

And the kids they dance and shake their bones

And the politicians throwin' stones

Singing ashes, ashes all fall down,

Ashes, ashes all fall down

From the Song "Throwin' Stones"

By the Grateful Dead

1982

Prologue

Under the Nevada desert I imagine there are a number of huge caves. These caves are not natural. They were created by the underground detonations of hundreds of nuclear devices, devices that pack thousands of times more punch than the little bombs ever used on people.

I think these caves must be the size of a football stadium, or larger. They must glow weirdly, like those strange fish that produce their own light, the kind you see on the Discovery Channel. That's what I think, at least. I don't know for sure.

The water table in the desert is very low, 400 feet below the surface. In most places, the water table is maybe a dozen feet below the ground. Not here. In this desert, you must dig down a long way until you hit the aquifer, a layer of earth -- rock, actually -- that is saturated with water. The military's own studies say that the aquifer is unaffected by the detonations of the bombs. I can see how they came to this conclusion. The environmental impact studies must have assumed that each cave would be glass, thick bubbly glass, fused together when the heat and the force of the explosion melted the sand. Like a bowl that keeps water in, these glass caves must keep water out, so that the radiation inside never infects the aquifer. At least, that's what I think they said.

These caves will never hear the drip-drip of water, like inside the other caves around the world. If a bug reaches some crevice or crack, and tries to establish itself, it will die very quickly, burned by the radiation. Except maybe a cockroach. That's what they say.

Ironically, these caves would be ideal as bomb shelters, if not for the deteriorating molecules that poison them for us. Perhaps someday, an earthquake will shake the desert hard enough and maybe these glass balls will break. Or maybe they will float through the earth to the surface, shaken loose like big jelly beans in a jar full of M&Ms. By then, we may not care, or it

may be hundreds of thousands of years in the future, when the molecules have tired of splitting and we don't have to worry about it anymore.

We used to talk about this stuff endlessly, talking talking talking about how to make things different, what we could do. And finally we did. We changed the world. After all that happened, all I want to do is stop talking and crawl into a hole somewhere. Maybe into a cave floating endlessly under the Nevada desert.

Chapter 1 – The Freeway

On those rare days when the Harbor Freeway is clear, it pours straight and true across the Los Angeles Basin from the Angeles National Forest to the Pacific Ocean. It is a straight gray expanse, and you power your way down it in a machine that costs more than most Los Angeles residents make in a year. You whoosh past light standards, and past the ever-so-cliche L.A. palm trees, ridiculous with their little tufts of fronds perching on top.

Most days, the Freeway is not clear, and you hiccup along like a blood clot, stopping and starting and stopping again, jerking along as you peruse the Freeway offal decorating the center divider. Usually, you see pieces of wood and strips of rubber torn from tires that survived long past their useful life. You see chunks of metal and broken glass from a fender-bender. Sometimes you'll see a child's doll, and wonder how it got there. And sometimes you may see something more ominous, like a cash box with its lid ripped off.

The Freeway flows on, slower and faster, and you drift with it, dodging the pigeons that swoop down from the eaves of the underpass, marveling at the sparrows that dive bomb the cars in a bizarre game of chicken. A few years ago, the government wanted to build another freeway to merge with the Harbor Freeway. At one point, the junction rose to a height of 300 feet above the

traffic where it ended, remaining unfinished for years, a testament to the deliberateness of public works. It was a cliff, asking to be photographed and remembered. It was a blood-thirsty god of suicide calling its victims. “Jump,” it said. “Drive and fly,” it said. Some did, it is said. Others merely dreamed of the future it offered: something faster than a crawl.

Underneath the unfinished cliff, the Freeway rolled on, from the hills to the ocean, past Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine, where the city fathers condemned the homes of the poor to make way for Brooklyn-style baseball. Now the city fathers and mothers (our municipal parents) consume themselves with one scandal after another, seemingly trying to outdo their forebears. But they are hard-pressed to beat the Chinatown of Mulholland and the water wars. But they try. They continue to make millions and billions of dollars by building high schools on toxic waste dumps and they get the water for the suburbs by draining aquifers in the desert, and deal with the waste by recycling sewage, and dumping the leftovers – the sanitary-sounding “bio-solids” -- in Kern County, a cash-strapped county to the north. Our city parents roll into downtown every morning on the Freeway, into downtown with its towering office buildings that wait for the earthquake we all know is coming. If the earthquake comes in the early hours before dawn, then the windows will pop out of the office buildings like a deck of cards flung into the air, wafting down in silence to crash onto the sidewalks below. If the earthquake comes at lunchtime, then each sheet of glass will be a guillotine, falling amidst screaming people destined for dismemberment.

The freeway starts in Pasadena, recently named one of the most liveable cities in the west. So elegant. So civilized. So far removed from the reality grinding away daily only fifteen miles away. Fifteen miles as the crow flies. The crow is unwanted on the manicured lawns of Pasadena, where there are flocks of wild parakeets chattering in the trees, refugees from bedroom windows all over Los Angeles. You need to get home, and don't want to stop on the gray sidewalks of the

blighted part of L.A. You have no desire to see the treeless streets or the trash washing up against the gutters, pushed there by the wind of passing cars. Safe in your vehicle, windows up, air conditioning on, you turn up the radio.

At night, the Freeway is almost pretty, with garlands of lights adorning the edges and the Christmas tree effect of the sparkling head-and-tail lights twinkling through the dust on your windshield. But if your car breaks down or you run out of gas, most people choose to limp to the side of the freeway and wait interminably for help. The alternative is to descend into that gray area that surrounds the Freeway.

It's not that I don't like living here. It's better than a lot of other places. It's just that I have seen what can go wrong when things go badly. And I can't get certain things out of my head. I can't un-see what I have seen.

Chapter 2 – The Bomb

The General was dreaming of Alexander the Great. He could smell roast lamb and saw Alexander eating. He even felt the canvas of the tent as he pushed it aside to speak with the great conqueror. Odd, thought the General. There was an American flag pin on Alexander's tunic.

"General . . . please come in."

The buttons of the general's coat sparkled in the flickering lamplight. His boots, though highly polished, were dusted with the luster of sand from the camp. Deeply lined, his face wore the mask of years at the Pentagon. He was old, he was wise, he was responsible.

The General tried to have a conversation with Alexander, but the words were confused, as words often are in dreams. Alexander smiled and responded to something the General said: "You must create a greater weapon."

The General tried to reply but the dream was fading. He struggled to hold onto it. "There can be no 'greater weapon.' We can destroy the entire planet. They'll be no one left alive."

"What, then, would be left to conquer?" Alexander speared a piece of lamb and dropped it in his mouth. "What's the fun in that?"

A cricket trilled, the bed creaked and the General found himself returning to a darkened room, cold from an over-active air conditioner. For a moment he wondered why the smell of lamb was gone. Then he got up, flicked on a light and reached for his glasses. The general -- Marc Anthony Rhodes -- lived alone. He had been trained from birth to be a soldier, and a soldier he was, to the core. Terrorists were cowards. If you're going to start a war, fight a war, fight it in the open. But the General was assigned to terrorist wars these days, and it was like swimming through Jello. He should retire.

He cherished his recurring dreams of Alexander, and without missing a beat, he continued his train of thought, interrupted by waking. Greater weapon? What the hell? Sometimes Alexander was obtuse. He reached for a cigarette and glanced at the time. The hum of the air conditioner provided all the background noise he would suffer to exist.

Everyone was afraid these days. Bombs in subways, in churches, in markets. Knife-wielding brain-washed idiots stabbing people at random. Fear was the hum of the air conditioner, fear was the rattle of the subway, fear was old news, fake news, fear was the child of the seemingly endless stream of crazies with access to the internet and some C4. What kind of a weapon could he yield that would not result in retaliation, but drive a population into submission?

A memory came back, unbidden. Many years before, the general was at an above-ground test in the Pacific. Before the blast, he toured the island, a lush and fecund paradise. The group then retreated to a ship far off-shore to witness the test. Even in the semi-dark of the bedroom, the

general flushed to remember what he did. As the cloud rose, forming the expected mushroom, his mouth dropped open, adrenalin surged into his system, and he stumbled backwards. He blamed the NCO behind him, but he knew this was his own lapse in courage. He had never seen anything so ominous, so awesome in his life. That day, the fear of the public became more understandable to him. He lay there, quiet, smoke floating upwards, the stillness of the room reflected in his glasses. He flipped back through pages of memories. He saw the American flag pin on Alexander's tunic. He saw veterans marching to a great brass band, hot dogs and picnics, fireworks and cold lemonade.

"Fireworks" he mumbled aloud. Everyone stopped to look at fireworks. You heard the boom, you watched. What if the fireworks were enough to seize up a population? Stop any opposition. You just move in the troops. What if fireworks were shaped like a mushroom cloud? It had stopped him, and he was no slouch. Stopped him cold. A mushroom cloud. Have to be big, believably big. But no radiation, no waiting before you could move in to take over the city. Troops just waltz in, take the place while everyone is panicking. Even the military. And it would drive the opposition crazy. . . how would they know if it's real or just fireworks? They wouldn't rely on their instruments. They'd be scared. Scared of the cloud. Scared of the end of the world. First strike, second strike. They'd be terrified. No resistance. Too confused to act.

He threw back the covers and headed for his shower. He was clean, dressed and out the door in ten minutes. It was 5 a.m.

* * *

"I'm certain it can be done."

Miles Davis was tall and lanky, a fluffy-haired scientist to whom all things were possible given time.

"What about noise . . . do you want this apparition to appear quietly?"

"Not necessarily."

"General, if you want fireworks, I'll give you one that is made out of a paper cone and can be lit by a sparkler."

Neither of the two men was smiling. They rarely did.

"That's good, Miles. I am assuming we can send it in with one or two of our people, in parts, construct it in place. Can it be made outside of a lab?"

"Probably. There might be risk of retaliation. The cloud will likely be seen by military."

Here, the general managed a semblance of a smile.

"I don't see that happening, not if they're like our people. The soldiers we have would only believe their instruments. They'd never think that a real nuke could go off in their territory without at least some warning, some sort of delivery ... dirty bomb is different. This would look like a nuclear first strike." He paused. "They'd expect a plane, a missile, something. If it came in by ground, there would be some sort of radiation warning. Some security breach that would show up on instruments. No, they'll give it just enough time to suit me -- I'd bet my life on it."

The general headed out of the door and down the corridor. Miles turned to his desk and punched the necessary buttons to bring "Fireworks, Manufacture of" up on the screen.

* * *

Funding the project was fairly simple. General Rhodes presented his idea in simple terms.

"It would be a very simple and cost-effective weapon. Set off in a large city, it would immediately cause massive panic. Half the population would go underground for safety, and the other half would flood the streets. It would immobilize any resistance. No one could move on the ground. You'd have to go in by air, and there would be no ground force that could stop you.

They'd be stuck in traffic. You control the key points of any major city in hours. All from the illusion of a nuclear attack. That's all it would take."

"Interesting. Might even be brilliant. But I'm going to have a hell of a time convincing anyone that we should use it. What about retaliatory nuclear strike?"

"I don't think that's a risk. The cloud will disperse relatively quickly, especially if we monitor wind conditions and time the strike accordingly. No one will be able to verify the 'rumor' of a nuclear strike. No instruments will back up the illusion. It's smoke and mirrors at its best."

The numbers man was taking too long to think. "C'mon Gil, I'm asking for money to make this -- that's all. Miles says he can do it with a minimum expenditure, but he wants funds for some sideline research -- I don't know who he's using these days. Someone out in L.A. The most important thing to remember is that it has to be kept secret. If anyone knows that such a weapon is possible, then the terror factor is gone. We won't be able to use it effectively."

The administrative head of research at the Pentagon paced from window to desk to door and back again. Head tucked to his chest, he could have been walking guard duty on a Minnesota winter night. Then he spoke.

"Okay, you got it. Unlimited funds under top classification." He smiled. "But don't abuse it. I already have enough headaches on that front. And I agree -- no one can know about this. You, me, Miles; we're the only ones with knowledge. I want him briefed on what he can and cannot say. And he can't say anything."

"Knowing Miles, he'll know how to work with his people on the coast without violating that."

The administrator finally stopped pacing, looked up and said, "I want regular reports on this, Marc. Orally, only. No paper on it, not anywhere. God knows, no emails. If Miles uses his

computer – obviously he has to.... He can use a closed system. He can do that, right? If this gets out, or worse – gets hacked – they’ll be hell to pay. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"And Marc . . . if this is successful. Well I don’t know. This is one hell of an idea." There was a pause.

"What? What are you thinking?"

"What happens after the first one is used? Can it be used again? Are there consequences we haven’t considered?"

The General grimaced. "Always are. But we have plenty of time to think about this. Let’s make it first, then figure out the ramifications."

A few final comments were exchanged, but it was done. The General did not smile until the elevator doors closed in front of him.

Chapter 3 – Reno

Flying into Reno is much like flying into Los Angeles. It’s the lights that define the city. Like Los Angeles, Reno is set in a basin, flat with a pall of smog hanging over it. Neighborhoods stretch for miles around the core, a brilliant neon center, punctuated with a few high rises. In Los Angeles, those tall buildings house lawyers and accountants, banks and insurance companies. In Reno, the tallest buildings are hotels and casinos.

As you move away from the center of the city, you move into old sections of the city, with old cars parked on the street, kids on bikes, and big trees with rope swings hanging down. Logs were dutifully split and stacked at the side of each house every fall, at the time the aspens were

turning. In just such a neighborhood, on just such a street, was a small house, prim and prissy. Inside that house lived a happy young couple, and this morning they were getting up late.

The bedroom was upstairs, really in the attic. The room was very small, and the pitch of the roof was steep. If they moved around too rapidly, the plaster would fall, showering them with touches of white. They lay in bed and talked.

“...I want to do something really important, something that makes a real difference. I feel like I’m only playing on the edges of something really big...” He stopped, looking very serious, a bit like a five-year old contemplating the death of a bug.

“I want to get involved in eco-terrorism.” His eyes lit up, but she wasn’t sure if he knew what he was saying. “Like spiking trees, but bigger. Something that will get people to sit up and take notice. Something that – “

” – something that makes me breakfast?” She sat up just enough so that she could wriggle out of bed without hitting her head on the ceiling, and leaned over to sift through the jeans, underwear and T-shirts on the floor for her own clothes.

With a whoosh of covers and plaster, he grabbed the pillow from under his head, threw it across the room and shouted, laughing, "It’s your turn! I made it yesterday... wait! And I made dinner last night.”

She smiled as she turned to slip down the steep stairs to the kitchen below. “Yes, but I did the dishes and that’s worth more points.”

Her name was Cassandra Smith. She had changed it from Esther Ann Blumenthal. She was smart; she was pretty. But not that pretty and she knew it. Cassandra had run through a steady stream of men since her fourteenth birthday. Some of them were pleasant. Others not so. At the

ripe old age of seventeen she married for the first time to a vicious brute who had no discernable personality. He beat her for smiling at other men. Then he beat her for smiling.

Esther knew, even at seventeen, that the marriage wouldn't last. But she was stuck at home and she knew she couldn't stay there any longer. So she left via marriage. One thing that amazed her still, ten years later, was that her mother signed the papers letting her go. She viewed her mother then as a jailer who would be loathe to give up her charge to a less punitive system. Fortunately for her mother, marriage was hardly less punitive. After she left, a year and a broken bone later, she knew it could never get worse. Living with that premise in mind, Esther changed her name, moved only to pretty places and worked enough to keep food in her mouth. A bed to sleep in never seemed to be too much of a problem.

Recently, she had hooked up with Duane, a charming twenty-something with a wide-eyed idealism that was refreshing. She told herself when she was alone that she liked him, and that it was nice to be out of the hustling world of single life. On the other hand, she spoke to friends of her adoration and awe, claiming he was “the one.” She really did not know which one it was, although she hoped that it was both. She knew she wanted to settle down, but she was skeptical of anything that promised peace.

Duane Saunders was light-hearted and lovable, with a seemingly endless stream of friends, all of whom were as idealistic, good-looking, charming and irresponsible as himself. Cassandra was amazed on how often their shoebox-sized living room was full of Duane's cohorts, eating, getting high, laughing, and arguing. They would sit for hours arguing about climate change, *Citizens United*, the Koreas, the 99%, facists, the banks, and – most often – what they would do when society collapsed under the weight of its own consumer-driven greed. Collectively, they

could not stand the thought of what was happening politically. How could people elect the type of folks that were in Washington? How could they allow corporations to run the country?

They ran food banks, and helped register voters. They circulated petitions to send aid to Africa and to pull U.S. troops out of whichever country they had been sent to this month. They believed. They believed in individual freedoms, and in women's rights, and in immigrants' rights, and in the innocence of political prisoners everywhere. They wanted to stop the death penalty, protect the disenfranchised, house the homeless, and stop racism, sexism, and ageism. They did not own their pets; they were the guardians of their companion animals. They wanted to make sure that if whales really were smarter than human beings, there would be some whales left when humans got smart enough to talk to them. Their desires, their hopes were legitimately based in the harsh reality of a society grown callous and careless. When they were in kindergarten and first grade, they were told that grades for "effort" were more important than grades received in math or science or reading or writing. And they carried forward that tenacious "trying" into their adult lives; they often failed to succeed. But they tried. And they cared. They would sit, passing a joint, lamenting the injustices the world had thrust upon them and others, and setting out solutions which they believed would work if they just had a chance to implement their plans.

And Duane was their leader, the one with the best ideas and the most enthusiasm. Cassandra just liked to watch. She was pretty sure he was dumb as a post, but she loved him anyway.

Together, Duane and Cassandra made a fine pair struggling to survive on the pay of a waitress and political activist. In a world of budget cuts, they spent most of their time in bed, each relying on the other's warmth for good, cheap entertainment. However, Cassandra, who had never

been involved in politics, often found herself talking of nuclear disarmament with semen dripping down her leg. She surprised herself by enjoying it.

Cassandra reached the kitchen and reached for the coffee grinder to throw in a fresh batch of beans for the morning brew.

"Duane, are you working today?"

A muffled groan came down the stairs. "I guess so."

The stairs creaked, as Duane appeared naked in the kitchen.

"Baby, I got to go to Las Vegas." The statement was flat, toneless.

She started to bristle. "Why? And why didn't you say something about this before now?"

"I couldn't! It's supposed to be top secret.... I was trying to tell you about it this morning. We're planning a protest at the nuclear test site, the Yucca Flat site. We figure if people are on the site, the government won't set off the nuke, 'cause it doesn't want to get hit with all the publicity of killing an activist."

The coffee made, Cassandra started to pull a bagel out of the refrigerator but stopped, bagel in one hand and knife in the other. "What do you mean, 'killing an activist'? Who's doing 'killing' stuff?"

"No! Really!" He waved his hands in front of her. "No 'killing.' We are going to stop the test by being there.... just being there. I am not going to be in any danger..." He sidled between the bagel and the knife and put his arm around her waist. "You're worried about me, huh? You must really like me."

She scowled. "How long are you going to be gone?"

"Probably no more than a week. Maybe more. Depends on whether or not we get arrested. And we want to get arrested."

A small smile twisted the corner of her mouth. "I want to come."

His other arm circled her waist, his tongue lapped her ear and he said, "I bet you do."

"No," she said, bagel and knife still in hand. "I really do." With an earnest sincerity she could turn on like a faucet, Cassandra searchingly looked into his eyes and said, "I really do. I think it's important. And I want to be there for you."

Duane smiled, and softened, pleased that she cared so much. "I know you do, baby, but let's be practical -- "

"Since when?"

"Somebody has got to work around here." He let her go, and scratched his flank.

"You asshole."

With an exaggerated sigh and a resigned look, Cassandra turned around to finish her bagel-making. Duane trotted away from her, calling over his shoulder that he was going to get dressed. She noted that as he ran from her, nothing jiggled. That made her smile.

Chapter 4 – Las Vegas

In the city of Las Vegas, there was a small drug deal going down. Nothing big. Big wads of cash did not change hands. Just a couple hundred dollars between friends.

A beautiful blonde woman, short and petite, was buying a little cocaine from her dealer. The dealer was a tall and gangly man, oddly disjointed in the way he moved. They were at the dealer's condo, just a few blocks off the Las Vegas strip, sitting on the balcony overlooking the pool. The sun was hot and bright. The pool was a perfect blue, with little ice chips of glare spraying up when the sun hit the water just right.

The dealer offered the blonde a drink, which she accepted, and they spoke, as old friends sometimes do, about times gone by.

“How long have I known you? Ten years? And I still don’t know your name.”

She smiled, and dimples appeared. “And I know yours? Like ‘Genie’ is a real name... You know, it’s a girl’s name.”

“I like that name. It suits me. And I don’t seem to have any trouble with . . . girls.” He deliberately used her term. “They like me well enough.” He grinned, a Cheshire cat sort of look

“I wouldn’t know. I personally find girls far more satisfying than boys.”

“I wondered that about you. Most women find me irresistible.” He waited for her to laugh, but she didn’t. It was time for a change of subject. “Seriously, when did I first meet you? You must have been 18 or so...”

“Actually, I was 21.”

“My, my... you have given me personal information twice, in one conversation. That’s more than I expected.”

She shook her head, almost embarrassed at her slip in judgment. They were both quiet. He was savoring the moment. She was not.

“Genie, dear...”

“Yes, my nameless friend?”

“I wonder... would you be interested in handling some financing for me?”

“Intriguing. First, personal information. Then a request. What kind of financing?”

“I need to make a little money. I have about \$50,000 in cash. We need to invest it, with a very high rate of return, and we need it quickly. I don’t suppose you could handle that kind of volume....”

“Of course I can. But you already know that, don’t you?” He paused. “But I need to know your name.”

Another smile, small and tight, crept onto her face. “Suzi Bates. And yes, I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t know you could do it.”

“What’s the timing?”

They talked about dates and numbers. They finished their drinks. By the time the sun started to set, they had determined the details. Suzi Bates left the condo, and Genie could attach a name to her for the first time. She was so gorgeous. Model beautiful. Long luscious legs. And if he could believe her, she was gay. Lesbian. “Whatever.” This last he said aloud, shaking his head. “God, what a loss to mankind.” He shrugged. “At least I’ll make some money out of this.”

Chapter 5 – Tamara

Los Angeles International Airport is a well-organized concrete behemoth, hunkered down in an extremely high-priced niche between Marina Del Rey and Manhattan Beach. Technically, it sits in the community of Inglewood. If it were not for the constant roar of jets, the land would have been developed into much sought-after condominiums, dragging young professionals, kicking and screaming, to their credit dooms.

But it was not to be. The airport was developed, and grew larger and larger, engulfing the sandy fields and marshy wetlands which used to comprise most of the southern California coast.

Flying into Los Angeles during the day in the summer is a dirty job. Coming over the hills from the east, you see spread before you miles upon miles of clapboard and stucco houses, stacked in rows under a sky muddy with smog. But the sun sets spectacularly through the smog layer, with reds and golds and violent purples splashing the sky, while the mirrored windows of the highest

towers flash back an answering farewell. The sun sets, and the twinkling stars of L.A.'s lights drown out the stars above. At night, the planes fly in only from the west over the ocean, and on this night, two eyes peering anxiously from the pressurized cabin on a 747 were dazzled by what they saw.

Tamara Kinney approached Los Angeles that hot summer night from over the Pacific, greeted by the twinkling band of lights stretching from Laguna Beach on the south to Malibu on the north. The twin ribbons of red and white that were Los Angeles freeways were simply Christmas wrappings to her, wrappings covering a wonderland she had sought since she was a young girl. The beauty, the glitter and the glamour of L.A. were all the woman knew, but she knew L.A. only in her dreams.

Tamara was flying in that night from West Virginia. She had gotten on a plane in Charleston only a few hours before, tearfully waving goodbye to the only person she would miss: her mother. Tamara looked a lot like her mother. She was five-foot-nine-inches tall, rangy and big boned, with broad sized-ten feet which came out at angles like a duck's. She had a pretty face, with high cheek bones and satiny deep black skin, so flawless that it could have been painted on. But she walked with a flatfooted amble, more fit for a wrestler than a lady.

Tamara still had that walk, a walk which carried her and her high school diploma into her first job at a local lumber mill. She worked a forty-to-fifty hour week, and was paid two dollars an hour under the table by the big-assed manager who was both shocked and surprised to find a local girl who had graduated from high school. She did his typing, and his bookkeeping, answered the phones, ran the office, made the coffee, and used his car at noon every day to run out for sandwiches. She always brought her own.

She still lived at home, as she would for the next six years. She brought home money for rent, and saved as much as she could, looking forward to the day when she could move to California.

The date of her first payday was as exciting a day as she could ever remember. She half-ran home with a purse full of \$80 in small bills, pulled from the till by her manager. She had her mother to herself that night. Her brothers and sisters were gone, either married, moved out or in jail. So she and her mother sat at the kitchen table that night and talked until nearly dawn, Tamara pouring out her heart and her mother simply listening, adding a comment here or a question there. That night they decided that Tamara would best be able to achieve Los Angeles if she had more training. There was a local secretarial school that promised to teach everything from computers to bookkeeping. It was extremely expensive, especially on a salary of two dollars an hour. But if she took one class a week, she could complete a full course in five years, especially if she started getting better-paying jobs.

Sitting on the plane that night, she remembered that kitchen table conversation, as well as all that came after. She had almost made it in five years; it had been six years almost to the day when she purchased her ticket to come west. There had been a few setbacks, as could be expected. Her mother had gotten very sick, and Tamara had to take off as much time as she could to take care of her. One of her brothers got in trouble with drugs, sick, and his wife was having a baby, so a chunk of her savings had to go somewhere other than school. The time had passed, and she was an ambitious person. She was excited, elated to be on the plane, although traces of sorrow tugged the edges of her smile when she thought about her mother's face at the boarding gate.

The first payday conversation had led to others, and soon the two women were inseparable. They ate together, played together, read together on long winter nights, with the snow falling

outside and a cranky propane heater warming the leaky old house. They would cook together, finding new recipes to tickle each other. Tamara's favorite was spaghetti; Mama liked to cook Mexican food, although it would not have been mistaken for authentic if served anywhere in North America. Nevertheless, they delighted in one another's company when they could.

Over the past six years, there was not much time for socializing. Tamara worked at the mill, then got a better job at minimum wage, and found herself paying taxes for the first time. She was proud of it, although she learned to complain as time went on. Every Saturday, she would go to the secretarial college, arriving at eight in the morning and not leaving until after dark year-round. She was a slow student, although industrious. It was hard not to like her, and few bothered to struggle.

Sunday morning, she and her mother would walk a distance to a newsstand, which sometimes carried a copy of the Los Angeles Times. The two of them would ceremoniously read the paper at a donut shop nearby, luxuriating in the ritual. The newsman was erratic; on those days when he did not have their copy of the Times, they would compromise with a paper from some other faraway city, like Boston or San Francisco.

Tamara smiled, as the high-rise towers downtown appeared below her. She already decided that every Sunday she would have her Times delivered to her door. The prospect of that was nearly as exciting as the fact she was here.

The plane made a wide arc and set down in the City of the Angels. Stepping out of the terminal, Tamara found the weather nearly identical to her home state. It was hot and muggy, and the woman gleefully noted that it already felt just like home. She found the bus she needed to take her to an Inglewood hotel, and bought a newspaper. She spent much of the night immersed in her excitement, searching the classified ads for apartments. Housing was more expensive here, but

she was well prepared for that; she had read the Los Angeles paper nearly every week. She knew from reading the paper there were a few neighborhoods that were reasonably priced. She was very concerned about living reasonably, knowing that she might not find a job for a few weeks, so she was off to check out the number of one-bedroom apartments in a neighborhood right off the Harbor Freeway, and on the way to downtown.

The next morning, she took a bus to that neighborhood, found several places that were a step up from her West Virginia home. She was moved into one of them by the end of the day.

It was a pretty little place in a quiet neighborhood. The building was old, a clapboard and stucco rooming house of a type popular in the 1920's. It had broad halls leading to the doors of each of the apartments, and had the atmosphere of an old Hollywood movie that enchanted Tamara. It was old, but it had been freshly painted, and the carpet was not too worn. The previous occupants had left a sofa bed, which suited Tamara just fine as she had not budgeted for furniture until after she had started working.

She spent a restless night on the couch, too excited to sleep but so exhausted that she could not stay awake. At 5:00 a.m., she thought she heard a rooster crowing, and woke up confused as to where she was, what city, what state. She rolled off the bed and walked to the window, looking down from the second story onto the street below.

It was still hot and still muggy. L.A. was in the midst of a heat wave. Her quiet street was crawling with police officers. They had blocked off both ends of the street. A SWAT team truck was parked at one end, its back doors flung open to reveal the debris of a paramilitary unit inside: a few extra flak jackets, some flares. The SWAT team itself was spread out across the street, each man crouching low and swinging his weapon from side to side in a continual search. Tamara was amazed; she had never seen this kind of action before, except on television. As the fog of sleep

and surprise cleared from her brain, she realized that she was witnessing what she thought would be a once-in-a-lifetime scene.

“It’s like war.” Her voice was incredulous. A pang of regret surged through her.

“Oh, I wish I had a phone. I gotta tell Mama about this.”

Chapter 2 – Sara

There are certain things common to urban blight. One of those things is children, scattered like grain across a barnyard. The children cluster in the doorways, the crumbling porches and decaying front stoops that are their playgrounds. They spill onto the sidewalk where the homeless lie in drunken or brain-dead stupor. The cars rush past at high speed just inches from their playground, yet with they play with the canniness of most wild things, and there are only rare tales of an infant being squashed on the roadway like an errant cat.

Parents are not around to supervise the babies playing. Sometimes, you may find an older brother or sister, age six or seven, but most of the time the babies play alone. They scamper and crawl as toddlers do, kicking chips off the peeling posts that mark the entrance to their ramshackle apartments and intently studying a bug that may invade their territory.

In such an apartment building, a woman who had not seen a doctor – not since her fifth birthday -- was about to give birth to a child. She didn’t quite understand what was happening, as she was only seventeen. This was her first child, although some of her friends had already had a second, and in one case a third child. They told her to go to the clinic when the pain started, but she had not wanted to go, and the pain simply got worse.

A rock ‘n’ roll song was lofting in through the window;

You got an open invitation
On that you can rely

You got a prepaid reservation
And that's the only way to fly

A band of pain circled her belly and she doubled over, falling to her knees. As the pain subsided, she studied the stains on the carpet and the way the fibers had worn away to reveal the matting beneath. A drop of sweat trickled down her cheek to her nose, pooled on her nostril and then dropped on the floor. She watched it sink in with an amazing calm, oblivious to anything other than the lack of pain. Her relief was short-lived; this time, all the muscles contracted and twisted and she couldn't breathe, could not hear, could not see. She became aware of the sound of her screaming only later, when the big pain began to recede and her ears started to work again.

Panting heavily, she sat up to look for the cracked white plastic block that meant "clock" in this house. Her roommates – two of them – would not be home for hours. The third did not come home last night. The pain began again, and with a curiosity that matched her fascination with the carpet, she noticed that she was starting to scream again even as her hearing went numb.

The children outside on the stoop heard the screaming but paid it no mind. People were always screaming in this neighborhood. There was a man up the street who would wander outside in the street at night, screaming gibberish and throwing empty cans at things only he could see. Another house had a woman in it that screamed almost every night, who never looked up and never smiled, and her face was often puffy and swollen from a cut lip or a black eye. The children also know when one of their own was being beaten. There was a boy who used to live across the street, but one day he screamed and screamed and the ambulance came and he never came back. Some of the older kids said he went to a foster home, and he was fine; others said he died. The little ones did not know which was true, and most of them did not care. They had heard enough screaming to know that you pretend you do not hear or you will be screaming too.

When Sara Roberts started screaming that afternoon, the children stopped for a moment, and listened. Then they kept on playing, like nothing was happening, like nothing was wrong. Upstairs, Sara knew that the children would not call for help, because she was once one of those children. She knew about the streets, and she knew about screaming. So, with an effort, in between pains, she went to the window and leaned out. She could not lean far because of her belly and because of her pain. But there was no screen and the flies zigzagged in and out, lazily enjoying the summer heat.

“You! Kids! Call your mama! I’m having my baby!”

Sara could see a couple heads turn upward, but she knew she needed to make an impact. Her voice went up and she could feel the band of pain circle in on her again as she screeched: “Call for help! I’m havin’ a baby!”

She stumbled backwards, looking for her comfortable spot on the carpet where she had survived ten hours of labor, looking for the spot on the carpet that would make it okay. She rolled onto her side pulling her knees up as far as they could go before they were stopped by her swollen belly.

Down on the street, one of the little ones -- about four years-old — went to find his mother. He explained what he could, and mom leaned out of her window past the flies and heard the screams. She knew Sara, so she figured she had some duty to help. She found the phone book, looked up the business number for the fire department and dialed. Word was the business number did not have a tracer on it, so no one would know who called.

The response time was above average for that part of the city: within thirty minutes, paramedics were at Sara’s door. Unfortunately, Sara had passed out from the pain and loss of blood, so it took another thirty minutes before a responsible party was located to unlock the door.

Sara lived; she awoke as the mother of a scrawny infant boy, weighing only five pounds and change. They didn't tell her until the day she was to be discharged that they had also taken out her uterus and ovaries, and that she should see her gynecologist about hormone supplements. Sara did not have a gynecologist. She did not understand. The nurse sighed, disgusted and exasperated, and asked Sara to sign a number of release forms and called for a social worker who would make an appointment to see this woman and her child, and to explain what had happened.

Sara was just happy to get home, as she had not been allowed to see her boy for the first three days she was in the hospital. By that time, any attempts she made at breast feeding did not seem to work. Her milk just would not flow. She was saddened but thought that perhaps it was for the best; she had heard from her friend that you could not get your figure back until after you stopped breast feeding. Sara had been proud of her figure. Unfortunately, her boy did not take well to formula, and was constantly colicky. The child cried all night and the child cried all day. Her roommates insisted that she leave. Within a month after the birth, Sara Roberts was homeless, broke and the mother of a sick baby.

Chapter 6 – The Test

Duane had made it to Las Vegas, and it was hot. He peeled a sweaty T-shirt off a glistening muscled chest, smiling when he heard an "ooh" from a young woman standing not too far away. But he was still hot. And things weren't going as they had planned.

A dusty, smelly group of about forty people sat in bunches in front of the gate to the nuclear test site in the Nevada desert. The test was supposed to happen today and their informants had told them that a truck would arrive with the Pentagon people. No such luck. The only truck that had arrived was a caterers' truck sent out for some workmen who were painting what looked like

a guard shack near the gate. It was nearly noon. These tests always went off before midday, he supposed because of wind conditions. A car could be seen approaching. Duane stood up, as did several others, to see if it was the truck that held the military types they were all waiting for.

The shiny bus wavering in the heat turned out to be a pale pink Volkswagen van, driven by one of the coordinators from Las Vegas. The test had been cancelled for the day. She had come to pick up as many as she could from the site.

"I'm Suzi, from the Alliance. There's another bus coming. Just wait, be cool. You won't be out here long." Duane looked at his savior. Long legs. Long blonde hair. She was something out of a swimsuit catalog. He was instantly in love.

Duane, still shirtless and somewhat relieved by the van's air conditioning, managed to position himself next to the driver in the front seat. Duane could not believe what he was seeing. She was so beautiful that it made him hard just looking at her. But Duane had been born in the south. While he had not been back for years, he was a true southerner when it came time to talk to pretty women. He brought out his best drawl, which he found did amazing things for his credibility. "I've been thinking, ma'am, out in the heat and all, I suppose that means I'm addled, but . . ."

"Oh no, not at all! Without people like you, we couldn't do anything." She was his dream of a revolutionary: huge blue eyes, with a mouth that let words out like a genie coming out of a bottle. He guessed her age at 19 or 20. She was actually 35.

Duane lowered his voice, although he was still speaking loudly to battle the wind coming through the open windows. "Well, Suzi, I don't think we are going to make any difference sitting out by the fence. I think what we got to do is get inside, and get close to the site. Even one person

could stop them from setting off a test. They may hate us, but they ain't going to kill us. Too much bad press, killing a protester." His drawl was getting thicker by the minute.

"I know." Slowly, as if to a child, she continued, "We have discussed that. However, there is no possible way to get inside that fence and get to the test site. If we could, we would. We have even had volunteers. But the perimeter is heavily guarded."

Duane was silent. Then he smiled. "I think I know a way in."

Watching the road, she nodded and said, "I'm listening." If he could have seen her eyes, he might have been concerned. They were flat and cold. Almost dead.

"A catering truck went in there today. And painters were in there on the guard shack. We could stop that catering truck before it got to the base tomorrow. There's only one driver. You distract him, and I get in the back and hide. When the driver feeds the painters, I get out and hide on the base." Duane started talking faster. "I know it's illegal, and it doesn't sound like a very good plan, but at least we get inside the gate, we will have a chance. If we keep it up this way, we ain't even gonna get press coverage. What good will that be? A bunch of us went out there and sweated in the sun, poked each other and said we have done a high-and-mighty thing but we didn't do jack-shit. If I could get inside the gate, I think I could get out of that truck and get into a trash can at the back of the guard shack. Then at night, when everything's quiet, I can slip out and make a run to the test site. The guards barely pay attention to us. They have been watching protestors at that gate for 20, 30 years. We don't mean anything to them. They must have run checks on every one of those painters, and the lunch man comes in, feeds the boys and leaves. He barely gets out of his truck." Duane's eyes were flashing an electric blue. His sincerity and his passion were almost palpable. "C'mon, it would at least be a shot."

Suzi Bates pursed her perfect lips. "I don't see it. Even if you got past the guards, and even if you managed to hide next to the guard shack, and even if you got to walk toward the test site . . . do you really think you could make it the four miles in to the test site without getting caught? And the test is supposed to happen tomorrow morning, not the day after. They never put these suckers off until noon unless the wind is really kicking up . . . "

Duane grinned. "And what's the forecast for tomorrow?"

"Windy," she said, sounding a little surprised.

"Then we have a shot at it. You let me go in there tomorrow and I'll hide out till the next day, or till the next, or to the next until they set off that sucker, and when they do, I'll be right there, sitting on top of the whole damn thing."

The people in the back of the van were chatting and laughing now. The heat was suffocating, but life was returning and the wind dried their sweat. After a few moments of silence in the front seat, Duane realized he was holding his breath and let it out in a slow, long sigh.

"Well?"

"We should have two people hide in the van. We'll let one of them get caught. You use that as cover to get into the trash container." She looked at him, and raised her eyebrows, asking for approval. He grinned, broadly. "No one else can know about this. None of the others and none of the people back in town."

"What's the matter? Won't they approve?"

"No, that's not the problem. There are legal problems attached. With the new laws on terrorism, whoever is caught will face years in federal prison, not just a fine, not like it used to be. The fewer people know about it, the fewer people are exposed to liability. They might be able to bust you, but the rest of them should be able to go on working. If you're caught, and you're certain

to be caught ... we're talking hard time in a federal facility after a lengthy, expensive trial. We can't expose anybody else to that kind of risk."

Duane was bubbling up inside, trying to hold in his joy at being chosen for a project of this magnitude. "We're going to have to get the lunch wagon to stop. Do you think you can pull it off?"

The wind fluffed back her hair. Duane thought she belonged on a TV commercial for hair color. "I don't generally see a problem with that." She turned and smiled at him, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight. They continued to talk, changing the subject to avoid being overheard by the others, as they took the long drive back into Las Vegas. Finally, they arrived. Everyone clambered out of the bus, and she leaned over to Duane, holding her mouth close to his ear and letting her hair drop across his face. "After the usual debriefing tonight, I'll invite you home. They'll think it's natural if you don't show up tomorrow. That's happened before with this group. Now get out of the van, and smile at me. We're on for tomorrow."

He did exactly as she said, even pausing to blow her a kiss as she drove away. Two of the girls watched and giggled. Duane adjusted his jeans, threw his shirt over his shoulder, and went to his car.

* * *

As they had expected, the winds started the next morning before dawn and continued well into the afternoon. By then, Duane was inside the facility and camouflaged under a thin sand-colored cotton cloth in the lee of a dune. As might be expected, the worst part of the day was the heat; but he had prepared himself somewhat by drinking what seemed to be gallons of water the night before. Chomping occasionally on a salt tablet, even he saw the surrealistic twist his life had taken for the moment. Despite the heat, he was inutterably proud of himself. First, that he had

managed to get this far, and second that he was single-handedly going to stop the first above-ground nuclear test in thirty years.

There had been numerous above-ground tests through the 1950's. The aftermath was an increased rate of cancer and other radiation-related diseases in the small towns to the east of the test sites, as the wind blew. But those were dirty bombs. The word was these new weapons were clean; no muss, no fuss, no people, and no residue. It was a step further than the first "clean" bomb, the production of which was supposed to have been vetoed during the Carter administration. However, the military did not pay too much attention to the politics of the decision. Instead, continued research was authorized for better versions of the same idea. A clean bomb. One that could be detonated above an urban population, eliminating the populous, but creating virtually no problems for an invading ground force, which could arrive within a day or even hours.

That was the story. It was one that profoundly disturbed people across the continent, and more around the world.

Feeling a lot like a lizard, Duane flicked his tongue across his lips, and thanked the gods for the wind that kept the tarp flapping and snapping and postponed the test until tomorrow when he would be in a better position to stop the test.

* * *

"No, it's still blowing here, Miles. . . . Yes, certainly, I'll look for that. No, it's not on the list. Good thinking, Miles. . . . Are you sure we're scrambled?" The General let out a low rumble that passed for a chuckle. "Miles, I wish you were here. The story we put out is so good that we even have demonstrators at the gate willing to throw themselves on the bomb site to stop the test. We caught one of them yesterday . . . No, no compromise . . . Just a girl, tried to sneak out of the back of a caterer's truck. We arrested her in front of the media, made a spectacle out of it . . . perfect

opportunity for us. Yes, we went to the media – hell! We invited the media! Number of those kids at the gate has doubled since yesterday. The press is there and all of them are talking about clean weapons.

"Miles, let's go over this one more time. I'm going to have my men in protective suits, but they don't need it, do they?" The General was pacing as far each way as the cord of the old phone would let him. "We're going to have some test animals at the site. What do you estimate is a safe range for that bomb of yours? Well, it is unlikely that the man I'd send in to plant this would stick around to watch it blow. However, if it comes down to that, it would be optimal to be able to tell the soldier how far away he should get before it blows. Thirty feet? . . . Uh huh . . . So one hundred feet from ground zero should be safe for all concerned. Right. . . . Test animals will be placed starting at five feet out to a hundred and fifty feet . . . Will that do it?"

At the other side of the continent, Miles was half-sitting, half-lying in a swivel chair, with his feet propped on the desk in front of him. Next to his feet was what looked like an orange highway cone, except slightly larger. "Save the animals, General, what you need is heat sensors. Cheap, more accurate, and you don't have to rely on a particular subject's strong or weak constitution to give you an idea of what you are facing . . ." Miles laughed. "Just a bleeding heart, General . . . One of these days, I'm going to show you that I'm even a registered Democrat." Smiling, Miles pulled the phone away from his ear as the General barked out a few chosen words. "Right, sir, I will call you tomorrow morning. And call me anytime, for any reason, sir."

Final niceties were exchanged, and the connection was cut. Miles dialed security and asked for a normal phone line to be restored. Feeling very pleased with himself, he then dialed out for pizza and clipped on the television above his desk.

* * *

While Duane was making his way across the dunes to the test site, Suzi Bates visited her dealer.

“Ms. Bates . . . how are you? Is that your real name?”

Suzi raised her eyebrows, and looked at him sideways, as if he was insane. “What an odd question from you.” She dropped onto a chair in the kitchen. “Are we ready?”

“No, not ready. . . . done.”

“Already? What kind of a return did we get?”

“Turned out better than I thought.” He brought out several shoeboxes and stacked them on the kitchen table. “Did you know that a shoebox can fit almost exactly a hundred thousand dollars in cash? Not a fact very many people know. I’ve already taken my commission. This is all yours.”

“Excellent.” She started to count, then stopped and looked at him. “I have one more piece of business for you.” Grabbing a handful out of the first box, she placed it on the table. “I need you to work your media contacts for me.”

“How’d you know about that?” Genie spoke casually, but his Spidey sense was tingling, big time. “What media contacts?”

“You grew up with Sasha Trembly. I need you to talk to her.”

“How do you know this?”

“I know. And I know that she has a taste for coke. Which I assume means that you supply her. Do what it takes . . . but I need her at the test site tomorrow morning, early.”

Genie’s mind was racing, and he was scrambled and confused as if he had been sampling his own product, which he generally avoided. How the hell did she know? Who was this woman? He had known her for almost ten years. She never talked like this before. Was she a cop?

“Look, I don’t know what this is about. But this is beginning to taste like entrapment. I have lawyers ... good lawyers – “

She laughed easily, musically and he once again saw how perfectly she was formed. It threw him off for just a second. “Don’t even think that way. This is a simple request, between friends.”

She explained, and he agreed. But he took the pile of bills off the kitchen table with a reluctance that he didn’t recognize in himself.

Chapter 9 – The Media

Sasha Trembly fluffed her hair, pursed her lips, and swaggered over to her chair on the set. The six ‘clock had been perfect. The eleven should be fine. She had created herself as a quintessential dumb blond, but Sasha was shrewder than most, smarter than some, and absolutely stunning. She liked men with violence in them, violence just under the surface, waiting to be discovered; she liked expensive clothes, hard drugs, and fast cars. She was a meme, but she did not know it.

She was the highest-rated TV news anchor in Las Vegas, but the concept of "big fish, little pond" never occurred to her. As far as she was concerned, the anchors at the network in New York were only sitting in her chair temporarily. “Keeping it warm,” she liked to say.

Sasha's real name was Katie Summerville, a name which set off fireworks in her brain, reminding her of pigtails, complacency and mediocracy: home. So when a voice came waltzing across the sets, her reaction was not surprising.

"Katie, oh Katie!"

Her eyes flickered from side-to-side instantly, checking to see if the cameras were on, before she automatically responded, "Fuck you." From out of the shadows, behind the cameras popped a face that could have been a caricature of human: a spiky blond crew-cut topped a long pale, grinning face, the kind of face they used to attached to people made out of rubber in comic books. Sasha shook her head once in disbelief, and then let it drop into her hands, and muttered, "Oh, shit... Genie." From off in shadows, a practiced voice shouted, "Five minutes!"

The body that belonged to the comic book face was lean and rubbery. His hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans, he half bounced, half sauntered onto the set. "Long time no see?" Sasha did not look up.

"You owe me a favor, sugar. I'm collecting."

"You little weasel." Sasha looked up through slitted eyes. "I don't owe you anything."

He cackled. "We can discuss that in more detail if you like ...right here."

"What do you want?"

"Today, the military busted a woman who was trying to sneak on to the test site . . . do you remember?" She nodded. "They caught her. They didn't catch the other guy." He waited for her response, and he wasn't disappointed. "And the test is scheduled for tomorrow morning, first thing. That guy is going to be sitting in the middle of the desert, right in the middle of a nuclear test. I need you to stop it."

"You're shitting me."

Genie grinned. "I guess I should have told you that I was doing you a favor, right?"

"Genie, if you're playing this straight, this will be the top story across the country tomorrow night." Sasha calculated what she was going to need tomorrow, and what she would get out of it. "Who's out there?"

"I ain't telling, sister. But I know he's out there. The woman was just a decoy to keep the guards looking in the right direction."

Sasha looked around and realized that it was almost air-time. Her eyes opened a little wider and she straightened up, almost unconsciously, then held up her hand. "Genie, you got to stick around, I need more information."

"Sure, sugar. I got some time."

"We go to sports in twelve minutes. I'll talk more then . . . and I need some product, as long as you're here."

"Not till tomorrow, sugar. Besides," he said smiling, "You know I never carry."

Sasha was exceptional that night; while reading the news, she kept wondering what the weather was like in New York this time of year.

* * *

The heat from the day before had dissipated. The desert in the spring is most beautiful early in the morning. The air has a certain feel to it, and you wish there were some way to drink it. Weather like this must have been devastating to those caught in the deserts of the southwest in generations gone by, because the air feels so wonderful, rich and full, something like walking into a house smelling of baking bread, and thinking that the air itself should be able to take your hunger away.

It was that type of morning, but of all the people who would matter in the desert that day, only the General noticed the air.

He pulled in a long breath, and let it out slowly in a loud, comfortable sigh. "A perfect day," he said to himself. He turned to his aides. "Let's go."

On the other hand, Sasha had just left the station in Las Vegas, after a long argument with her news director. She had broken two nails, had been up half the night with Genie and her head hurt.

Duane had been awake since long before dawn, still shivering from the cold of a desert night. He was out of food and out of water, though he heard a couple of drops splashing around when he shook the container. Duane was worried that he had to get more water or he would begin to suffer from the elements. But that fear was remote, and he was as excited as a kid at Christmas with the prospect of stopping the test.

From his vantage point, in a tower enhanced with special viewing equipment, the General could see the test site well. The site chosen was a dip in the dunes, which provided the best protection possible from erratic winds and prying eyes. Around a massive perimeter, soldiers were stationed as a precautionary measure, although the site commander was convinced that security around the entire site was sufficient to keep out any undesirables.

It was spring. Pockets of green with dashes of color lifted the General's already high spirits. You could see small figures in khaki setting the heat sensors, as Miles had suggested. Through binoculars, the General watched one of the figures pull an oversized roadway cone out of the back of a truck and walk it to an area that had been flattened and covered in asphalt. The soldier stopped and signaled in the direction of the tower. The General saw him; he turned and told an aide who turned and began issuing a slow and steady stream of orders into the communication system of the tower.

Marc Rhodes was slightly embarrassed. His palms were wet, and he could feel a trickle of sweat as it ran down his side from his arm pit. What caused his embarrassment was not his excitement; his joy in the moment was too complete. However, there was a nagging fear that the

clamminess that he felt was his only recurring war wound. In forty years of service only one experience had ever troubled the General, only one experience ever pained him. He still felt the shame of dropping to the deck when that cloud appeared over the south Pacific. Today, it was the thought of some similar involuntary reflex that worried him. He had to steel himself against any such lapse.

The General knew from Miles' description that the cloud would not be as spectacular as a real cloud. It would have the same shape, but it would not make a loud noise. As requested, Miles' invention was merely "fireworks." It would not look the same as a multi-megaton weapon, of a type the General had seen unleashed on that atoll so many years ago. And yet, Miles had suggested that the public would assume that new technologies would produce a smaller bomb, a smaller cloud, with the same force and the same devastating results. From that thought came the leaks to the press about a new, clean bomb, fashioned on the neutron bomb of the seventies. It was described as smaller, more efficient, but with all the killing power of its bigger brethren. It was a good story; they had managed to get it planted in most every country in the world. The General was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was. Miles had enjoyed himself thoroughly, pretending to get drunk at a State Department mixer and unburdening his soul to a man known to sell secrets on the open market. The General had watched, and was unconvinced that the evening -- despite Miles' glee -- had any impact on their propaganda campaign. Most of the "clean" bomb stories were spread by the professionals in the government who never asked why the Pentagon wanted the story spread. It was another pleasant surprise, one that was slightly unsettling because he thought security may have been breached around the project. Nevertheless, it was rare that a project this secure went smoothly. The General smiled. There was a first time for everything.

He was still musing when he felt his aide come up behind him.

"We're ready, Sir."

For the first time that he could remember, the General turned and looked at the young man who had been chosen to serve as his aide. It was rare the General even asked the ages of his aides, their names or whether they had families. If a soldier had been chosen for the job, the Army must certainly know what it was doing.

"What is your name, soldier?"

"Lieutenant Stephens, sir."

"Have you ever seen a bomb explode, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir . . . but not a nuclear one."

"I would like your impression after this is over. If it is frightening, I want to know. If it is unimpressive, that I would like to know as well. It will be difficult; however, I would like you to look at this as if you were a civilian, as if you were standing in a street next to your home, where your family or your friends may live and you hear an explosion and you look up. Try to clear your mind, and look at this not as a soldier, but as a man. Have I made myself understood?"

The soldier nodded decisively, and the General thought yes, the Army knows what it is doing. Understanding and intelligence looked at him from the soldier's eyes.

"Yes, sir." The aide turned to signal; the General turned his attention to the test site, and simultaneously the figure in khaki straightened and stood by the cone. Then he walked briskly to the truck and drove off.

At that moment, a large gray-green lizard toddled up to the asphalt which was warming in the sun. The black tarry smell was strange and almost overpowering, but the lizard, a curious

sort, felt the blackness giving off a pleasant heat. It spread its wide-webbed feet over the edge and slithered up, blinking its huge slit-pupiled eyes in the process.

On the other side of the tarmac, a few yards away, a desert sparrow flittered down out of what could have been curiosity. It fluttered tentatively away when it saw the lizard scuttle off into the mix of dry and green grasses that pass for foliage in the desert. The tentative flutter interrupted into a full-scale flight when the bird saw what the lizard had felt: streaking across the dunes like a madman was Duane, stripped down to his tan and a pair of sand-colored drawstring pants.

From his vantage point, the General estimated that Duane was approximately forty yards from ground zero and within Miles' estimated yardage for heat damage when the highway cone blew apart in a hemorrhage of smoke and noise. He began to turn to his aide and ask the obvious, when he noticed the slack-mouthed look of shock. He turned back to the window and for a moment, his face mirrored the face beside him. Then, the tension slowly returned to the General's face. The top of his lip became more rigid and the corners of his mouth began to turn up. His mouth closed. But the smile remained. Even as he looked through binoculars at the prone body of the half-clad sprinter on the ground, he was certain the man was not dead. Men do not usually die with their hands over their heads. If the sprinter were still alive, he could tell his soldiers that the device could be touched off and a departure from the scene could be relatively casual. He hated to think that a soldier would either have to run from the area -- increasing the risk of bringing attention to himself -- or suffer flash burns or death.

Next to the square of tarmac under that enormous gray mushroom, could be seen the charred body of a lizard; a few steps further away was the smoldering mass of feathers which was once a curious sparrow.

Chapter10

Julian Lee liked crows. He liked them because they reminded him of him. They were black and sleek, they were loud and brash. Crows survived in the city, where most other birds failed. Not only that, but crows seemed to thrive in the city, his city, the heart of South Central.

Julee, as his friends called him, had started out as a young man on the fringes of gang activity in L.A. He was never heavily involved, preferring instead to play it safe and smart, staying out of the nasty violence that left a lot of his friends crippled or dead. He was smart, so he said. And he had a flair, one that found him sitting -- pet perched on shoulder -- in a stuffy apartment looking down at a cheap kitchen table covered with thousands of dollars worth of drugs that were soon to be his.

“We talked price before . . . what say you now?”

A huge man stared at Julee and held up two fingers on one hand and five on the other. As his hands dropped back down, he let it be known that if Julee took the time to sell this on the streets, he could get ten times his value.

Julee just smiled. From his lap he pulled a large padded mailing envelope, thick with cash. His eyes never left his opponent's face, as he reached into the envelope and pulled the trigger of a gun. The recoil sent bills, mostly ones, scattering across the table and the floor. The big man looked surprised, then unhappy, as he slumped forward. Julee did not care if the seller were alive or not; he was from another part of the city, and the seller's friends would be hard-pressed to track Julee down.

Carefully, methodically, still smiling, Julee collected the drugs and let his pet out the window to fly home alone. In this neighborhood, one young man, mid-twenties, in jeans and a T-

shirt, would be impossible to pinpoint. The same man, but with a crow on his shoulder might be identifiable, if anyone bothered to investigate the death of just one more young black man with gang affiliations.

He chose the scenic route home, walking along a freeway overpass to check out the cars zipping by below. Julee had been doing this since he was 12; he would stand over the freeway for hours, picking out cars he was going to buy for himself when his big score came through. He had settled on a huge SUV, black with lots of chrome.

Behind him, tires squealed, and he instinctively hunched down closer to the retaining wall, hugging his parcel. He heard laughter, which was a good sign, but not always a true indicator of what was happening.

The boys in the car were barely old enough to drive. Julee figured they looked about 12 or 13 years old. One of them was pushing a cardboard box out the window of the car, an old Pontiac Le Mans, with four or five different colors of paint patch-working its battered sides. As the car came abreast of him, the box finally cleared the window smashing against the side of the car on its way down to the asphalt, bouncing a couple times and coming to rest crumpled alongside the curb. Unable to resist, Julee took two steps to the curb and lifted a flap.

A tiny black furball arched its back and hissed at him. Next to it, another kitten with oriental eyes due to its age, shakily tried to lift its head to stare at him. There were three other bodies in the box, one bent in a weird angle and certainly dead; the other two well on their way to that same condition.

Julee shrugged, picked up the feisty one, and continued his walk home. A boy who had been watching the same scene as Julee, wandered over as nonchalantly as he could, and looked inside the box. He too shrugged, and walked away. Cars swooshed by, some nudging the remains

of the box and others smashing it just for target practice. Inside, life remained until late in the night, when gracefully, gratefully, it was extinguished.

Dawn pushed up over the freeway, and found a ragged, shuffling transient mumbling to himself, as he walked over the cars that were already backed up in both directions. He too was curious about the box. He looked in it, and carefully collected the four bodies, slipping them into the odd pockets of a fourth- or fifth-hand Army jacket. He would eat well tonight.

Chapter 11

Tamara awoke to the sounds of raucous shouting. For a moment, she thought she was home in West Virginia, with her father or one of her uncles drunk and quarreling. She was no stranger to such arguments, having heard many over the years, but she was surprised at the strength of the shouting, especially since it felt as though it was very early. Groggily, she rolled over to look at the clock. It was 5:45, early enough that she would like to get more sleep, but late enough that she might not.

She decided to get an early start on the day, despite its less-than-auspicious beginnings. Rolling off her sofa bed, her big feet padded softly to the tiny kitchen to make coffee. Standing there, she heard the argument next door even more clearly. There were the usual accusations, muffled somewhat by the wall between the apartments. There was the shouted “bitch!” and the sound of a slap that invariably followed. Tamara didn’t mind this part; where she was from, she knew couples fought, sometimes loudly, and that the fights were often part of a weird ritual that had nothing to do with whether the relationship would last.

The entire argument had been punctuated, helped along really, by the whining of a baby.

“Shut that thing up!”

Tamara tended to get worried at this point, and she was not disappointed. The woman started screaming, the baby screamed louder, and she could hear the neighbors on the side opposite to her thumping on the wall. Then there was a thump on the wall closest to her, and the woman’s hysterical screaming hushed to a low sobbing.

Tamara had been in South Central for a week now. She found a good job with a law firm as a secretarial trainee. It paid more than she was used to getting in West Virginia, even though the lawyer who interviewed her seemed apologetic about the salary. Her apartment cost her \$500 a month. She had \$1,500 with which to buy a car, which was her task today. She figured she would still have plenty of money left over every month to start enjoying herself. She had already celebrated a little by planning her first trip to Disneyland.

She walked out in the hall to see if her newspaper had arrived. It was not there, but she was not surprised. Every morning she called the Los Angeles Times to find out where her paper was. Every morning the Times assured her that it would be delivered. Every morning it was not. So, as she had every morning, Tamara padded down the stairs to a newsstand on the corner only a few houses away.

It was nearly full light outside; morning comes early in the summer. By the time she returned, shaking the “classified” section out of the paper, the sound she heard from the apartment next door calmed her. Gone was the sound of the baby crying, gone the sobbing and the screaming; in its place, the squeaking of bedsprings and the murmuring and the moaning of lovemaking. Tamara smiled to hear it. This was how it was at home, with the sudden flare of tempers and the sweet apologies that followed.

Tamara believed that L.A. would not be so different than living at home. There would be some kind people and some stupid ones, some lonely women like herself and some lonely men who wanted a loving woman beside them. A loving woman like herself. She had a job. She had an apartment. In a few weeks, she would have enough to start buying some furniture. Today she was going to get a rug. She smiled to herself. Maybe, just maybe, she would see whether there were any men in the classified section of the L.A. Times.

* * * * *

Sara moaned slightly as her man grunted and pushed himself away from the bed.

“Honey, come back here, I ain’t done.”

Grinning and glancing over his shoulder, he shrugged.

“That’s your problem, woman.”

He pulled on his pants, leaving them unbuttoned as he rifled through some clothes on the table to find a shirt he liked. Dreamily, hands behind her head, Sara said, “Honey, why don’t we get married?”

“No need no more . . . boy’s gone.”

Sara paled and sat bolt upright in bed.

“Oh, my God! I forgot!”

Calmly, the man turned buttoning his pants.

“I told you, woman, everything’s gonna be alright now. That baby did nothing but cry. -
”

Sara pictured her little cherub, grinning broadly at her as only an 18 month-old boy can do. Tears started to spill from her eyes once again as she glanced at the heap of blankets that she knew covered the boy. Marcus had thrown him against the wall and she was sure he was dead.

In the meantime, Marcus kept talking, pushing soothing phrases at her about how much better her life would be without the boy.

“ -- pregnant again. You don’t seem to get pregnant, no matter what I do to you. From now on you’ll be a free woman . . . no more crying all nightlong -- ”

The boy didn't cry all nightlong. He cried once during the night, took his bottle and happily went back to sleep. He was a very happy baby, and had been until Marcus had come to live with them. But what could she do? She had no money, and her government check covered so little. She could go back to work now, now that the baby was gone. That meant new clothes and going out drinking with her friends after work. She hadn't been able to do that since he was born. But she had loved him so much . . .

Marcus stood across the room when Sara's tears began to fall again. He started to gather up the bundle on the floor, glancing only briefly at the staring open eyes and the purplish welt above them. The body was already beginning to get stiff, and he whipped the blanket around it and dumped it head-down into a paper grocery bag and laid the package by the door.

"Sara . . . baby . . . he'll be alright. When does your next check come in?"

"Dunno . . . next week."

"Only pick up one more. After that they might want to see the boy. But you better get a job. Can you go out today?"

"I . . . I . . . guess so."

"Julee ain't had any work for me lately. I need some money. There's none in your purse."

"You looked in my purse?" She was glazing over again, disoriented, and Marcus knew he was not going to get very far with her until the body was out of the room.

Patting her absentmindedly on the shoulder, he walked to the door, the bundle under his arm.

"You tell Julee if he comes by that I be looking for him."

"Sure, honey."

The door slammed, and Sara looked around for the baby. It took a second to realize yet again that he was gone, and would not be back. They had been fine together, happy, until Marcus had taken over. She brushed this thought away as quickly as she could, methodically cleaning the wall, spreading out a baby blanket, and filling it with the few pieces of clothing he had owned. She wrapped up the bundle and was just about to drag it downstairs to the trash bin when she saw one more toy: a ragtag red stuffed horse with a blonde yarn mane and tail. One of its black button eyes was missing and she remembered the day she had cried and worried that the baby would die if he swallowed it and choked. How her friends had laughed when she had told them that! Once the button goes down, they said, it comes out the other end, rain or shine. No need to worry. She had promised him for four months to find another button, but she just never found the time. He loved the horse with the fierce intensity that babies loved their toys. He would not sleep without it, and started crying this morning when he woke up during the argument and saw that his horse was not in his bed. If she had just put horse in bed, he would be okay.

That did it. She started to cry, and it grew louder and louder, more intense until she was sure she must die from her sorrow. But the world is not that kindly, and she cried on, remembering every nuance of the eighteen months she spent with her son. Occasionally, she would rise close enough to the surface to realize that there was someone to blame in all this, there was someone to hate: Marcus.

She was extremely confused, unfocused and overwhelmingly sad. She could not bear the thought of throwing out her boy's clothes, but knew that she must for fear of being thrown in jail. On the other hand, throwing away the clothes is exactly what Marcus would want her to do, and she wanted to do nothing to please him. She could get a job, and kick Marcus out. Tonight.

He took her money, ate her food and slept in her bed. It made sense to think that she would be better off without him, no matter what.

With that thought in mind, she started to get dressed up to go job hunting. Standing in front of her dresser she glimpsed herself in the mirror, then stopped and took a long look.

The baby had been born eighteen months ago. She had lost all the weight she had gained during the pregnancy, and then some, but her skin was dry and lifeless. Just a few months before the baby was born, she remembered how her hands looked, remembered how she would hold out her fingers to examine her nail polish and the picture of that hand stuck in her mind. The same hand she held out today, and she thought the skin formed little ripples, little triangles around the pores, like the hands of any old person. She was 21 years old. She was not old, she knew that.

But she had already had a child, and will have buried one soon. That thought brought her up short. She will not have buried her child, because her child will be in some trash can somewhere until the next garbage day. Shaking her head angrily to dispel the thought, she again looked in the mirror and her eyes narrowed. She was skinny. Her skin was dry, and her hair was frazzled around her temples. She had not had a period since the baby was born, but her friends told her that theirs did not return until after they stopped breast feeding, sometimes two years later. She thought that perhaps her body was taking a little longer to get back to normal because she had been so sick when the baby was born. Again, she made a little mental adjustment; the baby was gone. Many children die in infancy. Her baby had died too.

She was going to kill Marcus. But she was first going to get a job. She finished dressing, thinking that it was a small wonder that even Marcus would bed her, considering how old she looked. But she walked next door to the apartment of the new person, whom she had seen buying a newspaper on a daily basis.

Tamara opened the door a crack.

“Yes?”

“Hi. I’m your neighbor. I seen you buy a paper every day. I need a job. Could I borrow that paper?”

“Sure.” The door swung open the rest of the way, and Tamara added, “come in.”

Sara stood at the door, shifting from foot to foot, and waiting for the newspaper.

“I need today’s paper, ‘cause I need to buy some furniture. Is yesterday’s okay?”

“Sure.”

“How’s that baby of yours?”

There was only a slight pause: “I don’t have no baby.”

“But . . . I heard it crying this morning.”

Sara smiled, a small tight smile. “There’s ‘nother baby down the hall. I don’t have no baby.”

Entranced, Tamara held out the classified section wordlessly, her mouth open, waiting for a different explanation which did not come. Wordlessly, soundlessly, Sara accepted the newspaper from Tamara’s hand, turned and walked down the hall.

Very slowly, Tamara pulled back her hand where the newspaper had lain and shut the door with it. She looked at the wall dividing her apartment from the next. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe a different couple lived there. She almost walked down the hall to knock on the door to see if the same woman answered. Tempting as that thought was, Tamara was not sure she wanted to know.

Instead, she grabbed her jar of coins and went to make some phone calls. Time to call her mother, and give her the week's gossip. And she thought a big nice rug in the middle of the room would look good. Something round.

Chapter 12

Tamara and Sara got to know each other pretty well over the course of the long, hot summer. Tamara was working as a secretary, for more money than she had ever made, and she had a savings account, a television, and some new clothes. Sara stayed in the apartment next door, but she never got a job. She simply stopped talking to any welfare agencies, and Marcus started giving her enough money to survive.

Sara bloomed over the summer. Each afternoon, she looked a little more polished, a little prettier. Her clothes were better. Her shirts shrank upward. Her jeans receded southward. Her hair was more styled. Her nails longer. Tamara, on the other hand, seemed to absorb the sadness that was leaving Sara. Her clothes were unpressed, more often than not. Her nails were jagged. Her apartment grew more disheveled, just as she grew more disorganized. At first, she called her mother every Sunday, but as time went by, their conversations grew shorter. Her mother sounded so sad. Tamara couldn't handle the distance in her voice. The calls became routine and forced.

But in the evening, Tamara and Sara would sit with their feet propped up on the broad window of Tamara's apartment, sipping cold beer and talking about everything and nothing. When Marcus showed up, Sara would hop to her feet and scurry back to her apartment to serve him dinner or simply be there. Marcus demanded that, and when Sara was slow, she heard about it. For that matter, so did Tamara, but feeling part of their lives somehow cheered her. Tamara felt lost: lost without her mother's voice, lost without Sara's company. She felt hollow, out of place in a world she wanted, but a place that was not home. The awareness of her homelessness never reached the surface, though. She kept working, kept calling West Virginia on Sunday mornings, but her steps grew slower, and her bright-eyed alertness fell into weariness.

In the quiet of her own apartment, Tamara learned a lot about Sara's situation. The walls were thin, and Marcus was not shy about broadcasting his feelings. As for Sara, after the baby disappeared, she hung on in the apartment, without paying rent and never bringing home food. If there were a problem with the rent, she didn't know about it. Food appeared magically in her refrigerator, although most of the time Marcus brought home something to eat. Her sole duty seemed to consist of being there when Marcus got home and doing everything he asked when he was there, which was not often. It was not a bad arrangement, but Sara didn't think much about it anyway.

Everything went smoothly for months, until Marcus started bringing home product.

The two women were too scared of Marcus to take very much, so it was a small problem at first. Instead of sitting in Tamara's apartment, their feet up on the window ledge, sipping a beer, they simply had a pipe in their hand. It didn't seem like that much of a difference, at first. But if you were watching, you could see the shift. One was pretty, and getting prettier every day. The other growing more ragged daily.

One day, Tamara came home early from work, claiming she was feeling poorly. Sara was happy to see her and they began their evening ritual a few hours early. Tamara had loved her job. She was given a lot of responsibility and everyone seemed to appreciate her skills. She was never talked down to, as her West Virginia employers had done. Rather, everyone was courteous and spoke to her civilly, except for one of the lawyers, and she didn't work for him directly. He was one of the managing partners in the law firm and talked to her only rarely, but when he did she wondered afterwards what she had done wrong, even though she couldn't remember a word of criticism from him. It was a short meeting with him that sent her home early that first time; afterwards, leaving early or not going in at all became easier and easier.

After some weeks, Tamara was put on notice that her absences were a problem, and she went to work regularly after that for some time. But the lure of going home and sitting with Sara with her feet on the window ledge was too strong a draw. Tamara did not see it as an addiction, and she really didn't know the meaning of that word, but it bothered her sometimes, sitting at her desk, which was covered with pictures of her mother and her home. It wiggled in the back of her head, diverting her attention, calling her, until she was distracted and had to stop and think "what is it?" Then it would come to her, in a rush, a realization, like cool water on a hot day: she should be by her window ledge, sharing a pipe. She was never alone at the window. She didn't miss her mother. She was just happy.

She had been so proud of her job and proud of what she had accomplished in her new city. She didn't notice her clothes going ragged. She didn't notice that she didn't match in the morning, with colors that clashed and clothes that didn't fit quite right. More importantly, she didn't count the days. Little by little, she missed a day a week, then two days a week.

She had money in the bank, and she wanted to bring her mother out for Christmas. She had lost some weight and thought she looked good, good enough to be working in an uptown law office where the secretaries wore clothes that cost more than a month's worth of her rent. But her window ledge, her conversations with Sara, and that shared pipe were too strong a need. So little by little, she stopped going to work every day. She would wake up tired, so bone-tired. And eventually, she was fired.

She came home that day and slumped in a chair by the window, not wanting to talk to Sara or anyone else. She desperately wanted another chance, and desperately wanted a hit on that pipe to make this all seem reasonable. Being fired for absenteeism was something that was going to follow her to her next job, and probably to the one after that. She knew that from school, and she

knew that from common sense. She had to tell her mother and she didn't know what to say. Her depression was enormous. Even as she sat there, with the weight of the world dragging her down, she waited for Sara. Sara would bring the pipe. Tamara did not, would not, link the two. And then Sara came in.

“What’s happening, girl?” Sara fell down into the chair beside Tamara. “I see you home early today. Get tired of work?”

Tamara told her about being fired, and slowly, as if each word contained the seed of a tear, she began to cry. Sara watched, without any expression on her face. Night fell and Tamara was long-finished with her story. The two women sat at the window, listening to the rumble of cars and a far-off wail of a siren. Finally, without a word, Sara got up and went to her apartment. She returned with the pipe, lit it and passed it to Tamara.

“Marcus ain’t gonna be able to pay for your place too. Whatcha going to do?”

“Dunno. Marcus get me a job?”

There was a long pause. “I dunno what he does, girl. But I ask.” They each took another draw on the pipe and retreated into their own worlds. Sara didn’t hear Marcus come home until the door to Tamara’s apartment banged open.

“Whatchoo doing over here, bitch?”

Through a fog, Sara could see she was in trouble. She scrambled to her feet, backed up against the window ledge and started stuttering out an explanation.

“I was, I was just, I was . . . I was just sitting here talking to Tamara . . . We was just talkin’

—“

”Why don’t you come home when I called for you? You know I don’t like that!” Marcus moved toward her, one fist raised, the other hand low and beckoning her to approach him. Tamara just watched, unable to move through the haze in her brain.

“Baby, I didn’t hear you . . . I, I, I’m comin’ right now –“

”You’re doing more than that –“ He grabbed her arm and dragged her to the door, as she was trying to pull her head away from him, knowing what was coming. The back of his hand caught her across the cheek and her head snapped back. It took this much for Tamara to wake up enough to talk. Her words were slurred.

“Hey, Marcus . . . you got a job for me? I’us fired today.”

Marcus’ hand slipped off Sara and he slowly turned to face Tamara. “I might.” He looked at her critically, doing a once-over from top to bottom. “Can you drive?”

Tamara had only a vague idea how to drive. Her uncle taught her a little, but she had only been 12 or 13. The words came out of her mouth unbidden. “Sure. I don’t have a car though.”

“Need something taken to Vegas. Day after tomorrow. Take her with you.”

Like a bag of groceries, Sara was dragged out of the room. It didn’t matter. Tamara had a job. Sara knew what she had to do to make it work. She licked her lips. It wasn’t that difficult to make a man quiet.

Chapter 13

Tamara and Sara were on the road to Las Vegas. The product was in the trunk. Tamara was high, very high. She said she could drive, but admitted she had only tried it once or twice. Sara knew how to drive, although she was really nervous. Sara was driving and too nervous to even think about getting high.

“Tammy, this was a bad idea . . .”

For some reason that she couldn't name, Tamara was confident and strangely happy. “No, honey, we're fine. We're gonna get a nice vacation outta this. When we get back, I'll get a new job. I will call my mother and tell her all about Las Vegas. And you'll be fine. It's easy.” Tamara wanted to stop and get the pipe out of the trunk. But she was hesitant. She was working again. It was a weird feeling. Like her mother was watching and telling her to be good.

Sara was not feeling easy, and she didn't like driving. The farthest she had ever driven was to the beach. It had taken forever, it was crowded and sandy, and she didn't like it anyway. She had never driven this far before, and as familiar gray industrial buildings faded away, she felt lonely and lost, even though she watched every road sign and knew she was going the right way.

Tamara soon fell asleep, but Sara didn't mind. It was better than listening to her chatter on about nothing in particular. The road hummed beneath the tires of the car Marcus had found for them, an older SUV, black, nothing special, plenty of them on the road. Marcus had said that was good. You want to blend in with the tourists, he said.

Sara was only an hour out of downtown, and the traffic had slowly lessened. She finally noticed that she was going 70, and there weren't many people around. She was in the slow lane,

and heard Marcus' voice in her head . . . stay at 70, stay in the slow lane, don't pass anyone, blend in.

The longer she drove, the more comfortable she felt. The road was soothing, with nothing around her but desert, some hills, and the occasional gas station perched next to the freeway. The road lulled her and she started to think about things. Memories started pushing up from long-buried places. She saw her baby's face. The red horse. The black button eye. The day he died. She didn't think about that much. She held onto the thought that it had never happened. That she never had a baby, or that her baby had died from some childhood disease. SIDS, maybe. Something easy, something painless. But the red horse kept swimming into her head, bobbing to the surface and making her eyes sting, though she didn't cry.

The desert was endless, the cars slipping by her, quietly. Despite Marcus' warnings, she passed the big trucks when she crept up on them, and their rumblings touched her inside, the low bass resonating in her thighs, touching her belly warmly, gently. The hills changed color, and the rocks at the side of the road loomed larger, then darker, and she finally saw nothing except the headlights and the white line at the side of the freeway, leading her on, coaxing her into another state.

As she came to the top of a hill, she saw a white glare spreading out across the black hills, and she recognized it. She knew it was lights, so she must be getting closer, but it was only Stateline, and the casinos that had sprung up there like weeds in the cracks of the sidewalk at home. She didn't stop, and Tamara stayed asleep beside her, stirring now and then while Sara willed her to stay asleep, to keep the roll of the road to herself, to keep the quiet and her memories all to herself.

With each mile it was as if she went farther into her head. The red horse. The baby, Marcus, her life in the city. She watched TV. She knew about other places, other lives. She knew that there were other ways to wake up in the morning, besides being hung over or horny. She knew that somewhere – maybe only on TV, but somewhere – there were people who didn't fight with each other every day. And in five short hours between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, she decided that she was not going back. She was going to stay in Las Vegas. She just had to find a way.

Tamara snored a little and shifted in her seat. Sara glanced over. That would mean teaching Tamara how to drive, for real. In a couple of days. She rolled her right shoulder back, easing the cramp that was settling in. She could find a way. Maybe she would have car trouble for a couple of days, and then send Tammy back. Two days should be enough. No product in the car. No risk. Marcus wouldn't come to find her. He was pretty bored of her by now. And she knew he had some other woman. She could smell it on him.

* * *

At 2:00 a.m., the two women drove up to an address off Maryland Parkway. They knew exactly where to go. Marcus made them memorize the instructions, and his threats were a good motivator.

They knocked at the door of the condo, and Genie opened it, very awake, and very respectful.

“Ladies . . . so glad to see you. Please come in.”

Sara shook her hair back and smiled as she hadn't done since before she was pregnant, back when she knew how to tease. It came back quickly, that feeling of power. And it seemed to work.

“Thank you . . .” She put on her made-for-television accent. “And you must be Genie.”

“That is my name. And you are . . .?”

He mirrored her television-movie manners, which helped her remember how to flirt. “I am Sara. And this is my friend, Tammy.” Tamara just nodded and smiled, still groggy from the ride, sleepy and wanting another pipefull.

“You look tired, Tammy. Why don’t you have a seat on the couch and Sara and I will discuss business.”

That was perfect for Tamara, who curled up on the chrome and leather sofa, and fell fast asleep. Sara and Genie spoke quietly in the kitchen and finished Marcus’ business. Then they started their own.

Chapter 14

Genie hated calling LA. First of all, he wasn't fluent enough to clearly understand the street talk that accompanied the dealing. Secondly, he hated talking to these guys over the phone; they always made it sound like they were doing him a favor. They weren't. It was only business.

The conversations were always short. He hung up not knowing if the deal were made, or what the price was they had settled upon. But he'd show up at the meet site, and someone would be there, usually a black guy with an attitude. One guy had been real pleasant, but he lasted only a month.

Genie's business was brisk. He serviced a mid-level clientele, mostly business people, and reporters (he liked selling to reporters, especially TV reporters. Oh, how he loved television reporters!) and occasionally an unemployed actor or a dancer, from along The Strip. He stayed away from the casinos, since doing business there was off-limits to all but insiders. He stayed away from the streets, because the cops loved to bust the street people but they stayed away from the "respectable" people, people like his clients.

The buy this week was especially heavy, the result of two big summer parties this weekend. One was a going away party for the news director at Channel 10, and Genie was going to show up at that one in person. The other one was a wake for a dancer who had killed himself after being diagnosed with AIDS. Although Genie had not received any advance orders for this one, he was planning on sticking close to the phone. Experience told him these things always turned into celebrations of a sort, and often lasted for several days, dancing on the head of a pin.

Stretching into a Gumby-esque posture, Genie yawned wearily and reached for the phone to call LA. It rang as his hand touched the receiver.

“Hi, this is Genie.”

“Hello, dear.”

Genie scrambled mentally, knowing that he should know who this was, but not remembering.

“You don’t know who this is, do you?”

Oh God! It was so close, like having a hair on your tongue that you couldn’t quite find . .

“Of course I do. It’s Vanessa . . .” That did it. It always worked. Tell a woman another woman’s name, and she might think you’re joking. On the other hand, she might blow up and get angry.

“You slime! After all the time we spent together, you can’t even remember my name!”

Ah, yes. It was only a matter of time. “Cassandra, my dear, I was only joking . . .”

The proper outrage was expended on Cassie’s part, and Genie happily chattered away with a woman he had not seen for several years. They had lived together eons ago, when he was still working at a nine-to-five job, making ends meet only by supplementing his pay with a few under-the-counter deals. The job was a faraway nightmare to him now. He had been the counter boy at an auto parts warehouse. A few parts came in without the right paperwork, and he overlooked the error, for a slight fee. It was a step in the right direction, though, as he met a number of L.A.business types through the job. Genie knew he was supposed to call them “home boys” or some such thing, but he couldn’t stomach street talk. He found it strained and as false as the silicon he faced daily.

“Genie, darling, I am calling because of something important.”

“Cassie, my dear, am I not reason enough to call?”

“You know that man I moved in with?”

“I really can’t be expected to keep track of them, dear.”

“No, really. Duane. Nice guy. You said he sounded much better than the others.”

“Duane . . . Is he the one that marches and protests and things?”

“Yes, that’s the one. A big, blond guy . . . although I can’t remember if you ever met him. He’s missing.”

“So . . .?”

“I need your help to find him. The last time anyone saw him, he was in Las Vegas. He was supposed to go to a protest at Yucca Flats, but some of the others involved say he went home with a woman named Suzi Bates, and never showed up again. Suzi Bates won’t return my calls, but I don’t think she had anything to do with it anyway – Genie, why are you laughing?”

“Suzi Bates is with the Alliance . . .” Genie paused, weighing whether releasing this information was dangerous to him. “She’s a lesbian. She didn’t bring any man home with her unless he was buying or holding.” Something was starting to gel in his brain, and he didn’t like it.

“Aw, Duane wouldn’t do . . . How well do you know her, Genie?”

Smiling in the phone, Genie said, “Pretty well, Cassie. Pretty well.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. Genie looked at his watch. The window within which he could call his contact in L.A. was closing, and his attention shifted from pleasure to business. But something nagged at him.

“Genie, can I stay with you for a few days?”

“Cassie, I’ve got to get off the phone . . . I’ve got to make a call.”

“Genie, can I stay with you . . . please?”

“Sure, Cassie, call me when you get into town, but I really do have to go. I didn’t realize how late it was getting.”

“Thanks, love. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

Quickly, Genie started to dial his LA. connection. Then he remembered. Duane. The problems on the site. Suzi.

“I don’t have time for this.” He finished dialing and placed his order, which was taken in the usual shifting, confusing manner. Julee hung up at the other end of the line, grimacing at his first contact with one of the Las Vegas clients. It didn’t sound like no business man. Sounded like some little rich boy from uptown, trying to get his dick wet in downtown pussy.

Julee couldn’t complain too much. It was nice getting a piece of this pie; he could see himself moving into Las Vegas, permanent. He liked the idea of getting out of South Central. But a black man had no place in Vegas, or so he’s been told, although he had never been there. It was a white man’s city. Used to be you could say you worked in a kitchen at one of the casinos, but now you had to speak Spanish to get away from that. So he was told.

No matter, two more calls and the weekly run into Vegas would have to go.

Julee sneered and grimaced in the general direction of the telephone. He wasn’t angry or sad, or even disturbed with anyone. He just knew, he had been taught from a very early age, that you had to act like that all the time. He never stopped to figure out why. It was only when he was alone that he allowed himself the luxury of relaxing. After the hit a few weeks ago, he had been looked at with greater respect by some, men not affiliated with the warring gangs. Julee did not want to be any more involved with the gangs; he was too old. The gangs pulled in kids when they weren’t talking yet. On the other hand, he might forget and say something that wasn’t just right, and be killed on the spot by some 12-year old with a hard-on and a semiautomatic pistol.

“Julee.” A deep voice bounced out of the other room like the bass beat that precedes a good car stereo.

“Yeah, man. Time for the Vegas run. You got someone to do it?”

“Marcus says he’ll take care of it.”

It was going to be a large shipment for the Vegas run, but less than the largest Julee had handled. He was comfortable. This latest development, the demise of a cross-towner, put him into a higher league. He had attracted some attention from a good group. The man with the bass voice was one of them. Keeping an eye on the way he did business. A helping hand.

The chance of working into a partnership with these men was very appealing. They had the contacts, they were quiet, and hardworking, without any of the inside bickering and pettiness that could be found in some of the bigger operations. He needed to make a few more buys, do a few more runs, and he could move into a better class. He would be paid well, respected. Like other young professionals who worked downtown, Julee’s risks would be great and the company would demand long hours from him. His pay would increase as he brought in more clients of his own. It was a good arrangement. Very professional. Very business-like and up-front. Julee was on his way to a long and distinguished career. If he could stay alive.

Chapter 15

"This is Sasha Trembly. Channel 12 News has learned that one of the protesters, who have been gathered around the gate to this test site over the past few days, has gotten in. We have learned from a source, who refuses to be identified, that the protester was concealed in a catering truck, a truck which delivered food to the painters who were working on these shacks, behind me. These are guard shacks, but the guards were at the gate and not in this shack on Tuesday afternoon when the protester snuck in. The military is saying nothing. The nature of the test on-site today has not been discussed publicly. The only reports we have had, have been from protest groups such as this one.

"At first Channel 12 was reluctant to accept the word of the Alliance, a group formed specifically to battle the spread of nuclear weapons. But calls to the military personnel who staff the Yucca Flats test site provided us with no denial . . . denials which have come before, when charges like this have been leveled. As to the protester, the military says it knows of no one crossing the perimeter of the base. In fact, the military strongly denies that anything like that could happen here. Who to believe? We didn't know either. So we came out here, to the base, to find out. Here with me is Suzi Bates, a spokesperson for the Alliance. Suzi, what do you know of a protester, a member of your group who gained access to the base?"

The little blond looked convincingly serious, as she carefully explained what she did not know.

"The Alliance has no information about this, Sasha. Since you came and started asking questions, I've heard a lot of rumors. But no one has anything concrete. There was someone here a couple of days ago who disappeared about the time that someone allegedly got on to the base.

But, he could have just gone home. We don't keep tabs on each other that carefully. If someone wants to leave, they can."

"Did you see the catering truck we are talking about?"

"Of course! We were all standing around thinking of how much we wished they would be allowed to stop out here, and give us something to drink. The guards told them not to stop, because of security reasons. But they just wanted to make it harder on us . . . you know how hot it was out here a couple of days ago."

Sasha saw, from the corner of her eye, a production aide signaling furiously. "We'll have updates throughout the morning. Reporting live from Yucca Flats, this is Sasha Trembly, News 12."

She held the position for a moment, then turned and shouted "What is it?" The aide did not answer, instead gesturing for Sasha to come over. Away from the mass of protesters, the aide lowered his voice. "Sasha, I found someone interesting. . . ."

"So?" She was obviously impatient with the delay.

John paused, shrugged, and continued. "One of the girls here apparently struck up quite a conversation with one of the guards. They met after hours. They even went dancing and . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, she got some information. Now, I don't know how good it is . . ."

"I don't care how good it is, what did she say?"

"The guard said one of the big guys from Washington, a General, is here to watch some kind of test. Now it may be the test of a clean nuke. We don't know that. The guard didn't know that."

"Which girl?"

"She told me and she took off. She said she didn't want anybody to find out what she had done."

"Oh, shit. Well, we'll have to go with it. Call the station. See if anyone has heard anything, especially about any generals being in town. Maybe call somebody . . . call somebody else. You're always telling me that this is a small town . . . I hope you're right."

"Sasha, one more thing. This is the military. They won't deny anything, they won't admit anything. But if you say something outrageous, they may say something."

"John, what are you suggesting?"

"The guard said some big brass, right?"

"Right."

"So stretch it a little. Say that a personal representative of the Chief of Staff was here. Yesterday. And that he's probably still here, although we can't say for sure. I expect you're already going to say we have confirmation of a clean nuclear test, right?"

"Right."

"Well?"

"Okay." Sasha turned back toward the crowd of people in front of the gate. As she walked towards them, she started shouting. "Excuse me! Everyone! Could I get your attention please?" One by one people were turning toward her and the general rumble of the various conversations slowed.

"We just received a report that one of the top people at the Pentagon was at this site yesterday. We're not sure if that person is here today. Is there anybody who saw, or thinks they saw a Pentagon-type? And is there anybody who could identify that person?"

The rumble resumed and picked up its pace until there was a veritable landslide of chattering going on. Finally, one person emerged from the crowd and said, "I saw somebody."

Sasha smiled. Before long, she would be back on the air with another update. This one would identify an eyewitness to a top level Pentagon-type visiting Yucca Flats to witness the testing of a clean nuclear device. It was going to be a good day.

Chapter16

How long does it take . . . I read in the movies -- Oh, Lord! -- Movies showed these people's skin falling off in just a few minutes. Oh what the hell! What do the movies know! This is radioactivity. My skin could fall off today, it could fall off tomorrow, my dick could fall off today for all I know. Oh, God, look . . . There's a red patch here on my arm. It's going to start any second now . . . Mom, Mom was right. Oh, Lord, I wanted to do so much more. I wanted to have kids. Why the hell would I put kids in a world like this . . . I wonder if it will hurt? I guess they'll give me drugs . . . Oh, God, where am I? They won't give me drugs here. They'll want me to suffer. Press knows I'm here . . . maybe that will make it better . . . at least I might get into a real hospital. Oh, God, how long does it take to die? I wanted to have kids. I always wanted to have kids. I don't want to die. There are so many people I have to say something to first. Oh, Lord, I didn't think this would happen. My head hurts. I wonder if my hair is falling out....?

Duane was staring at his arms handcuffed to a belt they had put around his waist. He was completely unaware of the frenetic military activity going on around him. He was so absorbed in a thorough assessment of each area of his body, that he did not notice the outhouse odor that surrounded him: as parched as he was, when the explosion went off, whatever urine he had possessed soaked his pants. Occasionally, someone in a doctor's coat would take a look then walk away, aware that attempting conversation would be fruitless. Conversation or treatment appeared unnecessary; Duane looked sunburned, and had a few bruises. Otherwise, he was unhurt.

In an unconscious gesture, Duane shook his head to clear the hair from his eyes. A lock of hair, loosened either by the explosion or by his fall, floated down to his lap. His eyes grew wide, he stopped breathing and then he started to scream.

The sound was terror. To the soldiers milling about, Duane appeared crazy, at best. Only one remembered intimations of an above-ground nuclear test which was to be held today. His superiors had not warned any base personnel to take radiation precautions so no one did. Nevertheless, one soldier had watched Sasha Trembly on the eleven o'clock news the night before; that soldier moved as far as possible from the screaming man and looked for ways to perform duties in another area of the compound. As a result, that soldier was the first to see General Rhodes stride into the building. His aide followed, though at a short distance, still pale.

Duane was hic-coughing now, the first force of his hysteria softening to a surrender of sorts. Occasionally a sob would bubble forth. His eyes were red, his face wet, his nose running from the constant crying since the blast went off. With his hands tied he could not wipe his nose. It may have been that, in his hysteria, he would not have thought to do it. However, what the General saw was a picture of that which he despised most in his country: a snot-nosed, long-haired kid who stuck his uninformed face in places it did not belong. Not only that, but this same snot-nosed, long-haired kid had breached security at a theoretically impenetrable military installation, under his command, and while he was there. Moreover, this same kid was putting a bad taste in his mouth on a day he expected to be quietly explaining his ideas for the democratization of the world to the President. For that reason, the General was understandably upset.

"Kill him."

His aide stumbled forward and like the soldier he was asked the General for his reason so that the proper paperwork could be completed.

"He's a spy. Shoot him."

"I'm afraid that would entail a trial, General."

"Oh, hell."

The General was beginning to feel a depression coming on. For months, while waiting for Miles to complete this task, the General had stepped more spryly than he had since his youth. He was excited, he was thrilled, he had something to look forward to. Something very special. Now the day was upon him. Everything had gone exactly as planned. The device was perfect. And suddenly this long-haired thing appears, right out of his nightmares, forcing him right back into the center of the web that was politics in the twenty-first century. He had to hesitate, he had to wring his hands and act like a woman, constantly changing his mind or worrying what someone else might say because of a decision that he made. If there were justice in the world, if there were a god, he should be able to take this ass out and shoot him. But he could not. And it pissed him off. The General was not one to repeat himself but it seemed appropriate.

"Oh hell. Where's the doctor?"

The man in the doctor's coat who had tsk-tsk'd over Duane much of the past hour appeared promptly at his side.

"Give him something. I want to talk to him." A very small smile, more appropriately described as a lessening of the deep frown the General was wearing, played upon his lips. It was not the shot he had planned, but it would have to do.

* * *

Even sedated, trying to interrogate Duane was like eating jello with a fork. Between the stuttering and the crying, the General was assured that his early surmise was correct: this was just one of the protesters who were still sitting out by the front gate unaware that the blast had taken place. Duane was rambling on about truth and justice and how he wanted to have kids and how he missed his girlfriend and he was so sorry and he didn't want to die. The General was musing over ways to convince the Pentagon that the boy was killed in the initial blast when the phone

rang. At that point, the General turned to the doctor and said, "I need him to die on the operating table. We pulled him off the blast site, and you were trying to save his life when he died. Is that possible?"

The doctor shrugged, and while nodding said, "Sure."

His aide interrupted. "There is a reporter outside the gates from a Las Vegas television station. She is broadcasting that there is someone from the protest group inside the test facility who will be attempting to stop the blast. She says he got in two days ago on a catering truck."

"But no one knows I'm here except Suzi. She told me no one else could know." Duane, for the moment, was lucid. Unfortunately, it did not last. After an hour of sitting in a vinyl-backed chair, Duane shifted his weight. His skin had formed a bond with the vinyl. When it pulled away, his fears of radiation death re-ignited and he relapsed into gibbering. With a few short appropriate gestures, the General cleared the room, except for the doctor and his aide.

"Work on him. He saw a clean nuclear device explode. There was shielding and he suffered only minor injuries. A complete medical work-up will have to be provided. He seems to have minor burns from the explosion . . . make those worse if you have to. The outcome we want is to provide a convincing record that this kid was injured during a carefully-controlled and shielded detonation of a nuclear device. You might give him a few symptoms of radiation poisoning as well. I want a complete report within twenty-four hours as to exactly what he was told, exactly how he was programmed and exactly what symptoms he will exhibit for how long. This kid goes out into the world believing that he has survived a nuclear blast."

With a final piercing glance at Duane, the General turned and headed for the door, but he stopped. "One other thing." He again faced his aide. "Let him know that any communication with the press on this issue will be considered grounds by the Pentagon for re-opening the case

and pressing charges of treason. Even an off-hand remark to a reporter will give me the opening I need to shoot him." The General smiled. "Maybe . . . no, make sure he stays away from reporters."

Chapter17

"Damn!"

Sasha was pacing, furious. She was frustrated, and that was an emotion alien to her. First of all, she was hot. She was standing in the middle of this God-forsaken desert, with a bunch of useless rejects from the 60's, none of whom had any information she could use. She had a headache, she was tired, and her "Story of The Century" was turning out to be nothing at all. That means she dragged herself out of bed at some horrendous hour for no good reason, for the second day in a row, in order to get dirty, dusty, angry and frustrated. She was going to kill Genie.

"Damn!" The sound exploded, popping into the air like a firecracker.

"Sash, calm down, girl." Her production assistant walked up behind her. Putting his hands on her shoulders, he tried to explain that even the best stories didn't pan out sometimes. She whirled around, eyes flashing and claws out, "No, you don't understand! I need in there, or this whole thing will go for nothing. If there is somebody on the test site, they could arrest them and be done with it, and there would be nothing I will get out of it. Nothing! Do you understand now! We need to show, somehow, that the test was stopped because of one of these guys. No pictures -- no story."

In white pants that had just come back from the cleaners, Sasha sat in the dust of the desert. There had been lumps at the back of her throat which she had interpreted as meaning she should cry, but she just didn't feel like it right now. She would like to, but it would probably ruin what

was left of her makeup. Sasha combed her mind for anyone who could help her onto that base. She had dated military men, a common thing around Las Vegas, she had even dated a general once, although she didn't know what had happened to him. There had been a colonel once. She was fairly certain he had been promoted, too. She couldn't remember much about him though, except to recall that one of his buttons gouged a fairly deep scratch into the small of her back. But, it was worth a try, especially since she had no other options.

"John! There is a little base just south of the city . . . what's it called?"

"I don't know."

"Well find out! There is a colonel down there -- named Roger Mortis . . . M - O - R - T - I - S . . . call the station and get him patched through to the van. Use my name . . . he'll know it."

Waiting for her call to be patched through, Sasha wandered through the crowd around the gate, listening to conversations and hoping for information that could give her the angle she needed to talk her way on to the base. Bits and pieces she heard:

"I wasn't here yesterday. What happened?"

"Someone tried to smuggle herself onto the base. She didn't tell anybody anything . . . in fact, we didn't even see her the night before."

A fat, sweating brunette, obviously eavesdropping -- looked back over her shoulder dropped a morsel into the conversation: "Maybe she disappeared with that hot guy from Reno."

"What hot guy from Reno?"

The brunette turned around. "That good-looking southerner, the blond. The one with the great chest."

Sasha stood, nonchalantly, with her back to the threesome.

"Have you seen him today?"

The brunette shook her head, and drops of sweat which had beaded on her face splashed Sasha in the back of her neck.

"No! And I've been looking for him! The past few days, there hasn't been much to look at except him."

Sasha tried to casually wipe the droplets from her neck, while the threesome giggled.

"Do you suppose he tried to sneak in too?"

"Maybe . . . but if he did, they would have caught him. They caught the other girl."

"I wonder what's going to happen to her . . . You know, she's out already. What's up with that?"

Sasha was no longer interested in the conversation, and walked back to the van, optimistic for the first time that day. John leaned out of the van and said, "Sash, I've got the base on the line . . . do you want to take it from here?"

"Yes. John, circulate among the crowd, and find out as much as you can -- carefully, casually -- about some southerner from Reno, with a great body, who was last seen trotting off with Suzi Bates, the woman who got arrested yesterday. His name is probably Duane Saunders."

John smiled and nodded, handing Sasha the phone as he stepped off the van.

"Yes? This is Sasha Trembly, Channel 12 news. I am calling for Colonel Roger Mortis . . . Yes, I know what time it is. I thought he got to work early . . . Yes, I'll hold."

It was just past 7:30 in the morning, and Sasha wondered if she would be able to get to Mortis before the blast was set off.

"Well, well! Rigger! Still as stiff as ever, I trust . . ." She chuckled. "It's been a long time. That's not my fault . . . my mamma always told me that a good girl never calls a boy, the

boy is supposed to call her . . . No, I never got a message! Well, I suppose it doesn't matter now . . . I fired my secretary. She was always doing that sort of thing.

"Rigger, I have a favor to ask. I know it's is a big one, but it means so much -- I need to get on the base at Yucca Flats."

She listened for a moment, then cut in.

"No, I need to get on this morning. They are having that test here . . . yes, that's the one. Yes, it's the first above-ground nuclear test in I don't know how many years. The public has the right to at least see pictures of it . . . is there anyone you can contact? What? It's done already?" She cursed under her breath. "No, I still want you! Of course I want you... when are you coming into town?"

Sasha tapped her foot, and sucked on her broken nail as she waited for the Colonel to come back to reality.

"That's great, honey. But I still need to get back on the base. What? It went off yesterday? We didn't see a thing. Oh, well that would be great! . . . How long do you think it will be before you get an answer? . . . Well, we could do the 'just went off' story... that's almost as good. Is there someone I can talk to? Great! . . . Of course! I'd love to see you! Now, remember, you are supposed to call me. . . Great, I'll look forward to it. You're sweet."

Chapter 18

Genie's real name was Roy. He hated it. Hadn't used it since high school. And the only reason he used it in high school was because they made him. He told only one person his real name in twenty years. Every now and then, despite the intense desire he felt for Sasha, he wished he had never met her.

"Roy!"

"Sasha, don't call me that." His elastic grin disappeared, replaced by an equally elastic frown.

"I know it gets your attention, honey, and it did, didn't it?"

Sasha sidled up to him, behind some speakers that had momentarily gone quiet next to a pristine pool. Both were carrying glasses of champagne and strawberries.

"Who'd you come in with?"

"An old girlfriend, name of Cassandra."

"Oooh, baby . . . I thought I was the only one for you."

She flashed him a smile that blinded him. He stuttered.

"Sasha, she's in town looking for her boyfriend . . . she's not with –"

"Hold on there, lover – I don't care who you sleep with, means nothing to me. I just wanted to know . . ." She started to walk away, coyly looking over her shoulder at him, so he grabbed wildly for anything that would recapture her interest.

"He disappeared at the test site a few days ago. Weren't you out there?"

It worked.

"Who disappeared . . . where?" Sasha whipped around to face him.

“Cassandra’s boyfriend. He went to the test site for a protest, and no one’s heard from him since. D’you hear anything? Names’s Duane.”

“Yeah, I might of. Where is your girlfriend, anyway?” Sasha looked around her, again predatory.

Cassandra was across the pool, inspecting various items which were probably food, but looked like mini-artworks. She was hungry, but didn’t want to eat something that would turn out to be a high-class version of a pencil eraser shaped like a pineapple.

“Cassie, this is Sasha. Sasha, this is Cassandra Smith. Another refuge from middle America. You two should have a lot in common.” Elegantly sardonic, he stepped back and watched, half-hoping for a cat fight. He was disappointed.

The two, one dark, one light, both former lovers of the man beside them, sized each other up. Sasha, the practiced one, smiled first.

“Nice to meet you. You’re looking for Duane . . . He has a last name?”

“Saunders. He’s about six-one, blond, got a southern accent. . .” She drifted off for a second.

“ . . . it gets thicker when he’s with a blond . . .” Cassie looked at Sasha. “You’d remember him if you met him. He’s . . . memorable.”

“That’s the description of the man who snuck onto the test site. There has been no report of him by the base. Nothing. That doesn’t mean they didn’t find him, though. It just means they aren’t talking.”

The three huddled by the pool, while the music began again and drifted across the desert, and the sunlight glinted off the ripples in the pool until the sun set and the ripples were backlit from under the water. They finally drifted themselves back to Genie’s condo, and spent the night

together, talking and drinking and sampling Genie's inventory. By early morning, the three of them were in bed together.

Genie was deliriously happy. Sasha was back in his bed; having Cassandra was icing. He was used to long hours and he was used to the combination of intoxicants racing through his body. He was savoring the moment, watching the sleeping women and asking the obvious question: what next?

Chapter 19

It was months later when Cassandra saw Duane again.

He got off the plane, but she did not recognize him at first. One side of his face was red and scarred and all of the hair -- that soft, long sandy-brown hair -- was gone. In its place, from his forehead on the right side back to behind his ear was a mottled purplish bruise. It was peeling in spots. Duane's eye on that side was half closed and he told her he could not see anything except shapes, vague shapes out of that side. His arm was similarly discolored. He was so thin and he looked so old Cassandra still did not think she knew this man, even after he called her name twice. She stared for a long time and then she started to cry.

Cassandra had not been told what was happening to Duane. A woman called Suzi had telephoned, and told her that Duane had managed to get on the test site but no word had been heard since. Her trip to Las Vegas had cost a fortune and done no good. After a week, she came home and waited. It was Duane himself who finally called, two months later, and told her that he was being allowed to fly home. She was told not to say anything to anyone about his return nor about where he had been.

He spoke very slowly, and very deliberately. She tried to get him to say something, anything that would make her believe that it was really him on the other end of the phone, that it was not a trick. But he had very quietly, very slowly told her that it would be alright if she would just meet him at the airport. He said he just wanted to come home.

He was limping as he walked to the car and he had to explain under her insistent and tearful questioning, that the doctors had to cut away part of his thigh. He had also lost one testicle, he

said, and here he smiled for the first time. "But, baby, I ain't dead yet. They tell me I can have kids still, if you want to try with me."

Cassandra was still horrified at his physical condition, but old habits -- especially flirtatious ones -- die hard: "Ooooooh . . . we can try all you want." She was smiling, but the smile disappeared so quickly that he could not swear it had ever been there. "But first, let's get you home." There is a pause. "I learned how to cook while you were gone."

"I . . . I can't eat much."

"Why?"

"To tell you the truth, I seem to throw up everything I eat."

"How long is that supposed to last?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me much. I was in a military hospital, after all. They told me it would get better, but they didn't tell me much else."

"Well, after two months in a military hospital, you must want something to eat . . ." She was swallowing hard, but Cassandra could not keep the tears out of her eyes or out of her voice. In the next few days, she would shed more tears than she had in her entire life, and the tears provided an interesting filter through which she saw the past and the present. The future she managed to choke back. For once, what was in front of her, what was tangible, was far more frightening than anything she could imagine.

On the way home in the car, Duane fell asleep. He did not waken when she drove up to the house. She saw he was breathing, but she was afraid to touch him. The two of them sat in the car until nearly dark until Duane awoke, smiled, and asked for lasagna.

A week later, Duane had gained some weight, and was cautiously optimistic about his potential life span because he had not thrown up since he left the hospital. Cassandra was walking around singing much of the time because Duane was more attentive than he had ever been and was even talking marriage and children, something that had never happened before. That small cynical voice in the back of her head, that she had lived with for so many years, was not still. It would occasionally pipe up loud enough to say that if this is what radiation did to someone it should be standard treatment for every man on the west coast.

A woman named Suzi Bates kept calling, asking about Duane. She came up and took pictures, but Duane begged her not to talk to the press. Finally, Suzi convinced Duane to set up a meeting with local activists. She said she could arrange for financing for some real activism. The two spoke for hours. If Genie hadn't convinced Cassandra that Suzi was not into men, it never would have happened. But Genie was trustworthy. A lying sack-of-shit drug dealer, but Cassandra somehow knew he wouldn't lie to her.

Finally, Duane had a few of his friends over. He said he had a tale to tell. He was very secretive about it; Cassandra could not get him to discuss it with her at all. Only he and Suzi knew all the details. It was better that way, he said. He didn't want her to get into trouble with anyone. Word was spread, and on Thursday night, a few weeks after he got home, nearly two dozen people showed up at their house. It was an eclectic bunch, but one man stood out, a friend of Suzi's. He went by the name of CJ, but not surprisingly, he was known as the Swede.

The Swede looked his part. He was over six feet tall, muscular and blond, with a slowness of speech that frustrated him. However, it had the beneficial side-effect of making him appear slow-witted, which he had learned to turn to his advantage. His presence at Duane's house was most flattering, because he was known as a serious activist. In the past, he had avoided Duane's

circle of friends as dilettantes. The Swede still believed that his assessment was correct, but Suzi said to come. And he never said no to Suzi. Besides that, the stories he had heard about what happened to Duane were too interesting to pass up.

Duane had Cassandra set him up in the center of the postage stamp-sized living room before people were to arrive. Suzi sat in a corner, half-hidden in shadow, on the far side of the room. Duane barely looked at her. They had discussed this in detail. He knew how bad he looked. He could tell, not only from his own observations, but from the reaction he had received from Cassandra and the few other friends who had seen him since his homecoming. He believed that the people filtering in today would listen much more closely to what he had to say if their first reaction was one of shock. His appearance had the desired effect. As individuals or couples strayed from the front of the house and walked in they were hit -- almost physically -- with this mutilated scarecrow who used to be one of the most sought-after men in the area. A few of the women acted as Cassandra had; they made mewling noises of sympathy while tears coursed down their faces. Duane kindly refused to answer all questions, saying that he wanted to wait until everyone was there. When the Swede sauntered in, everyone immediately began to quiet down and find a place to sit.

Although he and Suzi had said little to Cassandra, Duane had asked her to do one small favor for him: he wanted an introduction. And the only introduction he wanted was her description of how she felt when she first saw him at the airport. That, Cassandra was willing to do, and she began almost casually, but finished as Suzi said she would -- in tears.

"That was a week ago. I came home after two months in a military hospital . . . although where it was I can't say. I think I was somewhere near the test site. I could have been on the test site, but one thing was sure . . . I was sick as a dog. They pulled me off the field where the test

takes place. I remember being real scared, and . . . more than anything I wanted to go home one more time, 'cause I had so many people I had to say goodbye to. I don't remember feeling hurt but it wasn't long after that that I woke up in the worst pain I've ever known. This whole side of me - - and you've seen it yourselves -- was charbroiled, like someone had taken a blowtorch to it. On the other side . . . well, you can't even see it. It was like the burn you get when you get too close to the oven, and the gas goes on suddenly. Like a flash burn, with only evidence of anything being a little like a sunburn, and the hair singed away. The funny part about it was that, well, that's the side that was closest to the explosion. That's how weird radiation is.

"I couldn't eat. I didn't eat for a long time. It wasn't that I hurt so bad, it was that every time I tried to put something in my stomach, I threw up. I asked them over and over for something to make my stomach feel better, just so I could eat. But they told me they had done everything they could. They gave me lots of vitamins and said there was not much else they could do until the radiation figured out what it was going to do by itself. One day I woke up, and found they had stuck some kind of needle in my thigh, apparently, while I was sleeping. My leg started twitching all around and they took some tests. They ended up cutting out a part of my leg, and took one of my balls with it. Apparently the radiation had started some kind of a growth in that area. I didn't think anything was wrong. One day I have a whole leg and two balls and the next day I'm . . . cut up like a chicken.

"I wish I could tell you what it was like to see what I saw. Because of all the things I'm telling you right now, nothing was so horrifying, nothing was like what I saw. I went down there when I did because I was sure they wouldn't set off this thing until after the truck with the military guy in it . . . after that truck was over a hill. Well, the guy had just gotten into the truck and had started to drive away when I ran in, as fast as I could from a hiding place on top of a dune down

into this little valley. I had been waiting for two days to get to this. I was ready. I knew it was dangerous. But I was more frightened of being arrested and interrogated by the military than I was of them blowing up a nuclear bomb in my face. I never thought that would happen . . . not in a million years." Duane was silent for a moment.

"They placed the bomb in some kind of box or behind some sort of shielding. A big metal wall surrounded the base of where the bomb was. I asked them later, and you might guess they didn't tell me much. But one guard told me that they had actually put the bomb in a hole, a pretty deep one, so that there would be a minimum of radiation at ground level. He said that's what saved my life. And that's why they were unconcerned about the guy in the truck. He didn't really need time to get away, because radiation at ground level was going to be minimal." Duane leaned back against his chair and let out a slow ragged sigh. "I just never thought I'd be in the middle of it, that's all. But, I guess it doesn't matter tonight, 'cause that's not why we're here. Why I asked you to come here is because I have a plan. I don't know how much good it will do to talk about this, because I don't know if we can do it, or if anyone can do it. But I had two months to think about it and this is what I came up with.

"I can't tell you how I felt when I saw that cloud go up . . . and up, and up and turn into that mushroom. Even on the ground, underneath, you could tell what was going on, and I was scared shitless. I knew why I was there. I had a commitment to changing things. And yet, that thing was so much bigger, so much more than I ever expected that . . ." He stopped for a minute. His lower lip quivering like an infant's, he began again, his voice thick, he spoke through clenched teeth. "All I knew was that I was going to die. All I knew was that I saw hell, it was right in front of me and there wasn't shit I could do. And for two months I thought about this. For two months I thought to myself that everybody who ever said 'yes' to any kind of nuclear development should

see one of these clouds. Right up front. Right in their own backyard, with their wives and their kids and their dogs and their drinking buddies sitting right next to them, all of them knowing they were going to die right that day, right that time and nobody was ever going to help them 'cause there weren't nobody that could help them."

The room was cold and silent, and as Duane looked from face to face, very few people were breathing. A young one, a girl of seventeen, broke the silence: "What are we gonna do?"

"We got to build one of those things. We gotta make a fake, that looks like the one I saw, a big old cloud with a mushroom on top and we set it off right in the middle of the biggest city we can find. In fact, I been thinking, we should set it off right next to a military base. Let's see how those boys think about nukes after they see a cloud right next to them." With a slight smile on his face, Duane turned to the Swede, knowing that he was the one who could set a plan of this magnitude into action.

"Well?"

The big man shifted, and his eyes flicked over to the corner where Suzi was hiding in the shadows.

"I think it can be done. I know someone who lives in San Francisco who is very smart. If anyone can do such a thing, he can. He is a little crazy, I think. But I like your plan. We can work with him, if we pay him, and if he can do it we will take the mushroom cloud to Los Angeles. There are more people there, and it is warmer, so more people will be outside to see. If we do it in San Francisco it will be too cold, and too many people will be inside."

Heads around the room were nodding, sagely, at this bit of wisdom and foresight in placing the mushroom cloud in a city where people were notoriously fond of the outdoors.

There was much small talk after that and quite a few people asked the Swede about the crazy San Franciscan who could build this thing. The big man was reticent, saying his mad scientist did not like notoriety, and that the quieter this project stayed, the better. Suzi collected checks and cash, even a few pieces of jewelry. Before everyone left, all were warned to keep this under their hat. Suzi left with the Swede. Duane was glowing with pride when the house was finally quiet and Cassandra came to help him upstairs to bed.

"Baby, I think we did a lot of good tonight. I hope the Swede's right about that guy in San Francisco. He sounds a little weird, but if he's as good as the Swede says he is, he should be able to build this thing." Cassandra said nothing, instead hooking her arm around Duane's waist as they approached the stairs. "This is so exciting! I almost got killed, but I didn't -- I'm still alive -- I get a whole new chance. And now I get a chance to do something bigger and better than anything I'd ever dreamed I could. I am so . . . ah . . . well, grateful that I got another chance." He looked at her, and a frown started to develop between his eyes. "Baby, you've been real quiet all night and now you look upset. What's wrong? Did I do something?"

"Duane, I am happy that you are here. I am grateful that you are still alive." She sighed. "But you're hurt, you're scrawny and you should be in bed. I still don't know if you are going to be here tomorrow or if you are going to die in the night."

She started to hitch him up the stairs. With an exaggerated exasperation, she said, "And then what am I going to have to do? Drag your damn body down the stairs thump, thump, thump. In the meantime I haven't gotten anything out of you since you got home, no fuckety-fuckety. Only some lame excuse that you were hit by a nuclear bomb." By this time, the two of them were laughing so hard that, without thinking, they stood up straight and banged their heads on the ceiling forcing them to laugh even more. Duane suddenly turned serious, and said, "I'm real sorry, baby,

I really am. I have been sick and you've been real good to me." He could hear her snort in disbelief at this comment, though her t-shirt was over her head. "No, I mean it, baby. I know I can still get a hard on. At least I know I could before they operated . . . on me.

"I was lying in the hospital. I was sleeping . . ." The crease between his eyes deepened as he struggled to remember something on the edges of his consciousness. "I woke up and I remember feeling like I had a tremendous hard on. They had me in restraints at night, although I don't know why. So I could only lift my head up a little bit. I saw one of the doctors standing there. I remember thinking that he looked real weird, real creepy. And I knew my pants were off cause I could feel it. It was cold. But I couldn't see anything and I couldn't raise my hands because of the restraints. Then there was this horrible pain in my leg and the doctor said it was good I was awake because he had to do something."

Cassandra was standing frozen in the middle of the room, unable to reconcile this sad tale of an invalid with the warning bell the cynical part of her was setting off like a fire alarm in her head.

"Anyway, like they said, I'm just happy I'm still alive." This last line was said with a weary resignation. It was so incongruous that Cassandra could not help but comment.

"Duane, you don't sound it. Maybe you're just tired. Come on, get into bed before I jump your bones. Nuked or not."

Chapter 20

When Kevin was a small boy, he figured out he was different from other kids. It did not take much to figure that out; he was never one of the gang, nor did he make friends easily.

His mother -- a large woman who had trouble remembering why she had bothered to have children -- did not pay too much attention, and so Kevin was allowed to figure it out for himself. His school system decided to test Kevin when he hit his teenage years. What they saw astounded them. Kevin was one of those odd human children who tested off the scale of the standardized test. He was a percentage of the top one percent. This would certainly explain his isolation, but the counselors felt it unwise to release data like this to the student. They called Kevin's mother, who told them she was gratified but did not have any time for a conference, couldn't they give her the information over the phone? With some stuttering and hesitation, they did. She was sternly warned not to release any of this information to Kevin; studies have shown that releasing information like this would damage a child's development.

Like Kevin, Kevin's mother was not overly impressed with studies. As she hung up the phone, Kevin wandered into the kitchen to get something to eat. She told him that his IQ had been tested at 40 points higher than the highest in the school.

Kevin was impressed, but what does a teenager do with that kind of information? He did well in school, when he put his mind to it. But he wasn't a straight "A" student. He didn't like school that much. He did not have that many friends, and he was painfully aware that the friends he had were not in the proper cliques to be considered "popular." But the information was filed away, and he understood it only much later, as he tried to unravel his isolation.

As a percentage of the top one percent, Kevin found that he did things differently than others. He discovered that school was very dull, and by the age of 16 had been kicked out for non-attendance. That summer he lied well enough to get a job on a defense project in Los Angeles, a job he kept through October, before pressure from the authorities forced him to begin attending classes once again. He found he was adept at dabbling in science and technology. Soon he was building and creating some fascinating things; however, his mother cut off that trend when a slight miscalculation resulted in a small explosion in his room. His mother had stopped going in his room when he was about 9 years old, but -- as she carefully explained -- privacy is one thing, meltdown is another.

Nevertheless, he eventually graduated from high school, made a sporadic try at college which failed, and moved away from dear old Mom to San Francisco, where companies were much more concerned about technological expertise than grades or degrees. He worked for a while, then played for a while, then worked again to get enough money to take off and travel. In the meantime, he spent his time learning things and skirting depression, like a toddler at the beach scared of getting his feet wet as the surf lapped up to greet him. His feet would get wet though, and when they did he would disappear, sometimes for weeks, only to turn up again more intriguing than ever.

He was "intriguing" only to a select few, most of whom wanted to exploit him. In Kevin, they found a mind more tempered and finely-tuned than they had ever seen. For the most part, Kevin had learned -- thanks to a gracious sixth sense -- to avoid this kind of person. But they paid well, and often the wolf looks a lot like Grandma. Kevin sometimes worked for the Swede.

When the Swede called him that day, he was off on a metaphysical tangent that was uncommon for him. Nevertheless, he listened patiently as the Swede explained the problem, and then Kevin began to laugh.

"What?"

"I made one."

The Swede's response was to raise an eyebrow and tilt his head, something that Kevin must have sensed over the phone lines.

"I made one. 'Way back in high school. The first one was perfect . . . a puff of a little mushroom cloud. The second one, I mixed in a little too much of a couple chemicals, trying to make it bigger. Blew up my room. My mom was real angry."

The sounds on the other end of the line first caused confusion, then frustration, neither of which were unusual for the Swede when dealing with Kevin. However, the Swede was a professional. He dealt with it as he would any hazard of the profession, something like a waitress who takes her sore feet for granted. On the other end of the line, Kevin was smiling a self-satisfied grin, lazily turning over the logistics of how to turn his pet mushroom into the large-scale project the Swede wanted.

"When can you make it for me?"

"Look, I'm going to L.A. to visit some friends next week. How about when I get back?"

"No, I want it sooner than that. Can you get it finished before then? If money is a problem, I will pay you much extra for delivery by next week . . ." Kevin's silence was encouraging. "Look, you already made one. You just said that."

"Sure, I guess so." They started talking numbers, and a fee was agreed upon.

"One more thing . . . Kevin, you are going to be in Los Angeles next week?"

"Uh-huh."

"If it is finished, you bring it there for me?"

"Sure . . . I could do that. Are you going to be there?"

"No, not me. I'll give you an address."

When the Swede hung up from Kevin, he reached for a cell phone and dialed Suzi. He spoke in German to her. They worked out some details, and Suzi promised to call him back within 48 hours. Different phone numbers were exchanged.

Chapter 21

"Ah, General it's good to see you back." Miles swung his legs up off the top of the desk, and began to stand.

"No, Miles," the General waved him down. "Don't stand. I should be saluting you at this point."

Miles dropped his head to one side and grinned, his eyes half-shut. In a gesture reminiscent of an 11 year-old basking in the attention of his loving father, he said "Aw, shucks . . . it was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"You've seen a tape?"

"Half a dozen times."

"Miles, you did a damned fine job. I thank you, and one day, if your part in this ever comes out, a lot of other people will thank you as well."

A long pause stilled the room.

"Well . . . what now, General?"

"Your part in this is over. Now, I've got to get clearances and set up military exercises in Germany and a few other spots. It should be done quickly. Somehow, things like this tend to leak. That's something I cannot risk. I anticipate we should have the project set, and agents in the field ready for orders within six weeks. But it may take longer than that to deal with the political end of things. You saw the tape and that's one of the most convincing pieces of evidence I have." The General looked hopefully at Miles half expecting him to anticipate his next comment. Miles responded quizzically.

"But . . . ?"

"But even seeing the cloud, explaining the reaction we are sure to get from the populace, it will not be enough. They will want more. And I don't know what 'more' I can give them. I really should do a test."

"How?"

"Set it off in a populated area. Record the reactions of the populace. Set it off in the right area and we could keep our own observers down to a minimum. The press would do it for us."

Miles' back straightened slightly and his face grew slack. "Y'mean set it off in the U.S.?"

"Yes. We can control the press better here. Keep the details to a minimum. Besides that, it would be a good test for our own people. I told you, months ago, that the military would not be a problem at ground zero because they only believe their instruments. It's like a pilot who has flown too long on instruments only . . . he loses his edge, and he'll miss that little Cessna flying across his nose. Soldiers should be able to react to more than just dials and meters. They should react to what they see and hear, and what they feel. It would be a great test."

"General . . . I . . . I don't know. Your own expectations indicate mass confusion, riots, suicide, a complete freeze in an urban area. If you want to test it in this country, you've got to be prepared for massive press coverage, and press interference, as well as a hue and cry that will undoubtedly be felt in Congress. And the surprise will be gone. What good will that do us?"

A grating wheeze rattled through the General, a sound Miles recognized as a chuckle. "We could diffuse it. Things have happened in Russia that the American public knows absolutely nothing about. Things have happened in this country that the rest of the world knows nothing about. . . . except for those people who were directly involved. And even they doubt what they saw or doubt what they've heard after we've been through talking to them. It could be managed."

"I don't know, General. You might be able to manage it, and do it right. It might still be a perfect weapon. But you are serious about using this to restructure every political boundary worldwide. But I don't know if you're ever going to get Congress to agree to that."

It was the General's turn to stiffen. "I never expect to get Congress to approve anything. First of all, you can't trust that many men with a secret. It will not work. Secondly, you don't need approval from Congress, you need a military emergency and a presidential order. The military emergency can be created, and with relatively little difficulty. I have concluded that if this weapon is tested, and it proves effective in a proper setting, that I could convince even Congress to allow offensive action. Compared to convincing Congress, a presidential order would be certain."

Miles stood, and placing a hand on the small of his back stretched and smiled. "You're the expert, General . . . I just build them."

He reached out a hand. "It is always a pleasure dealing with you, sir. If you need me again, just call. You know where to find me."

"You're a good man, Miles. We need more like you."

"Well, General, if anyone can pull this off, it's you. I have yet to meet anyone who is so sure of what he's doing . . . and I've never met anyone who has the power you do to push through a project.

"General, I have worked with a lot of people in this building, and I was frustrated and tired waiting for funding and then waiting for authorization, and then waiting for the pounds of paperwork that could choke a horse. Working with you, the paperwork is minimized, funding is always right there, and I have yet to wait for anything. Again, thank you for letting me work with you."

The two men let go their handclasp, and with a smile turned and walked out into the hall toward the elevators.

Chapter 22

Sasha Trembly was in bed again. She didn't particularly care for the person she was in bed with, but he had done her a favor and she could find no way out of it.

She was in bed with Roger Mortis, the Colonel, or whatever his title was. He had done too little, too late. He had gotten her into the nuclear test site, but after the bomb had been set off. She got a great interview, but then the video was confiscated. She kept asking about a protester on site, but they kept denying it. She was positive that her investigation led the right direction, and that somebody had been on the base. Obviously, whoever that person was had not stopped the test, but now it really didn't matter. She was on her back, again, she was making the appropriate moaning noises and she was being told how beautiful she was.

She did not want to hear it. She did not want to hear about her beauty, or her accomplishments; she wanted to hear there was a job waiting for her in New York, one that would pay her a hefty six-figure salary, and one that would ensure that she would never again see Middle America in all its glory. Instead, she was in bed with a middle-aged, left-brained asshole who had about as much right commanding in the military as Popeye had running the Navy. He was a stud, no doubt about that, he was as well-hung as a man could be. But he was about as boring as sandpaper. His idea of passion was to pant heavily. But she made the right sounds, and she wriggled in the right places, and she felt more like a whore today than she had in all of her twenty-eight years.

Damn it! She was young, she was smart and she knew it. She was making garbage money, taking a lot of abuse, and she wasn't getting anywhere. This man wasn't important to her. In fact, no man had been important to her for a long, long time. She had a brother once, who was good to

her, at least when he wasn't tracking her down to use her on her back, like so many others had and once, long ago, she had fallen in love -- at least she thought it was love -- with a boy of nineteen who wanted to marry her. But she had better ideas then, and she really should have better ideas now.

By the time she had run through this train of thought, "Rigger" Mortis had come. Sasha had had enough.

"Roger, I must be going."

"Sasha, baby . . . "

"Roger, I shouldn't be here, you have a wife, you have children. I suggest that you take care of them. I have to take care of myself. And I realize now, even though you are a very sweet man, that I should not be here."

Hurriedly, she grabbed clothes from the various spots around the floor where they had fallen, and got dressed. Roger was still sputtering and coughing by the time she hit the door, perhaps three minutes later.

Walking to her car, Sasha felt better than she had in a long time. It was time to take a vacation, she thought to herself. She made some quick mental calculations, and figured between the stocks and mutual funds, she could live comfortably for a year before going back to work. It was time for some reassessments. Come to think of it, as she pushed the convertible top back on her car, I'm not even sure I like men. Genie's face popped into to head. She stopped, stunned, for a moment and said out loud:

"In fact, I am fairly sure I don't like men." But even as she said it, she ran her hand across her chest, and wondered where he was.

Chapter 23

Genie was not a high-volume distributor. He was nothing special by the standards of the high-rollers in cocaine; he rarely moved kilos, he moved grams. Occasionally he would sell by the ounce or half-ounce, but most of his buyers were people he had known for some time: the recreational user, with only an occasional addict. He did not like dealing with addicts. They were too unpredictable. An addict would spend his rent money on cocaine and his kid's lunch money next. They always looked so damned desperate. And Genie didn't like it. He liked dealing with people like Sasha, who liked the drug, but needed to function. Sasha would hold herself back, and do just enough to get seriously high, but not enough to keep her up for days. She found that the circles under her eyes -- and the way she felt when she saw them -- would balance against the pleasures of the drug.

Genie, of course, was in love with Sasha, although he had never told her, and he thought he never would get a chance. But she was a delightful bitch, ever-changing.

He loved her unpredictability, and the way that she could be so soft and sexual one moment and so frigid the next. It was like shape-changing; he never knew who she was or who she would be until she had started to speak. Early in their relationship, he had spent days with her. They had -- between the two of them -- blown a week's profits up their noses in one night. She chattered on happily that night, telling him of growing up and growing older, telling him what she wanted to do with her life and what she hoped she would be. It was that night that Genie had fallen in love with her. He had started out the evening simply trying to get her into bed, and that he had accomplished. The night had ended with her falling asleep, exhausted in his arms with daylight

firmly established outside. He was still too jangly to sleep, so he held her for the next six hours, outlining the perfect shape of her lips with his finger, and whispering his adoration into her hair.

He had never gotten her that vulnerable again, if her hours-long monologue could be considered "opening up." But he believed that she considered him a friend, as much as she could consider anyone a friend, and he remained satisfied with that -- at least for the time being.

He lived in an airy two-bedroom condo on the south edge of town, overlooking the desert and with a view of the mountains in front of him. It was not a dwelling that you would expect this man to live in. It was elegantly spartan, and spotlessly clean. His lifestyle had bought him many advantages, one of them was a cleaning lady who came in once a week. He never had to worry about her interfering with his business, because his turnover was so high that he rarely -- if ever -- kept his stash in his place. His preferred mode of operation was out of public places, and there were plenty of public places in Las Vegas. As the result of his business, Genie knew most of the city's long-term residents who were in the public eye. If he did not know some of the older folks, he knew their mistresses, or their children. He was introduced to almost everyone as a "local businessman." That suited him just fine, and to ensure the safety of his cover, he had invested in several small businesses, including one which delighted him. A friend, who was an avid consumer of his product, had started a cellular telephone business just before the cellular phone became a necessity, not a luxury. If he sold his portion of that business now, he could retire . . . which was a nice thought at the ripe old age of 31.

Cocaine was his ticket into the right circles, the right places and the right people. Cocaine was a gift from God as far as he was concerned. He got into it originally just to make money. Relatively quickly, he found himself in contact with many different faces he recognized from the press, either celebrities or the reporters themselves. Genie liked reporters. He found he had a lot

in common with reporters. Half of them thrived on information, tidbits of what some would call gossip, inside information and confidences. Reporting, he had decided, was the marketing of gossip. It was a skill he had also developed, and one for which he had respect.

He leaned over to grab the remote control for the extremely expensive television he had purchased in order to watch Sasha, turning it on and sitting up simultaneously. Someone else was on, someone he knew from the station, but not Sasha. He leaned against the back of the couch, sighing, and out of habit he called the station to ask for her.

"Newsroom, please . . . yeah, who's this? Oh, hello there . . . this is Genie. Where is Sasha tonight?"

There was a long pause as he listened.

"No, I didn't know. You mean she called in this morning? No warning, she didn't say where she was going? Thanks for the information."

Even as he laid the receiver down, he could hear the voice on the other end protesting for him to wait because he needed to discuss "business." But Genie was deaf to all but the fear that Sasha would leave town, and he would not have a chance to see her. He had her home phone, but he did not think to use it. She would always call him before, especially when she needed something. She needed him now, he was certain of that. He could offer her anything she wanted.

And so he waited for her call, knowing that sooner or later she would call. It might not be today, or next week, but if she stayed in the state she would call. He could almost hear her upbraiding him for his arrogance:

"You little weasel . . . what makes you think I would ever call you?" But she would call. He would bet his life on it. Besides he couldn't live without her.

Chapter 24

"Cassandra, if I say anything to anyone in the press, they will reopen treason charges against me, and find a way to shoot me."

"But Duane . . . Sven's right. His plan will get us more exposure than anything we've done so far . . . "

"So it's 'Sven' now? What happened to the 'Swede'? He's let you in on his real name now, hasn't he?"

"Duane." Cassandra's eyes were flashing, and the corners of her mouth drawn down in that curious expression people get when they are trying not to scream at someone. Slowly, carefully, she drew in a long breath and then exhaled deliberately. She swallowed once, nodded, and began again.

"Duane."

"Cassandra."

"This is important."

"I know."

"You've got to do it."

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to go to jail. I also don't want to get shot. In fact, I'm real serious about both those things."

"Don't joke. This is not funny."

"I know, believe me, I know. Cassie, stop asking me to do this. I'm not going to talk to the press. I'm not going to be a part of this. I did my part. I did more than my part. I did enough of my part to cover me and you until we die. Now leave me out of this. I don't want to go to jail. I don't want to get shot.

"Look, Cass . . . everybody had been very nice, and very generous. This little fund-raising thing that Suzi put together has netted us enough money to start some place else. I don't want to live here any more. And I did my part, I really did. I'm not willing to do anymore. And I want you with me. I want to get married, and I want to have kids if I still can. Cass, are you still listening?"

Cassandra's brows had come together, creating furrows and ridges between her eyes. She was looking down, her mouth open slightly, her eyes defocused. "You've never said that before."

"Said what?"

"Said you'd want to marry me. You've never said that before."

"Yes I have . . . you just didn't pay any attention to it before. You knew that there wasn't much we could do to make a go of it, being broke all the time. But I think we can make it now. I have a friend in Montana who wants us to come live on his ranch. It's not a whole lot, Cass . . . but there are few things as wholesome as helping run a ranch in Montana. It's a neat little dream, dear. It may be stupid, but I came from a farm, and it's a good life. It's dull at times, so I'll understand if you tell me to forget it." Duane was smiling now. "We can at least try it. And in the meantime, we will have some money, but nowhere to spend it, so it might be fun. It will be a change. Come on, Cass, say something . . . "

"Kids? You said something about kids?"

"Yeah, I want kids. I said that before too. You didn't listen then either."

"This is incredibly dumb." She looked up at him. "This is really dumb. Okay. I'll marry you. I'll have babies." Each word was being delivered deliberately as she spit out her words, almost distastefully. "This is so dumb. I don't know why I'm doing this. This is such a mistake. Okay. Let's do it."

Duane grinned a little more broadly, and leaned forward to hug her.

He is still so damned thin, she thought. He is never going to get back the hair on that side of his head, although he does seem to be able to see better these days . . . I will think of him forever as the man I shared this house with . . . a real hunk. Her head resting on his shoulder, she opened her eyes to see a burn scar running down his arm. What the hell, he's a good man, I'll stay. I'm tired of looking. I'm just tired.

Duane leaned back into his chair, and started drawing out his plans for the move. He had things pretty well-worked out. If all went smoothly, they would be in Montana by week's end.

"The end of the week! Then you must have been planning this for at least a month, if not more . . . did you ever think I might say no?"

"Darlin', if you said 'no' I could always cancel the plans I made. But you said 'yes.' And now we can get gone, and do it quick." He lowered his voice a little and spoke into her hair, as his arms curled around her once again. "I don't want to be here, in this place where they know I lived when that thing goes off. There is nothing to link me or you to something that happens in Los Angeles, 500 miles away. Right now I'm not important, not to them. But, they will come find me, and I'm . . . I'm scared of 'em."

He started to cry, low and shivering, as he had so frequently since his return. Cassandra just held him, and his fear became her fear. They would move, and they would do it by week's

end. It was Tuesday. She had plenty of time to get this tiny house packed, and in a truck by Saturday.

“Wait. I just thought of something. I should go tell my mom. Say goodbye to my brother.”

Duane looked blank. “What mother? Where?”

“I didn’t tell you about my mother?”

“No . . . or a brother.”

Oh. I don’t like them very much. But if I’m going to move all they way to Montana, I really should go say goodbye. Besides, my mother would probably be happy that I’m finally getting married.“

”I can’t believe you never told me about them.”

Cassandra snorted. “Duane, you must know that everyone has a mother, even me.”

“I know, but you never said anything.”

“I have a brother too. He has three kids. I don’t see them much. But they like me.”

“When is the last time you saw them?”

“Actually, I saw them last month, when you were gone. I was missing you, and didn’t really know when you were going to be back. I guess I just wanted to check in . . . it was . . . “

”You have a secret life?” Duane wiped some tears off of his cheek with the heel of his hand, and started grinning at her. “You have a real family? And here I thought you were all mine.”

“I am all yours. I love you. Off to Montana.”

“But we want to go together . . . how are we going to do that if you’re going to – where are you going?”

“Los Angeles. Don’t worry, it’ll only take a couple of days. Why don’t you get started. We can get everything packed up, and when you drive to Montana I’ll go to L.A. I can meet you there in a couple of days . . . how does that sound?”

Duane shook his head and sighed. “It was not what I was hoping for, darlin’. But it’ll do. Do you want me to go with you?”

Cassandra’s eyes opened wide, and she sat far back. “No. Absolutely not. I think that would be a very bad idea.”

“Why? Won’t they like me?” He grinned, with some of his old cockiness.

“Noooo . . . that’s not it. I’ll explain it to you in Montana.”

Chapter 25

“I don’t like this, Esther.”

Cassandra felt a familiar headache coming on, with a slight nausea.

“Why don’t you like it, mother? You wanted me to get married, and you wanted me to settle down. I’m doing both.” Cassandra was careful to enunciate every word, as if being more clear in her speech would make her mother understand words that were coming out of her mouth.

“Esther.” Words were chosen very carefully, with clipped pauses cutting off the phrases. “A few months ago, just a few weeks ago, you told me you were going to kill yourself --”

“No, that’s not what I said --”

“You want to know why or not? You said that and said that the reason behind it all was Duane.”

“Mother! Do you ever listen! Do you ever hear anything but what you’ve decided you’re going to hear?”

“Don’t take that tone with me!”

Cassandra forced a deep breath in, then forced it out. “This is ridiculous.” I came here to tell you I was getting married and moving to a farm.” Cassandra’s voice was full of loathing, both for her mother, and for the idea of living on a farm. “I did that. I’m leaving now.”

“Esther, I can’t say anything about what you do anymore . . . but this is really a bad idea.”

Cassandra just shook her head.

The two women faced each other for a brief moment then both turned to head in opposite directions. This fight was not over, but Cassandra climbed into her old car, drove down to see her brother. She and Kurt had been fighting with their mother for as long as she could remember.

Kurt's technique was different. He would listen, then go off and do exactly what he wanted. It was a technique that served him well. The two of them actually fought far less.

Still more than slightly angry, Cassandra fumed in the car on the way down the hill from her mother's house. The house sat in the Palos Verdes Hills, overlooking San Pedro and Long Beach harbors. On a clear day you could see down the coast to Laguna, although clear days were not so common any more. The smog hung over Los Angeles proper with its dirty fingers spreading out over the coast into the ocean. Angry, feeling deceived and somewhat jealous she wondered why it was that Kurt could get along and she could not.

Kurt, on the other hand, was hardly a philosopher. Tall, rangy, with a mop of unruly dusty blond hair, he was the object of many a high-schooler's dream. As he got older he had developed a slight paunch. He was aging well, if acceptance of what comes along is graceful. He had a wife and three children somewhat by default; none was planned, all were enjoyed, none was disciplined. That is not to say that they were spoiled or unruly, although there were times when both those traits were apparent. Like a favorite pet, Kurt would address these children when the urge came to him. If he were busy, he would forget them for days at a time. His wife, Annie, would make sure they were fed and clothed. She too believed in child-rearing by default, which allows for discipline or participation only when convenient or absolutely necessary.

The youngest of these children, barely house-trained, was Elaina. Just over the age of two, she was the one who arrived at the door when Cassandra knocked that day. With her arms raised above her head, she ran bowlegged to the door, shouting, "Cassie, Cassie . . ." as she threw her hand around Cassandra's knees and continued: "I love you!" Maybe, thought Cassandra, this kid thing won't be too bad.

Cassandra bent over and scooped up the girl, squeezing her tight and asking, "Where's everybody."

"Out back."

Dana was the oldest daughter, a precocious child of ten whose aim in life appeared to be to outsmart her parents, while causing her younger siblings as much trouble as possible. She was beautiful, and at the right angle could easily be a teenager. It was a fact that had occurred to her parents, and one that they did not like very much when they thought about it. Fortunately, Dana was much more concerned with ruling the household than with conquest outside the home. Her father had a plaintive hope that her priorities would not change for at least three years.

The middle child, Nicole, was a young seven year-old. She adored her older sister, even when tortured by the all-too-often taunt that she was too young to play with the "big girls." Nicole was the most outgoing child Cassandra had ever seen; despite warnings, she would not only talk to strangers but would offer to sing and dance for them. Cassandra found the two older girls out back, while still holding Elaina in her arms.

The house Kurt lived in had been built by their grandparents, who emigrated from the "old country" in 1920. A few seasons of prosperity had allowed them to build this house, about 900 square feet for four children and the occasional relative who stopped by to stay. The backyard was functional; a root cellar led under the house, now populated for the most part by large black roaches, common to this area of San Pedro. Kurt believed that the hideous things were "common" only because he had hundreds. To the back of the property was an area that was once a thriving vegetable garden, fertilized by the husks of grapes left over from their grandparents' yearly wine-making. It was rich soil, now mostly overgrown, although spinach grew there wild, seeding and re-seeding every year, because no one bothered to pull it up or even to eat it. Three huge old trees,

planted when the house was first built, shadowed the yard. One was a walnut, the other a fig, the last an apricot tree which gave up most of its fruit to the birds every year, and the rest to the teenagers who walked by on their way home from the high school up the street. In the far back of the lot, detached from the house, were two tiny garages that had never seen a car. Each was stuffed with boxes and broken gardening tools and home to a vast assortment of spiders and fleas. This description may sound as if it were an unpleasant, ramshackle place to live. On the contrary, it was a house as familiar to Kurt and Cassandra as their own. The difference was that for Kurt, it held happy memories. For Cassandra, it was old and decaying, and made her sticky with frustration and anger, even now, years after her childhood was gone.

When their grandmother had died, Kurt had moved his family in, ostensibly to save money. However, he was as tied to the old country as his mother and her mother before that. He loved the old house. Cassandra did not.

"This place is a dump."

Kurt looked up from the steps where he was sitting fixing a bicycle wheel.

"Oh hi, Esther." Calmly. "Shut up." Cheerfully. "Want some apricots?"

"My name is Cassandra. Ask your kids."

Elaine pipped up. "Your name's Cassie." She said it carefully, as she had been taught.

"Good girl. No. No apricots. What I really want is some of those walnuts. Is that tree doing anything anymore?"

"Last year it did pretty well . . . but nothing like in the old days. I remember pulling tons of nuts off that tree . . ."

"Ah yes, but we were littler then, and 'tons' back then might not be 'tons' right now."

"I thought of that. But mom says she remembers the tree being a better producer." He stopped and looked at her, quizzically. "You hungry? Want dinner? When are you leaving?"

Cassandra frowned. She had already been here too long. She promised Duane to start driving to Montana on Friday. It was Monday, and she hadn't moved. It was the farm thing, she was sure of it. Cows. Pigs. Chickens. Chicken shit.

"Of course. Never turn down a free meal." It was at that point that Nicole saw her Aunt Cassie. . . "Cassie" If the girl were an animal, she would undoubtedly be a Labrador puppy. She bounded up, almost knocking Cassandra and Elaina to the pavement, squealing and chattering happily about nothing in particular. Cassandra stifled an urge to say, "Good dog." She did, however, spit out, "Get down . . . sit, girl, sit." The little girl laughed chimingly.

Dana walked up, exuding "older and wiser." "Oh. Nice to be loved." Cassandra looked around at the raggedy yard, the toys, the weeds, her brother, the children. Time to go to Montana. Chickens or no chickens.

Chapter 26

Kevin was very pleased with himself. In a few minutes, he would be delivering a quasi-bomb, global destruction in drag, all the finery and feathers of the real thing, without any of the punch. He had speculated for a time as to what the Swede wanted to do with this little toy he had concocted, on time, and there was a goodly bonus for that -- but he had stopped speculating because it seemed to lead to unpleasant consequences no matter which road he took.

Unless this thing were set off in a neutral environment, people would panic. As far as he could see, there would be no neutral environment in which to place it, except on a military base. Even that had repercussions, but knowing the Swede, and what he was working toward, Kevin could not understand the usefulness of that. The other roads led to show-stopping demonstrations of righteousness, inevitable panic and probably loss of life. However, although Kevin sensed the potential his toy had, he did not delve in too deeply in trying to understand the potential consequences.

Kevin knocked at a posh address in the Hollywood Hills, and delivered his bundle: a slightly conical umbrella stand with a lot of newspaper at the top.

" . . . just light the newspaper. It's like lighting a flare -- in fact, there is a flare down there to act as a trigger. Once you light the newspaper, back off at least 50, 100 feet or so. There won't be any explosion, but there will be a lot of heat." Kevin explained things slowly and carefully to his consumers, after finding out that most of them were not as careful as they should be when dealing with incendiaries. It had not been a hard lesson for him; although he understood that some damage had been done to those who carried his devices.

A large envelope full of cash was turned over and counted carefully. With a relaxed smile, Kevin nodded his head and took his leave, thinking his part in this matter had ended. Soon he would be the only person in Los Angeles who knew what was going on. He would watch much of the news coverage at a friend's condo overlooking the beach in Marina Del Rey, watching and listening with the detached air that scientists must have after injecting an animal test subject with a toxic chemical or a fatal disease.

Chapter 27

Elaina was still hanging daintily around Cassandra's neck and was obviously tired of having her big person distracted by those other children.

"Cassie mine."

"No! Sheesh mine!"

Nicole once again grabbed Cassandra's legs and squealed with a particularly annoying lisp.

"Nicole, don't talk like that."

"Shorry . . . Oops. Sorry."

"Thank you."

Cassandra sat down on the steps next to her brother while Nicole clambered off to resume playing with Dana, and even Elaina was sufficiently distracted by the repaired bicycle that Cassandra's lap was once again her own. She leaned back against the side of the house, aware that when she stood up again her side would be dusted with the whitewash that gave the house its illusion of paint. With her eyes closed, the sun turned her eyelids into a laboratory slide, the light was bright red, filtered as it was through her skin. She wondered idly at the amoebas of what she thought must be dust swimming through the red haze, half-listening to the screams and squeals of the children playing. Now and then, Elaina would start to whimper, only to be quickly shushed by Dana, who knew that if the younger ones cried, she would take the heat.

She wondered about the conversation she had had with her mother, and she jealously thought of other children of other mothers who had relations that were good and kind and close. It just wasn't fair . . . she'd always wanted an All-American mother . . . one that would bake cookies, and take her to Girl Scout Camp, and be the kind of friend only seen in television commercials.

Her mother threatened to sue the Girl Scouts, although she didn't remember all the details. She was good at blocking out things like that. Nevertheless, she suspected the daughters in the television commercials didn't have mothers who sued the Girl Scouts. For that matter, she doubted the women in television commercials ever had half the problems she had experienced over the last couple of years. No, it just wasn't fair and although she tried to remember who had told her it should be, she couldn't place a name or a face.

What does it take to be a mother? Cassandra didn't know. As far as she was concerned, she could still easily be fourteen years old. She worked, she was responsible, and she was apparently mature. For all intents and purposes, she was an adult. And now she was getting married. She should be happy as a pig in shit. She sighed, heavily. Pigs. Shit. Farms. O Lord.

The world thought she was an adult. She was physically capable of mothering, and she wondered again if Duane could ever have children. But, she didn't feel like an adult. If she were, she certainly hadn't noticed any transition. As far as she could tell, she still thought the way she did when she was in high school, although she recognized that her patience was better now than it was then. Her judgment was undoubtedly better as well -- she didn't embarrass herself half as often as she used to. She wondered if her mother ever had these thoughts. She figured that her mother must be an adult. She acted like an adult. Maybe, she mused, some people are just cut out to be adults, and others are meant never to grow up. She heard Kurt in the background talking to Dana about eating worms, and smiled. Some people are just never meant to grow up.

But when she got dressed in the morning, she could tell that her skin tone was not as good as it used to be. There were loose places where before there was nothing but firmness. Her skin was drier, and no matter what kind of lotion she would slather on herself, the dryness would return the next day. That wasn't the way she remembered things. She remembered what her grandmother

had looked like in the hospital on the day she died. There were wrinkles within wrinkles on that old face. Cassandra knew that age did not creep up overnight. But she wondered how her grandmother must have felt when she, too, noticed her skin was not as firm as it used to be.

Her grandmother, she was told, had lived a hard life. She had scrubbed and suffered, she had worked the long sweat-shop hours required of women in the first part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there must have been times when she looked down at her hands and realized that the skin was not plump any more. There must have been times when she -- like Cassandra -- realized that her hands were beginning to look like her mother's. They never talked about that, Cassandra and her grandmother, it would not have been appropriate. Cassandra wondered if the women on the TV commercials ever spoke to their mothers about the plumpness of their hands, at least when they weren't doing ads for dishwashing liquid. And she supposed the most important question to ask was whether this concern of hers was an aberration or whether it was common or the subject of only quiet reflection. Did any of the people she knew, the waitresses, the activists, think they were grown up? Did any of them think themselves capable of raising a child, as an adult would raise a child?

Again Kurt intruded on her thoughts appropriately. This time he was threatening to throw rotten fruit at the girls, while they screeched and squealed at high volume. Neither of them felt capable of being the grown-up on a full-time basis.

The sun was warm, the house was beginning to feel soft enough to sleep on, and Cassandra heard from a far-away place words that indicated food was in the works. That woke her up.

"Pizza, did I hear pizza?"

"No, you heard tuna casserole." It was Annie, Kurt's wife, with an extremely unhappy expression on her face. Despite her sun-washed snooze, Cassandra was awake enough to ask the obvious: "What happened to you?"

"Shit." Emphatic, frustrated, and disgruntled, Annie motioned her inside, while her mouth moved soundlessly, looking for words to explain.

"It's Helen . . . she and Greg had another fight." Annie started pulling food off a shelf in the refrigerator. "I just drove back from her house. She's ready to call it off. She's packing the kids in the car and going to her mom's . . . again."

"Where's her mom live?"

"Long Beach."

Cassandra sighed. How did she get sucked into this soap opera with only two visits? "What'd they fight about this time?"

"Greg's left again . . . at least she thinks he's left. He hasn't been there for two days, and the last time she saw him he was drunk . . . again."

Cassandra propped herself up on the kitchen table, punctuating Annie's comments by nodding or shaking her head, or with the occasional sharp intake of breath that one hears in kitchen conversations everywhere.

"He is such a jerk. He is such . . . He is such a nice person when he is sober. Then he gets a little frantic about something and you don't hear from him for weeks. At least you don't hear from him while he's straight."

"What's he using these days?"

"Mostly beer . . . although he's still getting high. You know it's weird . . . when he's straight he's talkative enough . . . but if he drinks he just . . . he just fades away. There can be a half a dozen people in the house and he'll just sit in front of the television and stare at it. Doesn't seem to matter what's on. He'll just watch whatever is there. And then, in the middle of the night, instead of going to bed, he'll just leave and he'll go for days. You know, I have never seen him do anything violent, or even raise his voice. But the kids are scared shitless of him. Helen says she does not know why."

Dana had quietly crept into the house, listening to the conversation, learning how to gossip from her elders the way she would later learn how to drive. "I know why."

Annie's eyes got a little larger, but she calmly asked, "Why?"

"Well I don't want to get in trouble for telling." Dana, being familiar with this kind of situation, knew she had the upper hand, and was destined to take advantage of it. "Helen told everybody that Greg was possessed by the devil and they are afraid they'll go to hell if they get near him."

"Dana, are you sure?" Annie's voice had just the slightest edge of annoyance in it as she quizzed her daughter.

"Yep . . . Janet told me so." Janet was the oldest of Helen's daughters, and the same age as Dana. The two of them had a running battle for years over which one was cuter, smarter, had more friends, had more toys, or suffered the most abuse at home, either from parents or littler siblings. Turning away from Dana, Annie continued to make dinner, ignoring the child's heated assertions that the devil story was plausible.

* * *

A few miles away, Greg Clark sat quietly at a bar, relatively sober, but unable to decide what to do. He had been drinking for two days and had stopped twelve hours before to try to clean himself up sufficiently to go home. He knew that if he did get home soon, he might be able to see the kids before they went to bed. He knew he loved his kids; and once in a while he remembered how much he had loved his wife. The thought of going home to her stuck in his throat. He knew what she would do and the thought of all of that screaming made him more nauseous than he already was. She would sit and harp, and then call all her little friends the next day to complain about what a tramp he was. She would moan and bitch and weep until he just couldn't stand it any more and she would tell his kids that he was worthless and evil, and then complain to him that he didn't spend enough time with them.

Greg Clark was not a stupid man. He knew damn well he drank too much. He knew he talked too much. He also knew a substantial amount about alcoholics, and about the patterns of abuse that result when a child grows up with an alcoholic parent. Greg was musing over what he perceived as his lack of guts at the bar, wondering why it was he could not stop drinking. The literature told him that his failing marriage was a result of his drinking, not that his drinking was a result of his failing marriage. He suspected that the two were feeding on each other. He wondered what it would be like if he simply shot himself or ran his car over a cliff or did something else to make these problems go away on a more permanent basis. He wondered if there was anything that he might miss; anything that he might regret leaving. He couldn't think of anything right off. And then he remembered his kids.

He had three children. Each had a distinct personality. Each one was desperately clutched to him in memory like a child would hold a treasured picture in a wind storm. He wondered if there was anything he could do to make their lives better, more secure, more stable so that when

he died they could remain happy. If not happy, at least they might look back on his memory with fondness instead of revulsion. Greg Clark was thinking these thoughts when the cloud appeared.

Chapter 28

Cassandra's mother was sitting on her back porch, looking out over the vast expanse of real estate that was known as the Los Angeles Harbor Area. Once, when she was only a child, all that real estate was merely fields. But that was more than fifty years ago, and vacant lots became parking lots in an afternoon, and baseball diamonds became office buildings in only a few months.

When she was a child, she would be sent down amidst the clutter and the gaiety of the streets to fetch her father from the gambling houses and the bars. When she was six years-old, her mother was comfortable sending her down into the part of town that was the "red light district" in San Pedro. Back then, it was hard to say whether her mother had been "comfortable" with anything. It had been the Depression and people were different then. But nothing had ever happened to her, because she was only a child, and people did not hurt children.

She looked carefully at the landmarks she knew now, and ones she remembered from long ago, but had never seen from this vantage point. She saw the oil refinery and White's Point, where she had spent so much time as a child. She remembered swimming at Cabrillo Beach, using tea as a tanning agent, to make her skin darker. Then she remembered trying to make it lighter, because that was fashionable. She remembered a time when it was unusual to walk down the street and hear English. The languages were Yugoslav and Italian and Polish; English was an oddity.

She could see the vast expanses of green, at least in relation to the rest of the city, that she knew to be Fort McArthur. She had worked there during World War II, a conflict she had always called the "War." She recognized now, years later, that there had been many wars since the "War." But that one always stuck in her head as being the most important, the turning point. She was just out of high school when the war started. One brother went off to join the Air Force and the other

kept fishing to help support the family for as long as he could. It was a strange time, exhilarating in many ways, as the days that make up your eighteenth year should be. But there was an undercurrent of anxiety that affected everything she did. Soon after the war was over, she met the man she eventually married, and they bought property and they had children and they did all those things you were supposed to do.

Now, she looked out over the old neighborhood and saw buildings covering every inch of real estate, property which had grown in value exponentially as the years had gone by. She did not understand the bitterness of her children. They would often whine about the cost of even a mobile home, and she had trouble comprehending their distress. After all, her parents had come here with nothing, and had managed to buy a house, and raise four children, surviving the volatile 20's and the Depression of the 30's. Her kids both whined about not being able to make ends meet.

How could it be possible that her son could have trouble surviving on \$40,000 a year? He had no rent . . . he lived in her mother's house. He had three children, which was not that much more expensive than having two. She had two, and managed to survive quite nicely, as well as buy property.

The economics of it baffled her. She assumed that money was being pissed away somewhere, but she did not want to ask too many questions about where. She figured they were probably using drugs, but she had no idea how expensive marijuana was. They were complainers. That must be it. They didn't make a budget, they ate out too much.

As for Cassandra . . . she was impossible. She started to get angry again. Another marriage. No real job. No college. What has she done to deserve this?

She spent a few more minutes gazing dolefully at the harbor, wondering what she had done wrong, and wishing her family -- her mother and her sister -- were still alive. Depressed, she

wandered back into the house to make herself something to eat. She was feeling very lonely and far older than she was. Behind her, at the south end of the great curve that was the Los Angeles Harbor Area, a small cloud started to blossom, rising up and up and up into billowing whorls, an impressive sight even from this far-away vantage point. A distinctive mushroom began to form, gracefully billowing out and out, while the center tower continued to plunge upward. If you had listened closely, you could have heard a slight rumble, like the sound on a summer night, when they set off fireworks in Long Beach.

The woman trudging up the stairs to the kitchen was not concerned with this; she did not see it and she did not hear it. She was deciding that she would not call her children any more. They would have to call her. If that took a week or two weeks or two months, she would not give in. She would wait for them.

* * * * *

Across the country, another mother was sitting and waiting for the phone to ring. Tamara had not called for weeks. She had not answered any letters. Her mother had finally called Tamara's employer, the law firm, and she hesitatingly, aching in her heart, asked for her child. Tamara had not worked there for weeks.

This was crazy. Tammie wasn't like this. Something was wrong. She went to turn the TV on. It was time for the evening news. It might take her mind off of her baby, missing in a big city. Her sons had disappeared for months, but Tammie just wasn't like this. She just wasn't like this.

Chapter 29

The first thing you notice when you walk into a newsroom is the chittering.

The chittering of the news machines is not a television creation, it is real, it is constant, and it is the breath of a newsroom. Without the chittering of the machines -- a sound often cloaked by putting the machines in another room -- it would be as if the creature were dead. The breathing of the great coiled dragon would have ceased.

Over the years, the sound has been muted. The machines have become more technologically perfect, quieter, faster. The clacking sound of the old Associated Press machines is all but stilled with the old relics relegated to low-budget news operations in thousands of small towns across the country. Those are the stations that bring news and music and weather and road conditions to most of the people who live in the country. The small stations are also constantly on the verge of bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy was not a specter for the people who worked in this newsroom. It was owned and operated by the Network, and was the largest operation of its kind in the country. It reached most of California and spilled over into Nevada and Mexico, touching parts of Arizona with its signal, 50,000 watts strong. The Network executives often chided the managers about the costs of the operation, but it was the most highly-decorated news staff in the country. The parts changed constantly; the writers left and came back, the anchors went to television and came back when they were too old and ugly for the glare of the lights.

Walking into the machine, into the heart of the dragon, was far from daunting. The room was carpeted and clean with the exception of coffee stains which punctuated the floor in places. The desks were matched boxes of steel and formica, in neat rows. The pulse of the dragon

emanated from the desk of the Assignment Editor, a position with very little thanks and a high stress level. Behind that desk were rows upon rows of police scanners, and tucked into a small, sound-proof room a few feet from the scanners were the chattering machines: AP, UPI, Reuters, City News Service, the Wall Street Journal Service. There were several machines for AP: the "A" wire, covering the long news stories, usually reserved for back pages of newspapers with lots of space to fill; the radio wire, which produced short, clean headlines masquerading as the whole story; and another machine that turned up features and headlines, sports and more.

The people populating the newsroom were very ordinary-looking. None of them were especially interesting or special. There were some short people, and fat people, there were women who were pretty and others who were positively plain. The men were generally over weight and had the intense air of husbands who would never think of cheating on their wives, although all of them had either considered it or done it.

The reporters who actually roamed the streets were impressively built. The women were large and striking; the men were very tall, and had those stentorian tones that were pooh-poohed as old-fashioned. However, those same tones were of the type which kept Walter Cronkite "in office" for decades, and which most people still instinctively trust.

Maggie Bennett usually was on the Assignment Desk during the day, a most prestigious position, but one which carried with it enormous responsibilities and minimal pay. She had been working with the Network for ten years, and had enjoyed it through several failed relationships, pay raises, strikes, staff cutbacks and awards banquets. She was extremely good at what she did, and during her tenure the station had picked up more than its usual share of awards. Throughout her years with the station, it was rare that the news itself depressed her. Instead it was a lack of

news-worthy stories or a lack of good reporters with which to cover the stories that brought her down. Lately, that had changed.

News these days was worse than before. She thought perhaps she was simply "burning out," as so many journalists do. But she talked to her friends, all of them in the news business, and all assured her that her enthusiasm was still in the right place. Perhaps, they said, it was her perception that was skewed. The longer she stayed in the business, the harder it was for her to shrug off the deaths of 276 people in a plane crash, or take a "just another day" mentality after discovering that a brush fire had destroyed a horse ranch and all its inhabitants in the San Gabriel mountains. That same brush fire was set by a teenager smoking crack near the ranch; they found his body as well as all the evidence a few days later. It was charred, but intact.

As if the local news were not enough, national/international news was just as bad if not worse. The U.S. was bombing Central America, and conducting similar forays into Columbia and Peru, ostensibly to destroy the cocaine crop. But those same countries were having trouble with Communist insurgents. At least that's what the governments called them. Maggie knew that "insurgents" was -- in many cases -- another word for a group of people who were tired of starving to death, watching their kids starve to death, and knowing that future generations would never go to school -- if a school could be found -- on a full stomach. In the meantime, the Middle East was doing what the Middle East does; with the internal collapse of Iran, the death toll throughout the region had skyrocketed. This alone probably would not have bothered Maggie that much. But both the U.S. and the Russians were getting involved, and the constant war of words had escalated to actual threats of violence. And not only violence against an army in a faraway country -- they were talking in "First Strike" language. She remembered the bomb shelter her parents had built

when she was a child: her mother standing in the gloomy concrete box, sternly telling her what a nuclear bomb could do to her and what would be left outside in the event they survived.

The anti-nuclear factions were rallying on a daily basis in every major city in both countries. Legions of fighting souls marching the streets, asking for sanity in international affairs. Maggie had little or no faith in marches; however, she gave the marchers what coverage she could, knowing that the coverage pissed off the government. And she was getting pressured by the corporate suits to tone down any kind of any-government protest coverage, which made her act in the opposite manner.

Maggie was drawn to the wire room by the tell-tale dinging of a machine -- a sound that meant an important story was coming across, one that should be noted immediately. It was, as she suspected, bad news. Another terror alert. It was not clear who threatened whom and with what, but U.S. forces around the globe had been put on full alert.

Maggie leaned back against the wall and brought her hand to her face, massaging her eyes. She believed that they would all live through this latest crisis. In fact, there was never any question in her mind. She made a vow to start looking for another job, tonight. As soon as she got home she would pick up the classifieds and get into a business that didn't leave her feeling so drained and so helpless.

"I should have called in sick." And it was only Monday.

Chapter 30

The intercom at the Assignment Desk buzzed.

"Hey . . . I was just on the phone to a traffic tipster in Seal Beach . . . All of a sudden, she started screaming and shouting out something about an explosion. She dropped the phone. I don't know what the hell she's talking about . . . but I thought you should know."

It was 3:30 in the afternoon, the beginning of the rush hour for L.A. traffic, and a heavy listening time for an all-news outlet.

"Thanks . . . I'll check into it." Maggie shouted across the room at an aging, taciturn reporter who was in between phone calls. "Hey, Fred, I gotta report of a big explosion in Seal Beach . . . probably somebody hurt. Check into it, will ya?"

The reporter nodded and picked up the phone, beginning to dial without bothering to look up the number. Across the top of the Assignment Desk, one of the writers looked up.

"I got a friend who lives down there. You want me to call her?"

"Sure, see if she's heard anything."

Despite the military alert, it was a relatively dull afternoon, at least "dull" compared to the usual frenetic pace kept in a radio newsroom. No one had been shot, strangled or mangled -- locally -- within the past few hours. Nationally, the news focused on waiting for Congressional action, which was rarely something the local press got excited about. It was covered at the Network in New York and in Washington. The really spicy local stuff concerned Central and South America.

Lord knows, thought Maggie, there was enough of that lately. There was an enormous, and growing, community of immigrants in Los Angeles. Most of those people were from Mexico

and Central America, although there were many Cubans, Colombians and Brazilians coming in, always in increasing numbers. So, when the U.S. dropped bombs in Colombia or Peru, the locals grew restless. And for good reason: most of them still had relatives living under those bombs. Others had left their countries only recently, and remembered vividly towns and villages that were spoken of, often cavalierly, in the past tense.

Maggie sighed, resigned long ago to the fact that she could not save the world, even though she controlled a newsroom which broadcast the stories she chose to anywhere from two to five million people every day. You would think that control of information would change the world, but the practicalities of broadcast news had come home to her years before: you might control what people hear, but you can never control what people think. You get what you sort for, as the saying goes. She could report, time and time again, of half-truths and downright lies emanating from the White House. To a conservative, the news was a reflection of the bias of a liberal press. Depending on how liberal the listener, the news could be an exaggeration or truth. To some, it was the press parroting what the politicians wished the people to hear, as if the press had no mind of its own. Sometimes, Maggie was sure it did not.

"Maggie!"

Her head slapped around to face the sound.

"What?"

"There is something very strange happening down there . . . no one is answering at the police station, some hysterical woman answered at the fire department . . . I couldn't get anything out of her except she was screaming for help. Should I go down there?"

"Not if it's dangerous. At least, not if it's as dangerous as it sounds . . . who else could you call?"

Maggie paused, thinking.

"Wait a second, don't we have a chopper up?"

"Yeah . . . it's really for T.V., not us. But I could call them."

As she spoke, she picked up the phone and started dialing. Within moments, she had the producer of the six o'clock news on the line, not surprising since he worked downstairs in the Network's building. What was surprising was his hysteria.

"Maggie, it's really been nice knowing you . . . I don't know what to say to you . . . we are going to die, Maggie. We are all going to die, and we are all going to die soon. They did it, they finally did it . . . they've been talking about it for years, I never thought I would see it. But they did it . . . "

"Did what?"

"They dropped the bomb, Maggie. We are all going to die. I got to go home, as long as I still can. I got to see my kids one more time. The last time I saw my son, I yelled at him for not doing his homework. What the fuck does it matter? I don't care if he did his homework or not, he is dying today. And I didn't tell him I loved him when I left this morning. God! Maggie! I don't want to die yet! Maggie, I got to go -- "

The phone was slammed down into its cradle, and Maggie was left holding a receiver and a puzzled look.

"Fred . . . you said there was somebody alive at the fire department?"

"Yeah?"

"How close was the fire department to Seal Beach?"

"Maggie, it was the Seal Beach Fire Department. Seal Beach isn't that big."

Even facing possible death, a reporter of forty years had trouble answering what he perceived as a stupid question.

"Fred, make some more calls. Seal Beach has a weapons depot smack in the middle of it. If somebody dropped a nuclear bomb in the middle of the depot, we would have felt it here. There's more fire power in a square mile down there than there is in all the rest of California.

"And call my sister, Marian . . . the one in Long Beach. She'll be home. See if she can see anything."

This last comment was to herself, more than anyone else. She was extremely confused. Everything she had heard told her that someone had seen a nuclear explosion. That would certainly mean sure death for most of Los Angeles, as conventional wisdom said bombs don't come one at a time. If this were a first strike, one bomb would certainly not be sufficient to prevent retaliation. If it were an accident, it would be the biggest story she had seen in quite a while, but it would not mean death for everyone.

"Fred, I'm going downstairs and see what's made those guys so crazy."

"Maggie, wait – what's your sister's number?"

One of the writers made a crack about television people being a little crazy, with or without nuclear bombs. Maggie smiled, shouted out Marian's number to Fred, and trotted down the hall to the stairs that would lead her to T.V.

Chapter 31

The General had been married once. He remembered her as a good, conservative girl who wore skirts, usually orange ones, and white blouses with rounded collars. His thoughts of her were often mixed with thoughts of a round-eyed deer, gently nuzzling him when he would hold a handful of grain out. If he moved too fast, the deer would bolt for deep cover, and that is what his wife did. She lived somewhere in Virginia now, with an executive of some sort as her new caretaker. She really did not need a caretaker, being a strong-willed woman who had put up with his rages and depressions for 12 years before deciding it was not worth it. He had one child from that marriage, a daughter who, like her mother, was attracted by executives. Therefore, she had become one, and working for some company in Boston.

The General was not sure why thoughts of his family had intruded on him today. Perhaps he was depressed; perhaps he was just getting old, a common malady among people his age. He used to shrug off these feelings of futility, quite aware that the feelings were directly proportional to recent successes versus recent failures.

The failures had come thick and fast in the past few weeks. A meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff had gone poorly; their recommendation had been to hold the Fireworks Program in reserve, not letting any word of it out, and not permitting any further testing because of the unusual nature of the project. He had practically begged to get clearance for a meeting with the Senate Intelligence Committee. He knew that he could convince Congressmen; politicians were much more easy to manipulate, and this project had panache, the type of flash that Senators adore.

Well, he had gotten his meeting with the Senators, but apparently the time was not right: they had agreed with the Joint Chiefs. The reasons were vague to him. The Senators had been

unwilling to even discuss the possibility of invading anywhere without clear cause. After Iraq, these men were tip-toeing around any mention of preemptive action, whining about international law and political realities. The realities that he was aware of had to do with liberating huge portions of the world, spreading democracy. Some of the Senators were as old as he, and must remember what it was like before Hitler and the treaties that rose like blackened, blood-encrusted abominations out of the ashes of the battlefields. It was still hard for him to believe that they had negotiated with the communists, when they knew how dangerous the Russians could be. The Russians had never lived free; domination was as natural to them as swimming is to a duck. A “free Russia” lasted only a few years. It was back to its old Soviet self. Ask the Chechens.

So let the Russians be, thought the General. Let us create terrorist-free democratic countries in South America, the Middle East. The General had a grand plan for a democratic world. He could show them how to do it. A few well-placed fireworks.

The General scratched his jaw and let out an exasperated sigh. He hoisted himself out of his chair, feeling the age of every muscle and he realized that he should sleep sometime soon. Weeks like this, he lived on caffeine pills and buttermilk. He had not slept since a three-hour nap he had grabbed Sunday morning; it was 6:30 Monday evening, and most of the staff was gone. Considering the success of his pet project, going home to sleep was not such a bad idea. Maybe tomorrow he would have some better ideas, or at least fresh ones. He locked his drawers, clicked off the lights, and stepped into the hallway, closing his door behind him. As the latch clicked into place, his phone started ringing. He almost returned to his desk. But the fatigue and depression convinced him otherwise, and he continued on towards the elevator.

Chapter 32

The boy sitting at the console was eighteen years-old, almost nineteen. He was buffed out to the max. Every muscle had been worked and stretched and toned until he could easily become the cover photo of a weight-training magazine. Other than his physique, the first thing you noticed about Seaman First Class MacIntire was his jaw. It jutted out in clear straight lines, defining his head in a distinctly Greek way. He looked like a statue of Apollo.

Unfortunately for MacIntire and for everyone he came in contact with, he knew it. He treated his girlfriends like the adoring priestesses they were, frequently burning them. And he liked the Navy. He looked great in a uniform. Living in a beach town in southern California at the height of his sexual prowess, this boy from Iowa was so pleased with his life that he easily could have died and not regretted wasting a minute.

His male friends fared much better than the women; to the men he was a bright, well-liked country boy who was generous and gentle when needed, and feisty and nasty when appropriate. His parents loved him, his superiors thought him outstanding, and they wanted to send him to Annapolis.

The kid was hot.

So it may have been for these reasons that he had captured one of the best duties on the base: he sat in an air-conditioned, underground room Monday through Fridays from 9 to 5, reading science fiction novels and waiting for a buzzer that would tell him that World War III had begun. It was a good job. No stress, no real challenge, but it suited him for the time being. He was just marking time now, until the fall when he would head out to Annapolis and the start of a long and illustrious career as a Navy Man.

There were a couple monitors in the room: one to watch the entrance to the room he was in, and the other to watch the entrance to the base. The one at the base entrance was the most fun, since on long summer afternoons he could watch as dozens of teenage girls took a detour -- usually on bicycles -- past the entrance to the base. His sister had told him that she could not understand the allure of a uniform for a woman. He liked his sister, but he was glad she was not like these southern California girls.. He had met dozens of girls in this area that were turned on simply by the sight of shiny buttons.

He reached the end of a chapter in his book, and checked the monitor to see if any of the pretty young things he had grown so fond of were crossing his screen. What he saw was a mass of running and screaming people, all frantically scrambling toward the base. He almost fell out of his chair in his hurry to fix the monitor, which he adjusted to show the bigger picture. The bigger picture was much worse. It showed a huge cloud of smoke, and what looked to be the beginnings of a mushroom cloud. On his feet, he lurched frantically to see every dial, every monitor.

There was nothing there. There was a slight disturbance on his seismic graph, but that was it: no radiation, no incoming missile warnings, nothing to show. But the nightmare outside was real. Every fraction of a second he would look up at the monitor, to see if the thing was still there. It was still there, although all of the people had disappeared, gone underground was his suspicion. He started tapping on the glass, thinking that his equipment could have been turned off by the radiation. He shook his head, confused and frustrated beyond all recollection, remembering that he was too far underground for radiation to bother the instruments.

"Lordy Jesus. What the fuck is going on?"

MacIntire picked up the phone, and started punching buttons trying to get someone upstairs to answer. Either they had all gone underground, or they were too freaked to answer the phone. So he started dialing numbers back east. He got a response immediately.

"Operator 4287 . . . what is your code?"

MacIntire was an outstanding fellow. He was trying to keep his voice from cracking, even though he was on the edge of hysteria. He explained what he had seen and what his instruments were registering. And he asked for advice. There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"C'mon, what should I do? Are you there?"

"I'm here . . . it sounds like . . . it sounds like you are the victim of some kind of joke."

"Joke! I can't see a soul on any of my monitors, and no one upstairs is answering. They may be dead, for all I know. This ain't no joke . . . what do I do?"

"Hold the line. I repeat: hold the line. I'll find some one with more authority. But listen, it sounds like it's not a real device, or there would be more info registering. Hold tight. Do you know if the base has been shut down?"

"No, like I told ya, nobody upstairs in answering and I can't see anything on my monitors. Even the corridors are empty."

The hum of transcontinental static filled his ear for one minute, then two, then three. He pranced around the phone, constantly checking and re-checking the monitors and the instruments to see if any change had registered. He was tied to the phone cord but desperate to be closer to his panel of instruments, and he started to giggle as he looked down at himself, realizing that he acted the same way when he was stuck on the phone and his bladder was full. The thought immediately produced a strong reaction; he had to piss more than anything in the world. Another minute went

by, and another, until he heard a snap, and a click. The phone went dead, and a dial tone assaulted him.

"Oh shit!" MacIntire slammed down the phone fuming as he ran to relieve himself in a cardboard box-sized outhouse that held a urinal. Zipping his pants, the other phone rang and he pounced on it.

Chapter 33

The staff of the T.V. newsroom was clustered around a bank of television screens. On each screen was a different angle on a mushroom cloud that was still surging and roiling in a shape that Maggie recognized from as far back as she could remember. Nightmares from childhood. The bomb shelter. Her mother's warnings about cockroaches being the only things that would survive. The chopper pilot, who had been out getting film of a brush fire down the coast, was over Laguna Beach when he saw the flash. Maggie learned this in bits and pieces from a dozen terrified staffers who lived their lives through pictures, and had no choice but to believe what they saw. On the other hand, Maggie was intensely skeptical. These people might have to rely on what they saw everyday; but Maggie's world was composed of what she heard, and she knew that Fred had heard a woman screaming long after that woman should have been dead.

Cynically, she thought to herself that the helicopter pilot must be on drugs, since he seemed so unconcerned with what he was photographing. He was instead making comments about the approximate height, width and color of the cloud. In a bizarre way, she realized his reaction was more sane than anyone else's. There was no way a helicopter should be flying on top of a nuclear cloud. She found her way back upstairs to see if Fred had heard from the military.

"Maggie, military says that either we're nuts or they are."

Fred was looking as if he questioned his sanity in not retiring last year.

"The only person I can get through to on the base was someone who was actually inside one of those Early Detection rooms. Seems everybody that usually answers the phone is outside looking at the cloud. Maggie, he described it as . . . it looks like a bomb landed . . ."

"Sure does. I just saw it downstairs. T.V.'s chopper is right on top of it."

"Anyway, this guy inside picked up the phone because he is waiting from a call from the Pentagon. Apparently, an outside camera picked up the picture. So this guy started scrambling to find out what happened . . . but he couldn't find anything. There is no radiation being picked up by any of his monitors. There is nothing that came in overhead, and there has been no report of any suspicious activity at the base, although I don't think that means anything. There is nothing going on down there."

"There sure as hell is something going on down there! There is a cloud, big as life, that looks like a bomb's been dropped in a heavily-populated area! And apparently, a hell of a lot of people are scared shitless, including the fire department, the police department and the military . . . at least all of the military that isn't inside that one room with techno-toys telling them it's alright!"

Despite the outbreak, Maggie started nodding and talking rapidly, giving orders to writers, then turning to Fred.

"I want something on the air right now. Go in there, break into whatever it is they're doing, and assure people it's okay. Tell them there is no radiation. Tell them that a couple of times."

As Fred rumbled out of the room, Maggie called over the head technician, and sat down herself to call the Network.

Chapter 34

Cassandra looked up, from her brother, prone on the ground. She thought he had fainted, although a part of her was convinced that he was dead because of the explosion. She looked around in an automatic gesture, one that made sure that all children were safe, if not happy. The only two kids left in the yard were Nicole and Elaina. Both were staring in amazement at the apparition to the south.

Dana had trailed behind her mother across the street, where Annie had gone to borrow milk. Cassandra did not know when they would return. She knew that something should be done now. But what should be done was another matter. And then, with sanity slowly ebbing out, she remembered the cellar.

She ran toward the girls, and scooped them up, one under each arm. She ran them to the cellar and practically threw them down on the ground, so she could fling open the cellar door. It was ugly down there, and dirty and dark. And the girls screamed in fear as she ran them down the stairs.

"Stay! Don't move!"

She ran back up the stairs and grabbed Kurt under the arms, trying to drag him toward the cellar. At that point he awoke and started screaming like a madman.

"Kurt! Kurt!" Her voice had taken on a hysterical edge. "Kurt, please! The girls are downstairs! Please help me!"

Kurt slowed down and stared at her. His expression was terrifying.

"Please, Kurt, please! Don't let me down . . . please! Just get some water, lots of water. We'll need some food too. We can wait it out. Please, please . . . Kurt!"

The last word was a scream, loud and high, as Kurt flipped over onto his stomach and started vomiting into the grass.

"Oh, God! Don't die! Kurt, please! It's not close enough yet! Water! We need water!"

Suddenly, realization washed over her. It was a fake. It was THE fake, it was the one they were working on last week. But it can't be fake . . . there hadn't been enough time. They couldn't have come up with this in a week, it didn't make any sense. It must be real. Cassandra had no idea what to do. She flopped on the ground next to her brother, and stared blankly at the ground. Was it real? Was it fake? Screams from the cellar jolted her out of her reverie, and she said out loud, "Better safe than sorry." Tugging on Kurt again, she managed to get him up and on his feet. She tried to get through to his brain this time.

"Kurt." She started speaking in the clipped tones that were so reminiscent of her mother. "We need lots of water. We need food. We need to get down into the cellar. Kurt, can you understand me?" Kurt shook his head, more out of confusion than denial. He said, "There's some Arrowhead on the front porch. I'll get that. Plenty of food in the cupboards, you grab that, and I'll meet you back here." He shouted down into the cellar, where the girls were making high-pitched screams of displeasure at all the bugs. "Girls! Stay there! I'll be right back!"

From years and years of hearing of the nuclear threat, Kurt was at least aware of what they would need. He had little faith in the doctrine of survivability. He believed, with all his heart, that they would all die. But he would be damned if he would let the kids die before at least giving them a fighting chance. He was unconcerned with himself at that point. All he could see in her mind's eye were Nicole and Elaina, shivering and screaming on the bench in the cellar. Nicole was deathly afraid of spiders; Elaina was simply scared. The two of them could be heard crying and screaming

their displeasure from only fifteen feet below the ground. Kurt was certain that fifteen feet would not save them from the bomb. Nevertheless he was willing to try.

Coming back with armfuls of food, Cassandra could hear Nicole in the cellar, screaming and sobbing with a hysterical edge to her voice. She undoubtedly had seen something crawling. The child had an unnatural fear of crawling things. On the other hand, Elaina loved bugs. But she, too, was sobbing, frightened by her sister's hysteria.

“Hold on, you two . . .” She ran back into the house to find Kurt, but he had collapsed on the front porch, and was staring at the mushroom cloud.

"Kurt, please . . ."

Tears streamed down his face. He was open-mouthed.

Cassandra started to cry too. She might be able to stay brave in the face of that cloud, especially since she wasn't sure it was real, but the kids were crying, her brother was crying, and all this pain was more than she could bear. Sobbing, she turned to run into the house, kicking Kurt once, hard, before she left. “Get up, asshole. This water is your job.”

Frantically, she grabbed a plastic bag and started filling it with food and whatever looked liquid inside the refrigerator. She somehow knew it to be futile, and midway through her frenetic rush she stopped. She looked around the little kitchen, focusing on the fluttering of the white-and-blue kitchen curtains.

"I don't know what to do." She sounded very calm, but with that she turned and raced back outside, flying down the cellar steps in time to squish a large black spider which had crawled unto Nicole's shoe.

Nicole's eyes were glazed over, and her breath was coming in ragged gasps as she stomped and screamed, even though the spider was dead. She was so scared, that she had wet her pants,

and Cassandra noticed the puddle as she pulled the child to her and tried to calm her down. Elaina was still crying, but quietly, choosing instead to poke at the body of the dead spider with a stick. Still holding Nicole, Cassandra saw Elaina reach out to touch the gooey carcass and said "No" too sharply. The word sent Elaina into another fit of crying.

Cassandra knew she should clean up Nicole. She wondered where Annie was. This was her job. She knew then that she needed toilet paper and a bucket and spare clothing and blankets and water. They would need water to drink and something to keep Elaina clean. With a rush, she realized that she had no diapers here and Elaina was not toilet-trained yet. Everything was upstairs, in the house. And if she ventured outside she might be risking death. And if she died, the children would likely die as well. There was Kurt, he knew where everything was in the house. He could probably get what they needed. But she had a child and a toddler in a filthy, infested root cellar that had not been explored in years. She thought to herself that two weeks would not be enough time for the air to clear of radiation; yet two weeks in this hell hole and everyone would be very sick, if not dead.

It was then that Kurt appeared at the top of the stairs. He was very pale, but he was standing and carrying a full 5-gallon jug of water.

"What do you need from inside the house? Where's Annie?"

"Cross the street . . . she's gone some place safe, I just know it . . . they have a bomb shelter in the basement." His eyes were glazed, but he made the logical leap. "We should go there."

"Then let's go."

"What if they're not home? Then we stay out in the radiation longer."

"Look, just get some diapers and some water. I got some food. I don't know if it's enough, but you'd better get in here before the radiation gets . . . too intense." She wondered if she should say something about Duane and the fake bomb. But she couldn't. She thought it sounded stupid.

"Okay." The face disappeared from the top of the stairs. While he was gone, Cassandra managed to calm the children and get rid of the carcass of the spider. She made a quick check of the rest of the cellar, for obvious signs of infestation; she even convinced Nicole to smash a couple bugs to make herself feel better. By that time, Kurt was back with armfuls of diapers and a huge bucket. He threw them down the stairs and disappeared again, this time to return with a glass jar full of water; the jar looked familiar. When Cassandra saw a handful of pennies scattered at the bottom she remembered; this old Sparklett's bottle had been in the corner of the living room for years. Anytime anyone had found a penny or two one of the kids was told to put it in the College Fund.

For some reason, Cassandra stared at the jar for a long time. A month ago, her first visit in years, she was in the living room with Kurt and Annie, with kids seemingly everywhere. With Kurt's three, and usually a friend or two of Dana's, the noise level was so high that conversation was nearly impossible. She remembered yelling at the kids for making too much noise; she remembered getting huffy. But it was family. She left town slightly wistful. It was that afternoon that had brought her to L.A. a second time in a month, to announce her wedding and the move to Montana.

She kept staring at the bottle, now full of water and pennies, wanting to have five more minutes in that living room with those kids and that noise right now. Wanting to go to Montana. Wanting kids of her own. Wanting Duane. She looked up and Kurt was staring at her. Her eyes

were wide, her mouth open, her face smudged where she had rubbed her hand against it after brushing cobwebs and dirt away from Nicole.

"Are we going to die?"

"Probably."

They stood in silence for a time, maybe a minute or two before realizing that the best way of optimizing their chances was to stay protected as long as possible. Kurt slammed the cellar door shut and darkness enveloped them. Immediately, Nicole started wailing and Elaina took up the chorus.

Chapter 35

Annie was across the street, gossiping with the neighbor, a thirty-ish single doll named Gloria. Annie stood at the front door, waiting for Dana who was tangled inside with Gloria's daughter. Gloria's son Jerry, on the front lawn, yelled loudly.

"Mommy! Mommy! Come look!"

Gloria was so engrossed in the conversation with Annie that, without turning, she said, "Just a minute, Jerry."

Jerry was insistent, even for a six year-old. "No, Mommy, come look now. I'm serious."

Gloria laughed. "Your kids ever do that? When we scold them, we say 'I'm serious.' Then they pick it up and throw it right back at you the next day." She turned around.

"Oh my God! Jerry! Come here right now!"

Gloria flung the door open so that Annie could whisk Jerry into the house, and both started screaming for the girls. Within moments, Gloria had led the five of them into a well-lighted basement, built as a bomb shelter in the 1950s. Boxes of Christmas ornaments were along one side, baby pictures and drawings from first grade were in another box. It was dusty, but it was a far cry from the cellar that surrounded Kurt and Cassandra.

It may have been that these two, as mothers, were used to crisis. It may be that -- like so many of their generation -- they had suffered from nuclear nightmares when their children were born. Whatever it was, these two reacted as if they had been drilled.

"Dana! Don't ask questions! Shut up! Go into Melody's bedroom -- pick up all the blankets and pillows off the bed and bring them here now!"

"Melody! You heard what she said. Go into the kitchen -- no questions -- get everything that you can find to drink. Jerry! Jerry! Follow Melody into the kitchen, and pick up every bit of food that you can carry. Melody . . . get him a big bag, and make sure its full of things to eat. Not Twinkies!"

Later on, much later on, Gloria and Annie would laugh about this afternoon and how organized they had been. They would laugh, remembering Jerry lugging a green plastic garbage bag of food down the basement steps and they would laugh remembering how it was full of cereal and cookies and chips but not one vegetable. They would laugh remembering how Dana and Melody brought bedding and Barbies. The girls told them that they wanted to save "the most important stuff." They would laugh when they remembered how Jerry cried when he was told he could not go back for his Yugioh sleeping bag, even though they were spending overnight in the basement.

The two women acted unconcerned about the cloud. They had heard their whole lives that nuclear war was possible, even imminent at times. But, like so many, they trusted in the continuity of life as we know it. They were not political people, either of them. They were both at a level of existence common to women the world over. They raised their children; they fed, bed, and fought with their men; and they talked with their friends about the simple problems of living, in kitchen conversations that would translate into any community in the world. They had been told about nuclear bombs. They had been told about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They were aware of the on-going battles between the nuclear powers worldwide. But they really did not care. They were not activists. They found it too inconvenient to vote. On the one hand, they heard from the government saying "all's well." But on the other, they heard from folks just like Duane, who preached a message of gloom and doom.

These women, like so many others, believed no one. It was not a conscious decision, so much as it was a refusal to take the time to sort out the messages, to find the one that was truthful amidst a barrelful of lies. It was a task far too metaphysical for women who found themselves faced with tangible reality daily in the form of runny noses, scraped knees and broken hearts. Their friends had husband troubles, or drunken parents, or a sick child. This is reality. They did not need to look for truth at any higher level.

Annie brought water, Gloria grabbed food, and they herded the children into the basement. “What about Kurt and the kids?” Gloria stopped right before shutting the door to the basement.

“Oh, they’ll be fine. I think.” Annie frowned hard, as if thinking hurt. “They’re probably in the cellar already – and it’s just the same as this, right?”

So, they did what they thought was best under the circumstances. They locked themselves in the basement with food, water, and three children, to wait and to hope that the comfort of normalcy would be returned to them.

Chapter 36

Julee was rolling down the Harbor Freeway on his way to meet a big-time buyer. He was in a brand-new SUV. It was black, of course. Lots of chrome. Just getting into it gave him a hard-on.

He was just past the Forum, traveling southbound, when he saw it. He was reading the huge electronic sign, telling him when the next Lakers game was. Behind the sign, it started to show. He didn't know what it was at first. He thought it was just smoke. Then he could just see the top of the cloud start to blossom, larger and larger, above the freeway, above the billboards, above the buildings.

It grew. Julee's SUV slowed down. Someone honked behind him, and then the honking stopped. Everyone was slowing down. The mushroom top of the cloud became obvious. Part of his brain told him it was down by Long Beach. His foot was off the accelerator now, and the big car simply slowed until it was stopped by the car in front. There was a slight bump. No one noticed.

The freeway was stopped cold now. There was some screaming, Julee could it hear in the distance. But everything was in the distance for Julee right now. He was moving slowly, slowly, deliberately. He opened his door and got out, mouth open. His associate, a huge man, overweight, muscled, and incredibly dangerous, opened his door too, but he did not move. He was frozen in place.

Julee just watched. He didn't think, he didn't process, and he didn't try to plan an escape. He just watched. Some part of his brain told him that this was bad, very very bad. But he couldn't do anything. He just watched. Finally, his big friend spoke up.

"Julee. Julee. Let's go."

Julee's head swivelled around slowly. "Go?"

"Let's get out of here. Let's go."

"Where?"

"Julee. Get in the car."

Julee did not move, so his associate got up and picked him up, putting him in the back seat. He climbed clumsily into the driver's seat, adjusting the seat so that he could fit his bulk behind the wheel. The two men sat in the car. They looked out the window.

Neither one moved. They couldn't move. The freeway was in lock down. Finally, after a few minutes, some of the cars started to twist off the freeway, towards an offramp. The big man put the SUV into four wheel drive, and pushed his way over and through, smashing the chrome on Julee's new ride, smashing through to the exit, where the two men descended into South Central. Home. Sweet home.

Chapter 37

Like her sister Maggie, Marian was not a small woman. She was fairly tall, and broad, built like the pictures you might see of the eastern European peasant stock from which she came. But unlike her ancestors, bearing children had not come easy. After fifteen years of marriage, and fifteen years of waiting for a child, Marian found herself pregnant and happier than she had ever been. It was as if she had won the lottery. Her marriage -- always strong, but often fractious -- had become loving, gentle and playful again after all these years. Her relationship with her family had smoothed, and what was once rocky was now mere sand.

When the child was born, Marian expected to hear the singing of angels and the ring of trumpets; and she might as well have heard such things, because the child was spoiled from the first moment it drew breath. It was a girl, and a more elfin creature could not be found. She was delightfully sweet, but mischievous, and often demanding. She became the center of Marian's universe.

Marian was an educated woman and had aspirations other than child-rearing. Her career stopped abruptly when the child was born. She thought she would be jealous of Maggie, but she wasn't. She was amazed; she had created life. As the months went by, she would tell herself that she should resume working, but it was so hard! Each day was a new challenge, each day the child learned another word, or walked more strongly, or learned how to hug. Each day, as the humanness of the baby became more evident it became a wrenching thought to even ask herself to separate from the baby merely to work. This was far more important to Marian. She knew that she would not have another child. The doctor was amazed that she became pregnant, at age 35, with this baby. She also knew that a person is a baby only once, and for such a short time.

She wanted to see the person she had created develop. Each day was a wonder, and she went through her familiar world in awe of the new things that she saw. She saw her baby smile at her for the first time. She saw the baby's first steps. She heard the baby's first word: dog. She saw a twinkle in that child's eye that she didn't know people could have. It was a magical time, and Marian had never felt so full, so alive, so exhilarated at the prospect of facing a morning.

There were, of course, times when the child was difficult or sick or simply grouchy. And Marian soon learned that too much love delivered at the wrong time creates a small dictator rather than a small child. Nevertheless, she loved the child more than life itself.

Like so many others, after the birth, Marian had a few nightmares. She was afraid of losing her child and those fears appeared in dark dramas in her dreams. In one, she was sitting on a hill looking south at the beaches that formed the great curve of Southern California. It was dawn with a tinge of salmon-colored clouds circling the horizon. Then she saw a cloud of a different color, rising out of what she knew was the Seal Beach area, where a major military depot existed. She saw it and she knew many things instantly. She knew she was going to die, and then she knew that her baby would die. In her dream, she ran off the hill trying to find her baby, frantic to hold her just one more time.

As often happens in dreams, Marian could not run quickly; it was as if she were swimming in jello. She knew she had to act quickly, but she couldn't get anywhere. She kept waiting for the sun to rise, but the salmon-colored clouds remained, and the sky continued to promise a morning which never came. She woke up thrashing and screaming, begging to see her child just one more time.

* * *

Marian sat on the floor that morning with her legs outstretched, and the child -- now eighteen months old -- explaining in a language all her own that if blocks are stacked up, blocks must be knocked down. Marian was enjoying the lesson. She heard a rolling roar, and stepped outside to look. The baby, of course, toddled after her wondering what had taken her playmate away.

There were people scattered across the street, in their doorways, in their cars. All had stopped and were looking up -- up at the mushroom-shape they knew so well from movies, books, newspaper accounts and descriptions from those who may have seen one. None of the people on the street had ever seen one in person. But none had to. All of them, down to the first graders, knew what it was. And all were frightened or in shock. Within moments, some of the people ran in their houses. Others stood still, looking at the cloud but not sure what to do next. Others started crying and became hysterical, either sitting down where they were or wandering off in an unimportant direction to wait for the end.

Marian's reaction was soft and slow. She turned to her baby who was tugging on her leg and she kneeled down. She gathered the child up into her ample arms and rocked slowly back and forth on her heels, crooning the child's name and whispering endearments. Marian knew what would happen next. One bomb was not enough. It was never enough. Others would fall and soon the radiation would encircle the earth and everyone would die. In the beginning, if they lived through this first shock, there would be pandemonium. Later, there would be no food and no water, and what nourishment they could find would be tainted with poison. Her child, her baby, her life and her love would -- might -- die quickly. She would die within the next few hours from the effects of this bomb or, she would die over the next few weeks or few months, slowly, horribly,

and in great pain. She did not know how long it would take for the radiation of the cloud to reach her house; she only hoped she would have long enough.

Still holding on to her child and still crooning, Marian went back into the house. Her child was unusually cuddly, listening quietly to the sounds her mother was making, and holding on tightly, her arms entwined around Marian's neck, her head tucked gently under her mother's chin. Marian found a knife, the sharpest knife in the kitchen. The blade was about seven or eight inches long. It could be used for many things, although she used it more for carving up chickens than anything else. She took the knife and the child back into the living room and sat back down on the floor amidst the blocks and the balls. She sat her baby in her lap and looked at her for what she knew would be the last time.

The child's curly hair framed her face, her eyes were open and bright, and she had that open half-smile that children often have when they are interested but unsure. Marian held her child tightly. She rocked her back and forth and called her name and then she steadied her against her breast -- a breast that was still providing milk to this bright-eyed wonder of her life -- and she plunged the knife into the back of the baby's skull and killed her.

The sparkly life of the child's eyes faded slowly and the smile on the baby's lips remained even after Marion pulled the knife out of the little skull. Marian tickled her nose with her child's curls, smelling baby shampoo and a faint smell of Desitin which she had slathered on a diaper rash that morning. Clutching the child tightly, she whispered, "I love you, little one . . . it's going to be alright . . . we'll be fine" Then she placed the knife, still dripping with her child's blood and brains, into her mouth. She shoved it upwards and she fell.

The phone started to ring then. But only the machine picked up. It was Fred. “Hey, Marian, it’s Fred from the radio station. Maggie asked me to call. You see anything weird down there? Some kind of hoax we think . . . can you call Maggie as soon as you get this? Thanks.”

When her husband came home that night, he had not heard any of this. He had been working alone, in a basement office, all day. He had not seen anyone. The radio in his car was broken. He opened the front door and found his lady, his wife of fifteen years, curled up protectively around the body of this eighteen month-old daughter. And he screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

Chapter 38

Maggie was sitting in her chair, feeling as if she were in the center of a huge web, and every jangling phone or barking police scanner was something she had to deal with immediately. She had called in for extra staff to cover the pseudo-holocaust. Some of the staffers were unreachable; normally, that would not bother her, except for the hysteria she had been encountering ever since the blast went off. She had a nagging feeling in the back of her head that many of these people would never show up again. And she couldn't reach Marian.

The news director had come by, and with his usual aplomb had commended her for a job well done, and had told her to keep it up. He was going off to a meeting, but would check in with her later to make sure she had all the support she needed. He knew this would require overtime, and thanked her for her hard work. He also grumbled a little about the fact that they were not in the middle of a ratings sweep, saying "Arbitron is always asleep when we are doing our best work on spot news."

She smiled and nodded, as she always did, and hoped that he would leave quickly so she could get back to work.

Within the first half-hour after the Seal Beach tipster had called in with what had begun to be a traffic advisory, but had disintegrated into a hysterical warning about a bomb, the station had carried "Calm Down" warnings. Maggie knew that if the area around Seal Beach was half as hysterical as the T.V. newsroom downstairs, there would be a lot of problems before the night was out. There was also the issue of how to get news out of the area; the police station still wasn't answering the phone, the fire department lines were ringing into the central bureau; and the guy at the Seal Beach Naval Base wasn't answering the phone any more, but then no one else was either.

Somebody had to go down there, but there was always the possibility that whomever she sent into the area would be exposed to some sort of radiation. On top of that, it was nearing the worst of rush hour, and any one she put on the road from Hollywood now would not get to the scene for at least an hour, probably more. She had one reporter who lived in the area. That reporter would not answer her phone. Another reporter, who lived less than a half hour's drive away -- even in rush hour -- had only gotten off work last hour and was unreachable. She could only hope that he would be listening to the radio on the way home, and would call in as soon as he got near the site of the accident.

"Accident" is what they were calling it now, for lack of a better term. They tried "incident," but people were being killed, and "incident" was far too impersonal. Nothing was moving. She needed news, she needed headlines, and she needed it now. She headed back to the telephone.

"Fred . . . what have you got going?"

"Nothing. I can't get through to any agencies, and the military base isn't answering."

"My sister?"

"Nada."

"Go to the reverse directories. We know this thing exploded near the Naval Base. Get some addresses around there, and call anybody with a listing that might be able to see what's going on." She turned to a writer, who was standing behind her.

"Take half of whatever he finds, and start calling. What ever sound you get, bring it out as soon as possible. We need somebody on the air, saying they saw it, and they're not dead. That should quiet things down . . . at least a little."

* * * *

"I wish I had a radio."

Kurt looked up in his job of clearing floor space in preparation for digging a toilet.

"Why? Won't work."

Cassandra shook her head, wrinkled her nose and said, "Why not? Even if all the local stations are down, sometimes you can get San Francisco stations, the ones that are really strong."

"Radiation. Remember the movies? How the cars would stop? Because radiation in doses that large interferes with electrical impulses. Even if a local station were able to broadcast, it couldn't get through. It screws up all the transmissions. Like trying to work inside the sun."

At that point, a large black roach scuttled out, disturbed by Kurt's work, and all three girls -- Cassandra, Nicole and Elaina -- shrieked in unison. Cassandra managed to compose herself enough so that when the creature came close enough, she squashed it. It crunched loudly in such cramped quarters. She looked down and saw that she only managed to kill half of it; half-hidden in the gloom of the dusty cellar, the bug wriggled to escape the prison of its own smashed legs. Fascinated, Cassandra stared at the creature. Scientists said that only cockroaches would escape the holocaust to live on. She felt very guilty about killing one of the survivors.

Kurt slapped his hands against his jeans, and stood. His head scraped the ceiling, so he ducked to avoid the cobwebs showering his forehead. "Esther, what the hell are we doing here? Sticking ourselves in a root cellar is no way to protect ourselves against a . . . a damn bomb. We have been here for four hours . . . I feel sick. How long is it going to be until we all feel sick, and we all die?"

Kurt had slipped into a dead-pan delivery that, for some reason, infuriated her. The girls started to cry again, which turbo-charged her anger.

"Damn you!" She hissed. "If there is a chance, I am going to stay here! I don't really give a shit about me, but these two are babies -- and they're part of you! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Still dead-pan, he replied, "They gonna be dead soon, Esther. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Would you stop calling me Esther!"

"Well?"

"So what you wanna do? Kill them?"

Suddenly, Kurt found himself smothering in *deja vu*. Her chin jutting out, her lower lip quivering, and he remembered arguments with her going back to his earliest memories: arguments over balls, over games, over which television shows they would watch. He could almost hear her screaming that she didn't want to watch the "Mummy's Curse" because it was too scary. Shaking his head, he stepped back to try to gain some perspective, and felt, rather than heard, the scrunch of another cockroach under his heel. Overwhelmed once again, he started crying, and did not speak for some time.

Elaina was more confused than frightened. She trusted grown-ups. They had never let anything happen to her before, and with the tenacity of a two year-old, she could not imagine a future that was different from her past. She hated bugs. That was true. But they kept killing the bugs; soon, they would go back upstairs, and everybody would stop shouting. She didn't like it here. But it wasn't unbearable. It was better, for example, than hiding in the dog house by yourself, during hide-and-seek, because there were people here with you. She hid in the dog house all by herself. That was scary.

Nicole, being older, understood that something was terribly wrong, although she did not know what. These two grown-ups kept talking about someone dying. She knew that she did not want to die. Her grandmother had died, and she never came back. Her grandmother was very old, though, and her mom had told her that she had lived a "good life." After many questions, Nicole had determined that if you live long enough, you have lived a "good life." She figured that she had not had even a bad life yet, because she was too little. She liked it here; she liked toys, and other kids and chocolate ice cream and everything else that made things fun. The thought of leaving all that behind was more than she could bear.

Now, her dad and Aunt Cassie were talking about the bomb. All she had seen was a cloud. She did not know the implications of that cloud, nor did she quite understand what had forced them into this dusty, bug-filled place, a place where spiders lived. To Nicole, there was nothing worse than a spider. She was terrified; it did not matter that her dad was there, because a spider could drop on her any second, and crawl on her and touch her skin, before her dad could find it and kill it.

Chapter 39

She lived in Wilmington, right next to the Port of Los Angeles, in the shadow of two oil refineries. She was just another person who died that day. Another number. She had seen the cloud at the back window. She never thought much of the view, and she did not think much of her view today. She had looked out the back window to see if the kids were okay. She had looked out the back window to see if they were safe. She had looked out the back window to see if the only child she had ever brought into this world had her knee scraped, or her finger bruised, or her ball taken away by the neighborhood bully. She looked out her back window which gave her the grand view of an overgrown vacant lot that smelled like asphalt. She looked out her back window which let her see across the street to the house of a person she was sure was dealing drugs.

She looked out her back window, a window she had looked out dozens of times to make sure the dogs were not barking because of a burglar in her yard. She looked out her window -- a window she knew as well as her own hand -- and she started screaming. She looked out her back window to see her baby, her only child, and saw a monstrous black mushroom cloud. She saw the visions of her nightmares. She saw death rising ugly and bleak. She saw her baby, only three years old, still playing while her neighbors' kids looked up and stared, some pointing at the apparition which had appeared so suddenly in their neighborhood.

She ran outside, hardly breathing, grabbed her child and then started crying, knowing even if she brought her baby in from the yard, she could never bring her baby in from death. And death was roiling toward her in great black gusts, going upward, then forming that horrible, horrible shape. She had seen it on television, she had heard about it since she was a child. She could hold her child close to her, she could wrap her arms around her and try to protect her; but she knew they

were both dead. If a wild animal were in this yard she could distract it a long time. She could feed herself to it, rather than let it take her baby. But it wouldn't matter if she took her child inside right this minute. This child was dead. She was dead. They were all dead. And she cried.

The child squirmed and wiggled, as children do. She squirmed and thought strange, frightened thoughts at seeing her mother crying. It was daylight. Her daddy, whom she knew but little, was not there. There was no reason, that this child could see, that her mother should be crying. Only that big, black cloud. The child thought it was neat. Something like fireworks on the Fourth of July. She had only seen fireworks once that she could remember. But they were big and they boomed just like this did. But her mother just kept crying and soon the little girl, scared and worried that her mama was sick, started crying as well.

She ran to the front of the house, then to the back, frantic, wondering where to go, what to do. Finally, a plan in mind, she grabbed her purse and her baby and started for the fire station, three blocks away.

A man, as scared as she was, was loading a pistol across the street. It misfired. She died instantly. It was random. Her daughter went into foster care. The man across the street was never charged. Just a number. Just a statistic.

* * * *

As the bullet was being fired in Wilmington, Greg Clark got up from his seat at the bar and walked to the door, squinting because of the contrast between the darkness of the bar and the harsh daylight outside. He saw nothing at first. In fact, he never saw the cloud. He had been meaning to get glasses for some time, but had not. What he did see was panic.

He saw people running down the street, some crying, some screaming. Others were standing, paralyzed, in the middle of the street. Those persons were obviously looking at something, but when Greg turned to see, all he could make out was a cloud bank over the ocean. It was something that happened all the time; he did not understand, and could see nothing unusual -- especially something that would cause all this confusion. He guessed he had missed something; but, if someone was panicking, it would undoubtedly result in traffic. With this thought in mind, he ambled toward the parking lot and his car, only to remember that he had left it somewhere else. At that moment, another patron came out of the bar to determine what had caused all the screaming. Greg pounced on him and talked him into a ride home. The two of them did not discuss the fog bank, nor did they try to determine the reason behind all the panic. There would be time enough for that later. It was bound to be on the evening news.

* * * * *

The news was on in West Virginia, and the pictures started to flow in from Maggie's news helicopter sitting on top of the bomb. At first, the anchors in New York and Washington referred to it as a "First Strike," then a terrorist plot. As the evening wore on, the words "Phantom Bomb" started being used to describe the carnage. The government denied everything. There was no bomb. There was no panic. The pictures were a hoax.

Tamara's Mama couldn't leave her spot in front of the television set. She watched television all night, alternately crying and pacing. She had no way of reaching Tamara. She was devastated, grieving and very much alone.

Chapter 40

It was 2:30 in the morning. He had been on the phone for hours. He had tried to find out how his bomb ended up in Los Angeles. He was now certain that it wasn't his bomb. But it didn't matter. The General had been expecting this call for some time. His aide, whom he sincerely hoped would not be tarnished by his association with him, told him who was on the line.

"It's the Chiefs of Staff, sir."

"Thank you." The General had come back to the Pentagon about 8:00, an hour and-a-half after the explosion in Los Angeles. It had taken him that long to get home, turn on the news, and turn around. It was not his bomb. He was certain of it. Every one of Miles' canisters was accounted for. And the one in L.A. acted differently, in some respects. There was a huge sound associated with it. He had told Miles to keep his quiet. From what he could tell from the satellite photos, the cloud was a little higher, and the color was darker. This was not his bomb.

The General stood and picked up the receiver. "Good morning, sir." He waited for the inevitable.

"No, it was definitely not one of ours. That much is sure. Every one of our canisters is at Yucca Flats or here. . . .no, I don't think so, sir. Several key indicators are different, including light, sound, height of the cloud. I understand, sir."

This was going predictably.

"Yes, it appears that someone infiltrated our operation. We have some leads, but it will take time. I have Miles here now, analyzing the data. He is certain that someone else designed

the item. The same results can come from different engineering concepts, he tells me. He says someone appropriated the idea, not the actual design. No, sir. No, sir.”

He waited for a pause in the questioning. “Sir, if I may, this proves my point about the bomb. It causes absolute panic. It is a very effective weapon, and we should consider strategic deployment.” The General frowned. No, he was right the first time.

“Of course, sir. You’ll have my resignation on your desk in the morning. Thank you, sir.”

What was happening in L.A. was even better than he had expected. This was a way to cause panic in a populace without leaving an ion of radiation behind. It was even better than his “clean bomb” idea, the bomb that didn’t exist. He expected to use Miles’ fake bomb to intimidate the world into thinking the U.S. had a clean bomb. This was different, but better in some respects. Set this off in an urban area, and you would have instant panic. Even military opposition would be heavily compromised. This was a different game, but it was a good one.

He sighed and sat down at his desk. He knew, after what had happened in L.A., that he would not survive the bomb. He had to write his resignation. A victim of war, he had to surrender to his superiors. He snorted, half-smiling. After a long career, he should have expected to leave the Pentagon this way. After all the battles within these walls, it would have been unexpected to have something happen as the result of outside interference.

His aide appeared, and they began to work on the letter, the General dictating, his aide dutifully taking notes.

“Where are you going, General?” After you leave . . .”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, young man.”

“If I may speak freely, sir . . .”

The General nodded.

“Private contractors are always looking for men of your caliber, sir. I have great faith that you will land on your feet . . . Perhaps with more freedom in the private sector that you had here.”

The young man had been listening to the General’s oft-held arguments, on the phone, in the hallways. He nodded.

“You’re right. That may be the next move. Thank you, Chris. Thank you. Dismissed.”

Chapter 41

Greg Clark had walked through his front door, after waving good-bye to the man who had given him a ride home. It had been a strange drive, seeing people speed down crowded surface streets, as they had never done before. Some people he could see screaming or crying, as they had been outside the bar. Greg was sober at this point; his driver was definitely not. Greg thought he saw his wife's car in amongst the confusion, but he couldn't tell for sure.

The driveway was empty when he got home, and not one of his four children was playing in the yard. His first thought was to grab a quick shower, so as to look as presentable as possible when Helen arrived. It was a day for decisions, and he was willing to go to any length to preserve and revive a family life that was slowly dying of his neglect.

He cleaned himself up, made himself some dinner, and then -- with nothing else to do -- he started cleaning the house. By midnight, the house was sparkling, and he was dreadfully worried. He waited, and paced, and finally fell asleep on the couch near the front door. When morning came through, he awoke and figured ruefully that Helen had probably taken the children to either her mother's or a friend's. He was depressed, thinking that all of his good intentions had come to naught. He was going to make some changes. He had come home wanting to make amends, and wanting to do things differently. He showered again, and called work.

"Hi. This is Greg. Let me speak to Sandy."

"Sandy, this is Greg, I won't be in . . . no, I probably won't be in this week at all. Who's in personnel now? . . . Does she know about insurance?" Greg waited, and his hands began to get cold, as his back started beading with sweat. He spent some time on the phone that morning, making plans for an alcohol treatment program. He then composed a long, pleading letter to

Helen, hoping she would come home to see it and hoping that she would understand. He never connected the office gossip describing some sort of explosion with Helen's disappearance. But it did take him a long time to find an in-patient alcohol treatment center that wasn't full to capacity after yesterday's blast.

Chapter 42

It may have been an hour, maybe more, but something extremely unusual happened which convinced Cassandra and Kurt that death was a mere moment away: it rained. It does not rain in southern California during the summer, at least not often. Occasionally, a summer thunder shower rolls in across the San Gabriel Mountains to the floor of the basin. Showers in the foothills are relatively common. But along the coast, thunder showers are unheard of; it was a miraculous coincidence, one of those little jokes the gods play on humans. Something like the advent of agriculture as an easier way to feed one's family.

The rain did not last long, nor was it a heavy shower. Nonetheless, when the first big drops hit the dust that covered the cellar door, the reaction inside was immediate.

"Oh Lord . . . its raining."

Cassandra shook her head, looking sideways at Kurt whose face had -- once again -- gone deathly pale. "So?"

"Don't you remember? That's what happens if enough stuff is blown up . . . nuclear winter . . . all the ash and dirt, buildings . . . it gets pulverized, goes into the atmosphere, and then comes down as rain. Highly radioactive rain."

Cassandra shifted her weight under Nicole, who was in her lap, frightened one minute and dozing the next. She was quiet, and stunned thinking that many more bombs must have fallen in order to create the rain that was so gently rapping their cellar door. Then she heard the sound: it was whining, scratching, but more familiar than frightening.

"Oh my God . . . it's the dog."

"Do we let it in?"

"Well, we can't leave it out there!"

"Esther, it's covered with radiation, through and through. It's the walking dead. It doesn't matter if we let it in or we leave it out there. It's dead."

Nicole and Elaina listened to this with wide eyes and simultaneously the two started screaming their displeasure. Elaina, too young to be verbal, simply cried. Nicole, on the other hand, was extremely articulate.

"You can't leave her out there . . . I play with that dog. If there is something out there that is scary, you can't let her stay there. She gets scared too." With that, she started crying.

Kurt and Cassandra looked at each other and Kurt shrugged.

"In the long run, Esther, I really don't think it's going to matter."

"Probably not." With that, she shook herself loose of the kids, and half-climbed, half-crawled up the stairs to push the door open.

The dog was a floppy-eared collie/shepard mix. She was tending toward the old side of puppyhood, being really ten years old. Nevertheless, she was big and playful and had suffered through many an ear pulling and tail yanking without ever having bitten a small child. She clambered down the stairs, panting -- as she did most all of the time -- and promptly started to shake the minute she got to the bottom of the stairs.

The girls screamed.

"Freddy . . . Cassandra sounded annoyed, and started brushing off the droplets of water that were spraying everywhere. Kurt sighed. What looked like harmless bits of rainwater could be pulverized bits of highly-radioactive material. He had not, from the first, believed there was a way to survive. If anything, this would expedite their deaths, and dying now or dying later didn't really matter to him.

The dog was extremely pleased to see everyone. She shuffled and snuffled, stuffing her nose into everyone's hand trying to get petted. The girls obliged, and for the first time in several hours, were looking somewhat normal. This was a comfort. This was Freddy, a dog they knew, and definitely not scared. She was acting as normal as a dog could act.

When Cassandra had opened the door, she had noticed that the sun had nearly set. It was about 3:30 when the bomb went off and they came to the cellar. That would mean that the four of them had been in the cellar for at least five hours. With the girls distracted, she could assess her situation better. First of all, she noted that her butt hurt. She had been sitting on a wood and cement "bench", if you could call it that, for most of the time. Most of the time she had been there, she had had one or more girls on her lap. She was also thirsty. She felt very grimy, and wanted a shower.

"Esther." Kurt broke in.

"What."

"Do you think there will still be showers -- I mean hot ones -- when we get out of here?"

"Sure. No problem. Haven't you been listening to the news? They developed a clean bomb . . . we may have missed the brunt of it. We may have gotten down here in time." She felt a mental itch. Could it be the fake? She wanted to bring it up, but couldn't. "We can't survive a nuclear blast."

"Then why did you let the dog down here?"

"You let the dog in here!"

"I couldn't leave her up there."

Kurt shook his head, and continued trying to rearrange things so that there would be more room in the crowded cellar. "But if we do get out of here, do you think there will still be

showers? Will there still be toilets? I've always thought that indoor plumbing was the greatest scientific invention of the century. Do you think it will be there when we get out?"

Cassandra was smiling. "Do you hear yourself? You think we're gonna die, and you're wondering about toilets. You've snapped."

"No . . . I just want to know . . ." He paused. "Do you think we're at war?"

Cassandra stopped cold. War? No. It was the fake. "Maybe . . . maybe it's just a hoax. A fake bomb. Maybe it's not real"

Kurt looked at her, squinting, just like he did when he was 10, and she said something stupid. Which was all the time.

"Sure, a fake bomb. You'd use it to scare people. Cause panic."

"That's so stupid. Why? What possible reason could there be to do that?" Kurt had a hysterical edge to his voice.

"Maybe to wake people up. Warn them about the dangers of nuclear proliferation."

"Listen to you! Who've you been hanging around with! That's a bunch of crap!"

As they talked, Kurt was discovering things. As he found them, he dusted them off and tossed them to Cassandra. There was an empty whisky bottle, with curious markings on it, including language prohibiting refilling of the bottle. There were several old jars of canned fruit, and neither of them could guess at how old the fruit was. The jars had to have been there a minimum of 20 years, although they agreed that -- in a pinch, if the food ran out -- they might try it. Underneath one of these jars of what was probably apricots, Kurt found dusty pamphlets partially eaten by bugs. In the stub of candlelight, he could make out his grandfather's name. He handed it to Cassandra, who lit a match to see what it was.

It was a membership in the Communist Party, signed and witnessed in 1922.

The find kicked off a discussion that distracted them for a long while. It was surprising to both of them to discover that their grandfather was a card-carrying Communist. They agreed it would shock and dismay their very-capitalist mother. They agreed that would be fun. And they worried about her, a little, although they knew that if anyone could survive a holocaust, it would be her.

It was at this point that Cassandra realized she wanted the bomb to be real. If it were Duane's bomb, this was her fault, and she didn't want to think about that.

There was plenty to keep her mind busy. Just surviving, minute by minute, fighting off the bugs, keeping the kids occupied, fixing snacks, trying to stay clean. All the while, the mental itch. Was it Duane's bomb? Was all this a bad joke?

Elaina was not completely out of diapers. They had few clothes as replacements, so it was important to keep an eye on the little one. Both children slept fitfully, if at all, and the constant tiredness resulted in crying jags that seemed endless. The first day was bearable; but the second tempers flared.

Nicole was weepy, and complaining about everything. Cassandra jumped on her, telling her to shut up or face a spanking. Kurt intervened, and started yelling at Cassandra, which touched Elaina off into a screaming fit to balance things out. Eventually, both kids were soundly spanked, both of them felt extremely guilty, and peace reigned for several hours.

Kurt and Cassandra were not sleeping well either. Cassandra woke up every few minutes, sure that bugs were crawling on her; Kurt had dark, visionary nightmares which he swore were a presage of things to come. Elaina was taking it the hardest of all. After the first couple of days, she stopped crying as often, but she also stopped talking, which was very unusual for her. She whimpered in her sleep, and asked for her mother constantly. By the third day, she

had lost all ability to control her bowel movements, and both Cassandra and Kurt were constantly on guard trying to keep her clean. It didn't work. Soon, she had a high fever, and did not eat or drink. Nicole was listless, but not sick. She spent most of her time talking to the dog.

The dog was allowed access in and out of the cellar, because Kurt put his foot down when it came to allowing Freddy to use the hole he had so painstakingly dug in the cellar as a toilet. So every morning, and in the evening as well, the dog went out the cellar door to finish her business. She seemed perfectly happy out there and Cassandra grew frantic trying to call her back into the dark of the cellar. It might have been impossible, but a heat wave had descended upon L.A. and being a long-haired dog, Freddy was more than happy to spend her time in the cool of the cellar.

It was Thursday. They had been in the cellar since Monday afternoon. The day dawned as had the others, cool and clear outside, and dusty and putrid in the cellar. The smell had become stifling after three nights of four people eating, sleeping and defecating in a 12-by-12 foot space. Cassandra reached over to check Elaina and found the baby's forehead and face very hot to the touch, and the child was ominously slow waking up.

"Kurt, if we stay here, she is going to die."

"If we leave . . ." he let out a sigh. "If we leave, won't she die anyway?"

Cassandra had learned over the past few days many things about her brother; one was his unflinching pessimism. But his pessimism could be turned fairly easily. And with a sick feeling at the pit of her stomach, Cassandra knew that there was no danger. This was Duane's bomb.

"Kurt, I feel fine. How about you?"

"I feel fine. But what does that mean . . . if we leave, we could walk right into the face of it, and have our skin falling off and have our hair falling out within a couple of hours."

"She'll die soon. I've never felt anyone this hot before . . . and she's so little. She needs a doctor. At least let me take her upstairs and get her temperature down."

"What if there is no water?"

She spoke gently, more gently than she had spoken since Monday. "We'll find that out when we go upstairs. It's worth a try. She has nothing to lose. And the reason we came down here was to save them, remember?"

Kurt nodded. "Should I stay here with Nicole?"

Nicole had been watching the conversation, her eyes flipping from face-to-face, listening for words that could change her life from bad to worse. When she heard this last exchange, she scrambled to her feet, sending the dog -- which had been lying with its head in her lap -- sprawling. "No! I'm going with you!"

Kurt shrugged, a gesture with which he was becoming very familiar. "Go ahead. I'll come too. I think I'd rather die clean, than like this."

They emerged into to sunlight, blinking at the brightness. Cassandra estimated it was early, probably about six, because of the way the shadows fell. It smelled like a summer morning, a little dusty, with only the barest trace of cool moisture in the air, as the coast waited for another day of 100 degree temperatures. They walked through the back door, each hesitant, waiting to see or hear or smell something dangerous or deadly. Nothing happened. So the three of them walked back into normalcy, with Kurt carrying Elaina and Cassandra hoping half-heartedly that it had been a real bomb. Because she didn't want this to be her fault.

Chapter 43

The body count kept going up. As the week wore on, people were found in basements, in cellars, and huddled in places that people shouldn't have to be. It wasn't a question of damage from a bomb; it was trying to calm down four million people in the Los Angeles Basin, all of whom had been trained for generations to be afraid of one thing before all others: First Strike, the nuclear holocaust.

Maggie had been working nonstop since 3:30 on Monday afternoon, when the whole thing started. She hadn't been able to reach Marian all Monday afternoon, and when the call came in on Tuesday morning from her brother-in-law, she couldn't believe it. Marian was the sweetest person she'd ever known. Her sister was her best friend, no matter how trite that sounded. They did everything they could together. And the baby. Oh, God, the baby. She tried not to think about it, and just kept working. And kept working through Tuesday, through Wednesday, snatching a few hours of sleep in the boss's office, on an overstuffed chair.

The whole news room was in the same position. By Thursday afternoon, they were all half-dead. One guy had even had a heart attack, although he was going to be fine.

She knew that if she stopped working, she'd have to think about Marian, and about all the others. But she had done some good. It was the reports from the radio station that had calmed down literally hundreds of thousands of people. The pictures on the television would get them scared, but the radio would calm them down. In the end, the station would get dozens of awards, some especially created for its coverage of the accident. On Tuesday morning, reports were coming out of Las Vegas that a group calling itself the Alliance had claimed responsibility, and issued a statement explaining that they wanted everyone to understand what nuclear war was

about. The statement was well reasoned, and thoughtful. Within hours everyone associated with the Alliance had been rounded up as “enemy combatants.” Maggie was fairly certain that the press would never talk to those people, not in her lifetime.

It was truly time to retire. She was young, and could find something else to do. First a vacation, perhaps somewhere up north.

Chapter 44

Las Vegas was unfazed by the bomb.

Life went on as usual. The casinos noticed a downturn in profits for about 48 hours, then a significant upsurge. People were flowing in from southern California in a steady stream. This was better than an earthquake, better than a mudslide. People wanted out of L.A., and they didn't care if it cost them a fortune. And they stayed through the work-week, because many of L.A.'s businesses had shut down until tempers and traffic returned to normal. The new refugees spent money, lots and lots of money. They spent like it was New Year's Eve.

Genie could care less. Sasha was really gone. Really. And the cute black girl – she was great fun, but she was working a lot. He had found her a job on The Strip, cocktailing. She said she was 21, but he thought she was a little older, maybe 23 or 24. Didn't matter. She kept him warm, but she wasn't Sasha. She was a strange one though. Cried in her sleep, whimpering something about a baby. Intense, quiet. Jumped at every loud noise. Weird. And her friend! Jesus! That big-assed woman was the worst crack-head he had ever seen. He dumped her off at a crack bar off the Strip right after the two women showed up. It was a happy day when she didn't come back. Sara stayed. Sweet kid. But not of this world.

And business sucked, because no one was answering the phone in L.A., and with no phone contact, he had no product. He sat on his balcony, complaining to himself about how rotten things were when the phone rang.

“Genie. It's Suzi.”

“Suzi-Q!” Finally, something interesting, something that didn't suck. “What's up, girlfriend?”

“I need a little help . . . I need a passport. Any ideas?”

“No, that’s not my department. I knew a couple guys that did that, but they’re gone now. I think the feds got ‘em. What’s up? What can I do?”

“Nothing. . . nothing, I guess. I just need to get out of the country, and I can’t use my passport.” She sighed. “Never mind.” The line went dead.

Genie squinted at the phone, at the window, then back to the phone. Things were too weird. Maybe he should go on a vacation for a couple of weeks. Something near the beach.

* * * *

Sara was dressed in a toga-like thing, waitressing at Ceasar’s Palace. She loved her job. She loved the Palace. This was Candyland, Disneyland, a fairy tale.

Genie had driven down the Strip the day after she and Tammy had arrived. She was in shock. Everything was so big and beautiful. Tamara sat in the back of the car, and kept saying she had to call her mom, but she was wasted all the time now. And Genie just gave her a pipe to quiet her down. Just like a baby and a bottle. Genie’s voice came through to her, far away, like the voice of an angel: “That’s Ceasar’s Palace.”

She told him he had to stop, and he laughed at her urgency and her wild-eyed insistence. But he stopped, pulled into valet parking, and walked with her through the front door. Everything was perfect. It was like a dream. Waterfalls and statues, huge trees, all inside a domed palace. A place of wonder. She couldn’t believe it. Then, again, Genie’s voice came through to her, hazy and other worldly: he knew some of the people here; did she want a job?

She knew, in the way you know you have to breathe, that she could never leave Las Vegas. Never.

She smiled now, wearing her gold-trimmed toga. Did she want a job? No, she wanted to live here, but a job was great. Perfect. Everything was perfect. But there was that time . . . that one time, when that baby started crying right behind her and she screamed and dropped her tray. The lady apologized, and she apologized, and the bartender came over and gave her a warning. Careful, he said, the customers don't like crazy waitresses. You're on probation, he said. No more mistakes, or you're outta here. She had been careful since then, her head swiveling around constantly, looking for things that might surprise her. Like babies. Like Marcus.

The television was on over the bar, and they were showing pictures of Los Angeles. She stopped for a moment. She knew that place . . . that was home.

It was near her apartment. About a block away, near the market. Some people were running, some were just standing in one spot, crying or screaming. And behind them, over the top of the buildings, she could see a mushroom cloud, just like in the movies.

“What happened?” She asked the bartender.

“Someone set off a fake bomb in L.A. Bunch of people panicked. Where you been the past few days?”

“Working, baby, just working.” She placed her order, and while she waited for the drinks, she watched the screen. She could swear she saw Marcus in one of the shots. The words on the screen under the picture said “Looting Continues.” She smiled and shook her head. He was having fun. She didn't have to worry about him for awhile.

She delivered her drinks and took another order, smiling, always smiling. She realized she missed Tammy, missed having someone to talk to about all this. But Tammy was lost. Like the baby. Genie said he found her somewhere comfortable, somewhere she was happy. That's all she could ask. She wasn't going to worry about it. She had a new life. She picked up her drinks and went back to the tables. Smiling, always smiling. No, she was never going back.

Chapter 45

Duane had made it out to Montana in record time. The weather was good, the driving was easy, and he didn't get too tired. He felt better than he had months. It was Friday, and Cassandra was already a week late. He didn't have a phone yet, so he couldn't check on her. But he had decided to go into town today and see if he could reach her.

The town was small, but it was heaven to Duane. In his usual way, he talked with a number of the locals, even finding a diner that might be needing a waitress within the next few weeks. It was the only diner in town, and the only waitress in the only diner was at least seven months pregnant. It would be perfect for Cassandra.

The local department store also carried gardening tools and animal feed. But they had TVs and one was on.

" . . . Thousands of people are missing, and many are presumed dead. Los Angeles authorities are looking into who could have set off the bomb, but there are no clues. Meanwhile, the military has promised to launch a full-scale investigation into the possibility that terrorists were involved, and leaks from the Pentagon indicate that several Islamic radicals were spotted at Los Angeles International Airport the day after the explosion . . . "

The news continued, showing pictures of bodies lined up like cordwood outside the hospitals and police stations. Duane yelled over an eye-high ridge of dry goods, "Hello!"

A man ambled over. "No need to get excited . . . can I help you?"

Duane jabbed a finger at the TV. "What happened?"

"Huh?"

"What happened in L.A.?"

"Somebody dropped a bomb there . . . wasn't a real bomb from what they say. Was a fake. But everyone who saw it panicked, and some died, some killed themselves. Real mess down there . . . You have relatives there?"

Glazed, Duane could not answer. He simply stared at the television screen. When he looked up again, the shopkeeper was still there, patiently waiting in case he needed something he might be able to provide.

"No . . . I mean, I have friends there." He shook his head slightly. "I have to go." But where to go when "home" is only a few days old? Duane called all the numbers he had for Cassandra, but there were no answers.

He spent several hours wandering around town, and thinking of things to do when he got home. The key was that the bomb might end up saving lives in the long run. He kept saying that to himself over and over. People know now what a real bomb could be like, and they will be more careful, and they will think more next time.

He never thought about the panic. He never thought that many people would die. And Cassie. Had he killed her? He drove back to the ranch, deflated, destroyed. He couldn't do anything. Didn't know where she was. He stopped at the side of the road, halfway out to the ranch. He leaned back against the bumpy old leather of the truck's seat. He could feel the sun on his lap. He heard, rather than felt, the breeze ruffle what was left of his hair through the broken window on the passenger side. It wasn't his fault. It was not his bomb. He thought about turning around, finding a phone to call Suzi, but he didn't have a number for her. He had nothing. Cassie was gone. His leg was missing a chunk. His hair was gone. He had one ball left. It wasn't his fault. He wanted to go home, but he had no home to go to. He sat unmoving in the truck. He heard a bird cry out the window. Hours passed. When the moon rose, he turned

the truck on and headed out to the ranch. He could do nothing. Everything had already been done.

Chapter 46

Greg Clark came home five days later to see if anything had changed in the house. It was apparent to him that no one had been there; the note was on the table where he had left it, a couple of the kid's goldfish had died, and the refrigerator smelled terrible. Before he went back to the hospital, Greg bought an answering machine, in hopes that she would call. He installed it, then realized that he should test it first. So, he called Kurt, partly in hopes that Helen had called Annie.

* * *

It was like looking through a prism: depending on the fraction of a second, Cassandra was either scared, angry, embarrassed, or a host of other emotions she swept through, holding on to each for only a moment before another replaced it. Kurt was with Elaina, holding her in tepid bath water, trying to get the dirt off and the fever down. Cassandra had no trouble reaching the doctor's answering service, but the operator warned her that the doctor had been on almost-constant call for a week. She suggested taking the child directly to the emergency room, where the operator was certain the doctor would be. She cleaned up Nicole, and then herself, wondering what the hell had happened that everyone was so calm. The operator said that no one could say whether or not a bomb had gone off in Long Beach. That she hadn't seen anything, she only knew what she heard. And she had heard that there was no danger, either on Monday when it happened, or today.

Meanwhile, Kurt kept yelling at Cassandra to find Annie, but there was no answer across the street. Still fearful, she hesitated sending Nicole across, opting to walk across herself. The front door was locked; as was the back door. Pounding and shouting produced no response, even though Gloria's car was out front. There were two or three newspapers sitting out front, and mail in the box. Frightened, and getting more worried as time went by, Cassandra went back to pack Nicole into the car to expedite the trip to the hospital. As the four of them were on the way out the door, the phone rang. It was Greg.

"Kurt? Have you seen Helen, or the kids?"

"No . . . have you seen Annie?"

"Annie's gone too?"

"Yeah . . . where have you been?"

"In the hospital."

"Oh my God . . . are you okay?"

"I'm . . . fine. I have to go back today though."

"Oh I'm sorry. Was it the radiation?"

"What?"

"Was it because of the bomb?"

"What bomb?"

"What do you mean what bomb? There was a nuclear bomb dropped on L.A."

"What!?"

"The bomb . . . a few days ago . . . didn't you see it? Wasn't there a bomb?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Kurt. I came home on Monday afternoon, and no one was home. I checked myself into an alcohol program. I came home today to get some

clothes and things, and Helen is still not home. The kids aren't there, I don't know where they are, I thought Annie might know. Stop talking like this! There was no bomb!" Kurt was silent. Cassandra motioned to him from the door.

"C'mon the kids are in the car. Let's get going."

"Greg. I don't know where Annie is. I have been in the cellar for days, after I saw the bomb go off in the harbor. If Helen saw that, she may have hidden too. Look in the cellar. Talk to the neighbors. I got to go. Good luck."

Kurt replaced the receiver, and hurried to the front door, noticing that the stereo and television set was gone. Stunned, he looked around and noticed that several other things were missing as well. While he had been underground, others had been very busy. He slammed the front door behind him, but didn't bother to lock it.

Chapter 47

Cassandra was babysitting Elaina that last afternoon, waiting for Kurt and Annie to bring the kids back from the doctor, when there was a knock at the door. She was not quite ready for the assemblage. Crowded onto the tiny porch were a half dozen people, several with cameras and microphones and related equipment. A basso-voiced spoke at her.

The reporter that Cassandra met that day was very well-liked by his editors. He was a tall man, relatively well-built, and good-looking enough so that he photographed well but was not intimidating in a too-slick sort of way. This producer was the same man who had gotten so hysterical on the day of the blast. He had taken two weeks off and had just come back to work. It had been his idea to do a "survivors" story. Other reporters were out interviewing the military, the police, and disaster experts.

Cassandra begged off, looking frightened. Just then Kurt and Annie got back from the doctor. Annie took one look. "Cassie, what's wrong?" Annie glared at the producer. "What'd you do to her?"

"Nothing, ma'am." His voice was soothing. "We're in the neighborhood to get interviews with folks about the blast . . . we're from Channel 3 News." He pointed at the huge "3" on the side of the camera.

Annie handed the sleeping Elaine to Kurt, and said, "Yeah. I've got a lot to say."

That afternoon Kurt and Cassandra got a lecture from their mother about their failure to even check on her during a crisis. The two staying in the cellar for four days was no excuse. It was just another example of the two of them not using their heads. She, she insisted, had

watched the news on Channel 3, and learned it was all a big hoax. She had not seen the cloud itself. She was taking a nap.

Cassandra watched the six o'clock news that night. Military disclaimed any hand in the blast, insisting it must have been terrorists. The base commander in Seal Beach was obviously proud of his staff, all of whom -- he said -- stayed on duty at the site of the explosion. He was especially laudatory of his Early Detection people, who -- despite an inability to get through to their superiors -- kept their heads, and watched their instruments.

Disaster relief was not as happy as the commander. Too many people panicked, he said, and a lot of people died. Although bodies were still being found in ravines, and at the beach, the death toll due to the incident had been estimated at approximately 35,000. Most of the deaths were apparent suicides. Some of the deaths, he continued, did not happen the day of the explosion, but rather days later. He told of one man who found his wife and child dead when he returned from work. The man survived for three days before he collapsed and died. The autopsy indicated heart attack, even though the man was only 35 years-old.

Cassandra was ready to get up and leave, unable to bear much more of the disaster spokesman, when they went to a commercial. With a big sigh, she let herself fall back on the couch. It was time to go. She had to find Duane. But she didn't want to see him, and she couldn't stay here. The mental itch had gotten much worse. She wanted to say something, but she didn't want them to hate her. The commercial ended and the announcer came back with a picture of Kurt's house in the background.

"This is Michael Sullivan in San Pedro . . . "

Cassandra recognized the deep, measured tone immediately; apparently, his voice was the same on-air, or off.

"In this quiet neighborhood, we found several people who claimed to have been affected by the Ghost Bomb. But many pointed to this house, where several members of the family were holed-up in an old root cellar for the better part of that week. The rest of the family spent the same time in the basement of that house, across the street, terrified and waiting to see if they could make it out alive. We spoke with Ann Blumenthal who spent a horrifying week in the basement waiting for news . . . "

Cassandra was shifting uncomfortably waiting for Annie's tirade, and hoping that it was not going to be as bad as she knew it was. Annie appeared on the screen, looking somewhat calm, and heard the voice-over ask the question which -- after several other stupid questions -- was the final straw:

"How did you feel when you found out it was all a mistake?"

"A mistake? You call that a mistake? I had friends who died in that 'mistake' . . . I had friends who disappeared, and I will probably never see them again. You, up in L.A., inside a building, when that thing went off . . . you would never say it was a 'mistake' if you had seen it. Mistake? Somebody set that thing off, and they did it for a reason, . . . I just don't know what that reason was. Somebody set it off just to see what we would do -- just to see how we would act, just in case a real bomb ever went off around here. Maybe they were testing the military, or maybe they just weren't thinking. But a lot of people died, and you're calling it a 'mistake', like it didn't matter."

The reporter appeared on the screen once again.

"Then why did you bother to go underground for four days?"

She answered more quietly. "I don't know. I haven't been able to figure that out. I couldn't understand it when I was in the basement, either. It was stupid. If it had been a real

bomb, it wouldn't have mattered, we would have been all dead. But I was trying to protect my children."

Annie walked in at that point, standing quietly behind Cassandra.

The reporter made a few comments about the general tenor of the whole South Bay, how quiet things were. Cassandra felt somewhat grateful and relieved, thinking the newscast was about to wrap up, and mentally kicking herself for bothering to watch. But he wasn't finished.

"Finally, I asked Mrs. Blumenthal what she would like to see happen to those persons who touched off the Ghost Bomb, if they were ever caught --"

"What could I possibly do to them that would be as bad as what they did to me? On a Monday afternoon, I was waiting to go to parent-teacher conferences when someone drops a bomb on my neighborhood. We grabbed the children, and tried to protect them -- and for what? I know they're dead, I know I'm dead, but I do it anyway. So I stick myself in a cellar until Thursday, waiting any second for all of us to keel over dead from radiation poisoning. I am across the street from my husband and two of my children, and I can't go across the street because I'm afraid of dying. I am so ashamed that I feared so much for myself that I couldn't check on my own children . . ." Here, Annie started to cry.

"What kind of a mother does that make me? What kind of a person?" She stuck out her chin, and glared at the reporter.

"They took away my life. My daughter got very sick. She almost died. And I wasn't there for her. And I'll know that for the rest of my life."

She wheeled around, now unmindful of the camera, now unmindful of everything except her own frustration.

"God! They don't even need bombs to kill us any more! They've got us figured out! Threaten us with war, threaten us with a bomb, and we fall over dead! Who ever touched that off killed us just as sure as if they had run us over with a car! I would rather have been killed by a car! What am I going to tell my girls when they're older? That she got stuck in the cellar by 'mistake'? That she shouldn't be scared of bombs? That would just be stupid. She should be scared of bombs, real ones, but how do I know what's real any more?

"They tried to kill me! And I don't even know who 'they' are . . ."

As Cassandra cringed on the couch, Annie, in the television, ran sobbing toward the house and slammed the door behind her. Looking smugly piteous, Michael Sullivan signed off from San Pedro. He was replaced by two women discussing a dishwashing liquid.

Annie cleared her throat. "Sorry. That was horrible."

Cassandra looked up. "Yeah." She paused. "I gotta go."

"You can stay as long as you want. Really. It's been great having you here. I don't know what Kurt would have done alone . . ."

"No, I gotta . . ." Cassandra smiled. "Remember? I have to get married. It's time to go."

Cassandra started packing. It didn't take long. By seven o'clock, she was on the road. She stopped for gas, and started going north, north back to Reno. Back to the house she had lived in with Duane. Back to some gentleness. Back to – she didn't know. She couldn't stay here. She couldn't go to Montana. She knew he was waiting for her. But she couldn't go there.

She couldn't think. She couldn't decide where to go. So she drove north, north towards Santa Barbara. She'd stop there for the night. Anything. Anywhere.

Chapter 48

Sasha adored the beach. She had rented a little place near Santa Barbara for the summer, and it suited her well. Her hair was blonder than usual, and it offset her tan in a luscious way. She looked great.

She was also enjoying unemployment, although she had made discreet inquiries at the local television stations. A couple of them were interested. The pay was piteous, but her mom had just written, and said that her dad had died. That meant a hefty life insurance payment, and she was the beneficiary. That should hold her for a few years, and a lot longer if she started working again.

Down the beach were a few sunbathers, including a big woman in shorts wiggling her toes in the sand. Sasha was feeling very generous, and ruminated pleasantly about how the woman probably had a couple of kids at home, and no worries. That might justify the old cow pouring herself into shorts and parading all that flesh on a public beach.

"I wonder what she does for a living?" Sasha drew closer, staring unashamedly at the woman in the beach chair, eyes shut, fingers tapping the edge of the chair.

"I bet she's a grocery clerk. She must do something with food to have all that weight on her."

A few more comments, and Sasha stalked on, preening herself in the sunshine.

* * * *

Maggie liked the beach. She should find a new job near the beach. Any job would do. The sand made little pyramid-piles on her toes as she wiggled them. Her beach chair stuck in the sand, and if the wind blew a little harder, the haze would move over and she could see the Channel Islands.

It had been about two weeks since the accident, or the "Ghost Bomb," as the television folks had dubbed it. Maggie still didn't know what else to call it other than "accident." Might have been a bomb. It hadn't been a nuclear accident either. It had merely been a first-class tragedy that no one could explain.

Just then, a strange looking man walked in front of her. Gangly and thin, he looked like a cartoon. He had a strange lop-sided grin, and he was walking toward someone Maggie had to assume was either a TV reporter or a hooker. They seemed to know each other. She smiled. She liked to see people in love.

It had been an incredible two weeks. In the news business, there are weeks when nothing happens of any importance. Washington keeps being Washington, the Middle East keeps being the Middle East, and there are the usual traffic accidents and fires and economic indicators. But these are predictable, and it's just the same old stuff recycled from previous years. Some weeks, on the other hand, are extremely exciting. It could be a scandal brewing in Washington. Scandals in Washington are always better when they are "brewing." Like lovemaking, the foreplay is always most delicious, and once the scandal has broken, it's time to have a cigarette and go to sleep. Some weeks you spend hours and hours of time on an investigative report on consumer fraud, or money being poured down a black hole in some department in city government. These are good weeks. These are the weeks when a reporter or an editor feels they are doing something good for the world. There is an unwritten assumption deep in the heart of

most journalists that says you are in the business to help others. Part of that helping is telling the unknowing populace that they are being taken in some way. The logical leap is that if people know they are being defrauded they will do something about it. But it just didn't happen that way.

After years in the business, Maggie was disillusioned. You tell people over and over again that they are being taken, or cheated, or that their government is lying to them, all that happens is that people become more callous. They do not become enraged, nor more involved in any way. Maggie presided over a radio station that reached perhaps five million people in any given day. Even so, she could not see the world as a better place since she had started working.

Only the oldest reporters -- Fred being one -- seemed to take a mushroom cloud blossoming in the middle of the city in stride. The younger ones grew frantic and frozen, unable to think because of the unreasoning fear that took them. She tried to prod them into action, but by the end of that first day of coverage, she knew that some would function and others would not. Maggie had read about politics and political exposes all of her life; she began to be interested when she was perhaps ten years old. Marian started it, reading her news stories and insisting that Maggie discuss it. Marian was older, wiser. She made it seem fun. And it was fun. The high school paper was "news." Then college. Her undergraduate degree was in political science, along with journalism, because of her fascination with the games of power. She could be said to be a student of machinations, and she understood the different components necessary to allow the machine to run. In the past two weeks, she had spoken with, or heard interviews with, dozens of people, all of whom had at least a minor role in the nuclear world in which she lived.

And they were frightened. All the individuals with whom she had spoken with over the past two weeks were terrified. Some were so terrified they were dead. There had been heart attacks, and too many suicides to count. There were bodies floating up on the beach on a regular basis still. With that thought, she scanned the sand, realizing she may have come to the wrong place to get away. She took a deep breath, then realized she was north of L.A. and the current went south.

Maggie knew she had to leave the business, but she didn't know where to go. All her life she had wanted to do only one thing, and that was radio. The sun washed her face, and she leaned back a little deeper in her beach chair, shaking the pyramids of sand off her toes. She spoke to the seagulls:

"I'll think about it tomorrow." She sunk back into her chair, noticing that she could now see at least the outlines of the islands off the coast. Then she thought about how much Marian would like this. And the baby. And she began to cry again.

Chapter 49

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. Tamara was sitting in a corner of a bar off Tropicana. She had never left Las Vegas, but she didn't remember most of the time she had spent there. She knew that she liked this bar. It was comfortable and someone was always willing to share a pipe with her, for a little favor or two. It wasn't a bad life. She slept in back of the bar, where there was an old mattress. A gas station across the street had a nice little bathroom. It was just sitting with her feet on the windowsill at her apartment in LA. She just needed to get back there. Had to do that soon. And had to call her mom. She was pretty sure today was Sunday.

Tamara was having trouble working out the details of how she got here, and what happened to Sara. She hadn't seen Sara in a really long time.

Two men walked in, and she squinted hard at the glare of the light coming in the front door, waiting for the cool darkness of the bar to return to her. She remembered them from before. Yesterday maybe. They walked her to the back of the bar, and out through the door by her mattress. She was groggy. She really hadn't woken up yet. She smiled, they didn't. She did not know what was happening, but she really didn't care.

"Her eyes look good."

"Yeah, they do. Kidneys are probably shot."

"Never can tell. We can do some tests. You sure she doesn't know anyone in town?"

"No one. She's got nothing. She sleeps here." He sounded slightly incredulous.

"Let's go then. Do we have a buyer for anything other than the eyes?"

"Nah, but we will. The doc's great about that."

Still confused, Tamara looked out the window into the glare of the September sun. She started to doze off as they pulled onto the Strip heading east towards the freeway. Smiling, sweetly, slowly, she remembered the lights of Los Angeles, coming in from the ocean that night. It seemed so long ago, but it was only a few months. The twinkling lights of the Harbor Freeway, the quiet beauty of the big city that she had loved.

She was in her apartment then, just for a moment, so proud of herself, so full of joy. She had done it. She had made it to Los Angeles. She had a job. She had an apartment. She had a best friend. Sara. Sweet, sweet Sara.

The car bumped and thumped over a pothole or two on the on-ramp to the I-15. Tamara drifted between waking and sleep, savoring the warmth of the sun through the window, the white noise that filled her head from the pipe, the concrete and clear skies that were the city. She frowned just slightly, trying to remember if she were in L.A. or Las Vegas, but she couldn't quite decide. But it wasn't important. Not right now.

The men in the front turned up the radio, and Snoop started singing about her town, South Central. She sighed, contented. She was home. She would call home to Mama as soon as she woke up.

Chapter 50

It was a month before Greg Clark came home again. By that time, the great hoax, the great tragedy, of the bomb had been dissected by every news medium in the country. Even sheltered as he was in the alcohol rehabilitation center, Greg knew how everyone had reacted, and he had seen the headcount of people who had died or were seriously injured in their flight.

His free time at the center had been spent entirely on the phone, trying to track down his family. He called his in-laws, and all their relatives, as well as his own. The results were helpful: soon, everyone who ever knew Helen or any of the children were out looking for her. The police were notified, but they had their hands full with hundreds of disappearance reports. There was no clue as to what happened to the woman, or to the children she must have had with her. No one had seen her since Monday afternoon, before the bomb went off.

Greg was sitting, sweating, in a large, overstuffed chair in his living room. He had been out of the center for 24 hours and he felt fairly confident about his recovery, and even about himself. Layers upon layers of positive reinforcement had been slathered on him for the past four weeks. Yet, under it all, there was a core of sheer despair. It was blackness, rotted out and crumbling, threatening to cause his collapse, like a bad building made of poor steel and concrete shot through with sawdust.

He had done it all for her, or her and the children, and they were gone.

He stood up with great effort, and walked slowly from room to room. He stopped to fondle a toy that had been a favorite of his son. He stopped to smooth the cover on the bed. He fed the kid's last goldfish, which had survived miraculously with no food for the entire time Greg

was gone. He had changed its water when he came back to the house, water so cloudy you couldn't see the fish. It appeared unaffected, which was more than he could say for himself.

In his room, he opened and shut closet doors, touching his wife's clothes and recognizing her scent. He could tell these were her clothes simply by the smell of them; he could never have said that a month ago, when he was living with her. It was a recognition of the smell that alerted him to the fact that it had always been there.

So many things he noticed now that she was gone. So many things he wanted back. At the center, they had told him time and again that his recovery was a rebirth. Perhaps this was so, but he had been born again after all the people that were dear to him had died. The recognition of their death was coming to him very slowly. Since his homecoming, he had gone to the door countless times to investigate a noise that he hoped was his wife returning.

He had been home for three days before he started talking to the goldfish. He told it about meeting Helen, about their first date, and about the summer that blossomed into the great romance that would run through high school and lead him to marriage. He told the goldfish about the wonder of seeing a child of yours born, and the shock and surprise when a baby does something distinctively human, something that lets you know that the being in front of you is not simply a "baby" but a thinking, independent human that will grow into as much of an independent entity as yourself. The goldfish learned quite a lot about humans over the next couple of days; as goldfish go, it was impressed, but goldfish tend to keep their feelings hidden.

Greg kept the house absolutely spotless, moving from room to room rearranging a chair here, and fluffing a pillow there. Helen had always wanted the place to stay clean, a luxury the children did not allow her. So Greg wanted it to be perfect when she got home. He told the goldfish, "She will be happy to see this place so clean . . . when she gets home."

* * *

Greg Clark was the last person to die of the effects of a mushroom cloud that appeared over the Los Angeles harbor. He had been holed up in his house for a week after he got out of the alcohol rehab center before he blew his brains out, waiting for a wife and children who never came home. The bodies of his family were never found, but they were never seen again, so it was assumed they died sometime after the blast.

Chapter 51

The Piazza del Fiore is a small gathering area, as Roman piazzas go. It has a couple of restaurants, a hotel, a motorbike rental place, and several entrances. Two of the alleyways lead to major streets. Two others connect to other alleys, which lead to other alleys, all crowded with shops and apartments and the tiny cars that an Italian could park inside an American SUV.

Every week, there is a farmer's market. Fish the size of Dobermans lie in stalls, melting on mountains of crushed ice, with black flies milling about at eye level. There is one stall of nothing but spices, and another of athletic shoes and soccer jerseys.

At the far end of the piazza, there is a small pizza place. Today, a large blonde man stepped out of the pizza shop, holding a slice of pizza and a drink. The man who used to be known as Sven took his pizza and sat down at one of the tables scattered in front of a restaurant. He ate, wiped his face with a paper napkin, and sipped his soft drink out of a can.

On the far side of the piazza, a beautiful blonde woman was perusing the fish. She smiled at the stall's keeper, and responded in flawless Italian. "I have no need for fish," she said. "I am just a tourist."

At the same time, a small man walked daintily from the area of the motorbike rentals. He was thin and bent, perhaps sixty years old, though it was hard to tell. He walked slowly over to the table where Swen was eating his pizza, and he sat down. Neither man said a word.

The pretty blonde bought a bag of mixed Italian spices from the spice stall, and she laughed musically at a joke made by the seller. The seller, an older man, felt himself lusting after her, though he had not been with a woman for years. The blonde flashed a smile and waved

to the seller, as she walked towards the table where the two men sat, silently for her. “Hello, gentlemen.”

“Suzi.” The Swede made a small hand gesture.

The thin man spoke in German. “I should not stay long. You have another assignment from Frankfurt. We have been asked to take the fireworks to several cities, for simultaneous detonation.” The success of the Los Angeles operation has not gone unnoticed. Your fee will be significant.” He wrote a number on the greasy napkin left over from the pizza.

Suzi nodded as she read the number. “That will be acceptable. Are you going back to DC?”

“No, too much had gone – differently than we expected. It was a good time to move on. But our reputation has been greatly improved. As I said, the money will be much better from now on.”

The three smiled at each other as a group of tourists went by. The Swede spoke up. “What cities? When? Any particular date? And is there a reason for the operation – are they planning something for the same date? Where should we be?”

The conversation was short. Suzi got up and went back to the spices stall. The Swede rented a motorbike. And the thin man walked back to the street, down a block, and into an internet café.