seen him."

"I would get hooked up with a woman smarter than me. Okay, you go back and repair our trail as best you can and I'll watch. Don't be long or I'll worry and come back for you."

Mona didn't take long. I had already begun to notice that she did things by the numbers, as fast and efficient as whatever the task called for. I would never have to worry about her competence even if I did feel protective about her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

James Shell was outside, standing almost as straight and tall as he ever did as an army officer, albeit a bit thinner. He waited on us while I very carefully maneuvered the car the last fifty yards. There wasn't much room for error, and a mishap could send us plunging over a precipice and into a deep ravine below. I could feel Mona biting her lip while I chewed on my own. I'm not the greatest driver in the world, which is probably why I've never had more of an accident than a fender bender; knowing my limitations, I'm very careful.



Jim waved us around the last turn and in under the overhanging cliff where there was just room for two vehicles to park side by side. I stopped by a brand new jeep, presumably belonging to him. As soon as I shut the car door, I was engulfed in a hug that would have cracked my ribs if he were at his full strength. I hugged him back, suddenly aware of the wetness in my eyes. He looked almost like his old self, with his gray, close-cropped military style haircut. He had the high cheekbones many Native Americans do and a strong nose set above a wide mouth that always grinned infectiously around those he was friendly with. He was tall too, three inches more my five eleven and had never carried any excess weight.

I stepped back and took Mona's hand as she came around from the passenger's side of the car. "Jim, this is Mona Terrell. We're together now, and not just because she's infected with that bug too. She's the woman I'm going to spend the rest of my life with."

Jim didn't play favorites. He hugged Mona as tightly as he had me, then stepped back and looked directly at her, letting his gaze travel over her face and body, not in the manner of the leering scrutiny women like her are subject to, but more in the nature of wanting to know her and how she was fitting into my life.

"Anyone Michael approves of suits me Mona. That bug you two are carrying around almost certainly saved my life-although I don't like to remember part of the time until it took hold. At times I was afraid you might get up here and find my body."

Mona gave him one of those warm smiles that would melt icebergs. "Mike saved my life when I got the bug, in case he didn't think to tell you. I was in the advanced stages of a very bad case of Lupus. And again when—"

I interrupted her before she began embarrassing me. "We can all tell war stories later, sweetheart. Right now, I'd like to finish covering our back trail and then get cleaned up. I feel like what that corpse I stuffed in the storm drain must look like by now."

"Corpse?"

"Tell you later Jim. Let me fix the road."

"You two go ahead. I'll take care of it."

**This from a man who had been dying from cancer just a few days ago?
"Are you sure you're up to it?" I asked. "I can wait a half hour to get**



clean. Mona has gotten used to the way I smell by now."

"I haven't though. Go ahead, I'm fine and getting better by the hour."

He wouldn't say that if he didn't mean it. I grabbed our shopping bags and guided Mona around the rock wall dividing the car storage from the cabin and paused to let her see Jim pulling on the rope that let the camouflage tarp down over the entrance.

Even the cabin-I still say cabin, but it was more a cave than anything man made-had a camouflage tarp that I shoved aside and held to let Mona go in ahead of me. The narrow entrance was shored up with huge old cedar posts that blended in with the rock almost perfectly. It was behind an outcropping of flint that hid it from all but the closest scrutiny. Inside, under the cliff, what had started as an ancient cave had been turned into very comfortable living quarters over a century or more, with furniture and bracing and shelving all made from cedar or oak carried laboriously up the slope in bygone days. Even today, a car or pickup could carry only so much of a load up the steep slope to the entrance safely.

Jim had added a few amenities since I was last here, extending the living area farther back into the mountain by chipping at the floor to make it level and bringing in lumber for more rooms and furniture. The beds were mostly sleeping bags and air mattresses except for the two oldest rooms. I hurried Mona past all that. She could examine the place in detail later. What I really wanted to show her was the little stream, bubbling out from a hole up about head level and channeled downward along a canal cut from the rock by someone long dead by now. It ran through the room and into an unused part of the cave and disappeared back into a crevice worn smooth by water flowing into it over untold ages.

"How wonderful!" Mona remarked when I had shown her how it worked. There was a spot in the canal (a trough, really) where the water could be diverted into a big iron tub, probably older than even Jim was. It was set on a sturdy oak stand. A propane heater was rigged so the flames could play up along its side and heat the water. Jim, always thoughtful, had turned it on when he heard us coming. We had a tub of warm water to wash in and could stand up and let the water coming from above give us a cold shower when we were finished. The tub had a plug that drained the used bath water into another trough chipped into the rock floor that led back to where the stream continued on its way, back into the depths of the mountain. Jim had told me that the flow never varied, winter or summer. The water temperature as it emerged never varied either and the stream was far enough back in the cave so that it almost never froze during



its short run.

One other thing I should mention. There was some plank shelving there with soap and bathing supplies and clean towels, and even a curtain attached to aluminum poles that could be used for privacy if one wanted it. We didn't bother.

As soon as Mona got the idea, she began stripping and I wasn't far behind. There wasn't room for both of us to sit in the old tub, but standing close together while we scrubbed suited both of us. While I was doing her back, I got a chance to see how that exit wound I had treated was doing.

I could barely tell that a bullet had ever plowed its way out of her body, ripping skin and muscle like tissue paper. It was very nearly healed and even where skin had been lost by the explosive force of the bullet, the area was clean and the scar tissue looked not much different than the rest of her skin.

"Another week and you won't be able to tell you were ever shot," I said.

"I don't feel like I was now. It doesn't hurt at all, no matter how I move my arm." She demonstrated, then turned to face me and showed me the entrance wound. "Go ahead, feel. No scar tissue."

I did with pleasure, taking my time until she stopped me with a giggle more like a little girl than a grown woman.

"Um, I think you're quite a bit lower than where I got shot. And I know I didn't get hit on the other side."

"Yes, but I have to have something for a comparison. I guess I could take your word for it, but this is more fun."

"You bet, but let's wait until we go to bed and can really enjoy it."

"That's a promise," I said.

We rinsed and dried and put on our last set of clean clothes, jeans and shirt for me, jeans and pullover for her. She tried out one of the new bras too, darn it. I loved the way her breasts moved beneath her top when she was without one.

*** * * ***

Good smells drew us to where Jim was heating a pan of what looked like stew on a Coleman stove. There was a small fireplace and dutch



oven against the rock wall of the kitchen, along with a stack of wood. Mona looked at it curiously-and with a bit of concern.

"Where does it all vent?"

Jim glanced up from where he was stirring. "This little mountain is honeycombed with channels and fissures. I don't know exactly where the smoke goes, but from the next room it gets sucked up into the ceiling and disappears. I've been all the way to the top when fires are going and have never seen any smoke escaping. It must be absorbed along the way to wherever the vents go. Are you guys hungry?"

Suddenly I was salivating like a well conditioned dog. It had been too long since either of us had eaten a hot meal.

Jim ladled out stew into bowls for all of us. We carried them over to a hand made table, rough hewn but sturdy, and sat in folding chairs. We talked while we ate.

I told Jim about our adventures first. It took a surprisingly long time, especially as Mona stopped me whenever I tried to gloss over part of her past. She told Jim the truth, that she was an ex-con on the run from an Eastern criminal syndicate and had been dealing in forged documents. He simply nodded, neither approving nor disapproving.

One of the things I like about my old friend is that he wasn't so instantly judgmental like a great many people are. He always looked for reasons beneath the exterior.

"It sounds like you two have been in a damn war," he remarked, shaking his head. "I'm glad you had this place to run to. Be that as it may though, have you any idea at all what this is about? Where the bug originated and so forth? And for that matter, what the long term effects might be?"

I told him everything our captive had told me. "I guess I should have been more aware of the condition he was in. Maybe I could have kept him alive and gotten more information from him."

"From what you've said, it sounds as if he told you just about everything he knew, except the last part. Besides, you would have had to kill him anyway." He said matter-of-factly. "Are you sure he said Oklahoma?"

"That part was clear enough. The last about a mountain, I'm not certain of. He was fading. It sounded like an R though. Ri—Rick Mountains? Rich Mountains?"



"Rich Mountain!" We both exclaimed at once.

"Rich? What's on a mountain to make it rich? Gold?" Mona asked, a puzzled expression on her face.

I laughed. "Rich Mountain, the big peak in Wilhemena State Park, over in Arkansas. But I really don't know if that's what he was saying Jim, and even if he was, what could it mean?"

Jim rubbed his chin, a characteristic of his when he was flipping pages in his mind to find a datum. He was an incredibly well read man and not just in medicine; he had an eclectic interest in damn near everything and especially in the science fields. Finally he shrugged.

"Nothing comes to mind, but we'll keep it on the table. As you say, he could have meant any number of things. And from your tale, I'm very glad you took such precautions to avoid letting anyone know I'm involved too. Now let me tell you all something I've found out about your bug-our bug now. I farmed your cheek swabs and some of my muscle tissue out to a very discrete individual I won't even name, with the promise to destroy it and everything it comes in contact with when he's finished. Under real high power he found that it isn't discrete organisms infecting each of the cells. Except for the blood and such roaming cells as histiocytes, every other cell in the body that carries our little friend is probably connected by very fine filaments, sort of like the axons and dendrites connecting nerve cells of the brain. Of course he wasn't able to examine every body system, but that's true for the ones he did look at. Apparently the little critter multiplies extremely rapidly and invades our cells through the membranes without hurting them. And after that, I suspect that information about various functions of our bodies is passed around among the parts occupying the cells. There may even be a nexus or center somewhere in our bodies to organize the information but it would take full-body tomographic scanning to really be sure; that or a thorough autopsy."

"But what does it mean?" Mona asked.

Jim smiled wryly. "All I can say is that it's the most interesting and intriguing thing I've run across in a long, long life of studying the human body. I did what I could with the samples from you and what I could take from myself here, but I could go only so far with them. What we really need is to get one of us into a full scale lab, then I could—"

A buzzing sound interrupted him. Jim looked up, eyes narrowing. "Uh oh. Something tripped the alarm." He stood up and ran toward



one of the side rooms where he kept his rifle, an old Army M-16 from the Vietnam War era. I was hot on his heels, feeling in my pocket for the Glock, then having to turn around and run back to where I had left my jacket with the gun in it. Behind me I could hear Mona's footsteps clicking on the rock floor.

By the time I got to the entrance, Jim was already there, breathing hard and kneeling behind a boulder just beyond the entrance, on the side away from where the cars were parked. I looked down the trail but couldn't see anyone.

"When did you put in an alarm?" I whispered, still scanning the trees and brush down slope with my eyes.

"I rigged it this time when I came up, just in case, though I don't know what we can do if they've found us. Except not go quietly." When nothing else happened for a minute, he started to stand up. "Looks like it was a varmint that tripped it though. Maybe a deer."

I grabbed his shoulder and pressed down hard. My eyes were better than his; I had spotted some movement.

Jim didn't struggle. He relaxed and began watching again with me. I felt a touch on my shoulder and nearly jumped out of my shirt until I realized it was Mona. She had crawled up behind us without making a sound.

Below us, a human figure emerged. A woman in jeans and a blue windbreaker, with long black hair blowing around her face from the breeze. She walked slowly, bent forward to compensate for the steep grade she was climbing. Every few steps she stopped and put her hands over her head like an enemy soldier trying to find someone to surrender to. As she came nearer I could see that she was pretty rather than beautiful like Mona, and equally as slim, though not quite as curvaceous.

"What do you think?" Jim said in a voice so low that I could barely hear him.

I sure didn't know, but I wasn't going to shoot a woman down in cold blood, especially one who obviously wanted to talk rather than fight. That didn't leave many choices.

"I'll risk it," I said, "but wait until she gets a bit closer so we can see if anyone is following."

We waited until she was nearly upon us, then I stood up and pointed



my pistol at her.

The woman's face broke into a wide smile, displaying perfect white teeth. "At last. You've certainly led us on a happy chase!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I kept my gun pointing at her chest and didn't return her smile. "What in hell do you mean, a 'Happy Chase'? It damn sure hasn't been happy for us," I said bitterly. I looked down the slope beyond her, thinking she must be a decoy for other Homeland Security agents. They were probably closing in on us now.

Instead of reacting to my frown and acid response, she only smiled some more. "Happy-no, Merry. That's it. You led us on Merry Chase. I'm sorry, I still don't speak perfect English. May I come on up? I'm alone, I promise."

"Who are you? Who are you with?" Jim's voice came from behind me, stern as an officer at a court-martial getting ready to pass sentence. I knew he must still have his rifle at ready arms. He was no fool to be taken in by words, while I sometimes can be.

"I'm not with any of your security forces. In fact, I'm on your right-your side, that is. Your side," she repeated as if setting the idiom into permanent memory.

"Then who—"

Jim interrupted me. "I think she's okay, Mike. All right, lady, come on, but keep your hands in plain sight."

"Thank you. I will."

We got her inside and sitting down at the table where we three had been polishing off the last of the stew. All the way, Mona had stared frankly at the other woman in the way females do, appraising her appearance in view of possible competition. In this case, she was doing it even though she should know I had no intentions of looking at another woman with anything other than an appreciative perusal, the kind that men can no more help than she could help what she was doing.

"Would you like some coffee?" Jim asked, already setting out cups.

"Yes please. My name is Terratannessaty," she said by way of



introduction, “but please call me Tera. And I already know who you are.” She pronounced her odd name as if it were all one word. I found out later that it was, but for the time being I was more than glad to use Tera rather than garbling the long form.

“How do you know us if you're not with the government?” Mona asked quickly, cutting to the chase.

“It is a long story, but I will tell you this much to start. We are the ones who brought the-the infection, I suppose you are calling it-to your world.” She had taken her coffee black. She sipped at it appreciatively. “This would make a good export. I've come to like it. And chocolate, too.” Then she added something odd. “If it were possible.”

I hope my mouth wasn't hanging open too wide during the next few moments while I digested that statement. I think it was Mona who recovered first.

“Coffee and chocolate be damned. You're saying this thing we have isn't from earth? And that you're a—” Her voice trailed off as if she weren't quite able to call someone sitting across the table from her a space traveler, especially one who looked for all the world like an attractive human woman.

I got my mouth closed and finally managed to say something. “You don't look like you come from anywhere but earth. And I don't believe parallel evolution could produce that close a match.”

What I really wasn't believing was how I could be sitting here talking to a being straight out of one of my science fiction novels, even though I had been reading the stuff all my life, and despite the fact that all three of us had acquired an infection that put us under a death sentence from our own government. An infection that Jim, with a life long career of studying human illnesses couldn't identify. Of course it didn't appear to be an illness for us, but still—

“As I said, it is a long story. I will gladly tell you all of it, because we need your help.” Tera drank more of her coffee. She unzipped her wind breaker. Beneath it she was wearing a conventional pullover. With a bra. An odd gold colored medallion was attached to a thick silvery, close fitting necklace device that partially showed above her pullover.

“Who are we? And why do you need our help?” Jim asked over a sip of his own coffee. His eyes were alight with curiosity.



She didn't answer for a moment. His expression became studious, as if she were running possible answers through her mind before committing herself. When she did speak, it was a bombshell. "The symbiont you're carrying in your bodies is fine for you, but eventually it will probably kill most of the rest of the human race."

I was taken aback but Jim didn't flinch from her statement. Instead, in the manner of the pathologist he was, he wanted more of an explanation. "According to the information we have, it doesn't wait to kill most people. It does it soon after they become infected."

"Yes, but that wasn't what I meant. Right now, the only way it can pass from human to human is through blood contact, or possibly through exchange of other bodily fluids, though that's not likely. But eventually, it will probably mutate and become very contagious. Then anyone not carrying a particular gene complex, as you three apparently do, will succumb to it."

"Die is a simpler word," Jim said. "Die from it."

"Oh. I was trying to speak formally."

"Don't. I dislike formality and it appears we may be spending a lot of time together-if you're telling the truth. Are you?"

Direct as always. Jim never tried side runs. That's probably why he retired as a colonel rather than a general.

"Yes," Tera said as solemnly as a benediction. "I'm telling the truth."

During the exchange, I was examining her as closely as I could without obviously staring. So far as I could tell she looked entirely human, though I couldn't place what race she might belong to. More of a blend than anything. Dark creamy tan skin, brown eyes, high cheekbones. Hell, she could have been part Amerindian by her appearance, just like us.

She must have noticed my scrutiny from the corner of her eye because she turned to face me. "I know what you must be thinking. I look entirely human don't I?"

"Yes," I said simply. She did.

"There are other humans, or there have been humans, on almost every earth-like planet we've explored so far. Or perhaps I should say hominids, since some have deviated enough over time to be classified as a separate species."



"Have we mutated?" Mona asked.

"No," Tera said, a bit shortly, then flashed one of her brilliant smiles. "Or rather, I don't know. Probably not, since some of you can accept the *Tersha* . Sorry. This has been such a trial that I'm having problems explaining it. And there are so many things you need to know. One thing I'm sure you're going to ask is how humans got to be on so many planets. The answer is, we don't have the slightest idea. We don't believe in parallel evolution any more than you do. Maybe an older race seeded humans on planets where they could flourish. Maybe there was a galactic empire long ago, though we don't have any evidence that it happened like that. Anyway, it's a mute question for now."

"I suppose," Jim said, somewhat reluctantly. "Okay, why don't you start by telling us more about this bug-*Tersha*, did you say?—we've acquired that's so dangerous to other people. What does it mean to us? How does it work. Why—well, you get the idea. I'm damned curious, since a short time ago I was dying of cancer and now I'm being cured so far as I can tell. At least I'm not hurting like I was and I feel better."

"Not only that, Jim looks a dozen years younger than the last time I saw him. Explain that!" I said.

"Of course. But there's much more than just the *Tersha* ."

"I realize that, but let's take it in small bites. We'll absorb it better."

"Fine. To start with, we don't call it a bug. It's—we call it the *Tersha* . The closest I can come in English is "Protector". Our world is the only one we've found so far where *Tersha* is a normal symbiot to humans. It is passed to the fetus by the mother during gestation. It serves to keep the body healthy and protects against aging and disease. It—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you mean that literally? It keeps a person from aging?"

"Sorry, no, not forever. I should have qualified that. However, you will live a much longer and healthier life than otherwise. Mister Brandon, I know how old you and Doctor Shell are. I can see that your *Tersha* s have begun repairs to your bodies. However, given your age, it can only do so much. Your appearance will probably stabilize so that you look to be on the young side of middle aged and Miss Terrell much younger than that."



"I told you not to be formal," Jim repeated, a bit more forcefully. "I'm Jim. He's Mike. She's Mona. Okay?"

"Sorry. Yes, that's okay." She paused for a moment, then continued as if she knew exactly what was on all our minds. "How much longer you will live? I can't say, not having a database on your world to write from-no, to draw from. No database to draw from. You should live a long time though, barring accidents. *Tersha* s can speed up repairs from injury but they aren't miracle workers. If you were shot in the head or heart for instance, I suspect you would die, just as I would. There's one other thing I should tell you." She glanced to where Mona and I were sitting close together and smiled. "Or perhaps you've found out already. The *Tersha* imparts a certain sensitivity to other people's emotions, the more so with the opposite sex. With us, it is very intense, or can be, but we are born with it. I don't know how far it will go with you."

Mona squeezed my hand and I returned the pressure, affirming Tera's statement. She noticed and smiled again.

Jim nodded at her. "Good. Now, you said something about mutations?" He leaned back in his chair, getting into the discussion now.

"Yes. Unfortunately, we didn't know this until very recently. In fact, until after we got stranded here."

"Stranded? You mean you're stuck here?"

Tera sighed but followed it quickly with a smile. "One subject brings up two more, doesn't it? Let's go back a bit. We—call us Cincans. That simply means earth people in our language. All humans call their world earth, or something equivalent to it. When we Cincans developed faster than light travel we found humans on other planets, as I said." She dropped her gaze before continuing. "Our survey ships, the same as I and my companions came here in, went in different directions. Some stayed a while on other worlds occupied by humans. On some of those worlds, a permanent contingent was sent to study and observe and collect data. Perhaps I should mention that your world is the most advanced technologically than any other we've seen besides our own." She paused a moment as if reflecting on something that wasn't of immediate concern, then continued. "Anyway, just after our lander failed and we found ourselves stuck here for the time being, we received a tachyon message, relayed from our mother ship. On two of the worlds where we had set up permanent stations, the *Tersha* s have mutated and become easy to pass from person to person-but no one on those worlds has the right genes to accept them.



It kills rather than protects."

She looked back up, an incredibly sad expression haunting her face and especially her eyes. They looked into some far distance. "The entire population of one of the worlds was wiped out. They're still dying on the other. Needless to say, plans for long term observers on other worlds were cancelled and stays by survey ships are being strictly limited, especially regarding contact with indigenous humans.

"Believe me, we had no indication that anything like that would happen. We had nothing to tell us differently. On our world, the *Tersha* is in all of us already. It has no reason to change or mutate. Or perhaps it has mutated, but how would we have noticed it when we already had it? You see?"

I could feel the intensity of her emotion, almost like a wave of heat emanating from her. She was trying her very best to convince us that it was a horrible tragedy, one completely unintentional. But inadvertent or not, she knew that her people were responsible. Perhaps it was even worse in her mind for that very reason.

"I think this calls for something a little stronger than coffee," Jim said. He got up and found a bottle of brandy. He and I took ours neat. Mona accepted some but only used part of it in her coffee.

Tera followed her example while remarking "By the way, you'll never be able to get drunk again. Your *Tersha* s will get to work in your liver cells and start metabolizing the alcohol once it reaches a certain level."

"Hmm. How about hangovers?"

"For us, no. For you, remember: no database. If you're as much like us as I suspect, you'll never have that problem again either. I can only imagine what a hangover is like. We really don't use much alcohol or other physical stimulants as you do. For enhanced emotional states of mind, we have mental techniques that work well and have no addicting properties."

"How long have you been here?" Mona asked suddenly. "You speak remarkably good English for not even being from the same world as us. And you keep saying 'we'. How many of you are there?"

"There are a dozen of us who came down in the lander and we've been here much less than a year." Tera touched the wide part of the necklace beneath her neck. "This is a translator, among its many other functions. Much like your Pocket Computers that you carry



around to stay in contact, though more advanced. We all carry one. Among other things it can do is detect the presence of *Tershas*. They resonate on a particular frequency that we just recently discovered. It lets us know where each of us is at any given moment. Incidentally, that's how I was able to point the pin at your location so quickly.

"Pinpoint," Jim said absently.

"Pinpoint, yes. English is very odd, but I like it. So many different ways to say the same thing."

"And I take it, your—what do you call it?" He pointed to her chest where she was still fingering the medallion-looking part of her necklace.

She shrugged and smiled again. She had a smile almost as warm as Mona's. "Just call it a PDA, though it's not really digital and it's much more than an assistant, but PDA is close enough. What were you asking?"

"Your PDA. That's how you stay in contact with your mother ship?"

"Yes. Relayed through the lander, of course."

"And you said you got word of what happened on those worlds where the *Tershas* got loose. Can't you ask for help?"

"Certainly. We already have. But it will be years before another ship can get here. It's not like we have survey vessels running around the galaxy in swarms. We're just getting started with exploring. And faster than light travel isn't instantaneous either, despite some of your fiction."

"Hmm. And you think the *Tersha* will mutate here before anyone else from Cinca can take you—and I presume us—off the planet?"

"Judging by the time frame where it got loose on the other two worlds, yes, but remember, we only have two examples to draw from—and *Bista*—God, I mean—God knows, I hope that's all. But if it follows the other two patterns, it will be too late. We're already shoving the limit."

"Pushing," Jim corrected.

"Pushing. We're already pushing the limit. You're our only hope. You and others like you."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jim stood up and began pacing. He stopped at the brandy bottle still sitting on the wooden shelf, decided against it, then resumed circling the room. I finished my drink but made no effort to refill it. Beneath the table, Mona was holding tightly to my hand, like it was the other end of a lifeline. I could feel the moisture where our fingers were entwined. I didn't try to comment. Jim was doing fine so far.

Abruptly he stopped pacing. "Why us? No, first, how much do you know about who's in charge of this clusterfuck? The humans, I mean."

"Clusterfuck? Is that an obscenity?"

"Yes. It means a big foul up."

"Oh, all right. We know quite a bit." She touched her PDA. "We started recording radio conversations from the mother ship, then television broadcasts as soon as we were down. And of course our PDA's continually record and translate, then feed it to us on demand by—sorry, there isn't really a word for it. Just take it for granted for now that we learned English very quickly."

"Why English?"

"You should be able to figure that out. North America is the most technically advanced area of earth, yet still has plenty of wild country to hide in. Now back to who's in charge of the, um, clusterfuck-it's not your Homeland Security. They are just being used when it becomes necessary to interact with civilians, and even then I suspect they are disguised military. There's a general by the name of Melofton who oversees day to day operations. He—"

"Ah, crap!" Jim interjected.

Surprised, I looked at him. His face was screwed up with evident distaste, like he had suddenly caught a whiff of something extremely unsavory.

"Do you know him, Jim?"

"We had a run-in once and friends have told me more about him. He's the reason I didn't make general and had to retire. He's—he's as stubborn and opinionated as a Missouri mule and I'll swear there's something badly wrong with his head. I think he's mentally unstable but he conceals it well. He also has a lot of political pull. His brother is



chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee.” He mused for a moment then continued. “When the terrorists really got started after 9/11, I heard a rumor that he was assigned to some sort of reaction force, then he disappeared from sight.” He turned back to Tera. “Let's get back to basics. Why do you need us? What do you think we can do?”

"You can get into the lander and replace a part for us once we have it fabricated. None of us can go back to it. There's only four of us who escaped and they have our fingerprints and photos. We can't get in by intrigue, and there's not much of a chance using force to get back aboard because we know it is well guarded. Of course, none of them can get inside, either."

"Whoa," I told her. "this is getting all disjointed and I'm confused."

"So am I," Mona agreed. "Jim, it's your place, but why don't we three sit back and let her talk uninterrupted for a while? I think we might get to where we want to go sooner."

Jim gave her one of his infectious smiles that he reserves for people he really likes. "You're probably right Mona. I tend to be a bit impatient at times. That's just the nature of us old farts who get in the habit of thinking they don't have enough time left for subtleties. All right Tera, you talk; we'll listen."

*** * * ***

And we did. Tera took a long time to tell the complete story and I won't try to give all the details here. We ran through another pot of coffee and part of the bottle of brandy before she was finished.

The Cincan mother ship was in orbit just inside the asteroid belt and masquerading as an old rock. There was only half of the contingent remaining from the Cincans who had started the exploratory voyage. Originally there had been two landers but one had failed at the last stop. Unfortunately, it went down over an ocean and was lost, along with the crew. Even shorthanded and upset, the remaining Cincans had decided to continue on after they examined their other lander and found nothing wrong with it.

Earth was a surprise to them. No other world was as technologically advanced, other than their own. The other worlds with humans found so far were still in the hunter/gatherer or early bronze age. Some had gone further but for reasons unknown had become extinct.

With their stealthed lander, it was easy to set down on earth in the wild country near Rich Mountain and stay inside their camouflaged



craft until they had finished learning the language and some of our customs. The trouble began when they attempted to lift off. A decision had been made to go into orbit before contacting any government on earth. None of the crew had liked what they learned about earth's political, cultural and social divisiveness, along with our wars, poverty, overpopulation and—well, you get the picture. Ours was a culture and society alien to their way of thinking and they were leery.

The lander began having trouble almost immediately. They were lucky to get back to earth again without crashing, but they came down in the wildest part of the Ouashita National forest in eastern Arkansas and that's where the luck ended. They were also stuck on earth until repairs could be made. The fault lay in a part which could be fabricated on earth, or even in the tools shops of the mother ship, but it was a Catch-22 situation. They couldn't make the part because they couldn't get to the ship, and without a lander, the crew remaining in the ship couldn't get the part to them even if they made it.

They carried precious stones and metal in the lander, intended as trade items for primitive cultures. It was enough for them to live on for a while, but not enough to have the part made through a special order at a machine and electronics shop. There were twelve of them originally. They decided to all leave the lander and establish themselves somewhere nearby and try to earn or steal enough money to have the part made. Unfortunately, the stealth mode of the lander had only worked erratically while on their last flight. The ship was spotted and by the time they left, an army swift reaction unit was on the way. All twelve of them were captured by General Melofton's terrorist reaction force no more than a few miles from their craft. It was the worst possible thing that could have happened to them.

The lander was safe. Its weapons systems recognized the resonance pattern of *Tershas* and allowed only those showing that pattern to approach. Anyone else was knocked unconscious, and if they tried more than once, were killed. Robotic equipment couldn't get near. It was destroyed at once. Two helicopters crashed after their pilots were rendered unconscious trying to descend on the lander from above. There wasn't even much anyone could learn by observation. Once power wasn't needed for flight, the stealth mode came back into operation, disguising emanations or reflections from the craft. The stealth program also concealed it so well that satellite photos wouldn't detect it and even humans on the ground had to be fairly close to tell that it was there. That left the crew.

Had it been anyone except General Melofton in charge of the reaction force, originally designed to counter terrorist threats, perhaps they might have been able to negotiate, but Melofton didn't trust them, and



they quickly learned not to trust him or his minions. The situation went from bad to worse, with the general ordering isolation and complete physicals on his captives, along with extensive genetic analysis and questioning. The interrogations began normally but quickly became brutal. The general wanted to know the propulsion mechanics of the lander and how interstellar flight was possible and he was determined to get the information. The Cincans told him all that they knew but none of them were theoretical physicists; they were explorers. General Melofton didn't believe them.

That empathic sense imparted by the *Tershas* that Mona and I had just begun to discover and explore with each other did allow the captive cincans to make friends with one of the guards. The friendship allowed several of them to escape, including that patient in the emergency room I had drawn blood from. That seemed like an eternity ago when I heard her tell about it. Four of the Cincans were still at large; Tera and two other women and one man. They could monitor activities around the lander from their PDAs, but had no chance to get back aboard without help. They didn't even have any valuables left; everything they owned had all been confiscated.

The only way they kept their PDAs was that the necklace was not only too short to go over their heads; parts of it extended into their bodies. One of them had been cut free, but the process sent the Cincan into terrible convulsions and then withdrawal similar to a catatonic state in humans. That procedure wasn't tried again, especially as nothing was learned about the function of the necklace; it ceased to work as soon as it was separated from its owner.

When Tera's PDA registered the presence of *Tershas* other than their own, it was like a godsend. Some humans of earth were compatible with them. Tera was closest to us, as she had been partnered with the Cincan from the emergency room. After he was recaptured by the Homeland Security agents, or perhaps military men, and not killed as I had assumed from newspaper reports, she had stuck around Lufkin- and had been utterly surprised when I popped up on her monitor.

They had learned caution though. She was waiting for an opportunity to approach me that wouldn't arouse suspicions when Homeland Security struck first (or perhaps military intelligence in masquerade as agents). She kept tabs on me, wanting to find out why I had lived when the federal prisoners all died. When Mona joined me as a *Tersha* carrier, she became cautiously optimistic. She even listened in on my conversations with Jim and traced his number with her PDA, then tapped into the internet and gathered background information on him to add to what she learned of me by the same means. It was amazing what they could do once they had a *Tersha* source to work



from. Eventually, she decided to come to the cabin and meet us while her comrades remained quietly in Dallas, slowly gathering funds by cautious gambling, of all things. That empathic sense again. Card players didn't stand a chance against them.

When Tera finally stopped talking she looked hopefully at each of us in turn. I met her gaze but didn't say anything at first. It was a big chunk of information to assimilate, so fantastic that I wondered whether this might not be some elaborate dream. It was just so hard to believe, especially the next part, which Jim already had outlined in his ordered mind.

"So you want us to recruit some other players, gain entrance to the lander by intrigue if possible, by force if necessary, and get you back inside it. That's after you've fabricated the part you need. Then once we get you inside, I presume we'll have to sit there while you do the repairs and maybe find out what it's like when a nuke explodes on top of us. Does that cover it?"

Tera spread her hands apologetically. "Essentially, yes. Unless you can think of some other option?"

I decided to contribute to the discussion. "You mentioned that you wanted us to recruit some helpers, if I heard you right. Are you talking about others who can be infected with the *Tersha* or just warm bodies? Because if it's just grunts to shoot their way in you're after, or to hold back the army while we get inside, it's not going to work. We won't be able to find anyone who would believe this story."

"He's right," Mona added. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the results first hand in my own body. Would you?"

A long silence ensued while Tera considered it but she had to agree "No, I guess I wouldn't. What, then? Remember, it's your whole population at risk. Or a good part of it, anyway."

"There's only one way I can see," Jim said. "We'll have to not only infect others with the *Tersha* but recruit very carefully even then. It won't be easy regardless of how we go about it. Unless you think one of us could fly the lander?"

She shook her head. "First you would have to do the repair job and that will require instruments you're not familiar with. And it isn't like flying an airplane; it interfaces with the pilot's PDA."

"Too bad," Jim said. "I was thinking one of us could try pretending to be a recruit of theirs who survived the bug-the *Tersha*, but I guess



that's out. And there's another factor. I mention this because there's something you haven't even thought of yet. We don't know why we three survived, not for certain. Earlier you said something about a gene complex? We may all have it, but how do we tell whether anyone else does? I don't want to kill anyone by deliberately infecting them then finding out that they don't have the right genes."

Tera was stricken. "You don't know? I just assumed-oh, damn. Yes, you're right. But—but it will take so long for the research to find out who does have the correct genes. The *Tersha* will probably mutate before then." She looked ready to cry.

"Don't be a pessimist," Jim said. "If we had access to a DNA sequencer and splicer and an idea of where to look in the genome, I might be able to identify prospects. Or rather, find someone who can."

"But how-Mike, I thought you knew when you infected Mona and had Jim use some of your blood to infect himself. You didn't?"

"Mona was an accident. Jim was dying from cancer and simply took a chance after hearing what it did for me. All three of us have Cherokee blood in us, though. That's where we thought the common denominator might be." When she brightened, I shook my head. "That doesn't mean the next Cherokee would necessarily have the same genes. It could be something else entirely. All of us have Irish ancestors, too."

"I see. This is getting even more complicated than I thought."

"It's getting late too," Jim said. "Tera, would you like to stay the night here? Where is your car parked, by the way?"

"It's not. I had Felinti-that's one of my friends-drop me off a few miles from here then head back to Dallas. We didn't want to risk both of us."

"All or nothing, huh? I like that. Can you contact your friends and tell them what's in the works now that we've sort of halfway decided what to do?"

Tera flashed one of her smiles. "It's not necessary. They've been listening."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



A cabin in the mountains with the bathroom consisting of a crevice in the rocks way back in the cave where another (but smaller) stream trickled over the edge isn't the best place in the world to make love, not with an air mattress barely big enough for two and a couple of sleeping bags for warmth, but we managed. Mona saw to it that most of the bodily fluids were contained, so to speak, but it was much harder to keep my voice down during the proceedings. If we were heard, I'm sure the others understood. Such a momentous day deserved a climax and I can't think of a better way it could have ended. And, as we were becoming accustomed to, the act was so intense and brought us so in touch with each other that it was almost like switching bodies for a time.

Of course it didn't end there. That too-small air mattress made cuddling and conversation afterward really nice, even if somewhat serious.

When we were relaxed enough to talk about something other than how much we loved each other and how close we felt, Mona brought up the main subject. "Mike, do you really believe all of this? Alien space travelers who are actually humans, a bug that may wipe out most of the population on earth? And most of all, do we have to leave earth forever?"

The whole thing was still sinking in with me, especially the idea of leaving earth. "Yes, I believe it," I said reluctantly. "And according to Tera, there's not going to be much choice about us leaving earth.

Remember, she said there was a variety of human races and groupings among the volunteers and the *Tersha*s killed them all. Unless there's something we're missing, it appears we haven't much choice about leaving in order to protect everyone else. Of course we still have to make that possible."

She stroked me with her free hand. It was like a little sizzle of low grade electricity moving over my chest. "It's not going to be easy, is it?"

I thought that one over. "Sweetheart, as near as I can figure right now, we'll be damn lucky if the whole gang of us isn't caught before we're ready to even try gaining access to that lander. And then I can think of all kinds of ways for it to go bad if we do try. I've seen it in the army over and over again. You make what seems like a foolproof plan, then at first contact with the enemy it all turns to shit. The thing is, you have to guess what the other fellow is going to do and you almost never get it completely right. I see no reason why this should be any different. Shucks, if it weren't for Jim, I don't think it would even be possible."



"Why not?"

"Oh, first off, he has so many contacts in the military and among the members of the Cherokee Nation that I believe he's one of the few persons I know who can put an operation like we're talking about together. That's assuming it is some genes peculiar to Cherokees. He's a brilliant man too, and not just as a pathologist either; he can fight if we have to. He went through Ranger school with me when I was a young man. He was twenty years older and he outdid all of us."

"What was a pathologist doing going through Ranger School?"

"He wanted to. He knew he was going to be in some more wars."

"And he was, I take it?"

"Oh yes. We were together in one of them."

"Which one?"

"It doesn't matter. You could probably guess, knowing how old I am, but I just mentioned his training to make you a bit more comfortable. No matter how we try doing this thing, it's going to be dangerous. I wish you had some military training, too."

"I do. I enlisted in the Marines. They train everyone to fight, women included. I went to flight school and flew choppers, but I was never in a war. I got out and went to school with the college fund I got when I enlisted."

That startled me for a moment, but it was just an old reaction from the era I was born into, back when women weren't in any of the combat arms. That fact got me to thinking about getting into the lander, but I didn't want to bring it up. Another old reflex that's probably burned into our genes no matter what the avant-garde sociologists say; the instinct on the part of males to protect their females from danger.

Mona nudged me. "You're not commenting."

I pulled her closer and stroked her breast, feeling the nipple begin to harden against my palm. "Just thinking. Besides, you know I don't talk much." That was true. I never was much of a conversationalist. I lived in books so much as youngster that I never became comfortable with every day socializing.



"Well, let's think about it tomorrow. If there's a chance of us dying, I want to get a lot of loving in beforehand."

I was willing. And I didn't worry about being too loud because just then I heard other noises that suggested our guest was trying to see just how well the *Tersha* had rejuvenated Colonel James Shell.

Afterward, just before I dozed off, I thought of what a wonderful woman Mona was-and not just because the empathy-inducing *Tersha* effect. I think I would have fallen in love with her, regardless. Despite two marriages, I had never met a woman who affected me at such a deep level, down where I seldom even look myself. Perhaps it was a flaw in my character, but I had always been reluctant to commit to a woman unreservedly until she came along. Nor do I think it was adverse circumstances that melded us together. I guess sometimes you just get lucky in choosing your partner, even if it is late in life. That's how I was feeling now. There might even be a bonus. If we lived through the coming encounter I could look forward to many more years, according to Tera. I fell asleep vowing to do whatever it took to make her as happy as I was.

*** * * ***

I didn't mention that Tera had been wearing a small backpack where I presume she carried items to freshen up, and the change of clothes she was wearing, because she was already up and around when Mona and I made our appearance. She looked as rested and alert as she had the day before, and had on a different top, a bright red one that went well with her wavy dark hair. I was surprised. From the putative event we had overheard last night I thought she and Jim would have slept in after staying up later than Mona and I. Jim is such a discriminating man that I couldn't imagine him going to bed with a woman he had met only hours ago, not without getting to know her better than he had when Mona and I left the room. On the other hand, I was already aware that I seemed to need less sleep than I used to. Maybe the same applied to him. We hadn't slept more than six hours on top of several very strenuous days and yet I still felt refreshed. I guess they did, too. Jim had a big, slightly guilty grin on his face as he greeted us while sliding an arm around Tera's waist. I guess her empathy sense had shown her quickly what a fine man Jim was. Or perhaps there were other factors peculiar to Cincans that played a part.

"Coffee's ready," he said, "along with some decisions if you two agree."

I was ready for coffee too, and while I was anxious to hear what they had to say, I doubted that I would disagree with much of it.



Mona poured for both of us and we all sat around the old wooden table again. It reminded me of my youth before leaving home, when the kitchen table was also the coffee drinking and conversational area for a big part of every day.

"Tera and I have been up most of the night," Jim announced after we were all seated. "I listened in and participated in the conversation over Mona's PDA thingy. We made some tentative plans."

I didn't mention what else they had done, nor was it necessary. If anyone ever knew what he was doing it was James Shell. "We talked some, too." I said. "I guess we're as ready as we'll ever be."

"Twere best done quickly," Jim quoted. "We've broken the problem down into several categories and assigned priorities, so let's take it in order. Feel free to comment as we go along. In fact, try playing Devil's advocate."

"First off, there's security. There's no getting away from the fact that I'm the only one General Melofton's boys don't realize is involved, so I get to be the loner, the one who makes contacts and so forth and gives

Tera's specs for the spare part to a place that can fabricate it. She already has the plans drawn up, by the way, so that's no problem.

Also, rather than risk all of us getting caught together, I think we should operate from two separate groups with only periodic contact. Let her friends stay where they are so that they can try again if we fail. They'll be monitoring us all the time, so if we make mistakes, they'll learn from them.

"Secondly, I'd like us to move our operations to the city of Ft. Smith—that's a city, not a military post." He clarified that point to be sure Tera knew, then continued. "It's fairly close to where Tera says the lander went down and I know some people there, mostly retirees from Ft. Chaffee. We can all communicate through the PDA's the Cincans carry. Tera assures me that we can't be traced through them.

Also, Ft. Smith isn't too far from the area where I know a lot of Cherokees through working with some Cherokee Nation groups after I retired. I'll rent a place and set us up a base there."

I wondered about the security of the Cincan's PDAs, but decided to take her word for it. "Where will you be?"

"I think I know someone who's capable of setting up an impromptu biolab with facilities for scanning and comparing the DNA of every potential recruit against what I'll call normal controls, that is, those of non-Cherokee heritage. We'll start our planning but try to identify the genes the *Tersha* s key on that allows humans to accept them before



taking any action. Which brings up the next point. Why recruits? Why not try subterfuge? Simply put, General Melofton may be a bigoted idiot with an unstable mind, but he's no fool. He'll be running an extremely tight ship after some of his prisoners escaped. Tera and I are agreed, there's absolutely no chance of us passing her or any of us off as someone from their testing program that survived. That leaves force, and for that we need a few more bodies. If we succeed, then we can think about how to rescue her companions, but right now that's not a good bet at all. We may simply have to sterilize the whole area with the mother ship in order to save the planet."

Tera dropped her gaze as Jim said that. I knew she must be thinking of friends and cohorts she was very close to. You don't go on a years-long expedition with anyone who's incompatible with the group, and as time went on they must have gotten to know each other extremely well. That's if their society and thought processes functioned anything like ours do, and by then I figured they had to be somewhat similar, if not so prone to violence.

Jim continued with his discourse. "As far as that goes, we may all get killed trying for the lander, but let's assume we're going to make it. If we do, we'll pick up Tera's friends in Dallas and go from there.

"As I said, some of this depends on identifying the gene or genes that we three-and presumably Tera—carry. That and getting the part fabricated is our first priority. Otherwise, we're simply working on an assumption that may or may not be valid. Once that problem is solved, if it is, we try for the lander. And that's where it gets hard and where the details will depend on how many recruits we think we need, how much military training they have, how we decide to go about the thing, what the good general has been up to in the meantime, and so forth."

"Do you have any ideas yet?" I asked, hoping he would come up with something other than what I was thinking about.

"Oh, certainly. Tera and the other Cincans will map out the area of the lander as best they can from memory and from the surveillance devices inside it. We form an assault force, perhaps even two; one a diversion to draw off their strength and the other to take the lander. If possible, it's probably best to come in by chopper directly down to it. That's if we can find a chopper pilot who has the right genes. All of this is very broad and a very brief outline of the final phase, and certainly subject to change."

"Why not just hire a mercenary force for the diversion?" Mona asked. It was a good question.



Jim shook his head. "It's going to be hard enough to convince anyone of this tale to begin with. I won't take a chance on mercenaries. In the first place, I doubt that we could find anyone willing to go up against the army except nut cases. In the second place, mercenaries are always undependable. Best to have people who have a vested interest in the outcome."

Mona continued with her questions. "Jim, best case, how many people do you think we'll need?"

Jim thought for a moment. At the very least, we'll need at least one, but preferably two chopper pilots; that's unless we want to assault the guard force infantry style. And Tera says it will take a little while to make repairs after we get inside, so we have to have someone to keep them busy while it's being done. And she says the lander has defenses, but it won't stand up forever to concentrated explosives should they decide to try disabling it or destroying it completely rather than let it be taken."

"If we go in by chopper, you're thinking of a small force," I said. "Why not use the other three Cincans?"

Tera answered for herself. "It's not that I'm afraid, or my friends are afraid of risking our lives. It is simply as Jim said: we may fail. Some of us have to stay free to try again. However, if it turns out that Jim is unable to find others who are compatible with the *Tersha*, then I suppose we'll have to risk it all on one tumble of the dice."

"Roll," Jim said, grinning.

"Roll of the dice. What an intriguing language."

Mona began speaking. I thought I knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth but she eased into it instead of blurting it out. Not only that, she came up with something none of the others of us had thought of. "Jim, regardless of how we go about this, I think the sooner the better. Remember, we believe our whole planet is at risk."

"Agreed," Jim said.

"Fine. Then let's keep it simple. Go ahead and get started on the fabrication of the part we need, and in the meantime recruit a few of your most trusted Cherokee friends who are willing to help and willing to take a chance on the *Tersha*. Perhaps you should recruit people like you and I who are very ill and have nothing to lose."



Jim nodded and let her go on. I was very interested now too.

She turned to the alien woman. "Tera, you said your landing craft got back down after the part began failing. Jim also said it would take a little time for the repairs. Do you think the lander could make one more short trip, say a few miles, the way it is now?"

"Yes, I think so," Tera said, somewhat reluctantly. "At least I'd be willing to try it if it simplified matters, so long as it wasn't any farther than that."

"What is all this leading to?" Jim asked. Both he and Tera were eyeing Mona in a new light, still unsure of what she was getting at. I knew what was coming, though.

"In a minute. Last question: how quickly can the repair be made?"

"If the fabrication is done right, it's mostly a matter of plugging in the part. If the fit isn't right, I might have to improvise but I could still make it work by rigging some connections, but it might take a while."

"All right. Get the part made, find our help and round up an old Blackhawk helicopter. Then I'll fly us in."

"You?" Jim exclaimed. For once, I saw him taken by surprise.

"Of course. Didn't I tell you? I flew helicopters with the Marines."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After a long moment of dead silence, Jim finally shook his head. "Mona, you'll have to forgive an old man. I didn't mean to imply that you're not competent. That was simply a reflection of my upbringing and of the times back then when women mostly stayed home and raised kids. By God, that doesn't solve everything, but it does make it simpler. Tera, my apologies to you too. I simply took what information I had and ran with it. You should have stopped me."

"It's your world Jim. I thought you must know best."

"Sure, but I guess I really am old. I missed even asking you whether the lander could make it any farther and how fast the repairs might go. This certainly simplifies things even if it is still chancy." I saw him think of a possible obstacle. "That's assuming a chopper can get us in close to the lander. Tera?"



"The landing craft made sort of a path along the top of a ridge before it slid down into a little ravine. I think one of your slicers can land there."

"Choppers!" Jim laughed, correcting her. When he sobered, he asked Mona "Why a Blackhawk?"

Mona didn't laugh but she did manage a chuckle at the malapropism. "The marines always get the old stuff, don't you know? I've been out of the marines for a while and the Blackhawks were getting old back then. I believe the first models that went into service have probably gone into surplus by now. I imagine they were stripped of munitions and anything else civilians shouldn't have, then sold. You should be able to find one without too much trouble."

Jim stopped to pour himself more coffee then sat back down. He glanced over to where I had Mona's hand enclosed in my own.

I was busy absorbing the simple plan Mona was proposing. I still didn't like to see her in any sort of danger but that was just my old bones talking. The way she laid it out would take less people for not much more risk. There was just one more point that might be a drawback that I hadn't heard mentioned.

"Tera, you said your friends were using gambling as a means of earning enough money for your replacement part. What is it made of to take so much money? And for that matter, where are we going to get the money for a helicopter?"

"Oh. I guess I didn't say, did I? Mostly diamonds, along with some platinum, some super hard steel and a few short superconductor connections that either operate at ambient temperature or have coils to cool them to where they are superconducting. How much would a helicopter cost?"

"Enough, but first things first," I said. "Let's get the part made. I see why you would need a lot of money for it. Well, I've still got a few thousand that I managed to withdraw before I had to run. You're welcome to it."

"Don't worry about that part," Jim said. "I have enough money, and if I don't, I can get it."

That surprised me. I didn't know he was wealthy. He saw the expression on my face and grinned. "I've been riding with some of the smartest players in the market for a long time now. It's just a matter



of cashing in enough stock without arousing suspicion."

"So, where do we go from here?" That was me asking.

"Now that Mona has lessened security concerns somewhat, I don't see why we four can't all stay together once we get a base of operations set up, so long as we keep the other Cincans informed in case we fail. I could go ahead and rent us a place in Ft. Smith and get started."

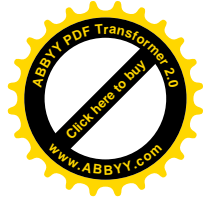
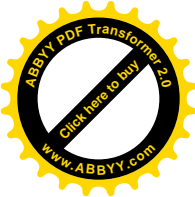
With that much settled, the meeting broke up and Jim left to gather a few things he wanted to take with him. Before leaving he made several arrangements simply as contingency planning, like setting up a way for us to contact Tera's friends in case anything happened to him, a way for them to contact him, calling his broker and a close friend and arranging for a bank account to be opened in the name one of the Cincans was using and funds to be transferred there, getting the phone numbers of the two disposable phones we still had on hand and so on. He left soon afterward, deciding at the last moment that the risk wouldn't be much greater if Tera went with him at the same time.

Mona and I were left by ourselves to wait until he had an address for us. I suppose we could have followed, but this way we would avoid having to check into a motel while Jim searched out suitable quarters.

It was an idyllic two days. We had no pressing duties and there was plenty of food and drink on hand and nothing much to do. And we didn't have to worry about making noise. Anyone who heard us probably would have thought it was a cougar screaming and given the place a wide berth anyway. The only thing that marred the enjoyment was the constant background worry over the situation that we-and everyone in the world-were facing. Of course the world didn't know it was in danger, but we did. However, Mona wouldn't let me spend much time on the subject. She said rightly, that we would have plenty of opportunity when we rejoined the others to begin thinking about it again, and in the meantime to forget it. I did, almost. When Jim called and said we could join him and Tera, I was almost sorry.

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With the best of intentions, I had failed to get an atlas at any of our previous stops. There was probably a shorter route from our hideaway to Ft. Smith but I didn't know one. I drove back the way we had come, then picked up Highway 270 and from there Highway 71 on into Ft. Smith. On the way, we passed very near the army post where Tera had told us General Melofton had his base of operations. It was also where he was holding the Cincan prisoners and conducting his interrogations and experiments. From the Cincan monitoring



through the prisoners' PDAs, I knew it was located in an area of the fort that had been closed down for years. Not that it concerned us. We were as safe in Ft. Smith as we would have been in New York, or nearly so. It was rescuing them after we took the lander that would be difficult, if it could be done at all.

*** * * ***

Jim greeted us like long lost family when we arrived. He had taken a semi-country home on the southern suburbs of the city, a big two story place with more room than we really needed, even for the lab he intended to set up-in fact, was already setting up. He had brought in the first piece of equipment he had purchased just before we arrived, having gone to pick it up himself from a shipment point at another place he rented. Security. Whatever we could do to lessen the risks of being caught before we made our move, he intended to see that it was done.

Jim hugged us all and Tera followed suit. She was catching on to the more intimate earthly customs rapidly. As soon as we were inside, he introduced us to someone else whom he had already recruited.

"Mike, Mona, this is Staghorn Strongarm. He's one of the best geneticists in the country."

"Call me Strongarm," he said, sticking out his hand. It was covered with age spots. His face was dotted with them too, as well as a million wrinkles. He was very old, yet he moved his small body spryly and his dark eyes twinkled with intelligence. Even with the furrows and valleys in the skin of his face, I could tell that he was a full blood Indian, or very close to it.

"Glad to meet you," I said. "I hope you can find what we're after."

"Me too, white man. Me want to get young again. Surprise my squaw."

"Knock it off, Strongarm. Mike, he isn't even married and that Indian act was old before you were born."

"Doesn't mean I don't have a squaw." Strongarm cackled like a hen that had just laid an egg. He peered closely at both Mona and I. "Injun blood, I can tell. You ever hunt with a bow?"

"No," I said.

"Smart. Firestick better. Come on, I need samples from you and your squaw."



He took us into a back room where some instruments he had brought with him were setting on improvised shelves made from sawhorses and planks. The room was largely bare of furniture other than a refrigerator. He drew blood from each of us, then apologized for the lack of anesthetic but insisted on digging into our forearms far enough to get a sample of muscle tissue. I bit my tongue to stifle the pain but surprisingly, there wasn't much. The puncture site hardly bled at all. MyTersha on the job.

After that, Jim showed us upstairs and let us pick a room. He had linen handy but there was no bed, just an air mattress. I was beginning to wonder if he had some stock in an air mattress factory. Or maybe we were just ordained to sleep on them by some mysterious destiny that had it in for us.

"Cheer up," Jim said. "At least we have lights and running water. I'll buy a few rolls of memory foam soon as I can get to it so we'll be more comfortable, but first things first. Any problems coming up?"

"Nary a one. If there's a dragnet out, I didn't notice it."

"Good. Still, I want you two to stay inside, just as a precaution." He grinned. "You can cook for the rest of us while we get organized."

"It's a cinch he hasn't tasted much of my cooking," I told Mona.

"We'll suffer for the cause. What do you think of Strongarm"

"I think he's funny," Mona said. "Is he always like that?"

"Sure, but don't let it fool you. He just gets a kick out of acting like a wild Indian, and he's older than dirt. He's brilliant, though."

Back downstairs, there was another refrigerator in the kitchen that came with the house. Jim pulled out a beer for himself and one for me. Mona declined and took a coke. There was a pan bubbling on the stove with something in it that smelled good, and out in the dining area there was a set of folding table and chairs and the packing material they had come in. Jim had been busy already. We pulled out chairs and sat down.

"Strongarm will be busy for a while getting his instrument set up and calibrated. Don't worry about offering to help; he likes to do things himself. Claims it keeps him going." He took a sip of his beer and continued. "There's five more people coming, including an old army buddy of mine. He's a retired Sergeant Major and former infantry



platoon sergeant. I should say there are more coming if they survive a dose of my *Tersha* . I inoculated them with my own blood. They're all at least half Cherokee."

**"Sounds like we're banking a lot on the Cherokee line being the key,"
I said.**

Jim shrugged. "It's all we have to go on right now, and I made no promises. They all have terminal illnesses so it's not like they're risking a great deal. I've told those men, and Strongarm as well, what the whole situation is. They're the only ones I knew that I could trust completely to just believe me, and to help us if they survive." He chuckled. "It helped that they both knew how close I was to packing it in before the *Tersha* got me."

"Have you listened to any news lately?" Mona asked.

"Just to and from errands on the jeep radio. Nothing unusual and I haven't had time to buy a television. This is a wired city so you can use my PPC when you have time if you like."

"I'd rather have something productive to do."

"Me too," Mona said.

"You can work with Sergeant Major Friedman with the planning when he arrives, if he does. That's if he's not busy running errands for me. There's just so much to do and only one of me. And you can help out our wild man if he allows it. I doubt that he will, though."

"Speaking of, he looks like he could use a dose of *Tersha* . Is he planning on trying it?"

Jim shook his head. "Not until and unless he identifies the specific gene or genes that indicate compatibility with the *Tersha* . He's too valuable to risk right now."

A timer made a dinging noise in the kitchen. Jim jumped up and ran toward the smells that had been attracting my attention ever since we arrived. A minute later he yelled, "Come and get it!"

The pot I had seen on the stove was lima beans and bacon and onions cooked together and he had made a pan of hot cornbread to go with them.

The old Indian came in just as Jim was cutting the cornbread. He was gnawing on what looked like a piece of old leather. He saw me eyeing



it. **"Buffalo jerky. Old Injun food." He sat down and began filling his plate, then sniffed. "You put pig in here, huh? No squash?"**

"Shut up and eat, you crazy bastard," Jim said. To us, he added "Beans, corn and squash. He thinks just because Indians always grew them that they're the only vegetables worth cooking."

"Wild onions are okay too," Strongarm said, spooning up a mouthful of beans. "White man onions too big."

"Sorry, I'll go see if I can find some. In the meantime, you don't seem to mind eating the white man onion I put in the beans."

Strongarm didn't answer. Jim winked at us from across the table.

We ate and then Mona and I went up to bed. The air mattresses Jim had provided were no more comfortable than the ones in the cabin, but we managed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Three of the five friends that Jim had inoculated with his blood died. Jim didn't grieve openly but the only thing that made him smile for the next week or so was occasionally when Strongarm's untamed Indian act became especially outrageous. It was a setback to our theory, but not entirely. Two of them did live, including Sergeant Major Herb Friedman. He showed up three days after Mona and I arrived.

Herb was medium tall and fair haired, an oddity for someone who was half Cherokee, and he was beginning to go bald on top. I wondered if the *Tersha* would cure that. He was about the same age as Jim, but thinner, a result of the chemotherapy he had gone through three times already in an attempt to beat lung cancer. It was Herb who gradually drew Jim out of the mild funk he fell into with the loss of three of his old buddies, even though they had been terminal already. Herb took over the organization and planning of our prospective encounter with a confidence and energy that belied his recent illness, not even counting his age. He was a good man to be around and I liked him from the start. He reminded me of all the tough old no-nonsense sergeants I had known in the army, the ones who really run the day to day operations of their units. Not only that, he proved to be immensely well read and had a disciplined mind that always stayed on track.

Herb agreed with Mona. If we couldn't mount a full scale assault, and



didn't have trained troops, it was best to keep things as simple as possible and go in with as few people as possible, counting on surprise and swiftness to get into the lander. Before he arrived, Tera had drawn up a map of the immediate area around where the lander was located, relying not only on her memory but that of her friends as well. Herb wasn't satisfied. He downloaded the most recent commercial satellite photos and got a shot of the ridge line where the lander had come in, then plowed a path down into the ravine. The stealthing was still holding; from the photo you wouldn't have known there was anything there other than fallen trees and underbrush. Herb made a new map on pieces of computer paper taped together (Jim had brought in a standard PC and printer during the week and gotten it hooked up and on line). He sat down at the table with Tera and drew in more detail, questioning her (and through her, the other aliens) about distances, slopes, elevations, debris, undergrowth, trees that might be used for cover and on and on until he was satisfied that he and the rest of us knew the layout and had it committed to memory. There was one bit of good news from the last satellite image. It didn't show a great concentration of troops and few signs of a permanent camp, at least to our untrained eyes.

After that drawing the new map, he penciled in the lander, its position, where the entrances were and whether they were immediately accessible, how they were oriented with the terrain, how long it would take them to open once we arrived and a hundred other little items that the rest of us probably would have overlooked. I sure hoped Tera's memory was good, because we were going to be counting heavily on some of that information.

Herb had arrived with two duffle bags that contained a small arsenal. He let us watch as he emptied them, giving a short description of each item, just as if none of us had ever been in the military. Well, for me it had been so long that I had forgotten a lot about arms and munitions. Same for Jim. Mona had been in the service more recently but none of us except Herb and Jake Sheridan, when he arrived, had been ground pounders. While we were in the service, we fired for qualification once a year with the standard army rifle and pistol and that was it.

The combination rifle and twelve gauge shotgun was Herb's choice. Any fighting we did was likely to be at fairly close quarters and he wanted both options. On the other hand, since none of the rest of us had handled that type weapon before and there was neither time nor opportunity for training, he gave us each a rifle that we were used to and made us practice dry firing them until he was satisfied that we had regained some competence. He offered us all one of the standard army pistols but Mona and I both chose to stick with our forties; we were used to them. Jim had brought his own arsenal and probably



didn't need the practice but Herb insisted on running him through it anyway.

Jake Sheridan didn't need any familiarization with firearms but went through it with us anyway. He had just recently been retired on a medical. Herb had been Jake's platoon sergeant when he first entered the army, fresh out of a college ROTC program. Herb told me privately that Jake had been an excellent officer and would have made a good infantry officer, but an accident had cost him part of his lower leg. He had stayed in, but moved over into logistics. His medical retirement came from some weird disease picked up in the last gulf war that completely incapacitated him. It was still undiagnosed when Jim inoculated him.

Had it been left up to Jake, I would never have learned anything about him. He was friendly enough but seldom spoke, and when he did it was in terse, simple sentences. He was a full Cherokee with the typical dark complexion and black hair.

Herb wanted two more men (or women; he wasn't particular so long as they were willing and able to fight) but Jim was having a problem finding anyone else he thought he could really trust, and that were so ill or old that they would have little to lose by risking the *Tersha*. He finally asked Herb for help.

Herb took off early one morning and didn't return until the next day. He told us he had injected a drop of his blood into three other men and one woman and given them his cell phone number to call if they lived. He hoped to get two more recruits, which would about fill the chopper when we found one. All we could do after that was wait. I was looking forward to spending some time upstairs with Mona, but then Jim found her a helicopter and she had to get ready to leave.

Jim had brought back a blond wig for Mona. When I saw her in it, with her lips painted in bright red lipstick and wearing a pair of jeans one size too small and a top with no bra beneath, I had to laugh.

"What's wrong?" Mona said. She grabbed Jim's arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Don't I look like some arm candy for my Sugar Daddy?"

Jim grinned uncomfortably. "It was the best disguise I could think of. I doubt anyone would suspect an old man in his dotage out spending his money on young women of anything sinister."

"You two look the part, all right," I conceded. "But what happens with the hanger operator? You sure as hell don't look like a helicopter



pilot."

Mona pulled her shoulders way back, stretching the top tightly over her breasts. "Oh, I suspect he'll be so busy studying my bust measurements that he won't worry about much else. Or don't you think so?" She grinned impishly.

"Um, I agree. I just hope he keeps his eyes there when you show him your fake flight book." Jim had already arranged that for her.

"If he doesn't, it won't matter," Jim said. I've bribed him so heavily he can afford to go find a bimbo for himself. Come on, Pattycake. Let's go play."

I was still stifling giggles as they went out the door. The whole absurd notion of seven old men and a woman wearing a blond wig and no bra tackling the United States Army in order to rescue stranded space travelers with the whole world at stake finally got to me.

"Good squaw, just too skinny," Strongarm said.

I turned around. The old Indian was standing nonchalantly, gumming a piece of jerky, his eyes dancing with amusement. I don't think I've ever known anyone who enjoyed life so much, nor made so much of a joke of it, as Staghorn Strongarm. It was the first time I had seen him in a day or two.

"I like her like she is," I told him.

"Okay, but me get fat squaw soon as I get young. Maybe next week."

"Why next week?"

"Have to get the *Tersha* bug going good first so I can service the squaw." He grinned, showing his gums. "Maybe I can grow new teeth, too."

I hated to think of someone so full of life taking the chance on the *Tersha*, even as old as he was.

He must have seen that I was frowning without being aware of it. "Not to worry, Mike. You act like white men. Worry too much. Bad for the brain. I found the genes. I gottum too. Shoot, maybe get two squaws, like in the old days."

He wasn't *that* old! Then what he had said hit me. "You found the genes? The ones that tell who the *Tersha* is compatible with? Wow,



that was quick!"

"Haw. White man government lab probably looking in the wrong place."

"What do you mean?" I was really astounded. This old man standing there gnawing on jerky with his toothless gums had found what we were after in a week when all the government research so far hadn't.

Strongarm grinned around the piece of jerky. "I looked in the nonsense genes. Figured some of them had to have a purpose."

He was talking about the great amount of genetic material we carry in our genomes that has no apparent purpose and doesn't appear to code for proteins like the regular genes do.

I was curious. "What made you look there? So soon anyway."

He shrugged and tugged at the end of the jerky with his gums, finally managing to detach a piece of it. "Actually, some pretty smart scientists work for the white eyes government. I thought they should have found it by now if it was in the regular sequences. So I looked somewhere else. Us redskins are sneaky, huh?"

"Sounds like more smarts than sneaks," I told him. "That's great news, Strongarm."

"Not so great. I brought along a lot of samples of white men and Cherokees, too. Only a third of us Injuns have it so far. And no white men or black men. Maybe a few Orientals. Still needs lots of study."

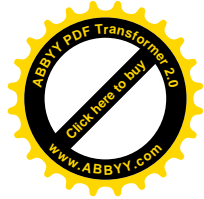
If what he said was true, we had been extremely lucky so far, what with giving the *Tersha* out to just any Cherokee we trusted.

"How about other Indians? Do you think any other tribes have the genes?"

"I don't know. There was some interbreeding with other eastern tribes back before the white men came. Captive women from wars.

Then big mix-up when the stupid white eyes dumped bunches of different tribes onto the same reservations. But we were mostly from the same stock originally, so maybe other tribes carry the genes too."

I thought about what he was telling me. The genes had to have originally come from the old world. Probably the geneticists could trace it back eventually, using mitochondrial DNA studies, but even so, it appeared that Blacks, Caucasian and most Orientals were



doomed to die if they came in contact with the *Tersha* .

"I wonder if the ones without the genes could accept the *Tersha* if the genes were inserted into the body first?" I said.

"No telling yet. Maybe, maybe not. Have to find a good way to get the genes into the body first. Gene therapy isn't all that advanced yet." He grinned over the piece of jerky. "Maybe like the Tera squaw says. Kill all the white men and black men. Injuns take over the world."

He was kidding. I hoped.

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Mona and Jim spent only two days at the little private airport south of Ft. Smith. Mona came back all enthusiastic. She had been wrong about the first Blackhawks going into surplus and Jim finally had to buy a used civilian version of the helicopter. After hugging me so tight I feared she was going to crack a rib, we walked in tandem, arms around each other, back toward the kitchen where one or the other of us always kept a pot of coffee going. She was bubbling over with how well she remembered her training and how well maintained the craft was, and other tidbits of news, just as if she weren't going to be flying into the teeth of a gang of heavily armed troops soon.

"—and you should have seen that hanger guy! He tried to put the make on me a dozen times. Poor man, I'm afraid I teased him, but I had to keep him from asking too many questions." She laughed merrily. "And you should have seen Jim! He acted like the perfect sugar daddy. He could scare dragons off with the glower he put on his face every time some young buck spent too much time in my vicinity. It scared *them* , for sure."

Herb and I came very near to having a disagreement over which one of us got Mona first. He wanted to show her his map again and go over approach routes, flying time, elevation and so forth. I won by being stubborn, but it might have been better if I hadn't. Not that it mattered in the end.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was still dark when Mona and I were awakened by a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" I called, feeling for my forty. I had sworn not to be very far away from it ever again.



"It's Jim. Come down stairs."

He didn't say what the problem was but I heard the urgency in his voice. Mona was sitting up beside me, blinking sleepily. She reached and switched on the lamp sitting on the floor beside our air mattress bed. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was a little past four in the morning.

Mona and I didn't try to talk. We simply pulled on our clothing and hurried down the stairs. All the others were already there, congregated around the folding tables and chairs that had been moved from the kitchen to the living room as our numbers grew. I took a quick look into the kitchen and saw that someone already had coffee ready. I poured two cups and brought them in and handed one to Mona. I sat down and saw that everyone was staring at Tera. Her face had that blank expression of someone listening to a phone conversation while others are in the room-except that she wasn't holding a phone.

"It's her friends," Jim whispered to us. "They've been found. All of them were captured."

Uh oh. That certainly was going to change our schedule. I felt Mona's hand creeping into mine. I squeezed it gently and could feel the tension there. I could feel it in my own body simply by how fast my heart was beating.

The blank look left Tera's face. It was replaced by one of resignation. She opened her mouth, hesitated, then spoke. "They've all been taken captive, except for Mettabantaty. They killed him. Poor Meta. He was such a gentle soul. Felinti is crying."

"Where are they now?" Jim asked.

"They're in a van of some kind. All of them are handcuffed. They don't know where they're being taken."

"They'll probably be brought back to General Melofton's little house of horrors right at Ft. Chaffee, not fifty miles from here." That was Herb, speaking in a sort of wistful tone. I knew what he was thinking. So close and yet we couldn't help them.

For a change I had something substantive to say. "The most important thing is how did they find them? And can they use the same method to find us?"

"Probably some agent working from Mona's old haunts recognized



one of them, then got the others," Jim said. He rubbed his eyes. "Tera, they will be made to talk, won't they?"

"We've always told them everything important, other than the location of the others," she said bitterly, then ameliorated her tone. "Sorry, I know none of you would be a part of that sort of thing. Nevertheless, even though their *Tersha* s will protect them, just the fact that I'm still missing will make them suspicious, won't it? I think we had best hurry."

I did, too, even though I wanted to hear more about how the *Tersha* protected the Cincans from questions they didn't want to answer. If we had the bad luck to be captured, it would be nice to know we couldn't tell about the possibility of the *Tersha* s mutating and give Melofton time to disperse the Cincans so that they couldn't all be killed in one strike.

There wasn't time though, because our action leader, Herb Friedman agreed upon the need to hurry. He began taking command. "Folks, I never expected this to be easy, but I did hope to have a couple more bodies to work with. Well, we've got some time, but let's not push it. I want to run us all through the loading and disembarkation sequence from the chopper and make sure you each know your assignments. How about you Strongarm? Want to inject yourself and come along or simply disappear?"

"Me Injun. Been waiting all my life for revenge on white eyes. Me go on warpath! And I gave me the *Tersha* soon as I identified it and tested myself."

"What! Why weren't you sick like the rest of us were for two days!" I said hotly.

"Strongarm shrugged. "I felt bad for a while but I'm okay now. Ready to fight the white eyes cavalry. Get revenge for Wounded Knee."

I went back over our conversation about him identifying the *Tersha* compatibility genes, and sure enough, he had said "me gottum" and "when I get the *Tersha* going". The old reprobate has as much as told me then that he had already injected himself and it had passed me by.

Herb forced a grin through his worry. "Are you going to wear war paint, too?"

"Sure. But I want a firestick like yours," Strongarm said. "And a knife, too."



"Okay, old man. You may as well go; you've got the constitution of a damn horse and it will probably go hard on anyone they catch who was helping the BEMS."

"Bems?" Tela asked. "What's that?"

"Acronym for Bug eyed monsters. It's an old science fiction term from the space opera days. Never mind. Finish your coffee and let's get organized."

Herb fitted Strongarm into one of his two missing slots, the best he could manage. I didn't doubt the old Indian would fight; I just hoped he would have the strength to keep up with the rest of us, but I don't know why I was worried; he hadn't been nearly as sick as the rest of us when the *Tersha* invaded our bodies. He might wind up leading the charge for all I knew.

"Let's run over it one more time here, then go outside and do a walk through," Herb said. "Mona, you'll land with the left hand exit already open and the right closed, facing away from the lander. That will give a little protection, or at least not give them visible human targets to shoot at. Then you get out of the pilot's seat *fast* and catch up to Mike's rear. Mike, you and Jim out first, then Mona and Tera. Form a shield for Tera on three sides and try to keep it like that. Jake, you follow immediately and stay behind them. I'll be first out, but I'll stay in place and me and the Injun will put out all the suppressing fire we can. If they go after you, they'll be shooting downhill, so quick as you get going stay in a crouch and it may pass over your heads. You may take some fire from the opposite ridge too; it looks like a bunker had been built there. No way to tell for sure, though; just be aware of it. Remember, getting Tera into the lander is the number one priority. If she goes down, pick her up and carry her but get her to the entrance."

Herb paused for a moment and eyed each of us individually. "We can't stop for wounded, other than Tera. Once she's inside, she's going to head for the controls, then give the rest of us three minutes to get inside. After that she takes off regardless. She'll try to get over the next two ridges due east and set down to install the part. Any of us who get left behind—well, we can keep fighting and try to keep them from going after the lander. There's worse things than selling your life to give your friends a chance, so don't give up—and try to take an honor guard to hell with you. Understand?"

He went around the table, looking each of us in the eye as we nodded acceptance. Tera looked on her eyes wide and blinking rapidly. I have no idea what she thought of us from this. Just from talking to her at odd moments, we had gotten the idea that her world was a much more

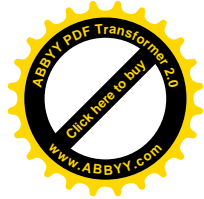


peaceful place than ours. Not that she was a total pacifist; all of them originally carried a personal sidearm for protection against animals and inimical humans, but of course they had been confiscated when they were captured. They hadn't attempted to fight their way free after seeing how heavily the army unit that captured them was armed. She had told us that it didn't matter that the government had their weapons; all of them were keyed to the individuals and no one else could use them. Herb had given her a revolver and made her practice dry firing it, but she was under instructions to use it only as a last resort and only if it was necessary to get her into the lander. Otherwise, we would do all the fighting necessary.

I hoped there wouldn't be any. My time in the military hadn't been spent in the combat arms. The only reason I went through Ranger School was that they wanted medics with them on all their maneuvers and I had volunteered. Through two wars, the only combat, other than a few mortar and rocket attacks, had come that one time when the perimeter of our compound was breached by a suicide unit and I had killed two of them just before they would have taken Jim out, but that had been almost like a reflex action. And Mona and I had gotten through the dust-up with the fake Homeland Security agents more through stupidity on their part and my determination to protect Mona than anything else. This was something different; *aplanned* combat operation, where I knew what was coming. I felt my hands began to tremble and tucked them out of sight to keep anyone else from noticing. I felt ashamed of myself, especially since I doubted that Strongarm had been in combat either, despite his Wild Indian act, and he didn't look a bit worried.

With Mona not having access to the pilot's military night vision equipment, and with some of the others of us not trained to use night vision equipment even if we had it, there wasn't much choice other than to do the thing in daylight. In any event, Herb was planning on speed and surprise to carry it off. He wanted Mona to come in and land at the fastest speed she could manage, doing it in one tree-top skimming straight line, and landing early in the morning-tomorrow—before the night guards had been relieved. They would be sleepy and less alert then, thinking of hot chow and a bunk.

We went outside to practice how we would come out of the chopper, using the folding chairs to simulate the webbed seats we would be in. The first time we tried it, we stumbled into each other and two of us fell on our ass. If the house weren't so isolated and neighbors had been able to watch, they probably would have thought we were playing some weird version of musical chairs. It took a lot of practice before Herb was satisfied. I just hoped it went off as well in reality as our final session did, but I wasn't optimistic.



After that we went inside to pack the individual duffel bags that Jim had gotten for us. We could hardly appear at the air field with rifles slung over our shoulders and pistols riding our belts and in Herb and Strongarm's case, a Randall knife with a seven inch blade secured in a scabbard ready for quick access. The law would have been called on us in a New York minute, if not Homeland Security itself.

All the while during our preparations, Tera continued to monitor conversation among her friends through their PDA's. During the afternoon she began to look haggard. When Mona attempted to comfort her, she began crying.

"They've cut two of the PDA's off our people and are torturing them now. They think that's what's let them resist pain so much. Oh, *Merka Teeda!* Why won't they believe us? Why don't they let us try to help instead of ripping information out of us?" Her voice held anguish and a terrible sorrow.

I don't know what those two alien words meant, but I suspect they were analogous to a bitter curse. There was no answer to her questions, of course. General Melofton was acting exactly as sadistic spy masters have done all through history. Even if he believed everything they said, he still would have insisted on trying for more. It was nothing new to us, but it must be having a horrible effect on Tera's psyche, especially as she could do absolutely nothing about it. Not yet anyway, and probably never. If our operation was a success, she had said the mother ship could put them out of their misery, but that was about all.

I felt sorry for Tera but there was nothing to do other than try to keep her sane and functioning until we got her to the lander. I hated to even think of the next steps that might have to be taken to protect the earth. It isn't easy to contemplate what Tera had suggested might be necessary: sterilizing the whole area where her friends were being held in order to kill all the *Tersha* s and keep them from spreading to the vast majority of the population who couldn't survive an infection. I don't think any of us had asked what "sterilization" might entail. We didn't want to know, probably because it couldn't be limited to her friends and Melofton's thugs. There would be other innocent people nearby.

We had a last meal at the house and began heading out after dark, going in three separate vehicles. There was one last minute addition, Robert Tenebaum, one of Friedman's friends whose body had accepted the *Tersha* . He called about noon and told us he could make it by dark, and he did. There was time for a brief introduction, then



Herb took him in his vehicle to brief along the way.

We arrived at the airfield early, but that was no problem. Nor was getting there after dark cause for concern. Jim had paid heavily to keep the field open all night; normally it closed after dusk or when the last scheduled landing had been made. The big problem was getting into the body armor Jim had secured and getting our weapons and gear attached after we got into the chopper. There were far more elbows and knees knocking around than could be accounted for by the number of people present.

After we finally got everything in order, it was just a matter of waiting. The jump from the field to our destination would take less than an hour. We had almost two hours to simply sit in the chopper and wait. I couldn't even take comfort from being near Mona; she was up front, going over all the controls and checklists and maps one last time. I think waiting there in that uncomfortable webbed seat was the longest two hours of my life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We were taking a fairly big chance with Mona being the only pilot; there was no one to help watch for such things as television towers and elevation and oncoming terrain but there was nothing to do about it. She hadn't even flown over this country before and had no idea of what landmarks to look for to stay on course. She had to rely on instruments and that innate sense of being in control of the flight environment that all good pilots have. I had heard my brother talk about it when he described flying jets for the marines. I guess Mona had that sense because she got us to the right place and we were right on time. Unfortunately, the situation wasn't quite what we had planned on, or perhaps I should say hoped for.

I said that the satellite photos hadn't shown a permanent camp, so we were going on the assumption that the force guarding the lander was ensconced father back on that ridge and the next one over so they could keep stray hunters and hikers away from the immediate vicinity of the lander. From the vantage point of our proposed landing spot, Tera had said the lander could be spotted for what it was despite being disguised. Also, both the photos and Tera's memory had indicated that there was space enough to land without mishap. The assumptions and memories both turned out to be incorrect.

The first thing that went wrong was that as Mona guided the helicopter down, she saw that some huge boulders mixed in with the toppled trees and shattered trunks made it impossible to land safely



on the ridge. She really should have aborted, but she didn't. She made an instant decision to try for another spot and manipulated the chopper thirty yards down the slope to where she glimpsed a tiny space in front of a large fallen tree trunk. She maneuvered the chopper into the space then swiftly touched the front of the skids to the trunk and let the rear part of them settle onto the ground. She killed the engine and the chopper settled heavily to a halt, almost level. Changing the landing site had been a snap decision and she made it instantly, knowing we probably wouldn't have another chance as easy as this. What we thought would be easy. Her superb piloting got us down safely but that was about all that went right.

Herb was out the door in two quick bounds, rifle ready-and he began firing almost instantly. I jumped out, ran a few steps down slope like I was supposed to, then stumbled on something and fell. As I was getting up, Mona and Tera shot past me and suddenly I was looking into the barrel of a rifle held by a man in civilian clothes but looking as mean as any angry soldier ever did. At the same time I heard a voice scream, "Alive! Take them alive!"

I don't think the guy in front of me or any of the others intended to listen at first, not when Herb and Jim were already sweeping the area with automatic rifle fire, but they didn't have to. Herb cut the one pointing his rifle at me down with a blast from his shotgun barrel that almost cut him in half. My next memories are nothing more than a jumble of bodies tangling together and running about in desperate fighting. I later learned that we had the bad luck to come down at the same time and almost right at the spot where General Melofton had planned a horrid attempt to get into the lander. He was going to force a Cincan under threat of death to get close enough to the lander for the entrance to open, then have sharpshooter kill him and see what developed.

I regained my feet in time to hear that voice yelling again to take us alive. A whole squad of men rushed from the trees and brush, attempting to overcome us.

I did my best to keep anyone from getting past me so that Tera could get to the lander. I think I killed two of them before my rifle went flying, from a bullet or from someone knocking it away, I don't know. I saw a stream of brass cartridge casings flying from Herb's rifle then he went down as a series of slugs chewed into both his legs. I couldn't see where Jake or Robert were; I think both of them were killed in the first few minutes, but not before they had a chance to cut down the odds against us. The body armor helped immensely. I don't think we would have succeeded without it.



I was knocked off my feet by a slug hitting me in the side and ripping into my armor. I struggled back upright and that's when I should have kept going because I saw the opening of the lander iris open and Tera and Mona disappear inside. I didn't go because Herb was trying to get back to his feet and I had a vague notion that I might be able to hoist him onto my back in a fireman's carry and still make it to the lander despite his orders to not stop for anyone. While I was hesitating, a weight landed on my back and knocked me to the ground. I had already pulled the Glock forty from the pocket of my armored vest when I went sprawling. Arms went around my neck in a choke hold. I managed to hold onto my gun as I went down. I worked it free from between my chest and the ground while my head was pulled backward and I struggled for breath. I pointed it back over my shoulder and fired two rounds. The weight lessened and I rolled free of the body, getting drenched with blood. Both of my shots had gone into his neck. One of them had cut his carotid artery and it was pumping out blood in a red pulsing stream.

I ran to where Herb was trying to aim his pistol at some target up the slope. His hand holding the big handgun was shaking like he had the ague.

"Get out of here you damn fool! I'm done," he gasped. Blood trickled from the side of his mouth. I could see now that two high caliber bullets had punctured his vest right at the level of his sternum. Both holes were still smoking and reddened at the edges.

I didn't want to leave him, mainly because I didn't think he was finished; I had seen how the *Tersha* could stop the bleeding and repair a wound. On top of that, forty years of working in medicine was crying out to me that you don't abandon patients, not while there is still life in them.

Just as I bent to lift him, another gang of men burst from among the shattered trees to the side of where the chopper sat, all in civilian clothes and all pointing weapons at us. Several of them ran toward the lander where Strongarm was struggling with someone at the entrance. All of those slumped to the ground as they hit the knock-out zone of the lander's defenses, the point where no one without the *Tersha* could pass. The others came toward us. I heard that same voice cry out, even shriller than before, "Alive, you fools! I want them alive!"

I dropped Herb's shoulders and rose to face them. With my side vision I saw Strongarm shove Mona back inside the lander as she tried to claw her way past him to get back outside with me. For a ninety year old man, he had amazing strength. I could *feel* Mona's



anguish at seeing me still up the slope and just realizing that I hadn't been following her. Strongarm gave her one more shove and dived in after her through the narrowing aperture, then it closed completely.

I raised my pistol to meet the charge. It clicked on empty, though I still can't remember firing the rest of the clip. The last thing I saw clearly was Herb, amazingly managing to rise to one knee as he was surrounded. The morning sun glinted off his knife blade. I heard a scream as it came back bloody, then he was swarmed under. I must have been clubbed with a rifle butt. There was a terrific slamming blow to the back of my head. I toppled to the ground and rolled over, just in time to see the lander pass jerkily overhead, then the whole world whirled around and around, getting blacker and blacker, and I fell into that dark space the mind retreats to when it is shocked into unconsciousness.

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The next thing I became aware of was the painful noise of helicopter blades biting into air. The noise assaulted my head in waves, making it ache with a pounding intensity worse than any hangover or migraine headache, worse than the ache of a swollen, infected tooth on a weekend when you can't find a dentist. It went on and on while I slowly became aware that my hands and feet were in some sort of restraints because I couldn't move them. When I tried, another series of pains shot through my body, that of too-tight bonds cutting off circulation. God knows what I would have felt like without the *Tersha* helping.

I opened my eyes and squinted against sunlight knifing through the canopy of the helicopter and cutting into my eyes like needles. I blinked and the world came into focus. Across from me was a litter with someone pounding on Herb Friedman's chest. I looked at his face and could have told them to save their energy. I've seen far too many corpses in my life not to recognize one. He was gone, just as he had said he was. I felt a surge of anger wash through me and found myself hoping that the one who had bloodied his knife there at the last was dead, too.

The anger cleared away some of the pain, enough so that I would have sat up if I were able because I suddenly felt a void inside myself, a blankness where the sense of having Mona near had been ever since she came out of her illness. It was like the two days she was gone to look over her helicopter, but worse, because I knew there was no way to fill it now. The memory of old Strongarm shoving her back into the lander was set in my mind like a protected file that can't be deleted. She was gone from me forever because I don't believe in miracles and I knew of nothing else that would reunite us. I cried then, mostly for



the loss of the only woman I have ever truly loved, but I also shed some tears for the brave men who had fell ensuring her escape. Herb and especially Jim, the best friend I ever had other than my brother- and I wasn't likely to see him again, either. Which goes to show how wrong assumptions can be.

That terrible headache began to fade to where it was bearable as soon as the helicopter landed and the noise of its engine stopped and the whamming sound of its blades grew slower then faded to a blessed quiet. I was carried into a low cinderblock building and taken back into its bowels. The two men carrying the litter set it down and unfastened the restraints then pulled me to my feet. I found myself facing an open jail cell. They gave me a hard shove then I heard the door clang shut behind me.

I bruised my knee when the shove made me lose my balance and fall. As I got to my feet I saw that someone else was in the cell with me. I didn't recognize my brother Martin until he spoke.

"Mike, what in hell are you doing here? I thought you were probably dead." Marty spoke through lips thickened with bruises and split in two places. There was a big purple and yellow blotch on the side of his face. One eye was blackened and almost closed. His hair was matted with dried blood.

"Marty? Is that you?"

He tried to grin but had a hard time with it. His parted lips showed two broken teeth. "Not my usual handsome self, ugly brother, but yeah, it's me. What have you gotten us mixed up in this time?"

We talked like that sometimes, using affectionate insults. "Would you believe I've been running around with aliens from outer space?"

He forced a painful smile. "From the looks of you, I don't think they're any friendlier than whoever the hell has been pounding on me."

I wondered what he was talking about until I realized that I was dirty and my shirt ripped to hell where the slug had torn into the side of my vest and that I was covered with blood. The guy I had shot in the neck really drenched me. My body armor was gone so I suppose someone had checked me for wounds then threw me in here when they didn't find any. And suddenly, seeing the blood all over me and remembering the violent encounter at the landing site, I began shaking and became deathly ill. Marty saw what was happening and helped me over to the commode in the corner of the cell. I got most of



what I threw up in it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I suppose they stuck us in the same cell together so that I could see what they had planned for me if I didn't cooperate. And what they could do to Marty, as if they hadn't already done enough. And of course they would be listening to our conversation, but I didn't give much of a damn. Now that Tera had made good her escape-or had she? I had a vague memory of seeing the lander pass overhead, jerking in flight like it was being pounded by an invisible sledge hammer but that only meant it had gotten off the ground. Maybe she had crashed. Maybe the part hadn't worked even if she sat the lander down again safely. But what then? Melofton couldn't get in but he could sure as hell starve them out if the lander couldn't fly again. I decided to pretend that they had made good their escape and see what Melofton's bully boys would reveal. At least that would keep me from worrying about Mona.

"Are you okay, Mike? You still look a little peaked."

I wiped my mouth. "Have you looked in a mirror lately? You were ugly before, but our own mother wouldn't recognize you now."

"You should see the other guy. Seriously Mike, what in hell is going on? I've been here a week. They said they were from Homeland Security and got me into a car by pretending I knew some terrorist they had picked up. Then they pulled guns on me, handcuffed my ass and brought me here, wherever here is."

"Ft. Chaffee in Arkansas, the part of it that was closed down years ago. And they aren't Homeland Security. They're a military unit, operating in the dark, I think."

"So what did you do? Start a fucking war? First they drew enough blood from me to fill a gallon bucket, then started asking about you." Marty rubbed the bruised side of his face. "Crap, after a while I gave them your last address but they kept beating on me anyway. Then they knocked me out with drugs two days in a row I think. I guess they finally decided I really didn't know any more about where you were than your last address because the beatings stopped."

"I'm glad," I said. "You were ugly enough to start with. What happened next?"

"Would you believe they started in on our family history? What was



that all about? Are they going to put us on trial because grandpa died before they caught him?"

Grandpa made a good brand of moonshine up in Missouri and had outwitted the revenuers all his life. I grinned remembering some of the wild escapades he got into and out of during a long and unsavory life. He always claimed he had fun, though.

"What are you grinning about, old man? This quit being funny about five seconds after they slapped the handcuffs on me." Martin is two years younger than me.

"Just thinking about Grandpa. He was a character, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but that's not why we're here, is it?"

"No, I told you, it's about aliens from outer space."

Mary sighed. He sat down on one of the two bunks in the cell. "All right, I'll bite. Tell me about it, but if you start out with little green men from Mars, I'm going to whap you a good one."

I used the other bunk as a seat and began telling my brother the story. I thought about holding back on the fact that I was infected with the *Tersha* but then decided not to; if they didn't already know for sure that I was infected they would find out soon anyway. I even toyed with the idea of asking Martin if he wanted me to try to inoculate him with a bit of my blood, then discarded the idea; he might not possess the right genes even if we were brothers. I told him everything except that Tera intended to wipe this whole area off the map if nothing else could be done. Sure as hell, if Meloftin found out, that would only cause him to disperse the Cincans and myself to other areas of the country, and probably into deep shelters, so that she couldn't get us all. He was obviously still under the delusion that hostages were the best way to pry the secret of star travel from the Cincans.

I even told Marty that Strongarm had discovered where the *Tersha* compatibility genes were located in the human genome. I figured it couldn't hurt, other than some federal prisoners with Cherokee blood in them would probably be sacrificed in the name of research. And I told him on the small chance that Tera wouldn't, or somehow couldn't, take action. If she didn't, then the government would start research on a way to insert the genes into humans so that the *Tersha* s couldn't harm them. Tera had told us that her people were doing the same thing in case it was loose on some other worlds they had explored and they just hadn't discovered the fact yet, and in hope of becoming able to safely explore other human inhabited planets.



However, she also told us that while they were way ahead of us in physical technology, they weren't much more than on a par with us in the biological sciences. With the *Tersha* in them all, there hadn't been a big impetus to study human anatomy and physiology.

Marty shook his head when I finished talking, then winced when it hurt. "If I didn't know better, I'd think we went out carousing together and wound up in jail after we got drunk and tackled a gang of Hells Angels."

"I wish to hell that's all that happened," I said. "No, I don't either, other than getting you mixed up in this mess. Otherwise I wouldn't have met Mona."

"Ah, you finally fell hard, huh?"

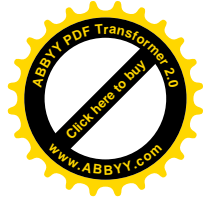
"Yeah, big time. I wish you could meet her." A sadness gathered inside of me at the thought of her.

"I wish I could, too," a voice said from outside the cell. "We've about used up those other long haired space girls."

I turned around. A tall thin man wearing army fatigues with a star on each shoulder was standing in front of the bars of our cell door. He was flanked by a pair of nondescript captains. I stared at the general, already knowing who it must be before I even read the name tag. Melofton looked the part. He had a slight mustache and thinning blondish hair but it was his eyes that got my attention. They were blue, but such a pale color that they looked lifeless, like a doll's eyes or those of a dead fish. His face showed absolutely no emotion and contained neither smile nor frown lines. He stared at me with his soulless eyes much like a snake must stare at a bird it has hypnotized. I knew I was looking at both a sociopath and a psychopath, a person who was unable to feel human emotions except under extreme conditions, like when he was observing pain and fear-or causing it. I shivered involuntarily.

"They didn't seem to enjoy sex very much," the general went on when I didn't respond to his first overture. "Perhaps it is their *Tershas* that interfere with it."

I could have told him different, but didn't. And Tera had never mentioned that her friends were being raped. It was probably such a repulsive, strange act to them that she couldn't bring herself to tell us about it-or perhaps her friends had concealed the knowledge. I was sure it had happened; the general probably derived a bit of emotion simply by remembering and telling me that it had occurred.



"That goes to show you aren't capable of enjoying sex yourself," I said.

He didn't react at all other to continue staring at me with those dead baby doll eyes.

"How did you survive their *Tershas* ?" Melofton asked me. He pronounced the word as if it were somehow separated from the rest of the sentence.

"Weren't your thugs listening when I told Marty about it just now?"

The general snapped his fingers and one of the captains hurried away, no doubt to chew out an enlisted man for not immediately calling his superior when we began talking. "Tell me," he said.

I did, then added a tag line. "And you don't have the genes, you sadistic bastard. If it gets loose, you die." I don't know why I was taunting him. Maybe I was simply taking out my frustration and anger and sense of loss on the man responsible. I probably shouldn't have done it, though perhaps it wouldn't have made a difference. Insults didn't bother him anyway. He lived in a world completely beyond the comprehension of normal humans.

Calling him a sadistic bastard affected him not at all. He merely nodded. "But you and your friend Colonel Shell have the genes. As well as many Indians, it seems. I always did think we should have exterminated them completely."

Was Jim alive? I didn't remember seeing him make it to the lander but that's what the general appeared to be saying. Carefully, not letting him notice how much I wanted it to be true, I said "Colonel Shell and I go back a long ways."

"Ah, yes. And it will be a pleasure dealing with him again. He caused some discomfort to my career at one time. I'll be sure to remind him of that. In the meantime, you're first." He turned to the remaining captain. "See that he's brought to the interrogation room in an hour." He turned on his heel and left. That's one of the tools people like him use, forcing prisoners to anticipate impending torture.

But apparently Jim had made it. I must have lost some of my memories of the battle because to this day, I don't remember it.

"Motherfucker," Marty said. "That bastard sat in a chair and watched while his thugs beat on me. It's the only time I ever saw him smile.



How in hell did a work of art like that ever get to be a general?"

"His twin brother is head of the Senate Armed Services Committee."

"No wonder." Marty suddenly peered intensely at me. "You know, what you told me about the *Tersha* bug just sank in. You look younger than me now, you bastard."

"Fat lot of good it's going to do me," I said.

"Yeah. I guess there's no way out of this, huh?"

"Not that I know of brother. The only good thing I've heard so far is that Jim Shell survived our fight. I thought he had been killed there. Though come to think of it, he would probably be better off if he had been."

"Don't give up hope. I thought I was a dead man that time when I ejected and my parachute malfunctioned."

That was a war story worth repeating, but then Marty always had been shot through with shithouse luck. Maybe some of it would rub off on me and Jim. And keep him alive, too. I was glad I was keeping it secret that Tera was probably going to have to kill us, not only to protect the world but to spare my brother the knowledge of our impending deaths. While I was waiting to be taken away, I wondered how long Tera would put off the inevitable. A few days? A week? Two weeks? She had never said, but it couldn't be long. The more delay, the more chance of the *Tersha* mutating.

The time passed with desultory conversation between us, mostly just family talk, remembering old times and such. I think it was because neither of us expected to live. I know I didn't and I suspected Marty didn't either, despite his attitude. Then I found myself telling Marty about Mona and how much I loved her and missed her and how glad I was that at least she had gotten away. That led to him describing his latest girl friend who had moved out to his place. He owned some acreage outside of Dallas and was busily turning it into a menagerie, with horses, Great Pyrennes dogs, cats, goats, birds and no telling what else. Like me, he had never been satisfied with a woman and also like me, had been married and divorced twice.

"Too bad I can't introduce you to Tera," I said. "You'd really go for her, except that Jim got there first."

"Shucks, maybe she'll come down with a space armada and rescue us and fall in love with your handsome younger brother."



"You'd better comb the blood out of your hair and get those teeth fixed first or she'd run the other way."

"Uh oh," Marty said.

I had already heard the footsteps. They were coming for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I don't see much point in giving a blow by blow description of what happened next, so far as the torture goes. Questioning a bound prisoner with rubber hose and brass knuckles is much the same technique all over the world and has been for a long, long time. I was tied to a chair and slapped around a good deal before I was asked anything; I guess to show me how the rest of the session would go.

There were two men and a woman, none of them wearing insignia, who worked me over. The woman was overweight and had thin lips that never parted, either to smile or say a thing. The men could have been twins or brothers. Both were short and muscular and wore sneers as their normal expressions. The three didn't do any talking; that was left to General Melofton. He sat straddled across a straight backed chair with his chin propped on his hands and questioned me in a monotone that never changed.

I repeated everything I had told my brother and filled in details I had overlooked while talking to him. Melofton started with the Cincan who had been taken to the emergency room and made me begin to go over everything I had done since, interspersed by short interludes with the hose and the brass knuckles when I gave what he considered unsatisfactory answers. I don't really know what they were after at that stage of the questioning. Maybe they thought I knew of some other aliens or other normal humans who had been infected and lived. They never told me and I didn't ask; I just tried to get through the beatings without giving away the one piece of information I was determined to keep to myself.

The *Tersha* helped me get through the worst of it. It blocked out pain past a certain level. I have no idea of the physiology behind the process; when the pain got really bad my mind would slip into a numbed state where I knew what was happening but didn't much care. It made me feel all the worse for knowing that Marty had had no such protection; he had to suffer through it and bear the pain afterward too, because he had no *Tersha* in his body to initiate repairs



and start the healing process almost immediately. Three hours after they got started Melofton finally called it to a halt. He got up and strolled out without comment. I was taken back to the same cell and thrown inside like I was a piece of refuse.

Marty helped me to my feet and led me over to the sink. I managed to lift my arms up to my face to splash water in it by bending over. One of the sneers had varied the beating routine by twisting my arms up behind my back until I felt muscles tear.

When I told Marty about that part of it, he said I must be special; he hadn't warranted the arm twisting part.

"Be glad," I said, wincing as I tried to work more movement back into my shoulders.

"Yeah, I guess I am. They never took that long with me, either."

Later, well into the afternoon, a guard brought around a meal for us and a change of clothes for me, the standard orange jumpsuit popular in so many prisons, just like Marty was wearing. They didn't offer a bath, which is what I really wanted. I cleaned up as well as I could at the sink then discarded my bloody clothes and donned the jumpsuit before trying to eat.

"I've had only one bath since they brought me here," Marty said while trying to open his injured lips wide enough to take a bite of his hamburger. That, by the way, is what we were fed the whole time. Hamburgers and water twice a day and not very good hamburgers at that. I got sick of them.

*** * * ***

I had three days of physical mistreatment; beatings I should say, and that brought me up through the fight for the lander. I didn't mind so much telling about that part because I enjoyed remembering that I had managed to kill a few of the general's bullies and that Herb and the others had taken care of even more of them. I even had the gumption to laugh at the way Mona and Strongarm had gotten away from them, though it cost me a tooth. The next day they started with the drugs. That went on for two days, but the general wasn't present during those sessions. I guess without the pain he didn't find them interesting. He must have either listened to the recordings or a synopsis of them though, because the next day he came to see me in the cell again.

I was just telling Marty that he was looking much better when I heard that monotonic voice I had grown to hate with a passion ordinarily



reserved for rapists and suicide bombers. It came from beyond the bars, just like it had the first time I heard it and just in time to break in on our conversation like a rude guest interrupting someone about to say grace.

"Too bad his looks are improving. I doubt that he will look nearly that good later on today."

General Melofton had walked up silently to our cell.

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on," Marty said. "Anyone who would torture a helpless man sucks green donkey dicks."

For the first time I think words got to him. I do believe our general harbored bestiality impulses from the red color that crept up from his neck and brightened his face. He started to speak back to Marty then changed his mind. Instead, he turned to his usual attendants, the two captains, and said, "See that they're both ready two hours from now. We'll see what they have to say then."

"I wonder what the son of a bitch has planned for us now?" Marty said after they were gone.

"It doesn't matter. I've already told them everything I know," I said. Which wasn't true, of course, but I hoped whoever was listening would pass my words on to the general. Maybe it would make things go a little easier, though I had no great hopes that it would.

As it turned out, General Meloftin had a new trick up his sleeve. Or rather a new one for us. Hurting someone they love instead of the person being questioned was old back when the Romans were building their roads across Europe and probably goes all the way back to when our ancestors were still living in caves.

Both of us were strapped into chairs, then we waited another half hour before Melofton made his appearance, accompanied by the captain and the two squatty little sneers. It was me he spoke to first. "Mister Brandon, I believe that you've been holding back on something. A bit of information you think is crucial, perhaps?"

"I've told you everything I know," I said.

"Oh yes, so you say. But under drugs you're not quite so reticent. The psychologists who listened to the tapes think you were not quite truthful on a couple of occasions, especially when we asked about the purpose of those Cincans, the aliens."



"Why haven't you asked them, then?" I said.

"Oh we have. I think that their little organisms help them to resist a bit more than yours do. But then they've been infected all their lives and you've just acquired yours. Well, we'll see. You may begin, gentlemen."

I had to sit and stare with helpless horror while the two sneers used instruments and techniques on Martin that made him scream, then cry in great desperate sobs from the pain. When I tried to turn away or close my eyes, they threatened to blind him if I didn't watch. Marty begged me not to let them do that to him and I didn't, but I got so sick that I threw up all over my jump suit. Hitting at loved ones goes to the very heart of the territorial instinct in humans, the one that demands that you protect your family. It is even more of a trial when children or spouses are threatened, but my brother was the only family I had left and I loved him. If muscular strength could have broken my bonds I would have come out of the chair and tackled the general bare handed, but all I accomplished by straining was to pull so hard that the straps cut into the flesh of my arms and legs until they bled.

I don't know how long it went on. I was sick to the bottom of my soul and crying as hard as Marty was by the time it was over. They carried him back to the cell on a gurney while I had to be helped along, even though I hadn't been hurt, except inside where it didn't show. I have never felt such anguish, such helplessness in a situation I could change only by risking the lives of six billion people.

Once they had placed Marty on his bunk and gone off to whatever dungeon they lived in, I bent over him and placed my mouth close to his ear. "I do know something Marty, but I can't tell. All the people on the planet might die if I do." I hoped my words couldn't be picked up by the recorders in the room. I had spotted a couple but there were probably more.

Marty tried to say something but I couldn't understand him. I leaned in real close. "S'okay," he mumbled. "I'm faking part of it. I infected myself with your blood the day before they started on you with drugs."

Be goddamned. And I had been so beaten and doped that I hadn't noticed. Apparently like Strongarm, his reaction to the initial foray of the *Tersha* into his body had been milder than mine. I stood back up, feeling only marginally better. His new *Tersha* might help him stand the torture better, but he had just given the alien organism one more human that it might mutate from. Anyway, I expected this place to be wiped out any day now. I couldn't predict when because the one thing



I had never thought to ask Tera was how long it would take the lander to get back to the mother ship. As soon as it did, I expected her to come calling, and that would be the end of us.

I washed Marty's face then went over to the sink and cleaned up the jump suit as best I could. I sure wasn't expecting the bastards to bring me a new one.

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The next day was a repetition of the one before, except it went on longer and achieved a savagery that outdid anything either of us had gone through before. I doubt that Marty would have survived had it not been for him carrying the *Tersha* in his body now. They would notice soon enough when his wounds started healing abnormally, if they didn't kill him first. It was so bad that I screamed and screamed at them to stop, then screamed some more when they started in again after they saw I had nothing new to tell them. My throat was raw and Marty was unconscious by the time we were returned to our cell. This time there was someone else laying there and an old mattress had been thrown in for the odd man out to sleep on.

Jim looked worse than me and not much better than Marty. When he saw me he gave a feeble grin from where he was stretched out and managed to raise one thumb in a futile gesture of triumph. "I thought you were dead," he said.

"I thought you were, too. And I will be if this keeps on," I said. I was already wondering what I could find in the cell to kill myself with rather than watch Marty be tortured any more-and wondering if I had the guts to do it if I did find something. I didn't know if I could stand another day like today, much less whether Marty could.

"Hang tough," Jim said. "We can't tell what we don't know."

So he was playing the same game, trying to buy time and keep all the *Tersha* carriers in one area until Tera returned. Which reminded me to ask.

"Have you seen any of the Cincans?"

Jim moved his head back and forth on the bunk. "No. Our resident psychopath told me they were still here though, for what that's worth. Sorry Mike, I don't feel like talking any more right now. They worked me over pretty good."

Our hamburgers came a little later. I broke them into small bits and fed them piecemeal to Marty and Jim and helped them each drink



from the paper cups they furnished us. After that I lay down on my bunk and sank into despair. I couldn't think of a single thing to do other than what I was doing. I kept repeating to myself that come what may, I couldn't give out that one bit of information. There was simply too much at stake. I think that mantra helped keep me sane.

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Marty and Jim were feeling better by the next morning, courtesy of their *Tersha*s, though their faces looked like part of them had been used to make our hamburgers. That helped me to come out of my funk. I decided that I owed it to Marty and Jim both to try to stay alive as long as they were willing to keep going. Still, I felt my gore begin to rise as the time neared when they had come for us the last two days. Marty and Jim were both wearing expressions of helpless resignation, but neither of them was cowering away from the cell door either. I wished with all my might that I could prevent whatever they had planned for today. I figured it must be something special and different, what with Jim being moved into the cell. I even thought the special session was about to start when I heard a commotion begin way off in the distance.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

It must have been going on for a while but we simply didn't notice because of the thick cinder block walls of the building. At first we heard loud voices and crashing noises, then more voices and then the unmistakable sound of gunshots, not so far away now. We looked at each other with a mixture of hope and alarm, mostly alarm. I couldn't imagine how anyone, even Tera with the aid of the mother ship, could have formed a rescue party, not here. And anything else boded ill for us.

The bunks were bolted to the floor and hiding under them wouldn't help. All we could do was wait. Soon we heard running footsteps. General Melofton came hurrying down the hall between our cell and the empty ones across the way. Both his captains were with him.

They came to a halt in front of our cell, the captains bumping into the general in their hurry. Melofton pointed into our cell and said, "Kill them" in the same monotone he always used. When the captains pulled their automatic pistols from their holsters we all shrank away instinctively, as far back from the barred door as we could get, huddling into ourselves. Then they began shooting.

I felt a slug tear into my stomach and another almost yank my arm off



as I fell. I rolled over and with what I thought was my last act on earth, lifted my head to watch them kill me. Damned if I would give them the satisfaction of dying with my back turned.

Amazingly, both captains suddenly crumpled to the floor as a torrent of automatic rifle fire tore through them. The general was hit, too, but not killed. He was behind his toadies. He fell though, with a bullet in the thigh and another one that shattered his kneecap. I hoped it hurt like hell. I guess it did because he started screaming.

I didn't feel any pain from my wounds at once and was able to look to see if Marty and Jim were alive. They were, though wounded. Marty had been hit in the shoulder and Jim in the side. Bullets had gone through both of their arms as they instinctively tried to shield themselves. As I tried to grin at them, a squad of marines in battle dress gathered around the cell. The sergeant told most of them to keep going and clear the building then called loudly for a medic. Even as he was doing that, one of the corporals was fixing a wad of explosive to the lock, reaching inside to mold it so that fragments would blow out into the hall instead of in toward us. I reached painfully for the mattress and dragged it forward. Jim helped me raise it up in front of our prone bodies.

"Cover!" The corporal yelled and they ran back to a safe distance while the fuse burned.

The explosion was extremely loud. It shattered the lock and blew the door open. Seconds later a navy corpsman was inside giving us emergency first aid. He wore a phone over one ear. I could hear him calling for backup and stretcher bearers. And a few minutes after that a marine three star general strode into our cell, trailed by another corpsman. The general had such a commanding presence you could almost see firebolts shooting from his body. He kicked General Melofton in the face and told him to shut up as he passed his prone body. Whoever he was, he was on our side. My wounds were beginning to hurt but I grinned when I saw that.

"Friedman! Where's Sergeant Major Friedman?" He demanded, looking down at us while the medics worked.

My grin faded. "He's dead, sir. I'm sorry."

"Someone else is going to be sorrier," he seethed." He started to walk away and leave us with the medics.

"General!" I called, then coughed up spittle flecked with blood.



The urgency in my voice stopped him. "What is it?"

"Keep all the prisoners close together, sir. And don't move them any farther than you have to."

"Does this have to do with something about spaceships and star travel?"

"Yes sir. Trust me, it's important." I coughed up more blood.

"That's what Sergeant Major Friedman said in the letter he left for me. Is it all true?"

"Yes, it is." I winced at something the corpsman was doing.

"All right, we'll talk later. Right now I want to finish cleaning out this house of horrors." He left with the same imperious strides as he had entered. I closed my eyes in blessed relief. Herb had taken care of us even from the grave.

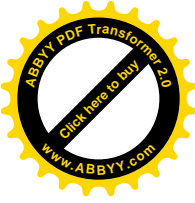
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All three of us, as well as two of the Cincans, went to surgery for treatment, but in two days we were back on a ward, all together. I was wearing a cast on one arm. Marty and Jim's arms were both bandaged but they didn't have casts on; apparently no bones had been broken. All of us were stitched and bandaged in other places where we had been shot but our *Tersha* s made for a speedy recovery.

I was at last able to meet Tera's Cincan friends-the ones who had survived Melofton's attempt to kill all witnesses. His men had killed two of them. Felinti and the others all looked remarkably like Tera, with the dark tan skin and high cheekbones and the long hair worn by both sexes. The doctors were astounded at our quickness with which our wounds healed, especially as we had demanded that no lab tests be done on us; I didn't want our blood spread around and maybe infect someone else accidentally. Too much of our blood was already spattered around the torture room and in our former cell.

The doctors had wanted to cross match some blood and have it ready but I insisted that they use O negative without matching it for compatibility if any of us had to have transfusions. After a hell of an argument, word came down from the general to do as they were told. Grumbling, the doctors had complied.

The best thing about the rescue operation was that one of the Cincans, the one Tera had called Felinti, was still wearing her PDA and would be able to communicate with Tera when the lander or the



mothership came back in range. That alone gave us some room for hope.

The third day after our surgeries, the marine general reappeared and we were finally able to learn who he was and the full story behind our rescue, even though we had already heard him say something about a letter from Herb.

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General Charles Smithers presented a much milder personality when he wasn't in action. He entered the ward with a lieutenant and a sergeant, his aides, and an air force colonel by the name of Ward Moore. The aide was pushing a cart loaded with coffee and several different kinds of liquor. The general went around to each one of us, introduced himself and his aides, then waited while we were given our choice of drinks or coffee. Most of us took the coffee. I wanted to add a little brandy to mine, but decided not to. Even with the *Tersha*, being shot in the stomach isn't easy on the body. I was still sore and eating only liquids, and spooning them up left handed at that. The bullet I had taken in the other one had broken the humerus, the big bone in the upper arm.

Once we were settled, General Smithers began talking.

"First of all, I want to apologize to all of you on behalf of the army and the United States of America. What was done to you goes against every moral and legal code we live by. General Melofton managed to use political influence to get into a position of authority where he should never have been. Indeed, he should never have been in the army in the first place. Unfortunately, we still have no way to detect these types of individuals in advance. It is only in retrospect that we can identify them, and even more unfortunately, it is usually as a result of occurrences such as happened at this facility. I want to assure you, he will be prosecuted to the full extent that Army regulations allow and I hope that he will be executed. At the very least, he will spend the rest of his life in prison."

He paused for a moment and must have seen the expressions of disbelief on mine and Jim's faces. Senators have a way of making things happen in the military the way they want them to, particularly powerful senators.

He grinned crookedly. "Don't worry. I know who Melofton's brother is, but I have a few connections myself. I've already spoken to the president about him." After that he continued.

"I've listened to summations of all the recordings. They coincide



pretty well with the information Sergeant Major Friedman sent me, so I think I pretty well know the whole story here. By the way, you are all being recommended for decorations and Sergeant Major Friedman will get the Medal of Honor if I have anything to do with it."

His eyes watered for a moment then he went on. "Colonel Moore will be talking to some of you in more detail later, but for now let's just stick with the basics."

General Smithers went on to summarize all the salient points. He had a wonderful way of condensing loads of information into a few concise sentences that still conveyed the essentials.

"To wrap it up, your mission to recapture the lander was a success despite the deaths of some brave men. And since it made it off earth, I expect we'll be getting a visit from the main Cincan spaceship in the near future. Is that right?" He directed the last sentence at Felinti, the spokesperson for the Cincans.

Felinti caught the eye of the other Cincans before answering, which made me suspect that they had already talked to Tera about the kind of action she had mentioned only to Jim and I of the others in the room. "General Smithers, I haven't heard from Tera or anyone in the lander since it left earth and got out of range. I think we can anticipate that they will return shortly, within the next week I should say. And I—this is very hard to say—I want to trust you, but I must tell you that they may not communicate at all."

"Why not? The president has told me that you will all to be able to return to your spacecraft if that's what you want, though I would hope that at least a couple of you will remain here on earth and negotiate a cordial relationship with us."

I still hadn't said anything about what Tera might do-probably would do, and it didn't look as if Felinti wanted to say anything, either. Nor had I told Marty. Now I was in a quandary. Should I or shouldn't I? Finally I decided to let it out. We all owed our freedom and probably our lives to General Smithers and his marines. I spoke after getting his attention.

"General Smithers, it's not as simple as that. The one thing you don't know yet is that the *Tersha* organism we carry is indigenous only to the Cincan planet. It isn't normally present on the other human inhabited worlds they've found."

"Yes, I know that, and I've been told that only humans with a certain genetic heritage are able to assimilate it into their bodies. So what is



the problem?"

Felinti decided to come clean. "General, we've just begun exploration of other worlds, as you've been told. What you haven't been told is that on two worlds where we established a base, the *Tersha* mutated. It killed every human being on one planet and is out of control and rapidly depopulating another. We can't stay here. For all I know it may already be too late."

"Then why shouldn't your lander communicate with you? Or come back for you for that matter? I will personally guarantee its safety."

"Because they may decide to simply wipe out this section of Arkansas and every person in it carrying the *Tersha* ," I said.

"I'm sending messages constantly, hoping I can stave off any action now that we're free," Felinti added.

"But you can't be certain they will believe you, is that it?"

She nodded. "Yes, general. That's the problem all right. Knowing how we've been treated so far, Tera and the others may decide that we have been forced in some way to tell them that we've been rescued and can be safely taken off earth. They can't and won't be certain it is the truth though. In that case, they may communicate with me, but it would only be at the last moment, and only to say farewell."

"And that's why you all insisted on staying in this area, even our people. You'd rather die by the Cincans own hand rather than risk the population of earth. Right?"

I saw Marty looking my way, understanding at last why I had let him be tortured unmercifully rather than give out that information. I answered, "That's right, sir. Better us than everyone else on the planet. Or almost everyone."

General Smithers shook his head, disgusted to the bone over what Melofton's psychopathic aspirations had led us to. Finally he stood up. "I guess there's really nothing else to do except wait then. Felinti, I'll see that you have a phone line with direct access to me. And we have comfortable rooms ready for all of you who are well enough to leave the ward. Speak to Sergeant Murfro about arrangements for any of you who want to share quarters."

He started to leave, but Marty stopped him. "General, there is one other thing you can do."



"What is it?"

"Can you get us some clothes so we can get out of these hospital johnnies? I hate going around with my bare ass hanging out."

He laughed. "We can certainly do that much. Tell Sergeant Murfro what you want."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

As the general said, there wasn't much else to do after that, but wait with the specter of death hanging over us all.

To begin with, Marty and I shared a room, but that changed after two days when he moved in with Felinti. If she were grieving over her former partner, whom she had mentioned as being one of the ones who had been killed, she didn't show it. I suspected their culture was able to move on from the death of someone close much easier than we do, but wasn't sure by any means. None of us knew much about that sort of thing yet. Marty did ask me if the sex was as good with Mona as apparently it was with them. I assured him that it was. He seemed to have already forgotten about the girl friend back on his spread near Dallas. He might as well have, because it suddenly sank that he and Jim and I would all have to leave earth if Tera consented to bring the lander down and take her friends off. There would be no point in taking them without us. I told Marty about it the first time he wasn't off with Felinti.

"I guess I knew, but it hadn't really registered yet. Be damned. All that crazy science fiction stuff you've read all your life might come true after all."

"Might? It already has," I said.

"You're certainly right there, but it still doesn't seem like it, what with the Cincans looking just like us."

"Uh huh. And isn't that going to raise some hackles if it ever gets out?"

"Yeah. Say, no one has told me yet. How young will this *Tersha* bug make us, anyway?"

"Two years younger than me," I said.



He raised a mock fist. "Right in the kisser. How young?"

"The better side of middle aged, so Tera told me. Tentatively that is. No way to say for sure until it happens. Hell, I don't even know if we're the same species or not. Strongarm was concentrating so hard on identifying the *Tersha* compatibility genes that I don't think he ever got around to comparing genomes. General Smithers probably has the information, if Melofton didn't destroy the research notes."

"Who the hell is Strongarm?"

I told him he was a geneticist and didn't mention his eccentricities. Let him find out himself. That would be fun to watch, if they ever got to meet.

Marty kept up as well as a layman can in the technology sector, but his interests were different from mine. He liked flying and computers where I tended to Space and the biosciences. "Anyway, why worry about how long you're going to live? You've been on borrowed time ever since you went over that cliff on a motorcycle," I said.

He grinned sheepishly and then I found out what his real concern was. "You know, I had pretty much given up the idea of ever having a family, but Felinti hasn't."

"Has she asked you?"

"No, it just came up as a sidebar. She mentioned that when she gets back from this trip, if she does, she wants to have a child."

We left it at that and went on to other subjects.

Time began to drag terribly. I found myself losing interest in most things, as did Jim. Neither of us had anyone to distract us like Marty did. I spent a lot of time just thinking about Mona and remembering how happy I had been to be with her. Despite all the difficulties, I couldn't think of another period of my life when I had been so contented.

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Each of the rooms had a phone in it. Mine rang one night almost a week later. It was Sergeant Murfro.

"Sir, General Smithers has requested that you come to the lounge as soon as possible."

"I'll be there quick as I can get dressed," I told him. This had to be the



communication we had been hoping for and dreading, depending on what it entailed. I drew on my jeans and shirt and shrugged into my jean jacket, feeling the weight of the forty in the pocket. I had requested that it be returned to me if it had been policed up at the battlefield and sure enough, it had been. It was as comforting as the presence of an old friend you knew you could count on standing beside you, even though there was no real reason to carry it here.

We had moved to an adjoining building, previously the administrative quarters for support personnel. It had been appropriated as an isolation home for we three humans and the Cincans. The spacious lobby had been turned into a lounge for us. Almost everyone else was already there, seated in loungers and chairs around the room. The television was off and the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted into my nostrils. I headed for the smell, found the source and poured myself a cup. I looked around and found Marty and Felinti seated together on a big lounge, with the general sitting opposite them looking as alert as he always did despite it being the middle of the night. A recorder had been set up and Sergeant Murfro was also taking notes whenever Felinti or the General said anything.

I slid in beside Marty and sipped at my coffee, wanting to get myself well awake. If this was to be our death knell I wanted to face it with a clear mind.

"Yes, I trust him," Felinti said, with a direct glance at General Smithers, then went on talking to the air if you only went by her appearance, but I knew she had to be talking to someone on the lander. Thoughts of Mona popped into my mind like a brightly lit Christmas ornament. I wondered if I could pass her a message-or if she would leave one for me.

General Smithers took the cue from her spoken words. "Tell them I've been in daily communication with the president of our country. He assures me that you can land and pick up your people and leave again with no hindrance. Not only that, we will protect your craft from interference from any other country should that be necessary, although we know of no other government that is aware of you."

Felinti subvocalized the general's message without an overt sign that she was even conversing with anyone else. It was how she and the other Cincans had communicated without Melofton's knowledge.

We waited while Felinti listened and, I assume, talked with her fellows because it was a long time before she spoke to any of us again. When she did she turned to me and smiled sweetly. "Mona sends her love." To the general, she said "Tera is discussing the matter with



the others. It may take a while. You must remember what is at chance here. We are suffering terrible remorse for having inadvertently infected at least two planets and perhaps others. Millions of humans have died because of our mistake. Millions more might die here if we trust your government and we turn elsewhere to be wrong."

"Turn out to be," I said, smiling. The Cincans almost certainly had a more precise language than ours, simply because of the way they occasionally used English phrases incorrectly or in odd ways. Sometimes it was humorous, even if I didn't feel like laughing right then.

"Turn out to be wrong," Felinti repeated, setting the correct wording in her mind, or perhaps into her PDA. Maybe both.

Smithers nodded. "I understand. In fact, I don't envy the ones who have to make the decision. For the life of me, I don't know what I would decide were I on the opposite side of the fence."

Again, there was nothing to do but wait. General Smithers seemed content to sit here in the lounge for as long as it took for the Cincans to make up their minds. No one else left either.

Eventually, I chanced a shot of brandy in a large mug of coffee, letting Sergeant Murfro fetch it for me. I still wasn't moving around so good. The general saw what I had done and smiled at me, then followed suit. An hour or so later, Smithers tapped Felinti on the knee. "Ask if they could give us fifteen minutes in case the decision goes against us in order to let those who need to do so make peace with themselves or their God."

After a moment, Felinti nodded. "They will do that much at least."

More waiting. To kill time I asked the general how he and Sergeant Major Friedman had met. He was willing to talk about it and did so.

"Herb Friedman was a child prodigy in college, but dropped out at seventeen when a war came along. He wound up staying in for over thirty years. He and I met in one of the gulf wars when the marines and army were conducting a joint sweep. He bucked my authority and put his ass on the line to keep me from making a terrible error that would probably have gotten a lot of good men killed. After that I consulted with him frequently, even when our units weren't near each other, or even in the same country. He was one of the sharpest troopers ever to wear a military uniform."

He went on to tell us some stories of operations he had been on and



some that Herb had been instrumental in the success of. I got the notion that there was more that he couldn't speak of because of security concerns. He had tears in his eyes when he finished and wiped at them unashamedly. He asked the Cincans some penetrating questions about how their society worked, but not from a military standpoint. He was genuinely interested in other ways of doing things. I sensed that he was one of those types of men or women who were able to change perceptions when evidence came along to warrant it. You find that more in the hard sciences than anywhere else but true open mindedness is rare anywhere.

Marty told a few of his humorous war stories and got us to laughing, though I think the Cincans completely missed the point of them a couple of times, particularly the story of how he led a prominent politician doing an inspection during peacetime into an unsavory bar, got him drunk, then called his wife to come pick him up. The Cincans couldn't quite understand why the wife was upset, nor why the journalist Marty had given advance knowledge of his caper to had a good story to print.

At daylight we were still telling stories. It was as good a way as any to pass the time while you wait to learn whether you will live or die. Most of the time I didn't even think about it, and I don't believe the others did either.

Sergeant Murfro began taking orders for breakfast. I yawned, thinking that after eating I would go back and get some rest if we hadn't heard anything by then. Trump of doom or no, I was sleepy.

The food was being brought in on a big cart when Felinti's face suddenly broke into a huge grin. She hugged Marty, then kissed him for good measure. Any of us who were looking at her had to know that the decision had gone our way. The rest of it was just a matter of negotiating terms of the pickup and some other matters that I hadn't thought of but General Smithers had. All of his time hadn't been spent telling stories or listening to them. Some of his gray matter had been occupied with thinking.

*** * * ***

I was as excited as a five year old waiting out the day before Christmas and I think the rest of us were, too. If we humans hadn't had to start thinking about what to pack to carry with us (and that required more consultation with the mothership), I don't think we could have stood it, particularly Marty and I. Jim stayed more subdued, but that was just his nature-and he didn't have anyone close like Marty and I had.

He wouldn't have passed up a chance to visit another world for anything, even knowing he could probably never return. As it turned



out though, he didn't go after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I didn't know it then, but while Marty and I were occupied with getting our gear together, General Smithers was busy negotiating an agreement to let Jim stay behind and for Strongarm to return. They would be transported to the Center For Disease Control in Atlanta and held there, under the most stringent isolation possible, so that the scientists on earth could add their expertise to that of the Cincans in their attempt to find a genetic therapy technique that would enable humans here and elsewhere to become able to accept the *Tersha* without it killing them. Jim and Strongarm would not only do research but they would provide *Tersha* samples from their bodies for experimentation and would provide their genomes serve as templates to compare to others. I supposed they would have to use federal prisoners under death sentences as experimental subjects eventually, but who wouldn't volunteer in place of a pending lethal injection?

It was a huge gamble, but the potential benefits were so great that it was finally allowed. Just think what some of the genius level minds like Einstein, Hawkings, Mandel, Darwin and the like could have achieved if they had been given even fifty more years of healthy life? Jim and Strongarm were risking effective imprisonment for the rest of their lives (which might be very long ones now) but both of them were willing. They had confidence in their abilities; I'll say that for them.

When I asked Jim about his relationship with Tera, he said he didn't know, but that he had asked Felinti to pass on a message for him. I left it at that.

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The lander came in stealthed of course, so that there was no radar signature. The replacement part had worked perfectly. It landed on an old unused runway partially covered with drifts of dirt and tufts of grass poking through cracks in the tarmac. Three humvees trundled us and our luggage out to the lander. I expected that only the pilots would have come in case of treachery, and so they had. But they carried one extra person. As soon as I stepped through the entrance Mona was there, shedding tears of joy and happiness to match my own.

When we finally got ourselves untangled and could look at something besides each other, I saw through the open entrance that Tera had



also disembarked and she and Felinti had their heads close together, speaking in voices so low that only the movement of their lips told me they were talking at all. Finally Tera separated herself and came over to me.

"I wanted to say goodbye before you left and to thank you again for what you did."

I was stunned. "Goodbye? Aren't you going back with the others?"

"No, I've decided to stay here and go into isolation with Jim. Surely, with both our worlds working on the problem we can find a way to safely pass the *Tersha* on to others. And if not, another ship will be back here eventually. We can both leave then."

I hugged her. "Let's not say goodbye then, but just so long."

"Yes, so long. Speed with God."

No one corrected her English that time.

* * * *

The lander needed to make a couple of orbits before catching up with the mother ship. It had come in from the asteroid belt, ready to sterilize the whole fort if any attempt was made to hinder the lander. None was, of course and Marty and I were allowed to leave our seats and look down on earth, possibly for the last time. It hung there, seen through a flawless observation window like a blue and white and brown colored bauble. It was beautiful and lonely, suspended against a backdrop of stars that shone with hard, pinpoint brilliance. It was a breathtaking sight, and I'm glad they let us look. I hoped that one day we could return, but if not-well, there was a new world waiting. And if that didn't satisfy, there is a whole universe out there to be explored. There were unanswered questions still hanging in the air, like why are there humans on so many worlds? Who put them there and why? Why is Cinca the only world found so far that harbors the *Tersha* -and where did it come from?

Maybe we would never find the answers, but it would be fun trying and with Mona, I would be content no matter what might be waiting out there.

THE END



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