

Terror has *NO* limits...



Loose
Cannon

C.H. Milton

Loose Cannon...

Special Agent Jake Cutter has a reputation for stepping on toes and kicking butts, especially those at the CIA. He also happens to be the best Narcotics Agent that the Washington Bureau has.

But, in his personal life, he's not doing such a great job at saving his twenty-year marriage to Verna. He suspects there may be another man, but that's something he doesn't want to face... especially now that she's gone missing.

So, when a long-time drug dealer turns up dead in Georgia, Jake isn't too interested, except to close the file on another scumbag.

When a second body turns up, however, Jake is drawn into a mystery that began five years earlier – and which will end in seven days, with the destruction of the American way of life.

Trouble is, Jake doesn't know about that deadline...

Nor does he know that Verna is now hostage with terrorists who are constructing a 25-kiloton nuclear bomb aimed at America's heart.

And now, six days into the murder investigation, Jake gets a lead on Verna's location...

But, there's only 30 minutes to go... to ground zero!

Loose Cannon

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ISBN: 0-9752336-1-0 (ebook – PDF & HTML)

ISBN: 0-9752336-0-2 (ringbound)

Published by EM Publishing, P.O Box 890, Morayfield, QLD, Australia.

“There is timing in everything.”

From the ‘The Book of Five Rings’ by
Miyamoto Mushashi, 16th century Samurai.

“To me, the final defenses against terrorism in our society are not the metal detectors. It’s not the explosive detection systems,” Jenkins says.

“It comes down to, as a nation, the individual citizen, our own courage. And I don’t mean courage in terms of some Hollywood bravery. I mean a realistic acceptance of risk, a stoicism, if you will, a continuing commitment to the basic values that I think this nation stands for.”

Brian Jenkins, Security Consultant

From the article “Professor of Chaos” in the *Washington Post*, June 1st, 2003.

“Old man! ‘tis not so difficult to die.”

From ‘Manfred, A Dramatic Poem’
by Lord Byron, Act III, Scene IV.

LOOSE CANNON

Part One:
Co-incidence

Part Two:
Cause and Effect

Part Three:
Chaos

Part Four:
Aftermath

Part One: Co-incidence

Prologue

Pakistan, July 1998, on the Baluchistan plateau

The *whup-whup-whup* sound of approaching Hueys is like no other.

The men on the ground, accustomed to the sounds of military aircraft, looked up quickly, AK-47s at the ready. Those at the top of the crater looked to the south, searching the craggy Chaghai Hills, and with a shout, one of them pointed to two drab shapes skimming low over the nearby ridge.

Both UH-1E helicopters – from whence the term ‘Huey’ originated – now banked and slowly did a complete circuit of the site. To the men on the ground, the identities of the choppers were clearly visible: both aircraft bore Pakistani insignia. Some white and dark faces were visible peering down, and both Hueys showed .50 caliber machine guns pointing outwards. The leader of the band on the ground, Faisal, waved with his AK-47, quickly thought better of it, let it drop in its sling and began waving with both hands. Standing at the edge of the large crater, he grinned and shouted, hoping they wouldn’t shoot; his men, about twenty in all, moved nervously about. Being one of the many bandits who roamed the Chaghai hills near the Afghan-Pakistan border, today Faisal wanted to make some money, not war. Of course, you would offend Faisal by calling him a bandit; the foreign press, after all, uses the terms ‘warlord’ and ‘bandit’ to encompass a whole range of modes of operation. But, Faisal liked to think of himself as an opportunist and entrepreneur. And this was simply another financial opportunity.

Over the noise of the choppers he shouted, “Be calm, brothers, we are in no danger. They come to pay us for what we have found.” Some of the men in the crater, which was about twenty meters in diameter, started to scramble out as the two Hueys landed on a flat outcrop about fifty meters from Faisal. He turned his

back for a few moments to ward off the sting of any dust, and then walked towards them as the whine of the engines was cut off.

Half a dozen Pakistani soldiers quickly disembarked and, with machine pistols ready, fanned out to take up outflanking positions; the heavy machine guns of both choppers remained pointed at the mixed band of mountain men, most of whom were Afghans. A Pakistani officer – Captain Hari Patel – came forward, a briefcase in one hand. Faisal knew Hari well – they’d done business before. Four other men joined Patel, and they all approached Faisal with easy confidence. It was obvious to Faisal that there were two American soldiers and two civilians, one who looked to be Pakistani.

Faisal, with three of his men, stepped up to greet them and shook Patel’s extended hand. Speaking in Urdu and English, Hari Patel made introductions to the US party. Faisal shook their hands but didn’t try to remember their names. He didn’t speak English anyway. Instead, he turned to Patel and immediately asked about the money. Captain Patel opened his briefcase, took out a large package and handed it to Faisal, who quickly looked inside, nodded and smiled. He shook Patel’s hand again and began to walk back to his men, now gathered around their Toyota pickup trucks sitting twenty meters or so beyond the choppers.

Hari Patel watched as Faisal called to his men, and then turned to his companions: “Well, gentlemen, here it is, as promised – all that is left of one AGM-86C cruise missile that went astray.” As he finished speaking, they all reached the slight rise that marked the crater’s edge. Launched from a B-52 bomber, it had been one of the many missiles designed to wreak havoc throughout Saddam Hussein’s weapons program in Iraq.

The oldest US officer, a general and the most senior, turned to the man beside him – his aide – and said, “Get on down there, Tom, and see what else you can find.” Much of the remains of a missile had already been retrieved by the bandits and lay about around the rim.

The man addressed as Tom said “Yes sir,” and carefully began to make his way down the slope. He was about five meters below the rim when he reached the bottom. The others began to examine the bits and pieces of war that lay around, some as much as three feet long, others just a mere scrap, all of them now far less than the sum of a 3200 pound cruise missile that should have landed on one of Saddam Hussein’s secret weapons caches.

“How the fuck did this’n get so far off course?” The question came from the Caucasian civilian, now turning over pieces of missile with the toe of his boot. By his accent, he was obviously American.

The general shrugged, “Hell, Bob, something probably failed in its GPS. Who knows? Happens more often than we like to admit, I can tell you.” He paused a moment, then continued wryly, “We just don’ like to advertise it, okay.” He came upon a very large piece with some symbols and markings. He continued, “But, we like to make sure, if we can... you know... cross off all those that we *do* lose, y’know what I mean?” Pointing to it, he turned to Patel, “Hey, Hari, get some photos of this, OK?”

He walked on, with Bob in tow, to where the Pakistani civilian was looking down into the crater. Peering down, the general saw Tom on his hands and knees looking at something that was all too familiar.

As the general shook his head and said “Aw, shit,” very loudly, Tom stood, looked up and shouted, “General, Captain Patel – you’d better have a look at this.”

He was holding up what was unmistakably a leg bone, presumably from some animal. Then, in his other hand, he gingerly held up a human skull for all to see.

Quickly as possible, given the loose earth, all four men descended into the crater. Faisal, having heard the shouting, left his group and walked over to the edge. He called out to Patel, “Have you found some *more* bones?” Patel, halfway down, was the only one who heard him.

Puffing and panting now, he returned to the top and asked, “What do you mean, more bones?” He was glaring at Faisal, sensing potential trouble. Patel’s squad of soldiers, hearing the exchange, was suddenly more alert.

Faisal shrugged, “We have found *many* bones... old bones.” He stopped.

“Well...” Patel looked around, “where are they?”

Faisal wiped his brow, and smiled. “My Captain, you asked to know where the American bomb had dropped. We have shown you, for an agreed amount of money.” He paused, for effect. “Nothing was said about any bones...” His voice trailed off, but his smile widened. Better to keep quiet about the gold rings, now in his pouch, that they’d found on some of the skeletons’ hands.

Patel stepped up to Faisal’s face, noses almost touching. Quietly, but with venom, he said, “You have a choice, Faisal. Show me the rest of the bones or join them in the crater, with your men.” At the same time, Patel made a motion with his

left hand. Both machine guns on the choppers came to full cock; the soldiers crouched low or behind boulders, guns ready.

Faisal looked over at his men, lolling about their Toyota pickup trucks; some were still busy dividing out the money he'd given to his second-in-command, others were smoking and talking. None had noticed the threatening exchange between him and Patel. He looked back, into Patel's eyes, and knew that he had *no* choice. Pashtuns, especially from Afghanistan, were not highly regarded by Sindhs, of which Patel was a member.

"Of course, naturally, my Captain," said Faisal pleasantly but with a trace of sarcasm, "I was just about to tell Mahmud to bring them to us." He turned and shouted to his group, and one of them reached into the back of one of the pickups, hauled out a large sack and, with the help of another, brought it over.

Patel wrinkled his nose at the approaching smell, loosened the rope and looked inside. When the full stench was released, Patel gave a slight gasp, but forced himself to let the sunlight into the bag. Scraps of rotting clothing hung off a mass of human bones, some leathery skin still stretched tight around them; a few insects crawled in and about, searching for morsels. Before he closed the bag – and before he was sick with vomit – he saw that one of the skulls had a large bullet hole through it.

Faisal's grin vanished quickly when Patel looked directly at him. Mahmud and his helper stood to one side, impassive, waiting for orders.

Faisal motioned them away, as Patel said, "Is that all?"

"There's more down in the crater, it seems..." Faisal shrugged, what did he care how many bones? The bomb came in, some people... peasants... who knows... were in the wrong place and were killed? *It is the will of Allah!*

Patel said, "I hope, for your sake, you're telling the truth..."

Before Faisal could say anymore, they both heard a shout from the crater.

"Captain Patel, come here... *there's something else...*"

Quickly, Patel told one of the soldiers to watch the bag of remains, and hurried to the crater rim. "Stay here," he said to Faisal, "just don't try anything funny." Faisal shrugged again, and spread his hands in mock supplication, but his gaze was hard.

When he got to the bottom a few seconds later, Patel couldn't believe what he saw: the breech of a large, cast-iron gun or cannon, from which the others were attempting to clean off the mud and dirt, was slowly being exposed to the hot

sun. To one side, Patel saw a gathering pile of human bones. "More to add to the bag I just got from Faisal," he said, pointing to the bones.

The general looked up, surprised, "There's more... are you sure?" He said to all, "Be careful of any bones...keep them as undisturbed as possible until we get a forensic team back here." He had even joined in, scraping away dirt from the metal with a piece of heavy timber that had also been found. Looking around, Patel saw other pieces of timber, most of them broken. *Probably when the missile landed*, he thought.

He shook his head, puzzled. "What does this mean?" The others paused and looked blankly at him, each of them sweating in the hot sun. In the crater, the effect was magnified, as was the stench of death.

"Fucked if I know," said Tom, the first one down into the crater. "While I was lookin' 'round fer more bones, my foot bumped this here breech that was only just exposed." He pointed to the bulbous end of the gun. "Looks like a real old cannon, y'know, maybe over a hundred years old." Over five feet had now been excavated and they were now almost to the muzzle.

The general agreed, "Yeah, I reckon it is very old... look at this here, at the breech..." He pointed to a coat of arms that he'd cleaned up using a handkerchief. Patel looked closely and just recognized the British coat of arms.

"This is amazing, unbelievable." He shook his head again, as Tom gave a shout.

They all turned to see that he had reached the muzzle.

"There's another one, I tell ya, another one, look." He pointed. "*But, you're not gonna believe this.*" As he scraped and dug, the others watched with open mouths as the muzzle of another gun, very similar if not the same, emerged from the dirt.

Feverishly now, Tom cleaned around both muzzles, while the others watched, unable to accept what they were looking at: *both muzzles had been welded together, face-on, bore to bore, so that both together formed a single, longer unit.* Pausing for a breather, Tom sat down and took a swig of water from a proffered canteen. For a few minutes, nobody said anything. The general looked at Bob, who said nothing, then to Patel who shrugged, and to the others.

He looked again at Bob, "Any ideas?" But, the question was almost rhetorical: none of them had a clue.

Bob shook his head, "Uh-uh."

“*Anybody* hazard a guess as to their age?” Now the general took his cap off, wiped his brow and hair, firmly pushed it back on and continued, “Goddammit, what *happened* here?”

The Pakistani civilian spoke for the first time, answering the first question. “The guns are of the type used by the British a hundred and fifty years ago. Probably a six-pounder, or maybe a twelve. Hard to tell without looking at the bore.” He shrugged. He was bored. And hot. And the crater stank of rotting flesh.

“Yeah, I think you’re right, Rashid,” the general said, “but... how did they get here.” He waved his hand around.

Again, blank looks from all were the only replies, while the sound of buzzing flies persisted angrily.

Finally, the general waved flies from his face and said, “Well, dammit, we ain’t gonna figure this one out, standin’ ‘round.” He looked at where the guns were joined and ran his finger carefully over the weld. “I just don’t understand why the British would go to all the trouble to weld two guns together like that. And, so long ago.” He lips turned down, a puzzled frown creasing his face.

Tom, running his fingers through his hair, said, “But, sir, maybe... maybe it wasn’t so long ago? Look at those bones. They’ve not been long in the ground. Perhaps only six months, but no more than a year, I reckon.” All of the men had seen battle before, and its remains; they all had a good idea of how long it took for flesh to rot, especially in arid conditions.

“Maybe the guns and the bones aren’t related?” The general’s question simply resulted in even more blank looks.

Patel now spoke. “There is one certainty only, at this point: these people died violently, as one of the skulls I looked at had a bullet hole in the back of the head.” He added, for emphasis, “That’s *all* we really *know*.”

The general grunted agreement. “Okay, let’s wrap this up. Like I said, we ain’t gonna get answers today.”

He turned to Captain Patel. “Would you take some photos of this?” pointing to the cannons. “We’ll need to get all this information and,” now pointing to the pile of bones, “those to Islamabad, for investigation.” He looked at Tom. “I want you to work closely with Captain Patel and give him all the assistance he needs.”

Tom nodded and saluted, “Yessir!”, knowing full well the intent in his superior’s request: *make sure Patel doesn’t screw us out of information*. Captain Patel was already taking photos from all useful angles.

The general faced Bob, and said, "Bob, would you get a few of those guys up top to help get the rest of any bones to be found... for now, at least." He looked around the crater. "There's probably others, so we'll need some medical support here, as I said."

Bob nodded. "Okay, General, I'll see to it." He began climbing to the crater rim, calling out to Faisal in Urdu. After a few minutes conversation, some of Faisal's men were busy making a desultory effort to search the rest of the crater, but were actually showing more interest in the old guns, now clearly visible.

The general returned to the top, Rashid on his heels, and soon the three were deep in conversation, looking back at the guns. A few minutes later, Patel had finished getting photos of the guns, the weld where they were joined, the coat of arms, all from many angles and was about to leave, when Tom called out to him.

"Captain Patel, somethin' *real* funny here." He had his hand on the other side of the barrel of the gun that was still half buried. "I can feel some kinda hole, fer fuck's sake." His hand was squeezed between the barrel and the crater dirt, and he could just get his finger into the hole.

"You mean, the hole at the breech, for igniting gunpowder?" Patel came back to look more closely.

"No, Goddammit. I mean there's a hole near the *muzzle*. Look... *feel*." Tom moved out of the way, letting Patel put *his* hand around to feel the hole. Patel carefully inserted a finger. He felt around gingerly, brushed against the rough edges of hole, surprised when he felt the threading that went deep into the hole. He pulled his finger out, covered now with dirt and what looked like rust. He smelt his finger and caught a whiff of gunpowder.

"What on earth is that for?" He glanced at Tom, who shrugged, a baffled expression on his face. "Well, I suppose I'd better get a few photos of it, too." In the cramped space, it was impossible to get a clear shot of the hole, so Patel had to scrape away at the surrounding dirt until he was able to get the camera in position. Hoping that he had the camera right, he took four shots, trusting to the auto focus of the digital camera, and moving the camera slightly between shots.

"That *is* odd, isn't it, Tom?" Patel cleaned his hands with a rag handed him and bundled up the camera. Tom just shook his head again, and followed the others back to the top of the crater. Patel called Faisal's men to him and had them take the pile of bones to the top. When he reached the rim, the general was issuing final instructions.

“Rashid, I want you to get these bones to Army pathology ASAP. We want to know whom these people were, how many, you know, how they died. *Carefully* put those bones in your chopper, okay! Patel, get your men to get all the missile pieces, that Bob’s marked, into the other chopper. Just keep the other pieces in a pile for later pickup. We’ll get something heavier in here tomorrow to lift those guns out and get them back to Islamabad. They need more investigation.” He scanned their faces. “Any questions?”

“What about Faisal’s men?” Patel had used Faisal before, but trusted him only when he could pay him. “If we leave him here with those guns, he’ll steal them, definitely.”

The general looked puzzled. “What for?”

“Scrap metal... sell the stuff to local dealers. For recycling.” He paused, then said, “The intrinsic value to archaeology *may* be high, but even in today’s depressed ferrous scrap market, he could make a few dollars.”

The general looked exasperated. “So... what do you suggest?”

“Well... I can’t leave any of my men here overnight, as we have no supplies with us – we didn’t expect *this*, y’know.” He looked across to Faisal who was smoking a pipe and looking at *them*. “We’ll have to pay him *not* to steal it. And wait here for us to return tomorrow.”

“How much?”

Patel thought for a moment and said, “Two hundred US dollars, half now, the rest when we get back tomorrow.” Not a lot, but nearly twice the rate for a metric *ton* of scrap iron. Indeed, it was equivalent to a year’s wages for some Afghanis. Hence, it should be enough to keep Faisal happy. Or, so he thought.

“Hell, is that all? We’ll take *that* outta petty cash.” The general looked at Bob, who nodded slightly.

“That’s it then,” said the general, “let’s get moving.”



Of course, Patel was dead wrong.

As the throb of the Hueys faded, Faisal looked at the five twenty dollar bills, stuffed them into his ammunition belt, and then spat in the direction of the departing choppers. He didn’t plan to see Patel ever again. He called to Mahmud and, in a few minutes, most of the men were down to the guns, digging them out with shovels, sticks and bare hands. When the guns were fully exposed, the

mystery deepened as the bandits all stood back, amazed to see the now exposed *other* end, jagged, cracked and blackened, like a suppurating ulcer, and with an exit hole now clearly visible. Faisal, standing on the rim, shook his head in bewilderment, shrugged his shoulders and then beckoned to one of the Toyotas. He held up his palm to stop it, just short of the rim.

The cable from the truck's winch was lowered and quickly wrapped around the guns to form a sling. Groaning and screeching, the macabre twins were hauled to the top; the shattered remains of the gun carriages were discarded. Fortunately, the weight of the guns – perhaps three-quarters of a ton in total – was well within the capability of the truck's winch and, in short order, forty willing hands then heaved them into the waiting pickup, and secured them tightly, with one end projecting beyond the open rear of the truck. The whole operation had taken less than an hour.

Again, Faisal examined the ruined end of the cannon and peered though the hole, expecting to find... what? At last, nodding his head with assumed certainty, he straightened up, apparently satisfied, and said to all, "It is nothing to worry about, God willing." He turned to go, then stopped.

There was one more thing to do...

Quickly, he told his men to throw all of the remaining cruise missile pieces into the crater, as a gesture of contempt. "Let the infidels dig them out again, brothers," he said, with a chuckle. As the last piece hit the bottom of the crater, he shouted, "Let us go, brothers," and motioned to Mahmud, who was driving. With a swirl of dust, the pickup trucks began the long descent from the hills to head for Kandahar, the truck with the cannons showing a distinct forward lift as the weight bore down on its rear axle. Gradually, the noise and the dust dissipated, leaving the carnage in the crater for predatory birds now circling overhead.



Patel wasn't completely wrong, however...

A week later, in Kandahar, Faisal sold the guns to a scrap metal dealer from Pakistan Steel Holdings, who paid him the princely sum of twenty US dollars, ten dollars for each gun.

"The guns are useless...and iron is plentiful," he was told, with shrugged indifference.

Faisal knew he was being cheated and opened his mouth to protest, but stopped: *why invite unnecessary exposure of his forays into Pakistan?* Mentally, he shrugged because he'd had his reward already: the infidels would get the guns *now* only as recycled metal... perhaps even as bullets or grenades.

And *that* was a thought that kept Faisal amused for years to come...



Chapter One

Washington D.C., Sunday, January 5th, 2003, 7p.m

“Okay, okay... listen up!”

His voice cut through the grunts and groans from the group of women, now fighting on the floor of the gym. “That’s enough,” he continued, and blew his whistle, “time to wrap things up now.” Verna Cutter, forty-one, stood and wiped the sweat from her face with her towel. Still breathing heavily, she picked up her jacket and draped it around her shoulders, then helped up her partner, a smaller woman in her fifties. The other women in the group — twenty in all — gathered together, exchanging smiles and small-talk, and all flushed from the last hour’s heavy exertion.

Motioning to them, the instructor said, “Take it easy, sit down and rest a bit.” As they all sat, making a rough circle, he said, “Let me just recap the main points of what you’ve been through here.” He looked around, studying their faces. Verna wondered, not for the first time, how old he was; *he looked to be in his sixties*, she thought. Dressed in a black tracksuit, he squatted easily on his knees, with his buttocks on his heels, his hands resting on his thighs. He waited until the women’s breathing and heaving chests had relaxed.

Then he said: "I want to thank you all for taking the time to come to this self defense course. It's been a tough week, hasn't been easy for any of you." His gaze went from woman to woman, carefully and with great deliberation. "*It wasn't meant to be.*" All of the women were now looking at him intently.

"If you've learnt nothing else this week, then *this* you now know: *without awareness, there can be no defense.*"

He pointed to the door and said, "It's a war out there — an urban war — and this last week has made you aware of the means to combat that war... but, only if you have to." He paused a few moments, and repeated, "Only if you *have to*, always remember that." He hunched forward slightly, splayed both hands on the floor, and continued, "Recall also, your first line of defense *always* is to run, if you can. If you can't get away, and you *must* fight, remember the three rules: you *must* use the appropriate technique with commitment, you *must* be accurate and you *must* be quick. And remember, above all else... *timing is everything.*" He let that sink in again, *as though he hadn't said it enough already*, thought Verna.

He continued: "However, the best information is *still* useless if you don't become skilful in its application." He smiled, "In other words, if you don't use it, you lose it. So... *practice*. Whenever and wherever you can." He paused once more and now his smile disappeared. "Finally, you know my attitude about weapons: leave them to others, more qualified. But again — *anything* can be used as a weapon, if you know how. *However*, always use the self defense techniques you've learnt here, *first.*" He looked at their faces intently once more, then, he brought his hands back and jerking vertically with a quick fluid action, was on his feet before Verna could blink.

Just before the rush to leave started, he shouted over the mounting noise, "See my assistant over there," pointing to the door, "and be sure to pick up your copy of the CD... and, thanks again." With a wave and a smile, he turned towards the changing rooms and was gone.

Verna quickly said her goodbyes to a couple of the women, nodded to a few more, collected the proffered CD and walked over to where Jake was patiently waiting. She sat down beside him, watching him as he watched all the other women milling around, saying their farewells. He was chewing the inevitable toothpick, moving it from side to side.

"Fancy anybody?" Verna made a face at him, and dug at his ribs.

"Ow... only you, babe, only you." Special Agent Jake Cutter, Narcotics Division, FBI, turned to his wife and pretended to leer. Then he laughed softly,

“Anytime too.” He leaned over, removed the toothpick and kissed her full on her lips, feeling the skim of sweat still there. He loved that feeling and her smell, and he moved closer. “Y’know, babe, when we get home, we could just sorta fall into bed, maybe, while you’re so sweaty an’ all, and then...”

Verna pushed him back, playfully. “Food first, fatso,” prodding Jake in the belly now, “I’m friggin’ hungry after that workout, and I need a boost.” Jake reached inside her sweatshirt with one hand, grinning. She slapped it down, “*Not* that kind of boost,” smiling at the same time, “*not yet*, anyway.” Now it was Jake’s turn to make a face as he settled back in the chair. Verna pushed her hair back from her face, wiped it over again with her towel and continued to smile at him. He smiled back, but he was thinking how *little* Verna needed a boost from him these past few weeks.

Chewing furiously on the toothpick, Jake was troubled, as only a man of forty-six with a twenty-year marriage can be troubled. Not in his prime, of course, but still in good condition, despite the ‘fatso’ accolade. A shade under six feet in his socks, two-hundred and ten pounds — *Okay, a bit over the top maybe* — but still able to run three to five miles on a good day *and* an hour in the gym at the office — whenever he could find the time these days, which was getting much more difficult now, with all the emphasis on counterterrorism. *Necessarily so, of course*, he thought. He studied Verna as she brushed her hair, and thought again for the zillionth time how lucky he was. *What the hell’s going on*, he wondered again. *What have I done? Scratch that... what haven’t I done for quite a few weeks*, he thought sourly. Mentally, he shook his head, as his thoughts drifted.

He ran his fingers across his almost baldpate. He kept it very short deliberately, as his only surrender to vanity. Jake just hated to see guys brushing wisps of hair across their heads. *What’s the point of making it obvious that you’re deficient? I know I ain’t, you know, handsome like some fuckin’ Hollywood star or even the Channel 7 weatherman, for Chrissake*, but he also knew with certainty that he was still worth looking at. That woman at the local 711, not far from their home, was making it very clear to him that she entertained lascivious thoughts about him, no question. *Uh-uh, absolutely, no question about that. And, why else would that insurance sales person – get that politically keeerect – show so much cleavage to me last week?* Jake caught himself starting to shake his head. *Get real, asshole*, as he pulled himself back to reality...

Verna was putting a band around her ponytail with quick flips of her hands and Jake again marveled at her beauty. Long brown hair, now with blonde streaks

that made her look a bit wild, Verna was striking, almost in a Nordic sense. For she was tall, almost five feet ten inches, with characteristically wide hips and long, strong legs. He saw that she still had a narrow waist, even after all these years. With a good bust — more than enough for him — she looked after herself, and it was obvious. Her blue-gray eyes caught his gaze, and she winked as she made final touches to her face. Her lips were perhaps a bit too full, but Jake liked that. Her high cheekbones accentuated her eyes, those eyes that he fell in love with first. *Nobody's perfect*, Jake thought, *but Verna's the closest. So... what's up, doc?*

He was startled when Verna seemed to read his mind.

"What's up, Jake?" she said.

Quickly, he grinned, "Nothing, babe," and cursed himself for his lack of honesty. He rubbed his face and eyes and said, "Office has been pretty busy these days, you know that. Just a bit tired, I guess." In truth, it wasn't hard for him to look tired anyway — he *was* dog-tired. More than a full year since 9/11 and the FBI just seemed to be in a bigger mess. He was just glad that he'd resisted all attempts by Josh Adams, Assistant Director and his boss, to move him over to Counterterrorism. Maybe he'd lose out eventually, but he was one of those guys who truly liked to work at the Narcotics Division. But, he was also glad that Adams hadn't been pushing too hard, as yet. Hell, at his age, why should he want to go running around with a bunch of preppies? Anyway, maybe Adams wasn't pushing too hard simply because he'd raped Narcotics of many agents already, reassigning them to the expanded needs of a country now in the grip of terror.

Jake stood and said, "C'mon babe, let's go eat... it's been a long day." Verna looked at him. *Did she sense something more?* Jake wasn't sure, as he held out his hand and helped her up. She kissed him lightly on the lips and whispered, "I love you, Jake." He returned the kiss, smiled, brushed her nose with his, and hoped that she still did.

Quickly now, they walked out into the frigid January air, brushed away the recent light fall of snow from the windshield of their car, and began the slow drive home.

As he drove, Verna lying back with partially closed eyes, the local radio was issuing the latest weather forecast. The slosh and slap of melting snow and breaking ice mingled, thumping on the underside and pulling at the steering. Jake kept his eyes on the taillights ahead, watching for problems. The weather news droned on...

“... weather-wise, the roads are in bad shape, so stay home if you can. Forecast is for continued bouts of sleet and snow – don’t bother trying to clear your driveway yet, commuters! Uh-huh. Temperature is still falling, and will probably reach ten degrees tonight, with a high of maaaaybe twenty-five tomorrow. Get those warm...”

Hope the power don’t go out, like further south, he thought: earlier, he’d heard reports of sixty-thousand outages in the Carolinas and Virginia. Jake flipped the dial to one of his favorite jazz stations and let the sweet sound of Bunny Berrigan’s “*I Can’t Get Started*” fill his ears. It’d been a long time since he’d heard it.

Verna stirred beside him and murmured, “Hmmm, you like that one.”

Jake grunted, patted her on the back of her hand, and said, “Yeah, always have. My dad was into jazz, as you know, so I guess I grew up with it. I like it a lot too,” and thought, *hmmm, I like a lot of things. Why can’t I get started?* he wondered. He threw her a glance, “Hey, babe, you very tired?” *Watch that car in front, it’s slewing around... stupid jerk, what’s it doin’?* He touched the brakes lightly and opened up a larger gap.

Verna had been half-asleep, for she was tired after a busy week at the high school, preparing for the new semester. The hour-long sessions each night at the self-defense course had just added to the load. But also, she felt drained mentally, because she was wrestling with the need to make a decision. She rolled her head and looked at Jake. He glanced at her again, smiling, as she thought, *I know I’m going to hurt him.* “Yeah, lover, a bit, I guess... but, I *have* to tell you: I *need* a break.” *Don’t pussyfoot around*, she grated to herself. “Jake, I mean, I need some time for myself, *alone.*”

The car slewed a bit as Jake looked at her quickly, the surprise showing. He corrected the steering and slowed down a bit, his gaze back on the car in front. For a few minutes — or was it just a few seconds? — Jake was silent. Dully, he was wondering what had gone wrong with their lives. *Okay, maybe I ain’t the best operative at the Bureau, but I’ve done well... we have a great home, Verna is doin’ great at the high school, Bobby’s in university now... so, shit happens, eh?* He looked at Verna. “You mean, go away somewhere, for another vacation?” *Shit, don’t be a stupid jerk.* He tried to smile; instead he looked sick.

Verna returned his look. “Jake, oh, Jake.” She said his name slowly, and now sounded even more tired. “You *know* what I mean...” For a moment or two, she looked out at the sleet, then turned back to him. “I just want some time to

think, by myself. Nobody else.” She sighed and lent back on the seat, looking directly ahead.

“Is this some kinda *find-myself* syndrome, now?” Louder now. He was remembering the recent holiday they’d had — down in the Dominican Republic — a real quiet getaway spot at Samana, on the north coast. *Was it only four weeks ago*, he thought? Idyllic, peaceful, the sweetest spot for lovers he’d ever been to. They’d had a good time, or so he thought. Now, the car in front seemed to be wobbling, perhaps one of the wheels, Jake wasn’t sure. He backed off a bit further, and changed lanes. *Good, no cars for two hundred yards or more...*

He glanced at Verna. “Well?” She looked at him, and from the depth of her eyes, he knew that he was losing her. He looked away and studied the road and sleet ahead, now seething inside, his anger now beginning to make him *feel* sick. But, his sense of loss was starting to make him feel worse.

“Jake... I just need some time away. Maybe alone... I don’t know.” She shook her head. “Maybe... maybe I’ll go see Vicky.” A slight pause. “She probably needs a bit of extra help now, anyway. She’s late, y’know, and it’s her first baby. *Yeah, and she don’t need big sis crying on her shoulder either, about Jake and me!* Verna shivered, even though the car’s heating was on full blast.

Jake turned to look at her, “Why now?”

“It’s as good a time as any.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” He had to look back at the traffic ahead, but wanted to glare at her.

“Jake, look... okay, it’s the start of the school term, but I just need to get away for a bit. I’ve got a few days owing. I think there’s a sub who can maybe take my classes for a few days, for God’s sake.” She folded her arms and pulled away slightly.

Jake drove on moodily, wondering. *Why does it always have to be like this?* He thought back to when his own parents separated, and eventually divorced. It hadn’t been a pleasant time at all, for a sixteen year old, to see his parents and his life disintegrate. He looked at Verna quickly, from the corner of his eyes. *Jesus... fuck... don’t want t’lose you, babe.* He hungered for her now, but instead had to avoid *stupid, goddam drivers like the one ahead... what’s he doin’, swerving across the whole fuckin’ freeway, for fuck’s sake.* He gunned the motor and surged ahead, coming up on the inside, and beside the other car. Verna jerked out of her reverie, and looked anxiously at Jake, then at the other car.

Jake lowered his window, stuck his head out into the blowing wind and sleet, and practically screamed, "Get off the fuckin' freeway, ya goddam idiot." The other driver, hunched over the steering, looked over to him, eyes wide with surprise. "Get off the damn road, fuck-face, before ya kill somebody." Jake knew the driver couldn't hear him, but now he didn't care, he just went on shouting while Verna pulled at him.

"Jake, for God's sake, stop. Stop... *STOP!*" She pulled at his hand. "Look what you're doing, how *you* sound, damn you." Now, she was screaming at him. He pulled away from her savagely and pushed down hard with his foot. The car jumped forward, the rear slewing but Jake expertly corrected, then backed off slightly as he left the other car to the rear.

"Fuckin' crap drivers... shouldn't be on the road. *'Specially at this time.*" His voice grated, and he glowered through the windshield, his anger still high. Verna sat back, feeling sick and worried. They drove on in silence for another twenty minutes until Jake drove to a slippery stop in their driveway.

He turned off the engine, and slumped back in the seat. "Sorry, babe. Goddammit, I'm sorry." He went to reach for her, but she was already out of the car, without a backward glance.

"Verna... *Verna... WAIT, goddammit.*" But she took no notice, opened the front door and went in, leaving the door wide open. Jake pounded, pounded, pounded the steering wheel, hurting his hand, but not caring until he accidentally set off the horn.

"Fuck, fuck, fuckin' crap piece a shit, dammit, shut the fuck up." He pushed and shoved at the wheel and, fortunately, it stopped. Still muttering and nursing his right hand for a few minutes, he sat thinking. Then, he got out, kicked the door shut — leaving a distinct dent — and followed Verna inside.

"Verna, babe... where are you?" No answer. He went to the kitchen, living room, then down the corridor to their bedroom. As he entered, he heard the shower, thrust his head into the bathroom, and shouted, "Hey, babe, you okay?"

"Fuck off, Jake, just fuck off." She was shampooing her hair vigorously. Turning, she looked through the misty glass. With one hand, she opened the sliding door and said, "You know you could have killed us both, don't you? Don't you!" She pushed the door closed and shouted, "*Stupid jerk. Stupid SHIT!*"

He turned to go, but she wasn't letting him off that easily. "You come back here, you friggin' fool." Finishing the rinse to her hair, she was wrapping a large towel around her, as he came back through the door.

“Now, look Verna... I said I was sor...” She cut him off in mid-sentence by kissing him full on the lips, pushing her body into him hard. He responded naturally, and felt her hands tearing at his belt.

“I love you, Jake, just love me, Jake, just love me.”

He fell backwards on the bed, bringing her with him, wet hair all over, “I love you so much, babe, I’d never hurt you, never let anything...” His voice was husky, and he felt her tears on his face. And, for the next few minutes, they both tried again to experience the honest joy of their love. Unhappily, barely a minute later, the orgasmic frenzy also ended with his premature ejaculation. If Verna noticed, she said nothing.

Exhausted, they lay quietly on their sides, she nestled on his legs, his arm under her head and his chin near her shoulder. Soon, her breathing softened and, before she drifted off to sleep, he said, “You go, babe... you go to see Vicky. It’s okay. I’ll be alright for a few days.”

He stroked her hair, and she murmured, “Hmmm, okay... lover... that’s nice... hmmm.” Soon, she was asleep.

Carefully, he extricated his arm, pulled off the rest of his clothes and lay there, wondering whether he’d ever see Verna again. He’d seen something in her eyes, and he brought that memory back and tried to fathom it. It didn’t make sense to let her go, but didn’t make sense to try to stop her. Either way, he was the loser, he knew it. *Maybe Verna’s a loser in this mess too? Maybe we’re both losers?* Turning often, it was another hour before Jake finally drifted off into the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.



Port Everglades, Fl., Sunday, January 5th, 2003, 1p.m.

Six hours earlier, the ten thousand ton freighter, *Barcelona*, slipped into Port Everglades, ready to discharge its cargo. Its deck was stacked two high with containers; its bulk cargo was sugar and sugar cane. Officially owned by the Caribbean Sugar Company of the Dominican Republic, but registered in Bolivia — thereby ensuring that the real owners were virtually untraceable — the ship was one of the many hundreds of small to medium freighters that plied the trade routes of South America and the Caribbean Sea. Much of its cargo — chiefly its sugar — was always bound for the United States, despite the high sugar tariffs of the

current administration in USA. But it carried other cargo on a regular basis and, like those other hundreds of freighters, it was well known to the US Customs Service and Port Everglades. That never stopped the Service from performing surprise spot checks, but *that* never worried Captain Pedro Gomez. It could be said, with some certainty, that Captain Gomez was one of the most law-abiding citizens of the sea that the US Customs Service had ever encountered. In a business that is rife with smugglers, arms dealers, drug runners, slave trafficking, illegal immigrants — stolen goods of *all* types — not once, in thirty years, had Captain Gomez been caught. The reason for that is very simple: Pedro Gomez *was* an honest man, and would allow only that smuggling that would profit *himself* directly and those members of his crew whom he could trust. Most importantly, he made sure that all the smuggling he did went the *other* way, back to the Dominican Republic and his homeport of Puerto Plata. Hence, on more than one occasion, he knew that the US Customs Service had emulated that famous one-eyed English admiral of so long ago, Admiral Nelson.

Truly, there are none so blind... he thought again, as he looked over the rail of the bridge and watched as the ship nudged to rest against Pier 5 at Southport, one of the three ports that make up the Port Everglades complex. He smiled, waving to two Customs Officers now climbing aboard, while thinking of some of the *additional* items that would accompany him on the return trip.

Gomez knew that US Customs had changed dramatically since 9/11. He knew that there was heightened awareness about the potential threat from terrorist infiltration. He also knew that the new procedures for customs clearance were a giant pain in the ass, but consoled himself with the knowledge that, because US Customs was now so pre-occupied with preventing terrorist attack, his little sidelines were now even less likely to be of any interest. So, okay, it might take a few extra hours to offload and clear some items through the new VACIS control system — at two million dollars each, *madre de Dios* — thus slowing down *his* efforts to load up again for the return trip, but that also allowed him more time for his own ventures.

In the long run, it might even work out better, he thought wryly.

Captain Pedro Gomez would not have been so complacent had he known about the sixty kilos of enriched U235 nuclear metal, enclosed within one of the 50 containers, now waiting for off-loading. With greater potential than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, should the U235 explode, it would vaporize the entire Port Everglades within a few seconds.

"*Buenos días*, James," he said, as one of the customs officers came up to the bridge.

The beefy officer, overweight and puffing heavily, came through the hatch and said, "*Hola!* How's it goin', Pedro?" Not waiting for an answer, he carried on, "Didn't expect to see you until tomorrow." He arched his eyebrows. "Got a tail wind this trip, or somethin'? Or just some wind up your ass?" James Kirkland actually slapped his thigh as he made his joke, and gave a loud guffaw.

Gomez shrugged and smiled, "*Loco yanqui!*" And they both laughed as Gomez opened a locker and brought out a bottle of his best Caribbean rum, together with two coffee cups. It was a ritual that they went through quite often, and James seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood today. *All the better*, thought Gomez, as they both tossed off a good measure of his delicious rum.

For a few moments, Kirkland savored the rum while he gathered his breath. Philosophically, he looked over the deck of containers and sourly reflected upon how one man had made the job of transportation easier, while opening up a Pandora's box of criminal activities on a global basis. Once again, he silently cursed Malcolm McLean, that entrepreneur of the mid-fifties, who was the first man to drive a truck onto a ship at New Jersey and transport it to Texas. From that simple action, the entire intermodal transportation system was born... *and the world is still trying to control it*, he thought. He mentally shrugged, finished his drink and leaned over the railing.

His partner was still on the foredeck, inspecting the containers, and often referring to a sheaf of papers on a clipboard. He shouted down, "Hey, Buddy... ain't you finished yet?" He grinned but didn't wait to see Buddy give him the finger, turned to Gomez and said, "Okay, let's see the paper work, hey, Pedro," knowing *already*, of course, what should be on board, and in great detail. As part of the procedures instituted post 9/11, the US Customs now required all trading countries to supply ships' manifests for scrutiny, *prior* to any ship departing from its home port. And, not content with just the manifests, US Customs had also introduced a whole mess of additional forms designed to make his life miserable.

Most of those document requirements had been standard for a while, but... *where's it all gonna fuckin' end?* thought Kirkland. He sighed quietly, with resignation, as he settled down for the second time since he'd started his shift. *How many more to go?* He quickly looked and saw there were another 30 ships listed, by the harbormaster, on today's schedule printout. *Fuck, when do I go on*

vacation? Kirkland grimaced slightly and pulled his mind back to the job on hand... a job that was just going to get more demanding with each passing day or week.

Now also, agents from US Customs were setting up offices to scrutinize and monitor traffic at the ten high volume ports — among them, Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Pusan, Tokyo, Genoa and Bremerhaven — that account for nearly half of all container traffic to USA. With more than fifteen thousand containers arriving *daily* at the 360 ports of entry around USA, Kirkland, with all other Customs officers, knew that the possibility of terrorist infiltration was very real, and even now more probable than ever before. Kirkland also knew that Port Everglades, while not in the same league as New York, Boston or San Francisco, was still a very busy port, and now also stretched to the limit to cater for the extra procedures and paper work. Working sixteen or eighteen hours a day wasn't uncommon any more, and he and Buddy just seemed to be getting more tired. *Only five hours' shuteye last night, fuck it*, he thought and caught himself yawning as he flicked through the manifests. The rum he just downed didn't help matters either.

He muttered out loud, "Let's see here, now...", flicking through, "uh-uh, Columbia Cotton... three containers ex Karachi, hmmm, okay, here's Florida Fruit Growers, five containers of bananas — why the hell we wanna import bananas into Florida, you tell me — from Brazil, no less," shaking his head, "okay, a container of coconuts, same place... aha... what's this," pausing a moment, "from Karachi, textiles and *more* cotton, gimme a break." He stopped, and flicked on his radio, "Hey, Buddy, check container... er... er" and read off a string of alphanumeric characters, "from Karachi, Pakistan, go through the standard checks, over." He stopped, and Gomez heard the distorted 'Wilco, roger' from Buddy down below. Kirkland scanned through the rest, "container of archaeological artifacts for Detroit Natural History Museum — hey Pedro, from your own Dominican Republic no less — okay, *four* containers rattan furniture from Malaysia," he stopped again, relayed container details to Buddy, and then resumed, "two containers, computer parts and hard drives from Malaysia... hmmm, by rail to Houston, five more containers from Brazil, raw rubber and wood products...", the list went on for another twenty pages. By the time he'd finished, that second shot Gomez handed him was very welcome, but seemed to be smaller than the first. *Probably is*, he thought, but didn't complain.

“Looks like that’s it, Pedro.” Kirkland reluctantly finished his drink. “I guess you’ll be going ashore for a few hours, huh?” Pedro smiled and nodded. “To see your cousin, hmmm?”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders, as only Latinos can, “*Si, amigo*, I haf zom biznees to do... *comprendez*, yes?” He smiled again. He was thinking of the load of Canadian Club Whisky to come from his ‘cousin’; he would give a crate to Kirkland to share with the others.

Kirkland winked and nodded, “Okay, get on with it... I’ll catch yer later, ‘fore yer leave.” With that, he saluted jovially, picked up all his papers and descended to the foredeck.

Pedro watched him go, watched him as he joined Buddy, saw them talk for a few moments, waved to them as Buddy waved and Kirkland gave a ‘thumbs-up’, and spat in their direction, as they both walked down the gang-plank. “Damn Yankees.” His first mate, Emiliano, who had been with Buddy, came through the hatch to hear that epithet.

“Oh, they’re not so bad... at least they leave *us* alone, no?” He saluted, as he said it.

“Just get on with the unloading, Emiliano. I’m going ashore now, for a few hours, do the business.” He put his jacket on, adjusted his tie and placed his cap on his head, with a flourish. “Just don’t ever trust what they say...”

Before Pedro could finish, his first mate said, “I know, trust only what they do, okay, I know.” They both laughed, and Emiliano was still chuckling as Pedro walked off the *Barcelona*, hailed a taxi and was gone.

The unloading of ships, in general, follows a very definite sequence, but all major ports have their own specific requirements and procedures, much of which depend upon the type of cargo imported. Some ports concentrate upon bulk cargo, such as wheat, sugar, coffee, coal, petroleum products, and many others. Still other ports are purely designed to handle containers and break-bulk cargo, the latter being products that are not usually containerized, such a raw or finished lumber, rolled or bar steel and similar products. Port Everglades, one of the top fifteen in USA, is very much a multimodal port, handling all types of cargo and also catering for the very lucrative cruise and tourism market. With upwards of three million tons of cargo and over half a million containers coming in each year at the port, it’s been generally an easy matter for a determined smuggler to slip past security measures, given those kind of volumes.

However, with the introduction of the Vehicle And Container Inspection System — VACIS — the probability of success for smugglers was now being lowered significantly, especially for those intent on terrorist activities. And, whereas the examination and clearance of just one container use to take five customs officers and three hours, the use of VACIS, fiber-optic cameras, vapor tracers and radiation pagers had reduced that to two officers and fifteen minutes, on average.

So, it was a relatively easy matter for James Kirkland and Buddy Granger to concentrate on the high-risk containers, while the crew of the *Barcelona* moved quickly to clear the remainder. Offloading was managed with the assistance of the large gantry crane nearby, now lowering the first of the containers to the wharf.

Gradually, the pile of containers increased, forming a regimental line on the foreshore, until all fifty had been offloaded. With the deck cleared, the bulk discharge of the sugar cargo began, continuing on into the late evening, into the waiting hoppers. The container with its deadly nuclear cargo squatted, alone and near the end of the line, as the fading sun bathed them all in gold.

Very late in the afternoon, a large flatbed truck approached the group of containers and stopped. The driver looked over some papers in his cab, peered at the containers and inched his truck forward, reading container numbers. With a grunt, he stopped in front of an ochre colored one, checked the numbers, moved the flatbed into position and stopped the engine. The gantry crew, that had been following, quickly secured that container and, in ten minutes, they had lowered and secured it to the truck.

With a wave of thanks, the driver gunned his engine and made his way to the port exit, stopping long enough at the security fence to get final clearance. Having a full declaration of the contents prior to shipping, the container had been cleared for entry to Port Everglades, by Customs at its departure point, and thus required no further checking through VACIS upon arrival. While the driver waited, he checked details on a map, nodded to himself, and leaned over and pushed the map into the glove box, which wouldn't shut properly until he gave it a boost with his foot. "Shut the fuck up, will ya," he muttered, and laughed at his own joke. A few moments later, the security guards gave him the 'OK' and, with a thumbs-up to them, he left the port, made a right turn and headed towards the nearby turnpike.

Ahmed bin Karim, watching from a car in a nearby parking lot, motioned to the woman beside him. She started the car, and moved it out into the evening Sunday traffic. A second car, on the opposite side of the road, started up and did a quick U-turn. The driver, also a woman, peered intently ahead; the man beside her studied some maps on his lap. In the rear, a second, older man sat immobile, looking straight ahead. The woman accelerated until the car was about one hundred yards behind Ahmed, whose car was now the same distance behind the truck.

Ten minutes later, the truck was north bound on the Florida Turnpike, the driver — blissfully unaware of the two cars following — thinking only of the long drive ahead and how quickly he would get home. He had his radio on, but unlike most truckers, he had his favorite classical station now playing Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. It was one of his favorite pieces, and he usually started with it on a long trip home. Softly, he hummed along, glancing in his rear view from time to time, keeping his distance from traffic ahead and watching out for hazards.

Michael Jackson took his work seriously...

The evening sun was nearing the horizon, silhouetting the sub-tropical countryside in glorious reds and yellows. The road stretched ahead, warm and golden, inviting Jackson home. *It's gonna be good trip*, he thought, as the music moved into the second act. He settled back, humming softly, picturing Jane and little Timmy, probably now starting up the fireplace in the living room. The truck sped on, the tires sang along with the music, or so it seemed, and Jackson relished being alive.

"Drop back a bit more, Ayeshah, traffic is not so heavy now. Don't risk anything suspicious." Ahmed looked at her, his cold black eyes searching for signs of weakness, his voice authoritative, flat and unemotional. "Let another car, or two, in between us and the truck when you can."

Ayeshah nodded, "Yes, all right," and glanced at Ahmed briefly, with a slight smile of agreement. She slowed the car until another hundred yards separated it from the truck; at the same time, according to prearranged procedure, the second car also slowed and dropped back.

Ahmed turned and looked through the rear window, and spoke into the two-way radio in his hand, "Bilal, make sure you keep proper distance... don't try to make this look like a caravan. Change lanes from time to time, mingle with the traffic. The truck driver must suspect *nothing*." His voice now had an edge, as

though he expected argument. Ayeshah thought there was no need to talk to Bilal that way, but said nothing.

In the second car, Bilal nodded unnecessarily, pressed the button on the radio, and said, "Okay," in his best American accent. He grinned at Rebekah and said, "Change lanes... you heard him. We must raise no suspicions." He sat back, still grinning, and lit a cigarette.

Rebekah frowned and opened her window halfway, "Why can't you wait until we stop?" She hated smoking of any kind, although most of her countrymen smoked anyway. It was a constant thorn for her, and she made people know it.

"Shut up, woman, just drive," was all Bilal said. He took a long drag and blew it deliberately in her direction, but also opened his window slightly. *Keep the bitch happy... for now*, he thought. He eased back in his seat and shut his eyes, listening to the rhythm of the tires and thinking of his beach house in Aden. The thought of the warm gulf waters was very pleasing, and that helped to take his mind off all the heavy work he had to do, over the next seven days. Soon, he was dozing, almost asleep.

Gratefully, Rebekah leaned over, took the almost finished cigarette from his fingers and threw it out the window. Bilal gave no sign that he'd felt the loss, but she knew that he knew, somehow. *He always does*, she thought, and shivered. She raised her window, hesitated for just a fraction, then pushed the button to raise Bilal's also. As the sun went down, and as the convoy moved further north, the air began to feel decidedly cooler. *It'll be getting a lot colder yet*, she thought, *where we are going*, and shivered again. Having been brought up in Karachi, Rebekah knew only azure days, humid nights and the warm waters of the Bay of Bengal; cold, wintry conditions were virtually unknown to her, except for one visit to Austria with her father when she was five. Now, twenty-three years later, she wasn't looking forward to ice and snow and hoped that it wouldn't impede their glorious mission, now so close to fruition. She knew what she had to do; she just hoped that Ahmed knew and believed that she could do it.

They were just west of Orlando when suddenly, the radio squawked and Bilal was instantly awake. "Bilal... the truck is turning off the highway... going up to a truck stop. You park at this end of the stop, I'll go past the truck and park further on. Understand?" Ahmed's voice was quiet, but authoritative as always.

Bilal grunted, "Yes, of course, all right. We know." Rebekah needed no directions, but took the exit and soon had the car parked. The truck was in full view, close to the big diner and she saw the driver descend and then walk

through, into the warm restaurant; it was the first time that they'd had a reasonable view of what he looked like.

Further down, she could dimly see Ahmed's car, with him and Ayes Shah waiting. Ahmed's voice came over the radio. "Wait in your car. Do nothing." Bilal acknowledged, while Rebekah turned to the older man in the rear, "What is the truck driver doing, Jusef?"

Jusef raised his head and looked at her with his dark brown eyes. He'd said nothing for the last three hours or so, nor had anybody spoken with him. He was dressed in jean clothes, with a NY Yankees cap on his head. When he spoke, he had a decidedly American accent, "Maybe what we should be doin': having a piss." He smiled slightly, "Need to go?"

She shook her head and turned back to watch. Bilal lit another cigarette, impatiently drumming his fingers on his kneecap, and ignoring the question.

"Well, at my age, ya gotta go more often." Jusef tapped Bilal on his shoulder, "Tell yer boss I gotta take a leak." He got out and walked towards the diner, but stopped short near the dumpster bins. In the darkness, it was an easy matter to relieve himself there, shivering slightly in the cold. As Jusef finished, the trucker came outside, pushing on his cap, and pulling up his collar against the wind. He got into his idling rig and warm cab, checked his mirrors, strapped himself in and, a few moments later, joined the intermittent traffic going north on the Florida Turnpike. He hadn't seen Jusef standing in the shadow of the bins. Nor did he see anything unusual about the two cars still trailing behind.

The three vehicles continued that way for another hour, joining I-75 at interchange 65, where the Turnpike terminates. The truck turned northeast, and they followed. Just over two hours later, they crossed into Georgia. An hour later, just past Tifton, the truck took an off-ramp that lead up to a large truck stop and rest area. It was now nearly 1a.m., on Monday, January 6th.

"Looks like he's gonna stop fer a bit of shut-eye," said Jusef, as Rebekah brought their car to a stop. Further down, Ayes Shah stopped abruptly as a Chevy pickup slewed across her path, throwing up slush across the windshield. Quickly she operated the wipers.

"Ah! Fool..." she said.

"Careful — wait!" As he cautioned her, Ahmed watched the pickup stop about thirty yards on. He still watched as the driver locked his cab and half-ran to the diner, then turned back to face Ayes Shah.

“Okay — go on a bit more to that line of cars,” pointing to a spot dimly visible fifty yards further down. Moments later, Ayeshah eased the car into a line of others, left the engine idling and sat back to wait.

Michael Jackson steered his truck to the larger staging area for trucks, and came to a stop, between two darkened vehicles with engines idling. He got out and locked his cab door, leaving his engine idling also. He was about fifty yards from the diner, so he hurried to get back into some warmth. The clouds were low and heavy with rain; a light sprinkle warned of more to come. *Mebbe some snow, too*, he thought, pushing open the door to the diner and getting to the john before he bust a gut.

A few minutes later, he emerged, feeling much better and looking for a quick snack before he bedded down for a few hours. Another thirty minutes later, and he felt like a new man as he pushed through the diner’s door and the cold air enveloped him.

Feeling pleased with his progress, and generally happy with the world around, he didn’t at all sense danger when a silhouetted figure stepped in front of him just as he reached his cab. Before he could take a breath to say ‘Hello’, the long thin blade had pierced his clothing, then his chest and sliced through the coronary artery of his heart, the tip of the knife just emerging through his back. It was an easy kill for Bilal; he was well practiced in the use of his knife. Jackson fell backwards, but was near death before he could feel the two hands behind him catch his body and quietly lower it to the ground. By the time his head hit the ground with a soft thud, Jackson was unconscious; in twenty seconds, his heart stopped. His murderers held the arms and legs for a few moments more, as the body’s nervous system protested. Very soon, all was quiet, except for the persistent drone of idling engines.

Ahmed hissed to Bilal as the latter extracted his blade, wiped it clean and put it in its ankle sheath, “Help me drag him to the rear.” A body’s dead weight is never easy to move, especially when it exceeds two hundred pounds. The wet ground that allowed them to slide it back to the deep shadows of the rig’s rear assisted them, however. “Quick,” said Ahmed, “search him for all identification, everything in his pockets, everything. Get it all.” He shone a small, hooded flashlight onto Bilal’s hands as he worked professionally over the inert figure. Ahmed looked around often, ensuring that no one was watching. He could see

their cars, fifty yards away, where the others waited. He pointed the flashlight towards them and flashed two long, two short. One car started quietly and drove just as quietly over to the line of trucks.

Rebekah stopped her car just behind the truck and popped open the trunk lid. Jusef got out and stood waiting in the shadow of the truck, near the cab. Ahmed and Bilal lifted the body and rolled it into the tray, closed the lid, and Bilal gave it a soft tap. Rebekah drove quietly back to where Ayeshah waited in the second car, parked beside her and stopped the engine. Not a word had been exchanged between any of them. Nobody stirred in the idling trucks.

Ahmed moved over to Jusef and handed him the keys to the cab. They scrambled into the warmth, while Bilal waited in the cold, wishing he could have a cigarette. Jusef switched on the interior light and went through what had been Jackson's schedule. Carefully, he scanned the sheaf of papers on the clipboard.

"Everything there?" Ahmed's tone was impatient.

Jusef looked at him coolly, "Be patient, Ahmed...I'm gettin' there, okay." He shuffled through some more papers, taking his time. There's no room for errors when you're hijacking a truck, and then you have to drive it *another* thousand miles or so. Vehicle licence, interstate permits, Jackson's licence, freight manifest...*all looked okay and current.*

He glanced around the interior. The CB was on and squawking with chatter; he switched through some channels and nodded to himself, murmuring. A cell phone was clipped to the dash, within easy reach; he picked it up, verified that it was on and put it back. *If the company calls, I'll just hafta make like I've got a bad cough...* Squirming around, he pulled aside the curtain to the rear cab, where Jackson had slept, and found a switch. Blinking back the bright light, he scanned the area carefully, making sure: *No onboard computer, so no GPS tracking using the Internet – good!* He switched off the light, closed the curtain and sat, holding the steering wheel and staring through the frosted windshield. He could feel Ahmed's eyes boring into him, but Jusef was thinking. He knew that a cell phone could be used as an uplink device when connected to a GPS receiver, but there was no wiring, no sign that it was anything but a cell phone. *Guess the company can't afford GPS tracking yet... Wouldn't have mattered anyway — we're stickin' t'Jackson's route all the way, so they'll never know anythin's different.*

But he shrugged with relief, smiling slightly, looked at Ahmed finally, and nodded. "Looks okay, we can get goin'."

Ahmed grunted, and said, "Good. *You* can get going now." He smiled sardonically. "You *do* know where you're going, don't you?", he said, as he got out.

Jusef looked into his black eyes and wondered again whether he was doing the right thing. "Yeah, that's one thing I *do* know." He slammed the cab door and leaned out the window. "I'll see you later."

As he gunned the engine, he heard Ahmed say, "No speeding... don't take any risks." Jusef waved, spat out the window and muttered, "Fuck you, Ahmed... just be sure *you* keep your end of the bargain."

Ahmed watched, with Bilal, as the truck moved through the gears, picked up speed and got onto the on-ramp to I-75 north. Then, he turned and said to Bilal, "Good. Now, we'll get rid of the body."

As they walked back to the cars, Ahmed glanced towards the Chevy pickup again and then stopped, Bilal almost bumping into him. He remembered what had happened, and also recalled that he hadn't seen any indication that the driver had activated an anti-theft alarm. The pickup was sitting behind a line of darkened trucks, all of them with engines idling. For a few brief seconds he considered the risk, and then made his decision.

"I have an idea," he said. "Go and get Rebekah, bring the car here. We'll dump the body under the cover of this pickup truck." He smiled, and Bilal grinned agreement. "Quick, before the owner returns." Ahmed waved him on, and waited, again impatiently, for the car to come.

Less than thirty seconds later, the car drew up beside the pickup truck. Bilal got out, while Rebekah remained at the wheel, engine idling. Bilal went to the back of the pickup and began unlatching the canvas cover, while Ahmed beckoned Rebekah to reverse the car until it was a few feet from the pickup. She popped the lid and Ahmed and Bilal both looked around, making sure there were no curious onlookers. Satisfied, Ahmed nodded to Bilal and both pulled at Jackson's body, lifted it quickly and rolled it over the side of the pickup. It landed with a muffled thud. Ahmed didn't wait, but beckoned to Ayesha, got into the car and drove off. Bilal fastened the pickup's cover again, returned to the other car and got in, blowing on his cold hands. Gratefully, he lit a cigarette. "All okay," he said. "Let's go. *C'mon...move it.*"

With a squeal of tires, Rebekah accelerated the car and soon caught up to Ayesha and Ahmed just entering the on-ramp. Bilal couldn't resist looking behind and watched the pickup until it disappeared from his sight. With a satisfied grunt,

he settled back, took a long drag and reached into his pocket to pull out a plastic bag containing all of Jackson's personal items — watch, licence, photos, billfold, some loose change, company credit cards, two condoms, a notebook, a pen engraved with his name. He looked at Rebekah, her face impassive in the dim light of the dashboard.

“Well... wherever that body turns up, there's no way it can be connected to us.” As he spoke, he lowered the window, tossed the bag out into the night and chuckled, “Goodbye, Jackson...” Then he burst out laughing, thinking how clever Ahmed was to think of such a simple expedient: *No body, no worries about the Highway Patrol.*

Rebekah smiled slightly but said nothing. She looked in the rear vision and wondered herself just what would happen to the body. They drove on, into the night, keeping Ahmed's taillights always in sight...



At the truck stop, a light snow was just beginning and, in another half hour, a fine covering enveloped all the waiting vehicles. The pickup truck sat, with its grisly cargo, slowing assuming its white overcoat and the wind picked up, blowing the snow around, erasing all traces of any disturbance. At about three a.m., its owner came out of the diner, pulled up his jacket collar and quickly walked to his truck. “Gittin’ fuckin’ colder”, he muttered to himself, as he started the big V8. As the engine idled and warmed up, he reached inside his coat pocket, dragged out a bottle of rye, opened it, and took a swig. With a grunt of satisfaction, he lit a cigarette, and rested the open bottle against the back of the passenger seat, within easy reach. He pushed his duffel bag against the bottle to keep it steady.

“Okay, let's do some business.” With that comment to himself, he maneuvered through the gathering snow to the freeway and was soon heading north. After about an hour's drive he reached the 280 interchange, exited from I-75 and headed west and south, taking smaller roads towards Dawson, in the heart of the peanut belt. *Somewhere, 'round here, Jimmy Carter's got a peanut farm... or, did have,* he thought. But, he wasn't going to Plains, the hometown of the 38th president of the United States, to meet Charlie. He'd missed his exit at Tifton, and was now doubling back on these back roads, heading towards Bronwood, and just past there was Charlie's place. By the time he reached the

bridge at the Kinchafoonee River, and as he took another swig, he'd been driving for hours, and the long day and the rye finally took their toll...

He fell asleep.

Just as he got across the bridge, the bottle dropped from his hand and spilled its remaining contents over his legs and the floor. His head drooped and his face came to rest on his other hand still on the steering wheel.

Many people are fortunate enough to die in their sleep, but not this way. As his body slumped in exhaustion and the effects of liquor, his body weight pressed his foot harder on the accelerator. Oblivious to death, he met it full on: by the time the pickup truck left the road down an incline and hit the power pole, it was doing in excess of 100 miles per hour. The force was so severe, the truck nearly broke in half as the front collapsed, killing the driver instantly, while the rear kept going, rising up until the canvas top almost hit the pole also. For the contents in the tray, inertia obeyed its rule, as Michael Jackson's body, a toolbox and a large package all ripped through the canvas and scattered in three directions, like missiles from three slingshots. The massive pole, while it shuddered and shook from the impact, failed to break, but some wires at the top flashed and sparked as the strain pulled connectors and insulators from the wood, as though they were putty.

Slowly, agonizingly, the truck's rear fell back and thudded to the snow covered ground, shaking and sizzling. Steam hissed through the mangled hood. Oil began to seep through the bottom, spreading a large ugly patch on the snow. Large drops of blood pooled with it, gradually turning a muddy color.

Thirty yards away, in a small clump of bushes, the light snow began to cover Jackson's body. Slowly and almost reverently, his body assumed a ghostly sheen, while his eyes remained wide open and his mouth agape, both already frozen in utter, dreadful surprise.



Washington D.C., Monday, January 6th, 2003, 4a.m.

Andrew Blackwood had a problem.

It had been a fitful night, broken by periods of wakefulness as he thought about the difficulty facing him; and, it seemed to him that he'd been awake most of the night.

As a young graduate of twenty-three, however, he'd only just started a new career with the Central Intelligence Agency, at Langley headquarters, two weeks earlier. He looked at the clock: 4:04a.m. — still an hour to go before the alarm was set to wake him. He turned over to lie on his side, watching the snow slash at the window and listening to the wind. The prospect of even driving there was looking less attractive, with each passing minute; the roads would be slippery and dangerous, increasing the probability of a collision with some other driver not as careful as he.

Being of a very precise nature, Andy thought about that for a few moments, idly calculating the real probability: after a few brief mental calculations, he figured it to be just a hair above 50%. *Well, you can't use that as an excuse not to go out this morning, can you now...?* Besides, living in the small town of Belleview, CIA headquarters was within easy reach; he could make the drive in fifteen minutes, even in snow conditions. He reached over and turned on the radio but kept it low, as he didn't wish to disturb his mother, who not only had a very nervous disposition, but who also intensely disliked being woken up before 6a.m., on *any* day. Unless, of course, nuclear war was about to begin, as she often said. Being an only son to a widowed mother has its advantages, of course, but there is a downside: his training and education, as a psychology major, told him that his mother was highly neurotic with distinct paranoid tendencies. In another time, people would have said that she was just a worrier about everything and anything, and left it at that. *She knew differently, of course*, he thought wryly.

'Why *do* you want to get mixed up with *those* people?' was the question she'd asked when he'd told her about his application. "They're not *nice*, you know..."

"C'mon, mom... it's a vital part of our defense systems, you know that. I'd be contributing to that effort... and the money's okay. Not *great*, but okay."

"Well, I don't like it. I just *know* your father wouldn't have approved, I can tell you." His dad had been a banker and stockbroker, but not very successful at both. Andy believed that his dad's fatal heart attack had been brought on by the '87 stock market crash, coupled with his forced retirement from the bank. But, at the age of seven the only thing you know is that you've lost your dad and your mother is struggling to keep you in school and later, to send you to university. Whether his dad *would* have agreed with his mother's assessment was a moot point, but Andy didn't say that.

“Mom... look, it’s just like any other corporation. I’ll be in an office, all day. I’ll be using computers and stuff like that. And, I *won’t* be going to other parts of the world, or into any dangerous places. Really, I’ll be just another pen-pusher, y’know... only, I’ll be doing something that can maybe help the country to be a little safer.”

“Yes, I *know* that, Andrew... but they’re spies, what people call *spooks*, you know that. And they have guns there... somewhere... and you know how I feel about guns.” She sounded exasperated, but resigned, because these discussions had been going on for weeks, while he’d been waiting for news of his acceptance. “*There’s nothing really honest about what spies do, Andrew.*”

“It’s a big bad world, mom, and you’ve got to deal with it. One way or the other.” He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. “Don’t you want to feel safer?” That was a dumb question.

“*Don’t patronize me, Andrew... nobody is ever completely safe.*” She looked at him squarely. “We thought we were, but look what’s happened to this country.” She went on, “You could have been a doctor, or an engineer, or even a scientist – you were always so curious about everything. *Always* reading, *always* so curious...” Her voice faded, and she sat at the table looking at him with her sad, sad eyes.

“Yeah okay, I’m a curious guy, always have been – especially about what makes people tick, Mom, you know *that* too.” There was another long silence, as she sipped her coffee, and while he patted her hand. Then, he remembered what she’d said. “But, what do you mean, Mom, about what’s happened to this country? C’mon...” He looked at her quizzically, half joking.

“Oh? You think I’m crazy, paranoid?” For a moment she looked spirited, then she visibly slumped. “I can read, I see what’s happening. People being held without charge, not seeing their families, no legal representation. *It’s happening!*” There was a long pause, while she stared vacantly out the kitchen window. “It’s all so depressing.”

“Well, there’s just *no* need to feel that way.” Before she could protest, he continued, “Mom, I have a right to my career, y’know, and I know that sounds selfish,” he held up his hands, as though in supplication, “but that’s just the way it is. And, look, after all the worries you’ve had, well, I’ll be able to repay you for all the hardship you went through to help me through college.” He held her in both arms, and kissed her on the forehead. “Mom, I love you dearly, and I wouldn’t want to do anything to upset or hurt you, but I promise you I’ll be okay.” Then he’d

squeezed her lightly, for she was short and slender, as was he, but he was much stronger. “And, y’know, I’ll be part of an organization that I really believe is doing a good job, helping to keep the good ol’ USA safe.”

Now, as he lay half-awake, he wondered whether that was true. *Of course, any person with half a brain would — or should — know that absolute safety was an impossible dream. But, that’s a red herring anyway. Complete safety is impossible in all walks of life, no matter what you’re doing, so that just clouds the whole issue. What really matters is being able to have sufficient intelligence, domestically and from around the world, that would allow you to reduce the probability of any serious threat occurring.*

He looked at the clock — 4:37a.m. — and shivered even more as he heard the wind whistling between the houses. *Damn, I hope the battery in the car is okay.* His mother’s car was in the garage, while his always had to remain on the driveway. Shivering even more now, he went over to the window and looked out at Colville Street. *Fuck, it’s getting to be a real blizzard.* His car looked like a blue icicle as the wind whipped around it. *That’s gonna take a while to warm up,* he glumly thought. He looked down the street: some lights in houses were showing, one car was idling in a driveway across the road, its exhaust hanging momentarily and then whipping away like a frightened ghost. It was almost mesmerizing, as he watched it spew forth and scatter. *Better get out there and do the same, I guess,* he thought.

He shook himself and shivered and went back to the bed. He turned on the bedside light and as he lay looking at the ceiling, he went over again, in his mind, the CIA report that he’d been reading, on and off for the past week. His new boss, Cochrane, had told him to read it thoroughly and look for errors, omissions, inconsistencies, and such like. *Just a glorified proof-reader,* he thought, as he conjured up the title again: *Summary Report on the Incidence of Cruise Missile Failures, Middle East & Asia, 1990-2000*, then lit a cigarette — knowing his mother would disapprove, of course — and mentally flipped through the pages he’d read dozens of times already.

For most people that would have been difficult, if not impossible; Andy, however, was one of those people blessed — or cursed — with what is loosely termed a photographic memory but which is, in fact, an innate talent for organizing data according to keywords and mnemonic devices.

Again, he slowly thought about the whole of Incident 239(A), and examined all of the photographs, with his mind’s eye, slowly traversing every pixel of those

that showed the two guns welded together. Occasionally, he made more notes on a pad beside him, bringing the light from the gooseneck lamp down further to the pages, squinting his eyes, trying to focus more sharply. Shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, he muttered, "I need to get the original digital photos... only then can I have a hope of being *absolutely* sure." He took a final drag, then crushed the cigarette out and stood, stretching his arms, back and legs.

He went back to the window. *If I go to Cochrane with this today*, he thought, looking at the report in his hand, *he'll think I'm crazy*. "Maybe I am?" he said, looking at his reflection, speckled with frost and driving snow. He looked at the clock, saw that it was 4:58, and got to it in time to stop the alarm sounding. He then spent the next few minutes doing some more stretching, sit-ups and push-ups. As he was finishing his push-ups he said aloud, "Time to... *puff*... get going... *pant*... Andy, me boy. This should... *puff*... be... *whew*... a very... *puff*... interesting day."



Chapter Two

Washington D.C., Monday, January 6th, 2003, 5a.m.

As Andrew Blackwood sweated on the floor of his bedroom doing push-ups, Jake Cutter wearily forced his eyes to open as the insistent sound of his pager finally obtained a reaction from his sympathetic nervous system. With a start, he wondered what was wrong, but then yawned loudly, and fumbled around on the bedside table for the unit. Finding nothing, he rolled out of the bed onto his hands and knees and groped with his hands, in the semi-darkness. At least the light from his digital clock/radio gave some relief, with its eerie glow. Just under the bed, his fingers found it and he quickly clicked the alarm off as he rested on the bed.

His weight shifted and Verna stirred slightly. He patted her on the bottom, and murmured, "Sleep on, babe, it's just the blood-suckers." Stretching, he reached and turned on the small lamp nearby, and scanned the message: *Emergency meeting 0600 1/06/03 — all department heads and supervisors. Homeland Security Alert — CODE RED.* Jake blinked and read that again: CODE RED. He shook his head again, went to the window and opened the blinds slightly with his fingers. *Fuck, still snowing.*

It took him two minutes to have a shower and shave, and another three to get dressed. As he clipped on his badge and gun, he sat on the bed beside Verna and bent closer to her hair. He nuzzled her neck and whispered, "See ya, babe... don't wait up. Some kinda emergency is on."

He rose and was on his way out the door, when Verna murmured, "Jake, watch out for X-men, okay..." It was a standing joke between them.

He grinned and said softly, "Always, babe... always."

He closed the door quietly, checked the time — 5:18a.m. — opened Bobby's bedroom door quietly, saw him there — *Wonder what time he got in?* — closed it just as quietly, and was about to leave the house when he turned, went back to living room and switched on the TV. He flicked through the news channels, catching up on the previous twenty-four hours, but... *All's well in la-la*

land, he thought. There was no mention of any alert or emergency, just the usual violent upheavals so common in *other* countries.

Switching off the TV, he was in his car, on I-395 to the Washington bureau office by 5:35a.m. At this time, traffic was still slight, but increasing. Jake moved onto the fast lane and pushed past other traffic quickly — paying little heed to blaring horns — wanting to make sure he stayed ahead of peak hour madness.

He covered the fifteen or so miles from Franconia, where he and Verna had their house, in just under twenty minutes, getting into the parking lot at 601 4th NW Street at 5:55AM. *Some days ya get lucky*, he thought, as he parked the car, noting that many others had already arrived. Five minutes later he was nursing his first coffee of the day, with other supervisors, waiting for Josh Adams to begin the briefing in the main conference room. There was the usual muted buzz and the smell of stale tobacco. Jake pulled out another toothpick and began to chew. He nodded ‘Hi’ to Jennings from Fraud, Baker from Homicide, Johnson from Counterterrorism and a few others, and settled back to wait.

At 6:11, Josh Adams, Assistant Director, FBI, came through a side door and took up a position at the head of the long conference table. A second person was with him. Jake vaguely recalled the face, but not the name.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” Adams indicated the somewhat overweight, but very tall person now sitting beside him. “I’d like you all to know the local deputy for the Department of Homeland Security... that is, if you didn’t already know him: Chris Ballinger of Emergency Services has taken up those duties for the DC area, now that Homeland Security is more formalized.” Adams paused. “Chris is here so that we can keep him fully briefed, directly, about the current situation.”

Adams paused again, measuring his words. “First and foremost, there is now a full, nationwide Red Alert initiated. Second: you won’t find anything on the news wires, yet, for security reasons that I will go into in a few moments. Third, no knowledge of this alert is to be conveyed to any member of the public, yet. And, fourth, this announcement is being simultaneously conveyed to all FBI offices in the country, and abroad. The Strategic Information and Operations Center is, of course, coordinating information between all FBI offices.” Once again, Adams paused, and briefly referred to his notes. He looked around the table, slowly, making sure he had their attention.

“Understand this: *we are under attack as at this moment.*” Now reading from his notes, he continued, “At six p.m. yesterday, a known terrorist –

Muhammed Khalil bin Hadid – entered the United States at San Francisco International Airport, alone, posing as an executive for a Malaysian electronics company.” He read out a company name, which made no impression with Jake. “While going through the usual immigration checks, it was only the sharp eyes of one of the officers, at the airport, that recognized bin Hadid through his disguise. He was not stopped, but allowed to proceed, for one very good reason: I can reveal now that, a week ago, the CIA Director alerted the President, the Director of the FBI and the Homeland Security Chief that, based upon the best available intelligence, a suitcase plutonium bomb had already been smuggled into the continental United States.” Adams took a long drink of water from a glass on the table, and then carried on. A muted buzz that already begun, now increased in volume; people exchanged looks and started talking. Adams held up a hand. “There is every reason to believe that bin Hadid — a skilled explosives expert and very knowledgeable about nuclear devices — has been sent to retrieve the device from its current location, wherever that is, and then either detonate it immediately or take it to *another* location for detonation.” He looked over his glasses, under hooded eyebrows, and then said, “I think some of you know the full implications of this situation, but let me state it clearly: plutonium is one of the most toxic substances known, and just a few grams is sufficient to kill thousands. We don’t know the size of the nuclear device precisely, but again, available intelligence estimates that this device may have a yield in the range of 100 kilotons... or more. And, most importantly, we don’t know what or where the ultimate target is.” The room went quiet, each person trying to take in what Adams was saying.

Adams wiped his brow with his handkerchief, took another sip of water. “Obviously, as bin Hadid entered the States on the west coast, we’re assuming — for the moment — that the target is somewhere in that area. But, that can change obviously, depending upon what bin Hadid does and where he goes. To cater for that, there is now a special task force that has him under constant surveillance, twenty-four seven.” He looked at Ballinger, of Homeland Security, briefly and then gazed around the tense faces. “Any questions, at this point?”

Nobody said anything for a fraction of a second, then the uproar began. Jake got in first, “Boss, if the action is on the west coast now, how d’you want us to operate here?” A few others signaled agreement with nods and murmurs.

“Work your area, *as never before*. We don’t know where bin Hadid will be going. He’s still in San Francisco, but he could be here tomorrow. So, keep your ear to the ground, and eyes open. Quite frankly, we *can’t* afford to fuck this up.”

People were starting to talk together, so Adams held up a hand again for silence. "Listen up! I'll repeat: say nothing to anybody outside this building. Mass panic across the nation would be all that we'd get. Anybody leaks information from here, I'll see he winds up in Guantanamo Bay." Now Adams glared around the room. Somebody cleared a throat. "You *don't* even tell your wife." But, he smiled as he said it.

My God, Josh just made a joke, thought Jake, and smiled briefly. *That's a first.*

Adams continued, "Don't ignore *any* information, however trivial. Ask around. Check with your informants, *without divulging anything.*"

Johnson, from Counterterrorism, spoke up. "Sir, at what point *will* there be a public announcement?"

Adams sighed, looked at him and said, "For the benefit of all, let me say again: there will be no specific information about this attack released, for now, and certainly not until bin Hadid leads us to the bomb and is caught..."

Or, until the bomb explodes, thought Jake sourly.

"... but, as per usual, Homeland Security will, later this morning, issue a statement that the country is now at Yellow, and give the general impression that an attack *may* be imminent." He shrugged. "It'll help to keep people on their toes, and we might get lucky." Suddenly, Adams looked very tired and he took another sip of water.

Jake couldn't help saying, "Boss, you mean, just another round of fuckin' motherhood statements on CNN and FoxNews, eh?" His tone was flat, held in check, but he was getting angry. He glanced at his watch and thought of Verna, still probably asleep. *Fuck, are we all gonna be here tomorrow*, he wondered?

Adams shook his head. "Okay, Jake, I hear you", he looked around the room, "all of you. You have a right to be angry, I know. We all have families... but we have *no* choice." Ballinger nodded agreement, but didn't look happy about it. "The most important thing is that we concentrate on bin Hadid and hope we get to the bomb before he does. That's about all we *can* do."

Somebody in the back piped up, "Does bin Hadid know he's being followed... does he know he's been made?"

Adams peered down, focusing his gaze. "Oh, you, Baker... yeah, well, we don't know that. We hope that he never knows, until it's too late for *him*, of course."

Then Jennings asked, "Is this for real, boss? Is the intelligence correct?"

Adams sighed again, "Bob, I wish it wasn't, but we have to take it from those spooks at CIA as being one hundred per cent accurate." He paused a moment, then added, "We'd be stupid not to, now, wouldn't we?" Jennings shrugged, but said nothing.

Jake took his toothpick out of his mouth and said, "Er, boss, ah... do we know why bin Hadid is so important? That is, apart from his skill with explosives? Why didn't some *other* terrorist detonate it before this?"

"Like I said, we're told he's an expert in explosives. The spooks at CIA think he's the trigger man." Adams looked around the room again. "Contrary to what you might read or hear about, it's difficult to arm a nuclear device, especially an implosion device using plutonium."

"Do we know how the bomb got in?" This from Baker, up the back.

Adams shook his head. "No, not as yet. And we may never find out. The best guess is that it came in a container on a ship. And, no, we don't know which port of entry was used."

Great, thought Jake, *fuckin' great. Now we're supposed to catch the bad guys with guesses.* But he said nothing, just chewed his toothpick furiously.

"Are we certain that it's a plutonium bomb, and in a suitcase?"

Adams looked directly at Jennings, who'd asked the question. "CIA obtained inside information from a terrorist group in Yemen. And, yes, that means they've been able to penetrate that group with their own operative." He added wryly, "Some good things have been done since 9/11, y'know." Then, he went on, "It's not Al-Qaeda, we know that much. But it may as well be so." He took some more water from his glass, then said, "And just in case there's anybody here who doesn't think a suitcase bomb is a reality, let me remind you that our own government developed such a device some years back, and we know that the Russians have — or had — many. Most of you know that the Russian brass have admitted that they're missing quite a few of those devices; *and* they don't know where they went or who has them."

Jake recalled seeing internal memos on the topic about a year ago; there was even a top Russian military general on TV who admitted the losses publicly. *Lebed, was that his name? And, now this fuckin' mess*, he thought.

"Any more questions?" Adams went from face to face, making sure that everybody understood the gravity of the situation. "Okay then, make sure you tell it like it is to your units. Impress upon them the need to keep the media out. Make absolutely sure they all know about the need for security. One whisper of this to

the public and there'd be mass panic." He took off his glasses, and leaned forward, white knuckles on the table. "And, if that happens, those terrorists may just decide to detonate, wherever they are." He paused another moment, then said, "The best brains are now on this, have no doubt about that. As we know more, as we are informed, so will you be." He put his glasses back, nodded and said, "That'll be all, for now... don't let me take up any more of your valuable time." He raised one eyebrow, as he said it, and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

Sonofabitch always courteous to your face, thought Jake, as he turned and left, went down one level and pushed through the door labeled Narcotics Division. He went straight to his office, ignoring questioning looks from the staff present and closed his door. He looked at the clock — 6:58a.m. — and dialed his home number. He took out another toothpick and began to chew thoughtfully; a few more minutes before he told his crew wouldn't make any difference. A male voice came on the line. "Bobby, is your mother up?"

"Oh, hi Dad... er, no, not yet. Want me to get her to the phone?" Bobby still sounded sleepy; Jake could hear him yawning.

"Yeah, son, tell her to pick up the extension, okay." He looked through some papers on the desk, as he waited, checking over some recent reports from some of his agents. He heard a click as Verna came on the line.

"Jake, are you okay?" A slightly worried tone to her voice.

"Yeah, okay babe, no problem with me... or the car." He stopped, thinking about how he was going to tell her.

"Jake? Jake? You there?"

"Mmm, yeah Verna, I'm here. You okay, babe?"

"Sure, Jake, just waking up to get going. You know me, hmm." Now she paused a moment, then said, "Any problems?"

He drew a deep breath and said, "Verna, look, there's a situation here... it's important. Looks like we'll be busy for a while, I guess. Homeland Security will be issuing a Code Yellow alert soon, just wanted you to know..."

Verna interrupted. "What d'you mean... a situation?" She knew the Bureau's euphemisms.

"No, no... nothing like you're thinkin', babe," he lied. "We were just told that there was another of those unspecified threats from Al-Qaeda comin' down the pipe. Just wanted you to know *before* you see it on FoxNews, okay." He beckoned through the glass wall to Joe Scarletti as he was passing by, motioned to the seat

on the other side of the desk, and continued as Scarlett came through the door and sat down. “Wanted to say I love you, too, babe.” Scarlett was reading some notes in a file and seemed not to hear. But, Jake knew he did.

“I love you too, Jake, always.” Was it his imagination, but did Verna sound a bit sad? Jake couldn’t tell.

“Looks like I’ll be late tonight. Probably, but I guess I’ll call you later at the school, hey?”

“Okay, lover,” she said, “I’ll be there till five, five-thirty... should be home by six. Bobby should be in for supper too.”

“Fine, I’ll see you then. Don’t worry.”

Jake rang off and then looked directly at Joe Scarlett. You could be forgiven for thinking that Joe had a distinct resemblance to Eddie Murphy, although his skin was a shade paler than that of the famous Hollywood actor, but you’d be left wondering how he managed to stop people asking him for his autograph. It was only when Joe stood that you realized he was close to six feet four inches, prompting a young smart ass at a shopping mall, to call out, “Hey, Mom, look... Eddie Murphy on stilts.” The nickname stuck, much to Scarlett’s pleasure, giving him the ominous-sounding moniker of Joe ‘Stilts’ Scarlett. Nobody had called Joe anything else since that day. Nobody in the division *dared*.

For Jake, Monday mornings were the times that he, with Stilts and three other supervisors, reviewed the previous week, assessing workloads, shift requirements, budget concerns, operations, outstanding investigations, and possible problems. Jake took the sheaf of reports that Stilts had handed him and said, “Have to put a hold on these for a bit, Stilts. Something bigger has just come up. Who’s in the office now?”

“My guys are in, we’re going over the setup for next Friday — you know, the sting at the Astoria, down in Springfield.”

Jake grunted — he wanted to be on that one, and made a note on his desk pad. “Who else?”

“Porter’s due in later, maybe 10AM. Cunningham’s here with his team, Kuzinsky’s not in till after 4PM.” Stilts looked up from his notes, “What’s up, Jake?”

“Get everybody together, in the operations room. I’ll hafta bust into your spiel for a few minutes — I’ve just come from Adams.”

Stilts nodded, said, “Okay.” He turned just before he left Jake’s office. “Serious?”

Jake nodded very slowly, and said, “Hmmm-mmmm, just about as fuckin’ bad as it can be.” *No point in mincing words*, he thought. Stilts rolled his big brown eyes and left. Jake had a few minutes, so he called home again as soon as Stilts had gone.

“Yo, Bobby Cutter here, who’s...”

Jake cut him off. “Bobby, how’s it goin’?”

A stifled yawn again and then, “Oh, hi Dad... yeah, well, I’m okay... just still a bit tired. Got in pretty late, y’know. You guys were in bed, already.” He yawned again.

Jake said, “Did your mother tell you about the Yellow Alert that’s been announced?”

“Oh, yeah, *that*. So... big deal, okay. Who takes any notice of *those* anyway?”

Jake stifled an angry retort, and merely said, “Well, y’know, some kinda warning system *is* needed. And, it keeps people aware that government agencies, y’know, are doin’ all they can to make sure we’re all safe.”

“Aw, c’mon, Dad, you *hafta* say that.” He chuckled and said, “You know, better’n me, that we’re *wide* open. Just about anybody who’s determined enough can get in and do their friggin’ damnedest.”

Jake gripped the phone harder; his knuckles showed white, his face took on a hard look. With a sigh, he suddenly relaxed. *No point in having a shouting match with Bobby now*. But, he was angry, not only with his son, but also because he knew that Bobby was mostly right.

“Dad... hey Dad, you still there?”

Jake saw Stilts beckoning through the glass. “Yeah, yeah Bobby. I hear you. Just take care of yourself. Gotta go now... big meeting...”

“Okay Dad, see ya tonight.”

“Fine, love you son.”

He hung up the phone and then followed Stilts into ops, where the staff had assembled. He went to the front of the room, took the proffered coffee from Stilts, opened up the notes he had, and began talking. In the next thirty minutes, he covered all that Adams had divulged an hour earlier, speaking without interruption and then answered questions for another fifteen minutes. After a long pause during which the enormity of the attack was truly beginning to sink in, Jake said, “If there’s no other immediate questions, it’s time to get back to the job. I know that’s gonna be difficult to do, but it *hasta* be done. None of us like it, but let me

say again, we have no choice: *Until the bomb is found we cannot let the public know.*” He looked around the room, into their faces, “Okay, enough said for now. I’ll keep you all posted, as I find out.” As they all turned to leave, Jake said, “Okay, Stilts, let’s go over the plans for Friday.”

It was now 8:15a.m.



At precisely the same time, Verna rubbed her eyes and again tried to concentrate on her class notes. But, she was thinking of Jake, herself, Bobby, last night... the last twenty years. So trying to bring her mind back to her daily routine at the high school was proving to be more of a chore than ever. The classroom was still empty. Shaking her head, she rose from her chair and went to the large window overlooking the school entrance and grounds and stared moodily at the sleet flashing by. The overcast sky brooded with her, it seemed, the fractostratus tearing and dancing through the blowing wind — white, gray and near-black fragments co-mingling and separating. She stared at the torment in the sky, and thought of her thoughts. *Much the same as I am, all over the place and no certainty in place...* Furiously, she pulled herself away from the window and went back to her desk, muttering, “Get back t’work, girl...” and was momentarily startled when she heard a reply:

“And, about time too, honey.”

The door to the classroom, behind her and just beyond her peripheral vision, squeaked as the head that accompanied the words peeked around the corner.

“Oh... hi, Lou-Lou.” Verna visibly brightened, for a moment, as a very large, blonde woman in her fifties entered. “How’s things with you?” Before Lou-Lou could answer, Verna went on, “Don’t mind me... just another case of Mondayitis.” She forced a smile, trying to match the glowing beacon that flashed across Lou-Lou’s face.

Lou-Lou Parker never walked — she charged, scattering papers, books, students, even other teachers, as she moved through her personal space, treating the rest of the planet as a mere inconvenience. She had *no* time for anybody except those whom she regarded as *trusted* friends; consequently, her less than meteoric rise in the teaching profession was inversely proportional to the fear she instilled in most other teachers, and particularly in principals. Being an English

teacher, she was often fond of saying: “My principals always seem to screw around with *their* principles; I’d rather *my* principles simply screw *all principals*.” Principled or otherwise, all school heads were terrified of Lou-Lou Parker.

Lou-Lou stopped with a rush in front of Verna’s desk, pulled a chair from one nearby, sat down, leaned forward with her elbows on the desk and said, “Okay, darlin’, you spit it out now.” Her voice had that liquid quality of sound so indicative of a Southern upbringing, not harsh or discordant, but soft, warm and melodious, redolent of summer nights and dancing fireflies. “Or, Ah’m about t’call Jake for sure, Ah can tell *you*.” She cocked her head to one side, and raised an eyebrow. “There’s time, honey, before the little maggots arrive, t’tell me *why* you have been so distant these past few weeks – and Ah *don’t* mean because you live in Franconia and Ah’m forty miles away in Fredericksburg.”

Verna looked at her. They’d been close friends, for over twenty years. “No... I... I’m sorry, Lou-Lou. It’s just that... well... y’know, I’ve been busy catching up, after Jake and I went on vacation, and I’ve been on that self-defense course.” She threw her arms up, taking in the classroom. “And, there’s been a hell of a lot of work to do, you know, getting ready for first day back, after Christmas break.”

“Well, that may be so, honey, but all Ah know is this: we’d talk on the phone often, you and Ah, but in the past few weeks, Ah’ve maybe heard from you *once*. That’s all.” She held up a hand. “Now, Ah know you and Jake have *your* priorities, and we’re *all* busy little bees, but Ah *know* somethin’s bugging you, Verna, and that *bugs* me.”

Verna said nothing, brushed a wisp of hair from her face, and then rested her head in her hands, her elbows matching Lou-Lou’s.

“Did you realize, honey, that you went by me earlier, in the corridor, without so much as a nod, even?”

Verna raised her face, her eyes just brimming with tears, and gave a soft groan. “Oh, Lou-Lou. *Fuck*. Goddammit... what *am* I gonna do?” She grabbed for a Kleenex and wiped her eyes, then blew her nose loudly.

Softly, Lou-Lou said, “Just tell me, Verna... just tell me.” She smiled, trying to encourage.

With the aid of a few more Kleenex, a few more restrained tears and Lou-Lou’s sympathetic ear, Verna poured out all of the troubles with Jake and her feelings of insecurity. She was short and to the point, noting — somewhat dryly — that it took her only two minutes to summarize all of it. *So, is it all just a hill*

o'beans, after all? Verna sniffed and blew her nose again. She felt foolish and angry with herself.

"What about Bobby? What does he know?"

"I'm sure he doesn't know much at all... I've tried very hard to keep this from him. I... I... just want to do what's *right*," Verna finished vehemently.

"Hmmm, yes... but, honey, right for whom?" Lou-Lou held one of Verna's hands and patted it.

Verna just looked at her, eyes beginning to brim again. Savagely, she shook her head, stood up and walked to the wind-swept window. The snow swirled about, and she could see some of the students throwing snowballs at each other. Faint laughter filtered through the glass. *Where's the laughter in my life*, she wondered dully.

"You *know* you can't turn away from it, Verna."

Verna turned and rested, with her back to the window. Then, she jerked away with a start, as a snowball thudded against the glass. By the time she looked through the window again, the students were out of sight.

"You know also, honey, that we don't always see things coming. They just creep up on you... sometimes." Lou-Lou gave a small laugh. "And, sometimes, Ah make *terr'ble* jokes."

Verna wiped a tear and laughed also. Then, with a rush, she gave Lou-Lou a bear hug and said, "Thanks, Lou-Lou. You're right. I *will* make some time to go and see Vicky, help her out and talk with her. I just hope I can get Irma Duncan to cover my classes for a few days." Then she shook her head. "No.. no... how can I? Mr Martin won't let me go at the start of friggin' school. That's too much. No... I don't..."

Lou-Lou cut her off. "Just you calm *down* and let *me* handle that S-O-B." She gave a sweet crocodile smile. "He owes me, y'know... and he *knows* it." She glanced at her watch. "Ha, the stampede is almost here." Picking up her papers, she waved one hand and said, "You just get through today, honey, leave it to Lou-Lou, okay." With a final wave, she was gone.

Verna had no time to think any more about it as the first of her mathematics and physics students started to come noisily through the doorway, and the next three hours were spent checking through student rolls, putting the final touches to schedules and putting her students through final year math and physics.

She was a good — but not great — teacher. What Verna perhaps lacked in presentation flair, she made up for, in spades, with her attention to detail. For

Verna, content was always more important than form; and, when required — which tended to be quite often — Verna was coldly, ruthlessly logical. More than one student had been reduced to abashed incoherency by Verna's quasi-Socratic method of exposing bull-shitters, smart-asses and loudmouths. The students may not appreciate the finer points of the subjects, but they sure as hell respected Verna. So much so that one student, last semester, had presented her with a desk plaque bearing the inscription, in large, bold gold paint: **Don't mess with the Miss!**

After the three hours and three sessions, Verna had just cleared the room of students and was half-smiling as she looked at the inscription, when there was a knock on the door and, as she said, "Come in", two of her students walked over to her desk.

Her smile broadened. "Oh, hi Freedom, hi there, Jimmy." She looked from one to the other. "You need somethin'? Can I help you?"

The taller one, Freedom, said, "Me and Jimmy got a question, Miss Cutter." He looked at Jimmy. "Well, we gotta argument, like..."

"Yeah, we gotta ask you about this nuclear stuff, y'know. Like you told us about in class, just now?"

Verna sat back in her chair. "Yes, okay. What is it exactly that..."

Jimmy interrupted her. "Look, Freedom here says he saw how to make a bomb... you know... a *nu-cle-ar* bomb, at this website he seen." He stopped and shrugged and stabbed the air in Freedom's direction. "He says it's so easy to make a bomb. Like, just get two pieces of uranium stuff and just smack them together, is all."

Verna sighed mentally, thinking about all the disinformation she'd researched on the Internet. Despite her best efforts to teach responsible physics, *there'll always be somebody who'll fuck it up*. Aloud she said, "So... what exactly do you want to know?" She looked from face to face.

Freedom actually shuffled his feet, looking at his runners. Then he looked up and said, "I seen... saw it, I tell ya." He pushed his jaw forward pugnaciously. "This guy was writing about how you can take two pieces of U233 or U235, not sure now," he glanced at Jimmy, looking defensive, "and if they're below critical mass, then... when you put them together... BOOM!" He clapped both hands together expressively, at the same time.

Verna shook her head. "Uh-uh, not so simple as that, Freedom." During the physics class, they'd discussed various aspects of nuclear physics, including the

first nuclear bombs of the Second World War, radioactivity and isotopes of Uranium and Plutonium, nuclear hazards, nuclear wastes and some of the benefits of using nuclear power. In very broad terms, Verna had provided a chalk talk of the basic schematics of those first nuclear devices. “For starters, it’s not just *any* uranium or plutonium that is used – it must be very specific isotopes, brought to a very high level of purity. Secondly, what you’re talking about, Freedom, *doesn’t* apply to Fat Boy, the implosion device that was dropped on Nagasaki. And thirdly, the gun type *explosion* device that is, in essence, what you’ve *read* about, requires very precise engineering and construction. Quite simply, it’s just not physically possible to have a piece of U235 in one hand and a piece in the other, and expect them to explode when you bring them together. Quite apart from the fact that the bearer would quickly expire in a blazing meltdown, such an action would produce what’s called a *fizzle*, in nuclear terms. It just *wouldn’t* work.” *Not quite true, but they don’t need to know that*, she thought. *Drop the right grade of stuff onto another piece, down a twelve-foot vertical tube, and you’ll get a ton or two of yield, maybe much more.* Shaking her head, she pushed the thought away.

Freedom shrugged. “Yeah, well, this guy wrote that terrorists could still make a bomb, if they had enough U235 stuff.”

“Aw, you’re just fulla shit,” said Jimmy dismissively.

“No, Jimmy, Freedom’s not full of shit, as *you* say.” Verna looked at Jimmy and tried not to sound too scathing. “What he says is *essentially* correct: given enough resources, *anybody* can make a bomb. Whether it *works* is another question.” She measured her next words carefully. “Look, you guys, that’s *why* we have to keep tight control on nuclear material. Anybody *can* make a weapon, a nuclear weapon, if they have the knowledge and the makings. Pretty much all the *knowledge* is out there, in the public domain. What we *have* to do is keep the bad guys away from the nuclear material.”

“Right on,” said Jimmy, and punched the air with a fist.

“Yeah, man... but, I told you I *was* right, y’know. Ya get the stuff, and ya whack it together, and ka-blooie... game over.” Freedom leered at Jimmy triumphantly.

“Yeah, well, *you* can’t do it... *you* ain’t got the brains, asshole.”

“Yeah, well, got more brains than *you*, asshole you. Ya need the stuff *first*, anyways, ya dumb fuck!” Freedom leered again, peering down at Jimmy who was at least a whole head shorter.

Verna cut in. “Hey, hey... you two. Cut the crap!” She glared at them. “You keep that kind of talk for the gutter, where it belongs.” She glared at them until they both dropped their gaze to the floor. A few seconds went by, both boys fidgeting with their feet and hands. Then Verna said, “Okay, just cool it.” She looked at Freedom. “Hey, Freedom, just don’t take everything you read as being gospel, particularly when it relates to the nuclear industry.” She smiled to herself, as she realized that the subtlety of her joke was lost on these two. “And, Jimmy, don’t be too hasty to tell somebody they’re wrong, *especially* when you know” — she *almost* said ‘nothing’ — “very little yourself.” They nodded in unison, looked at each other, and then grinned at each other.

“Sorry, Miss Cutter,” said Freedom. He scratched his head, looking a trifle sheepish.

“Yeah, we’re sorry, Miss Cutter.” Jimmy took off his toque, twirled it in his fingers and flipped it back onto his head. He looked sidelong at Freedom and then laughed out loud.

“Go on... get outta here, both of you,” said Verna, smiling, “I have *real* work to do, okay.” As they walked out the door, she heard muffled “Asshole” and “Dickhead” exchanged, and then the door closed. She shook her head, pursed her lips, and then looked at the clock on the wall: 12:15p.m. *Jesus, I’d better get something to eat quick, before one.* Hurriedly, she entered some notes on her pocket digital recorder, shut it off and put it in her bag. Then, she brushed her hair, fixed her ponytail, picked up her bag and followed the boys into the corridor.



Near Jellico, on the Tennessee border, Monday, January 6th, 2003, 12:15p.m.

Jusef rubbed his eyes, then his face, then lit a cigarette and took a long drag. As he exhaled, he narrowed his eyes to focus on Bilal and Rebekah, facing each other at a table near the long windows of the diner. A light sleet was whipping passed and dribbling down the window where he could see Bilal talking heatedly with Rebekah; *no*, he was talking *at* her, and she didn’t look too happy, Jusef decided. They didn’t look at him at all, but he had no choice, even though Ahmed had made it clear that there was to be no contact between them when in the presence of others. Not until they all got to their final destination, anyway. Jusef crushed the cigarette — *Marta would kill me if she knew I was smoking*

again, he thought — took a small bottle from his side pocket, flipped the lid and poured a small capsule onto the table. He peered through the clear plastic and shook it, satisfying himself that he still had a few left. With a swig of coffee, he swallowed the capsule, and then surreptitiously felt his own pulse for thirty seconds. Nodding to himself, he went over to the counter and poured himself another coffee. On the other side of the diner he could see Ahmed peering intently through the glass, looking impatient as ever and *not* like the rich, easy-going Malaysian tourist he was pretending to be. Ayesah, as his tourist wife, played her part well, the very picture of Asian servitude to a domineering husband, eyes downcast, quietly sipping her tea. *Give her an A for effort, I guess*, thought Jusef, as he went back to his seat and picked up the road maps. Once again, he traced out the route he knew only too well, with his finger. *By tomorrow night, everything goes okay, we'll make it*. He settled back in the hard seat of the cubicle, went to light another cigarette, but decided on sipping his coffee instead.

As he sipped, he thought about the night before, the hijacking, the truck driver – *was he okay? Hope so, Ahmed said he was just gonna knock him out and tie him up for a few days* – the worsening snow that forced them to get off I-75 barely fifty miles from Tifton. They'd stayed at a rest area south of Macon for around four hours, where he'd dozed in the cabin, engine running. Just around five, Ahmed had called on the radio to get everybody moving. He'd heard Bilal acknowledge, mumbled an 'Okay' into the mike a second later, slipped the truck into gear and carefully made his way through the accumulated snow, down the onramp and onto the freeway. He hadn't slept very well, but then, he was accustomed to sleep deprivation. Just as well, as there was still quite a ways to go.

Six hours later, Ahmed had called a halt at this little place near the Tennessee border, a typical diner at any typical border town in the USA. They all needed the food, and wasted no time getting their fill. Jusef was happy to be the lone driver — no need to talk to anybody. He rubbed his eyes again and, as he finished and looked up, he found Ahmed standing at the exit, looking directly at him. Ahmed moved his head slightly, indicating the door and then went out. Jusef stood, finishing his coffee and looking through the high window of the cubicle; he could see Ahmed and Ayesah at their car. Craning his neck, he could just see the other car, with Bilal and Rebekah waiting in it. *Damn, fuck, must be slippin'*, he thought, as he grabbed the maps and his cap, dropped enough money on the

table and went out, buttoning his jacket as he went. *Gotta remember to ask Ahmed about that driver...*



Ahmed watched as Jusef came through the door, and said, “He looks tired. What do you think, Ayeshah?” He didn’t often ask opinion from anybody and that surprised her.

She raised her eyebrows, looked more closely at Jusef as he hurried to the truck and said, “He is a trucker, of many years experience. He should have no trouble.” Deliberately, she forced a confident tone into her voice, hoping to end the discussion. Too much discussion in the past had often resulted in arguments that she knew she couldn’t win. She got into the car, secured her seat belt and started the engine.

Ahmed stood, looking at Jusef and waited until he saw the truck beginning to move to the on-ramp. He turned and looked at Ayeshah. “I hope you are correct.” He got into the car and continued, “But, there’s something on his mind, I can tell.”

“He’s just thinking about the drive, getting the truck off the road, probably.” Ayeshah glanced at him, as she accelerated down the ramp, onto the freeway. “We *have* to do that quickly, anyway.” It almost sounded like an order, and she bit her lip, hoping that Ahmed didn’t notice and didn’t get angry.

She mentally sighed with relief, when he said, in a mild voice, “Yes, you’re right.” For a few moments, he was silent, then he said, “We need him for a few more days, then I think we must make sure that Jusef is not cause for concern.” He looked at Ayeshah, his thin, humorless smile barely cracking the granite of his face. “Then, we’ll pay him off.”

She knew what he meant, and simply nodded agreement, concentrating on the traffic. The truck was about two hundred yards ahead, so she accelerated, gained fifty and eased up to a steady distance. Glancing in the rear vision, she saw Bilal and Rebekah another hundred yards behind. Ahmed was studying road maps on his lap, and using a calculator to add mileages as he scanned between maps.

A large sign proclaimed that they were now entering the state of Kentucky. It loomed in her vision and then it was gone. “We’re now into Kentucky, Ahmed.”

Without looking up, Ahmed said, “Yes, I know.” He was still using the calculator.

Ayeshah fell silent, watching the road, and taking in the beauty of the Daniel Boone National Forest that bordered the west side of the freeway. *It’s a beautiful country*, she thought. The further north they went, the more the snow covered the ground and the trees. Seeing so much snow was quite new for her. Unlike Rebekah, Ayeshah — although born in Pakistan — had never ventured to the Himalayas and had never experienced snow. She’d remained in Islamabad for most of her life, attending school and gaining her science degree in nuclear physics from the University of Pakistan, where she’d gained distinction as a serious and brilliant student. It was there that she’d met Surendra Brahmin, five years ago, while he was also completing *his* science degree. And, it was through Surendra that she’d met his uncle, Ibrahim Omar. *And now I’m in this car, in the land of our enemies, bringing retribution to those who offend Allah.* She smiled faintly, content in the knowledge that she was doing Allah’s will. In her eagerness, she pushed more firmly on the accelerator.

“Slow down.” Ahmed’s harsh voice and command came quickly, jerking her out of her reverie.

Reducing speed, she glanced at him, and said, “Sorry, I was thinking about...”

He glared at her, his jaw tight. “Don’t think --- just drive, and pay attention.”

“I said I was sorry. It won’t happen again.” She said it quickly, a note of fear in her voice.

Sounding almost tired, he said, “Just drive, Ayeshah. Keep your distance from Jusef.”

We’re all tired, she thought. Aloud, she said, “Ahmed, I won’t fail you. I’m sorry if I upset you...” Her voice trailed off into an uncomfortable silence.

Ahmed grunted a sigh and said, “I will doze for a while. Just make sure you do as you should.” He closed his eyes, moved the seat into a more comfortable position and was soon breathing heavily.

Ayeshah drove on, eyes fixed upon the truck ahead.



They’d been driving for hours now, and Bilal wasn’t happy at all.

The drive was boring, Rebekah was boring, the snow was boring. He hated snow, as only one born and raised in Yemen can hate it. He didn't like driving in it; it was always slippery and dangerous in this hated country. So, he was glad that Ahmed had said that the women should drive. In America, all the women drive, that's how stupid this country is — letting the women do things that they shouldn't be doing. He took a sidelong look at her, driving intently, her lips pursed in concentration, her sunglasses reflecting the afternoon sun. Not bad looking, if you like them a bit plump. Her skin was good, smooth and flawless, a dark honey color. Her nose, astonishingly long, pointed like a beacon almost directly ahead; the tip of her nose faded to a very light tan, reminding him of a horse he once owned. He smiled thinly, and entertained some lascivious thoughts about what he could do with her, given different circumstances. But, he knew that this wasn't the time: Ahmed was the leader and, quite simply, Bilal was terrified of Ahmed. That self-knowledge didn't make him any happier either, so he pulled his eyes away from Rebekah and stared again at the bleak, frigid landscape rushing by, continuing his sullen silence that had pervaded the car since they'd left the last diner. He lit another cigarette, ignoring the sniff of displeasure from Rebekah.

"Bilal! Bilal! Look... behind us." Rebekah's urgent call, tinged with fear, almost jerked the cigarette from his fingers. "No! Don't turn around" Her words were almost a scream, as he moved in the seat. "He's... he's right behind us." He could see that she was looking in the rear vision, her eyes alternating quickly and furtively between that and the road ahead.

"Well... what is it?" He deliberately made his voice sound irritated, as he rubbed his finger where the cigarette tip had burnt it.

"It's the Highway Patrol. Two officers... I think. It's about fifty meters back, gaining slowly." She looked again in the rear vision. "They're speeding up." She checked her speed: 55 MPH, well within the limits.

Bilal quickly reached behind to the bag on the floor, brought it to the front, unzipped it quickly, removed the 9mm Uzi machine pistol, placed that on the floor with an additional clip and pushed both just under his seat. He zipped up the bag again, and threw it over his shoulder without a backward glance. He took another drag on his cigarette, opened the window slightly and threw it out. A flash of sparks blew back as he closed the window, one of the ashes almost hitting his eye.

Cursing the ash, he said, "Just drive normally, as you are. Don't panic." He turned halfway on the seat, facing her. "We're tourists, with valid thirty-day visas

and Indian passports. We're on our honeymoon, aren't we?" He looked through the back window – the patrol car was now only twenty meters behind – and then looked at Rebekah. "Don't worry." He straightened up in his seat, took out a chocolate bar, and opened up a map from the glove box. Munching on the candy, he pretended to read as his peripheral vision caught the patrol car as it began to overtake them in the middle lane.

It drew level, inching forward at just one or two mph faster. Bilal made a show of lifting the map and turning towards Rebekah, all the while munching. "Just keep driving... keep looking ahead, now when I point, turn to me, nod happily, look happy, don't worry... just keep going, that's it, look ahead." He wiped his mouth, turned his face to the front, raised his candy bar and pointed; Rebekah nodded and smiled weakly. He glanced at her, still munching and saw one of the troopers a few feet away, hat firmly in place and dark sunglasses, gazing steadily at Rebekah; a moment later, his head moved as though his gaze traversed the length of their car. The patrol car edged forward some more, the officer's dark glasses seemed to bore into Rebekah again, and then went back to looking ahead. A few seconds more and the patrol car was well ahead.

As the spray from the patrol car splattered their windshield, Rebekah gave a long sigh and then hurriedly turned on the wipers and cleaner. Bilal gave a throaty chuckle and said, "Drive on, heathen fools. Soon you will all know the wrath of Allah." He stared moodily at the rear of the patrol car, wishing that he could have used his Uzi.

Rebekah opened her mouth, glanced at Bilal, and then said, "Shouldn't we radio ahead, tell Ahmed... Jusef? Maybe they haven't seen..." She moved the car into the middle lane as she spoke.

With a growl, Bilal flipped on the radio. "Ahmed... Ahmed... coming up behind you, a highway patrol car, two troopers. They're just looking. No cause for alarm." He switched to 'Receive', and they both heard Ahmed respond: "We know. All is well. Don't worry, but be ready."

Bilal said, "Okay", then said, "Rebekah, drop back a bit and move into the center lane. We'll get a better view from there. Keep the speed steady."

She nodded, but said nothing.

They watched as the police officers gradually overtook Ahmed, and again breathed a sigh when they saw it keep moving. Ahmed's voice came over the radio, "They've moved on, well ahead now." A few moments of silence, only the sound of ice and snow sloshing under the car. Then Ahmed's voice again, "No

cause for worry, there's other traffic around, we're just part of the usual stuff on these freeways." They heard him laugh and then silence. Bilal looked at Rebekah and gave a thumbs-up of encouragement. She smiled slightly, and nodded.

A few moments later, they heard Ahmed calling to Jusef, warning him of the patrol officer in his rear. "Yeah, I see them. Nothing to worry about, usually."

Then, Bilal looked further ahead, as much as he could through the gathering dusk and sleety clouds. He could just make out the truck Jusef was driving, in amongst the other traffic. Suddenly, a horn sounded loudly behind the car, causing Rebekah to jump in her seat. Bright headlights flashed behind them repeatedly and the sound of the horn grew louder. Bilal glanced to the rear, and shouted, "Get over, there's a fucking truck wanting to get through." He reached over to push the steering, but Rebekah had already begun to move into the slow lane. A few moments later, the large rig blared passed them, drenching their car in over-spray.

"Pig!" Bilal shouted. He glared after it, and caressed the stock of the Uzi, the veins on his forehead distending and his face flushing. Then he relaxed and gave a laugh. He looked across at Rebekah. "Don't worry. I'm okay."

Rebekah, already nervous about the fading daylight and the worsening weather, smiled weakly and nodded. She said nothing but was thinking: *This man is dangerous to us... Ahmed must know... I must talk with Ahmed as soon as I can...*

The thought was barely done when Jusef's voice came over the radio.

"Listen up, everybody... Ahmed! Looks like Smokey wants me to pull over. Dunno why yet. Maybe just curious about my load." There was a brief pause. "Just don't panic, okay." Another pause. "Ahmed, do you read me?"

"Yes, yes. I understand. Bilal — you know the drill. As soon as you see my car pulling over to the shoulder, you do the same. Rebekah, keep your distance back. We must not arouse any suspicion." His voice sounded strained.

Bilal looked at Rebekah. "Do as Ahmed says, you hear?" He reached under the seat and hauled the Uzi onto the seat, covering it with one of the maps. He grinned to himself and said, "Maybe we'll have some fun?" He laughed aloud, looked at Rebekah's worried frown and laughed even more loudly. She said nothing, but cast a cold look in his direction. Still chuckling, he lit another cigarette, blowing clouds of smoke... *Take that, bitch!*

Then Jusef's voice came again. "Yep... pulling over now. Guess they wanna have look-see." They heard the squeal and hiss of the truck's brakes and then, "Just sit tight. Switching off now." The radio went silent.

Three hundred yards ahead, on a long upward left hand curve, they saw the truck pullover. It was now just visible in the fading daylight. Ahmed's car, a hundred yards ahead of them, was just pulling up also. Rebekah skidded slightly on the snow as she brought their car to a full stop.

"Keep the engine running, but *don't* put on any hazard lights." Rebekah pulled her hand away from the hazard toggle on the dashboard, and sat back with her hands on the steering wheel. "Stupid bitch!" Bilal leaned over and shouted in her ear, "Why don't you tell every fucking patrol car to stop and have a look at us?" Shaking his head, he leaned back, the Uzi now on his lap but still covered by a map.

"Now, we wait" He opened his window slightly and threw out his butt.

Rebekah sat, hands on the wheel, her jaw set but a with a slight mistiness to her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision, and settled down to wait.



Jusef had been driving steadily, noted when they'd crossed into Ohio a half-hour back, and was just keeping note of the miles as they dropped away, and thinking of the time that he'd be back with Marta. He always kept a watchful eye out for Smokey and wasn't surprised or worried to hear that a patrol car was in the vicinity; everything in the truck was in order, and he had all the right papers. So, when he saw the lights begin to flash, he was ready, and with a grunt he began to slow down.

As Jusef finished bringing the truck to a stop, he opened up the glove compartment and put the special VLF two-way radio under a pile of papers and pushed it shut. *No sense in having that in view*, he thought. It fell open, and the radio hit the floor. Savagely, he retrieved it, shoved it back in and rammed the door shut; this time, it held. Slightly larger than a handheld walkie-talkie and with a thicker and longer antenna, the VLF (Very Low Frequency) transceivers had been specially prepared — by a trusted contact in Miami — for short-range communication between the truck and both cars.

“No cell or satellite phones can be used. And UHF or VHF radios are too risky also,” Ahmed had said, a week back. “Too many US agencies scan for information. Constantly.”

“So... how good is VLF?” Jusef had never heard of VLF, and was skeptical. It must have showed on his face.

Ahmed looked at him levelly, and a thin smile hardly broke his granite-like face. “Only the US Navy and Air Force use part of the VLF band, for communication with nuclear submarines, but they use very highly powered systems, over longer ranges.” He passed around the radios, allowing everybody to have a good look. “But, these are relatively low power, good for only thirty miles at the most. So, they are ideal for our use, and have the added advantage that nobody else uses those frequencies.” He held one in his hand. “They operate just like any other two-way radio, and we’ll test them on the freeway before the *Barcelona* docks next week. Sometimes, there may be a lot of noise, like radio hiss, but it will not be a big problem.”

“You telling me that the US forces use these frequencies? And *we’re* gonna too, fer fuck’s sake?” Jusef didn’t try to hide his disbelief. “You crazy?” He looked at the others, but hadn’t seen any help there.

“Don’t worry — there are no nuclear submarines on the route we’re taking, so they won’t be listening.” Ahmed’s smile broadened and then he laughed, a deep sound that came from his belly as he leaned back in the lounge chair. “They will be too busy talking with their precious submarines to think about anybody else who’s using part of that frequency band in the middle of their country.” Then, he’d lifted his face and laughed uproariously as the others had joined in.

It was the only time that Jusef had heard Ahmed laugh out load, but he knew that nobody was in the mood for laughing now, as one of the officers from the patrol car approached his door. Pulling up his collar around his neck and pulling down his cap, Jusef opened his door and jumped to the ground, a flashlight in his hand. *Just stay calm, I’m on my regular run, there’s nothin’ to show a hijacking’s been done...*

“Evenin’, officer. What’s up?” Jusef sounded at ease, but pleasantly puzzled. The light from the patrolman’s hand flashed to this face for a moment, then it was turned to the truck. Jusef looked towards the patrol car, but couldn’t make out where his partner would be. *On the other side of the truck, probably...*

The flashlight came back to his face until Jusef held up a hand.

“D’you mind, officer?” Just a touch of irritation.

The light went down to the snow as the officer said, "What's *your* destination tonight, sir?" He didn't sound interested at all. The flashlight played over the container, from end to end.

Jusef struck a match and lit his cigarette. Exhaling into the wind, he said, "Detroit, Michigan, officer. But, I'll be there *tomorrow*. Tonight, I'll be stopping just outside Cincinnati." He sensed somebody behind and turned to see the cop's partner shining a light on the licence plates and then on the driver's door. Jusef felt his heart rate rising and, with it, his blood pressure. A slight sweat began in his armpits and, despite the wind and cold, small beads began where his cap and forehead met. *Stay calm, fuck you, breathe...* He forced a smile and took another drag of his cigarette.

"Not tonight, sir, I'm afraid." The officer switched off his flashlight and came closer to Jusef. He was gray-haired, like Jusef, very tanned, but with deep lines on a long face that had probably seen too much violence. He wasn't smiling.

Jusef tried to look more puzzled – which wasn't difficult, because he was very puzzled now – and said, "Huh? What d'you mean, officer?" He took his cigarette from his lips and flicked it onto the freeway where it was immediately lost beneath the wheels of a passing car. He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets to make sure nobody could see them beginning to shake. "Some kinda problem?" He hoped he sounded nonchalant, looking at the truck, back to the cop.

The officer didn't say anything but merely crooked a finger and motioned Jusef to follow him. Without waiting to make sure the command was being obeyed, he started to the rear of the truck. Jusef shrugged and followed, catching up to the officer just as he turned, found Jusef behind him, and pointed to the back of the truck. As he did so, he said, "Mind if my partner gets into your cab, for a moment?" He was close enough for Jusef to see, even in such poor light, a very small mole on one corner of the officer's left eye. Jusef looked towards the front and then back to Authority standing a nose away.

"Sure, go ahead. But, what's..."

The officer held up a palm, so Jusef waited. The officer then waved to the other, fifty feet away, and said, into his radio, "Okay, Herb... give it a go." He pointed to the back of the truck again and said to Jusef, "Watch."

Okay, I'm watching, what'm I supposed to be looking at, fuckface? Jusef looked but nothing seemed out of place.

"Did you see it?" the officer asked, after a few moments. Then he said into his radio, "Hey, Herb... press the goddam pedal, okay, fer fuck's sake."

A crackling voice came over the radio, "Hank, I'm doin' it, okay, fuckin' doin' it... *now!*"

Looking at Jusef he said, "You don't see it, do you, huh?" Hank played the beam across the tail and brake light assembly. "No change, right?" Shaking his head, he said, "May I see your licence, please, sir?"

Jusef felt a terrible urge to urinate as the relief flooded over him. *Somethin's wrong with the fuckin' brake lights... that's why they stopped me.* He smiled, in what he hoped was a contrite manner, and said, "Well, I'm sure sorry, officer. Had *no* idea there was any kinda problem..." as he handed over his false papers. Without waiting for any response, Jusef bent to examine connections to the brake lights, knowing that the main connection at the cab was probably where the fault lay. But, doing *that* gave him a chance to regain his composure.

As he straightened up, Hank was saying, "Well, I'll still hafta write up an infraction, Mr... er... Amaru. Yer can't drive on without brake lights anytime, but especially in this type of weather." He waved his flashlight at the sleety snow expansively.

Jusef shrugged, "Well, I guess I'll have a look at the cabin links to see if they're iced up or somethin'." As he strode back to the front, he could see Hank beginning to write up the infraction notice. *What's it gonna be this time... hundred bucks? Fuck it!* Jusef got to the cab, as Herb was descending, and nearly shit his pants then and there when Herb handed him the special VLF transceiver.

"Sorry 'bout that, er, Mr...?"

His composure almost gone, his knees feeling weak, Jusef said, "Wa... ah... Amaru. David Amaru." He groped in his pockets for a cigarette, his medication, anything to help him calm down. He looked at Herb, at the radio, speechless.

The officer loomed before him, holding the radio in one hand, "Damn thang fell outta the glove box when m'fuckin' knee bumped th' cover. Ver' sorry 'bout that, Mr Amaru, sir. Ah hope it's okay, not damaged an' all..." He even *looked* a bit sheepish.

He pushed the radio towards Jusef who took it dumbly, just looking at it.

There was an awkward pause, and then Herb said, "Well... like Ah said, it were an accident, y'know, gittin' in th' opposite side of yer cab furst." He paused again. "Guess yer better turn it on, hey, make sure it's workin' an' all..." His voice trailed off, and he shifted on his feet, looking at the radio, then at Jusef.

The cab light shone down upon both of them, and Jusef looked at Herb more closely, the fresh young face, the wide set, bright blue eyes, the ill-fitting clothes and neck-tie, the deferential manner: *Goddammit, he's just a wet nosed kid, and he's embarrassed, fer fuck's sake*, thought Jusef. He looked at the radio again and made sure he had a good look. *Everything okay, looks like*. But then he said, "No matter, officer, this here unit ain't been working for awhile anyways. No trouble at all, no problem. It's just a damn spare I got, anyways." As he finished, he threw the radio into the cab to land on the seat, then turned back and said, "No harm done – but, now I gotta find the fault in the brake electrics." Quickly, he slammed the cab door shut — *Don't want any more cops looking in* — and methodically began to track down the fault. With the obliging Herb holding the flashlight, Jusef found that a buildup of ice on the main link had caused an open circuit. Using a small screwdriver point, he chipped away at the ice, separated the connectors and cleaned them down. Five minutes later the brake lights tested satisfactorily.

As Jusef was putting away his tools, the older officer, Hank, handed the ticket to him, "Sorry about this, Mr Amaru, but I gotta hand you this. It's official now... but you can be on yer way." He gave a small salute to Jusef as he got into the patrol car, then motioned to Herb, in the driver's seat, to get moving, looked at Jusef again and said, "You take care of those brakes, now," smiled slightly and then they were gone.

When Jusef was sure that he couldn't see their taillights, he went to the side of the road and threw up violently. As he did so, he was moaning, "Oh, fuck, a hundred grand ain't worth it, it ain't worth it..." After a minute of retching, he pulled himself upright with an effort, wiped his mouth and spat. "Take a hold of yerself, Joe Wahiz... they're gone, they didn't see anything." Wiping his face with a rag, he reached into the cab, retrieved a bottle of water from the floor, and took a long swig. He spat that out, took another, swirled it in his mouth and spat that out also. Finally, he took just a few sips and allowed them to sink to his now empty stomach. He tucked the bottle into a side pocket, and breathed deeply for a few moments, gathering his strength. Then he walked to the rear of the truck, lighting a cigarette as he went. Looking back down the freeway, he couldn't see Ahmed's car, nor Bilal's, but he knew they were there, waiting. He looked at his watch – nearly seven and it was pitch dark now. *Time to get movin'...*

He returned to his driving seat and picked up the VLF radio. Flicking it ON, he said, "This is Jusef... Ahmed, do you read?"

The response was immediate. “Yes, yes... I’m here. What is wrong, what did they want?” Understandably, Ahmed sounded demanding and... *worried*, Jusef wondered?

“Okay, just hang on there... nothing to worry about.” In thirty seconds, Jusef recounted the essential aspects of what had happened. He didn’t tell Ahmed that one of the officers had seen the VLF radio. *No point in tellin’ him... what’s to be gained?* He waited a few seconds, then said, “Ahmed, did yer get all that?” The radio was silent. He lit his fifth cigarette in the last hour, and looked impatiently at the radio.

As he was about to speak, Ahmed’s voice came back to him: “You had to use *your* driver’s licence information?” His tone was ominous.

Jusef snarled back: “What d’yer expect me t’do — use Jackson’s, with his photo ID on it? Don’t be fuckin’ stupid. I used a false licence that I’d prepared, just for this trip.” He could feel his rage mounting. It was hot in the cab, and he had to blink the sweat from his eyes and wipe his face. It made him feel worse. “Listen up, Ahmed, I’m handling this fuckin’ truck — that’s why *your* boss hired me. I know the ropes. I tell ya, it’s no big deal, a simple ticket for faulty brake lights. The cops know *nothin’!*” He was breathing heavily now, practically shouting into the radio. “Fer Chrissake, Ahmed, we have more to worry about with Jackson, somewhere, when he comes to, when somebody finds him. We gotta get this truck home, like *now.*”

“Jackson’s dead.” Ahmed’s flat monotone pierced Jusef’s bluster like a needlepoint through a balloon.

Jusef visibly sagged in his seat and said, “You *said* there’d be *no* killin’...” to the empty cab. He grabbed the radio and screamed, “No killin’... no killin’, that’s what you *said*, fuck you.” He dropped the radio on the floor and beat his hands, then his head, on the steering wheel, moaning as his anger mounted.

“Jusef... Jusef... listen, understand: we had to do that. We could not afford *any* alert from Jackson. It was necessary to ensure our survival, as much as yours... and Marta’s.” Ahmed was trying to sound conciliatory, but the harshness of his voice smothered his attempt.

At the mention of his wife’s name, Jusef stopped moaning and brought his head up, to look directly ahead into the night. Ahmed had told him: “We are going to steal a truck and its contents. The truck driver will not be hurt — nobody will be hurt. We need *you* because you are familiar with US regulations and truck routes, and your knowledge will ensure safe passage to your farm in Michigan.

Remember, you are being well paid for your help, praise be to Allah!" *Yeah, a hundred thousand dollars to get outta bankruptcy and a guarantee of no killing.* Now he knew that Ahmed, Bilal — all of them — had lied, had no intention of keeping up with their side of the deal. And, now he knew also what he had to do. He picked up the radio and said, "Ahmed — *leave Marta outta this.*" He hoped that his voice sounded menacing enough. Then, he gunned the engine, selected a gear and began to move into the night traffic, and said, "Better get movin', you guys, I'm drivin' through without stoppin', 'cept fer gas. Gotta get this load off the road, whatever it is you've stolen." He grinned into the night, feeling better with himself now. "Better keep up, yer don't wanna lose me now, d'yer?" He gave a deep throaty chuckle into the radio, switched it off and then threw it on the floor.

"Fuck you, assholes..." He got into top gear, pressed his foot harder and began humming '*Take Me Home*', in time with the drumming tires. He looked at his watch — 7:38PM. Grinning, he wondered what Ahmed was thinking and saying, right now...



Washington D.C., Monday, January 6th, 2003, 6:00p.m.

As Jake put the phone down, he wondered again whether he was doing the right thing for Verna and Bobby. Bleakly, he watched the CNN news-anchor, as he thought about the day's events...

After the briefing to the entire division, Jake was working out the plan for Friday's sting operation with Stilts when Josh Adams called: "Jake, spare a few minutes, in my office?" It was a question, but also a command. Jake looked at his watch: it was around noon, and he was about to call Verna. He rolled his eyes, grunted a "Yeah... be there in two, boss", gave Stilts some notes to review and went back upstairs. He reached Adams's office just as two spooks from CIA were leaving. They tried to ignore Jake as they left, almost colliding with him as he opened the door, and leaving him to close it. "Well, excuse me all to hell, assholes," he said as he was pushing the door shut. The bigger of the two turned briefly, gave him the finger and said, "Fuck you too, Cutter!"

"Likewise, sweetie-pie," Jake murmured with a patronizing smile, nudged the door with his foot and turned to face his boss. Adams sat at his desk, a scowl ruining his usually placid exterior.

“Enough of that... siddown, Jake.” Adams waited until Jake sat down opposite, then leaned forward over his desk and said, “Jake... *cut out this fucking bullshit with CIA*. We have enough problems just now, without me having to worry about *you* continually antagonizing agents from other departments!” He sat back and ran his fingers through his hair, a habit of his when angry or agitated. “Just cool it, Jake, I’ve got no time for prima donnas, okay!”

Jake flicked his toothpick into the waste bin and shrugged. “So, who’s a prima donna? *He* just left, didn’t he?” His lips didn’t curl; the tone of voice said it all.

Irritably, Adams said, “Just forget it. Instead, try telling me your thoughts about my suggestion. *If* you don’t mind, that is...” Adams waved a hand in the air, as though trying to conjure up an answer.

Jake ignored the touch of sarcasm, but not being one to beat about the bush, he said, “If you mean moving me to Counterterrorism, then yes... I’ve thought about it. And, no, I don’t want it.”

Adams looked at him levelly, while Jake just chewed another toothpick, returning the gaze. After a few moments, Adams said, “Y’know, you could do a lot better there, in Counterterrorism. You’re a good agent, a good investigator — one of my best. And, God knows I need good agent in there.” He poured himself a glass of water from a bottle he took from his desk draw, and offered it to Jake. Jake shook his head as Adams continued. “Look, Jake, Johnson only came in a few months back at the behest of the Director. It was against my wishes, but I had to agree... you don’t need to know why, sorry.” He didn’t *look* sorry.

Jake nodded, said, “Uh-hmmm”. *Yeah, I’ll bet*, he thought

“Johnson is bright, and he shows promise, but he lacks... *finesse*, among other things.” Fleetingly, Adams looked a bit uncomfortable, then said, “You know I can force the issue.” His face set, he now glared at Jake. Then he relaxed, visibly, and leaned back. “I just don’t understand what your problem is.”

Jake flicked the toothpick into an ashtray. He had to say something, but he was thinking of Verna, his marriage, their relationship. He was also thinking of the FBI, the CIA and other agencies and how much an upheaval there had been since 9/11. There was all so much change, so many things all happening and all at the wrong time. *Is there a right time?* Adams has been a good boss — not great — but at least he was fair. Jake liked Narcotics, he had a good thing going, he could run his own show virtually unchecked, he was smart, he knew how to work the system: *I get the job done. So... what? Fear of failure? Too comfortable in my old*

office? Just didn't want the hassle of change? What is bugging you, Cutter? You don't like the changes at Justice? Got problems with the Patriot Act? The expanded powers of Counterterrorism trampling all over civil rights? Illegal detention of aliens for months, even years now? So? We're at war, asshole!

Jake rubbed his face and eyes for a moment, conscious that Adams was fidgeting, waiting for something... *anything*. Then he said, "Look, boss... I appreciate your confidence; it's just that... well... I need to fix my marriage. It's that simple." *There — you said it. But, you're avoiding an answer for Adams, dickhead, and the answer he wants.* Jake stood up and walked to the window. He could almost feel Adams's eyes following him, boring into his back. The sleet lashed at the glass and beyond, the sky was so dark the city lights had lit early, forming a crazy kaleidoscope dancing in the distance. It was almost carnival-like.

"So... what are you saying, Jake?"

Jake turned and said, "Josh, Verna has told me she wants some time alone. I know what that means. And, I don't want that — I couldn't take it." He looked at Adams, showing his agony for the first time. "I need to fix this, Josh, *before* I can do anything else."

Adams was silent, but took another drink of water. Then he said, "What about your vacation in Dominican Republic, few weeks back? You were at...?"

"Santo Domingo, then Samana mostly, but we drove around, seeing touristy stuff, y'know. Did all the usual things and it seemed to be okay... but only for a bit. Verna was holding back, I *know*." Suddenly, Jake wished he had a cigarette, but began chewing on another toothpick instead. Furiously.

"Jake, why didn't you tell me before? Hey, it's none of my business, I know, but when it starts to affect *your* career, *your* performance, then it *is* my business." He ran his fingers through his hair again, a few times. It was an awkward situation for Adams; he never liked to discuss personal problems with his staff.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke. Adams offered the water to Jake, who took it this time and filled a glass. He drank it slowly and finally said, "Look, boss — give me a week to sort it out with Verna. Then, I'll be able to sort it out here." He drained the glass and stood. "Maybe I could take time outta the office if I had to?"

Adams nodded. "Fair enough. You've got good men in your division. Just keep me posted as to where you are, okay? And... just don't run over any toes, remember!" He raised one eyebrow, and let a slight smile crease his face.

Jake nodded and said, "Thanks. I'll be in and out, I guess, but definitely here on Friday, for the sting down in Springfield." He turned to leave, but Adams brought him up short.

"Jake... the spooks at CIA don't like you, you know that. And, I can't watch your back all the time. You made some people *real* angry, last year, when you busted *their* dirty operation with that Venezuelan drug cartel." He looked into Jake's eyes. "Just don't fuck up. But, go ahead — save your marriage and — whatta they say in the movies? — *keep your nose clean!*" He grinned and waved Jake out.

When Jake got back to his office, Stilts was gone but he'd left a message on the desk. It was from a Sheriff Buford Longhorn, who'd called from somewhere in Georgia — looked like Dawson, but he couldn't be sure about Stilts's writing — wanting to talk to Jake about a road accident. *What the fuck for?* He looked at the time of the call: 12:47p.m., today's date. Jake, message in hand, went to his office door, saw one of his agents, Wendy, at her desk and called out: "Hey, Wen — seen Stilts around?"

She shook her head, mouth full of donut, swallowed, cleared her throat and said, "Uh-uh, Jake — he's at the City Court, y'know. That Ferguson case..."

Jake nodded. He'd forgotten for the moment. And then remembered also that he'd forgotten to call Verna. The clock on the wall read 13:05 — Verna was back in class, for sure. Furious with himself again, he put a call through to Sheriff Longhorn before he forgot that too. After two attempts, he got through. *Weather must be playing up with the lines, I guess...*

"Terrell County Sher'ff's Office — how kin Ah he'p yew t'day?" The female voice was deep and *very* Southern. Idly, he wondered what she was like and would have been surprised to know that she was sixty-two year old great grandmother.

"Jake Cutter here, Narcotics Division, Washington. I got a call from your sheriff at twelve-forty-seven, asking me to call him. Would you connect me please?"

"Well, Ah would, Agent Cuttah if Ah could. But, Sher'ff Longhorn just this minute has been called away, y'know. Ah hope yew know what Ah mean, an' all."

"Okay, fine, when the sheriff's finished having a shit, would you tell him I called — here's the number again," Jake reeled off his direct line in, "and tell him I'll be here for the next few hours. You got that, Miss...?"

There was a long pause, during which Jake could here the woman breathing. *Don't take your goddam frustrations out on...* She interrupted his thought:

"That's *Mrs...* Rose Amelia Honeysuckle to yew, Agent Cuttah! Ah *will* certainly convey *your* message — such as it is, sirrah — to the sher'ff, jest as soon as Ah'm able." Jake tried interrupting to apologize, but she was not inclined. "Y'all be hearin' from the sher'ff ver' soon. Good *day* to yew, Agent Cuttah." The line went dead.

Jake grimaced, put the phone down and decided then and there he'd better work off some of his tensions in the gym. He told Wendy that he could be paged, if necessary, and that he was going to the gym for a workout. In the next vigorous hour and a half, he not only lost six pounds but he also managed to come to a firm decision about what he would say to Verna that evening. It was 1:45p.m. when he gave the bag a final, satisfying punch, had a quick shower and was back in the office at just before 2:00p.m. He'd brought back a ham and cheese sandwich, his first real meal of the day, when the call from Sheriff Longhorn came through.

Munching carefully, Jake answered the phone, "Cutter, Narcotics. May I..."

The sheriff interrupted. "Well, hello there, Agent Cuttah. Ver' nice to talk to yew. This hyah is Sher'ff Buford Longhorn from Dawson, Georgia, callin'. Rose Amelia — that's Mrs Honeysuckle, yew'll recall — told me yew'd *called?*" The question hung on the line.

"Yes, sheriff, I did. And, before we get off on the wrong foot, please convey my apologies to Mrs Honeysuckle for my..."

"Aww, never mind 'bout that, Mistuh Cuttah — she's jest an old southern lady who still likes t'think that nobody uses *any* cuss words. To her, that is. Not that shit is a *real* cuss word, as we both *know*, Agent Cuttah." There was a slight pause. "Anyways, jes' *why* is that yew called mah office, earlier this day?"

Jake stopped his chewing and cleared his throat. "Sheriff — *you* called me *first*. At 12:47p.m., you'll recall no doubt?" Jake took another bite. *Is this guy for real?*

"Hmmm, yes, so Ah did. That's a fact now, Agent Cuttah." There was a slight pause and some muffled words, then the sheriff's voice again. "Mrs Honeysuckle would like yew t'know that she *accepts* your apology, Agent Cuttah."

"Thank you, sheriff. And, please thank Mrs Honeysuckle, also. Thank you. Now, can we get on with the business of your call, sheriff?" He finished the

sandwich, threw the wrapping into the bin and shifted the phone to his left hand. With pen in hand now, Jake said, “Just how can I help you, sheriff?”

“No, suh, Agent Cuttah. It’s how Ah kin he’p yew, today.”

“And, how would that be?”

“Well, suh, as Ah told your associate in your office, there’s been a *terr’ble* *coll*-ision hyah, ‘bout fifteen miles on the north side of Dawson. One of them Chev-rol-et pickup trucks and one of our pow’r line poles had a bit a bit of a set-to, know what Ah mean? We only found out ‘bout it so soon, b’cause the ‘lectricity was down and some people hyah were *com*-plainin’. Yes suh, it was awful — why, that truck was jest ‘bout cut clean in half when it hit that pole...”

Jake interrupted, “Well, that’s all very interesting, sheriff, I’m sure. But, how can that information help me... today? Here in Washington?”

“Well, Ah comin’ t’that, Agent Cuttah, right this minute. Y’see, there was a driver, *o’ course*. But, the impact mustah killed him outright — Ah was *told* the engine was pushed right back, inta the driver’s seat, y’know. It was jest a *mess*, is all.” He paused to gather his breath. “Anyways, we found the driver’s AhDee and, after checkin’ with the national database of felons – y’know, jest as a standard *pro*-cedure – we jest *had* t’call yew.”

“And, why is that?” *Play along – he’ll get to the point, I guess.* Jake leaned back in his seat and put his feet on the desk. He took out a toothpick and began chewing.

“Well, suh, seems like the man who *ex*-pired went by the name of Calvin James Eastwood — among other names, as we found out — and, from the database, we also found that yew, Agent Cuttah, still had a warrant out for his arrest. Drug traffickin’, illegal use of *pro*-hibited substances and importation of same, are jest some of the items listed on *your* warrant, Agent Cuttah.”

At the mention of Eastwood’s name, Jake sat bolt upright. “Yes, I know the man and the warrant. This is *great* news, sheriff.” While talking, he pulled out a file from his desk, opened it and began reviewing notes as he continued. “Sheriff, are you certain it’s Eastwood?”

“No suh, not yet — but we’ve sent fingerprints to your main office for ver’fication, jest a while back. The body, as yew can imagine, is not fit for *any* visual AhDee, no suh.”

“Okay, Sheriff, I’ll check that from this end.” Jake paused a moment then said, “Sheriff, did you find anything in the truck, any... merchandise that he might have been carrying?”

“Mah officers tell me that there was nothin’ in the back, at all. Seems like *all* he was carrying was himse’f.”

“Nothing in the cab? No packages, no boxes?”

“No suh. Jest his carry bag, with some personal thangs”

Jake chewed on his toothpick, thinking. Then he said, “Sheriff, what was the time of death, the collision?”

“Well, goin’ by the time that people started t’call ‘bout the pow’r outage, we reckon the *coll*-ision occurred round four a.m. this mornin’.”

“So... what was Eastwood doing on a back road in Georgia so early on a shitty morning? He’s from the Florida Keys, sheriff, long ways from home. No reason for him to be so far from home, unless...”

“Up to somethin’, yew think?”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, mebbe so. He wasn’t the type of guy to travel unless he had a delivery to make.” A thought occurred to him. “Maybe he was planning to have a meet with somebody in *your* area... that day?”

“Well, suh, that’s *en*-tirely possible, yes. We *do* indeed have our fair share of such trash in this hyah county.”

“Sheriff, did your officers search the area around the crash site, for any debris, anything at all? If Eastwood *was* going to a meet, then he’d be sure to have drugs — a large quantity, I think — with him.”

“Agent Cutter, Ah have been *assured* that there was *nothin’* at all. The officers found only the canvas top, lying ‘bout ten yards from the truck, and almost buried by the snow. It had been ripped some, with part of it still attached to the back. *Nothin’* else. Leastways, that’s what the report hyah says”

“Well, I’m telling *you*, sheriff, that Eastwood was *always* dirty. That truck would’ve had drugs on it *somewhere*. I *know* that guy’s MO.”

There was a long pause. Jake chewed his toothpick, listening to the sheriff’s breathing.

The sheriff broke the silence. “Well suh, what mo’ do yew want?”

“Sheriff, I’d like for you to fax me a copy of that report. I know that’s not normal procedure, but it would be appreciated.” Jake read off a fax number slowly while the sheriff copied it. “In the meantime, I’ll get in touch with the Atlanta field office to send a few agents to search the immediate area where the truck crashed. But, that might take a day or more, I just don’t know how busy they are down there.” Without too much effort, Jake lowered his voice into a more relaxed tone. “Y’know, I feel certain that there’ll be a package, a box, something with drugs in it.

Eastwood was gonna make a sale, I'm certain of *that*." He paused a moment, for effect. "Anyway, if I'm wrong, I'll send you a bottle of Jamaica Rum." Jake grinned, and added, "If I'm *right*, I'll send you two." He'd brought a half-dozen bottles back from Dominican Republic, so it was small price to pay for co-operation. *Adams won't like it, but he can go to hell*. Aloud, he said, "So, how about it, sheriff? D'you think you could ask some of *your* men to get out there again for another look *now*?" He glanced at the clock — 2:28p.m. Outside, the weather was turning worse, *and it might be worse down there*.

"Hmmm, that's mighty fine of yew, Agent Cuttah. Ah'll see what Ah can do t'get a couple of mah officers back out to that there crash site, have 'nother look round. B'fore dark, that is." He gave a chuckle. "It'll be dark'n a nigger's ass in a few hours, Agent Cuttah, so we'd best be goin' now."

"Okay, sheriff. Thanks for your co-operation. Call me here, using the number you have. They'll patch you through wherever I am."

"Fine, fine. *Always* a pleasure doin' business with Federal Officers, Agent Cuttah. Yew take care, now." The line went dead.

Jake re-read the file he had on Eastwood: a three-time loser on the run for the last six months, ever since the Venezuelan bust. Aged forty-two, unmarried — although he had two illegitimate boys from two different women — in and out of jail since he was eighteen. Jake looked over Eastwood's list of credits: auto theft, grand larceny, some gunrunning, but mostly drugs for the last ten years of his life. *Gone to your reward now, Cal, ol' buddy*. Aloud he muttered, "You were dirty alive, Cal... and I'll bet you were dirty when you died." He snapped the file closed, picked up the phone and dialed through to the Atlanta office. He asked for Agent Carl Jamieson.

A few moments later, Jamieson came on the line. "Hey, Jake, you old fart. How's it goin'?" Jake and he had graduated from Quantico, in the same intake, twenty-two years ago.

"Who's old, *paisan*? I still have two years on you." He smiled. "But, I guess some would agree about fart." He spent the next two minutes exchanging news about families and the upcoming Superbowl and then said, "So, how's the weather down there?"

Jamieson laughed. "Jake, you didn't call to ask me about the weather... what's up?"

In two minutes, Jamieson had it all. "So, why the urgency?"

“Two reasons, Carl: the snow’s gonna get deeper, so the sooner the area is searched for drugs the better chance of finding *any*. And, you and I both know that Eastwood was always good for two or three hundred pounds of heroin or cocaine *every* time. I don’t wanna risk that sort of stuff lyin’ around until spring for some locals to pick up. The word’ll get out, you *know* that, Carl.”

“Yeah, well... *if* it’s there.” He paused a moment, then said, “Look, Jake, it’s really shitty here and getting’ worse. I can’t justify sending any agents to Dawson on a hunch only.” Before Jake could protest, he hurriedly continued. “Tell ya what I’ll do: if the prints come back as being Eastwood’s for *certain*, then I’ll get some guys out there *toute-suite* to have a look around.” Another pause. “That’s the best I can do, now, okay.”

Carl, you ol’ son-of-a-gun, you always were one for the book, thought Jake. But, he knew he had to go along with it. *Better than nothing...* Aloud, he said, “It’s fuckin’ *there*, Carl, I know it. But, okay... as soon as I know about the prints, I’ll call you.”

“Okay, ol’ buddy, I’ll be talkin’ to you. Hey, and I’ll put you down for Oakland by seven?”

Jake laughed. “The Buccaneers, asshole, by 13. Twenty bucks.”

“You’re on, buster. See ya!”

Jake put the phone down, chuckling, just as Stilts stopped at the door. Jake beckoned him in and spent the next ninety minutes going over the current caseload, including the Ferguson affair. He knew most of the details, so it wasn’t surprising that he found himself listening with only half an ear. Just before Stilts stood to leave, he stopped and said, “Oh, yeah, we gotta another piece of rumint” — rumored intelligence — “about that shadowy Ramo, the one who’s supposedly been supplying the Caribbean with cheap heroin, you know the case file?” He raised his eyebrows as Jake nodded. Stilts went on, “Seems like there’s been some activity in Dominican Republic recently, more so than usual. So *they* say. Problem is, nobody’s seen this Ramo, nobody knows a damn thing about him, or her, nobody knows *fuck*, except the name.” He paused, deep in thought and looking at his notes, then said, “Sounds *almost* like Ram-*bo*, don’t it?” He lifted his gaze to meet Jake’s, a slight smile on his lips.

“So?” Jake looked at him. “What are you gettin’ at?”

“Well, we’ve been hearing about this for a coupla years now, but still nothing. Just think it’s weird that nobody will talk to us, or CIA. Just the name...” His voice trailed off, looking at his notes. “If only...?”

Jake waited a moment, then said, “Yeah, so, if only what?” He was thinking of Verna, wanting to call and talk with her. His question was meant to sound impatient.

“Well, if only I knew the other six guys, y’know.” Stilts pulled at his ear, frowning, obviously in thought. He looked at his notes again, then the ceiling.

“What the hell d’you mean, six other guys?”

Then, Stilts deadpanned, “*You* know, the six degrees of separation. We get the sixth guy, he’s the one.” As he finished, he grinned showing his immaculate teeth.

Jake studied him for three full seconds. Stonily. Then he said, “Is that a joke, or what?” Then he also grinned, looked at the clock — nearly 4:30p.m. — and said, “Go on, giddoutta here, you Eddie Murphy wannabe, I gotta call Verna.”

“Okay, Jake.” He laughed and turned to go, then said, “Any news from Adams about the Red Alert?”

Jake shook his head. “Uh-uh. Haven’t heard anything. Turn on CNN and you’ll know what the rest of the country knows.” He was dialing Verna’s cell phone he spoke.

Stilts shrugged, waved a hand, “Hasta la vista, baby!” and was gone.

Jake turned on CNN while he waited for connection, and saw that the Yellow Alert was in force, with the usual line up of TV flotsam, all pontificating about what was *really* going down. He turned the sound off when Verna came on the line and, for a few moments, watched their silent tirade, wondering if they knew how silly TV looks with the sound off...

“Hi, babe... how’s it been today?”

“Oh, okay I guess, Jake. For a first day back, anyway.” She gave a small laugh. “Not as hectic as some years, but you know how it is.” Jake heard the click of a cigarette lighter and then the expulsion of air... and smoke.

In an instant, Jake was angry. “I thought we had a deal? *We both* quit together. No exceptions.” An instant later, he wanted to cut his own tongue out.

“Jake — would you get *off* my back? *Please?*” He heard her blowing smoke some more. “Okay, so I still have a smoke, so *there*.” Now she sounded angry. “Jake, I’ll *give it up*, just that I’m stressed out now — you *know* that!”

“Okay... *okay*.” He wasn’t happy, as much as he tried to sound otherwise.

“Jake — for fuck’s sake, *don’t* be my nursemaid, okay. Just back *off!*” She almost shouted.

"I *said* okay, Verna." For a moment he thought she'd hung up and said, "Hey, you there?"

"Yeah, Jake, I'm here."

"Verna, babe... this is stupid, y'know. Arguing about such a little thing, y'know."

"*You* started it, lover," she said sharply. Then her voice softened. "Jake, look... I know you care, I know you love me and that's why I agreed to the smoking ban." She blew some more smoke out, making a loud hiss in the phone. "Just let me sort myself out, okay... lover?"

There was a long silence. Jake rubbed his forehead, his nose, his eyes. He heard Verna breathing. *What do I do now*, he thought?

"Jake... you all right?" Verna sounded genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, babe. Don't worry. Look, I'll be leaving the office here in the next half hour, I guess. Should see you, maybe six-thirty or so, okay?"

"That's fine, Jake. Bobby and I'll wait for you... we'll all have supper together." He could hear the smile in her voice.

"Great. And look, I think it's a good idea to go see Vicky. Like I said this morning. And what with this Yellow Alert on, well, Washington has never been the safest of places, anyway. Hey look, this alert is no big deal, I can tell you *that* but I'll feel better if you're not in this area... maybe Bobby should go with you too? For a little while, anyway." He grinned, then chuckled and said, "But, I reckon you'd better take extra clothing with you — Detroit is not my kinda city, *not at this* time of year." He heard her laugh, a genuine, throaty laugh that made him tingle. "See ya soon, babe." And he hung up, but sat there thinking, hoping he was doing the right thing...

He glanced at the clock — 6:20p.m. *Fuck, I'd better get goin'*. Five minutes later, he was southbound on I-395.



Chapter Three

Near Detroit, Michigan, Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 8a.m.

Marta Wahiz breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the truck slow down and then turn into their driveway. Through the frosted window of her kitchen, she could see Jusef's gloved hand waving to her, as the truck came directly towards the house. Just when it seemed that it was about to hit the house, he turned the wheel to his left and Marta then saw the two cars following close behind. The procession made its way passed the house crushing the fresh snow, the tires squealing, and towards the three bay truck garage. The roller doors were already open as the vehicles approached the garage, revealing another trailer waiting for its rig in one of the bays. Jusef steered the truck into the middle bay while the two cars went in line into the third. As they killed the engines, the roller doors rumbled down to a groaning stop.

She continued to watch as Jusef came out of the office door and began to stride briskly towards the house, hunching down against the bitter wind. Another man — with a beard so heavy and black, it was clearly visible to her — followed, almost running and stumbling slightly in the soft snow. He caught up to Jusef, pulling him to a stop. Jusef turned so that Marta could not see his face, but she could see the other. It was warm in her kitchen, but she felt a chill as she saw the anger in the face of this man she'd never seen before. They stood facing each other, the man doing all the talking it seemed, as he leaned in closer to Jusef. She saw Jusef briefly turn to look at her and wave; she waved back and smiled. The other man was still talking as she could see his lips moving, with his teeth bared into a snarl. *Or, perhaps it's just the cold wind causing him to grimace?* Suddenly, Jusef abruptly turned and strode to the house, leaving the other standing and glaring at his back. Further back, Marta now saw three others, a man and two women and, as they drew closer, she could see the tiredness in their step and then their faces as they looked up while they mounted the stairs. Quickly, she left the kitchen window and went to the side door as Jusef came through with a swirl of snow. Seconds later, the other four were in the enclosed porch.

The porch wasn't heated and their breath hung in the air, adding to the chill that Marta had already felt. Nobody spoke for an awkward few seconds, each

looking at the other, the man with the beard still glaring at Jusef. All, except Marta, were breathing heavily.

Then, Marta said, “Come, get your wet clothes off...I will get some coffee and breakfast ready for all.” As she said it, she smiled but her hand shook as she opened the kitchen door to usher everybody in.



When Jusef and Marta had bought the farm just south of Macon, forty or so miles from downtown Detroit, they were lucky enough to have paid only a pittance for it. Indeed, it was the only reason that they were able to do so, twenty-three years earlier, when they arrived in the United States with very little money, but with a fierce determination to do well. Even in those times, thirty thousand dollars was not a lot of money, but it was enough to use as a deposit for a forty-acre property on the edge of the grain and livestock belt in southeast Michigan.

And they did do well.

It was a boom time in the US economy, Jusef had been a truck driver in Yemen — he’d been driving trucks since he’d turned twelve — and the American economy was on the move.

As a skilled driver, Jusef had little difficulty, in 1980, to obtain employment with a trucking company in Dearborn, mainly hauling automobile parts from local and interstate manufacturers to the Big Three of the auto world. Ten years of that coupled with the expansion of their pig farming and light dairy industries — managed very effectively by Marta — had provided enough seed capital to allow Jusef to set up his own small haulage company: Atlas Trucking. As business grew, he was able to sub-contract out work that he couldn’t handle personally and later, he had enough business to keep two fulltime drivers, with rigs, very busy most of the time.

Everybody possesses 20/20 hindsight. From the vantage point of January 2003, it was easy to see now that the decline began at the end of their first decade in America. With the 1987 stock market crash and the subsequent recession of 1990-1992, Jusef and Marta were beginning to feel the pinch as business contracted all over. Gasoline, diesel and oil prices were fluctuating wildly, with the resulting unsettling ripple effects throughout the economy; their profits from grain feed production dropped significantly as the whole meat industry suffered from reduced global demand; and their debt burden increased as more

money was sunk into infrastructure and farm improvements. With good management they could have skittered on the edge of bankruptcy for quite some time, biding their time for an economic upturn and hoping for the best.

They might have been all right, except for one thing: Jusef's cousin called him on the telephone in August 2002, and demanded the return of the thirty thousand dollars he'd loaned Jusef in 1980.

Jusef was thinking back to that day now, as he showered, removing the grime and stubble of the last four days, and *almost* wishing that he'd never taken that loan in the first place. Through the glass, he peered at Marta who was sitting at the bedroom window, alternately gazing at him then turning her head to peer through the icy window. He'd told her about the trip, about the driver's murder, about his non-stop drive at high speed and he knew she was upset and worried. *So am I*. At the back of his mind, there'd been the infantile hope that the Highway Patrol would stop him for reckless driving or *something*, and Ahmed and the others would simply fade away; but neither happened, of course. *There's never a cop around when you need one...* Viciously, he turned off the taps, stepped out of the shower and toweled himself down as Marta watched. He didn't want to look at her and see the hurt and anger in her face. Still without looking, he wrapped the towel around his waist and went to the wardrobe for new clothes. In his peripheral vision, he could see her gaze follow. Finally, it was too much for her.

"What *more* does he want?" Her words came out like bullets from a silenced pistol.

Jusef now looked squarely at his wife, the set face with her eyes boring into him, the clenched fists, the rigid frame of her body. As calmly as he could, he said, "I told you...I must get rid of the truck that we hijacked. We can't leave it here; I must drive it somewhere else and dump it." Then he added, "After they've got what they want from it, I mean." He finished dressing and sat on the bed, across from the chair where Marta sat.

"You...we...are being paid to hijack and drive a truck to some other destination. *Not* back to our farm. That was the arrangement, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah," he lied, "but things change. It was decided...Ahmed said it'd be too dangerous to anything else. Whatever they've stolen is very valuable, and they needed the other trailer to put it in. It's heavy, so I must go over to Tecumseh and hire a small mobile crane to get it out." His eyes pleaded with her. "We *need* the money, Marta...*a hundred thousand dollars*." Not quite, as he knew: he still had to pay back the thirty thousand to his cousin, but he would tell Marta *that* only

after this business was all over. Suddenly, he felt more tired than he should and he looked around for his medicine, saw it on the dresser and reached for it.

“You mean...whatever *you’ve* stolen. You’re the one who’s stolen it, not them. Even now, nobody can trace it to Ahmed or any of the others. *Only you.*” She stabbed a finger at his face for emphasis.

As she spoke, he fumbled at the cap to the bottle on the dresser, finally got it off and quickly swallowed a pill. But her words brought back the memory of the Highway Patrol the night before; he hadn’t yet told her about *that*. He put it out of his mind quickly and said, “It doesn’t matter; I had a false ID just in case I was stopped. Just don’t worry about it, okay!” He tried to smile encouragingly as he said it, but felt a sharp tightness in his chest and took a drink of water to mask his discomfort.

“But, how will you get rid of that truck?”

“I’ll drive it over to Chicago maybe, leave it at one of the big truck stops, with all the others there. Hide in plain sight, y’know?” He managed a grin this time. Then he said, “Bilal will follow me in his car, and I’ll come back with him.”

Marta was silent for a few moments, clenching and unclenching her hands. Jusef reached forward and clasped one of hers into his and gently pulled her to him, to sit beside him on the bed. He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. “Don’t worry,” he said, fully aware that he was repeating himself and maybe overdoing his attempts at reassurance.

Marta turned her head, and looked up at Jusef to meet his gaze. There was a deep sadness brimming within her soul and she said, “Jusef, what is so valuable that they had to kill?” Her voice was soft now, almost a whisper. Her lips quivered slightly.

He averted his eyes, looked through the window and shook his head in resignation. “It happened. It didn’t have to, and they told me that there’d be no killing.” He looked again into her eyes. “Marta, I can’t change it now. All I can do now is make sure you and me get out of this okay.” Then he shrugged. “As to how valuable...all I know is that it’s a load for the Detroit Military Museum, from some marine archaeological project in Dominican Republic. Somethin’ in that trailer and it’s heavy, that’s all I know.”

“You mean, they’ve stolen artifacts, maybe gold and jewels, things like that?” Already, Marta’s thoughts were racing.

He shrugged again, impatiently. “Don’t know, don’t care. At this stage, there’s only one thing I know, Marta.” He pulled her to him, both arms around her.

“I know I can’t trust *any* of ‘em.” He pushed her away gently, and looked down at her. “We have to be very careful.”

She looked at him levelly, realizing how much she still loved him. “Jusef, you *knew* that you were bringing the truck here, didn’t you? Before you even left last week?” She raised her right eyebrow and cocked her head to one side.

With a sigh, Jusef nodded dumbly. And immediately felt better as he gave her another squeeze.

Now, she pushed him back and said, “Just don’t lie to me anymore!” The last word came out through tightly clenched teeth and a few specks of spittle hit his face.

As he nodded dumbly again, wiping his face, there was a loud knock at the door, accompanied by Ahmed’s voice shouting, “Jusef, open up.” Marta gave a start. Jusef squeezed her hand and went to the door.

Ahmed stood there, with Bilal behind, glowering at Jusef as he opened the door. “Enough resting and eating; we must get the mobile crane *now*.” He didn’t look happy at all, *but then Ahmed never looked happy*, thought Jusef.

Jusef nodded curtly and said to Marta, who was now standing behind him, “Marta, get my heavy coat; I have to go out.” While the others watched, Marta helped him into his coat. He half-turned, smiled at her, chucked her under the chin with his gloved hand and said, “Back soon, my love.” He glanced out the window: the sky showed some blue and the snow had stopped for now. “It’s one-fifteen now, Marta. I guess we should be back before dark.” Briefly, he cupped the side of her face tenderly with his right hand, then turned to face Ahmed.

“Okay, let’s go.”



Washington, Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 8a.m.

After dropping Verna at Dulles for her 7AM flight to Detroit, Jake slowly drove to 4th Street NW — traffic was bad anyway — all the while thinking and hoping he was doing the right thing. *Let’s hope we’re both doin’ the right thing*, he thought as he cut through gaps in the lanes, again leaving blaring horns behind him. If he heard them, he paid no heed: he was already late for the morning briefing anyway. *Why does everybody hafta go to the office at the same time?* Nudging, pushing, edging across lanes, shaving inches when ever he could, Jake

made it to his office in record time, knowing full well that he'd left a minor collision behind him as a result of his single-minded purpose; a glance in his rear vision reassured him — the drivers were arguing and pointing in his direction. Shrugging, he carried on and with a squeal of his protesting brakes, he came to a final stop in the parking lot, slammed the still dented door shut and half ran to the Operations Room. As he entered, Adams looked at him as though he was some kind of bug, and then went on speaking.

“...and so, it looks like the terrorist is moving slowly west, towards Colorado. Field offices throughout the Midwest are coordinating operations and reporting directly to SIOC. Special Forces and Air Force personnel are on immediate standby, ready to move.” He glanced at his notes, and then looked over those assembled. “So, to recap: bin Hadid has made no overt hostile moves; he's not associated with any known terrorists or felons as yet; he's hired a pickup truck and is now driving east on Route Fifty, across Nevada; earlier this morning, he'd just passed through Ely, in that state. Our spy satellites, and a Predator drone, are constantly tracking those movements, so we won't lose him. As his general direction, at this time, is towards Colorado, there's concern that the target may be the underground military complex once used by NORAD. He could be heading for U.S. Ninety-three and south to the Hoover Dam — we just don't know yet. But, we do know that he's purchased supplies of various kinds, food, camping equipment, communications gear and a range of guns and ammunition — he's used false ID, Driver's Licence and credit cards to ensure very little or no hassles with all his buying. So, he knows what he's doing and so do we; but we still don't know the why.” He took a sip of water from an open bottle. “And, just so that we don't raise any concerns amongst the population, Homeland Security has announced — or will today — a series of security exercises across the country to coincide roughly with the movements of bin Hadid. People then won't be at all surprised or concerned about seeing contingents of police, Emergency Services, Army or Air Force out and about. And, they'll be nearby, when needed anyway.”

Behind him, Jake heard Baker speak up. “Er, boss, havin' a great show of force around near bin Hadid might spook him?”

“That's been considered, of course, but he would know that this is a country on Yellow Alert and should not feel directly threatened — provided we don't get too close yet. There will be other areas, such as in New England, that'll be running 'shows' at the same time. So, bin Hadid won't see anything out of the ordinary. For him, it'll be coincidental”

Or, so we all hope, thought Jake. He threw his toothpick into a nearby ashtray. “Anything on the nuclear device yet?”

Adams shook his head. “Still nothing — but, if you’d been here on time, you’d have known that already, Jake.” He smiled thinly at Jake as he said it.

Jake shrugged, turned his lips down and made a motion of steering a car.

Adams ignored that and looked up at the meeting. “Any more questions?” Waiting barely two seconds, he went on, “Okay, that’s it for now. When I know more, so will you all.” With a wave of his hand, he collected his notes and was gone.



As Jake walked back into his office, the phone rang.

“Cutter here.” He glanced at the clock — 9:05a.m.

“Why, Ah was hopin’ Ah’d get yew, Agent Cuttah.”

No mistaking Sheriff Longhorn.

“What can you tell me, Sheriff?”

“Well, suh, we have been able t’get back out there, as yew requested, and Ah’m sorry to say that no drugs have been found...thus far, that is.”

Jake grimaced his disappointment. “Well, thank you, Sheriff, for your efforts anyway. But, I still think there should be some around there, somewhere. So, I was hoping to get some agents from the Atlanta office out there this morning for a closer look.”

There was a long pause while Jake heard the sheriff breathing. Puzzled, Jake said, “Er, Sheriff...are you okay? Still there?”

“Hmmm, yes suh, still hyah. But, Ah was just thinking that Ah just might hafta agree with you, seeing as how we found somethin’ else, is all. Yew’ll be interested t’know that while lookin’ fer drugs, one of mah officers upped and fell over the body of a dead man, ‘bout thirty yards or so from the wrecked pickup.” There was a slight pause as the sheriff let that sink in; then he carried on. “Seems like the body was completely covered by the snow. Guess that explains why they didn’t see it first up.” He chuckled quietly. “That was one mighty *sur-prise*d officer, Ah kin tell yew.”

Jake thought for a few moments. “A pedestrian? Hit by the truck?”

“Uh-uh, no way. This’n died from a stab wound through the heart, looks like. Anyways, the body’s at the morgue with Eastwood, both now waitin’ for the pathologist’s examination and report.”

“Any ID on him, sheriff?”

“So far, been unable t’find *any*. Looks like whoever killed him took it all. But, we’ll keep lookin’, yew can be sure of that.”

“Okay, sheriff, thanks again for the update. Too early to say, of course, what it all means, but I know one thing: doesn’t sound like something Eastwood would do. That guy was never directly involved with homicide... just not his scene.”

“Well, Ah hear yew, Agent Cuttah, but there’s *always* a first time, Ah reckon.” He gave another chuckle. “Now, yew mind, yew don’ ferget about that thair rye whisky, Agent Cuttah. Oh...and yew’ll be happy t’know that we have a match for Eastwood’s fingerprints...the driver, that is. Bye now!” He rang off.

Jake put a call through to the Atlanta office and asked for Agent Carl Jamieson.

“How’s it goin’, *paisan*?”

“Good...fine. Look, Carl, the situation with Eastwood may also include a murder. The sheriff there has confirmed that the dead driver *is* Eastwood, but as yet no drugs have been found.”

“Waddya mean...what murder?”

Jake gave Jamieson as much as he knew, ending with a request again to get some agents to Dawson as soon as possible.

“Okay, buddy, a promise is a promise. I guess we can get a flight down to Albany, not far from Dawson. It’s a bit clearer down here this mornin’ anyway...looks like it’s *all* movin’ your way, Jake.”

Jake looked out the window and nodded. “Tell me about it! Looks like we’re in for a big one.” The wind had picked up, sending faint shivers through the glass. Buildings on the other side of the freeway were only just visible. “So long, Carl. And thanks.”

He spent the rest of the morning with standard routine, tried to call Verna once on her mobile — out of range or off — and then got a quick lunch at the food court and took it back to his office. Munching the food, he spent the next hour looking over the faxed information about Eastwood’s crash and clearing up a backlog of reports for Adams. With a yawn, he stood for a moment and stretched.

The phone rang again, for the second time only that day. He saw that the time was 1:15pm as he lifted the receiver, thinking: *Nobody's angry with me today...*

"Sheriff Longhorn hyah, Agent Cuttah."

"What can you tell me now, Sheriff?" Jake put his feet on the desk and had a pad and pen ready for notes. He took out a new toothpick from a small glass on his desk and began chewing on it.

"Well, we might jest get an AhDee on the second one quick y'know, seein' as how we found a bunch of credit cards in his right shoe, right under his toes. Guess the killer didn't think of lookin' there, no suh."

Jake just knew that the sheriff was shaking his head as he said it, and smiled. "That's a real break, Sheriff. Let me have the full details by fax, but give me any one of them now — I'd like t'run a quick check from here. This one's got me real curious." As the Sheriff read off the numbers, Jake wrote them down and then the name on one of the cards: Michael Jackson.

"Of course," continued the Sheriff, "we don't know fer sure that these hyah cards belong to the deceased, but it's a logical *dee*-duction, Ah think. Don' yew agree, Agent Cuttah?"

"It's a starting point, Sheriff. I'll get back to you. And thanks." He rang off, went to the door and over to Wendy's desk where she was busy entering data on her computer terminal. "Hey, Wen," handing her the sheet with the numbers and the name, "run this by the credit card company and get all the information you can. *Maybe* these belong to a murdered guy down in Georgia, but keep that tight. As far as the company is concerned, it's just a routine check. Got it?" He raised his eyebrows.

Wendy nodded. "I'm on it, boss." She picked up her phone and began dialing.

"Oh, and Wen... "

She paused and looked up from the phone, "Hmmm?"

"Get the medical report on the body. We need to establish whether it was actually Jackson down there. So, we're lookin' for a description, any identifying marks or scars, driver's licence records... you know the drill, okay? Call the sheriff at Dawson — Sheriff Longhorn, here's the number." He handed her his scribbled note.

"Right. Got it," she said.

Jake grinned his thanks and went back to his office to try getting through to Verna again. The clock ticked over to 1:35p.m. as he dialed her number.



Across the Potomac, at CIA headquarters, Andy Blackwood was wondering what to do next.

He looked at his wristwatch — 1.35p.m. — and drummed his fingers on the food court table where he'd been eating his lunch. As a new recruit to the spying industry, he knew that he had to keep his nose clean, his head down and never — but never — rock the boat. *How many more clichés can I think of?* Again, he thought back to the previous twenty-four hours, and how the news of the Red Alert had sent a good portion of the management and personnel into a frenzy of activity. He was worried also. *Hell, who wouldn't be?* He sucked on his cigarette, drummed his fingers some more and wondered, not for the first time, why so many in management were assholes. *And, Cochrane must be one of the biggest...*

Shaking his head, he started to rise when Caroline Trilby plunked herself down on the seat opposite and said, “Hey — I've been looking for you, Andy Blackwood.” She had a big smile, which made her face shine like a beacon. Or so it seemed.

He smiled back. “Oh, yeah? Well, I'm here, Caroline.” He started to light up again. “What can I do for you?”

She leaned forward and ripped the cigarette from his mouth, ground it up in her fist and threw the mess in the waste bin. “Well, for starters, you can stop that.” But laughed as she said it, showing her perfect teeth again. At thirty-two, she was still a young woman, but there her attractiveness for most males ended. Caroline Trilby was one of those women who relentlessly battled excessive weight, excessive waste and excessive stupidity, but not necessarily in that order. Her rather plain features were softened by her luxuriously curly hair that flowed down her back, glinting in the afternoon sun that filtered into the food court. She dressed well, but not expensively, attesting to a good sense of propriety: ‘Don't overdo things’ could be said to be her watchword. Except when it came to telling others what to do and which is why most men — and many women — tended to avoid her. If that could be said to be her major fault, it was at least rendered palatable — if not wholly excused — by her ebullient personality.

"I just don't know why you people continue to commit suicide in this fashion." She dusted her hands off, into the ashtray, as she said it, but she was still smiling.

"I guess you must be a reformed smoker?" said Andy, slightly miffed by the loss of his cigarette. He thought better of taking out another.

"What else, bucko?" She gave him a mock salute and then said, "But, anyway, I've seen you twice today already and both times the glazed frown on your face reminded me of... well, I won't say, will I?" Now, she grinned widely and leaned forward. "You still look that way, Andy..."

Andy shrugged and tried to look brighter, spreading his hands, "Hey, no problems, Caroline. Just trying to make a decision, that's all."

"Bullshit! You've been here two weeks now, and just in the last two days you've been going around as though you're constipated. Now, I *know* a lot of people around here are full of shit, but it's too soon for you." She grinned and patted his hand. "Look, Andy, we're a big family here; okay, so we have our fights and our fair share of infighting, but when I see a colleague in trouble for no apparent reason, I want to know why." She stopped suddenly, as though out of breath, but she raised her eyebrows quizzically. "So, Andy, what's the big decision anyway?"

When he'd first met Caroline, he'd taken an immediate liking to her. And, the past two weeks hadn't changed his mind. He'd also sensed that she'd taken a liking to him. Which was good in a very real sense, because he felt that he was developing a good relationship with a veteran, so to speak, of CIA operations. The downside was that she tended to act like a limpet mine and *probably just as explosive*.

As he finished that thought, he ran his hands through his hair and said, "It's just too fantastic. Cochrane thinks I'm crazy. Even I think I'm crazy sometimes..."

"But, Andy... *you're* a psych major. You *know* crazy, right? If you think *you're* crazy, then you're not, right?" She laughed some more and said, "C'mon, can't be all that bad, can it?" As though to urge him on, she said, "Cochrane said what then?"

He shrugged, almost in resignation. "Look, I've been going through a classified report about cruise missile failures over the last decade, throughout the Middle East and Asia. Cochrane told me to read it, try to find any errors, inconsistencies, that sort of stuff. Dunno why really — just seems like a waste of my time." He took out a cigarette and lit it; Caroline didn't stop him. "It was all very

interesting stuff, I guess, not something I knew much about, but I was learning. You know how it is?" She nodded encouragingly and he went on. "Anyway, I got to a particular section which included an addendum about an inexplicable... situation... event, or *something* that happened near where a missile finally hit." He reached into his briefcase and brought out the report, opening it on the page with the photos of the exposed artillery pieces. "Here... and here, look at these." He pointed with his pen, but careful not to leave any marks.

Caroline narrowed her eyes as she quickly scanned the three pages that comprised the additional information. Andy sat back, as though relieved, and smoked his cigarette as Caroline continued to read, frowning once or twice, looked at Andy once, paused as though to ask or something but didn't, then continued to the end. Looking up, she said, "So, okay, we have here a very curious situation with some old cannons and some evidence of murder perhaps, war crimes maybe. Or just an unfortunate accident of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for whoever those people were." She looked at Andy, but pointed to the two cannons welded at the muzzles. "But, what's with these? The author," she flipped to the front: R. Abrahams, CIA Operations Officer, Islamabad, "doesn't say much about them, except to acknowledge their existence as a mystery." She frowned. "And, it *is* a real mystery."

"Exactly, that's what I thought as I read. And that got me to thinking about it more. It bugged me, y'know." Andy ground the cigarette in the tray and again ran his fingers through his hair. "I kept thinking about it — it didn't make any sense for the British to do something like *that* a hundred or more years ago. It just didn't add up, but Abrahams just dismissed it as being a '*mystery shrouded in history*', as he likes to say. Poetic, I guess, but not much use as analysis goes, y'know." He inhaled deeply as Caroline waited. "I think it's more than that, but I can't be sure. Not until, or if I ever can get my hands on the original digital images." He shrugged. "Only then, maybe I can figure out for sure."

"Figure out exactly what, Andy? What's got you so spooked about this... event?"

"Caroline, look, I tried to talk to Cochrane yesterday about it, but the situation with the Red Alert is just too... hectic right now, I guess. Just after he came from meetings with the Director, I managed to talk briefly about my analysis and theory. But, he just laughed."

"Andy, for Chrissake, what the hell is this theory then? I can't help you if I don't know." She leaned forward more and said, "Andy, trust me. I can help."

He looked into her eyes and hoped like hell that he could. Reaching into his briefcase again, he brought out a file with four pages of typed notes and some diagrams. “Last night, at home, I put down all that I know and think about this mystery.” He paused, shook his head and then pushed the file across the table. “Here, you read it and tell me that I’m not crazy.”

Two cigarettes and fifteen minutes later Caroline looked up. Her face was set and somewhat paler than a few minutes ago. She closed the file and sat looking at Andy for what seemed like a long time, but it was only a few seconds. Then she said, “You’re not sure yet, are you?”

“No, of course not. But, if you can think of another scenario that makes better sense, then tell me.”

Now it was Caroline’s turn to shake a head. “Uh-uh. My knowledge of nuclear stuff is abysmal.” She put her hand on the file, as though to protect it. “But, you’ve done a lot of research on this, I’m sure — otherwise, you wouldn’t be prepared to discuss it all. Not with anybody, right?”

Andy nodded tightly, not saying anything.

“And, you’re trying to decide whether you should go to Cochrane again with it now? Or... go even *higher*, huh?”

Bingo, she thought, as Andy nodded silently again. She watched him light up a third cigarette and then said, “Andy, this is serious stuff – *if it’s correct*.” She stressed the last three words and before he could protest, she went on. “Let’s assume that it is, okay?”

“I must assume that, Caroline. Of course.”

“Okay then... you have no qualifications in nuclear physics, but you’ve put together a cogent argument about how terrorists could very easily manufacture nuclear devices of the type used in the Second World War.” Andy nodded agreement. “Just how effective one would be is open to question, but,” she held up her hand to stop interruptions, “that’s not the point. The point is: *what do we do about it?*”

“I have to get those images. Then I can run these photos,” while talking, he opened the file and pointed, “through some image enhancing and 3D modeling software — that’ll go a long way to verify what I’m saying, I just know it.”

“That’s all well and good, Andy, but that’ll take time. And, I don’t think we have much of that right now.”

He looked at her sharply. “What d’you mean?”

She pointed to the windows and said, "Out there, we have a Red Alert on. How do we know that what you're talking about isn't here already?"

Andy frowned and said, "But that's a suitcase plutonium device. That's what the Director said."

Caroline chuckled grimly. "So? You don't believe everything you hear, do you?"

He opened his mouth as though to answer, but stopped and simply shrugged his shoulders. Then he said, "I just don't know," and slumped back into his seat.

Caroline opened the file again and scanned through Andy's analysis once more, flipping to photos, then to diagrams and then to text. As she finished, she closed it and sat back.

Andy looked at her. "I must to get to *somebody*, Caroline, who can listen and understand. Somebody more qualified than me, or you, who can tell me that I'm full of shit." He paused very briefly, then said, "Or... that we have the potential for a very real problem on our hands."

Suddenly, Caroline grinned. "Well, Andy, this is your lucky day." She winked at him. "I might just have a solution for you... at least one that will help you to find out *if* you're full of shit, as you say."

He raised his eyebrows. "So, tell me..."

"You need a qualified independent review source, that's what. Someone who has no axe to grind and who's immediately available. Well, as available as he'll ever be, I guess." She frowned, pulling her brow into a deep 'V'. "But will he still listen to me?"

"Why not use one of the consultant physicists here, or at one of the universities, who's under contract to the CIA?"

She looked at him, raising one eyebrow into a large arch and half-smiled. "D'you want *everyone* to know *before* you talk to Cochrane again?" Not waiting for a rhetorical answer, she carried on, "Don't do it... this place is the same as any big university or corporation, Andy, don't forget that. Ever." She tapped the file with a finger. "Andy, I'd like to run your theory passed my uncle Jim. Not only my uncle, but also he was my physics teacher in high school also. He knows nuclear physics; it's a fascination with him. If anybody can tell us whether this," she held up the file, "has *any* credibility, he'll know for sure." Before Andy had a chance to say anything, she continued, "And, listen, I'll take *your* name off it..." she hesitated, and then broke into a broad grin, "In fact, I'll take the main points of

your theory and rework it... tell him that *I'm* thinking of writing a piece of fiction." She slapped her hand down on the table. "Ha, he'll love it... it'll give him a chance to rub my nose in it. He always thought I was some kind of urban terrorist anyway."

Andy looked at her, and she could see indecision on his face, as he looked away and then gnawed at his lip. He turned his eyes back to her and said, "You said: *'But will he still listen to me?'* What did you mean?"

She shrugged her shoulders and tossed her hair back. "We go back a long way, as you can imagine, and I gave him a bit of hard time. It's a family thing, but it's been a long time." She paused, then asked, "What do *you* have to lose, Andy?"

He shook his head. "Nothing... I guess." But he was thinking, *Can I really trust her?*

Her eyes sparkled at him. "Trust me Andy... on this one. You *know* you have to trust somebody, don't you?"

Slowly, deliberately, he nodded. "Yeah... you're right about that, Caroline."

She gathered up the file and stood. He looked up at her, squinting against the lowering sunlight filtering through the glass. She said, "I have to get going now, but I'll call my uncle and try to see him tonight... no, I *will* see him, you can count on it." She tucked the file under her arm. "And, I'll see you tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Okay!" He felt relieved, but still anxious at the same time. She gave a small wave with her hand and said, "And, brighten up, hmmm?" and then was gone. He watched her go and then looked at the clock: 3:05p.m.



Inkster, near Detroit, Michigan, Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 3:07PM

Verna pulled up the collar of her coat, and then tightened her belt as Tommy opened the door, allowing a blast of frigid air to pull at her hair and buffet her cheekbones. She put her head down, went through and Tommy quickly pulled the door shut behind them both. He checked his watch and saw that it was just passed 3p.m. Even at that time of day in the metro area, his breath hung ragged in the air and was then whipped away by the wind. He shivered and said, "Hey, Vern... let's get a bite to eat, okay, and a coffee?"

Verna was too cold to say anything to her brother-in-law, but simply nodded vigorously behind her high collar and held his arm as they both returned to his car. Tommy unlocked and opened the door for Verna, shut it quickly and then did the same for himself, blowing on his bare hands as he sat down. Tiny stalactites of ice hung from his copious beard and mustache, giving him a faintly Santa Claus effect. His wide grin merely enhanced it all, as he said, "Whew, let's get some java and some warmth, eh?" and gunned the big V8.

The parking lot attendant was just as anxious to conduct a quick exchange at the gate and, with a wave as they both closed their windows, Tommy turned out of the Garden City hospital's parking area heading south on Inkster Road for home. He switched on the heater to full and said, "You don't get it like this down in D.C., huh?" and grinned again.

Verna shook her head, murmured a "No, not usually" and took out her cigarettes. She offered one to Tommy, who shook his head as she lit up, and opened her window a crack. "You don't mind?" she said.

"Nah... I used t'smoke, but gave it up years ago. It don't bother me now." He smiled to reassure her, then said, "There's a favorite diner of Vicky's a few blocks down here. Wanna try it?"

Verna smiled, for she was very hungry. She hadn't had much breakfast, the flight from Dulles had been very bumpy and the last two hours with Vicky, in the maternity ward, had prevented her from having anything to consume, except for a glass of water. She was ravenous. "Sure, Tommy, that'll be great." She gave a throaty chuckle. "I need a pee anyway."

"No problem," he said, as he made a right turn and then into a small parking lot in front of an older house that had been converted into what looked like an inviting and warm country style cookhouse. In the fading light of the afternoon, the warm yellow glow through the curtains made Verna think of her mother's place, and fireplaces, so long ago.

Where are you now, Mom, when I need your advice?

Without falling over on the ice, they made it through the door as quickly as possible, and spent a few moments brushing off accumulated snow and slush. While Tommy attended to the seating, Verna made a beeline for the toilet, emerging five minutes later with her hair brushed and a freshened face. She scanned the large room and walked to where Tommy sat, nursing a hot coffee with his big hands while another steaming cup sat waiting for her. He was reading the menu as she sat.

“So... how yer fixed, Verna? Looking for somethin’ out of the box?” He pointed with a finger to a dish of pancakes with maple syrup. “This place’s got the best Canadian maple syrup you’ve ever had. You won’t be sorry.”

She looked at the marketing picture on the menu and decided it looked okay; she liked maple syrup and hadn’t had it for a while. “Looks good, Tommy. It’ll fill this big hole.” She patted her stomach and took a few sips of the coffee while Tommy gave the order to the waitress. Absently, she lit another cigarette and stirred her coffee, thinking about Jake.

Tommy Andeson was wondering exactly why Verna had decided to come to Detroit. He knew that she was very close to her sister, Vicky, and wanted to help out in this, Vicky’s first pregnancy. *Thirty is a bit old, I guess, to start havin’ kids, so, yeah, Verna can help, I guess... but, there’s somethin’ else.* He sipped at his coffee, glad to take in the warmth and to feel it on his hands. He looked at her, across his cup, and marveled how much she resembled Vicky; except for the age difference — and the lighter color to Verna’s hair — they could have been twins... well, almost. No mistaking the common parentage, that’s for sure. Suddenly, he had a thought. “Say, Verna, how come there’s such a big gap between you and Vicky?” He grinned. “Your parents go on a second honeymoon while you were out babysitting somewhere?”

She smiled slightly and said, “Just one of those things, I reckon. Mom started when she was sixteen, three boys and then me — all of us within six years, no less.” She looked up from her coffee that she’d been stirring. “Must have thought that Dad had dried up, I don’t know.” She gave that low chuckle again. “I can tell you that she was one surprised woman when she learnt that Vicky was coming along.” She stirred her coffee some more, while Tommy sat and waited. He wanted her to talk, and she didn’t let him down. “I guess we’re both glad that Vicky did arrive, eh, Tommy?”

“Damn right you are, Verna, I can tell you that.” He finished his coffee and pushed the cup away. “Vicky’s the best thing’s ever happened to me.” He laughed, slapping the table. “And, at my age, too.” At fifty-one, Tommy still looked fit, for he was a bear of a man, fully six feet three inches and two hundred and fifty pounds, give or take a few. Still with a good head of hair that hung down to his shoulders and with a square jaw that added to the thrust of his beard, Tommy could instill fear in others very easily. Nothing, however, could be further from his jovial, easy-going nature. “So, I guess Vicky ’n’ me are *both* late starters, eh?” His brilliant white teeth, enhanced by the blackness of his bushy beard, reminded

Verna of the Cheshire cat's smile in *Alice in Wonderland*. Idly, she wondered how Vicky coped with it and almost blushed as she did so. She didn't bother answering with another cliché, but merely nodded and smiled faintly. She liked Tommy, but didn't know him too well as yet, as he and Vicky had been married only just a year. And, like most families in a hurly-burly world, Verna got to see her siblings only at births and deaths, and usually after the fact.

The meal came and they spent the next fifteen minutes doing justice to the fresh pancakes and syrup, exchanging a few pleasantries in between mouthfuls. As she pushed away the empty plate, and lit a third cigarette, Verna said, "So, Tommy... I remember Vicky telling me that your work is going well." It was a statement that sounded like a question.

Tommy nodded as he hesitated over the last two pancakes, decided to put them out of their misery, and said, as he poured the last of the syrup, "Yeah, it's okay, I guess. Times are tough, as you know. But hell, we're gettin' by." A slight pause, "And you?"

"Oh, 'bout the same, I suppose. Still teaching at the high school." She paused reflectively. "Probably be there till I retire, I reckon."

"And... *Jake*, that's right, yeah?"

"Hmmm-mmm, yeah. He's okay, doing fine by all accounts."

"Still with the FBI?"

She stubbed out her cigarette, grinding it slowly down. "Oh, yeah — that's for sure. He's Special Agent in Charge at Narcotics, Washington office, y'know?"

Tommy grunted and pulled a toothpick out of the holder on the table and began picking. "I guess he sorta likes it, huh, been there twenty years, eh?"

"Twenty-two, going on a hundred..." And immediately regretted saying it. Tommy said nothing, and didn't appear to notice. As she lit another cigarette, she said, "Jake does that all the time."

"Huh?" Tommy looked at her blankly.

She lifted her chin, as though pointing. "Chewing toothpicks. Says it keeps him off cigarettes." She smiled wanly. "I didn't even bother to try."

"Don't bother me, as I said in the car. I used to smoke, but gave it up after seventeen years. Cold turkey." He threw the toothpick into the ashtray. "Second best decision I ever made."

Verna couldn't let that go by. "So, what was the best?"

He grinned, without guile or shyness. "Marryin' your gorgeous sister, yes ma'm." His bright blue eyes sparkled from his weather-beaten face, crows-feet at

the corner of his eyes widening as he raised his hooded eyebrows and laughed out loud. "She's the gr..gr..greatest."

Verna felt herself beginning to warm to him. "Vicky's lucky to be with you, Tommy."

"Hell no... you got *that* all wrong. I'm the lucky one, Vern. If you didn't know, you should now: she was the one who pulled *me* back from suicide, three years back now, it is."

Now, Verna raised her eyebrows. *So, Vicky doesn't tell me everything anymore?* Aloud, she said, "No, I didn't..." She paused, delicately she hoped. "D'you want to tell me about it?"

He shook his head and turned his lips down. "Uh-uh, it's history now, don't dwell on it anymore. Why bother?" He shrugged, as a gesture of finality. He had no desire, anymore, to go into the nightmares, the drugs, the Army field hospitals, the insanity of the death and destruction he'd seen in the closing stages of Vietnam and the madness of the Gulf. For him, the Army and Special Forces were now as though it was another person who'd been there, just something you read about in books or see on film. And Tommy wanted to keep it that way.

He jerked himself out of his thoughts. "Anyways, how long y'gonna be our guest here in Motown?"

"To the weekend, I guess. Vicky's close, as the doc said, so I'm hoping to be here when your new baby arrives. Son or daughter, d'you know?" She smiled, remembering the time when Jake was present at Bobby's birth.

"Dammit y'know, can't tell. The little legs are always just hiding the truth, in all the pictures we've seen. Even the operator can't say fer sure." He chuckled quietly and deeply. "Doesn't matter — we'll be happy with either."

Verna got up and said, "Want a refill? I'll get one for you." Tommy nodded his thanks as Verna went to the counter with both cups and returned with fresh coffee for both. As she sat again, she said, "Will you be working the rest of this week?"

"No — I called my boss, and told him I'd be unavailable this week. Vicky and the baby are more important than a few extra bucks, anyway." He took a few sips. "Hmmm, that's good," and laughed, "sounds like a friggin' commercial, eh?" He looked at Verna and said, "Look, you're welcome to stay long as you like, okay." He smiled some more. "You gonna tell me some secrets 'bout Vicky?"

“Do you *really* want to know?” She matched his smile. “Maybe you should think about that one?” One eyebrow arched and she tapped the table with her index finger.

He laughed again. “Okay, okay — you win.” Then he said, “Jake coming up?”

Verna pulled her hand back to the coffee and hunched forward slightly, elbows on the table. Slowly, she sloshed the coffee around the cup for a few moments, watching it swirl, then said, “He’s too busy, what with this Yellow Alert on and his regular workload.” She looked up to Tommy and continued, “Hey, I’m lucky to be here; it was a good friend of mine who managed to get me free for this week, seeing as how it’s first week back.”

“Yeah, I did wonder about that.” He raised his cup and drained the rest of the coffee, then looked at the wall clock: 4:30p.m. “Ready t’go now?”

Verna nodded, pushed the cup away as Tommy said, “I’ll get this — you cook breakfast tomorrow, okay?” While he paid at the counter, she left two dollars on the table, pulled her belt tight, turned her collar up and walked to the door to wait.

Two minutes later, they were back on Inkster Road heading south to Route 12 and the city of Inkster. It was almost dark and the sleet was starting. Verna pulled her collar up higher, shivering and thinking again of Jake, while Tommy negotiated peak hour traffic to his home, just across the Lower Rouge River and within spitting distance of the Suffolk Northern railroad.



Near Macon, Michigan, Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 3:00p.m.

It was barely a twenty-mile round trip to Tecumseh and back and, even with the heavy snow conditions, Jusef had had no trouble. He’d arranged, the week before, the pick-up of the crane and had already paid for the rental in advance. So, it was a simple matter to present the invoice to the rental clerk, hand the keys of his own pickup truck to Bilal and drive the crane back himself, with Bilal following. Farmers and property owners in the district were always renting heavy equipment, so the rental clerk thought no more about it as she watched Jusef leave with his friend in tow. *Unhappy and unpleasant lookin’ guy, though*, she thought, as she reached to quell the insistent phone.

The crane had four tractor size wheels and was quite compact, but heavy, with hydraulic rams at each corner for steadying the whole frame. The telescopic crane itself was secured at the rear and stretched forward across the cab where Jusef sat driving. In top gear it maybe reached forty m.p.h., so the drive back was leisurely, in a sense, giving Jusef more time to ruminate about getting the job done as quickly as possible — and to smoke too many cigarettes. He coughed violently as he thought about the mess he and Marta were in, opened the window and spat, and then closed it just as quickly. He turned the heating up as far as it would go, but it made little difference to the frost on the windshield. “Fuckin’ piece of shit,” he said aloud, and tried to scrape the film of ice off, but gave up in disgust.

By the time he stopped in front of the three bay garage, Jusef was feeling worse and knew that he needed his blood pressure pills. He’d taken his anti-cholesterol tablets prior to leaving, but he could feel his head pounding and his chest felt tighter again, something he didn’t want Marta to know. As he was about to get out, the roller door began to rise, so he waited; moments later he was inside with the door closing behind him. Ahmed approached as he carefully got down. Jusef looked at his watch: three p.m.

“Quickly,” said Ahmed, “bring the crane,” he pointed to the hijacked truck, “we’ve removed many of the lighter things.” His hands were scratched and dirty; his face was sweaty and his heavy black beard had a distinct sheen.

“You’ve been workin’ hard, hmmm?” said Jusef.

Ahmed’s eyes glittered, bright with urgency. “Our real work is now just starting. Come, come quickly.” He pulled at Jusef’s arm, dragging him to the rear of the trailer where the doors hung fully open. For the first time, Jusef was able to see inside and was disappointed to see only piles of heavy looking crates, some small, others quite large. Ayesah was inside, looking through the manifest, pushing small boxes to the side or rear, obviously looking for something in particular. Jusef looked around: there was a pile of twenty or so boxes near the side of the trailer.

He said to Ahmed, “I’ll hafta move the crane to the rear of the whole garage and turn it round, so that I can move directly forward with the boom and hook, okay.” Then, it occurred to him that there were no cars in the garage; his own rig was in one bay, the stolen trailer in the middle and now the crane in the last. “Where’d you put the cars?”

Bilal came through the back door and heard the question, tossing Jusef's keys towards their owner. "They're out back here, with your truck."

Jusef bent and picked up his keys, saying nothing, went to the crane and started up. When he'd built the garage, he'd included roller doors at both ends, so it was an easy matter to move the crane out, do a quick turn and bring it back inside, in line with the open trailer. While he sat in the cab, Ahmed directed the others. For the next half-hour or so, Jusef worked the crane as Bilal attached grappling hooks to boxes, allowing him to lift box after box, until over half of them were to one side. Eventually, with excited cries, Ayeshah indicated two boxes, each about three meters long and perhaps a meter square, or just under.

Ahmed startled Jusef as he banged on the door on the crane cab. "Jusef, those are the two boxes we want. Bring them out very carefully. They are heavy, maybe three hundred kilos each, so take it easy." Jusef looked and saw Bilal attach the hooks to prepared lift points on each, and who then waved and nodded when the first was ready to move. Ahmed came closer to the window and looked into Jusef's eyes, "Do not drop them... or I will kill Marta." He said it softly, but that only made it worse.

Although the words chilled him, Jusef felt his blood pressure rise and he gripped the wheel tightly to help stop the shaking. But he nodded, in what he hoped was a calm manner, and said, "I haven't dropped *anything* yet." He forced his eyes away from Ahmed and waved Bilal away from the box. Gunning the engine, and with skill born of many years with such equipment, he soon laid the box on the concrete where Ayeshah now pointed, towards the very rear of the garage and on the left side of the roller door. In short order, the second box was laid to rest with its twin, but on the right side of the door, so that there was a gap of at least three meters between them.

As Bilal disengaged the hooks, Ahmed again banged on the cab door. "Jusef, now we must get all the other boxes back into the trailer and then you can take them all away, far away, to get rid of them."

No rest for the wicked, huh, Jusef thought moodily, and for the next hour, began to think he was looking at some kind of bizarre movie in reverse. By four-thirty p.m., all of the boxes were loaded and with a sense of relief, Jusef watched as Bilal closed and locked the trailer doors. Somewhat stiffly, he got down from the crane and stretched his back.

"Feeling old... old man?" said Bilal, and laughed as he walked off.

Jusef looked after him, thoughtfully, wondering when he'd have to deal with him, but was surprised when Ahmed grabbed Bilal, spun him around and slapped him three times, rapidly, across the face, pulled him close and then whispered in his ear for a few moments. Bilal paled visibly, looked at Jusef fleetingly, nodded and then stumbled on, as Ahmed pushed him away roughly. Ahmed watched him go, then walked to Jusef and said, "Don't worry about Bilal... he will keep his mouth shut and do his job."

Why in hell does he beat up on Bilal? That bothered Jusef, but he couldn't figure why.

Ahmed continued, "And you, Jusef, just make sure you do yours – and no harm will come to you or Marta." He gave what he thought was another of his reassuring smiles, but the look in his eyes negated it entirely.

Jusef merely shrugged and said, "Well, okay then." As he said it, he watched Bilal go outside, pushing roughly passed Marta, as she came in. Ahmed followed his gaze and said, "Tell your wife to prepare an evening meal," and walked off to talk with Ayesah and Rebecca, who were both now removing securing bolts from the two remaining boxes.

Jusef grunted and went to meet Marta, giving her a long, warm hug, then kissed her full on the lips. She pushed him away slightly and then looked at him, her eyes questioning. In a voice he knew Ahmed would hear, he said, "It's okay, Marta, we got the stuff out they want," pointing with a thumb, "over there. Tomorrow morning, I'll take the stolen truck to Chicago probably and dump it around there, somewhere." He squeezed her again and whispered, "Then we'll be free of them."

She snuggled closer to his chest, holding him tightly, so neither of them saw or heard Ahmed approach until his grating voice said, "No, Jusef, you'll go with Bilal tonight, later, and take the truck to Chicago, as you say. That is a good idea, and after that, Bilal will drive back in the car with you."

Jusef turned to face Ahmed, and said, "Okay, if that's the way you want it." He secretly squeezed Marta's hand as she stood beside him now. "Probably better that way — the sooner it's gone, the sooner we're all safer, no question."

His answer obviously pleased Ahmed, who tried to smile again, but merely looked twisted. "Good," he said, "but now we should eat, and your good Marta will make a meal for all of us." He called to Ayesah and Rebecca and followed Jusef and Marta to the house. Looking at the clock on the garage wall, Ahmed noted the

time: 4:45PM, and thought, *Good — Jusef should be back from Chicago a little after mid-night.*



Washington, D.C., Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 4:30p.m.

There was a knock on the door and Jake looked up; it was Wendy.

“Hey, boss... on that credit card, y’know, Michael Jackson... “ She had some notes in her hands. Jake waved her in, still cradling the phone to his ear; he been trying to get a hold of Verna again, but still no connection. Either the communications were bad or she’d turned the phone off. He picked up the notes Wendy had put on the desk and began scanning as she talked.

“Looks like he had a good credit record, always paid his bills. The company had only praise for him. They show him as being employed as a trucker for a company in Detroit... I think it’s called *A1 Trucking Inc*, based in downtown Detroit. It’s in my notes there...”

Jake was reading rapidly. “Hmmm... yeah, you’re right, Wen.”

“Okay... So, I called *A1Trucking*, and spoke to a Mr Albright, the manager or owner, not sure which,” Jake looked up at her, brow furrowed, “okay, it doesn’t matter which, I know... anyways, Albright said that Jackson should have checked in — that is, arrived back in Detroit — late Monday night. But, he hasn’t shown yet.” She paused and then said, “Now, maybe we know why, huh?”

“You’re telling me Jackson had a load to deliver?” Jake pulled out a toothpick and began to chew absently.

“Yeah, that’s what Albright said, a load from Port Everglades for the Detroit Military Museum – some kinda archaeological artifacts from some place down in the Caribbean...”

“Yeah?” Jake raised his eyebrows. “What country?”

“He didn’t say, but I can get back to... “

“Later,” Jake interrupted, “what about the description of Jackson?”

“The company has photographs of all employees, so Albright sent this fax,” she laid it on the table for Jake to see, “which is a pretty good match for the photo ID copy I got from Licensing Bureau in Detroit.” She laid down another sheet for Jake to see. She went on, “And, this is the photo of the deceased sent back by

the police photographer at Sheriff Longhorn's office." A third piece of fax paper was laid beside the others.

Jake looked at the three closely, then at Wendy. "Perfect match, Wen. Good..." With the three faxes in his hand, he went to the large wall map of continental United States and traced with his finger. "Jackson started here, at Port Everglades, on last Sunday evening, driving on through the night to here," stopping his finger near Dawson, Georgia, "where his body was found covered with snow, near this river — the Kinchafoonee — with a single stab wound through his heart." He tapped the map with his finger, looking at Wendy. "So, where was he killed?"

She shook her head, making a face. It was a rhetorical question, anyway.

He went on, staring at the map, "At the same time, Eastwood, our known drug peddler, is killed in a collision with a power line pole. On the surface, nothing suspicious about that, although the full report hasn't come through yet. But, just a few yards away, Jackson lies dead, and it looks like he was killed at or near the time that Eastwood crashed. But, we can't be sure of that yet, either." He looked at Wendy again. "Any thoughts?" he said, moving a toothpick from side to side in his mouth.

"Anything in Eastwood's background that connects him to Jackson?"

"Nope, nothing that I've been able to find. Yet!" Jake looked at her, and raised his eyebrows.

"Did Eastwood have an accomplice?"

Jake shook his head. "He was a loner, all his life. Trusted nobody. But, I guess we can't rule that out." He sat down at his desk again, hands cupping his head and leaned back in his chair. The phone rang, and Jake grimaced as he had to put his feet down and reach for it. It was Adams.

"Jake, what're you doing now?"

Jake resisted the urge to say 'Talking to you,' and instead said, "Right now, going over a new case with Wendy."

"How important is it?" Without waiting, Adams continued, "It's just that I need — *no, I hafta have today* — those budget figures for next fiscal year. How soon will you have them ready?"

Jake looked at his watch: 4:55p.m. "Tomorrow morning." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, knowing full well that his boss could easily wait another week. He looked at Wendy and grinned. She shrugged and smiled.

“Not good enough.” Wendy heard the shout, as Jake moved the phone from his ear, waited a moment, then put it back.

“No can do, boss. Still waiting for your authorization to include those additional capital items I need. You said you’d think about it...” He stopped and waited.

“I gave you that, yesterday, I know.” Jake heard shuffling of papers, then an exasperated snort. “It’s here, on my desk. I guess my secretary didn’t get it down to you.” Adams paused then said, “Anyway, what’s the new case?”

“One of my outstanding warrants was found dead, in Georgia, on Monday; a collision, looks like an accident. But, a dead body has been found nearby. We’re checking it out.” And for the next few minutes, he filled in all the details to date. “So... now we’re trying to find out more about the collision and Jackson’s death.”

“Why not just let the local offices handle this?” Adams sounded impatient.

“We’re still tryin’ t’find any drugs that I *know* Eastwood had in his truck.” Jake pressed on. “It might give us a lead back to where it all came from... “ *A long shot, but what the hell*, he thought.

There was a short pause, then Adams said, “Okay, Jake, clear it up ASAP. But, get those figures to me a.m., got that?”

“You bet,” he said, and rang off.

Wendy said, “D’you need me anymore, just now, boss?” She pointed to the clock: 5:05PM. “I’ve got an appointment t’keep.”

“Just a few moments, Wen. I’m gonna call Albright for more information. In the meantime, I want you to keep in touch with Sheriff Longhorn, try to get more on where Eastwood had been — I think he must have come from Florida also, probably his home town, Miami. And contact the local office in Detroit, give them the details about Jackson; somebody has to tell his wife about this.” He stopped for a moment to think, then said, “For the moment, we won’t release any news about the truck; I’d like to speak to Albright and the museum people first.”

Wendy nodded soberly and said, “Okay. Got it.” As she turned to leave, she said, “What did I miss with Albright?”

“Nothing with Albright, but Jackson was a trucker, with a load you said. So, where’s the rig? If he was driving, Albright will have the description and licence information.” As Wendy was leaving, he was picking up the phone. He had to wait for five minutes, impatiently, until Albright came to the phone and spent the time noting questions he wanted answered.

“Yeah — who is it now?” The voice was gravelly and indistinct, as though he was talking through a filter of some sort — it was in fact a heavy scarf — with a lot of engine noise in the background. “I’m busy, what is it?”

Jake introduced himself and, by pressing his ear tightly to the phone, was able to decipher Albright’s answers. Jackson had been driving one of the company’s trucks, an International flatbed, used for container shipping; he’d taken a load to Miami and had been returning with a container pick-up at Port Everglades; the truck was in perfect order, no reasons for any breakdowns; he could only assume the truck is missing and Jackson was murdered because of the nature of the load.

“Which was?” said Jake.

“Archaeological artifacts, quite valuable, part of the contents of a Spanish galleon that sunk off the north coast of Do...public...” his voice was drowned out by truck noise for a few moments.

“What was that last?”

Albright repeated the last bit. “I said, the Dominican Republic, Spanish galleon.”

“Do you have the full manifest?”

“Yeah, I got a copy here. Do you want a fax?”

“Yes. Anything unusual you know, about the whole shipment?”

Albright must have thought about it for ten or fifteen seconds, or was busy with traffic, or both; Jake couldn’t tell. Just when he was about to prompt him, Albright said, “Dunno. A lot of stuff from a ship of the sixteenth century, is all I can remember. I’d hafta look over the manifest in the office.”

“Just fax it to me here, please, Mr Albright,” and gave him the number. Then he asked, “Mr Albright, would Jackson check in with your office regularly? Or, do you have any GPS tracking in place? Had you heard from him, *at all*?”

“No to the first two questions, but he called from Florida as he was leaving the port.” He went on, anticipating further questions, “Normally, there’s only a need for us to call our drivers when we need schedule changes, otherwise we rely on them to keep us advised, y’know. As to GPS, well, it’s still expensive to setup and maintain, and I ain’t big enough yet to outfit this whole operation yet.”

Absently, Jake thrust a toothpick between his teeth and went over possibilities as Albright went silent, leaving just the background noise of trucks.

“Say, Mr Cutter...”

“Yeah?” He spat the toothpick into the waste bin.

“Do you have... d’you know who did it yet, or... “

“Too early, Mr Albright. It’s under full investigation now. Oh, and by the way, I’ve sent word to the Detroit office to get down to Jackson’s widow.”

“He was a good man, Mr Cutter — it’s a shame, y’know.” He was silent for a moment, then said, “I’ll get over to see her later this evening; I owe her that, I guess. He was a good guy, I’ll miss him.”

“Yes sir, Mr Albright, you’re right. But, we’ll get the killer, you can count on it.” *Not so fast, Cutter*, he thought, and started chewing on another toothpick.

“Yeah, right.” But his negative tone matched what Jake was thinking. “I’ll get that fax off now. Thanks for callin’, Mr Cutter.”

“Thank you also, Mr Albright. We’ll keep you informed.” He broke the connection and sat back, waiting for the fax, and thinking: *Why would anybody hijack a truck full of sixteenth century artifacts?* He stared at the ceiling, trying to think of a good reason. The market for such things is very limited, and you have to be connected to dispose of any of it. Moreover, from what he’d seen and read, it was usually an inside job by an employee or company official. *So, maybe somebody in the Detroit museum is up to some funny business? An offshore art entrepreneur? A foreign museum from a not too friendly country? An insurance heist?* He mulled over the possibilities, looked at the time — 5:35PM — and grabbed his phone to dial out. On the first ring, it was picked up almost immediately, and he told Bobby that he’d be late in, so to go ahead and eat without him. As he finished speaking, Jake heard the fax machine start and said, “Gotta go, Bobby — see you soon.”

He put the receiver down and scanned the fax as it was printing. It went on for page after page, ten in all, listing every single item within each box or crate. As it finished, he counted the crates and boxes: sixty-five in total, containing a grand total of three hundred and forty-seven items. He scanned the pages again, more carefully, taking his time but still, he almost missed them — two entries listing two identical items: a pair of sixteenth century bronze rail cannons, part of the shipment for the governor of the island, at that time. He sat back, frowning, forcing himself to grab the thought that was gnawing at him: *he’d seen something like this before, but where?* He closed his eyes, rubbed them and his face. He got up and stretched, forcing the air in and out of his lungs, then went to get a drink of water. That’s when it came back to him: he’d been reaching for a drink of cold water when Verna had showed it to him — an article in the local Santo Domingo newspaper.

The cannons had been stolen once before, from the museum in Santo Domingo, in early December and while we were on holiday there...

Quickly, he dialed the number for the Detroit Museum and looked at the clock: 6:17PM. After four rings, the call was answered: "Good evening, Detroit Military Museum, Security. How may I help you?" The voice was smooth, low and unhurried, just with a hint of boredom. Jake asked for the Director and introduced himself, but was told that the Director had gone for the day and the Museum was closed.

"This is important FBI business, involving the Museum, and I need to talk to..." he looked again at his notes, "Dr Ingram as soon as possible. Can you give me his home number, please?"

"I'm sorry, Agent Cutter. I can't divulge personal information, not even to you, sir. But, what I can do is have Dr Ingram call you direct, if you would give me your number there." Jake had a mental image of the man holding a pen ready and sighed quietly.

"I'll give you the number here, and my mobile," and rattled off the two numbers. "When you get in touch with the Doctor, please tell him that it *is* urgent. *Very* urgent."

"Yes, I will. You can be sure of that, Agent Cutter. Thank you for calling."



Driving home, on the freeway, Jake suddenly remembered Ricardo and cursed himself for forgetting. With one eye on the traffic, one hand holding the wheel, he fumbled for his mobile and searched its memory for Ricardo's number. *Maybe I'm lucky, maybe I did enter into this one also...* He did it twice, searching up and down, then by name, but nothing came back. His friend, Ricardo Figueroa, of the Santo Domingo Police department, was there with them when they were lolling on the edge of the pool and even made some comments about the theft. *Ricky, ol' buddy, I really need to talk with you now.*

Jake put the cell phone down and put his foot down also. The car surged and Jake moved to the fast lane, honking to get cars out of the way. He had to get home, to look up Ricardo's phone number in the phone diary, and quick.

Fifteen minutes of fast driving brought the car to the driveway. Bobby had heard the car squeal to a stop and had the front door open as Jake got to it, giving him a high-five and a "Hi, Dad," before Jake swept passed saying, "Hey there,

son,” and moving quickly to the phone stand, oblivious to the slush that he was dropping on the floor. Bobby, a lanky boy with blond hair that matched his mother’s, shook his head and muttered, “Mom ain’t gonna like this, Dad.” He scratched his chin in mock seriousness.

Jake looked at Bobby, then his feet and the footprints, and then went back to scanning the directory in his hand. “Got it... here it is,” he said, writing Ricardo’s number in his own personal notebook, then dialed the number. While he waited for the connection, he said to Bobby, “Bring me that chair in the corner and man, I could use a coffee.”

“Sure thing, Dad. And, yeah, I had a nice day too, thanks,” he said, grinning as he got the chair then left the room for the kitchen.

Gratefully, Jake sat just as he heard the connection complete, a woman’s voice answering.

“*Hola!* America calling. Ricardo Figueroa, *por favor.*” His knowledge of Spanish was about on par with the average tourist, which is to say abysmal. The woman said nothing, but Jake could hear footsteps and voices. Bobby brought a coffee; he saluted his thanks and took a grateful sip. The warmth felt good.

“*Si, hola.* Ricardo Figueroa. Who is calling, please?”

“Hey, Ricardo, *mi amigo* — it’s Jake, Jake Cutter, you ol’ son-of-a-gun.”

“Jake? Hey man, how’s it going?” Ricardo spoke American better than most Americans, for which Jake was eternally grateful. A Puerto Rican by birth, he’d lived in the States most of his life, and had been a cop with the Miami Police Force until he’d met his future bride there, a ravishing beauty from Dominican Republic. It wasn’t long before Carmen had convinced Ricardo to move to her country and sign up with the local force. He’d been there for five years and seemed to be enjoying the leisure, the life-style and the laughs.

“Fuckin’ cold here, man, so I wish I was there with you,” and Jake almost meant it. Before Ricardo could respond, Jake went on, “Reason I’m callin’ is semi-official... “

Ricardo chuckled, “Yeah, I figured that, Jake. Hey man, it’s late, y’know. Where are you?”

“At home, at home. Look, I need to find out more about that heist of those cannons that happened there. You remember — you even brought it up that day, at the poolside.”

There was a slight pause as Ricardo drew in his breath. Then he said, “Ah, yeah, I know the ones — the cannons that had been found in a sunken Spanish

galleon about two years ago, by some joint American/Dominican Republic consortium. Yeah, that's right, and after being restored, they'd been put on display, for a while, in Santo Domingo. And, you're right, some guys busted into the museum here and hauled off two crates with the cannons in them. Yeah, a real funny business that was, *amigo*. After you left the next day, we searched all over the island, busted some asses, you know what I mean?"

"Sure, but what happened to those guns?"

"Now, that's the *real* funny part, funny peculiar, y'know. About two weeks after the heist, we got a tip off and went to an old warehouse on the outskirts of Puerto Vaillarta, more like an old house with a big barn, actually. So, we busted the place wide open, and there they were still in the crates, safe and sound." He paused for breath, then said, "So, what's the pitch, Jake?"

Jake didn't answer the question, but said, "Anybody caught with them?"

"The short answer's no, but here's the odd thing: a local cop down on the eastern tip — perhaps only a couple of miles from where you stayed at Samana — reported finding four bodies dumped in a culvert. These four were known felons, and it seems like they turned out to be the guys who actually stole the guns because we matched *their* fingerprints with those found on the metal locks of the crates."

"When was that?"

"Ah, let's see now. Maybe seven... no, ten days after we found the guns."

Jake thought for a moment then said, "Any leads on the perps?"

"Uh-uh, clean as a whistle, Jake. It's a funny business, and we still have no leads on who killed them." Ricardo paused and Jake could hear him puffing on his perennial cigar. Then he said, "Anyways, the museum people were just glad to get the cannons back in one piece, unharmed." He stopped and spoke rapid Spanish to someone, then said, "My wife, sorry. So... *amigo*, what's the scoop, huh?"

"Those cannons — they've been heisted again, Ricardo. They were shipped to Florida a few days ago en route to Detroit, as part of a big crate of artifacts for a museum here. Just Monday morning the truck driver was found dead, and the truck is missing."

"Hey, hey, maybe something real dirty goin' down, what you think?"

"Yeah, beginning to look that way. Any drug deals, big ones, being talked about your end?"

Ricardo was silent for a full ten seconds, and then he said slowly, "No big deals that I know of, but more talk about that elusive Ramo. I tell ya, that name is

popping up more here and further south, Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, you know. Local dealers are shit scared, I can tell you that.”

“Yeah, I’ve got Stilts looking into that already. I’ll get him to call you later, okay?”

“Sure thing, Jake. But what about those cannons?”

“What happened after you got them back to the museum people? Who inspected them? Do you have a full report on that?”

“Yeah, sure, I can fax you a report. But, as I recall, the guns were still in the crates, they were opened and inspected by the museum scientists, all seemed okay. What’re thinking, anyway?”

“Maybe somebody put somethin’ into the crates with the guns? Maybe a load of hash, heroin, speed or somethin’ else. Why else would somethin’ be stolen, only to be found again fairly rapidly, then stolen again as soon as it reaches USA?”

“Bingo. And, in all probability, that shipment had been pre-screened already, by Customs here, so that when it docked at Miami or wherever, there’d be no need for any close check. But, I can check that here for you and call you back in a day or so, okay.” Jake knew that Ricardo was referring to the major changes that had been introduced within US Customs since 9/11: pre-screening and full disclosure of all container contents, prior to shipping, allowed for much faster and easier clearance at the port of entry.

“Good point, Ricardo. Makes sense.” Jake stopped, suddenly realizing something else now. “And so does this: we’re suckers in this country for anything to do with guns and cannons, and especially if it concerns archaeology and science. Send a container like that to a prestigious scientific organization here, and it’ll walked through, no questions asked.”

They both fell silent, for a few moments, thinking of implications and possible flaws. Then Jake said, “Question is, is anybody in the museum involved? Is this a setup by somebody on the inside? Either at your end, or this end? Or both?”

“Too many questions, my friend... “ Ricardo sucked on his cigar, the noise easily audible to Jake. It almost made him want a cigarette, but he thrust a toothpick between his lips instead. Then Ricardo said, blowing into the phone, “I’ll ask around some more about drug deals, see if anybody knows anything that I don’t, right now anyways.” He sucked on his cigar again and then Jake heard him speaking to his wife. They exchanged some short, sharp words then Ricardo

came back to the phone. “Gotta go, amigo. Like Carmen says, it’s late, and we’re late for a dinner engagement.”

“Okay, Ricardo. I’ll keep in touch. Don’t forget to fax that report.”

“Yo, no problem — first thing in the morning. *Hasta la vista.*” And he laughed as he put the phone down.

Jake sat for a moment, thinking, and sipping at the rest of the coffee. Bobby was in the living room on the sofa, watching a hockey game on TV. Jake joined him, sitting down on his easy chair that was at right angles to the sofa. Bobby had the sound on the TV turned down very low so that only a dim murmur could be heard.

“Everything okay, Dad?” Bobby glanced at Jake quickly, but went back to the game just as quickly. “Yeah, go Lakers. Another goal.” He pointed. “See that one, Dad?”

Jake preferred NFL, but grunted his approval while still sipping his coffee, and said, “Yeah, just another case I’m workin’ on, but it’s a screwy one.” He pushed his chair back to lift the footrest, and let his head loll back. It had been a longish day, and he was glad for the break. “So, how are the new classes for this semester, Bobby?” He finished the last few drops, and put the cup down.

Bobby kept an eye going on the game, as he answered, “Working out okay, Dad. Just the usual stuff, you know.” He was now into his second year of his Political Science degree and all of his grades were well above average. “I reckon it’ll be another good year for me — I hope so.”

Jake grunted again, put his hands behind his head and went over what he’d found out earlier; he kept coming back to the central question: *Why steal the same things twice? Well, yes, it’s possible that the two events could be unconnected, but it smells, the whole business. And why just two old cannons, been in the sea for hundreds of years, which obviously have some scientific value, but their resale value would be questionable, especially stolen? Ain’t easy to cart two heavy cannons around, no sir. Hey, that’s an assumption, asshole —who said anybody’s after the cannons anyway? Maybe there’re drugs in the container, and the cannons are just a coincidence? And, why did the four thieves in Dominican Republic turn up dead, and who killed them? Why did they steal the cannons in the first place?* He sat bolt upright. *Maybe the stuff is inside the cannons, in the bore? How many bags of heroin can you shove down a six-foot gun barrel?*

He did some quick calculations on the border of a handy newspaper: a six foot gun barrel, with 4 inches in bore diameter, that would give a capacity of half

a cubic feet, enough for a small shipment of high grade heroin. *Twice, with two guns. Street value? A lot. But... enough to warrant using two old cannons, and heisting a whole container?* He shook his head. *Why not just hide the drugs in the container, or any of the crates in the container?*

The phone rang, pulling him out of his mental doodling. He picked it up and said, "Me, Cutter."

"Hi, lover. How's things?" It was Verna.

"Hi, babe. Oh, just relaxin' with Bobby — if you can ever relax in front of a hockey game."

Verna laughed. She sounded at ease. "And, how are you? Working too hard, as always?"

"Well, you know how it is. Adams wants budget figures first thing tomorrow, I've gotta head up an op on Friday, down in Springfield, the Yellow Alert is keeping everybody on their toes... like that." Now he chuckled, "I'll survive — just." He hesitated, then said, "You havin' a good time there? How's Tommy and Vicky?"

"Brrr, it's friggin' colder here, at least today. Vicky's fine, should have the baby any day now. Tommy's getting the house in order and I'm just hanging around."

"Tried to call you, a coupla times today, but I guess the phone was off?" He tried not to sound accusing.

"Sorry, Jake — I completely forgot to turn it on. Got so caught up with Vicky, y'know. I promise: it'll be on all the time, even when I have it on battery charge, okay."

"No problem, babe. I understand. I just miss hearing your voice, y'know." He heard Verna breathing and, for a moment, thought he could smell her perfume; then he looked at the phone he was holding. *Hey, dummy, Verna uses this phone too.* He grinned to himself and said, "You reckon you'll be back on the weekend?" Bobby looked from the TV to him, realized that Jake was talking to Verna and made a motion to talk to her also. Jake nodded and held up a hand.

"I think so, Jake, but it all depends on the baby. I'd hate for Vicky to have the baby induced — that could drag on a week, and none of us can afford that." Jake could hear her light up a cigarette, but said nothing. She went on, "Tommy's on hand all the time, he's not going to work because he wants to be present at the birth."

“Yeah, okay. Hey, Bobby wants to have a few words.” He handed the phone to him and indicated that he wanted the phone back before Verna rang off. Bobby saluted jovially, stood up and was soon deep in conversation, wandering around the room. Jake sat back in the chair again and watched the closing minutes of the game, but he hardly paid any attention. He was more intent on what Bobby was saying, but he moved around so much, from room to room, he couldn’t make much sense of it.

When he got the phone back, Jake said, “So, what’s with Bobby? I heard a name — Yasmin — and somethin’ about visiting Detroit.”

“Yes, Jake — Bobby said he’d probably visit a girl friend of his this weekend. Her name is Yasmin, she has folks who live in Dearborn, and he said he’d be there on the weekend.”

“Huh, didn’t say anythin’ to me.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear him, lover. You are kind of busy a lot, you know.” She paused, and then continued, “Said he might come over to Tommy’s, but not sure. Said he’d call me. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, of course not,” he lied, but the tone in his voice didn’t quite match the nonchalance.

Verna chuckled, “Don’t worry, lover. I think I’ll be home soon, but I’d better go now. And I love you Jake...”

“Take it easy, babe. I love you too, always.” As he said “Bye”, the connection went dead.

The game was just ending and Bobby stretched and said, “Hey, pop, you want another coffee or something?”

Jake shook his head. “No thanks, son. I think I’ll crash for now.” He went to leave the room, then turned and said, “So, who’s Yasmin?”

Bobby grinned, his bright blue eyes shining with pleasure, “Oh, she’s a girl in my Pol Science course. Just started this year.” He brushed his hair back. “She’s nice, we get along quite well, I guess.”

“Anything more than just a friend? Not trying to pry, just interested, Bobby.”

He shrugged and Jake could see himself, just for a moment. “Can’t say yet, Dad. We think alike, so I guess that’s a good start.”

“Well, when your mother’s back, why don’t you invite her for dinner one evening?”

“I dunno, maybe. I’ll see how this weekend shapes up.” He stood and yawned. “I think I’ll get to bed also. G’night, Dad.”

“G’night, Bobby. Call me, would ya, if you go to Detroit?” Bobby nodded, yawning even more and waving as he left the room.

Jake sat for a moment longer, rubbed his eyes, and looked at the clock: 11:55p.m. He yawned and didn’t realize the point at which he fell asleep in the chair, thinking, *Gotta find that rig...*



Interchange 267, I-55, near Chicago, Illinois, Tuesday, January 7th, 2003, 11:50p.m.

As Bilal drove across I-55 he glanced at Jusef, who’d just settled back in the seat, and noted that it was almost mid-night. Another long drive lay ahead, but at least the stolen rig was now behind them, at the large truck stop at Exit 267, a few miles south of Chicago. Bilal grinned to himself as he imagined how long it would be before anybody queried a parked truck amongst the other three hundred or so that sat there, milling around and constantly being replaced. Granted, the stolen rig was unattended, but Jusef had left the engine running, with a full tank of diesel fuel; that way, it was less likely to be of any concern — any curious trucker would assume that the driver would be in the diner, enjoying a meal and the warmth.

What was it that Jusef had said — hide in plain sight?

When they’d arrived, Jusef had simply walked into the diner, grabbed a packet of cigarettes — he needed a refill anyway, he’d said — and walked out a side door to another part of the parking area where Bilal had been waiting in the darkness. Jusef said he’d never been to that particular stop before, so there was no chance of any employees at the diner recognizing him; and, there was only a slight risk of meeting another driver who would know him.

“Clean getaway, yes, Jusef?” Bilal smiled some more, showing his broken and tobacco stained teeth. He leaned over and pushed Jusef’s shoulder. “Hey, wake up when I talk to you.”

Jusef opened one eye and looked at Bilal with thinly veiled contempt. Then he closed it again, and said flatly, “So far, so good. That’s all.”

“Aargh, you’re like an old woman — always worrying.” Bilal lit a cigarette, happy that he was with another who smoked and who didn’t complain about *that*. He was getting sick of complainers, especially Rebekah, and was still smarting

from the face slapping that Ahmed had given him – *and in front of all of them*, he thought viciously. Silently, he brooded as he drove, thinking of what he'd like to do — *no, what I will do* — to Jusef, when Ahmed gave the word.

With his eyes closed, Jusef suddenly said, "Now that you've woken me up, you can tell me what you — or Ahmed — plan to do with those cannons."

Bilal giggled, in a fashion that was almost girlish. Surprised, Jusef open his eyes, looked at him and said, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Soon, you will find out, very soon. You just be ready to drive the other trailer with the cannons in it."

Jusef fell silent, wondering how far he could push Bilal to open up; he had to go carefully. He turned in the seat to face towards Bilal, trying to look and sound more friendly and said, "Look, I got all the other supplies for the trailer – the welding gear, the laser-levels, the vacuum pump, emergency lighting, and I even got the long wooden bench installed." That had been a lot of work, and had taken a few weeks, working alone. He pulled out his packet of cigarettes, lit one and offered another to Bilal, who took it and a light, but who continued to stare ahead, into the night, almost without blinking. "So, what's it all for?"

It happened so quickly, Jusef didn't even see it. One moment he was holding his cigarette between his lips, the next moment it had been sliced off a fraction from his nose, and then the long blade glinted in the dashboard lights, its point barely an inch from his left eye. Bilal held it steadily, while he continued to drive and said, "Do not ask any questions. If I suddenly swerved, this would be very painful for you, and you would take a long time to die. You are being paid to drive your truck when we are ready." He turned his face to meet Jusef's eyes. "Ask no more or Marta will die slowly before your eyes." The knife disappeared into his leg sheath and Jusef was glad to see both hands back on the steering wheel.

He sat back, still half-facing towards Bilal and remained silent, smoking his cigarette, but now worried sick about what would happen to Marta and him when they *were* ready. His cousin, Ibrahim, had told him that it would be a simple hijacking, after which Ahmed and his team would be gone. That was a lie also, now he realized. *Why do they still want me? I've done my part, but there's more. Why? I'm not a gangster, I've never killed anybody. What the fuck do they want?* Thoroughly depressed, he turned to look out the window, watching the distant lights of houses and buildings stream passed, wondering who those lucky people were, none of whom were in the jam he was in. In the glass, he saw Bilal's

reflection look over and grin at him, but he pretended not to notice. *I'm just a goddam driver, just a fuckin' driver who's trying to make a buck. Fuckin' Ibrahim, goddamn him — I wish I'd never taken that thirty thousand, fuck it.* He clenched and unclenched his fists in frustration and mounting anger, wanting, wishing he had a gun so that he could blow Bilal's brains out. *God, now I'm actually thinking about killing someone.* He felt a tear well up in his eye, and to cover his discomfort, he yawned deliberately and rubbed both eyes, then closed them, trying to go to sleep. But he didn't sleep, he couldn't and he felt his blood pressure rising. With his finger tips, he felt for his pills, found the bottle, opened it and carefully got one out which he quickly swallowed.

"What's that for?" Bilal was curious; he'd seen Jusef use the bottle a number of times.

He thought about what to say then grudgingly said, "Got a bit of heart condition. Marta makes me take them, but I can do without them, if I have to." He enjoyed lying to Bilal; *you ain't getting' anythin' more outta me, fuck you...* In actual fact, Jusef's doctor had told him that the blood pressure pills were the only things that were keeping him alive. An exaggeration probably, but still...

Bilal just grunted, and said no more.

They drove south on Route 53 and reached I-80 in twenty easy minutes, turning east on the freeway to head for I-94. From there, it was a good run all the way to the Michigan border where Jusef told Bilal to exit the freeway and take Route 12. "That way, we're less likely to see any highway patrol, and we don't hafta drive at freeway speed — more relaxing, okay."

Bilal merely grunted again, keeping his eyes on the road. It was snowing more heavily, and Jusef felt the wheels slipping and sliding.

Suddenly, Jusef felt sleep overcoming him. "I gotta get some shut-eye. Best keep the speed down in this weather, and... er... wake me if you need directions." Within thirty seconds, he was snoring loudly.

For a moment, Bilal looked over to him, his eyes glittering with hate. *Soon, you will know, Jusef, soon you will get to the heart of the matter,* he thought, and grinned again at his own private joke. He drove on steadily, eagerly thinking of the next few days.



Jusef's tactic of leaving the hijacked truck at a busy truck stop was sound in theory and would have sufficed, but it was the random intervention of the Velasquez brothers, at seven minutes past midnight that sealed the fate of the truck forever, and lifted Jusef's idea from being merely innovative to one that assumed the proportions of sheer genius.

As Luis Felipe stood on the brakes and brought his rig to a full stop, his brother, Enrico Maria, woke immediately, looked around and yawned. Both of them shrugged into their coats, dismounted and walked over to the big diner, leaving their rig running and locked. Beside their rig, the stolen truck chugged away quietly, but they gave it not even a cursory glance.

It was only after they returned from an hour-long meal — the first they'd had in the last fifteen hours — that Enrico took a closer look. As he and Luis were professional hijackers, they were always on the lookout for any opportunity.

Enrico noticed that the engine of the other truck had stalled — there were no exhaust fumes from the stack — and looked around for the driver, but he could see none. The driver could be asleep, of course, in his cabin, but all of the rig's lights were still on, even the interior light; *but the engine had stopped*.

No driver allows his engine to stop in winter, particularly at night, and especially when he's asleep. So, it looked very likely that the truck and trailer were minus a driver, for some unknown reason. *Who cares why*, he thought. He nudged Luis, who had his head down against the wind.

"Hey, Luis, look." Luis grunted but didn't look up. Enrico jabbed harder with his pointed elbow. "Luis — look now, maybe we have another score... "

His brother stopped and looked around at the parking area, noting what was happening and what was moving. Then he looked at the rig in question and then at Enrico. He shrugged. "Okay, let's take a look."

Hijacking trucks has its risks; both men knew that, from long experience. But, as with stealing anything in plain sight, the trick is to make like it's yours *anyway* and the Velasquez brothers were past masters. While Luis went to their truck to get their set of skeleton keys, Enrico simply walked around the other with his alarm scanner, ensuring that there were no surprises, but giving the appearance of performing a safety check. Grunting with satisfaction, he moved out of the way to let Luis open the driver's door. Enrico then went to the front of the rig and began to clean off accumulated snow and ice, but kept an eye out for anybody approaching.

Mounting quickly, Luis checked out the controls, found the copy of the manifest that Jusef had left on the floor, and quickly riffled through it. Enrico kept himself busy with the snow clearing, assuming the mantle of ownership, and looking around constantly, but carefully.

When Luis realized what the contents were, his grin broadened to the shape of a new moon and he leaned out the window and whispered hoarsely, “Enrico, we’ve hit the jackpot – this has treasures from a Spanish galleon, maybe gold!” He gave a thumbs up, and added, “Let’s get going *now*...”

A few minutes later, both trucks were heading south towards the Mexican border. Driving just over the speed limit, Luis — the brains of the team — figured they should be at Nogales, near the Mexican border, in about forty-eight hours, give or take.

That wasn’t to be.

After passing through St. Louis, Missouri, just before five a.m., Luis noticed the slight drop in the oil pressure, on the gauge in front of him. He stared at it and, as it settled back again, he made a mental note to check the level at the next stop.

Seven hours later, just past Tulsa, Oklahoma, the pressure dropped almost to zero, then struggled to climb again, fitfully. But now, of course, Luis knew that the level was good. Bleakly, he watched the needle drop further and backed off the revs. *No question — we gotta stop at Fernando’s in Oklahoma City and take a look.*

He told Enrico on the CB and then nursed the engine for the next hundred miles until both trucks pulled into the parking lot at Fernando’s Truck Repairs, on I-35 and just south of the city. It was just after three p.m., Wednesday, January 8th, and as he got down, Luis saw Fernando wave from the office as Enrico reached the broken rig.

“Now what?” asked Enrico. His voice was tired and dull.

Luis smiled broadly towards Fernando, waved, and said, “I’m thinking, I’m thinking — okay?”



Part Two: Cause and Effect

Chapter Four

Inkster, Michigan, Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 5:30a.m.

Waking up on a cold winter's morn is hard to do at the best of times. It was so warm in bed, though, Verna didn't even want to open an eye, but was almost desperate to snuggle down more. She moved her feet around, rubbing them on the sheets, creating an artificial, frictional heat that lasted a few seconds. She hated to think what the temperature was outside because the tip of her nose told her that the new baby's bedroom was very cold, despite the central heating that Tommy said was operating. Cautiously, she opened an eye, blinking the sleep out and trying to see the window through which the dawn light was only now starting to bring into sharper focus. She yawned hugely, taking in a deep, cold draught then shook her head, arched her back and stretched her arms and legs, one by one, going through the sequences she'd learnt at the self defense course. For another few moments, it felt glorious, but as the cold air generated more goose bumps on her arms, she dived under the covers, furiously working her arms and legs for more heat. Gradually, she felt more comfortable and then tried, as always, to recall her dream; but, just as always, it eluded her. *Well, not quite*, she thought. Whatever she did remember never made any sense anyway. *What the hell — who cares?* As best as she could in bed, she shrugged, and then groped for her watch: 5:45.

"Time to get moving, girl — you've got a breakfast to make," she said to the room, and giggled.

Throwing off the covers, she almost jumped out of the bed and spent the next fifteen minutes limbering up until a slight sheen of sweat covered her face. With a final pushup, she put on her housecoat and quietly made her way to the bathroom where she took a very hot, five-minute shower. By the time she got back to the bedroom and was fully dressed, with hair brushed and face in

reasonable condition, Verna felt ready to do battle in a strange kitchen, albeit her sister's.

Tommy and Vicky were renting a two-story condominium on Daley Street, which was just off Inkster Road on the south side of the Lower Rouge. Looking through the kitchen's picture window, Verna could just make out the outline of the river, now blanketed with snow. Idly, she wondered if there was any solid ice, thinking back to the times, in Montreal, when as a young girl, she'd been able to run around and skate on local streams and creeks with impunity. *Not so cold down here, though*, she thought. She turned, examined the kitchen, and found the makings for a good breakfast of ham and eggs, with toast and coffee. Soon, she had the fry pan sizzling and the kettle bubbling and didn't notice when Tommy came in through a side door; it was the blast of cold air that made her yelp with surprise.

"Hey, hey, Vern. Smells good... how's it goin'?" Tommy was shrugging off a heavy coat as he was talking. "Man, am I hungry!" He threw the coat onto a kitchen chair, chucked off his boots onto the rubber splash mat and tiptoed his big frame around the table to sit at the head of the table, leaving a faint wet trail behind him. He grinned like a five-year old and said, "I'm here... let's eat," and bellowed, a deep laugh coming all the way from his stomach. Or, at least, that's how it looked and sounded to Verna.

"Okay, big guy — comin' at yer, right now," she said, and had to laugh with him, unashamedly adding to his infectious conviviality. She flipped the eggs expertly, allowing a ten second sizzle on the sunny side, flipped them again, slid them onto a plate with five pieces of ham, added four slices of toast and then slid the lot on the table to stop a bare six inches from his belly. He watched as the plate came to a stop, looked up at Verna and said, "But... I like eggs with very soft yolks."

For a moment, Verna was nonplussed, looking at his crestfallen face, egg skillet in one hand, the other still outstretched across the table. Then he brightened and said, "Gotcha..." and began to eat as though he'd not eaten for a month.

Laughing aloud now, Verna prepared a plate for herself and a few minutes later, was eating with almost the same gusto. In between mouthfuls, she said, "Been out already, eh?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I was up at five and went down to check out my rig, make sure it's okay." He pointed with his knife, now dripping with egg yolk. "I got a

deal with a gas station down the road, on Inkster — I can park my rig there. For a price, of course. No wheres t'park it round this condo, that's fer sure."

"How far?" Verna hadn't noticed it the evening before. *But then, why would I*, she thought.

"Oh, 'bout half a click, is all. It's good exercise every mornin' anyway."

Verna raised one eyebrow. "Not worried about carjackers... er... hijackers?"

"Nah. It's a twenty-four-seven operation there, pretty busy. Haven't even had light bulb taken, yet." He grinned again. "Anyways, it's insured to the hilt — hasta be. If it's stolen, it's stolen. I can always get another." He paused and then said, "But, that's not the same with my car." He finished up his coffee and said, "Thanks, Verna. That was great." He stood and, beckoning to her, said, "C'mon, come'n' and take a look at this..." Without waiting, he went down the corridor and through the door that Verna had seen earlier and had wondered about. Holding her coffee, and munching the last of the ham, she followed.

As she went the door, Tommy turned on the light and shouted "Ta-Daaaa!"

Shimmering in yellow/orange paintwork, looking as if it was just from a 1969 showroom, stood a fully restored Mustang fastback. Never one for autos, Verna could appreciate the vehicle but not the mystique. Tommy, however, was positively beaming, and took his time to extol the virtues of his pride and joy.

"But, Tommy — the color?" She was grinning and shaking her head at the same time.

"Ah, well — yer can't miss it, that's fer sure. That way, nobody is likely to hit it, right? And, if they do, well... then I'll just kill 'em, right?" He folded his arms and cocked his head onto one side, daring her to dispute it. But he was grinning also.

"Hmmm..." was all she said, and peered — or tried to peer — through the heavily tinted windows, but soon gave up. Verna straightened and walked around the car, making more appreciative noises.

After a few minutes, though, Tommy could see that Verna had as much interest in it as she had in contracting cancer, so he turned to usher her out. At that moment, something else caught her eye and she said, "What's that, over in the corner, covered with the tarp?" The Mustang occupied one half of the garage, the other half with the usual detritus of auto fanatics.

Tommy glanced back, from where he was standing in the doorway. "Oh... that's my skidoo. Haven't had much chance to use it lately. Wanna look?" Again

without waiting, he went over to it and pulled off the cover, revealing a bright red snowmobile. Verna put her cup down and went over,

“Does it work?” Verna looked excited, her eyes bright with anticipation, something that Tommy had not seen before.

He chuckled and said, “Lady, if somethin’ don’t work, I don’t keep it.” He turned the key, primed the fuel pump and pressed the starter. After the third turn, the engine started easily and quickly settled into a steady drone. Over the noise, Tommy shouted, “You like skidoos?”

She nodded vigorously, grinning from ear to ear.

He leaned over, and took two helmets from a rack and threw one to her, while placing the other on his head. “Okay then, let’s suit up and get going.” He grinned at her. “There’s a suit that Vicky uses hanging in the closet there,” he pointed to it, “so if you get that on, I’ll get mine, okay.”

While she put the suit on, Tommy opened the garage door and inched the skidoo forward to let it sit on the fresh snow, engine idling. Quickly getting into his suit, he turned to Verna and said, “Ready?”

She’d wrapped a big scarf about her face, and then placed the helmet firmly on her head, grateful that Vicky and she were the same in size. As she sat on the pillion, behind Tommy, he closed the door with his remote switch and put it in his pocket, then said, “Any place you want to go?” He heard her muffled ‘No’, gunned the engine and shouted, “Okay, hang on. Gonna take you to one of my favorite spots. Let’s go.” He let the clutch in slowly and they were off. As they left the driveway, Verna realized irritably that she’d left her cell phone on the dresser beside the bed, was on the point of stopping Tommy to tell him, then changed her mind and hoped that Jake was still asleep.

The last time Verna had been on a snowmobile was when she was sixteen and, as Tommy surged and spun the tracks, the memories came flooding back. Her parents had lived on the southern end of Montreal Island, in Pierrefonds, a small suburb. Every winter meant clogged roads, mountainous snowdrifts and plenty of opportunity to ride behind one of her older brothers on one of the three skidoos the family used. With her arms trying to hold onto Tommy’s expanse, and her head resting on his back, it was as if she was there once more, racing down Gouin Boulevard. What she hadn’t remembered were all the jarring bumps as Tommy expertly negotiated his way through the city streets, across the Suffolk-Northern railroad at the crossing, and scooted on down the edge for about ten minutes, eventually stopping at the top of a cutting. As the engine idled, he said,

“This is where I come when I want to watch the trains, y’know. It’s one of my watch points — during the summer, of course — although I don’t tell anybody about it. Until now, that is.” Twisting his head, he continued, “I shouldn’t be at this spot but, what the hell...railroad marshals are getting tougher since 9/11, all over.” He shrugged as though dismissing the matter.

Verna looked up and down the tracks, but they were clear of trains, and the snow, which merely threatened a few minutes ago, was now falling and getting heavier and thicker quickly. Above the noise of the gathering wind, she said, “Reminds me of when I used to live in Montreal, with my folks, watching the freight trains. Sometimes my brothers would do it for hours, but not me, and Vicky was way too young.”

Tommy grunted and said, “I’ve been all around these tracks, on and off, over the years, know them like the back of my hand.” He pointed to the south and west. “Down thataways, there’s some disused sections from way back, and even a few tunnels on one section that cut through some hills.” Almost wistfully, he said, “But it’s all going now, all to progress — so-called.” Then, he twisted around again and Verna could see his big smile as he said, “Ah, but now me and others can skidoo on those old sections as all the rail was ripped up long ago — just a road track now, but only good for these things. And, SUVs, of course.” Slapping the gas tank, he said, “It’s great fun — you’d love it.”

“Well, let’s get on down there,” said Verna. “I’d love t’see...”

“No time now, Vern... gotta get back t’see Vicky, she’s expectin’ me there at the hospital pretty soon.” He gunned the throttle and carefully swung the machine around. “Hang on,” he shouted.

Verna needed no encouragement and was in fact thankful when Tommy slid back into the driveway to stop just short of the door. Rubbing her bottom, she dismounted and gratefully took off the helmet, allowing her hair to billow in the wind. She gave a mock groan and said, “Ouch, too much city living, Tommy. I guess I’m way out of condition — in certain areas.”

“You go in, Vern,” he said, tossing her the door keys, “get yerself a good hot shower. I’ll get this’n inside.”

As she opened the door, the wind fairly blew it wide so that it banged against the doorstep with a shudder. Shivering, she closed it quickly, and threw off the snowsuit and gloves. Next came the boots and heavy socks, both now sodden, all of which she carried to the door to the garage, dropping them there, while she continued to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. When Tommy came in

through the side door a few minutes later, the coffee was almost ready — the smell permeated the lower section of the house — and Verna was leaning back in a chair, smoking her first cigarette of the day.

“Smells good, Vern. But, I think I’ll wait till I get back later, okay.” He left his boots on the tray and said, “I’ll shower first, if yer don’ mind, then I’ll get on my way t’Vicky.”

“Sure thing, Tommy. I’ve got a lot of schoolwork to do, so I’ll be okay. Tell Vicky I’ll see her later.” He nodded and turned to go, but she continued, “Say, maybe I could cook you a dinner tonight?” She raised her eyebrows. “Steak okay?” Hurriedly, she added, “D’you have any in the freezer?”

He laughed and said, “Yeah, plenty of that around. Help yourself. And, yeah... a steak dinner sounds good t’me.”

Twenty minutes later, he shouted ‘Bye’ from the front door and left in Vicky’s Pontiac GTO that was parked in the driveway. As she heard the growl of the Pontiac fade, Verna crushed her second cigarette and reached for the phone to call Jake at his office. As she did, she glanced at the wall clock: 8:45a.m.



Washington, D.C., Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 5:30a.m.

Jake woke with a start, the jumbled course of events of the previous day mingling crazily with the dream that forced him to wakefulness. Desperately, as his level of consciousness moved from the last stages of sleep to full cognition, he clung to the last point of reality that made any sense: *he had to talk to Ingram about those cannons, get more information.* Groggily, he remembered: he’d left a message with security at the museum, and went to get up to find the phone. As he did so, he suddenly realized that he was still in his chair. *Fuck it.* For a few moments, he rested his head in his hands and leaned forward; then he rubbed his face vigorously and finished with a rub over his cropped scalp. Cautiously, he stood and stretched, raising his arms high and arching his back, and for a few minutes, vaguely attempted to do what he’d seen Verna doing over the last few weeks. Then, he bent forward and tried to touch his toes, failing by about half an inch. *Still, not to bad...* and straightened up, breathing in deeply. He did that ten times and just managed to just touch one big toe with his outstretched fingers.

There you go, Cutter. Persistence pays off. He stopped, panting for a few moments.

The clock stood at 5:45 as he pulled the curtains apart to look out upon the gray, sleety day that was just beginning. Grimacing, he turned on his radio to catch the weather reports and picked up the phone to call Verna, looked again at the clock, hesitated and then shook his head. *Too early... call later.* As he headed for the shower, he banged on Bobby's bedroom door and yelled, "Up and at 'em, bucko — time to keep the American dream going. Let's go." He heard a faint, "Aww, leave off, Pop," grinned and continued down into his *en suite*.

By the time he'd finished showering and dressed, he could hear Bobby up and about in the kitchen. When he got down there, Bobby was sitting at the table munching on some breakfast cereal and listening to a CD on his portable player, nodding his head with the rhythm. He waved, mumbled a "G'mornin' " through a mouthful and kept on.

Jake fixed himself some scrambled eggs with toast and poured some of the coffee that Bobby had prepared. In five minutes, it was gone and Jake rose to leave, giving Bobby a wave. His son took off his earphones, turned off the CD player and said, "You'll pay for that later, Pop," and shook a finger in mock severity, "Heartburn, y'know..."

Jake gave a small burp in response, and said, "You have a good day, now, okay Bobby."

"Oh, sure, Pop." As Jake went through the door, he called out, "Hey, Pop, I think I *will* go to Detroit t'see Yasmin. Might call in t'see Aunt Vicky also — and Mom, of course."

"Fine, Bobby — take care, radio said it's worse weather up there than here right now. See ya later." He shut the door firmly, and quickly got his car started. Five minutes later, he was on the freeway. The clock on the car's dash showed 6:45. Easing into the traffic, he searched his voice mail on the cell phone but there were no messages. *Maybe Ingram hasn't got my message yet?* Driving with one hand, he then punched in Verna's cell phone number only to get back the usual unavailable message. *She said she was gonna keep it on...* Disgruntled now, he threw the phone on the seat and urged the car forward; he had plans to go over details for the Friday sting with Stilts and he had to be at the office for the bull session about the terrorist alert at seven. He looked at the time again: 6:52... *Gonna be late again anyway.* He shrugged to himself, slid a toothpick between his lips and pressed down on the gas.

At 7:10, he sidled quietly into the operations room and was surprised to see that Adams was late. He said 'Hi' to Johnson and was about to pump him for any information, when Adams came through, went to the podium and began. It didn't last very long at all.

"Sorry to be late, gentlemen, but there is not much to report. And, I only received the latest from the Director two minutes ago." Looking now down at a fax, Adams began to read: "The subject has now been in contact with two other, previously unknown, suspected terrorists, both of whom are male, of Middle Eastern extraction and whose backgrounds are now under full investigation." Adams looked up and added, "Looks like that we've cracked into a sleeper cell that we didn't know about until now." He went back to the fax, "For the last twelve hours, all three have remained at a two acre property on the outskirts of Denver, and have not moved from there at all. Video, audio and infrared tracking equipment is being used to monitor all movements inside the house and around the property. As yet, there has been no attempt, by the suspects, to move from that position. Portable radiological equipment is being brought in to scan the area for any sign of abnormal radioactivity." Adams looked up again and his gaze swept all assembled. "We won't get any feedback about that for a few more hours, but the Director told me on the phone that he's expecting additional information later this morning." He looked again at the fax, then said, "That's about all, the rest of this is not relevant." He stopped and took a drink of water. "Any questions or comments."

Jake listened with only half an ear to the usual run of questions from his colleagues; he was thinking more about Verna and why there was no answer to his call. He'd met Tommy once before and liked the guy; and he'd been impressed with Tommy's sense of values. *You couldn't find a more honest, hard-working, rock solid piece of America — a standup guy, no question.* Vaguely, he felt troubled, but wasn't sure why. He glanced at his watch: 7:30. *I wonder what she's doin' now? What are they doin'?* He heard Johnson ask another fatuous question that Adams barely deemed to answer, but did anyway. Some other questions about evacuation in case of nuclear detonation, Special Forces readiness, the news leak about the mock alert to be staged at Colorado Springs later that day, a few others, all except the one question that was uppermost in Jake's mind when he suddenly said aloud: "What the *fuck* are they *doin'* in that house anyway?" while smashing his fist and palm together with a loud smack.

Adams looked directly at Jake. "As I said, Jake, they're there, but we don't have any specific intel on their precise activities inside the house as yet. As soon as we get reports through from all the electronic gear, then we'll know." He stopped and looked more closely at Jake. "Are you all right, Jake?"

Jake rubbed his face to hide his embarrassment and to remove a slight sweat from his brow, "Oh, sure, boss. Just a bit edgy, I guess." He shrugged. "I'm okay, I'm cool."

For just a moment longer, Adams looked hard into Jake's eyes and thought, *Is this guy cracking up?* He put the thought aside, and then said to the roomful, "Anything more? No? Okay, I expect to have more information later today. Let's get moving." He saw Jake leaving hurriedly and called him back. "Jake, can I have a few moments?"

Jake stood to the side of the door while the rest filed out then returned, closing the door behind him. "Yeah, sure. What's up?" He sat at the long table again, as Adams sat opposite.

"You look a bit worried, Jake. I know you — remember? And, don't try and tell me that you're tired, or over-worked, or whatever." He paused to run his fingers through his hair. "Is it Verna?"

Almost too quickly, Jake said, "No!" But, then he carried on with the lie and said, "No, she's fine, in Detroit helping out her sister, Vicky." He hesitated for a second, then continued, "It's just this hijacking that's been bothering me, y'know. It's really bugging me, and I'm not sure why." That *was* true, of course, and Adams decided, then and there, not to press further on the topic of Verna. Jake then went on to recount all of the details known about the hijacking, the contents, his conversation with Ricardo and his enquiries with the Detroit Museum.

When Jake stopped talking, Adams said, "So... what d'you want to do?"

"I'll be talking with Ingram today, one way or the other, but I think I'll hafta go to Detroit. I'd like to find out more about those cannons."

Adams grimaced. "Seems an unlikely vehicle to hide drugs in. Very small capacity – what'd you say, a cubic foot maximum?"

"Well, maybe a bit more, but that's only an assumption, boss; but, Ingram can shed more light on that. More importantly, I'd like to get a feel from him about the insider angle: so far, we have no idea about the identity of the perps."

"So... ?" Adams leaned back, tapping his fingers on the table. At the same time, he cocked his head on one side and turned his lips down.

“If you agree, I’ll take a commuter flight to Detroit later today, see Ingram, maybe see Jackson’s widow — I don’t think he was involved, but ya never know — and, if there’s time, I’ll check t’see how Verna is.” He raised his eyebrows briefly, then said, “How does that sit with you?”

Adams said nothing for a few seconds, weighing the pros and cons. On the one hand, the local FBI office in Detroit could do exactly the same, but would maybe take more time; on the plus side, Jake would get to the answers more quickly maybe, *and* could possibly resolve the Verna thing more quickly. Suddenly, he remembered his demand from last night. “D’you have that budget stuff ready?”

Jake nodded; he’d had it ready two days earlier, but just hadn’t told Adams.

Adams sucked at his teeth as he drew in his breath and finally said, “Okay, Jake. Do it your way, but get it done.” Then he remembered another point. “What about releasing the news about the hijacked truck?”

Jake shook his head, “I’d say no to that for now, until we know more. There’s an all points out on it, but I don’t want the perps t’know that we know it’s been hijacked. They *probably* think they’ve covered their tracks well... and I don’t wanna spook them, not yet anyways.”

Adams nodded, but said, “Okay, I guess you’re right, for now. But keep it in mind, hmmm.”

“Sure, of course, but only when we’re closer to where the most likely location is.” With thousands of trucks hijacked each year across the continental United States, Jake knew that the chances of finding just one stolen truck quickly were highly unlikely, in fact about one in every hundred. They might get lucky, of course, if the truck was abandoned and then spotted, but that was long odds. He added, “I’ve got Wendy checking up and down I-Seventy-Five, from Fort Lauderdale to Detroit, passing on the details to all law enforcement offices. Maybe somebody saw it, but we’ll just have to wait ‘n’ see.” He shrugged. “It’s the best we can do at this stage.”

“Fine, that’ll have t’do for now,” said Adams, “but, on another matter, if you’re in Detroit, what’s your change of plans for Friday’s op in Springfield?”

“No problem, I plan to be back on Friday, early. Later today, I’ll iron out the final details with Stilts.” Reluctantly, he added, “If push comes to shove, I’ll be back tomorrow night.” That seemed to satisfy his boss.

“Good, that sounds fine. Just don’t fuck it up — in Detroit *or* in Springfield.” Adams leaned forward. “Look, Jake, a lotta guys are a bit skittish about you, *and* your methods, you *know* that, f’Chrissake.”

Jake stood, taking that as his cue to leave. “I’ll be good, I’ll keep in touch with the Detroit office — that’s a done deal.”

As he left the room, Adams called after him, “Jake, give my regards to Verna, okay.”

Jake smiled and gave a thumbs-up sign as he closed the door, thinking... *That’s if I get to see her.*



When he got back to his office, there was a message from Wendy on his desk: the director of the museum, Dr Ingram, had called at 8:05. He looked at the wall clock: 8:15. As he dialed the number back, he saw that there was another message, from Carl Jamieson at the Atlanta office, with a cryptic note in Wendy’s erratic scribble — after more extensive searching, a carton of heroin had been found near the crash site, about twenty yards from where Jackson’s body had lain. Jake made a note to call back later as he listened to the phone ringing in somebody’s office in downtown Detroit.

On the tenth ring, the phone was answered and, after moments later, Dr Ingram came on the line. Once again, Jake introduced himself as quickly as possible and then went through the recent history of the hijacked truck and Jackson’s murder. When he finished, without interruption, there was a very long pause.

“I’m still here, Mr Cutter. Just making some notes as you were talking.” There was another brief silence, then, “Well, that *is* bad news, Mr Cutter.” The voice was precise, cultured and definitely not American, although there were hints of that accent. Jake couldn’t quite place it. Ingram continued, “Naturally, I’m very sorry to hear about the death of the driver; what an *awful* business.” Jake heard the man sigh, audibly. “What can I do to help, Mr Cutter?” *Is that an act for my benefit*, Jake thought?

Aloud, he said, “Dr Ingram, we’re obviously looking at all the angles we can to arrive at some kind of motive — other than heisting just a truckload of ancient artifacts... er... no offense intended.”

Very mildly, Ingram said, “None taken, Mr Cutter. *Do* carry on...”

British, that's it! He's a lousy Limey, but been here a few years.

"Well, I need to come to your office, today. I'd like to talk to you directly about some aspects that I find puzzling, and I think it's best if we talk face to face."

"Can you give me some idea, Mr Cutter. Although I want to help, naturally, I do have other things on my plate, so to speak. What *exactly* is so puzzling?" Ingram never raised his voice, but the authority was there.

"There's a possibility your container of artifacts may have been a cover for a drug shipment. Other incidents that occurred near the same time and place involved known drug dealers, so we just want to explore all the angles." Before Ingram could reply, he added, "I'd like to know more about all the items in your shipment also, get a better feel for what they look like, how valuable, that sort of thing."

There was another extended silence and Jake thought he just heard Ingram making notes. Presently, Ingram said, "Well, of course, many of the artifacts are priceless in a very real sense. That of course just about renders them worthless as stolen items on the open market. Very few people would be able to harbor those things, let alone sell them to some unscrupulous dealers. Artistic treasures are, by their nature, very difficult to dispose of and, what's more, one must find the right buyer. *Not* an easy task, at all."

"All the more reason that we suspect some other reason for the high-jacking." Jake spat the toothpick from his mouth.

"Yes, you're probably correct, Mr Cutter... "

"And, seeing as how those cannons — part of *your* shipment — had already been stolen once before, in the Dominican Republic — and recently, it sorta bolsters the case for a motive other than just mere stealing, y'know?" Jake began chewing on another toothpick.

"Hmmm, yes, I was about to mention that item to *you*, Mr Cutter, but I see you're ahead of me already."

Were you, Mr Ingram, were you? "So, what about it? I can get up there within two hours, air traffic and weather willing, but certainly by early afternoon."

"Yes, of course, Mr Cutter. We want the artifacts back and we want the murderers of Jackson apprehended." Ingram paused again, and then said, "Mr Cutter, I hope that you don't think I was trying to be uncooperative. Please believe that."

He sounded genuine, and Jake found himself beginning to think that he may be, despite his initial misgivings. “Er, no, not at all,” he said, and rolled his eyes.

“Fine then. I’ll be expecting you. Bye now.” The line went dead.

Jake put the phone down slowly and tapped his teeth with the toothpick for a few moments. Then, he made some notes, placed them in the case file and called Carl in Atlanta who, after the usual banter, confirmed that his team had found a hundred kilos of the highest grade heroin they’d seen in a long time. “In fact,” Carl went on to say, “it’s so good — if I can use that term — that I wonder if it’s from South America at all.”

“Any theories?” said Jake.

“Nope, just a gut feel, is all. We’ll keep checkin’ around, let you know if we find anything definite, okay.”

“Sounds good, Carl. Thanks for the quick help on this one, buddy.”

“*No problemo*, Jake. But... you owe me. Again!” and laughed as he cut the connection.

Grinning, Jake put the phone down and stood to stretch. As he did, the phone rang.

“Hi there, lover,” said Verna.

Jake looked at the clock: 8:45. “Hi, babe -- great to hear your voice. How’d yer sleep?”

“Terrific — I loved it.” Then she sounded sad. “But, you’re not here with me to enjoy it too.”

Jake ignored that, but said, “So, how’s Vicky and Tommy? Everythin’ okay with them?” He threw a sodden toothpick towards the waste bin; it missed. Then he added, “Yeah, well — pretty busy here, got another crazy case to solve, you know me, eh.”

“Hmmm — mmm, yep, sure do, Jake. Just make sure you look after yourself. How’s Bobby, all right?”

“He’s fine, gone to college this mornin’. But, he said he’s gonna get up there to Dearborn, where his new girl lives with her parents; you know, Yasmin.”

“Oh that’s fine. Maybe I’ll get a chance to meet her?” She sounded radiant, and as he pictured her, he was suddenly insanely jealous of Tommy for being able to see what he couldn’t.

“Well, he said he’d call you and maybe get out to Inkster to see Vicky and Tommy also.” He kept his voice as neutral as he could, but he had beads of

sweat on his forehead and his hand shook with repressed anger. He took a deep breath.

“You okay, lover?” Verna sounded worried, concerned.

You’re the second person today, he thought sourly.

“Yeah, yeah,” he lied. *And, that for the second time today too, asshole.* “Just got a lot on my mind, is all. And,” he added quickly, “just glad to know that you’re okay.” He meant it, every bit of it. Then he said, “What’ve you and Tommy been doin’?” and tried to stop his jealous mind from going berserk.

For the next few minutes, he listened to her account of the hospital visit, the pancakes and maple syrup, the skidoo ride, the short history of the Suffolk-Northern railroad, Tommy’s orange Mustang, the warm, inviting breakfast of that morning. She stopped, almost out of breath, then said, “Oh, Jake, I wish you were here with me. I *do* love you so.” She paused, “Only...”

“Only what, babe?” he forced himself to ask, quietly and calmly, but his hand still shook.

“Just that... well, I just wish you could be *really* with me, more often, y’know.” He heard her sigh, long and low.

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry I hafta work for a livin’, okay.” His voice grated more than he’d wanted it to and he snapped his pen, some of the ink messing his hand. Cursing under his breath, he started to use some tissues to clean it up, cradling the phone on his shoulder.

“Jake, oh, Jake... you *know* what I mean.” She stopped and then he heard her light up, and blow smoke down the phone. *Bitch*, he thought.

“Look, babe, I’ll call ya later, okay. Got another call comin’ in.” *Is this how it’s gonna be, asshole – lyin’ all the time?* He had to get off the phone before he exploded.

“Sure, take the god dammed call – just don’t expect me to be waiting for it here, okay.” He heard a loud noise as the phone hit its cradle.

Jake threw the broken pen into the waste bin viciously. “Fuck it, just FUCK IT!” He stood quickly and paced the room, walking to the window and placing his head on the frigid glass. The sleety snow rushed wildly passed, whipped and tossed by the strengthening storm; the cold felt good and he let his hands rest on the glass, palm outwards. He rested there, thinking of nothing, just trying to cool down. He knew he’d blown it again, just like the other night and many nights before. *Christ almighty, Verna, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Just help me, babe... help me.*

In his anguish, Jake hadn’t heard Wendy come to the door.

“Er, boss, you okay?”

Fuck, not a third person, please... With an effort, Jake composed his face and, wiping the cold condensation from the window on his hands and face, he turned and said, “Man, it gets hot in these offices sometimes, eh, Wen? Oh, I’m fine, okay. Just tryin’ t’cool off a bit.” He wiped his face with another tissue.

Wendy had a heavy sweater on and looked at Jake quizzically, but said nothing. As she turned to go, Jake called her back.

“Ah, Wen, would you get me a flight to Detroit, later this morning if possible. But, as soon as possible today, anyway, okay.” He looked at her and smiled reassuringly. “By the way, any more news about the stolen truck?” She shook her head. “Well, keep me posted...”

“Don’t I always?”

He looked at her and shrugged. “Point taken. Sorry.”

“No problem, boss. I’ll get that booking to Detroit.” But, she still sounded a bit miffed.

“Fine. Do that,” and he looked at the clock: 9:20.



Near Macon, Michigan, Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 9:00a.m.

The night had passed fitfully for Ahmed, as he woke occasionally to listen to the wind and to mentally assess their progress: all seemed to be going as planned. After a quick breakfast, at 6:00a.m., of weak tea, bread and some goat’s cheese, he was pacing, not nervously, but simply with full concentration, as he considered the remaining tasks.

But now, as he walked by the open trailer for the twentieth time that morning, again he asked of Rebekah: “Are you progressing well?”

She didn’t hear him because of the noise. He banged the floor of the trailer with his big hand and shouted, “Rebekah, is everything going to plan?”

Rebekah, bent over and with full welding gear on, felt the vibration and looked towards the end of the trailer. She stopped the hot torch, turned off a large electric fan that had been blowing the hot gases out of the trailer, pushed up the heavy facemask and said, “Please, Ahmed, please do not interrupt. Everything is fine, the welding is good — better than I expected. And, we’re saving a bit of time by eliminating the need to drill and tap a hole for the vacuum pump.”

Ahmed nodded; Ayesah had explained to him that the evacuation of air from the gun barrel was not crucial. Rebekah looked at him for a second more then pushed the facemask down, lit the torch again and went back to work.

Ahmed stepped back further as the hot gases once again streamed from the rear of the trailer. From an oblique angle, he peered again at the bronze cannons, now mounted on the heavy hardwood bench that Jusef had constructed, and bolted down, weeks earlier, and once again thought about the night before.



Before Jusef had left to dump the stolen truck, Ahmed had watched as he had carefully hoisted one of the guns and with great precision had lowered it onto the wheeled dolly that rested on the twelve-foot section of railroad track bolted to the bench. As the weight bore down, the dolly rocked slightly even though the brake was fully on and, as the chains went limp, the cannon came to rest in its prepared cradle with the bore facing the rear. The deep bronze almost glowed in the bright lights and Ahmed marveled, once again, at the skill of those who had restored them.

While he was admiring it, Jusef backed out the crane, stopped it and dismounted. Coming up to Ahmed, he said, “Craziest thing I ever seen, Ahmed.” Jumping into the trailer, he walked around it, feeling the metal and admiring the craftsmanship. “Nice piece of weaponry. What yer gonna do — rob a bank from the back of a truck?” He slapped his thigh and laughed.

Ahmed stifled an angry reply and merely said, “All you’ll have to do is drive this,” he pointed to the trailer, “to another place soon, and we’ll do the rest.”

“How far?”

“Very close, it won’t take long at all. Then you’ll be able to go.”

Jusef hesitated for just a fraction, and then said, “What about my money?”

“I will send an email to our contact offshore, and he will transfer the money to your account already waiting in the Cayman Islands.”

Jusef shifted his feet, looked at Ahmed, looked away, then back at him. “Well, okay, I guess that will be fine...” His cousin had already told him, by letter, that the thirty thousand he owed was forgiven; as instructed, he’d burnt the letter after reading. But now, Ahmed confirmed for him what Ibrahim had also said in the letter. He felt better now. “Guess I’d better get the other gun into the trailer, eh,” and he went to go to the crane, but Ahmed called him back.

“No — you go now with Bilal to dump the stolen truck. I’ll load the other gun into place.”

That surprised Jusef: *Ahmed usually gets others to do all the dirty work.* Raising his eyebrows, he said, “You sure ‘bout that?” Anticipating trouble, he added quickly, “Not that I doubt yer skill, Ahmed... “ and stopped, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“Just go. Now. I can manage with the women to help.” With a wave, he dismissed Jusef as he would an annoying fly, and with as much disdain. Ahmed had used heavy equipment before, not unlike the crane, in a variety of prior experiences, most notably building construction in Saudi Arabia, in the late eighties. So, it had been relatively easy for him to familiarize himself with the controls within a few minutes, and practice a few lifting operations after Jusef and Bilal had departed. When fully satisfied in his knowledge, he placed the other cannon, on the second waiting dolly, with its muzzle facing directly towards the other. Grunting with self-satisfaction, Ahmed backed off the crane, turned it carefully and drove it to the rear of the garage in the middle bay; its work was done.

Dismounting quickly, he waved to Rebekah who’d been patiently waiting while the cannons had been loaded. “Now, Rebekah, get the laser-leveling gear set up — I want you and Ayeshah to have that done as soon as possible. I have work to do in the house, but I won’t be long.” He knew what they had to do, and also knew that he couldn’t contribute to this part of the plan: precisely aligning the bores of both cannons so that they formed one continuous tube, without any deviation between vertical and horizontal axes. Using commercially available lasers that Jusef had bought locally, Ahmed knew, from prior testing three years earlier in Pakistan, that the job could take an hour or more. He also knew that they could do it because they had done it already, in Pakistan. While they started that delicate process, he had something equally important to do.

He stopped at the other car purchased for them by their contacts in Miami, and opened the trunk. Reaching in, he pulled out the long green overnight bag that had been there for a week or more and carried it over to Jusef’s house. He went through the back door and into the kitchen where Marta had been preparing a meal and told her not to bother him as he went down to the basement. There, he checked the contents of the bag: twenty five kilos of C4 plastic explosive, with detonators and remote switches.

For the next hour, he’d been very busy, making his preparations.



Now, as he waved away the acrid fumes that still billowed from the trailer, he briefly wondered what Jusef would think when he saw both guns welded together at the muzzles. *Surely then, he will think me possessed of a jinn.* He gave a low, grim belly laugh that only he could hear.

Rebekah killed the welding torch, but left the fan on as she pulled off her welding coverall and facemask, dropped them on the concrete floor and jumped down after them. “It’s done, finished. We just now wait a while for the fumes to clear and the heat to dissipate.”

Ahmed reached out and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “That is good work, Rebekah. You and Ayeshah have, once again, proved your loyalty to our jihad against the Great Satan.” He squeezed her shoulder again, making sure that she felt comfortable. *It seems so,* he thought.

She pulled away and said, “Later, Ayeshah can prepare the uranium slugs and the necessary detonators for the double-gun.” She smiled slightly and said, “Right now, I will have a shower — I feel very grimy.”

“Good, yes, you do that. You need some rest now, and we have time.” He watched her pick up her winter jacket, slip it over her head and walk across to the house. Ayeshah was already over there, now resting also, after helping with the leveling process. He watched her enter the house, then went back to the trailer, heaved himself up and slowly inspected the work done so far.

The central weld, where the muzzles were joined, looked far superior to those that Rebekah had done on the old cast iron cannons used in Pakistan, and looking down the conjoined barrels, Ahmed failed to see any defects or deformities in the alignment. He grunted to himself. Then he examined the dollies and cradles upon which the guns sat, noting how they’d been securely strapped and bolted to each, so that the whole unit could move as one, on the rails easily. After trial and error, in Pakistan, they’d found that leveling and shimming were much easier that way. And, once leveled and joined, it was then an easy matter to lock the small steel rail wheels in place, so that no amount of pushing and shoving would move it. That was crucial. Although he told the truth to Jusef when he said that the cannons didn’t have far to go, Ahmed didn’t want any risk of the cannons moving if the truck had to stop quickly.

He was a big man, and very strong, and when he pushed against the end of the whole unit with all his strength, he couldn't feel the slightest movement. He moved to one side and sat down with his back against the trailer wall. Bracing himself and placing both feet on the side of the heavy bench, he again pushed with all his strength of his legs and back until the veins bulged from his head. He heard only a slight creak from one of the wooden cross-struts. He stopped, breathing heavily. "Allah be praised — this will not move over such a short distance, even if the weather and conditions *are* very bad." Still panting from his exertion, but for good measure, he went to the other side and repeated his test, pushing until he felt the trailer *wall* begin to bulge against his back. "Ah, that is good," he said, mopping his brow with a rag.

He got up, wiping his hands with the rag, looking at the whole assembly and thinking of the devastation to come. Like others before him, he would be a martyr for Islam; but in becoming so, he would be dealing a catastrophic blow to the economy and people of this hated and reviled land. With something bordering on contempt, he thought of the disruption and death that would result from this attack, far surpassing the economic and psychological effect of the attack on the Twin Towers. He fell to his knees, facing Mecca and, even though it was not time for prayer, he felt an urgent need to praise Allah and give thanks; and, for the next few minutes, the howl of the wind outside joined in unholy unison with his almost incoherent mutterings.

Satisfied at last, Ahmed sat back on his heels and wiped his face and beard, then rose quickly, dusted off his trousers, put on his winter jacket and trudged over to the house, keeping his head down against the wind. Marta, who was again in the kitchen staring out the window, turned and looked at Ahmed as he entered but said nothing as she turned her face away, to keep gazing through the glass. In the reflection, she saw Ahmed look at her with studied dislike, perhaps even hatred, but she didn't care. As he closed the door, she began to make a pot of coffee, as she felt that Jusef would soon be awake. He and Bilal had made it back to the farm at 3:00a.m. that morning; she knew that because they had woken her as they came into the house and she'd noted the time. *But, he would still be tired*, she thought. Sorrowfully, she again wondered why Jusef had gotten them into this mess and again she felt tears welling. Pushing her hair back, she put the coffee percolator on the table and plugged it in just as Jusef opened the door, rubbing his eyes.

He sat down and yawned, reached across the table, took her hands in his and said, "Marta, no more worries soon. The stolen truck is gone, and very soon Ahmed will get the money transferred to the account in Cayman Islands." He smiled gently. "Ibrahim confirmed that in a letter."

"What letter? I didn't see that." She felt annoyed, and her eyes flashed angrily at Jusef.

"I had to burn it – Ibrahim instructed me to do that, and I had to." He shrugged wearily and said, "I had no choice, Marta."

"You stupid man. You stupid, stupid man." She was practically shouting and nearly tore out her hair as she said it. "Now, you have no proof at all that Ibrahim has offered you anything." She stood up quickly, almost upsetting the coffee pot, and went to the window, clenching her fists against her temples. Softly, she began to moan. "Oh, Jusef, we are ruined, we are dead." She'd always been a strong woman, but now she felt all of her fifty-one years, as though each year was burden she could no longer bear. Her shoulders began to heave and large, long teardrops began to course down her cheeks to splash silently upon the kitchen sink. Through her blurred vision, she watched as a tear rolled down the stainless steel to the edge of the drain, teeter for a moment and then disappear, as another arrived.

She felt Jusef's big hands on her arms as he gently turned her around, allowing her to bury her face in his shirt, and she couldn't stop herself. Jusef, sick at heart and also feeling rushing pains in his chest, clumsily patted her back and made soothing noises in her ear. "I'll get you, me, outta this, I promise." He was still patting her gently when Ahmed came through the open doorway.

"Ah, good — coffee is ready." He took a cup and poured himself a good measure, ignoring Jusef and Marta. As he sat down, Ayeshah and Rebekah also entered and joined in.

"Marta," Ahmed said, "bring out some food, it's nearly noon. We have to eat now and finish our job. Then we'll be on our way." He made another of his attempts to smile, but again, only succeeded in making his features look worse, perhaps even more insane. Marta said nothing to acknowledge Ahmed, but did as ordered, and soon all three intruders were busily eating and drinking. A few moments later, Bilal came in, took some of the bread and cheese and began eating greedily and noisily while he lent with his back against the wall, watching everybody.

Jusef didn't feel hungry at all, but poured himself a coffee and wished he could light a cigarette. After another five minutes of uneasy silence, Ahmed finished eating and motioned to the others. "Finish up now, we must complete our work." He rose, putting on his winter jacket, and opened the door to the side verandah. As the others filed passed, he said to Jusef, "Stay here, rest, while we are completing our work; I need *you* fresh and relaxed to drive the truck tomorrow, or Friday at the latest."

Jusef nodded and grunted and, as he watched them all through the window, stumbling and slipping in the snow, he wondered what was so important that Ahmed didn't want him to see it.



CIA Headquarters, Langley, D.C., January 8th, 2003, 11:45AM

Everybody was on edge, Andy could feel it — it was so palpable.

It had been Monday morning when the secret Red Alert was issued and still the terrorists had made no threatening move, no overt act of aggression against anybody; the farm — or whatever it was, they hadn't been told — on the outskirts of Denver was covertly sealed off. Local residents within a wide radius were quietly being moved out, as much as such an operation can be held quiet. Inevitably, however, some news hound would start ferreting around, trying to find out more.

That's what the two people behind Andy were discussing in a not so quiet whisper, but he was trying not to listen to their speculations.

He was sitting, once again, in the food court waiting for Caroline; she'd called him, earlier that morning, to tell him that she'd talked with her uncle the night before and to meet him at the food court again, at 11.30AM. He looked at the clock again — *she's fifteen minutes late, where the hell is she?* He lit another cigarette, and sipped at his almost cold coffee. He got up, went to the counter for a refill and almost knocked Caroline over when he turned around.

"Oh, there you are..." He took the cigarette from his mouth and said, "Was wondering what'd happened."

Caroline was pouring a coffee as he spoke, picked it up and inclined her head towards the far window. "Let's go over there, shall we?" She strode off without waiting for a reply, stopping at a table beside the large window. The snow

had abated for a while, allowing a weak sun to filter into the whole area. She shivered slightly as Andy sat opposite. On the table was the file that Andy had given her the day before.

“We’re on camera, but I don’t think there’s any bugs close enough for us to be overheard. You caught me by surprise yesterday, and I didn’t think of that while we’d been talking.” She frowned, tapping her fingers on the table, and looked at Andy directly. “Andy, I’ve got some bad news... and I’ve got some *more* bad news.”

He lent forward, so that he could speak quietly. “So, tell me — I need to know.” He crushed the cigarette and blew the smoke to one side, away from Caroline.

“I saw my uncle and pitched the fake story line to him, with all my own diagrams — I did some quick copies of yours by hand, pretty rough, but enough so that the concept was clearly visible.” She took a few sips of her coffee. “Let me see if I can repeat his summation verbatim. He took about half an hour to look it over, and he asked a few questions — technical stuff, that I couldn’t answer — and then he said: ‘*Caroline, this is the most fantastic, preposterous, outrageous idea for a nuclear device that I’ve ever heard of.*’”

Andy sat back and started to feel a sense of relief. *So, I’ve missed something crucial, but what... ?*

“Andy, that’s bad news. Now, do you want more bad news? My uncle then said: ‘*But, it’ll work, no question. Just how effective it would be is open to question — but that’s just a matter of technical know-how, money and the right resources.*’” She paused and then said, “Andy, I did some checking in the library here and online, looking for old documents referencing gun-type nuclear devices — you know, the early type of fission bombs that our government and others constructed at the end of World War Two.” She tapped the table again, “This theory of yours, of using two cannons, is conceptually identical to the double-gun device.”

Andy finished his coffee and said, “You know what else?” Without waiting for a reply, he said, “There are a *fucking* lot of old cannons all over the world, as that report from Pakistan showed.”

“You mean in museums, exhibitions, old forts?”

“Shit, you *know* you can find them in local parklands, things that kids often play on, eh?”

Caroline nodded agreement, then frowned again and said, “But all of those cannons are plugged — totally useless. Aren’t they?”

“Maybe, maybe not — we just don’t know for sure. But, I do know that iron is a very good reflector for nuclear devices. Tungsten’s better, of course,” he added.

“Huh?” Caroline looked suitably puzzled. “What d’you mean — reflector?”

Andy drew a long breath and said, “Without getting too technical, you can look at any nuclear explosion as a race between the nuclear elements trying to release vast amounts of energy, and the physical elements trying to blow themselves apart in a conventional explosion, before the nuclear forces can really get going. Now, the first usually takes only a few shakes — a few nanoseconds, that is — but a crucial element is the reflector used.” He paused to light a cigarette, as Caroline hung on his words. “You know about chain reaction?” She nodded. “Well, probably most people have this idea that it’s like a roomful of ping-pong balls on mousetraps in a large room — throw in one ball, and all the traps spring in succession, releasing a ball, and so on, and on.” He paused for a moment, picked up a cylindrical salt dispenser on the table and separated the two pieces. “Look, here’s a better example: think of these two pieces as being two sub-critical slugs of U-Two-Thirty-Five. When the slugs are propelled together, down a tube, the critical mass increases exponentially as the pieces come together...” Caroline stared as the salt dispenser pieces clicked snugly together, one inside the other, in Andy’s hands. “The trick is to make sure that you do it very quickly, at three hundred meters per second or better; anything less increases the chances for the whole thing to fizzle, in a slow-blow pre-detonation.” He blew out some smoke. “For a successful *nuclear* explosion, however, you need a reflector to force neutrons back into the pile quickly, to help stop pre-detonation, and to increase the yield... er... the size of the explosion. And, iron happens to be a very good reflector...”

“But, hang on, Andy, what about the nuclear material? That’s not easy stuff to get, it’s hazardous stuff, right?”

Andy smiled grimly. “Caroline, you know as well as I do that there is nuclear material for sale in many parts of the world; all it takes is enough money.” He shrugged and added, “As for being hazardous, yes you’re right, but U-two-thirty-five, for example, is not in the same league as plutonium.” He looked into Caroline’s eyes and continued. “But why should that worry *any* terrorist who wants to be a martyr? He’s prepared to die anyway. *He wants to die...*” As he said it, he crushed his cigarette and sat back, a sick look on his face.

“But... but, this is all still conjecture, Andy, right?” Caroline tossed her hair back, leaned across and took one of his hands. “I mean, the chances are really long... “

Bleakly, Andy returned her look and said, “Caroline, we’ve already been hit with a not totally unexpected — and very common — device that killed thousands and which took a trillion dollars out of our economy.” Now he tapped the table with his index finger. “That report from Pakistan tells me that an enemy has thought of a new application for another common device... “ Suddenly, he gasped and seemed to choke for a moment. His eyes went wide as he said, “And, that also tells me they already have enough nuclear material to do the job.” He smashed a fist down on the table, so that people, even on the other side of the room, looked up and around, startled. He leaned over the table, covering his hands quickly and hissed, “Why test *any* system just in the *hope* that you’ll *maybe* one day get the stuff you need?”

Caroline felt as though she’d been punched in the solar plexus. What Andy said made sense: *only when you have sufficient nuclear material on hand would you look around for a means of delivery.*

Andy continued quietly, “They’ve had three more years to find just the right vehicle, Caroline. Maybe they don’t have it yet, but I wouldn’t count on it.” He lit another cigarette, and said, “You said yourself, yesterday, how do we know it’s not here already? How do we know, for sure, that the current Red Alert is what we’re told it is?” Viciously, he stabbed the air with his finger pointing at her. “*How* do we know *any* of it is true?”

They both fell silent but finally Caroline nodded soberly. “Well, you’re right to ask the questions.” She shrugged, thinking of the operations she’d helped manage. Most of them had been completed successfully; as always, it was only the failures that everybody hears about. She went on, “All we can do is work with the best available intel. I can tell you, Andy, that the guys we’re tracking in Denver are real terrorists *and* we have no reason to doubt that a suitcase device has been smuggled into this country.”

“So... what’s the plan if it’s not found?”

She shook her head helplessly. “That’s not for me to know — I’m not far enough up the food chain to be fed that data... “ She fell silent, trying to sort out in her mind, what should be done. Andy interrupted her thinking.

“What else did you say to your uncle?”

“Nothing much, really. He did ask whether I was serious about writing a piece of fiction, and I let him know I was undecided. But, then he asked me whether I’d discussed the idea with anybody in the company and I told him, truthfully, that a report was being prepared, and left it at that.” She stopped to finish her coffee, then said, “He seemed to think that’d be a good idea, but *he* doesn’t have to work here, does he now... “ It was a statement, not a question.

“He’s right, of course,” said Andy. “I’ve *gotta* convince Cochrane to look at this more seriously, but how?” He smiled crookedly. “But, first, I’ll have to find him — earlier, he was off to the Director’s office for meetings with other Assistant-Directors.” He shook his head. “There’s no chance of getting to even see him today.”

Caroline wagged a finger at him. “Hey, just get the report ready and make sure you reference a ‘reliable source’ concerning the veracity of the information about the double-gun fission bomb. Lay it on thick, without mentioning names. I know Cochrane, he’s not the type of guy to ask for details like that up front.” She thought some more, then said, “In fact, make it sound scary, so scary that, if he doesn’t pass it on for consideration — and something happens later — his ass will be in a sling.” She smiled encouragingly. “You haven’t been here long enough, Andy, to know what he’s *really* like. He’s a corporate exec, through and through, and he’ll cover his ass first, always.” She stopped and looked searchingly at Andy, measuring her words, “Andy, are you convinced *yourself* that this theory of yours is a genuine cause for concern?”

He was silent for a full minute, thinking of all the possibilities and risks. Then, he said, “Look, Caroline, nobody can be one hundred per cent certain of something like this unless somebody hands you a plan for an attack.” He stopped, taking a deep breath. She knew that, of course, but wanted to hear from him. Andy went on, “Even then, it may not be true. But, given the failures of the last few years – of the company, the FBI, others – I don’t see how I can keep this to myself. *If I can think of a possible scenario for a realistic and catastrophic attack, then I must find somebody who’ll listen to me.*” Suddenly, he laughed out loud and said, “Were you aware that our intelligence services had asked a group of Hollywood scriptwriters to brainstorm attack scenarios? I think that was last year, sometime.”

Caroline nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I heard about that.”

He smiled and said, “Am I convinced of the risk? Yes, I am. Do I think it *will* happen? There’s no answer to that, and you know that. But, this isn’t fiction,

something out of Hollywood, is it, Caroline?” With repressed vehemence, he lent forward and hissed, “*This is the real world, the world we now live in.*” He shrugged, almost in resignation, and sat back. “We have to deal with it, one way or another, *before* we get dealt a hand that blows us all away.” He looked away, out the window and there was now agony in his voice, as he said softly, “*A lot of people saw those planes coming, y’know...*”

Caroline looked at her cup; it was empty. She felt the same way. Mentally shaking off the feeling, she said, “Okay, Andy. Get that full report to Cochrane, and make sure it’s on his desk today. He may not see it, but you’ll have done as much as you can with it, today at least.” She stood slowly, smoothing her dress and picking up her bag. “Right now, I’m going to see *my* boss and tell *him* what I’ve researched and found concerning gun type fission bombs.” She looked down at Andy and smiled. “He’ll want to know why, and I’ll tell him that I’m brainstorming crazy ideas; he *thinks* I’m crazy anyway.” Her smile widened to a broad grin. “I might even suggest that he bounce it around at the next inter-departmental meeting on Friday.” She shrugged. “We’ll see, won’t we, eh!” She opened her bag, took out a card and gave it to Andy. “That’s my home number; it’s unlisted, of course. Call me, if you want, let me know how it goes. I have to go now, it’s 12:45.” She snapped the bag shut, gave him a wink and walked off.

Andy called out after her, “Thanks, Caroline. Thanks for your help.” Her hand went up in a wave, but she didn’t look back. He picked up the file she’d left on the table, quickly verified that all the information was there, then just as quickly strode off towards his work station.



Detroit, Michigan, Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 12:15p.m.

Jake was lucky to get a taxi as soon as he came out of the terminal at Detroit City Airport and, while the cabbie weaved quickly through the lunch time traffic, Jake called Ingram to let him know that he was on his way from the airport.

“That will be fine, Mr Cutter. Please come to the Annex, behind the main building. I’ll be waiting.”

Twenty minutes later, the taxi was stopping outside the Detroit Historical Museum complex. After paying off the driver, Jake walked to the rear, down a narrow alley, eventually coming to an inner courtyard. On one side was a two-

story building of brick and stone, with a large engraved label that proclaimed Museum Annex; the other sides of the quadrangle formed other sections of the main museum. *Must be cozy here in the summer*, he thought, noting the small circle of lawn, now snow covered, the small group of picnic tables and chairs, the park benches at the edges.

The door opened with a squeal and as he shook the snow from his shoes, a woman rose from an antique, roll-top desk and came to the counter.

“Good morning... oh, I’m sorry, it’s afternoon, isn’t it?” She was in her late forties, maybe just over fifty, but still cut a good figure. She was dressed in a very severe black skirt, a white blouse buttoned to the throat and a dark gray cardigan; her hair, very well kept, had just a touch of gray. Her skin, pale and wan, matched the color of the frosty skies that now hung over Detroit, and looked just as cold. Jake wasn’t at all surprised to see a pencil stuck behind one ear, but he was surprised by the tone of her voice — a mellifluous cadence that could never offend, and paired with a smile that, he felt sure, could melt the hardest of hearts. *Am I dreaming*, he wondered?

“How *may* I help you, Sir?” As she said it, she actually cupped one hand into the other, at her waistline, waiting. Vaguely, Jake had a boyhood recollection of a nun he knew who had stood likewise, but for different reasons.

He introduced himself, showing her his badge, and said he had an appointment with Dr Ingram. “He’s expecting me now — I called from the airport.” He smiled genuinely, forgetting the actual FBI training about keeping the public at ease, and continued, asking unnecessarily, “Is he available?” He wanted to hear her voice again.

She looked at his badge slowly, looked up at Jake and was about to answer when a side door opened. Both turned to see a well-dressed man of sixty or so come through the opening, hand extended. “You must be Special Agent Cutter?”

They shook hands, and Jake said, “Yes, that’s me.” Ingram was very tall, probably six-two or three, so Jake had to look up to his slate-colored eyes. A true ectomorph, Jake had the impression that Ingram could disappear if turned side on. The fact that his face looked as though it had hit a brick wall and had stayed that way only added to the effect — wide, flat cheeks, a squashed drooping nose and an equally wide and flat forehead. His grip was crushing, surprising for such an older person. *Keeps fit*, Jake thought, as he increased pressure to match the

other's. Ingram's eyes twinkled as he let go and said, "Please come this way, Mr Cutter. Let me show you around."

Having not seen the inside of a museum since his parents' divorce — an annex was something he'd not even heard of — Jake was mildly fascinated to follow Ingram down dingy and ill-lit corridors, passed numerous rooms where crates stood, some sealed, others spilling contents onto the floor; old muskets leaning against walls; a brace of pistols, from the 18th century, sitting on a miniature antique gun-carriage; a collection of shields, from Africa probably, together with a clutch of assegais; a larger room with a number of iron guns, some on gun carriages, others on pedestals; a pile of cannon balls, sets of bows and arrows from who knows where, all of which was garnished with varying layers of fine dust. Jake raised his eyebrows and then realized that he was lagging behind, as Ingram had stopped at a door and had turned to look back, waiting.

"This way, please." He went through and Jake followed a few seconds later. Ingram was already turning on an electric jug and said, "Some tea, Mr Cutter?"

Jake had already eaten on the plane, but was thirsty. "Would prefer coffee, if not, just a glass of water, thanks."

Ingram pointed. "There's a water cooler there."

Jake turned to see the cooler just visible behind the open door, and he could see that it must have been made in the 1940s. *So, what else is new*, he thought, and laughed quietly at his own little joke with words.

"Something humorous, Mr Cutter?" Ingram was sitting at his desk, cleaning his glasses.

As he drank the crisp, cold water Jake said, "It fits, it's perfect." He threw the paper cup into the bin and then sat down on the proffered chair that was opposite Ingram and very close to his desk. Jake pushed it back to give himself more room.

"Ah, yes, the cooler. It is rather nice, isn't it? Not at all like some of the more modern ones..." He put on his glasses, opened the top draw to his right and pulled out a file, setting it down and opening it up. It was quite thick with papers, the most recent being his notes while speaking with Jake on the phone. He folded his hands over the top of them and looked at Jake. "Now, Mr Cutter — to business."

Jake pulled out his notebook, put it on the edge of the desk and opened it at a random page. "Dr Ingram, would you go over the history of that container

first? I'm interested in as much detail as you can give me." He added, "Perhaps you could start with how and why this organization — the museum, that is — became involved with the whole project?" Jake took a toothpick from his coat pocket and began to chew.

Ingram then sat back, taking off his glasses. While polishing them again with a soft cloth, he began: "First, Mr Cutter, this annex serves as a repository for many artifacts, as you've seen, all of which are concerned with weapons of all types, but mostly encompassing all types of cannons, guns and rifles from the earliest times of the New World's history, up till the end of the nineteenth century." The kettle started to whistle. He reached for it, poured some boiling water into a cup, looked at Jake and said, "Are you sure I can't tempt you?"

Jake shook his head, "Uh-uh. Thanks anyway."

As he stirred three spoons of sugar into the thick, dark fluid, he went on, "Second, we are affiliated with Fort Wayne, just down the way a bit as you probably know, storing weaponry and such like for that organization also. Much of what you saw on your way to my office is for the latter, eventually. Our function here essentially falls into two categories: storage and safekeeping, and when necessary, assisting with archaeological projects and restorations." He took a sip of his tea, decided it needed more body, and put two more spoons of sugar into it, stirring vigorously.

Suitably unimpressed, Jake thought, *I guess with a metabolism like his, you need it ...* He took all his coffee, black, no sugar.

Ingram continued: "About four years ago, a sunken Spanish galleon was discovered off the north coast of Dominican Republic, about ten kilometers, ummm, that's six miles or so..."

Jake interrupted, "I know my meters, Dr Ingram," arching an eyebrow.

"Yes, of course." He carried on, "... and, at a depth of fifteen fathoms." Just the slightest of pauses, then he went on, as Jake said nothing but simply chewed his toothpick, looking at him. "The local archaeological society, together with the government, set about salvaging the wreck and all its contents but, when they realized that the project was too expensive for their budget, they came to the USA to search for backers, interested organizations, that sort of thing, you understand?"

Jake nodded and grunted.

“These sort of projects are usually affected by inter-disciplinary and academic networks, as you might imagine, so it was, in one sense, inevitable that this organization became involved.”

“How’s that?” Jake turned briefly and flicked the toothpick towards the bin behind him; it went in.

“Oh, that was easy — the people who found the wreck initially were marine archaeologists from this area, having done a lot of work on the Great Lakes over the years. But, this was their first foray into foreign waters.” He took another long sip of tea. “It took a year to get all of the loose artifacts to the surface, and then another to haul up all the guns and cannons. Fortunately, there were few mishaps and even a lack of significant hurricanes to impede us.” He finished his tea and lent forward. “The actual wreck is still there but there are plans to raise it, if sufficient funds can be obtained. But, it was when all of the cannons were restored — as well as they could be — that the significance of the find was truly appreciated.” He paused and pursed his lips for a moment, as if in thought.

Impatiently, Jake said, “Yes? How significant, Doctor?”

“Well, they’d found something that had not been previously found before — a matched pair of rail cannons, quite large for the type, and cast in solid bronze. Now, rail cannons of that period were quite common, but usually they tended to be somewhat smaller; these were quite huge — nearly three hundred kilos each.”

Jake held up his hand. “Stop a moment, Doctor, please. What’s a rail cannon?”

“Ah, yes, sorry.” He coughed lightly, as if to clear his throat. “On the poop decks of galleons and the like, you might have seen pictures of them in your travels, hmmm?” As he spoke, he pulled out a large book from a lower draw, and quickly riffled through the pages. Finding what he wanted, he spun the book and pointed, “There, at the stern, you can see two cannons, one on each side rail, pointing outwards. They are rail cannons, but as you can see, they are relatively small in comparison to those we found — these,” pointing with a pencil tip carefully, “being about three feet long at best and weighing perhaps eighty kilos each.” He sat back again and tapped his teeth with the pencil rubber. “But that’s *not* why the ones we found are so unique. They’re big, yes, but only because they were designed for mounting on a very heavy rail, perhaps even a stone battlement; we’re not sure yet. That’s another reason we want to get the wreck up because the rail mounting for the cannons was so massive.”

“Okay, Doctor, so what was so unique then, if not size?”

Ingram looked at Jake quizzically and said, “Mr Cutter, what do you know about cannons?”

Okay, I’ll play along, Jake thought, *be nice*. Aloud he said, “I guess about as much as any average Joe in this gun crazy country.” He didn’t smile.

“Hmmm, yes, you have a point.” Ingram rummaged around in the file, muttering for a few moments, then said, “Ah-ha, here it is.” He took out a large eight by ten color photo that he turned so that Jake could view it correctly. It showed two bronze cannons, each one lying on a wooden bench; beside each at the muzzle was a standard, white foot rule. Jake could see that each cannon was nearly six feet long and quite bulbous at the rear, but each rear also tapered backwards to what looked like an elongated teardrop. Through each teardrop, he could see a short, thick shaft.

“Nice looking weaponry,” he said, looking up at Ingram, “But what’s with this at the ends?” He didn’t need to point.

“*Exactly*, Mr Cutter – you’ve spotted it.” Ingram looked happy, as though he’d won over another convert. He went on, “This — these cannons are the only known examples of sixteenth century bronze cannons that were *breech loaders*.” He emphasized the last two words, drawing them out very slowly, almost with bated breath.

Jake raised both eyebrows. “Huh? I thought breech loaders only came along in... the nineteenth century?” The tone of his voice betrayed his ignorance more than his quizzical look.

Ingram waved his hands about. “Tush, Mr Cutter, they were present soon after cannons and guns were invented around the middle of the twelfth century. The problem with breechloaders is, simply, the *breech*. In ancient times, casting methods and metals were in their infancy, so that many guns failed to fire properly, even blowing backwards often. So much so, in fact, gunners would quite often weld up the breech and just plump for muzzle loading all the time. There were too many ill-fitting breeches, you see.” He paused and added, dryly, “Quite a waste, all round, you *could* say...”

“Okay, so these two are breech loaders. So?” Jake took out another toothpick and rolled it around his mouth, side to side.

“Well, they’re the finest examples ever seen, I can tell you. What’s more, the cannons are in pristine condition — well, there is some corrosion from being in the sea for four hundred years, but nothing to worry about.”

“How can that be? Even bronze would have become encrusted, surely.” Now Jake was even more puzzled and showed it.

“Under normal circumstances, yes, you’re right. But, these two cannons — the history of which has been thoroughly researched — were actually packed into two large crates, and each cannon had been wrapped in tar and oil cloth for the journey from Spain, where incidentally they had been gravity-cast, to their final destination, presumably for the governor of the island.”

“You mean, these two cannons are in such good condition that they could be fired, if needed?”

“Why, yes, Mr Cutter. Isn’t *that* what cannons are for?”

Jake snorted, a bit exasperated. “Obviously, Dr Ingram. But, I thought all old ordnance — in fact, any ordnance on exhibition, display or whatever — is spiked, plugged up good so that they *can’t* be used?” He furrowed his brows, looking at Ingram intently.

“Right again, Mr Cutter. But, you see, these two were in such good condition and, being so unique, we arranged to have the Dominican Republic government allow them to be trans-shipped to our museum here for thorough scientific examination, using — what do they say? — state-of-the-art equipment *before* being rendered useless.” He shrugged. “That sort of analysis just wasn’t possible down there, you know.”

“Okay, fine, so what happened when those cannons were stolen — and then recovered? Relatively easily, too — actually, *way too easily*.”

Ingram sighed and nodded. “Well, yes, you’re right of course. But, you see, we were so glad to get the cannons back intact, that we really didn’t think too much about any ulterior motives.”

“And, as far as you could see, the cannons hadn’t been tampered with? Nothing was out of place?”

Ingram shook his head slowly, his jowls turning down. He wasn’t happy at all. “Anything is possible, in an infinite universe, I suppose. But we had no reason at all to suspect anything but a failed attempt at theft.” He looked at the photos again and pointed to the muzzles. “The cannons are, in a very real sense, already priceless, as I said on the phone, but also, when they were cast, they *had* been encrusted with precious stones around the muzzles here,” pointing again, “and here,” pointing to a spot near the breeches. “But, somebody had already extracted those, pillaged on the voyage out, presumably.”

Jake sat for a few moments, taking it all in, thinking of the angles. Then he said, "Anything else in that shipment that would be viewed as valuable? Anything else I need to *know*?"

"I don't think so, Mr Cutter. The rest of the shipment contained mostly small artifacts, knives, pistols, plates, mugs, that sort of thing. All of the *iron* cannons are still in Dominican Republic, very much worse for wear, I can assure you." He stopped and then asked quietly, "Have you had *any* success in tracking down the driver's killers yet? I presume there are more than one," he added

"Nope, but we're still investigating." He tapped the table with his notebook and said, "Dr Ingram, would you say that your team in the Republic are trustworthy?" Jake continued quickly: "Let me be clear: have you *any* reason to think that any of them could be involved with drug dealing?"

Again, Ingram shook his head very slowly, his brow turned down, and looked directly at Jake, who held his gaze as Ingram said, "Mr Cutter, these are academics we're talking about, most of them in their middle years. I know of *nothing* that would cause any one of them to get involved in criminal activities. *I trust them all completely*," he added, with great emphasis.

Then, that leaves only you — or somebody else, Dr Ingram, he thought, but his face betrayed nothing of his suspicions. He smiled broadly and said, "Well, that's good. I would have thought as much." Then he went on. "Dr Ingram, what exactly do you plan to do with those cannons, when you get them back?"

"I'm glad you said 'when', Mr Cutter, because I don't want to give up hope. But, as to what, well, we plan to do a full X-ray and metallurgical analysis, try to determine how it was cast so well, so long ago, and do a very detailed analysis of the breech locking mechanism which is, we think, the earliest known screw mechanism in existence." He paused and continued, the admiration in his voice clearly evident, "The man who designed that casting was a genius in his own time; I doubt that I'll ever see such work again."

Jake smiled. "Well, I hope we get them back for you soon. And, the rest of the artifacts, of course." He stood to go, but then stopped. "One more thing, Doctor: in the breech block, just how much room was there for the gunpowder?"

"Oh, that was quite large, enough for a very large measure of packed gunpowder."

"Volume size, what — half a cubic foot?" Jake put another toothpick between his teeth and began to chew.

"Hmmm, more than that, perhaps up to a full cubic foot, for both of course."

Jake nodded. *That's twice the volume then, and that's how they got the stuff in — hidden in the breechblock and maybe the bore, too.* He extended his hand across the desk and waited for the pressure as Ingram's hand gripped his, but none came. "Thank you, Dr Ingram, for your time; you've been very helpful."

Ingram made a deprecating wave of the hand and said, as he rose, "Not at all, Mr Cutter. Under the circumstances, it's been a pleasure." He went to the door with Jake, and said, "Do you require a guide back?" and smiled naturally.

Jake cocked his head on one side. "No — I think I can handle that," and returned the smile. Just before he went through the door, he half turned and said to Ingram, "By the way, your receptionist has a most unique voice, Dr Ingram..."

"Ah, you mean Joyce, my wife?" and he grinned as he sat down again at his desk.

"Mmmm—mmmm," said Jake, as he grimaced to himself, and gave a small wave. He worked his way back through the archaeological mess, and then gave Joyce a small wave also as he said 'Bye' quickly and stepped out into the cold again. Her faint, but honeyed, 'Goodbye, Mr Cutter' made him wonder how the two had ever gotten together. He shrugged slightly. *Hell, he thought, look at Sophia and Carlo...*

But, now he *did* feel hungry. Pulling up his coat collar, and walking quickly, he went to find the nearest restaurant or get a taxi to take him, and looked at his watch: 1:35PM. *I'll call Washington and Verna from there...*



When he was certain that Jake had left the office, Ingram buzzed the front desk and, when Joyce replied, he said, "Joyce, would you get through to the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in Washington DC, for me, there's a dear? Ask him if he'd call me back about an urgent matter, hmmm?"

"Of course, dearest."

While he waited, Ingram brewed another pot of tea and left it to one side, to allow it to steep for the required amount of time, perhaps three or four minutes. Just as he went to pour another cupful, the phone rang. He put the cup down, and then spent the next ten minutes talking; occasionally, he would stop to listen briefly, and then carry on unhurriedly. His voice, all the time, remained quiet, firm and demanding. Eventually, he appeared to be satisfied and put the phone down.

As he poured the tea, he murmured, “There, that should be enough.” But, he wasn’t referring to the tea.



Near Macon, Michigan, Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 1:00p.m.

Work on the final phase of gun construction was progressing well.

While Ayeshah was busy with preparing the smokeless cordite charges for each cannon and the remote switch, Rebekah, with assistance from Bilal, was readying the stainless steel inner tubes that would form the basis for the actual double-gun platform. Precisely engineered, by a local steel manufacturer, from specifications that Jusef had received from his cousin Ibrahim, Rebekah and Bilal were now maneuvering the longer section through the open breech of the cannon nearest the trailer end. The clearance between the cannon bore and the steel was barely half a centimeter but, once in position, a steel O-ring — much like a piston ring — was inserted and eased into place around each end of the steel tube. The fit was snug and tight, allowing for no movement, after which Rebekah examined both ends, making sure that the steel tube was flush at both ends and would not interfere with the breech locking mechanisms.

Satisfied that both ends looked good, Bilal picked up the shorter tube that had a diameter less than the one already installed, and a length that was exactly one half. With Rebekah guiding him, he slid one end of that tube into the larger, slowly and carefully, until the entire length was inserted, stopping only when the positive stop was reached with its end level with the larger section. A flange, welded to each end, and equal to the internal diameter of the larger tube, prevented any cross-sectional movement of the smaller tube. Methodically again, Rebekah examined the work, making sure there were no potential problems. Satisfied, she then carefully closed the breech lock and screwed it in tightly, then backed it off, and opened it fully once more.

“Looks fine,” said Bilal, showing his crooked teeth.

Rebekah glanced at him coldly and then back at the breech, “It’ll do.” She closed it again, re-opened it and left it open. “Wait here,” she said to Bilal, climbed down off the trailer and went over to Ayeshah and Ahmed where they were preparing the electronic detonators. “It’s ready for the smaller slug now.”

Ayeshah looked up from her work and nodded, "Okay. Be there in a few minutes." Her head went down again, as Rebekah walked over to the workbench to get a coffee. She poured one for herself and said, "Ayeshah, Ahmed, want any coffee?" They both looked up and nodded. As Rebekah began to pour, Bilal called from the trailer.

"Pour one for me, too." He jumped down and walked over to them. He was lighting up a cigarette as he approached.

"I told *you* to stay there," said Rebekah.

As he reached the bench, Bilal came up very close to her face and said, "*You* don't tell me anything, woman. Remember that." Flecks of spittle clung to his lower lip, giving him the appearance of drooling, and the smoke that he blew from his cigarette hit Rebekah full on.

Before he could say more, Ahmed had spun him around and pushed him back to the wall so that the back of his head hit it, partially stunning him. The cigarette fell from his lips as Ahmed lifted him off his feet and shouted, shaking him viciously in unison with each syllable, "Leave... the... women... alone." Bilal almost lost consciousness on the last word and slid to the floor in a heap as Ahmed let go. He looked down at Bilal for a moment, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching. "Pig," he said to the groaning form and then turned back to the workbench where both women were now working. "Leave that for the moment. We'll get the smaller slug fitted now."

As Bilal continued to groan and slowly got to his feet, Ahmed went to the end of the bench and, with a heave, lifted a box and carried it carefully to the trailer, the two women following closely. All three climbed up and then moved to the breech that Rebekah had left open. The box that Ahmed put down was heavy for two reasons: it was lead lined and it contained a cylindrical slug of 93% enriched U235 metal, about a foot long and just under three inches in diameter. It was below critical mass, and just the faintest bluish glow could be seen. Ayeshah reached in and carefully lifted the lead-colored slug in both hands while Rebekah inserted a plug of rubberized wadding into the tube and pushed it forward a couple of inches. It was a very tight fit, but not so large that it couldn't move. She moved to one side, allowing Ayeshah to then insert one end of the U235 slug into the tube. Placing a wooden ram against the slug, she and Ahmed then carefully and slowly pushed it all the way in, until it was flush with the end of the tube. The fit was perfect to within a fraction of a micrometer and Ahmed nodded approvingly as Ayeshah looked at him. "Good. Very good," he said, "now finish up the charges

for this breach, load them in and close it. Then seal it all, understand?" They both nodded as he walked to the end, jumped off and went over to Bilal who was moodily drinking his coffee and nursing the back of his head.

He came up close to Bilal and said, "Bilal, I've told you — we have a sacred mission, and nothing must impede it. Yesterday, I told you to leave Jusef be, as I need him as our truck driver, and you knew that..." He brought his face up very close and continued quietly and impassively, "I — we — need *both* of those women to complete the assembly of the bomb." He paused and came even closer still. "Do not do *anything* that will upset their concentration or I will ask Ibrahim to slaughter your parents and your brothers, and then feed their carcasses to pigs." Bilal looked into his eyes and saw only death. Ahmed continued, "*Only then will I kill you...* "

As Ahmed spun and walked away, Bilal's face was, for a fleeting moment, suffused with a mixture of fear, anger and hatred. He was still furious from the slapping that Ahmed had given him the day before, and as he rubbed the back of his head, he thought about ways that he could make Ahmed suffer when the mission was completed. He was still thinking his dark thoughts as he walked to the other side of the big garage and sat down at a table near the door to outside. For the next hour and a half, he chain-smoked and drank coffee, while Ahmed and the women continued with their preparations and assembly. Brooding and still fuming, Bilal had just finished another coffee when Jusef came through the door, closed it and stopped, looking around.

"Where is everybody?" He still looked a bit tired from the round trip to Chicago.

Bilal grunted and said, "They're all over in the trailer, getting the cannons ready." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one; he didn't offer one to Jusef. As he blew smoke towards Jusef, he added, "They should be finished tonight." Leering at Jusef, he added, "Then, we'll all get going, won't we?"

Jusef had just finished a nap and gave a short yawn, then stopped abruptly. "What d'you mean — gettin' the cannons ready? Ready for what?" He frowned and looked at Bilal, raising his voice. "Ready for what, *asshole*?" Jusef looked from Bilal to the trailer and back again. "What *exactly* are Ahmed and you all makin' in there?" He started to walk towards the trailer.

Bilal, moving very quickly, ran a few yards passed Jusef and turned, holding out his hand like a traffic cop. "Stop right there, Jusef. You're the *driver*, that's *it*." Jusef stopped and Bilal paused, for effect. "Now, just *fuck* off back to

your mousy wife and *drive* — when we want you to, got that?” He stood there, leering even more and looking too confident.

That was too much for Jusef: he charged full tilt.

Bilal, of course, was ready. As a person trained and much experienced in hand-to-hand combat, he had his body and weight positioned perfectly. When Jusef was two yards from him and totally committed, Bilal almost languidly stepped diagonally across the line of Jusef’s charge, planted his left foot firmly and quickly spun clockwise on that foot while raising his right. As Jusef stumbled forward, charging the space occupied by Bilal just a tenth of a second earlier, Bilal’s right heel — describing an arc of nearly two-hundred and seventy degrees and with enough kinetic energy to break four inches of pine boards easily — caught him on the rib cage directly over his heart.

It was an *almost* perfectly executed spinning back-kick; Bilal *had* been aiming for the pit of Jusef’s stomach, a mere four or five inches lower. But, it was enough: the ribs imploded at that point, causing massive pressure on Jusef’s heart and it didn’t matter that none of the shattered bones pierced it.

Four things all occurred in succession, in the next ten seconds.

First, Jusef stumbled backwards, the force of the kick being so great, while his face turned ashen as he fell to the floor, gasping with pain and for air. Second, Bilal crouching low after having completed the kick, grinned with satisfaction as he saw Jusef thrashing about on the concrete; but, as he straightened up, the third thing happened. Ahmed, alerted by the shouting, arrived at full speed, without Bilal realizing that he was about to be pole-axed. Ahmed’s body weight, combined with his lethally extended and stiffened elbow, caught Bilal directly behind his cerebral cortex, sending him lurching forward — now unconscious — to hit the floor face down, smashing his nose, and skidding across to stop a couple of feet from the door. A bloody trail was left in his wake. At the seventh second, the door opened and Marta — worried about Jusef — arrived to tell them all that supper would be ready in fifteen minutes, at 6:00p.m. Blankly, she looked at Bilal, smashed and bloody at her feet, then at Ahmed wild-eyed and breathing heavily, and then, as though in a nightmare, her gaze found Jusef as he raised his head once and began coughing bright jets of blood; a second later, he went limp, but the blood continued to well from his mouth.

Temporarily paralyzed with shock, Marta stood with mouth agape and arms extended towards Jusef, as Rebekah knelt at his side. Skillfully, she pressed her fingers against his carotid artery, and quickly peered at his pupils. Still kneeling

there, she looked at Ahmed and calmly said, “Jusef is dead, or nearly so...” Then, she looked over towards Bilal’s inert form. “Bilal has just killed him.”

Somebody began to scream and scream and scream...



Inkster, Michigan, Wednesday, January 8th, 2003, 5:30p.m.

Verna picked up the phone on the third ring. It was Jake.

“Hi, babe,” he said, “How’s yer day been?” She could hear him chewing on his toothpick.

“Fine, lover. Had a *good* day, in fact.” And that was true. Since early morning she had completed reviewing and revising her school schedule, while Tommy was out; she’d also finished reading a book about marital relationships — a book that Lou-Lou had foisted upon her before she left Washington — and had even prepared a *‘This Bugs Me!’* list that she wanted to go over with Jake. Idly, she circled the first on the list — *Toothpicks* — as she continued to speak, telling him that she’d gone down to the local mall when Tommy had gotten back from his visit to Vicky and afterwards, while he polished his Mustang, she’d spent the rest of the afternoon, relaxing and thinking.

“Oh, yeah... about what?”

“You and me, Jake. What else? And, Bobby of course...” Her voice trailed off.

“So, did you hear from Bobby? He said he was comin’ up, but I don’t know if he made it yet.”

“No, not yet. Maybe he’ll call later — he has the number here, right?”

“Hmmm – ummmm, as far as I know, I guess...” Now Jake’s voice tapered to a long silence. He heard her breathing; *at least, she’s not smoking*, he thought. Finally, he said, “So — what about you and me, babe?”

Verna sighed and lent forward over the table to rest her head on her hand. “Jake, we really have to sort out what we mean to each other, y’know. I keep trying to get through to you, but... both of us... we’re so busy, it hardly seems... seems as though...” She stopped, a tinge of exasperation creeping in, as she continued, “Oh... I don’t know... y’know, maybe we should *talk* to somebody? *Together*, I mean?” Furious with herself now, she lit a cigarette.

There was silence again, as Jake took that in and turned it all around in his mind. After a few moments, he said the only thing that made any sense to him, "Babe, Verna... I love you so much it hurts." His voice was soft, entreating.

"I know, Jake, and I love you too — but who are you hurting? You know you're hurting *me*, sometimes, don't you? How much do you *really* care, Jake? Y'know, I'm not some kind of *doll* on a bedside table, y'know." She was talking quickly and vehemently, blowing smoke out, and waving the cigarette around in the air. She coughed and spluttered for a few seconds, then sneezed. Into the mouthpiece, she said, "Hang on, I have to blow my nose... "

Jake listening to her, grimaced slightly, but decided to say nothing about the smoking. When she came back to the phone, he spat the toothpick out and said, "You okay? Not catching cold, are ya, babe?"

"No, Jake — I'm *not* catching cold, okay. But, I am *feeling* cold, y'know, sometimes... sometimes, y'know, *you* even make me *feel* cold, Jake..." Her voice trailed off again, so that he could just hear her breathing.

What's that supposed to mean, he thought? Aloud, he said quietly, "Verna, maybe... maybe I could come up there tomorrow, I gotta see some people in Detroit about a case. I could boogey on over there, no problem, maybe in the evening, y'know." He waited, listening again.

Verna drew in her breath and waved to Tommy as he came through the garage door into the corridor, wiping his hands and looking well pleased with himself. Into the mouthpiece, she said, "Yes, I'm sure... that's okay, Jake, I think Tommy and Vicky would appreciate that. Sure, come on up tomorrow evening and we'll have dinner together here." Out of the corner of her mouth, she said to Tommy, "Jake'll be here, in Detroit, tomorrow. Be coming to see us for dinner, maybe go visit Vicky, too." She smiled as she finished speaking.

"Hey, that'll be great," said the big man, "Say hello for me, okay, I gotta have a shower." As he walked off, he shouted over his shoulder, "So, how's about that steak dinner, eh, Vern?" And he laughed as he tramped up the stairs.

Jake had heard the exchange and didn't feel happy; he said quickly, "I'd better go, babe, gotta few calls to make before I leave the office... love ya." *Why don't you tell her that you're lying on a bed in a room at the Knights Inn, right off the Detroit Metro Airport, and only ten minutes from Inkster? Didn't you want to go see them and knock on the door as a surprise? What's the matter, asshole, don't you like a surprise?* He dropped the phone on its cradle and lay back, staring at the ceiling.

“Okay, lover. Sleep tight... and watch out for those X-men, hey?” said Verna as the line went dead, and she knew he hadn’t heard. Slowly and quietly, she put the phone down and lent back in the chair, pulling out another cigarette as she did so. She sat there, watching the spiraling smoke as the cigarette burned itself into a charred, jagged column. *Is that how it is, we’re burnt out?* As she flicked the whole butt into the tray, Tommy came stomping down the stairs, rubbing his still damp hair.

“How’s it all goin’?” he finished rubbing and sat down, throwing the towel onto an empty chair. “Jake all right?” He looked at Verna’s face intently; she seemed a mite strained.

“Yeah, sure... he’s okay. Looking forward to coming up...” She didn’t finish what she was saying as Tommy suddenly slapped his thigh and reached for the phone.

“I forget — I was gonna call Joe, my boss, and tell him that I’d be takin’ a few extra days next week, seein’ as how Vicky is late. Hang on...” He raised his eyebrows and glanced at his watch — 5:58PM — as he dialed the number. He let it ring for a long time, but eventually cut the connection, a puzzled look on his face. “Now, *that’s* unusual — Joe may be out at this time, but I know his wife just about *never* leaves the house.” He looked at Verna, shrugged his big shoulders and said, “Guess I’ll try later...” Then his face brightened. “Hey, Vern – let’s get stuck into that steak, *yeah!*”



Chapter Five

Washington, D.C., Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 7:00a.m.

Josh Adams stood at the podium and began reading from the latest Red Alert update issued to all offices by the Secretary of Homeland Security: *“’At four-oh-nine, Mountain Time, January 9th, the terrorists moved out of the Denver location and began proceeding south on I-Twenty-Five; the pickup truck was loaded with what appeared to be additional explosives. Security forces are once again tracking them closely while teams of specialists raided the vacated property and searched it thoroughly. From that search, there is a strong indication that they are proceeding to Houston, Texas where, it is thought, the main target is probably the large petrochemical installations in that area.’ ”* Adams adjusted his glasses, looked around the room briefly and continued, *”‘The basis for this threat assessment is a report from the National Security Agency —at approximately oh-two-forty-seven, local time, that agency intercepted a coded satellite phone call transmission to the Denver location, that indicated the terrorist group was being instructed to proceed to the Houston area to complete the transaction. The transaction referred to is now believed to be the collection of the plutonium device. The NSA is continuing to monitor all electronic communications in major areas and in particular, the areas through which the terrorists are passing. State and other Federal agencies, directly involved in the tracking of the pickup truck, are being kept informed on a minute by minute basis; any change will be communicated immediately.’ ”*

Adams removed his glasses and looked around the room again. “That’s the sum of what we know now, and it looks as though this situation will be resolved in the next twenty-four hours. As always, as things change, I’ll issue updates in the usual manner. Any questions?”

He peered around the room, and then spent the next few minutes clarifying a couple of points for those who weren’t listening or who failed to understand some aspect. “Okay then, that’s it for now,” he said, “Let’s get back to daily routine, eh.” As the assembly began to file out, he called to Stilts.

“Yes, sir?” Stilts leaned against the long conference table.

“Heard from Jake yet?”

“Just to tell me to attend this update in his stead. Is there something I can do, boss?” Stilts shifted his weight and sat on the edge of the table, and looked expectantly at Adams.

“Move your ass off the table, for starters.” Adams looked stonily at Stilts as the latter shifted and straightened, with a muttered apology. Adams went on, “Get a hold of him as soon as possible, I want to know whether he’ll be back tonight or tomorrow morning.” He stopped, frowning, and then seemed to come to a decision. “And look, about that hijacked truck with the artifacts — get a press release ready and issued this morning. Get it on all the news services so that the general public knows about it; it’s an unusual type of theft, and somebody may know about it. I want this one off the books quickly.”

Stilts looked uncomfortable, wondering, *What’s happened, here?* For the briefest moment, he hesitated, then said, “But... but Jake said that might cause us to lose *any* chance of finding more drugs *or* the people responsible, and we...”

Adams interrupted him. “Agent Scarletti, I don’t give a rat’s ass about some theory about using that shipment for smuggled drugs. There’s absolutely no evidence to support that... that... *suggestion*.” He made the word sound like a disease. “We *need* to get that shipment of priceless artifacts back, that’s what’s important, Agent Scarletti.” He leaned forward, over the podium, looking down on Stilts despite his six foot four size. “Just get on with it, and do it quickly. And when you hear from Jake, tell him I want to talk to him. Got that?” There wasn’t a hint of a smile on his face.

Stilts briefly raised his eyebrows and turned down his mouth at the same time, “Well, yes, *sir*. I’ll get on that *right away, sir*.” There was more than just a hint of sarcasm.

Adams ignored it as Stilts departed, leaving the door open. *Asshole, fuckin’ nigger asshole*, he thought. *And that fuckin’ Ingram too — he’s an asshole too*. Brooding, he walked back to his office, again thinking about that phone call he’d received from the Director yesterday. He sat down at his desk and moodily looked out the window, lost in thought for a few minutes. Then the phone brought him back to the job; he picked up the handset. His desk clock showed 07:15.

“This is Adams,” he said.

“Hi, Mr Adams, this is Verna Cutter. How are you?”

“Ahhh, Verna. Please, call me Josh.” *Fuck, do I need now this now?*

“Thanks... Josh, look, is Jake with you? I talked with him last night, but he’s not in your office yet, it seems. I called home a few minutes ago, but no answer.”

So...she doesn't know he's in Detroit? What's he playing at? If I tell her, that'll maybe slow him down now, and I need Jake to move fast. Aloud, he said, “Well, Verna — I’m afraid I don’t know right now.” Sensing unease from her, he added, “I know he’s on a number of cases, and, well, you know how he works sometimes.” He gave a chuckle. “I’m often the last to know, but look, I’ll get a message to his pager, that should bring him in, all right?” He stopped, and heard her sigh, long and loud.

“Yeah, I know what you mean, Josh. Okay, just let him know I was calling, please. And, thanks Mr... er... Josh.”

“Not at all, Verna. You’re very welcome.” As she said ‘Bye’, he put the phone down quickly. He sat back in his chair again and swiveled it to stare out the window for another thirty minutes. The phone call with Verna had only made his moodiness worse.

The storm had abated overnight and the day was beginning to look more promising, with streaks of bright sun cutting through the gray mass that had sat over the Washington area for days. But, he wasn’t looking at that at all – he was looking at his career that was now in danger of immolating unless that truck was recovered. *How the fuck could I know that the Director and Ingram are like two peas in a pod? Goddammit, why is this happening to me, for fuck's sake?*

The call he took from the Director was short and to the point: *Get that truck back or be busted to Training.* Adams protested, citing the Red Alert, the lack of staff, the lack of funds, the cruddy computer systems, you name it... The Director wasn’t interested: Adams was told he had a week to find it; after that, the Director told him that his position at the Washington office would be up for grabs. *So, what's the big deal? None of my goddam business, he says.* Sourly, he’d told the director that he’d have the priority raised, that he’d get all the news services involved and that he’d put more agents onto the task. Then he did the stupidest thing he’d ever done in his life: he guaranteed that he’d get it all back in one piece.

“That’s good, Josh, I’m glad to hear that. But, I don’t *need* your fuckin’ guarantees, do I?” There was a pregnant pause. “Just get that fuckin’ truck *back*, or *your* ass is grass.” The line went dead.

Then, he'd spent the rest of the day trying to get a hold of Jake, *but the fucker must've turned his mobile off* — and hadn't returned any of his phone messages. *Goddammit, Jake! And, now, even his fuckin' wife can't find him...*

Adams mopped his brow with his handkerchief and reached for the phone; he *had* to talk with Jake. As he heard the ringing, he looked at the clock: 7:49AM.



Macon, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 7:00a.m.

The silence at the farmhouse was deathly, and not just because the body of Jusef lay on a workbench in the basement.

Marta was sitting beside him on a work stool, keening in a low monotone with her body rocking slowly backwards and forwards; her eyes were closed and she held one of his stiffening hands in hers, close to her cheek. Salt from dried tears marked her already stricken face and her hair stood in disarray. She was dressed in black.

Ahmed looked at her for a few more moments and then went back up the stairs to the kitchen, where Bilal still sat, and still holding a compress against the massive bruise on the back of his head. If he'd had any hair on his head that *might* have cushioned Ahmed's elbow strike; but the thing that saved him was the fact that the bone structure of his head was unusually thick. It was that alone that kept him from paralysis or even death in that terrible instant yesterday. He looked up as Ahmed entered the room, but said nothing.

Ahmed studied him for a few seconds, and then said, "You have to thank Ayeshah that you are still alive, Bilal. Had she not pulled my arm, I would have shot you, and you would now be dead. Luckily, no-one else was hurt." The bullets from the Uzi had gone through the roof instead. He sat down opposite Bilal, and as he did so, Rebekah came in and began to make coffee.

Ahmed went on, "I'd told you that you couldn't afford to upset Jusef — or the women." His dark eyes bored into Bilal, who still refused to look up. "It is lucky for you that you did not know Jusef had a bad heart condition." He put both hands flat on the table and leaned over, close to Bilal's ear. Quietly, he hissed, "If you had known that, then, even now, I would kill you..."

Bilal moaned some more. "I *did* not know... I did *not* know, I swear," he lied. He looked up at Ahmed, almost beseeching, and hoped and prayed that

Jusef had not said anything to that cow, Marta. Groaning, as much as in fear as in pain, he put his head down again.

Ahmed sat back and thought that Bilal probably did know, but there was no point in killing him yet. *That will come anyway...* Right now, he needed Bilal, and the women, to complete their task of attacking the Great Satan, of smiting the sworn enemy of Islam, of bringing death and ruination to the heart of America.

But, there was now a seemingly insurmountable problem: Jusef had been needed as the driver of the truck to haul the bomb to the target, for Jusef was the only person qualified to drive the truck. *And he was also the only person who could get the truck through security at the target.* That thought kept coming back to Ahmed.

“Do you want some coffee?”

Ahmed came out of his thoughts to focus on Ayeshah, patiently waiting with a cup in her hand. He nodded, “Yes, thank you.” He looked at Bilal and said to Ayeshah, “Give one to him also.” He needed Bilal functioning, and he needed Bilal to think that all was forgiven. “Drink up, man, we still have work to do.”

Bilal sniveled a bit, still holding the compress. But, he picked up the cup and began to sip. After a few moments, he took out a cigarette and began to smoke also. His head was still hurting, his broken nose had been quickly and painfully set straight by Rebekah, and his face was still ugly and raw from scraping along the concrete floor... *but, I'm still alive, fuck you,* he thought as he gazed at Ahmed through the smoke.

“Where’s Rebekah?” Ahmed looked at Ayeshah as he stood and stretched.

“She’s still resting — it has been very... *difficult,* for the last twelve hours, Ahmed.”

“*No matter.* It’s been *more* difficult for others,” he said, looking at Bilal grimly. “Go and get her.”

Ayeshah looked at him, and saw no room for argument. “All right,” she said and went to go.

As she left, he called out, “Tell Marta to stay in her bedroom.” Ayeshah waved as she went out the door to go upstairs. He went back to sipping his coffee and thinking. He was still thinking, almost in a trance again, when the two women came in and sat.

Ahmed looked around at all of his conspirators. To a lesser man, the task would now be beyond completion, but he didn’t see it that way at all. Yes, they had a problem, but every problem has a solution — that was the mantra that

Ibrahim had drilled into him for many years. *Just find the solution that works*, Ibrahim had always said. *Then use it...*

Ahmed began to speak: "Jusef was our driver, but he is now dead." His gaze flicked to each, but they remained silent. "Therefore, we need another driver, a driver who is qualified to take us to the target." He paused to make sure they all understood. "None of us is qualified to get through security — hence, *we must find another driver, one who is qualified, as Jusef was.*" As he finished speaking, he looked from one to the other, all now listening intently.

Each looked at each other, in turn, and then back to Ahmed; nobody said anything.

Bilal, showing a flash of inspiration for once in his life, said, "Why is it so necessary to get right inside the target? It's a big bomb, so Ayesha has said, and the blast area will be wide. Can we not simply get close and park it nearby?" He was hoping to show Ahmed that he had brains as well as physical skills; he couldn't have been more wrong.

Ahmed rounded on him, bringing his face close. "Idiot! Ibrahim has given us strict instructions to get the bomb to the very center of the target and I have given my *word!*" His face had darkened, and a large vein pulsed on his forehead near one eye.

Bilal looked into Ahmed's eyes and decided to say no more. He sat back, shrugging his shoulders and looking away; but his eyes glittered savagely.

There was an awkward silence, for a few minutes, the only sound being their breathing and Bilal's smoking. Ahmed continued to stare into space, as though in a trance.

Eventually, Ayesha said, "But, Ahmed, where would we find one, a driver?"

"Wherever we can..." And, as the idea took shape in his head, his voice rose, "Yes, wherever." He looked around the table. "We must find another person, who is a driver and who can get through the security without any problem." He almost ground his teeth together in frustration. "But, where?" not realizing for the moment that he was merely repeating what Ayesha had already said. Another silence ensued, as they all struggled with the issue.

Ahmed startled all of them when he suddenly smashed his closed fist on the tabletop. "Ayesha, get Marta. I have an idea." He sat back as she left the room without a word, just the hint of a satisfied look on his face. Rebekah was

curious, wondering what Ahmed knew that she didn't; Bilal brooded sullenly and blew smoke rings.

Two minutes went by. Ahmed rose and began to pace the room, but only for a moment, as the door opened. Marta slowly walked in, Ayesah close behind her. Just as slowly, Marta went to her stool near the sink and sat.

In a tone that he was hoping sounded conciliatory, Ahmed said, "Marta, we are sorry about Jusef's death, but it was accidental." She looked up at Ahmed, but her eyes were dull and bloodshot from too much crying. When she said nothing, he continued. "But, as you know, he was contracted to be our driver, so I wanted to ask you: Do you know of any drivers that Jusef trusted, perhaps someone who worked for Jusef?"

Marta continued to look vacantly at him, saying nothing.

Even at the best of times, Ahmed was not a patient man and opened his mouth to start shouting at her, but Ayesah intervened, going over to her, Ayesah looked in her eyes and said, "Marta, we need to find another driver, do you understand?" Gently, she held the older woman's shoulders in her hands. The blank, dead look frightened her, but she said again, "Do you know where?"

Ahmed had stood and now glared at Marta. "Answer, Marta — I have to know now."

Ayesah, still looking at Marta, extended an arm behind her with her palm facing all of them; the signal was unmistakable. "Marta, Marta — I know you are in deep sorrow, but you must tell us whatever you know." Delicately, she pressed on while Marta's eyes, welling with more tears, remained fixed upon her own, "Marta, you know Jusef wanted us to go, to get out of here, away from you. It's what you want. Tell us where we can get a driver, and we can be on our way." Ayesah heard Ahmed coming forward, but she spread her fingers wide, and made a gesture of pushing.

As the tears rolled down her cheeks, Marta reached out to Ayesah and said, "Jusef... had two drivers... who... who did work... the same work... delivering to the same... places." Her voice was now broken by deep sobs. "If y... you... get one of... of them... they wi...will... d... do it. Where... ever... you want t... to go... one of... them w... would..." But, she collapsed into Ayesah's arms, unable to complete what she wanted to say.

Ahmed almost started to scream again, in the same way he had screamed and screamed in anger when Bilal killed Jusef; but, with a great effort, he held himself in check and said, "Quick, lift her up and take her to her bed. Rebekah,

help Ayeshah. Get her a drink and get the names of those two drivers.” His voice began to rise again, as he added, “Do it now, quick, quick...”

For ten minutes, he paced the room, after they had left, supporting Marta between them. As they went through, Ayeshah had looked back beseechingly, and then closed the door. Bilal, who’d said nothing through all of the commotion, chain-smoked, dropping ash all around him; to Ahmed, he still seemed to be in a daze.

The waiting was too much for him, however: Ahmed went to the door and pulled it open just as Rebekah returned.

In her extended hand, she held two business cards. “Here, Ahmed, these are the names and phone numbers of the two drivers that Jusef had used.”

Without a word, Ahmed grabbed the cards and looked at them. Without looking up from them, he motioned to Bilal, beckoning with one hand and said rapidly, “Bilal, get the phone — bring it quick.” Bilal slowly began to rise and Ahmed turned on him, shouting, “Get moving, pig, move fast or Allah will see you sooner than you wish.”

Sullenly, Bilal went to the living room, found the cordless phone and brought it back. Ayeshah, having settled Marta to bed, followed him into the kitchen. As Ahmed began dialing, Bilal sat down again, and continued his smoking; Ayeshah sat opposite, beside Rebekah who was already seated. For perhaps two minutes, Ahmed waited, listening to the ringing and making sure that he was allowing enough time for somebody to answer, but none came. He had his limits, though.

With a curse, he cut the connection and looked at the next card. Dialing carefully, making sure he entered all the numbers correctly, he waited a lifetime, it seemed, for some one to answer. It came, on the third ring.

With a click, the connection was made, and a voice said, “Hello, is that...”

Ahmed interrupted the female voice and said, “Is Mr...,” he looked more closely at the name, “Anderson there, please?” It was an effort to remain calm and to keep his voice in check. There was a slight pause.

“No... er... not at the moment. Can I take a message?”

“No!” Mentally cursing at his tone, he quickly added, “Please. Ummm, please, when will he be back?” The whites of his knuckles showed as he unconsciously gripped the phone harder.

Another pause, this time a bit longer. Then, “Well, he should be back soon, I guess. Is this Joe?” To Ahmed, she now sounded more at ease.

With a flash of insight, Ahmed smiled broadly, and said, "Yes. This is Joe."
She must mean Jusef...

"Oh, okay then. Look, Tommy's just gone out for a bit, but I guess he'll be back in an hour."

Quickly, Ahmed looked at his watch -- it was 08:27. "You mean, at 9:30?"

"Well, more like ten, I'd say. Want him to call you?"

Steady, go carefully. With more confidence now, he said, "No, that's all right — just say I'll call back after ten. Thank you."

"Well, okay then. I'll tell him as soon as he gets in. Bye now." The line went dead.

Ahmed slowly put the phone on the table; his hands were sweating, and he rubbed them on his trouser legs. The others were looking at him expectantly. He turned to Bilal, who was beginning to show some signs of more life. "Bilal, get a street directory, look up this address," he gave the business card to him, "and you, Rebekah, you also get ready to come with us, to drive." He looked at Ayeshah, "Ayeshah, you can start on the final assembly of the gun, but don't try to complete it until we're back." He thought for a moment, then said, "No — instead, stay with Marta, make sure she stays in her room; there must be no more mistakes or errors."

Ayeshah nodded. "There's time to finish the assembly overnight or tomorrow. I'll see to Marta, don't worry."

Bilal, coming back with the street directory, heard the last bit of the exchange between them, and said, "Why not just put her out of her misery?"

Ahmed verbally pounced on him again. "Fool, and what do we do when somebody calls here, at the door, wanting to see Marta or Jusef?" It was unlikely to happen, but Ahmed didn't want any risk of discovery. Only with Marta alive could he hope to keep happy any locals who may happen to drop in unexpectedly.

Again sullenly, Bilal handed the directory to Ahmed, who threw it back and said, "Look it up, Bilal. Do something useful." Then he sat down and said, "Get some food into you — all of you." He laughed but it sounded like a snarl. "You may not get another chance, for a while."

"But, Ahmed — where are we going?" This from Rebekah, as she cut some cheese from a block.

Ahmed looked at the card again. "A place called Inkster, an outer part of Detroit. We'll leave here at 9:30, so be ready."



Inkster, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 7:00a.m.

After a quick breakfast, Tommy said that he was going out to check on the rig and get it gassed up. Still sitting at the kitchen table, Verna said, "Okay, fine... I'm not going anywhere, maybe have a shower and call Jake."

Tommy waved and went out the front door, banging it shut against the build up of ice around the frame. A few moments later, Verna heard the Pontiac growl away. She lit a cigarette, picked up the phone and dialed the Washington FBI office. After finding out that Jake wasn't there and nobody seemed to know where he was, she asked for Josh Adams.

Frowning slightly after she put the phone down, she was thinking, *So, where the hell are you, Jake? Where are you? Even your boss should know, if not your wife, goddam you!* Still frowning, she brewed another pot of coffee; she'd found that Tommy liked to have a pot ready after being out in the cold. *Maybe he's had an accident?* She shook her head. *Most unlikely... he leaves accidents behind him.* She pulled out her wallet and looked up Jake's cell phone number again. *Am I trying to tell myself something by being unable to recall his cell phone all the time?* Mentally, she shrugged as she lit a cigarette, listening to the ringing; eventually, the computer voicemail told her the usual. *I guess he doesn't want to talk...*

Shrugging physically now, she poured a coffee, carried it to the living room and sat down on the couch. Her notes from school were on the coffee table and she riffled through them, checking some details. From time to time, she used her digital recorder, often finding it better than writing out something that was either complicated or long-winded. After an hour or so, she got another coffee, and came back to the couch to sit down as the phone rang. She picked it up on the third and, as she did, she wondered if it was Jake.

Quickly, she said, "Hello, is that..." but she was interrupted by a very low, but harsh sounding, foreign voice.

"Is Mr...", Verna heard him pause, "Andeson there, please?" He seemed to be breathing heavily.

She hesitated a fraction and said, "No... er... not at the moment. Can I take a message?"

“No!” She quickly took the phone from her ear at the intensity of the reply, then put the phone back as she heard, “Please. Ummm, please, when will he be back?”

She looked at the phone in her hand again: *Who is this guy?* She hesitated for a moment. *Is this the guy that Tommy works for – Joe?* Cautiously, she said, “Well, he should be back soon, I guess. Is this Joe?”

“Yes. This is Joe.”

He sounded happy now. *I wonder if he’s smiling?* “Oh, okay then. Look, Tommy’s just gone out for a bit, but I guess he’ll be back in an hour.”

“You mean, at nine-thirty?”

“Well, more like ten, I’d say. Want him to call you?”

“No, that’s all right – just say I’ll call back after ten. Thank you.”

“Well, okay then. I’ll tell him as soon as he gets in. Bye now.” Verna quickly cut the connection, lent forward and wrote on her pad, ‘Joe called at 8.30 — tell Tommy’. She put the phone down and suddenly stopped, thinking: *Joe didn’t ask who I was? Doesn’t he know Vicky’s voice? Or, does he?* Slightly puzzled, she said aloud, “That’s odd, girl — *why* didn’t he inquire about me?” She picked up the phone again to call Tommy, thought about it and then said, “Oh, what the hell — just tell Tommy when he gets back.” She put it out of her mind and went back to her work, and smoked two more cigarettes before Tommy returned with a frigid rush of air as he banged the door shut again. She saw it was close to 9:40.

Rubbing his hands and with bright red cheeks, Tommy stormed in and said, “Where’s that coffee, Vern — man, do I need it, whoa!”

She followed him to the kitchen, poured two coffees and sat down, putting her notes and the recorder on the chair beside her. And, for the next ten minutes, she listened to him rail against the cold weather of southern Michigan, batteries that fail when you don’t want them to, ice that refuses to budge from a windshield, locks that get gummed up and don’t want to open and a host of other things that people always complain about in winter. But, she knew he was joking as all of it was interspersed with guffaws and belly laughs. Suddenly, she remembered. “Hey, Tommy — somebody called at about eight-thirty, asking for you — I wasn’t sure who it was, but he said he was Joe. Said he’d call back after ten.” She finished her coffee and put the cup down.

Tommy glanced at his watch: 9:59, and shrugged. “Probably was.” He paused, then said, “First — shower, cos I stink. Then I’ll call Joe back.” He

grinned and a few minutes later, Verna heard the shower start. She smoked another cigarette and was just about to start recording a few notes, when Tommy came stomping down the stairs again. As he got to the bottom, they both heard the front door chimes summoning. "I'll get it," Tommy said, as he walked to the door, rubbing his head with a towel.

Verna went to turn off the recorder, but it slipped and fell to the floor. She felt that cold rush of air again, as the front door opened and closed, and was only mildly curious that she couldn't hear any voices as she stooped to pick up the recorder. As she brought her face above the table again, she stopped cold, frozen by the image of Tommy slowly walking backwards into the kitchen, the long, black cylinder of a machine gun pressed under his chin and forcing his head back, so that he had to feel his way with his hands and feet. When the small, bald man who was holding the gun saw her, he forced the gun harder into Tommy's throat and said, "If you scream, he dies."

Unable to comprehend what was happening, but knowing certain death for Tommy when she saw it, she said, her voice thickened with fear, "I won't scream." Her face paled and her heart was racing as adrenaline began to pump through her system. One word flashed into her mind: *Jake!* The recorder dropped, with a soft *plop* from her nerveless fingers, onto her notes on the chair. Very slowly, she began to stand and, as she did, her fear turned to sheer terror as she saw a second man come through the door, a man almost as big as Tommy, but with a face that was like something from hell. Verna took in the beard that was almost the same as Tommy's and saw the mad intensity of the man's eyes. But, her gaze dropped to the .50 caliber Desert Eagle pistol, with a bulbous silencer, pointing directly at her head, and she stopped breathing.

The big man looked at Tommy, pushed against the wall with his face now looking at the ceiling and the machine pistol pushing hard, then back at Verna. He spoke for the first time, and she almost fainted as she recognized the voice on the phone: "You will both come with us. *Now.*"



Knight's Inn Motel, Detroit Metro Airport, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 07:00a.m.

As he walked into the hotel restaurant to order breakfast, Jake was thinking about why he hadn't gone to see Verna the night before, and he was angry with himself. So it was an effort to be pleasant when he gave his order to the waitress and chewed a toothpick as he brooded. Staying at the metro hotel seemed such a good idea, being so close to Inkster – *could've been over there toute de suite to talk to Verna, no question. So, you fucked up again...chickened out, asshole.*

Suddenly, his pager began to buzz, alerting him to the fact that Adams wanted to talk. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the Washington bureau, but nothing happened. He looked at it more closely and saw that the battery indicator was *gone*; he turned it off and on again, but got the same result. He took the battery out, fiddled with the connections, put it back in: same thing. Exasperated, he put it back in his pocket. *Adams can wait, first get the cell phone battery, then Albright at A1Trucking and then go see Verna...*

The waitress brought his order and for the next forty minutes, he did it, and himself justice; he'd not eaten much the day before, so he made up for it. As he ate, he thought of his mother who always said, with a smile: *So... have a hearty breakfast — then you won't break your heart so fast.* He smiled at the recollection; *this one's for you, Mom...wherever you are.*

He ate slowly, giving himself time to think about Verna and what more he could do to save their marriage. *Maybe we should see a counselor together?* But he hated the idea of admitting what he saw as failure. By the time he finished up and went to the front desk it was 08:30, but he still had no firm idea in mind except to go see her later that morning, and not in the evening as he said he would. He told the desk clerk that he'd be staying for another night and turned away to leave but remembered the cell phone. He pulled it out and asked for directions to a supply shop in the mall beside the hotel; luckily, there was one. It was a ten-minute walk dodging through the commuter and tourist crowds, but eventually he found it, a small hideaway in one corner. *Why are these really important places so hard to find, but the crud's everywhere?*

His mood wasn't made any better when the clerk gave the phone back to him and said, "Sorry, sir, looks like there's a real problem with this one."

"Can you fix it?"

He gestured to the rear, "I gotta truckload out the back — wanna get in line?" He smiled to soften the sarcasm.

Resigned, Jake said, "Okay, have you got a phone that fits the battery?"

The clerk took the phone back and popped the battery out again; shaking his head he said, "I can tell you now, sir, no I don't."

Too fuckin' old, like I'm beginning t'feel... Sourly, Jake asked to see a new phone.

Thirty-five minutes later and after suffering through the clerk's sales pitch and instructions – "Now, remember, you hafta charge the battery for twelve hours before you can use it" – he was out of the store with a new cell phone. Walking more quickly now, and kicking himself for leaving his second phone in Washington, he went back to his hotel room and put the new phone on charge; from the now defunct phone, he extracted the SIMM card, put it into the new unit and threw the rest into the trash. He was about to leave when he stopped: he had to make some calls, starting with the Detroit field office.

Picking up the hotel phone, and grimacing, he remembered that he should have called in yesterday, but after leaving the Museum Annex, he'd traveled way across town to see Jackson's widow where he'd spent an hour or more. It had been worthwhile to the extent that he eliminated Jackson as being involved in any wrongdoing; besides, Jake knew beforehand that Jackson had no criminal record.

Thirty seconds later, Bartlett, the Assistant-Director, came on the line: "Where are you, Cutter? Adams called and said you'd be in town — so how come *you* didn't call in here?"

Jake told him briefly and also mentioned that he had to replace his cell phone. Then he asked if there were any autos available.

Bartlett snorted. "You kiddin'? Maybe they *make* autos here, but we sure as hell don't see enough, not on our budget. You're on your own, Cutter, at least until next week." There was just the slightest pause. "But, you're *not* gonna be here next week, are you, Jake?" A soft chuckle followed.

"Maybe I will, maybe I will Bartlett."

"Not likely, Cutter. Adams called again, just an hour ago. He's lookin' for you and he don't sound happy, at all."

"What'd he say?"

Bartlett ignored the question. "So long... asshole," and Jake was left with a dial tone. *Well, fuck you too and all t'hell...*

He dialed Washington and got through to Adams

"Where are you, Jake?" He sounded angry and frustrated. And worried.

"Knight's Inn, Detroit Metro, on my way to see Albright at A1 Trucking."

“Any progress on finding the stolen truck?” Now Adams sounded much more anxious.

Jake flopped back on the bed. “Not yet, but I saw Ingram, and I think it’s possible he had something to do with it. But, that’s just a hunch, boss.”

“Jake, listen — just listen. We need to get this hijacking cleared up, and we *must* get that truck back.” No mention of finding Jackson’s murderer.

What’s changed? Why is Adams so gung-ho about it now? Jake frowned and sat up. *Why is he telling me what I already know?* “Absolutely agree, boss. That’s why I’m going to see Albright at A1 Trucking now; I wanna see if he can tell us any more.”

“So, wrap it up quick, okay.” Adams paused a moment, then said in a quieter voice, “Look, Jake, there’s a bit of heat on about that hijacking — I had a call from the Director... “ He left that hanging, then said, “All I can tell you is that we have a week to recover it.”

Jake went silent, thinking. *Who’s been complaining? Who’s losing here?* The light went on, and he said, “Ingram’s been making a few calls, right? *Right?*”

He heard Adams breathe out, long and loud. “Look, Jake, that’s all I can say for now. Just get that truck and its load.” Then he remembered. “Oh, yeah — earlier, I told Stilts to get a press release out to the media — I want as much coverage on this one as possible, and quick... “

Jake was about to protest, but held it in check, and shrugged. *What the hell, maybe we’ll get real lucky.* To his boss, he said, “Okay, we’ll see what happens.”

“And, Jake — can Stilts handle the op for tomorrow morning? I mean, if you’re in Detroit, then maybe you can investigate the Ingram angle thoroughly.” Listening to the tonal changes in his voice, Jake had the distinct impression that Adams wouldn’t at all be sorry if Ingram *was* implicated.

That gives me more time to see Verna and Tommy... Jake nodded to himself and said, “Sure thing, Stilts is okay. And, yeah, maybe I can get t’find out more. Will you tell Stilts?”

Adams grunted and said, “Yeah, I’ll let him know. I’ll hafta go now. Keep me posted, Jake.” Adams rang off and as he did so, Jake realized that nobody at the Washington bureau knew that his cell phone was out of action for twelve hours.

He called back, and after giving an update and the new instructions to Wendy, he was about to cut the connection when Wendy said, “Hey, Jake —

gotta call from the Highway Patrol down in Ohio. Looks like the hijacked truck was heading north on I-Seventy-Five, at least at seven-thirty or so on Monday night — it was stopped for a brake light infraction, but allowed to proceed after the driver fixed it.”

“So... that’s a long ways from where Jackson was found. Anything useful about the driver?”

“Not yet. The driver was some other guy called... where is it... uh, oh here: David Amaru, Arab-American, 55, no record, no recent traffic violations and with an address in Illinois. I’m checking it out further, but I reckon it’s a false ID.”

“Probably right, Wen. But, let me know when you know more. Remember, my cell phone’s unavailable for twelve hours — so, I’ll be checking with the Detroit office for messages, okay. Or, just page me. Gotta go.” He saw that it was just after ten and he wanted to call Verna before seeing Albright. He just heard Wendy’s “Bye, bye,” as he cut the connection and then quickly dialed Tommy’s home number, letting it ring for a long time before he stopped. Then, he tried Verna’s cell phone and got the same result. *Must be out again somewhere...fuck it. Maybe they’ve both gone to see Vicky?* Aloud, he said, “Fuck it... and I don’t have Vicky’s hospital number. Or even the Goddamned name.”

Thoroughly cheesed off now, with electronic gear, himself and Verna, he went down to get a taxi and interview Albright at A1 Trucking.



Langley, D.C., Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 10:00a.m.

Andy Blackwood closed the door to Cochrane’s office and walked back to his computer station slowly. The discussion with his boss hadn’t gone well, but at least he hadn’t rejected the report outright. To that extent, Caroline’s assessment was correct: Cochrane would cover his ass first, but Andy would have to wait to find out just how his boss would do that.

He got back to his desk and called Caroline’s number. She picked it up almost a soon as it rang.

“Trilby,” was all she said.

“Hi, Caroline It’s me, Andy.”

“Andy, can I call you back in say, half an hour?”

“Sure, no problem... “

“Better still,” she said, “meet me at the food court, at around eleven, okay?”
“Got it, okay,” said Andy and rang off.

He spent the next hour completing some psychological assessments of a couple of international politicians and reading up on a procedures manual, a monumental task at the best of times but hard going when he couldn't stop thinking about Cochrane and what he would do. Gratefully, however he saw that the time had crept around to 10:45, so he locked his computer and wandered down to wait for Caroline.

He was on his second cigarette and it was 11:05 when Caroline appeared, waved and carefully walked over with two coffees.

“How's it goin'?” She had a bright smile and a dress that was positively gleaming with some kind of fleck throughout the material. In the sunlight, it looked like tiny lights shining back on him and he found it somewhat distracting. He got up and moved to her side, so that she was on his right.

“Thanks for the coffee.” He raised the cup in salute and sipped.

“Your welcome.” She smiled, took a sip, put the cup down and continued, “So, what happened with Cochrane?”

“He said it was an interesting theory, now that he'd had a chance to read all of it, well presented, and cogently argued.”

Caroline nodded. “Just as I expected — he thinks it's a load of crap.” She squinted in the strengthening sunlight, reached into her bag and put on her sunglasses.

Andy snuffed out the cigarette butt, grinding it slowly into the tray. “Yeah, I guess you're right... “ He sipped his coffee, deep in thought. Then he shrugged and said, “But he may be right, y'know. Nothing may ever happen.”

“True,” said Caroline and then laughed, “however, aliens might never land, either, but we still have SETI.”

Andy arched one eyebrow and had to smile, even as he grimaced. “You mean the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence?” She nodded. “Well, you're right there, too.” He lit another cigarette and fell silent again, unconsciously blowing smoke rings as he always did, when deep in thought.

Caroline was sipping her coffee, thinking about her suggestion of yesterday, to force the discussion of the report at the next departmental head's meeting. Her gaze went around the food court, as though looking for inspiration and it was then she saw the big screen TV in one corner of the room. It was there for employees to use, but nobody was paying attention to the newscaster on CNN

now talking while an insert beside his head showed a picture that made Caroline grab Andy's arm as he was raising his cup to his lips. The coffee spilled over onto the table and Andy yelled, "Hey, Caroline, what th..."

She interrupted Andy with a low, urgent hiss. "Andy, look at the TV — I think maybe the aliens *have* landed." And, she pointed with her chin at the same time. As she finished speaking, she'd already risen and was walking quickly to the TV. Andy stopped, frozen with surprise at what Caroline had said and then even more so as he saw the picture. Recovering his composure, he followed Caroline to come within hearing range of the newscast:

"... and today, Federal Officers are now looking for a truck, hijacked on last Sunday or Monday, containing priceless treasures from a sunken Spanish galleon. Among those treasures was a pair of matched cannons from the 16th century, both cast in bronze and weighing around eight-hundred pounds apiece — not the sort of thing that an everyday hijacker will run away with quickly. And that might make it easier for our law enforcement personnel to find it more quickly. Let's hope so... The truck was last seen heading north on I-Seventy-Five, at around seven p.m. on Monday, January six but has not been seen since. The whole load was bound for a Detroit museum that had been one of the principal players in efforts to find the treasure off Dominican Republic in 2001. Should you see this truck or have seen it in your travels, please contact the Washington office of the FBI at this number..."

As the screen faded to black with a toll free and a local number to call, Caroline was scribbling the information on a scrap of paper from her bag. She was still standing, but Andy had sat down, eyes glued to the newscast. The screen came back to the studio and the reader finished by saying, *"... but do not approach anybody who may be involved. These people are armed and dangerous."*

As the guest expert began to comment, Caroline tapped Andy on his shoulder, inclined her head, and walked away. Andy rose and followed her to another table away from the noise. He looked back — others there had not bothered to look up from their own activities at all. As he sat down opposite Caroline, Andy was, by this time, giving a good impression of having just seen a ghost. He didn't say anything; he was that much in a daze.

"Andy!" He didn't respond. "Andy — it's show time: we have to do something!" There was no hint of laughter on her face as she looked intently at him. "We can't sit here, knowing what we know and do nothing."

Shaking his head, he said, “What then?” He shook his head, “I just can’t believe this is happening... *this ain’t happening, man!* “

“Believe it,” she said, “and believe that you — we — better do something quick.” She pushed the scrap of paper across to him. “Look, these are the numbers — make a note of them and call, find out who the FBI case officer is. I’ll do the same. Leave our private numbers and have that officer call one of us — then we’ll have a chance of being heard” She stopped, and then she shrugged. “Hey, we might still be dead wrong, Andy, but can we afford to take that risk?”

Slowly, he shook his head, and said, “No, Caroline, we have to go on.”

She looked at her watch: 11:35a.m. “Now, that hijack was four or five days ago, so that truck could be anywhere in USA.” She frowned and then slowly said, “That means the truck was hijacked on the same day, or just about, that we all received news about the Red Alert.”

Andy’s eyes widened as the full import of what she said hit home. “Do you think... are you saying they might be related?”

She looked at him squarely. “Do you believe in coincidence to *that* extent?”

Dumbly, he shook his head.

“Neither do I.” She rose from the seat and said, “Andy, I think we’d better see Cochrane directly. Failing that, we’ll take your report to my boss and, if necessary, beat him over the head with it. Either way, we’ll get the case officer of the FBI to call us on a conference call and see if we can get a consensus to do something real quick.” Her face was deadly serious now. “We must find out if those cannons are dangerous... “

As she was speaking, Andy had stood also, his face set with a look of calm determination.

He said, “Well, let’s get going then... “



Macon, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 1:00p.m.

It was the pain that pushed Verna back to consciousness...

She was in a strange position, with her knees buckled and her body sagging and the pain in her arms was excruciating. Involuntarily, she tried to cry out but couldn’t, because her mouth, she realized, was securely clamped shut by some kind of tape. She shook her head slowly and tried to lift her head, but she

felt ill and dizzy, so she let her head drop again. With a supreme effort, she straightened her knees and pushed back to feel the hardness behind her. Her nose hurt but she couldn't understand why, but as her right eye focused on her feet, she could see drops of blood falling and hitting them; and with mounting horror, she tried to open her left eye, but it was so gummed up with blood and mucous, it wouldn't budge. The same muck was also dribbling from her nose and, from the pain, *it must be broken, I guess*. Groggily, she tried again to lift her head, but failed.

But, as she gained more control of her brain again, she began to discover why her arms and legs felt so strange: she was spread-eagled against a wall, with both arms high above, stretched into a Y and securely held by strong rope which was tied to support beams for the floor above. A three-foot beam that was tied to her ankles spread her feet apart, all of which made it impossible for her to move, except for her head.

Breathing was difficult because of the buildup of blood and the tape gag that was very tight, but she just managed to suck the air through her right nostril. Suddenly, her knees buckled and she sagged down and forward again; behind the gag she tried to scream in pain but simply succeeded in sending more muck through her sinus passages. *Oh God, oh God, don't vomit, don't throw up...*

"Verna! Verna! Look at me, look up. It's me, Tommy." He was speaking in a hushed whisper.

She heard the voice but couldn't see him it was so dim. She screamed from her throat, an agonized animal sound and tried to pierce the gloom with her one good eye. Desperately, she managed to twist one hand around the rope and gain some leverage to keep from sagging again, and in one darker corner, she made out the bulk of Tommy sitting down on the floor, with his hands spread and tied, just like hers, but anchored where the floor and wall meet; his feet were spread in the same way with a beam, but stretched out in front of his body. The muffled scream came again as her eye pleaded for answers.

"Verna, listen and listen good. Just nod or shake your head to answer, okay?" Slowly, she managed to nod, and Tommy continued, "Do you remember anything of what happened after those fuckers busted in?"

She blinked and blinked, but shook her head.

"Okay, I'll be quick, 'cos I dunno when they'll be back." He licked his lips. "Verna, you know we're in a tight spot, but you don't know why."

She nodded, a bit more quickly now, as she gained more control.

“Okay, this is what I know.” he said, “These guys need me to drive a rig somewhere, don’t know yet where. But, as they *do* need me, then I’ve — *we’ve* — got some leverage. I don’t know what they’ve got and they don’t talk much in front of me, but they’re not American, they don’t look or act like Mafia and they’re well armed. So I’m guessing that they’re some kinda terrorists who have a job to do... “

Verna’s good eye widened and she nodded in understanding.

“They talk English with foreign accents and I think they’re from the Middle East, so I reckon my guess is probably near to the truth. You got that, can you hear all that?”

Again, she made a strangled noise in her throat and nodded vigorously.

He was silent for a few moments. Then he said, “We’re in the basement of the house that belongs to the guy I worked for — Jusef Wahiz, but everybody I knew called him Joe. I don’t know what his involvement was, or where his wife, Marta, is. But, Joe’s dead anyway, his body is on the workbench in front of you, under the sheet... I heard them talking about it. “

For the first time, Verna took note of the shape about six feet from her; the outline covered by the sheet was distinctly like a body. She shuddered and almost gagged again, thinking, *God, I hear what Tommy’s saying, but how can this be happening?* She looked over to the corner again and again pleaded with her one good eye.

“More? I don’t know much — but, I think whatever they wanna do is gonna be done soon.” He paused a fraction, then continued, “Look, Vern, don’t give up hope, okay. *We can* get outta this, trust me, okay?” He said that for her benefit, but the way she looked at him, he knew she didn’t believe him. *Hell, I don’t believe myself...* but he smiled encouragingly at her.

Suddenly, the door to the basement opened and the small, bald-headed man came in carrying a glass of water. He was smoking and, as he approached Tommy who was in the corner on his right, Bilal ashed his cigarette in the glass. Most of the ash settled quickly, but some remained on the surface as scum. He held it out to Tommy’s mouth and said, “Drink.”

Tommy looked at him, seeing him fully for the first time: a wiry, finely muscled frame of about a hundred and seventy pounds and maybe five feet ten in height, obviously very fit, a nose still flattened and bloody, a head like a billiard ball — but with a dark bruise at the back — and, as he smiled crookedly at Tommy, he showed teeth that looked as though they had terminal cancer. Tommy

let his gaze travel from Bilal's toes to his head again, and then looked into his eyes; calmly, Tommy said, "Fuck you, asshole."

Bilal's grin grew wider as he slowly poured the water over Tommy's head until the last drop fell. Then he made a quick motion to shove the glass into Tommy's face, but stopped a bare inch away, laughing. He stayed there for a moment then straightened and walked very slowly over to Verna, still carrying the glass and stopped in front of her, tumbling the glass in one hand and grinning at her. Turning, he placed the glass upside down on what was obviously the toes of Jusef's right foot, and then quickly began to rub his hands from Verna's crotch up to her breasts and back, all over, pushing and grabbing, squeezing and tugging while Verna stood, pushed her body back hard against the wall and simply closed her right eye tightly.

Savagely, Bilal hissed in her ear as he continued his abuse, "Like that, bitch? Do you like that, hmmm? C'mon now, what do you say, bitch?" He looked back at Tommy and grinned, "Your woman likes it, I can tell" He was panting now, getting more aroused and he began to tear at her sweater and blouse, his fingers digging in like claws.

"I wouldn't do that any more, if I were you, asshole."

With a muted scream of rage, Bilal turned and was back in front of Tommy's face so quickly, Tommy didn't even see where the knife came from. But, it was there, long and gleaming and right in front of his left eye. The hand that held it was steady; the eyes that looked at him were coldly murderous. Bilal hissed, "She's just about lost her left eye, American pig — do *you* want to lose yours too?" He grinned and his breath hit Tommy in the face. It stank.

Tommy looked back at him and said, "I wouldn't do that either, if I were you." Deliberately, Tommy relaxed his body, as though trying to make himself more comfortable. "You want me to drive yer fuckin' rig, then you need me to look good." Now, he grinned, "Otherwise, people might get suspicious, right?"

Bilal's smile went, and he stood up and then swiftly stomped on Tommy's crotch. He walked away, back to Verna, as Tommy gasped with pain and his face drained of blood. Just as Bilal began on Verna again, Tommy managed to croak, "Touch her again, asshole, and I don't drive, no matter what you do." At that moment, Tommy knew he was taking a gamble that the mission, whatever it was, was much more important than raping and murdering. Dizzy from the kick, he let his head droop but Bilal grabbed Tommy's hair and pulled his face up to meet his own.

“Okay, American... *asshole*.” The word came out with all the venom that he could muster; spittle hit Tommy in the face, but Tommy didn’t care and Bilal didn’t notice. “Plenty of time for fun later.”

He stood up again, walked back to the door, picking up the glass along the way. At the door, he turned and laughed, looking at Verna, “Soon, bitch, you will give me great pleasure...” The door closed, Bilal’s laughter fading as he mounted the stairs.

Groaning still, Tommy said, “It’ll give *me* great pleasure to deal with him later.” He shook his head and looked up at Verna, “Can’t do anything about that, Verna, just gotta roll with it, for now.”

Verna managed to give an impression of shrugging, as she shook her head in resignation. *I’ve been groped by a lot worse, Tommy*, she wanted to say.

“Anyways, they think that you and me are... kinda like married, y’know. You being with me and all, when they busted in...”

Again, she tried to shrug and even seemed to be trying to smile.

Tommy went on, “... so that’s the leverage they have over both of us: we’re both hostage but they’ll kill *you* if I refuse to drive — and then, they’d kill me too, I guess, and just get some other poor saps to do the job.” He paused for thought, shaking his head at the same time. “Well, we’ll just string ‘em along, okay — make like we’re gonna do it. That way, we both stay alive for now...”

Verna’s legs and feet were aching. The floor was concrete and cold, and try as she might she couldn’t stay upright. She sagged, allowing her body weight to take the strain off her legs, but soon the strain on her arms was too much and with another shaky effort, she pushed herself upright and tensed the muscles of her buttocks and legs. She still felt sick and dizzy, but at least she wasn’t throwing up yet. *If only I could get the gag off...* She looked from side to side, as best as she could, but there were no convenient hooks or nails in the wall. *There never are — only in comic books...* Suddenly a few tears fell as she thought of Jake and Bobby; and as the tear ducts of the left also released the salty drops, she grunted with the stinging pain in her eye and pushed her head back too quickly to hit the wall, making her see stars. With that her whole body began to shake and Tommy called out to her loudly, but not shouting.

“Vern, VERNA... don’t lose control on me! VERNA! Don’t pass out...I need you.” No words could take the pain away, but he tried. “Verna, don’t worry about that guy — he’s not gonna hurt you, because they need *us* more than we need *them*...” He chuckled grimly, and went on, “... not that we really need this, eh?”

Her body had sagged again as she lost consciousness for a few seconds, but then the pain of her arms forced her to stand again. This time, she got both hands around the rope and gripped it as tightly as she could, to keep her balance as much as to relieve the strain. Weakly she looked at Tommy, and said it with her eye, and the firmer stance, *I'm here Tommy, I'm still here...* Her head, which had been pounding anyway, felt now as though it wanted to split apart, and she winced as she moved it from side to side. Mucus filled her nose, from the tears as much as from blood and, as she turned her head, she managed to wipe the excess off, onto the sleeve of her upper arm. She took some deep breaths and just wished that her head would stop thundering like Niagara Falls.

Tommy smiled again, and said, "And, look, if you're wondering what happened to yer eye, well, you can blame that on me." She raised her eyebrows, and winced again. "Yeah, when I started to mouth off at them in the kitchen, the big guy sandbagged *you*, knocked you clean off your feet." He looked unhappy and then darkly angry and added softly, "I thought you was dead, you didn't see the backfist comin' at all..." He went on, cautiously, "Looks, from here, that you've got a broken nose and cheek bone, and your eye is all swelled up to a slit, but I reckon there's no permanent damage." He fell silent, watching her as she took it all in, and as she nodded a couple of times. "Anyways, I shut up then and just listened to what they wanted. Now, you know as much as I do." He moved and winced also, as the pain of the kick made itself known again, and for a while both of them fell silent, except for Verna shifting wearily, seeking relief from the strain.

Ten minutes later, they were both jerked out of their thoughts as they heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Moments later the big man, with the beard like Tommy's, came through and shut the door. He had a writing pad in one hand; the other held the big Desert Eagle .50 caliber, *sans* silencer. He ignored Verna and went straight over to Tommy and stood there, looking down on him for a minute, then he said, "I am going to loosen up one of your hands, and I will place a pen and this paper beside that hand. You will then write on the paper the names of all of the places you have delivered to, using Atlas Trucking's trailers and equipment. Start with the biggest." He put the gun on the bench where Jusef's body lay, and said, "While you are writing, I will have the gun pointed at your woman — if you try to do anything other than write, she dies." He bent and placed the pen and paper on the floor, near Tommy's right hand.

"Other side," said Tommy. He was left-handed.

Without a word, Ahmed moved it over then went to the end of Tommy's outstretched hand and loosened a length of the rope and quickly tied it back. Backing away, he picked up the gun, walked over to Verna and put the muzzle against her left temple, next to her horrendous bruising. There was a snick as he moved the safety off with his thumb, and a louder click as he cocked it fully.

"Write!"

Verna remained standing with her legs braced, trying to forget the cold feel of the gun. Her arms ached again and she hoped she didn't faint. Tommy looked at her and knew, at that range, the muzzle blast would kill her instantly; the .50 slug would then take her head off. He held her gaze for a brief moment and then bent his head to the task.

For the next ten minutes, he searched his memory for every company, every government organization, every school, every single place of note that he'd ever been to for Jusef. Writing quickly in large block letters, he filled two pages with two columns per page, in all about forty names. Finally, with a grunt, he threw the pen down and said, "That's it, no more."

Still aiming at Verna, Ahmed came forward closer and said, "Push the paper towards me." Tommy flicked it to him. "And the pencil," Ahmed added. Stooping quickly, he picked up both and went back closer to Verna, studying the list, the gun pointing in her direction. Eventually, he looked at Tommy and said, "Good." Now he knew that Tommy had delivered to the target many times, but neither Tommy nor Verna knew *which one* he was targeting. Then he said, "Stretch out your arm again." As Tommy did so, he bent quickly, pulled the rope tight and fastened it securely. Without another word, he went to leave but was stopped by Tommy.

"If you want me to drive a truck to any of those places, I'll need to have my rig." Tommy was bluffing, but he had to try. His face deadpan, he watched as Ahmed came back to stand over him.

"You lie," he said.

Pay out the line, but go real easy... He looked squarely at Ahmed, fixing his gaze on the other's eyes. "I could be, but I'm not and I'll tell you why — all those places know the rigs *and* the drivers, just as though they would have known Jusef with *his* rig."

Again, Ahmed said flatly, "You lie, like all Americans."

Tommy countered quickly, "Why should I? You want to get into somewhere, using a rig and a driver that security knows and trusts, right? If I turn

up in Jusef's, that'll be the first time in ten years. I can tell ya, that'll cause questions." *Yeah, they'll probably ask me which brothel Jusef is at.*

Ahmed said nothing for another minute, obviously going over Tommy's argument. "You're looking for a chance to escape," he finally said.

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "While my woman is here? Knowing that you'll kill her if I try?" He shook his head convincingly, he hoped. "No way — I just wanna do your job, and let you guys get on your way..." He'd learnt to lie very convincingly in Vietnam, so it was easy to use that skill again. He saw the indecision in Ahmed's behavior, the way he looked again at the list and back to Tommy again.

Then Ahmed said, "Why tell me this, knowing it will help me?"

Reel it in now...he's thinkin' about it. Looking directly into his eyes, Tommy said, "If we're stopped by security, I know I'll die first and I don't want that. By making sure that *you* get through to drop the load, then I know you'll be on your way and outta my life and my woman's..."

Ahmed didn't blink, didn't change expression, but he was thinking: *This stupid American doesn't know he'll die anyway, but if the truck cannot get through...*

Then, Tommy delivered the punch line and he made it a statement, not a question: "Anyways, you *can't* afford to take the risk..."

Briefly, he saw the anger flare in Ahmed's eyes and nostrils but it went after a second. Tommy kept staring at him: *this guy's in control, no pushover...*

Ahmed put the pad under his arm, pushed the gun into his belt and without another word, went to the door. As he opened it, he turned and said, his voice taunting, "What is it that your ridiculous Terminator said? Oh, yes: *'I'll be back.'*" Laughing he banged the door shut and mounted the stairs loudly, still laughing.

Tommy looked over to Verna and quickly said, "I think he's bought it..." The look of hope in her eyes made him feel more hopeful himself, but he added quickly, "We ain't outta the woods yet, Vern, but you just hang in th... fuck, I'm sorry, that's a poor choice of words. What I meant was...."

But she was shaking her head vigorously, her one good eye bright, and he swore she was trying to not laugh and to laugh at the same time.

"Atta girl, Vern," he said, grinning broadly, and they both fell silent again for another long while, interspersed with the sound of Verna's constant moving, as she searched for a position that didn't hurt. The pain in her arms was becoming excruciating and she knew, within herself, that she had to stop thinking about

gagging or choking. It was, however, just thirteen minutes later that they both heard the footsteps descending, and Tommy gave a thumbs-up quickly to Verna. The door swung open and Ahmed, followed by Bilal and Rebekah came in. Bilal was holding the Uzi in a sling; Rebekah had the Desert Eagle in one hand and one of the VLF transceivers in the other. She went to stand in front of Verna while Ahmed stood over Tommy once more and said, "We will go and get your rig. Where is it?"

Tommy told him where the gas station was, just half a mile from his house.

"You will come with Bilal and me, while Rebekah stays here to guard your woman. If you try anything, Rebekah will know immediately," and he showed Tommy the VLF unit, then gave it back to Rebekah, "and will kill her, remember that."

Tommy nodded, "I understand. I won't try anything... " *Yet!*

A few moments later, Tommy was standing, albeit unsteadily at first, while Bilal fastened his wrists with nylon packaging strips, and for good measure, tied a piece of copper wire around his thumbs until the flesh bulged. Tommy winced as the wire tightened, but said nothing. Then, Bilal pushed him against the wall with the Uzi at the back of Tommy's head and hissed, "I would love to kill you – *please* give me the chance..." and giggled.

Ahmed glared at him, "Later, Bilal. For now, shut up."

Now, Tommy made his pitch. "Hey, cut down my woman, okay. Let her sit on the floor, as I was. She can't get away."

Ahmed turned upon him, suspecting a trick.

Tommy didn't flinch, but allowed his voice to rise and said, "We'll go and get my rig, but when we get back, she'd better be alive. Look at her, for *fuck's* sake, she's been hurt bad and she's weak. If she dies, I don't drive, that's it!" Calmly, Tommy gazed back into Ahmed's eyes, willing him to say yes.

Seconds passed while Ahmed glowered, unmoving, at Tommy; then, without turning his head, Ahmed told Rebekah to tie Verna to the floor and Tommy breathed a long sigh of relief that took all of his will power to keep hidden.

As the three men filed through the door, Tommy just managed to catch Verna's grateful look, as she now sat spread-eagled on the floor, and winked at her. Then the door closed. Three minutes later they were back on Route 12 to Tommy's home and Ahmed, sitting in the rear with his gun pointing at Tommy's back, said to Bilal, "What's the time?"

As Bilal said “Two-fifteen”, Tommy wasn’t looking at the clock on the dash at all; instead, he was staring ahead through the windshield and wondering whether he had only one or two clips with his 9mm Glock that was hidden in his rig’s cab. It was thirty-five miles or so, so he had a half-hour or so to think about it.



Detroit Field Office, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 2:00PM

Jake jumped out of the taxi, paid off the driver quickly and almost ran to the elevators and punched the button for twenty-six. As he entered the field office, he waved to a couple of agents he knew but made a beeline for Bartlett’s office, who looked up and saw him coming, but went back to reading papers on his desk. Jake knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an answer.

Without any preliminaries, Jake said, “When I called earlier from Albright’s office, I was told you now had a car that I could use?”

Bartlett slowly raised his head and looked at Jake as though the latter was some kind of deadly virus. “Cutter, I don’t like you, and I never have. You’re just a fuckin’ pain in the ass, and then some.” He paused for a moment and looked out the window at the bright sun reflecting off the river, barely half a mile away; the sky was clear, for the first time in many days. He turned back to Jake and said, “Somehow, somebody *thinks* you can get a job done, but all I see is a guy who continually fucks up. Yer just a fuckin’ loose cannon, Cutter.”

Jake said nothing. *What’s the point?* Stolidly, he waited for Bartlett to get to anything relevant.

“And, despite my protestations, it seems that our Director in Washington also has similar misconceptions about your abilities.” He stopped and wished he could light a cigarette, sighed and then he said, “Get down to the car pool, see the clerk there and fuck off.” He glared at Jake’s back as he turned to go, “And, bring it back in one piece...”

Jake barely heard the last as he slammed the door and took the elevator to the garage. Ten minutes later, he was heading west on Michigan Avenue towards Inkster. It was about twenty miles and the time on the dash showed 2:25, so he pushed harder on the gas and weaved his way through the traffic, paying no heed to the blaring horns and irate faces to the rear. He hadn’t had a chance to call

Tommy's place since the morning and was anxious to get out there to spend some time with Verna. He pushed his foot down harder.

By the time he got to the junction of Michigan and Inkster, it was just 2:43, but without a local directory, he had to ask directions to Daley Street from a local gas station. As he drove away to make a left and head south to Daley, he had no reason to notice the car that pulled into the gas station, behind him, just as he departed.

It wasn't far to Tommy's street, as the gas station attendant had said, and as he killed the engine and got out, Jake wondered what sort of reception he'd get from Verna. Then, he wondered what Tommy would say. It was bright and cold, but the sun's heat was tending to melt the edges of snow banks, leaving a skim of icy water on the sidewalks. *Cold shoes again*, he thought wryly, *and I got cold feet already...*

He banged loudly on the front door and turned, as people often do, to see whether the neighbors were looking at him; none of the houses opposite showed any signs of life. All was still on Daley Street, at the moment. Jake banged on the door again, louder this time, but still there was no sound from inside. He put his ear to the door and listened for thirty seconds: nothing.

Exasperated now, he walked back to the GTO in the driveway, walked around it, peered in the windows, checked the doors — both locked — and was about to go back when he noticed the rear tires. Both were flat, but they hadn't been immediately apparent because of the depth of the snow. He crouched down and looked carefully around the tire and found a slash on the sidewall, near the bottom. He checked the other wheel and found the same thing.

Standing up, Jake looked around again and stood, for a few moments, thinking of possibilities. *Could've just been vandals havin' some fun at Tommy's expense...* Making up his mind, he went back to the sidewalk to look for the common access to the condominium complex and, after sloshing through knee deep snow, he got to the rear entrance for Tommy's unit. Much pushing and shoving finally allowed him entrance through the six-foot high back gate and then he was on the back patio, peering through the kitchen windows. He banged very loudly on the door and called out "Verna! Tommy!" but there was still no response.

He stopped again, thinking furiously, *What time... when did I speak to Verna last? Yeah, that's it — 5:30 or 6, yesterday evening...* He looked through the kitchen window again, pressing his face up close. He saw the table, the chairs, a pile of papers — *Verna's?* — on one, a coffee pot, cups, all the usual

stuff you'd expect to see. Nothing out of place, or so it seemed. He stood back, looked up to the rear windows: none were open, or looked broken. *Where are they? What the fuck is goin' on here?*

As he went to close the back gate, on his way out, a voice called out, "You lookin' for somethin'?"

Jake spun in the direction of the voice and saw an old man's face peering at him from the back door on the unit beside Tommy's. "Well, yeah, I am — lookin' for Tommy, Tommy Andeson. Have you seen him?" He pushed his way through the snow, as best as he could.

"And, who might you be?" Cautiously, the old man kept his distance, showing his face only from behind the door.

"Tommy's brother-in-law. I'm up from Washington to see him, and my wife too. Have you seen her?"

The man grimaced, "Oh, yeah?" It was the way he said it.

"What d'ya mean — oh, yeah?"

"Nothing..." He went to pull his face back behind the door.

"Well — have you seen them? Today? Or yesterday?"

The face came back into view. "Nah. Ain't seen 'em t'day. But, I heard all the ruckus earlier — bangin' doors, thumpin' on the walls, shouting, just like you been doin' now." He spat, a long gob that made a deep hole in the snow. "Woke me up, it did, an' I been tryin' t'sleep, y'know."

Now, Jake was getting alarmed. "When was that, all the noise? What time?"

The man screwed up his face, making it look even more like dried apple peel, while Jake just got more impatient. "Uh, I dunno, maybe nine-thirty somethin'." He shook his head and carried on, "Naw, wait a minute — more like ten, 'cos I had t'go out at ten-thirty... I think..." He stopped, and then said, "... or was that yesterday?" He shook his head, looked at Jake and said, "Sorry, mister..." and closed the door.

"Wait, hey, wait up, you old..." but Jake stopped himself in time from saying any more. *There's more important things to think about*, he thought, as he got the back gate closed again and tramped around to the street and to the front door. Then, he noticed the garage had two small oval windows on each but a quick look through both revealed only the usual — Tommy's Mustang and other bits and pieces; in one corner was what looked like a covered snowmobile. *Looks*

a bit like my garage — except for the Mustang, of course... Nothing unusual... except for the flat tires. Who's got a grudge against Tommy?

Cursing the lack of his cell phone, Jake went back to the office car to find a phone booth, somewhere. As he started the car, he remembered seeing one at the gas station where he'd asked directions. With a quick U-turn, he headed for Inkster Road, slewing the car from side to side in the slushy snow and made it back there in one minute flat, only just missing spearing another car as he reached the Inkster Road T-junction. Ignoring the blaring horn and outraged looks, he quickly got to the gas station and parked beside the phone booth, went to get out but stopped himself when he saw the severed line, with the phone hanging uselessly on the cradle. Cursing loudly now, he backed the car over to the convenience store, killed the engine and went to the payment booth. The bored cashier looked at him coolly as he approached.

"Gotta phone I can use?" He was a bit out of breath and red in the face; his trousers were wet through to the knees; his jacket was unbuttoned and his shirt, at the front, hung out from his exertions at the rear of Tommy's back gate; and his shoes looked like the remains of a dog's dinner.

The cashier looked him up and down, slowly, while still chewing her gum. She popped a bubble and said, finally, "Back of store" and jerked her head in that direction. She must have been all of eighteen.

Jake leaned in to the window and said, "Well, thank you... *sir!*" But, he wasn't smiling as he went in to find the phone. He found it and what was left of the local phone directory hanging underneath, at the very rear of the store, and tucked away in the corner... *again*. He had to find the hospital where Vicky was — she might know what had happened to Verna and Tommy and she would probably have a house key that he could use.

Trouble was, he didn't know which hospital she was in — Verna hadn't told him, and *you didn't ask, did ya, Cutter?* Cursing again, he suddenly remembered that there would be a street directory in the car, standard issue for all field office cars. He got it out quickly and returned to the phone, and then spent the next few minutes cross-checking the nearest hospitals on the map with address and phone numbers in the phone book.

He found it on the third call.

"Garden City Hospital, may I..."

Jake interrupted quickly, "Ma'm, my name is Jake Cutter, I'm trying t'find out if you have a Victoria Andeson registered in your maternity ward." He added

just as quickly, "I'm her brother-in-law." He'd gone through this routine twice already, but it was still hassle.

"Well, we're not supposed to... "

Jake was ready for that. "Look, please, just look and see if you have and then check with her about me, Jake Cutter." He spelt his name slowly. "I'll stay on the line. Please!" He tried to put enough, but not too much, urgency into his tone.

Again, he waited impatiently for thirty seconds. Forty. A minute...

"Are you there... I'm connecting you now."

A bit of noise in the background, then aloud bang and "Ooops, careful... " And then Vicky was talking to him.

"Jake... is that you?"

"Yeah, yeah... Vicky, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, I guess... as well as you can expect. The little guy just doesn't want to come out into the cold world, is all." She giggled. "Guess I don't blame him, too much... So, how've *you* been?"

Go easy, here, go easy. Jake drew in his breath and calmly said, "Hey, look Vicky, I was supposed t'meet Verna at your place t'night for dinner, but I decided to come on up early. Well, you know how it is, they must be out somewhere, and I don't have a key." He forced a chuckle. "You wouldn't happen to have another key, would ya, Vicky? Let an old guy kick up his heels for a bit and wait in a warm kitchen, hmmm?"

She laughed, "Old guy, my ass. You're such a fake, Jake," giggling again at the inadvertent rhyme. "But, yeah, I have an extra key here," she added.

Too true, Vicky... too true...

Aloud, he said, "Fine, I'll be up there soon, I'm at a gas station on Inkster not far from your house."

"Yeah? That's where Tommy keeps his rig, if it's the same one — Trixie's Truck Stop."

Jake looked around the interior of the store, then said into the phone, "Vicky, hold the line a moment, okay... " He let the phone drop carefully and went out to the front again, turned around and looked at the sign that he didn't see before, it was so big. He shook his head, "Well, fuck me... " He scanned the whole area rapidly but saw no trucks and went back to the phone. "Right on, Vicky — I'm at Trixie's, but no rigs around."

"Huh... well, I know he's not workin' today, but I suppose he might have gone out with Verna somewhere. Maybe to get somethin' for the rig, just take

Verna for a run. Tommy likes to take drives, just about *anywhere*, y'know." There was just a touch of cheerful resignation in her voice.

Careful now... "Vicky, did they call in this morning, t'see you?"

She sounded a bit put out, as she answered, "No, they didn't and Tommy always comes in the mornin' and the evenin'. And, y'know, he didn't even call yet."

Before she could continue, Jake said, "Okay, look, I'll be up at the hospital in a few minutes, I'll get the key and wait for them at home. Then, I'll give both of them heck for not seeing you earlier..." He managed to make his voice sound cheerful, but inside he was puzzled. As quickly as he could, he rang off, and headed north on Inkster to the hospital. He spent as little time as he could with Vicky, who looked very tired and somewhat depressed, got the key and promised to call her as he made his exit. He remembered to turn with a smile and wave as he went through the door.

It took him only five minutes to make the four miles back and a few seconds later he was standing with his back to the closed door, listening intently: nothing.

Very slowly, he pushed off his shoes with as little noise as possible, and moved them out of his way. First, without moving, he scanned the open plan living room, looking for any signs of disturbance. There were none obvious. Then he padded down the corridor, stopping at the garage door; he turned the knob very carefully and opened the door a crack, listening for any sound. In the distance, he now heard the ticking of a clock, but couldn't place where it came from. He went through the door quickly and stood to his right, with his back against the wall, scanning the garage expertly and efficiently. Still nothing...

Closing the garage door, he continued down the corridor, and passed by the stairs on his way — pausing to listen — then continued to the kitchen, the door of which was wide open. He entered slowly and again took it all in; there was nothing out of place. Frowning, he went back to the stairs and searched the three bedrooms and two bathrooms just as thoroughly: nothing out of the ordinary.

He called out, "Vernaaaa! Tommyyyyy!" No reply.

So, what was the old guy talkin' about — bumps and noises earlier this morning? He went back to the kitchen and turned on the coffee machine, noting that it had been readied for use already. *So, maybe they did go out on the spur of the moment?* Suddenly, he swore out loud, turned off the coffee pot again, went to the front door and put on his cold, and very wet shoes: on his way back from Vicky, he'd forgotten to stop at Trixie's to ask about Tommy's rig.

In two minutes, he was back there and approached the pay booth cashier again. “Are you Trixie?” This time, he tried to sound pleasant. As he did so, he looked around the parking area: no rigs that he could see. And, he couldn’t recall if there *were* any earlier, either.

“Oh, you’re back, are you... *m’am?*”

Jake laughed genuinely and said, “Okay, I deserve that, I’m sorry for earlier, but I was in a fix...” He smiled broadly, hoping to mend fences. It didn’t work.

She looked at him and saw just a tired, unkempt old man, but she did set Jake straight. “Trixie’s just a name. See the man inside — he’s the boss.” And, she went back to her fashion magazine.

Jake pulled a face and went inside, for the second time... *no, third time today, asshole.* He found an older man than he, at the back, stacking food on a shelf. Jake introduced himself as Tommy’s relation and then asked about the rig.

“Yeah, sure — Tommy pays me to keep a watch and let him park it here.”

“Have you seen Tommy today?”

“Oh, yeah... he was in earlier this mornin’.” He banged about with tins, stacking them as he spoke, not even looking at Jake.

Like pulling teeth... “Uh, d’you recall what time that would have been?” Jake smiled unnecessarily — the man just wasn’t watching.

But he did stop to think for a moment, then carried on with his job, and said, “Oh, yeah. It was early, maybe seven-thirty, eight. Maybe a bit later.”

“D’you know where he went in his rig?”

The man shook his head. “Didn’t. Just checked up on a few things, hadta replace a battery, as I recall.”

“Is that when he left in his rig?”

A head shake again. “Nope. Just drove back to his home in the GTO.” Some cans fell with a crash and he spent a few moments picking them up; Jake handed him a couple that fell to the floor.

The man smiled briefly at Jake, and took the cans. “Thanks, mister.”

So... the tires on the GTO were slashed only this morning.

“So, when did Tommy come back t’get his rig?”

The old man now stopped for a moment and turned around to face Jake. He took his glasses off to polish them as he looked at Jake closely. Ignoring Jake’s question, he said, “You say you’re family, huh?”

“Yes, my name is Jake Cutter, as I said. My wife’s sister is Vicky and my wife’s name is Verna. I’m sure you know Vicky.” He described her, as best as he could. Jake queried him again, “The rig? When did Tommy come back?”

The man absently scratched his head and screwed up his eyes to slits. “Hmmm, mebbe around two-forty-five, three, somethin’ like that.”

Fuck! That’s just after I called in here the first time...

“Did Tommy have a woman with him?” He was trying not to sound too testy, but he had to inject a sense of urgency. “I wouldn’t ask unless it was important, y’know.”

The old man put his glasses back on his nose, adjusted them properly and said, “Nope, didn’t have a woman with him.”

So – where is Verna? Where is she, if not with Tommy? This was getting more puzzling. Jake leaned back against a shelf, but when it moved he thought better of it. He was about to ask the old man to think again, but he carried on.

“... but, there was man with him. And a car, with another guy driving.”

Jake spun around, with a sense of beginning unease. “Did Tommy see you? Did he say anything?”

He shook his head, looking at Jake. “Nope, but then I didn’t see his face.” He went back to his stacking. “He was getting into his rig with the other guy.”

Jake stopped, again going over possibilities. *Could be just a trucker friend of Tommy’s in need of assistance.*

“Can you describe the man with Tommy? Was he anybody you know?”

Now he scratched his chin, choosing his words. “Well, didn’t get a real good look, y’know, but he was big, like Tommy, but not quite the same. And he had long black hair and a beard, yeah, come to think of it, just like Tommy’s. But, I saw him mostly from the back too, didn’t get a look at his face at all.”

Does Tommy have a brother? Would Vicky know? Jake shook his head; that’s possible, but Verna’s never said anything about such a sibling. “What about the car, and the other guy?”

“Just some kinda Chevy, late model, gray, out of state plates — didn’t get the number, why should I? The man driving? Nah, didn’t see him, the windows were tinted.” He stopped, then said, “You some kinda cop?”

Pretty darned good, all round, for an old geezer... Aloud, Jake said, “I’m with the FBI,” showing his badge, “but this is unofficial, Mr... “

“Brewster — Geoff Brewster.”

“... Brewster. Sorry to sound official, only I was supposed to meet my wife at Tommy’s place, but they seem to have gone out for the day. I guess that guy you saw might have been a relative... or friend?” Jake turned the statement into a question.

Brewster nodded and said, “That may be so, can’t say either way.” Anticipating Jake’s next question, he added, “They all went west on Michigan, and that’s all I know.”

Brewster nodded to himself again but Jake wasn’t watching, or even listening. Brewster turned back to his shelves and continued stacking, dismissing Jake from his mind completely.

In the same way, Jake had dismissed Brewster as the sense of unease stayed with him. *Are they both in some kind of jam? Still, it could all be entirely innocent: Tommy may be helping out some guys about a job, a load to deliver. Maybe it was a friend whose rig had broken down and Tommy was going to help out? But, where’s Verna? Did she stay somewhere, waiting for Tommy to return with his rig? How did they both get to somewhere without a car? And, who slashed those tires on the GTO? Most importantly, why didn’t Tommy tell Vicky where he was going?*

Jake pulled himself out of his reverie to make up his mind.

Only two things certain right now — too many questions is one, the other is get back to Tommy’s house and do some more digging...

He thanked Brewster and left him his card and told him that he’d be at Tommy’s house or the Knight’s Inn Motel on Middle Belt Road; he gave Brewster both numbers and asked him to call if he remembered any other details.

As he parked his car in Tommy’s driveway, he glanced at his watch and saw it was close to five-fifteen — he’d had no chance for much lunch and virtually nothing to drink since breakfast. He felt ravenous. He locked the car and went inside, turning on the coffee to perk and picked up the phone on the kitchen table. He dialed the Detroit office and asked for Bartlett who came on the line very quickly.

“Where the fuck’ve you been?” Anger was there, yes, but something more.

Anxiety? Jake couldn’t tell, but simply said, “Busy, doin’ my job. When’re you goin’ t’start doin’ the same?”

“Okay, wise guy — listen up. At three-twenty-three p.m. today, an auto in the downtown district killed a pedestrian. We don’t know yet whether he just fell,

was pushed or simply ran into the car. But, the car didn't stop, so the local precinct is treating it as a homicide, first up."

"So... ?" Jake didn't try to mask his boredom or impatience with Detroit's traffic problems, however tragic.

Now, Bartlett chuckled, "The pedestrian was Ingram, from the Detroit Museum Annex... *asshole*."



Macon, Michigan, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 5:00p.m.

Ayeshah's brain was weary and her eyes were tired from looking at the drawing on the workbench.

As the nuclear physicist and expert, it was her knowledge that had brought the project to its final stage; and, she'd been working towards this final week ever since she'd come under the spell of Ibrahim Omar, eight years earlier. She knew that she owed him everything, even her life; so, this project was her way of showing him that, and she was happy to martyr herself for him and for their cause. She had no fear of death, just a calm serenity in the belief that their cause was just — unlike the local tribesmen, ignorant and too curious, whom Ibrahim had executed and left in the sealed cave, with the test bed, in the dry and desolate hills of the Baluchistan plateau. Ayeshah felt no pity or remorse for them — there was no time, anyway.

She looked again at the scale drawing, remembering how they'd tested the concept of using cannons, proving to Ibrahim that it could work, given the right combination of resources and materials. At first, she had designed the device as a crude, but simple, copy of the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima in 1945; only later did she advance the idea of increasing the yield by employing the double gun technique. With explosive charges at *both* ends of the double gun, both slugs would be propelled to meet at the mid-point, at a closing speed of just over six hundred meters per second, twice the speed of early fission bombs. That presented increased technical difficulties, not the least of which was the need to calculate precisely the point at which insertion — *the action of the smaller slug meeting the larger* — was complete and disassembly — *in raw terms, nuclear fission* — commenced. Ayeshah had solved that problem and her calculations showed, in theory that the yield would be in the order of twenty-five kilotons, over

fifty percent more than that at Hiroshima. She'd been over those figures so many times that she knew them almost by heart.

But, she didn't feel calm now because she'd found a problem with the construction of the final stage of the nuclear device, now squatting in the trailer.

She looked again at the scale drawing that had been drawn up, back in Pakistan. It showed the two stainless steel tubes, the smaller fixed inside the larger and at one end, and held in place with the flanges, both of them forming the core of the device; the bronze cannons were simply the outer coating and the ruse with which the U235 could be smuggled in so easily. Of course, the reflecting capabilities of bronze is inferior to tungsten, but guns made of the latter don't exist; and, although they had searched far and wide, two suitable iron cannons couldn't be found. So when, by sheer chance, Ibrahim's agent in Dominican Republic had seen the matched pair on display in Santo Domingo and had reported that to him, Ayesah had readily agreed to use them.

Now, with a magnifying glass, Ayesah again looked closely at the internal diameter for the larger tube, as shown on the drawing: 156mm, or just over of six inches. Again, she looked at the actual diameter of the tube now in use, and which she'd just measured again: 155mm. She shook her head almost in despair now — the larger slug of U235, with a diameter a hair under 156mm was now too large to fit inside the tube.

And, that meant the bomb wouldn't work in its present form.

She mentally cringed at the thought of telling Ahmed; he would go berserk, and could kill everybody immediately, including himself.

How did this happen? Jusef had had the tubes manufactured according to those specifications, following Ibrahim's instructions, but without being told the reasons, and he was told not to allow anybody to see the drawings, not even Marta. So, he must have given the dimensions to the suppliers to get the job done, perhaps just a rough copy in his own hand? *But, would Marta know? Did he tell her? Probably not; and no point in asking.* She looked again at the figures on the drawing, particularly the diameter. To Ayesah's eyes, the figure was undeniably 156mm, but as she again looked more closely, she confirmed again that it would be just possible to misread the last character '6' as a '5' — the upper stroke of the five was curled over and short, and the lower part was almost closed. An easy mistake for a fifty-five year old with eyesight that was less than par.

Stupid Jusef, it's just as well he's dead... She straightened up and rubbed her eyes again. The others had returned from Inkster with the rig nearly two hours

ago, but she had paid little heed as it had been about that time that she'd discovered the problem with the tube. Ahmed had come to her to ask about progress and to tell her to let him know immediately when it was ready. She hadn't dared say anything to him at that time, but had merely nodded and watched him walk out of the garage and back to the house.

Picking up the drawing and some of her calculations, she now knew what had to be done to fix the problem and, luckily for them, she'd found the tools in Jusef's workshop that could do it. She just hoped that she'd be able to convince Ahmed while keeping him calm enough to understand.

But, it meant a delay of twenty-four hours.



I-25 and I-10 junction, New Mexico, Thursday, January 9th, 2003, 5:00PM

In another of life's great ironies, the Velasquez brothers were heading north on I-10 from El Paso en route the junction at I-25 and onto Nogales for their crossing into Mexico. As they reached that junction, at approximately five p.m. local time, Thursday, they passed the pickup truck being driven by the terrorists, who were heading south, from Denver, on I-25 towards Houston.

Both brothers commented excitedly on the number of police and army vehicles they saw heading in the opposite direction to them, and were greatly relieved that nobody paid them any attention.

The pursuers of the pickup truck, naturally, saw nothing unusual in the two rigs, one with container, going north — all of *their* eyes were on their prize.

As he saw the convoy of official vehicles disappearing in his rear vision, Luis recalled how lucky they had been, a day earlier, at Oklahoma City: the problem with the oil pressure had been nothing more than a blown gasket on the external oil filter. So, they decided to take the time to have Fernando change the filter *and* the oil while they both got some shut-eye, asking Fernando to wake them in six hours.

At nine p.m., refreshed and with full bellies, the brothers argued for an hour about the best route to take to Nogales until Fernando pointed out that, although I-40 through Albuquerque was a hundred miles less than using I-20 and I-10, going the more southerly route would take them through Abilene, where Fernando had a brother with a similar business.

“Cheap insurance, just in case something else goes wrong,” Fernando said.

Luis nodded vigorously and overruled Enrico’s complaints.

It was a fortuitous decision, because taking I-40 would have resulted in meeting the terrorist convoy at Albuquerque and thus vastly increasing their risk of exposure.

So, blithely unaware of their good luck, they completed their 1750 mile run from Chicago in just under forty-six hours, to reach the outskirts of the Nogales border crossing — just south of Tucson, Arizona — at around eleven p.m., on Thursday night. A wait of two hours and phone calls to their contacts in US and Mexican Customs ensured that they had no problems crossing into Mexico, at one a.m. on Friday.

Forty-eight hours later, they were both elated and disappointed: the chop shop in Vera Cruz had given them a very good price for the truck and trailer, but the contents of the container revealed no gold. Also, they were puzzled and angry that no bronze cannons were in the container, although they were listed on the manifest. The remaining artifacts that they found, however, were quickly sold off to local dealers who traded and bartered with the constant stream of American tourists at various points along the border, including those at far-away Tijuana, Juarez, and even Nogales.

None of those tourists ever realized, of course, the real value of any of those bargains and, in a final twist of irony, the stolen artifact list was lost in transit between the FBI Washington office and the US Customs office, two blocks west, and that fact was not realized for another six months.



Chapter Six

Inkster, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 5:00a.m.

As he drove south on Middle Bank to the Knight's Inn to pick up his clothes and cell phone, Jake had a lot to think about: still no word from Verna or Tommy and he couldn't raise either of them on their cell phones; Ingram now dead and possibly murdered; and according to Stilts, some CIA agent now wants to talk to him about the hijacked truck which, Jake figured, was already long gone, into Canada or Mexico probably. *What the fuckin' hell's going on? Why CIA — of all people — and all of a sudden? And, who's got the drugs that were smuggled in — if there are any drugs?*

Still too many questions. Jake shook his head and swore, exasperated that Bartlett wanted him downtown to fill out a report about Ingram for the local precinct; and Adams had called the Detroit office, looking for Jake, and backed up Bartlett's request. So, he had no choice: he had to clear *that* out of the way, before he could get back to his search for Verna and Tommy, if in fact they *were* now missing persons. He pounded the steering wheel in his frustration and his mood hadn't improved by the time he got to the hotel to check out and collect his things.

Ignoring the raised eyebrows and disapproving looks from hotel staff, he got to his room and quickly packed his things and checked the cell phone. At least he was now mobile again as he dialed Washington and left a message, on voicemail, for Stilts, telling him why his cell phone had been out of action. As he was talking, he grinned wickedly when he saw his disheveled state in the mirror — he hadn't shaved for twenty-four hours and was still in the clothes he'd started out with Thursday morning, all of which made him look like somebody from the Ten Most Wanted List at the official FBI website. *Most wanted? Adams, the CIA, Bartlett, that's for sure, want me — what about Verna? Am I still on her wanted list?*

That thought didn't help his mood at all, as he stripped off and had a quick shower and shave. Fifteen minutes later, his body felt and looked better, but with each passing minute, his feeling of unease about Verna and Tommy was getting

worse, but doubts that had been gnawing at his brain kept coming to the surface: *what if they're not missing, what if they want to be missing, and don't want to be found?*

But, just as there was no evidence yet for any real problems, there was also none for... *playing around?* In the elevator going down, he kept shaking his head, but the thoughts were there. *No way, asshole... Vicky's havin' their first baby, fer Chrissake, Verna's never hardly mentioned Tommy at all, what would they have together? A fuckin' rig, a Mustang, and a barrel of debt? Uh-uh, it's ridiculous. No way, NO WAY....Cutter!*

But, the thoughts wouldn't go away.

He was at the front desk, finishing checking out; as he turned to leave, he remembered he hadn't called that CIA agent yet. He'd retrieved his voice mail only an hour ago, when he woke up, and that's when he got the message from Stilts. He pulled out his notebook and looked at the number he'd written down: a Washington phone number, but not CIA. *Private number?* He'd soon find out as he walked away from the front desk, listening to the ringing on his cell phone. He looked at the time on the wall — 06:25AM, white on black. As he looked, it clicked over to 06:26.

On the second ring, it was answered: "Hello, Andy here." He sounded as though he'd been awake all night; Jake could hear stifled yawns and a bit of a slur in the speech.

"Jake Cutter, FBI, Washington Field Office – I got your message about wanting to speak to me about a hijacked truck. Wha... "

Andy Blackwood interrupted quickly. "Thank God you've finally called, look... there's an emergency, Mr Cutter... we must find that truck.... It's vital that we... " He suddenly stopped, then said, "Are you alone? Is this a secure line? Where are... "

To Jake, he sounded very worried, so now Jake interrupted. "Hold it, hold it — just shut the fuck up for a minute. And, call me Jake, okay." Andy stopped, so Jake went on, "For starters, I'm on my cell phone, so although I could be tracked by any one of a half dozen agencies, there is no cause — at present, anyway. So, just *who* are you, Andy?" He listened closely as Andy gave him a brief, but concise explanation of his relationship with the CIA. Before Andy could say any more, Jake continued, "So, Andy, why is the CIA interested in a hijacked truck that I wanna find?"

"Officially... " Andy began.

Oh, God — not that word again... Jake grimaced as he walked towards the restaurant — *may as well get a quick bite...*

“... the CIA is not interested yet. But, it will be today, for sure.” He stopped and Jake could hear him draw in his breath. “I have every reason to believe that the truck had a very dangerous cargo contained in two bronze cannons that were part of that shipment.”

“What d’ya mean, *dangerous*?” Not waiting for a reply, he went on, “Andy, I’d already figured out that those guns contained a large cache of high grade heroin, but now one of my chief suspects is dead, maybe murdered. Besides that, I’m still tryin’ t’find the truck and the drugs — if they’re there.”

“Mr Cutter... “

“I said, call me Jake.”

“Uh... okay, Jake. Look, I’m going way out on a limb here to talk to you, but I have to — you’re the agent in charge of searching for that truck, so you’re the one who should know first.”

Fahchrissake, give me a break!

Jake sat down at the table and pulled out the menu, and managed to keep his temper and his voice steady. “Andy, *what* should I know first?” To the waitress, he indicated his choice on the menu and she went away, leaving him with a coffee to nurse.

For the next ten minutes, Andy talked and Jake listened, his face becoming more sober with each second, as the full import of Andy’s words became crystal clear. Jake forgot about the coffee and didn’t even notice when the waitress put the breakfast in front of him.

“... so, you can see, Jake, that we must find that truck — then we’ll all know if my theory is just a pile of crap.” He sounded miserable and very unsure of himself.

“Andy, you’re saying that your own department head won’t let your report go any further yet?”

“Yes. No! I don’t know, maybe he will, but I just can’t afford to wait him out. If I’m right, then we’d better find it before it’s too late; if I’m wrong, then I guess my career’s down the tubes... “

“Andy, do you have your report, or a copy?”

There was a brief hesitation and then, “Well... yes, I guess I should tell you, I re-entered it from memory onto my own PC here, at home, and printed out a copy... I could print as many as I want, of course.”

“Glad you’re my team, with a memory like that, Andy.” He chuckled quietly, trying to put Andy more at ease.

“Hmmm, yeah, I think I impressed some people with it, during my interviews.”

Jake thought for a few seconds, then said, “Okay, Andy, would you do this? Would you fax me a copy of that report?” He knew the significance of what he was asking: allowing classified CIA reports to fall into the hands of unauthorized personnel was a Federal offence. *Yeah, Jake Cutter, and you’re compounding a felony...* He went on, “I promise you this: nobody will ever know about it, from me, and nobody else but me will read your report that you fax to me — *if you fax it now.*” Jake stopped and waited — he couldn’t force Andy to send it to him, but if he didn’t get some documentary proof from Andy, then he was blocked from raising alarm bells. He pushed: “You hafta trust me on this, Andy, you’ve come this far. Don’t back off now... “

There was a pause but, slowly, Andy let out his breath and said, “What’s the number to use?” He sounded resigned, but also relieved.

Jake had forgotten all about the food, and was walking quickly to the front desk as he talked. “Hang on for a few moments Andy.” At the desk, he cupped the phone in his hand and asked the desk clerk, “Is there a fax service here, in this hotel, or in some nearby facility?”

The lone desk clerk raised a finger to silence Jake, as he continued to talk to the customer on the line, “I’d be happy to accomo... “

Jake reached over the desk, grabbed the phone from the man’s hands, slammed it down on its cradle and said, loudly, “Put the goddamn phone down and listen — this is an emergency, I’m with the FBI and I need a fax, NOW!” He flashed his badge and glowered at him, causing the hapless clerk to visibly wilt before Jake’s gaze.

“Ah, um... er, yes, th... there is a self service facility over there,” pointing to a small room with a glass door, “or... or, there is an office supply shop in the mall, just about... “

But, Jake was already nearly running to the glass door, the desk clerk forgotten. He hadn’t noticed the small alcove before, but it was ideal: there were a number of different machines, computers and telephones. A sign on the door announced that all the equipment was for the use of hotel guests only. Jake quickly pushed passed it and went to the fax.

“Andy, you there still...?”

“Yes, yes. What’s the number?”

Jake read it off and said, “How many pages?”

“Six. Here they come... ”

Ninety seconds later Jake had all six pages in his hand; he scanned each rapidly to make sure all the text was there, including edges. “Okay, Andy — that looks good. Give me a little while this morning to check this through. I hafta get down to the Detroit office later — after that I’ll call you back. Will you be at this number or where can I reach you?”

Quickly, Andy said, “I’ll call *you* on my cell phone — all our phones at CIA are monitored, could be bugged at any time. What time?”

“Call me on this mobile,” Jake gave him the number, “at noon. I should be finished with the Detroit office before that, okay?”

Andy said ‘Okay’ and then the line went dead.

Jake walked back to the restaurant, passing the desk clerk on the way. Then he stopped, and walked over to him. “Look, I’m sorry for the rough stuff, but it was very important.”

The man looked at Jake a trifle nervously and said, “That’s okay,” and nodded.

Jake had punched in his vacated room number to gain access to the fax, so he said, “Look, bill me for that fax service, okay, and send it to my office.”

“And, where would that be, sir.”

“Detroit Field Office, 477 Michigan, got that?” He nodded and smiled at the clerk and then went to his car to read Andy’s report alone and unobserved. As he got in he saw that the dash clock read 07:22.

He read the report through, and then re-read it, this time more slowly and sat back, staring out of the parking lot and at the leaden sky, for another few minutes.

That truck could be anywhere, and the cannons too — and not necessarily with the truck... Wendy said the truck was last seen heading north on I-Seventy-Five, sometime overnight last Monday/Tuesday... Ingram’s out of the picture, and I doubt he’s a terrorist — there must be some other factor there, with him. Stonily, Jake looked into space, shutting out the world around him, concentrating, sifting, assessing. He pulled out a road map from the glove box and opened it to show the whole continent, and sat with it on the passenger seat, looking at it, staring at it. *Think, think like a terrorist — if you were gonna plant a nuclear bomb, where would it do the most damage, where would it hurt the most?* He traced his finger

along I-75, up through Georgia, Tennessee, to Ohio where the truck was seen, and stopped. *Where would I go from there?* He tapped the map with his finger. *Think, asshole, I want to hurt the US as much as I can, where could I do most damage easily. Chicago? Why, what's at Chicago that would be worth the risk? No way... Washington? The White House? Uh-uh, too secure now, a truck wouldn't make it?* Suddenly, his eyes widened, as he looked directly north along I-75. *Yeah, but where would a truck make it to easily? Where is the one place — maybe the only place — where nobody would give another truck a second glance?* His finger stopped at Detroit, and he knew, he just knew that Detroit was the target. During the Second World War, it had been called the Arsenal of America; today, it was very much a depressed area with the onslaught of global competition. *But still, the GDP output from auto manufacturing and ancillary industries would be five per cent, maybe more — and a devastated Detroit would be a catastrophic blow to the economy.* Suddenly, Jake felt almost sick thinking about it. *So easy — hijack a truck that was goin' there anyway, no cop would be suspicious, and have the bomb already in the truck.* Another thought hit him like a hammer. *That means the bomb material was planted in the cannons in Dominican Republic, most likely... and the real reason it was so easy to be found again.* Silently and viciously, he cursed himself for his fixation on drugs as the reason for the use of the cannons — but the co-incidence of Eastwood's death and the heroin found there had muddied the whole scene. Another question began to nag: *How come the bomb hasn't been detonated yet? It's been four days — why the delay?* He looked at the freeway traffic, not seeing it, his mind racing. Then it came to him: *They're building it, asshole, assembling it somewhere in the Detroit area...* He was about to phone Adams about his deductions, but stopped again. *What's the deal with the Red Alert then?* He pulled the map closer and then it became so obvious he felt like throwing up. From San Francisco, the terrorists had gone to Denver, where they stayed for a day, then they headed south all the way down to Houston — that had been the latest news from Stilts earlier — taking their time and probably knowing that they were being shadowed all the way; while, at the same time, the hijacked truck had started at Port Everglades and headed directly north for Detroit — *if I'm right.* Andy Blackwood had even confirmed that the San Francisco terrorist had landed on the same day that the container landed at Port Everglades.

So, what does any soldier, guerrilla fighter or terrorist do to help ensure success?

“Create a diversion, asshole, *create a diversion*,” he said aloud as he punched in the number for Adams in Washington

It was picked up on the first ring. “Adams...”

“It’s Jake, that Red Alert, Josh...looks like it’s... “

Adams interrupted, drowning Jake’s voice, “Over? Yes, we just got the news from Homeland Security about twenty minutes ago — seems like there was shootout near some petrochemical installations, near Houston. They tried to crash through with a truck bomb, but they were stopped by an Apache gunship. All the terrorists are dead... and here’s the best part: the intel about the suitcase bomb was a fake. The fuckers were just spooking us so that they could get to Houston unimpeded... dumb assholes!”

“Dumb assholes? *We’re* the dumb *mother-fuckers*, Josh – I’ve got some real bad news about that in my hands and I’m gonna fax it to you from where I am, right now.” He was shouting into the phone and when he finished there was stunned silence.

“Are you crazy, all of a sudden, Jake? Where the fuck are you, anyway?”

“Never fuckin’ mind, Josh. Just get this fax when I send it, in the next five minutes, and get in touch with Homeland Security, Emergency Services, the CIA and whoever else needs to know. I’ll be following that up with my report to you from the Detroit office. Just fuckin’ do it!” He broke the connection and ran back to the hotel lobby and the communications room to fax Andy’s report to Adams’s office.

Ten minutes later, he was driving at high speed, heading for Michigan Avenue and the Detroit field office.



Macon, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 5:00AM

Verna was thirsty and hungry, but mostly thirsty and it was getting more difficult to make any saliva. The tape was still tight around her mouth, it hurt and so did her body; but at least she could still breathe. She was sitting down, even though her hands and feet were still tied, and the beam was gone. None of *that* bothered her though.

What frightened her now was the utter darkness she was in, a small box room underneath the stairwell. It was so black, she couldn’t see any part of her

body, or any part of the room itself, small as it was. She'd read about how people could become disoriented, despairing and insane under prolonged conditions such as these, but she'd been in it for only a few hours — *or was it days?* — and was desperately trying not to panic. Her injured eye was still seeping blood and uncontrolled tears, but it didn't matter: there was nothing to see. So, for hours now, she'd had both eyes shut and, to her surprise, she'd dozed off for a while. But, she had no idea for how long, or whether it was night or day.

They told her nothing, she had no idea where Tommy was, and she hadn't heard anything for hours, not since they'd thrown her into the room, locked it and walked off.

So, she thought and tried to think only of Jake, and Bobby — *oh, God, I love you both, please help me* — poor Tommy — *where are you, Tommy, fuck, where are you?* — Lou-Lou, Vicky — *has she had the baby yet?* — her dead parents, her brothers, anything to take her mind off the terror to come and the horror she felt. Sobbing quietly from misery and pain, she began to rock herself, back and forth, back and forth, willing herself back to a time when none of this existed. She did it quietly, but not too quiet to suddenly hear the soft sound of the key turning in the lock of the door, the door she couldn't see.

With a very low click, she heard the lock trip, and then came the sound of the door knob, the slight twang of the return spring compressing, the soft scrape as the catch scraped against wood, and the door very slowly began to open outwards, the thin shaft of dim light piercing the void like a lightning bolt and blinding her.

Verna pushed herself back against the wall, trying to compress her body to nothing, and making terrified animal noises in her parched throat, and now nearly going berserk with fear, knocking her head on the wall behind her, trying to blot out the blurred sight of the crouching form coming towards her with the long, gleaming blade pointing at her stomach, and wanting to scream, and scream and scream...



In the workshop, adjacent to the three-bay garage, Ayeshah switched off the lathe's motor, and sat down for the first time in many hours. Gratefully, she pulled off the facemask and respirator, the earplugs, and the rubber gloves,

dropped them on the small table beside her and, for a few moments, held her head in her hands.

She felt exhausted: over the last twelve hours, she'd completed the recalculation of all of the requirements for the larger slug of U235 to be machined to fit the 155mm diameter of the gun core tube, and then operated the lathe to turn and mill the slug to fit. It had to be done very carefully and slowly, not only because U235 metal is extremely dense and hence very difficult to machine to exact and precise dimensions, but also to ensure that she didn't break the two diamond-coated tungsten-carbide cutters that were in the workshop. She was a competent lathe operator, and had honed her technique at Ibrahim's workshop, back in Pakistan, using lead as a substitute. Even so, she counted herself lucky: only one of the cutters had broken. With Jusef dead, it would have been almost impossible to purchase another from a local supplier; and ordering a COD package would have been fraught with time delay and high risk of exposure. For those reasons, she had taken extra special care with the remaining cutter.

Despite all that, it was finished and now sat, gleaming with a lustrous gray, on the work bench in a carry sling; she and Rebekah would fit it later into the guns, and then complete the installation of cordite charges and electronic detonators.

The new size of the slug would now allow it to just fit; the new weight however — instead of forty-two kilos, it was now about forty-one — would mean that the overall yield would be less, but still very good. When explaining the need for the delay to Ahmed, he had taken it surprisingly well; but, of course, he had no choice and had spent much of the night alternating between sleeping and praying while Ayeshah, with Rebekah assisting when necessary, worked through the night to complete the job.

An hour ago, Ayeshah had told Rebekah to get some sleep; it was obvious that she was in desperate need of rest. As the work was just about done, Rebekah didn't protest and was now asleep back at the house. *That's where I will go now, get some sleep myself and we can both finish getting the gun ready later this afternoon...*

She stood and yawned, stretching her long limbs and moving her head around in a circle, loosening up the muscles of her neck, shoulders and back. Quietly, she opened the door, putting on her wind jacket as she did and started to go back to the house. As she passed by the open door of the trailer, she saw Ahmed asleep on a mat, a pillow under his head, a muffled snore issuing from his

throat; it was his practice to stay on guard beside the gun at all times, and would wake at the slightest noise. She looked down at her stockinged feet, thankful that he couldn't hear her, as she needed sleep, not talk.

A minute later, she was in the kitchen, closing the outside door quietly, trying to make sure she woke nobody at this time. It was still quite dark at 5:30AM, and she didn't want to put on any lights, but as she opened the door to the darkened corridor, she heard some strange noises and then Marta went passed her with a rush, but without a word, and up the stairs. Ayeshah couldn't see her face, but she knew it was Marta from the silhouette as she mounted the stairs. Moments later, Ayeshah heard Marta's bedroom door shut with a soft thud.

Puzzled, Ayeshah tip-toed down the corridor to the end, switched on the light and turned around; even in the dim light from one weak bulb, Ayeshah couldn't see anything out of place. As she came back, she stooped slightly and tested the lock where the American woman was held prisoner; it was tight and locked as it should be. Ayeshah knew that Ahmed had the key, and it was the only one, as far as she knew. She put her ear to the door, but she wasn't sure whether she could hear anything except the wind that moaned around the house.

What was Marta doing?

Shrugging, she told herself to ask Marta after she'd had some sleep. *What is one more American, anyway?* Two minutes later, she was in the second bed, joining Rebekah in some well-earned and dreamless sleep.



Inkster, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 11:30a.m.

Jake brought the car to a skidding stop in front of Tommy's house, almost ramming the GTO. As he got to the front door, he felt like kicking it in, but merely cursed some more as he groped for the key in his pocket, found it, then got inside. It was a deadbolt, so he put the key in the inside lock so that he didn't lose it, took off his coat and shoes, and then started a systematic search of every nook and cranny in the house. For the second time.

But now, he was looking for something, anything that would tell him where Tommy had been, places he'd visited, trips he'd taken, and companies that he drove for. Again, he scanned the living room: front window, curtains, bookcase with books, newspapers, trucking magazines, TV and stereo cabinet, small liquor

bar in the corner, small chest of drawers, couch and two chairs in the center with coffee table loaded with old newspapers, Verna's briefcase leaning against one end. Twenty minutes later, he sat back in one of the chairs: nothing — not a bill, not a note, not a business card. Just the usual stuff in any living room, in a million homes across America.

He walked to the kitchen and did the same thing: nothing immediately apparent. Notes from Vicky to herself and Tommy stuck to the refrigerator door, some local business cards but nothing that looked useful, Verna's work still on the chair, a calendar with illegible scrawl on some dates. All in all, nothing helpful, nothing informative.

He went upstairs and again looked in and around cupboards, under beds, in drawers, behind doors — *that's where people drop things and either don't see or don't care* — but, again, he came up blank. He went to the bedroom window, and looked up and down the street, stupidly hoping that he'd see Verna or Tommy walking towards the house. *Where are you, babe... where are you?*

Angrily, he shook his head, feeling frustrated and impotent; and then he punched the cupboard door, splintering the thin wood, oblivious to the shards of wood sticking in his knuckles. *So, Tommy, where d'ya keep your personal info and data?* Absently, he rubbed his knuckles against his other palm and went back downstairs, and then remembered the garage.

Like all garages, it was messy, but it was evident that it was just tools, equipment and cars; a workbench stacked with cans of oil, spanners, truck parts, an old carburetor, a few hammers, engine additives, again all the stuff you'd expect to see on a million others. Nothing. Frowning, he went back inside to the kitchen and sat down, to look through the glass of the back door. There was short flight of four steps to a landing and then the back door and as he went down to look out over the back yard, he saw the alcove — and the door to the basement — previously hidden from view.

How could you forget that, ya jerk?

He turned the knob and pulled. Locked. Shrugging — *Sorry, Tommy, I'll pay for the damage* — he kicked once, twice and on the third, the wood around the lock splintered with a crash. He grimaced. *Wonder what the old geezer's thinkin' now...* He pulled the broken door back fully, so that it almost covered the back door, then lifted it off its hinges and put it up against the back one. Switching on the light, he went down one flight, made a right turn and then he was down at the bottom. Another switch in the wall flooded the whole basement with soft neon

lighting, and there it was: Tommy's desk, almost buried under papers with a four-drawer filing cabinet beside it.

As he approached it, Jake saw that there was a notice board attached to the wall and *that* was covered with business cards, notes, bills, invoices, more notes from Vicky, post-it notes. *Where the fuck do I start with all this crap?*

Moodily, Jake sat back in Tommy's swivel chair, thinking. Adams had taken the news about Andy Blackwood's report seriously; he had to, there was no question about that. Jake had faxed it to Adams, after first blacking out Andy's name and then put it back into his pocket. After he arrived at the Detroit office, he'd then hurriedly compiled a report that detailed all of the efforts to trace the hijacked truck and then faxed that to Adams also; but he didn't show Andy's report to Bartlett, choosing instead to leave it to others in Washington to get things moving.

While Adams wasn't entirely convinced of Jake's deductions, he'd agreed there was nothing better to go on, so he was now distributing both reports to FBI headquarters, Homeland Security and Emergency Services. Hence there was now a nation wide alert to find the truck, but most resources were concentrating on Michigan, and particularly the Detroit area. Now, more than ever, it was just a matter of time...

But, Jake hadn't said anything about the fact he couldn't find Verna or Tommy — that was an irrelevant issue, and one that Adams could scarcely have immediate interest in. Jake looked at his watch — it was nearly noon. Officially, it was time to report them both as missing, but he hesitated.

Do I really want it known that maybe Verna and Tommy are off together? That I've been left in the lurch, high and dry, possibly? That Vicky's been left, high and dry, too? That's all ridiculous, ya dumb jerk... there's just no way that Verna and Tommy could be involved. Is there? Or, is there? Okay, she wanted to see Vicky, but maybe there was another reason, one that she didn't want me to know about? Gotta find Tommy first, then I'll find Verna, I just know it.

Angrily, Jake smashed his fist on the desk, scattering papers, cards, pens and magazines all over. Cursing again, he bent to pick them up, but sat back again to slump in the chair. *How the fuck do I find Tommy and his rig — they could be anywhere, right? And, there'd be nobody around to help look for him anyway — everybody's searchin' for those fuckin' cannons now...*

Moodily he moved the papers around with his feet. *Maybe that was one of his trucker friends, at the gas station? Maybe some other friends have talked to*

him today? Suddenly, he stiffened in the chair. *But, if Tommy's cell phone is out, then there's only one way...* He didn't finish the thought, as he cleared away papers, books, newspapers and other garbage to uncover it: Tommy's CB base station.

It looked as though it hadn't been used for a long time, but when he switched on, the crackle and chatter of Ch.19 came in loud and clear. He thought about what he would say for a few moments, reached for the unit and hit the send button: "Hi, this is Jake-Break outta Motor City... I'm at Big Bazooka's base station, but nobody's home. Anybody there got his ten-twenty? His other half is lookin' to know. C'mon back, now." A 10-20 was a request for location; and he knew that Big Bazooka was Tommy's handle. He grimaced slightly at the handle 'Jake-Break', but it was the best he could think of on the spur of the moment.

The ether returned static and other background noise for five seconds and then: "Oh, hi there, Jake-Break, this is Blue-Eyes, ain't heard your handle afore this. Where you from, boy? Back to you." There was a rumble of truck and traffic noise behind her, for it was a woman speaking.

"Up from D.C., Blue-Eyes. What's your ten-twenty? Come on."

"I'm on a flip-flop, just outside Toledo, Jake-Break, an' headin' your way. Gotta stop at the eat-um-up for gas first, though. C'mon back."

By flip-flop, Jake knew that she meant a return trip; the eat-um-up was truck stop. "Seen anythin' of Big Bazooka? Back to you."

"Now, Jake-Break honey, you know I'da told that by now, if'n I knew." She gave a cackle. "Why you in such a hurry anyways? You c'mon back now."

Jake repeated the only thing that made real sense. "Well, Tommy's other half is close to havin' the baby, and she'd like him to get home real quick, y'know. Maybe his CB is out of action and that's why we haven't heard from him. Come back to me, Blue-Eyes."

"Ain't Big Bazooka gotta cell phone? Back to you."

"Hey, Blue-Eyes, that's why we're using this, okay. We don't know what's happened to his cell phone. Maybe he's had an accident, but somebody's gotta see him, I reckon. Come on."

"Well okay, Jake-Break, if we see him, we'll get back. Talk t'ya later. Clear."

"Roger. That's a big ten-four, Blue-Eyes. I'm keeping this station on, twenty-four-seven. Clear."

Jake put the unit down, and went to the kitchen to get a coffee, and for most of day spoke to other truckers, friends and various businesses but none had

any knowledge of Tommy's location. But, what he did get was a list of six trucking companies that Tommy had sub-contracted for recently. That wasn't unusual at all: many independent truckers sometimes worked for dozens of companies, as it was just the nature of the business. Now, he was looking at the list as he sipped his coffee:

Morgan's Freight Co.
Northern Trucking
Clayton's Carriers
Atlas Trucking
Kirby's
Powers Transport

The clock on Tommy's desk clicked over to 7:37PM. He'd been there for eight hours or so, searching high and low throughout the house, and now also across the continent, and all he had to show, for now, was that list of six companies. Rubbing his eyes, he went back to the kitchen and made himself two ham and cheese sandwiches and sat thinking and looking at the list, for a few minutes more, while he ate. From downstairs, he could hear the CB receiver, monitoring channel nineteen with the volume set high. As he finished the last piece of bread, he pulled one of Verna's blank sheets of paper from the chair; as he did, he heard a soft thud and looking down, saw Verna's digital recorder on the floor. *That's what I bought for her, last Christmas...* He smiled as he picked it up and turned it around in his hand; there was a small scratch on the reverse side.

He looked at the front — it was off. He turned it on, showing three messages on the queue. Just for a second he hesitated, then hit 'Play'. Verna's clear, but husky voice then went on for two minutes about some of her lessons at the high school and how she wanted to put them across, then it stopped. Jake hit 'Next' and then 'Play' to hear her remind herself to get a birthday card for Lou-Lou. He was about to hit 'Next' when the phone rang.

Verna?

Dropping the recorder on the table, he quickly picked up the phone. "Hello, yes, is that you..." The person at the other end interrupted.

"This is Garden City Hospital, Maternity. Sister Jacobs calling. Is Mr Andeson there?"

As he slapped himself on the forehead, Jake remembered that he hadn't called Vicky back. "No, Mr Andeson is not here, but this is Jake Cutter, his brother-in-law."

“Ahhh, Mr Cutter — this is an emergency. We need to get in touch with Mr Andeson as his wife is now in labor. She needs him, and she’s calling for him. Do you know where we can find him?” She sounded very concerned.

Jake shook his head as he said, “Sorry, Sister Jacobs, he’s just not available. I’m actually trying to find him myself.”

“Is there a problem, Mr Cutter?”

“No, nothing serious, as far as I know... perhaps just a breakdown in his truck. Is there a problem with Vicky?”

Nurse Jacobs paused and then carefully said, “Mr Cutter, Mrs Andeson was undergoing an inducement — she was late — but there may be complications. It would be best if somebody from family is with her.”

It didn’t sound too good.

Jake thought for a moment, and then said, “I’ll be down there shortly.”

“Thank you, Mr Cutter – I’ll tell the duty nurse to expect you. Good night.”

Jake quickly got his coat, switched off the CB in the basement and was in his car, heading for the hospital inside five minutes; as he drove down Daley Street, he turned the transceiver on to channel nineteen. *Why didn’t I think of that before...?*

Back at Daley Street, he’d left all the papers on the kitchen table and Verna’s recorder, still on, sat there on top, the red operating light shining brightly. After another three minutes, however, its auto turn-off switch kicked in and, at exactly 8:17PM, the red light blinked three times and then died.



Macon, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 7:30PM

“It’s done!”

As she came through the kitchen door with Rebekah, Ayeshah gave the good news to Ahmed, who was sitting at the table; Bilal was in the basement, guarding Tommy.

Ahmed was looking at a large, detailed map of the north section of Detroit. He looked up and said, “Good, all is ready then. Sit and let’s go over once again, the plan for tomorrow morning.”

He looked around the table, as Rebekah and Ayeshah sat, and continued, “We have all come a long way to achieve this sacred and glorious act for Islam, to

strike terror once again into the hearts of all who oppose the will of Allah.” His voice shook with emotion and rose an octave. “Remember the years of oppression, the acts of aggression, the treachery and lies, and the economic subjugation of all our peoples, from the hated capitalist and colonial powers, in particular the Great Satan, the United States of America. Remember this always, my friends!” He paused and closed his eyes. “Close your eyes and think; think of your reward to come with Allah, the heavenly bliss that we will all enjoy soon...”

Death is upon us all, thought Ahmed, but that is our lot, our choice, it seals the bargain that I made with Ibrahim, years ago, when he saved my life and showed me the true path to salvation. He remembered his last conversation with Ibrahim when he’d said, “Ahmed, I can trust *you*, I know, to follow through with this mission, but you are the only one.”

“Thank you, Ibrahim. I will not let you down, may Allah be my judge.”

“The others don’t have the same commitment — *you* must ensure that they do. I have spoken with each individually, and each has vowed a willingness to die for Islam, but you must make sure.” Ibrahim’s calm gaze and voice always beguiled the unwary, but not Ahmed.

“Have no fear, Ibrahim, I will make sure that they all die the martyrs they aspire to be.”

Ibrahim nodded, satisfied with Ahmed’s reply, and then said, “As for Jusef, my cousin, he is dependable but stupid. Watch Marta, she is clever and devious,” he gave a ghost of a smile, and added, “like most women. Dispose of them, as you see fit.”

“I understand.”

Then Ibrahim came closer, put his hands onto Ahmed’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. “Ahmed, what you are about to do will strike at the heart of America and will forever change the balance of political and economic power around the world. No longer will it be easy for the Americans to steal oil profits from our people, no longer will they be able to dictate terms favorable to them alone, no longer will oppressed peoples be subject to the whims of barely five per cent of the world’s population.” He gripped Ahmed’s shoulders until they hurt, grinning at the same time, “There is no better time than now, my friend, while they are still trying to build that farce they call Homeland Security — but that will improve, over time, and that’s *why* we must act *now*.” The fingers dug further into his arms, and Ahmed wanted to squirm. “There must be no survivors, Ahmed, *no*

survivors at all — they must see and feel total devastation for generations to come, in the same way that we have been devastated for centuries... “

Then, Ibrahim kissed him on both cheeks and had whispered, quoting from the Exordium of the Holy Koran, “ *‘Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, The Compassionate, the Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of Judgment!’* And you, Ahmed, are the instrument for bringing this Day of Judgment upon them...”

Even now, it almost seemed as though those fingers were still digging into his arms, and he gave a start and opened his eyes, to find both women staring at him intently, waiting for his orders. He said, “Here the main points of the plan again: Bilal will be in the truck with the American, making sure that he drives according to our directions. Bilal will kill him if he tries any tricks and will then take over the driving; he knows enough about it to do it. You two,” he looked at Rebekah and Ayeshah, “will be in one of the cars following behind the truck. Your task is to stay with us and prevent any police from stopping the truck, using any of the weapons you’ll have in the car.” There were a selection of RPGs and machine pistols that they’d been supplied with in Miami; both women had gone through thorough training, in their use, in Pakistan. They both nodded, understanding. Ahmed pointed to the map of Detroit. “We will make our approach here,” indicating with his index finger, “where the main goods entrance is. Jusef had prepared a sheaf of false documents and manifests that indicated a truckload of electrical parts were being delivered; it is, in fact, proof of a genuine shipment that he should have done a week ago, but which he held back deliberately. So, there will be no difficulty in passing through with our substitute trailer that looks identical from the outside.” He looked up at the women, and grinned, “If, at that point, there is *any* difficulty getting through security, if we are prevented for *any* reason, I will detonate the bomb.” He shrugged. “If that happens, so be it, but it would be good to get right inside, if we can.” He looked at Ayeshah. “Tell us again, Ayeshah, the blast radius of the device.”

She licked her lips briefly and said, “My calculations show that the explosion will be larger than Little Boy, which had a yield of fifteen kilotons and which utterly devastated a radius of one kilometer. I am certain that ours will be close to 25 kilotons and a radius of nearly two kilometers.”

Ahmed looked satisfied and said, “So, it will completely destroy this area of about twelve square kilometers,” and he drew a rough circle around an area just north of I-94, “and will cause further major damage from here,” indicating Detroit

City Airport, “to here,” pointing to a spot near Dearborn. He stopped and looked at Ayeshah. “That is correct?”

She nodded and said, “The shock wave will also travel up to fifteen kilometers, causing windows to break, cars to be overturned, trees uprooted, exposed wood to be scorched and burnt. Many thousands will be killed or maimed by flying debris, there is no doubt about that.” She looked around the table and added, “Read what happened at Hiroshima, it’s all there for anybody to see.”

Ahmed grunted. “There is no need.” He pushed his chair back from the table, noisily, and stood and stretched. “Get something to eat and then make a final check of all the equipment. Then get a good sleep. We start at eight next morning.”



Upstairs, in her bedroom, Marta stood with her back to the door for a few moments, regaining her breath: she’d just hurried back up the stairs from the kitchen door where she’d heard all that Ahmed had been saying. Moaning with the fear and terror of knowing now the nature of their plan, she sat on her bed, rocking herself and quietly murmuring Jusef’s name, frantically wondering what to do...

The one thing she did know for certain was that she’d soon be dead if she did nothing.



Ahmed sat with them while they all had a meal of bread, cheese, some dates and weak tea. He ate sparingly, saying no more as they finished and went to their rooms to sleep, and waited a while longer until he was certain that all was still. For such a big man, he then rose quietly and, without shoes on, padded to the room used by the women to verify that each was asleep, making only slight noises on the creaky stairs. He closed the door and went downstairs, all the way to the basement where Bilal was guarding the American. The lock made a *snick* as he turned the knob and he paused for a few seconds, then pushed it open slowly. Bilal lay in one corner, his machine pistol beside him; he was snoring loudly. Ahmed continued to push the door all the way until he could see Tommy, still on the floor, his hands and feet securely tied; he was awake, looking squarely

at Ahmed, his face impassive. They'd allowed him to drink water through a straw, but he hadn't eaten, although food had been placed beside him. There was a faint whiff of stale urine in the air and Ahmed could see the glass bottle that Tommy had used, with some pale gold fluid glinting in the light.

Satisfied, he closed the door just as quietly, went back to the kitchen, put on his boots and coat and went outside; the night was cloudless and crisp, and his boots crunched the snow, but not too loudly. Walking quickly, he went to the garage and made a final inspection of the trailer, walking around the double-gun, admiring again the work that Ayeshah and Rebekah had done so skillfully. He put his hand on it, feeling the texture, the smoothness, trying to feel the hidden power and it almost made him giddy with excitement and anticipation.

At the double-doors of the trailer, he picked up the remote switch that would detonate the cordite charges in both breeches of the guns. When detonated, both of those would then propel the two sub-critical masses to meet at the midpoint thus producing a supercritical mass for nuclear explosion. He saw that the switch was armed, but the safety mechanism was in place. All that was required was for him to move the safety off, and to press the button and it would then be all over, literally in a flash. Carefully, he hung the switch on a metal hook on the trailer wall, within easy reach, and jumped down to the concrete floor.

Going to his car, he unlocked the trunk and took out the bag he'd been using two days prior. He unlocked it and checked the contents: eight charges of C4 explosive, each a lethal package of five kilos, even one of which would be sufficient to demolish much of the garage.

Taking the bag with him, he went to the workshop and placed one in the garbage bin near the central lathe, making sure that the detonator receiver was switched on. Going to the other end of the garage, he placed a second in an empty box near a 44-gallon drum of diesel fuel. As he switched it on, he muttered aloud, "That's two." Next, he went to the other car, opened the trunk and pushed the bomb up into a corner, flicked the switch and covered the bomb with some old rags; he didn't disturb the RPGs and machine pistols that lay there, ready for use.

Then, picking up the bag, he saw that the time was nearly 9:00p.m. "Not long now," he muttered, as he started back for the house, treading as quietly as possible.



With a nervous jerk, Verna realized that she had been dozing again, she was so tired and her body was so weary. But something had woken her again, just as she had been when Marta had come in stealthily hours before.

The knife blade had terrified her to the edge of insanity but Marta crept very close and whispered in her ear: “Don’t be afraid. I am trying to help you. My name is Marta — my husband, Jusef, has been murdered by these people, and I want revenge for what they have done. Will you help me?”

Unable to see just how she could help, Verna nevertheless nodded her head vigorously and made appreciative noises — or what she thought were so — from her throat.

Marta continued, “I cannot set you free as yet, but I will leave this knife with you, here.” After wrapping a cloth around the blade, she reached behind Verna and pushed it down inside Verna’s jeans, so that the blade rested along the length of her spine to stop just beyond her coccyx; the tip of the handle was just visible above her belt. Marta made sure that Verna’s shirt was outside the jeans, thus concealing the knife from casual glances. Then, without disturbing the gag unduly, Marta managed to allow Verna to suck some water from a bottle using a straw. “I cannot take the tape off, as that would alert Ahmed when he sees you again. But, I will come back later.” She was about to say more when she must have heard a noise. “I must go.” And, with that, she locked the door again and was gone.

Bless you, Marta, God I needed that water...

Quietly the tears started again, running down her cheeks in a torrent, but she didn’t care. She didn’t even care about peeing in her jeans anymore — nobody had come to attend to such necessities anyway. She had no food, no water, no help, no contact — she’d never felt so alone in her life. And she thought, *Well, at least now somebody cares, if only for the wrong reasons...*

And, at least she’d been able to get some more sleep, however much, and hadn’t noticed any more noises from beyond the door. Her hands were tied behind her and she had verified that she could reach and hold the haft of the knife, but she hesitated: she knew they had guns and a knife alone was useless against that. She had to wait for the right moment. Dimly, she remembered someone saying to her: *There is timing in everything! Who’d said that to me?* She moaned quietly and slumped to the floor, shaking her head from side to side; she couldn’t think, it was hard to concentrate, her whole face and head still ached.

She must have dozed off again, and it was in that slumped position that she'd heard the sound at the door. Now, she stiffened, the hair on her neck rising. As best as she could, Verna pushed herself up with her back to the wall and gripped the knife in one hand but as the door opened, she saw that it was Marta who quickly closed the door behind her and locked it. A small flashlight came on and Verna cried out as the dazzle temporarily blinded her one good eye.

Marta directed the light to the low ceiling and hissed, "Shhh, quiet, we mustn't be overheard." In the dim light, she looked at Verna with the beginnings of some pity; she came closer and tugged at the gag, easing it slightly to one side so that she could again push a straw through.

Verna managed to squint to see the old woman kneeling in front of her. Greedily, hungrily, she sucked at the cool water, taking in big gulps, as big as she could manage without choking; and even as she did, tears of relief again cascaded down her cheeks.

Marta reached with her other hand, still holding the flashlight, and gently caressed Verna's hair, now all matted, dirty and bloody, and murmured, "Drink, yes, drink quickly, as much as you can — you must try to regain some strength." As Verna continued to drink, Marta carried on, whispering urgently, "I have found out what their plan is — they have a bomb in the truck, and they are taking it to some place in the morning, to blow it up. The woman, Ayeshah, said it is a nuclear bomb."

Verna stopped and pulled back, horrified. She looked at Marta who now held the light between them, again pointing it to the low ceiling. The light cast long shadows on Marta's face, accentuating the look of anguish and fear clearly visible.

"We *didn't* know, Jusef and I were told he just had to help steal some things, artifacts and deliver them. *That's all.*" She seemed to be pleading, and then drew in her breath sharply as she realized the extent of the deception. "He lied — Ibrahim lied to Jusef, his own cousin. Oh, that evil man, I always knew it. I told Jusef many times not to trust him." Her voice was low and vengeful and her teeth showed in an attempt to snarl with rage. But, she stopped and began sobbing softly and moaning, "Oh, my Jusef, my poor Jusef," as her shoulders shook.

Verna could hardly believe what she was hearing, but without knowing more, she had no way of finding out the truth.

What matters now is what to do, girl... but what?

At the point of despair, she watched Marta as she continued to sob and as the light from the flashlight began to flicker and fade, knowing that their hopes of staying alive were fading also, with each passing second.



Inkster, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 9:15p.m.

Jake had made it to the hospital in fifteen minutes but had been waiting for forty-five. And that had made him as mad as hell as he furiously paced around the waiting room of the maternity ward. He'd never liked hospitals — he hated the waiting, the casual indifference of some doctors, and the overbearing arrogance of others that he'd known, one of whom had almost cost Verna her life when she gave birth to Bobby. So, he was ready to snap at the least sign of resistance to any of his requests for progress information, requests that would soon be elevated to insistent demands if he didn't find out something soon.

For a Friday night it seemed to be relatively quiet, but Jake knew that could change in an instant. He approached the nurses' station for the fifth time, and said, his voice tight with suppressed anger, "Nurse... Amberly, I've been hanging our here for close on an hour for some word about Mrs Andeson." He almost banged his palm on the counter, but checked himself. "Fahchrissake, I hafta know what's goin' on — I hafta talk with her, I need some information, please!"

The nurse arched an eyebrow, scarcely concealing her annoyance. "Mr Cutter, I can only tell you again — you'll *know* as soon as Doctor Swift comes through that door." She pointed again to the door in question. "That's all I can tell you." As she went back to her work, she added, "Please sit down, Mr Cutter, you're making others nervous."

Jake looked at her bowed head and decided he'd better go outside for a change of scenery and before he did something rash. It was cold, of course, and the sky looked more threatening, with the clouds building and billowing. *Looks like more snow comin'*. He pulled up his collar and put his head down, brooding about Verna and Tommy. *Jesus Christ, babe – where are you, what's happened? Have I driven you away from me? Do I deserve this? What have I done that's so bad? Fuck, are you in trouble? Why don't you at least call Vicky and let her know you're okay? What the fuck is goin' on?* He slammed his fist into his palm, as much to keep his arms moving as to vent his anger. *Goddammit, babe, what about Bobby?*

“Fuck — Bobby! I haven’t called him yet.” He pulled out the cell phone and dialed his home number. On the fourth ring, the answering machine kicked in and Bobby’s standard greeting started. Jake cut the connection, and then went to his voice mail, but there were no messages from Bobby; there was, however, one from Stilts. Quickly, he dialed Stilts’ cell phone.

“Stilts here, who’s... “

Jake interrupted, “Stilts, it’s Jake. How did the sting go today?”

“Oh, hi boss. Say, everybody’s buzzin’ about how you twigged to that hijacking and the terrorist angle. The whole FAH-kin’ town, just about, is talkin’ about Jake Cutter.”

Jake could hear the grin in his voice and grimaced. “Yeah, no big deal, Stilts. I got lucky, because I just happened to be around at the right time. So, what about the sting, eh?” As he talked, his breath hung in the air, in a large cloud.

“Okay, that went down okay, boss. Hernandez gave it all up after he tried to buy. He’s been booked and he’s asked for his lawyer. But, now we have four others to track down — so, it was a good operation, boss.” He paused and added, “I did a quick report for Adams, and he seemed okay with it.” Stilts went on quickly, “Boss, where are you now, anyways? Comin’ back this weekend, or what?”

“Be here for a bit yet, Stilts. I’m at the Garden City Hospital, tryin’ to see my sister-in-law, Vicky — she’s havin’ her first baby, and somehow I got stuck holdin’ the ba... “ He stopped and laughed out loud, but it sounded bitter, not funny at all.

“What’re you sayin’? What’re you tellin’ me, boss?”

Anguished and sick at heart, Jake said, “I was *supposed* t’meet Verna on Thursday at ten in the mornin’, but... but, I dunno where she is. There’s nobody at Tommy’s place, nobody. But, Verna’s stuff is still there, and Tommy’s gone *too*.”

There was silence while Stilts waited, thinking, listening to Jake’s labored breathing. *So, what’s going on*, he wondered?

Jake continued, “I’ve been on the CB, tryin’ to get information from other truckers but nobody’s seen his rig or him for a week or more. Now, because Vicky’s havin’ the baby, Tommy was off the road anyway, so that’s no big deal — but, his rig’s gone, and nobody’s seen it in the last, well, nearly thirty-six hours.”

“So, Jake... you saying Verna’s with Tommy, maybe — or what?”

“I just don’t know, Stilts — and now Vicky’s havin’ the baby, and Tommy’s not here. “ He drew in a long lungful of the frigid air and made a decision. “I gotta

report him and Verna as missing, I have no choice.” His voice sounded broken and hoarse.

With the hunt for the hijacked truck now consuming the attention of every law enforcement officer in Michigan, Stilts knew that a report of another missing person — even two — wouldn’t rank very high on any priority list. In the state of Michigan alone, there are thousands of missing persons every year. He said, “I guess you’re right, boss — at least, in time, there’ll be other officers looking and a better chance of somethin’ turnin’ up.” Mentally, he winced at his poor choice of words.

Jake was walking back through the doors as he spoke; snow was now beginning to fall and the wind was picking up. “Tell Adams in the morning that I’ll be here for few days more — I’ll see the local precinct to make out a report and stick around to see what turns up about the hijacked truck. Gotta go, Stilts — I’ll call ya later.”

As he approached the nurse again, she heard his footsteps and looked up. “Ahh, Mr Cutter – I was looking for you. Doctor Swift was here a moment ago – I’ll get him back.” She disappeared through swing doors, almost running.

Thirty seconds later, she was back with a small man who looked swamped in his green operating gear; he was masked, but had no gloves on. He shook hands with Jake and wasted no time: “Mr Cutter, Mrs Andeson’s inducement is not going to plan — there is excessive bleeding and a prolapsed cord — and coupled with that, the baby is large.” He paused very briefly. “We’d like to perform a Caesarean section, but Mrs Andeson is sedated now, and we can’t find Mr Andeson to arrange authorization.”

Jake raised his eyebrows and said, “I’ve been trying t’find him myself, but what can I do to help you?”

The doctor handed him some papers that the nurse had been holding. “Mr Cutter, as the nearest relative, I’ll need your signature to proceed.” He held out the forms.

Jake read them quickly and then signed, and as he handed them back, he said, “Doctor, when will I be able to talk to Vicky?” He must have sounded worried.

Doctor Swift’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled reassuringly. “No need to worry, Mr Cutter, she’ll be all right — I would say, oh, in a couple of hours, maybe three at the most. Now, I must go.” And with that, he went through the doors.

Jake looked at his watch: 10:45p.m..



Macon, Michigan, Friday, January 10th, 2003, 10:45p.m.

Tommy pulled at the ropes again, probably for the hundredth time, but there was no movement; even his strength wasn't enough.

He forced himself to relax and thought about the big guy, *Ahmed, that's his name*. When he'd come through the door very quietly over an hour ago and looked at Tommy, then at the little guy snoring in the corner, Tommy had felt a chill course through his body. He'd seen death many times, and that Ahmed guy had the look of those who knew they were about to die.

They're wantin' me to drive the rig somewhere, one of the places I've been to time and again, I guess. Might be one of the big auto plants, but it could be anywhere — but I still don't know exactly what they're gonna do. What've they got in that fuckin' trailer? Gotta find out. And, where's Verna? And, where the fuck is Jake? Surely, he knows that we're both missing by now — fuck, how many days has it been? God, oh, God, what's happening with Vicky — is she okay, is the baby okay?

His mind was in turmoil, but there were no answers, only the certainty that the next day would be final. For Tommy was under no illusions: he knew that they planned to kill them both.

Suddenly, Tommy heard a strange sound, muffled, coming from somewhere in the house, probably upstairs. He looked up at the forced-air heating duct almost directly above him. Faintly, a moment later another sound, and another and now he knew what it was: a Desert Eagle with a silencer is still loud, loud enough for his trained ear to catch and recognize.

What the fuck's goin' on up there?

He looked over to the small guy — *Bilal, they call him* — still snoring and oblivious to the noise. *He may be small, but he's dangerous with that knife — he had it so quickly yesterday and he did in the tires on my GTO so fast! But I'm gonna kill ya, mother-fucker. When I get t'drive the rig, then my hands are free...* Tommy grinned at the thought but came alert when he heard heavy steps on the stairs.

The door to the basement swung open quickly and Ahmed came in, his eyes wild. In one hand, he carried a large blue bag, with a zipper; in the other, Tommy saw the Desert Eagle and silencer. The noise of his entry woke Bilal who was awake quickly, gun ready in his hand.

“Bilal, come — search the house. Marta isn’t in her room, and she’s not with the others.”

Bilal looked blankly at Ahmed, looked at Tommy and then back to Ahmed. “Huh?” was all he said.

Ahmed’s face suffused with quick rage as he threw a set of keys to Bilal, and motioned to the door with his automatic. “Go, take the keys, hurry, and if you can’t find her, search outside and when you find her, kill her.” As he said the last, he was practically screaming, phlegm spraying from his mouth.

Bilal scurried out the door and Ahmed turned to Tommy. “Soon, you will drive.” He stared at Tommy, wishing that he could shoot him now.

He went to turn away, when Tommy said, “How do I know Verna — my woman — is still alive?”

Ahmed swung back to face him, gun pointing at Tommy’s head. “She is alive, and will stay alive as long as you drive.” And he laughed as he heard his rhyme and repeated himself, laughing uproariously, “Stay alive as long as you drive.”

He kept laughing until Tommy said, “Show me.”

The laughter stopped and Ahmed hissed, “Tread carefully, American fool, I might just decide to do without you.” He brought the gun to rest in the middle of Tommy’s forehead. Tommy gazed at him levelly, saying nothing, but he was thinking, *You’re bluffin’, motherfucker, or I’d be dead now.*

Ahmed straightened and said, “But, I will show you — and to show you that I keep my word.”

Tommy watched him leave, heard his footsteps on the stairs and along the corridor immediately above. There was a faint jangle of keys, the sound of a door opening and then Ahmed’s raised voice, muffled by the walls. Thirty seconds later, Ahmed pushed Verna through the open door; her arms and hands were tied behind her back and she was still gagged with tape, but she was standing, she was walking, she was alive. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief, thinking, *So, who was Ahmed shooting at earlier? Marta’s gone — was he shooting at her?*

Verna looked at Tommy and also felt relief to see him alive; but her relief was mixed with frantic thoughts about how she could tell him, or show him what

Ahmed was planning to do with the bomb. Desperately, she looked around the room, looking for inspiration, but there was nothing.

How d'you tell somebody that it's all going to blow up?

She wasn't given the chance to think about it anymore as Ahmed grabbed her by the arm and said, "There, she's alive and she will be here when we get back."

Tommy nodded, knowing full well that Ahmed was lying, and said, "Okay." He smiled at Verna, trying to keep her courage up. As she got to the door, she suddenly twisted in Ahmed's hands and swung her face towards Tommy, her face trying to say something. *What is it you wanna tell me, Verna?* As he looked at her, her cheeks filled with air and distended the gag, and then her eyes rolled up to the ceiling. She managed to do it twice, without Ahmed seeing her face, and before he pulled her back with a curse, slapping her on the damaged side of her face. She cried out and almost fell but Ahmed caught her by her hair and hauled her to her feet, shouting curses and knocking her head on the doorjamb.

Tommy shouted in anger, "You'd better make sure she's stays alive, mother-fucker," but Ahmed was already up the stairs dragging Verna with him.

Seething and fuming, Tommy thought of all the ways that he could kill Ahmed and then slumped back against the wall, thinking: *Verna was tryin' to tell me somethin', but what?* She'd looked so awful, beaten up, dirty, hair all over the place, it made him feel sick at heart and all the more determined to wreak vengeance upon these terrorists. *But, what was she saying? She looked up to the ceiling, she looked back at me, then back to the ceiling. So, what's up there that she wants me to know about.* He shook his head — he'd never been any good at charades, but he knew that he was missing something.



Cursing and pulling, Ahmed dragged Verna back to the first floor and went to the box room under the stairs. He'd left the door open and pushed her back into the hole. "Get back in there, American bitch and be quiet." Verna fell to the floor and began to crawl back into a corner, sobbing uncontrollably. "Shut up, shut up bitch or I will kill you now." He leveled the gun at her, grinning at the terror in her one good eye. "But, it suits me that you can stay alive now." He'd just had an idea, one that greatly amused him, but he said nothing. Still grinning broadly, he closed and locked the door and then went to the kitchen to get a drink of water.

As he was drinking, Bilal came in from the verandah, stomping his feet to shake off snow. “A storm is coming up, Ahmed, and Marta is nowhere to be found. She’s not in the house, I know.” With all the noise they were now making, Bilal said, “Where are Ayeshah and Rebekah?” He looked puzzled.

Ahmed said, “They are asleep, they have been working hard, so leave them be.” He finished his water, looking out at the blowing snow and thinking about both of them upstairs in the bedroom, their brains now scattered all over the beds and walls, the bed clothes soaked with their blood. *They are martyrs for Islam and they have done well, but now it’s up to Bilal and me.* As he’d shot each of them, he’d remembered Ibrahim’s exhortation — ‘*No survivors, Ahmed, no survivors.*’ — but still, he’d flinched as he saw each head virtually explode as the big gun flashed briefly once to kill Ayeshah, a second time to hit Rebekah as she woke, but he just missed her; quickly, a third shot caught her in the mouth to splatter her brains over the pillows. He had to make sure that they didn’t survive, and the only way to be sure was to kill them himself. *Their courage may have failed and they might have tried to drive off in their car before we all got to the target.* Neither of them was required any more, but in a way, he’d regretted having to execute them. *But it was the only way to be sure...*

Ahmed shrugged and looked at Bilal. “Get some sleep. The storm will keep Marta from going anywhere. We have all the keys to the house and cars, so she must walk.” He looked out the window again. “We’re three kilometers from Macon to the north and five from Britton to the south, and there are no neighbors nearby; so she will not try to walk in this blizzard — she will hide, so I will watch and wait.” He looked at his watch. “It’s nearly midnight — you sleep for two hours more, then I will sleep after I wake you. Go!”

Bilal nodded and went back to the basement.

Ahmed turned out the lights and sat in darkness, the gun on the table. He listened to the house groan in the wind, and watched the snow as it whipped passed the window, shrieking and howling. Ahmed was inured to waiting and very patient, when he had to be. If Marta were still in the house, he would hear her when she moved; if she was outside and decided to come back in, he would hear her also. If she were stupid enough to walk in the blizzard, she would freeze to death long before she could get to Macon or Britton.

Patiently, he waited, reciting passages from the Koran in his mind.



In the darkness, Marta hugged Verna close to her, trying to soothe her. When Ahmed had come previously to get Verna, Marta had hidden herself under the old blankets at the low end of the box room, where she had been hiding for the past few hours; in that dark corner, her presence had been thoroughly concealed. When the noise made by Ahmed and Verna faded, Marta had crept from the box room, and quickly padded to the kitchen to get out of the house by the back door. She turned the knob, but it was locked. *Ahmed has all the keys...* She had no spare key for the back door, only one for her bedroom and the box room, which Ahmed knew nothing about. Stupidly, she twisted the back door knob again and then stiffened — she heard footsteps on the basement stairs

As she turned to go, she grabbed a long knife from the block of knives on the counter and got back to the box room just as the back of Bilal's head came visible through the slats of the balustrade. Panting with fear and out of breath, she frantically crawled under the blankets again and tried to stop the sound of her pounding heart. In the distance, she heard Bilal unlock the back door, then close it and all was quiet.

Cautiously, after a couple of minutes, she peered out from under the covers to the corridor but then dropped them again when she heard Ahmed coming back with Verna. Seconds later, she had the breath knocked from her body when Verna was pushed into the room to land on top of her. Luckily, Marta had put the knife flat on the floor beside her. As Verna fell, she began to sob again, and then they were left in darkness.

Now, Marta pushed the blankets aside and pulled Verna to her. Gradually, the younger woman relaxed in Marta's calming embrace, her sobs receding and stopping, finally, after a few minutes. Marta stroked Verna's hair for a long time, how long she couldn't tell, but eventually she knew that Verna was asleep.

Marta had no idea what time it was, but she knew that the time for reckoning was close.



Inkster, Michigan, Saturday, January 11th, 2003, 00:45AM

Jake looked up quickly as he heard the swing doors open to see Doctor Swift coming towards him.

He was smiling. "Good news, Mr Cutter. All went smoothly — Mrs Andeson is now the proud mother of a ten and a half pound boy." He held up his hand before Jake could say anything. "She's now sedated and resting from the section, but you'll be able to have a few words with her when she comes round, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes." He nodded, as though agreeing with Jake. "If you have any questions, please see the nurse on duty." He nodded again, and then went back inside, leaving Jake standing with his mouth half-open.

Shrugging, Jake sat down again, noting the time. He had to talk with Vicky as soon as she was awake to find out the most likely outfits that Tommy had contracted for recently; that would *maybe* help to speed up his search. *That's a start, anyway, but as from this later this morning, there'll be others looking too.*

After he'd finished talking with Stilts, Jake had called the local precinct and had reported the fact that Tommy Andeson and Verna Cutter were both missing. He related the broad details of the last thirty-six hours, including the fact that he'd been broadcasting on CB, trying to get any sightings of Tommy's rig. After a tedious fifteen minutes of providing names, addresses, phone numbers, background information and such like, the bored duty officer informed Jake that he had to appear at the precinct to file a report of the disappearance. Even when Jake made it clear that he was looking for his wife, missing with another man, the duty officer merely repeated the requirement to file a report.

That had been nearly two hours ago, and although Jake was glad that he'd started the ball rolling, he was under no illusions: it would take a lot of time, probably days, before any other officers became actively involved. In the meantime, he had to talk with Vicky to get the names of the most likely places that Tommy would head for.

She had to call his name twice before he realized that the nurse was trying to get his attention.

"Mr Cutter, you can go through to see Mrs Andeson now. She's in C-Three-Nineteen."

As he went through the swing doors, Jake rubbed his face and mentally prepared himself for the lies he was about to tell Vicky and when he arrived at C319, the smile on his face was relaxed and natural.

Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing normally and easily, surrounded by a battery of medical instruments and monitoring equipment; in one

corner, there was a crib in which Jake could see a rolled up bundle. As he approached the bed, he said quietly, "How's it goin', Sis?" He took her hand and gave it a slight squeeze.

Dreamily, Vicky's eyes opened. "Oh, hi, Jake. How are you?" She turned her head from side to side. "Where's Tommy? And, Verna, what's happened to Verna?" She didn't sound alarmed, just puzzled.

Jake tried to match that puzzlement. "Beats me, Vicky. I've been askin' around, but can't find 'em. Brewster, at the gas station, saw Tommy yesterday — no, make that Thursday — about 2PM, but nothin' since. Maybe he's on a job and his rig broke down, but I thought he woulda called by now." He injected a note of confidence into his voice. "Look, Vicky, I've got truckers out there all lookin' out for the rig — so pretty soon, somebody's gonna see it."

Now Vicky's face showed some alarm. "Jake, do you think something's wrong? Do you think they're in trouble?" Weakly, she held onto his hand.

"No," he lied, "the only trouble they've got is not letting us know what's been happening. Verna knows my mobile and either of them could call your house — so I guess that means that their cell phones are out of action, for some reason." He patted her hand. "Don't worry — I'll be bird-dogging this all the time, Vicky, until I find them. But, maybe you could tell me some of the likely places and companies that Tommy might head for?" As he said that, he made a mental note to check up and down Daley Street — one of the other neighbors might know something.

He got out his note book and, over the next five minutes, Vicky told him about a few restaurants, two taverns, three close friends, the train spotting club, a pool hall and three of the businesses that he'd been contracting for recently. Jake looked at the list of businesses he'd obtained from other truckers and saw that those three were on it.

"Try Atlas Trucking, first," she said, "Tommy was working there last week."

He looked at Vicky again. "Who's the boss there?"

"Jusef Wahiz — but he always calls himself Joe." Her troubled gaze looked back. "His wife's name is Marta," she added.

Before he closed his note book, he said, "Anything more, Sis, that might help?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "No, that's it, Jake." She started to cry. "Something's wrong, Jake, I just know it — it's not like Tommy to miss the birth of

the baby.” Her grip tightened on Jake’s arm as the tears flowed more freely. “Jake, please find him and Verna please, oh, please.”

Her voice was rising and the nurse outside poked her head in and said, “What’s the trouble?” She looked at Vicky, then at Jake. “Please, Mr Cutter, I think you’d better leave now – Mrs Andeson needs rest.”

Jake lent forward until he was close to Vicky’s ear and whispered, “I’ll find them today, Vicky, just don’t worry, okay.” He wiped her tears away with a tissue, and patted her hand again, all the while smiling and exuding confidence. “You’ll see, there’ll be a perfectly logical explanation, so just don’t worry.” He straightened up. “And, you can give Tommy heck when you see him, okay — I won’t say a thing, promise.”

As he went out the door, he turned and waved. But it was only when he was outside the front door and walking to his car that he realized he’d forgotten to offer any congratulations or even to look at his new nephew. Grimacing at his oversight and lack of thought, he started the car and saw that it was 01:15a.m. on the dash.

The snow and wind were blowing much harder now and it was a relief to get in from the wind chill. “Fuck, this’ll be a big blow, by the feel of it.”

As he headed south on Inkster Road back to the house and a few hours sleep, he pulled out the list of companies and again looked at the address for Atlas Trucking: Macon, just east of Tecumseh. Stifling a yawn, he shoved the list into his pocket and pressed his foot harder and the car surged forward, slewing and sloshing in the accumulated ice and snow.



Part Three: Chaos

Chapter Seven

Saturday, January 11th 2003

It was the telephone ringing that brought Jake out of his sleep.

He lurched from the chair and ran for the kitchen, picking up the phone on the fourth ring. “Yeah, this is Jake, who’s...” As he spoke he saw that it was 5:30AM. *Only four hours sleep, fuck.* He rubbed an eye and yawned.

“Hi, Dad, it’s Bobby — I came up to Detroit late yesterday to stay with Yasmin and her parents, y’know, I told you. They’re in Dearborn, that’s where I’m calling from...” He stopped, but Jake was still waking up rubbing his other eye, so he went on, “Hey, Dad, can I speak t’Mom?” He added, as an afterthought, “Sorry to call so early, but I tried last night, but you guys musta been out, and you had your cell phone off, Dad, or somethin’.”

“Oh, sorry, Bobby, but I been kinda busy, y’know. Ah... look, er... Mom’s not available right now, okay. I’ll take a message, and I’ll get her t’call back later, okay?” He hated the lie, but he didn’t want to worry Bobby also.

“Oh, sure that’s okay, just wanted to tell her I love her — I’ll let *you* do that. Hmmm, say, I’ll give you the number where I’m at now, and the address too.”

As he stifled another yawn, Jake cradled the phone to his ear and wrote down the information in his notebook. “Thanks, son, I’ll make sure you get a call back later today.”

“Okay, Dad, see ya later... Oh, yeah, love you too, Pop!”

Jake smiled as Bobby hung up, but a second later his mood was somber as he ran up to take a shower. After a quick, two-minute soaking, he dressed rapidly, went to the kitchen and got some coffee going; while waiting for it to perk, he made and ate two pieces of toast. As he munched, he looked over his notes from last night, going through the list of people and places to contact. *Talk to the businesses first, then the friends, then call all the other places, I reckon.*

He poured coffee into a mug and pulled the phone to him. After getting back from Vicky, he'd looked up all the necessary phone numbers and as he picked up the phone, he read off the number for Atlas Trucking. He looked at the time — 06:05. *Am I too early?* The ringing continued and was up to the eighth when it was picked up.

“Yes? Hello?” The voice was deep, resonant and with a foreign accent; and there was a decided edge to the tone. *Impatience? Anger?*

Jake went in quickly with his prepared line: “Hi, my name is Jake Cutter, sorry to call so early, but I’m lookin’ for Tommy Andeson, my brother-in-law. His wife has had her baby, and she’s a bit worried about where Tommy is — she hasn’t heard from him. Has he been your way in the last day or so?” Jake took a sip of coffee, waiting.

Three seconds went by and Jake was about to say more, but an answer came back, loudly. “No! He is not here, I mean he has not been here for days, at least a week.”

Jake heard some metallic noise in the background, but couldn’t quite hear it properly; but he knew he’d heard it before. He said: “Is this Mr Wahiz I’m talkin’ to — are you the owner of Atlas Trucking?”

Very quickly, the answer came: “Yes, yes, I am Jusef Wahiz, I am the owner and I told you, Tommy is not here.” *Jusef? Vicky said that he calls himself Joe.*

Jake smiled broadly and went on, “Well, look Joe, I know that Tommy told me he was supposed to deliver a few loads for you this week, so how come he hasn’t shown? Any ideas?” *Verna and Vicky both told me that Tommy wasn’t workin’ this week at all and was gonna take next week off also.*

There was a subtle change in the tone: “Yes, I know, but I don’t know what’s happened to Tommy.” A slight pause. “I had to get another driver to take the loads — it has been very inconvenient.”

This guy’s lying, no question. Okay asshole...

“Did your wife, Marta, see him at all, maybe while you were out somewhere? Did she say anything about Tommy?” *If this guy is lying, or not who he says he is, then I’m gonna get stonewalled.*

There was a longer pause now and Jake felt his scalp beginning to crawl; in the distance, he heard the faint sound of a truck starting up. “Mr Wahiz? Joe...?”

“Yes, I heard you. No, my wife didn’t see him also.”

“May I speak with her, please?” Jake stood up and put his jacket on as he was talking. Something was still bugging him about the other noise that he’d heard, in the background. *What was it?*

“No, my wife is in bed sick, she cannot come to the phone.” The tone was now certainly testy, and getting angrier at each exchange. He went on, “Now, I have to go.”

Jake again cradled the phone between his head and shoulder while he buckled on his gun. “Well, that’s okay, Joe. Look, if you see him, please call Tommy’s home number, okay?”

“Yes. All right.”

The line went dead and Jake put his finger on the cradle, and briefly thought about calling for assistance from the local precinct at Tecumseh, shrugged it off as being useless at 06:10 in the morning, let his finger off and then quickly dialed another number to call Stilts. As he dialed, he kept trying to remember where he’d heard that sound before, but it eluded him. It was still bugging him as he drove to the end of Daley, turned west on Route 12 and headed for Macon.



Ahmed ripped the phone out of the wall with a curse and threw the whole lot across the room, to bounce off the wall; for good measure, he then stomped on it, breaking it up, *grinding* it into the cheap linoleum. That made him feel better.

Suddenly, he stopped, wild-eyed and panting: *What did that man, Cutter, say? Tommy Andeson’s wife just had a baby?*

He looked down the corridor to the box room under the stairs, feeling the anger rising again: *Then who is this woman? Why did he let me think she is his wife?*

For another precious minute, he stood looking at the box room, his Desert Eagle, the clock now showing 06:15, at the box room again — thinking, assessing the information, gauging his risk. He shook his head and made his decision.

There is no more time to lose – he was suspicious, I know. Whoever she is doesn’t matter now. I’ll let them continue to think I don’t know...

Now chuckling softly, he checked the Desert Eagle again and made sure he had extra clips in his coat pockets and then went to the back door and onto the

stairs down to the fresh snow. It was still dark but, on the horizon, the blush of morning was just beginning to fight its way through the blowing snow and low cloud. The wind tugged at his clothes and beard, cutting through like a razor blade.

Bilal, driving the truck and trailer, brought it to a stop just passed the house and facing down the long driveway, with the rear of the trailer just a few yards from the back door and stairs where Ahmed now stood.

As Bilal dismounted and approached Ahmed, the latter said, "Bilal, there is somebody coming who is looking for the American driver. We must get going sooner than expected."

Bilal stopped and said, "What do you mean? Who?"

Ahmed related the essence of the conversation with Jake Cutter and finished by grabbing Bilal by the shoulders, "We can't wait — he is probably on his way already. Come!"

Bilal turned to go back to the truck, but Ahmed called him, "Leave the truck engine running — we won't be long."

As they entered the house, Bilal said, "I'll get the women." And, he started to go up the stairs.

"NO! I need you first to get the American into the rig. Come with me." He glared at Bilal until the latter went down to the basement, with Ahmed following. As they entered, Tommy looked up and thought, *Show time, I guess*, but he said nothing.

Bending down, Bilal produced his long knife and quickly slashed through all of the ropes holding Tommy down, then quickly backed away, well beyond any chance for Tommy to rush him. He brought his Uzi ready, pointing at Tommy while the big man got to his feet for the first time in three days. He was pale and felt a bit giddy. "Give me some water, before I pass out."

Ahmed, gun in hand, motioned to Bilal who went to the bed he'd been using and retrieved some bottled water. He threw it across to Tommy, who caught it deftly, unscrewed the cap and then drank it all in one long swallow. As he finished and dropped the bottle on the floor, he rubbed his wrists and then his face. Wearily and warily, he looked at Ahmed. "Yes?"

Ahmed threw him a fresh jacket and cap, each with the logo of Atlas Trucking. "Put those on — you are now driving for Atlas." He grinned, but then said, "Hurry, we are ready to go."

Tommy took off the jacket he was wearing and slowly put on the fresh one. *It's probably one I've used before when delivering for Joe, poor Joe.* Now, impassively, he put the cap on and waited for the next move, gauging the distance between himself and the two of them. Mentally, he shook his head, *Not a chance*, staring down the barrels of the two guns pointing at him.

As though reading his thoughts, Ahmed said, "If you try to escape, you will die and *your...* woman also, horribly." He grinned at his own private joke. "If you try to stall, for any reason, she will die first, before your eyes. Remember that every time you think about trying to escape." Ahmed's voice was coldly flat, full of menace. Tommy knew that he had to wait.

Ahmed motioned to the door. "Bilal, go first and up to the top of the stairs and wait." He watched as Bilal quickly went through the door, then he waved his gun at Tommy, "You next, walk slowly, do not touch anything or I shoot."

Tommy was feeling better now, feeling more awake. He cracked his knuckles of his hand and said, "Anything you say, boss."

As he started up the stairs, Tommy felt the silencer rest against the back of his head, just below the cerebellum, and heard the safety catch as Ahmed took it off. "I ain't gonna do anything, rest easy, okay." *Don't wanna get my head blown off here.*

"Shut up!"

At the top of the stairs, Bilal had backed off again until he was at the kitchen door and covered Tommy as he appeared, with Ahmed following closely. Bilal motioned Tommy to one side of the corridor and said, "Face the wall." Tommy turned as ordered with his nose just touching.

On the spur of the moment, he said, "Where's Verna? Where's my woman?" *Gotta make sure again that she's still alive. As soon as we get clear of this place, I can deal with these two and then get back to her...*

"There is no time — get to the truck!" Ahmed was shouting now, and stood close to Tommy's ear, spittle hanging off his lips. He brought the pistol up, his face enraged.

"Show me — or kill me now!" Tommy shouted back, knowing he was now taking the biggest risk of all.

Without another word, Ahmed strode down the corridor to the box room and unlocked it quickly. Screaming with rage, he reached in and dragged out Verna and pulled her by the hair until she was a foot from Tommy, pushing her

tear-stained, bloody and filthy face towards him. “There, American pig, there is your bitch, she is alive — but she will be dead now if you don’t get into the truck.”

Tommy looked at her, groaning inwardly at the sight, but he managed to crack a smile and wink, “I’ll be seein’ you soon, Verna, don’t you worry now.” Tenderly, he touched her broken face briefly, then turned to Ahmed and said, “Okay, assholes, let’s get this show on the road.”

Ahmed dragged Verna back to the box room, thrust her in and locked it again. “Go, out the door, don’t try anything.” He nodded to Bilal, who went to the back door, opened it and stepped out into the dawning day. Tommy followed and stood for a moment savoring the sweet morning air and the rushing wind, as Ahmed prodded him with the gun down the stairs.

As Tommy walked to the rig, Bilal got in and waited with his Uzi ready, while Ahmed covered Tommy from the rear. With some relief, Tommy settled into his seat, and Bilal said, “My gun is fully cocked. Once false move and you’re dead.”

Tommy looked at him, without blinking, and merely nodded. Then, he grabbed the wheel with both hands and looked through the windshield. “Ready when you are, asshole.” As he sat and belted up, he looked at the cover to the door — it hadn’t been disturbed, as far as he could tell; which meant that his Glock was safe behind it and within easy reach. Impassively, he waited, gathering his strength, breathing deeply and regularly.

Ahmed watched as Tommy got in and then went to the rear of the trailer, opening one of the swing doors. He threw his bag onto the floor and then, leaving the door open, ran up the stairs into the house: there were still a few things to do. Going to one of the cupboards in the kitchen, he pulled out the two remaining C4 packages; he’d already hidden two on the top floor during the night.

Carrying both, he went down to the basement and pushed one package up into a recess between the joists at one end of the basement. Going to the other end, he did the same, making sure that both receivers were switched on. From his pocket he took out an electronic transmitter, with an LCD screen, and checked to make sure that all receivers were operating properly.

As he pushed a sequence of buttons, all of them showed as being online and ready. Satisfied, he put the switch into his coat pocket and went back up stairs, pulling out the big Desert Eagle as he did; as he mounted the stairs, he was grinning again, thinking about the trick he was about to play on Tommy.

Up till now, Ahmed felt that, although there had been problems, he'd managed to overcome all of them and had been able to keep the mission on track. He felt justifiably proud that he'd made no mistakes, so he was feeling even more confident as he turned the key in the lock.

However, he was about to make the single most important mistake of his whole life...

Still grinning, he opened the box room and called out, "Come out, bitch, you come with me." As Verna slowly came forward, he reached in, grabbed her hair, and yanked her out. She fell face down, overbalancing, knocking her forehead on the wood floor.

Momentarily stunned, she lay there wondering, *what the fuck does this mother-fucker want now?*

"Get up, get up, bitch — hurry." He lifted her by her neck, causing her to shriek behind the gag as his fingers bit deeply into her flesh. Pushing her before him, he started back down the corridor, leaving the door to the box room open. He didn't see or hear Marta crawl out, stand and then charge toward him with a long knife raised.

As he got to the kitchen door, whatever it was that caused Ahmed to look behind him will never be known, for sure; he would have said that Allah was guarding him against the ungodly. Others would say it was a sixth sense. As it was, he half turned and as he did, the long knife that Marta held in her hand missed the middle of his back and pierced his shoulder instead.

Verna fell forward for a second time, skated across the floor and hit her head on the cupboards. Marta, shrieking wildly, pulled the knife out and went to strike again. As she did, Ahmed shouted with pain but managed to keep turning, while bringing the Desert Eagle around in time to fire quickly.

He was lucky.

The bullet took Marta in the stomach, on her right side, sending her lurching backwards, still screaming horribly. Ahmed quickly fired again, the second bullet grazing the top of her head and tearing a long furrow of skin and bone from her skull. She continued to fall, pushed back by the 1200 feet per second muzzle velocity and went backwards down the stairs to the basement, coming to a bloody and mangled rest at the bottom.

Ahmed glanced at Verna and saw that she was out cold. Nursing his wounded left shoulder, he went to the top of the stairs to the basement and looked down at the inert form. A large pool of blood was spreading around her and her

head was soaked; she looked to be dead. Ahmed raised his pistol to fire again then muttered aloud, "If not dead now, you will be soon." Pushing the gun back into his belt, he strode back to the kitchen, lifted Verna up, shouting, "Wake up, bitch. Wake up." He turned on the cold-water tap and splashed her face with a cup of water and, ignoring the pain of the knife wound, began to shake her bodily and slap her face.

That did it — the pain of being hit on her old wounds brought her around. Wearily, she opened her eyes and looked around vacantly and then almost fainted again.

Ahmed caught her. "Come, outside." Dragging her quickly, he pulled her out the door and both were almost blown off their feet by the wind and thick, blowing snow, each of which had picked up considerably in the last half hour. Half carrying her, he pushed her onto the trailer, where she lay on her side unable to move, her hands still tied behind her. Ahmed then unhitched the door from the side and swung it with him as he climbed onto the trailer. With a final heave, he slammed it shut and then pulled down the steel bar that Jusef had prepared weeks ago. The trailer door was now locked down from the inside making it impossible for anybody to gain entry easily.

Ahmed reached across to the wall of the trailer and flicked a switch. The interior neon lighting, also fitted by Jusef, flooded the trailer. Picking up the VLF radio he said, "Bilal, get moving. It's getting light and we have a forty-five minute drive. GO! Over."

Bilal had been wondering what had caused the delay and said, "Ahmed – any problems? Over." He kept his gaze and gun directed towards Tommy. Bilal and Tommy knew nothing of the unequal fight between Marta and Ahmed; the idling diesel and blowing snow had effectively drowned it out. And, when Ahmed brought Verna out, the position of the cab had also prevented Bilal and Tommy seeing anything of Ahmed's actions. All they knew was the thud of the rear door when Ahmed closed it.

Ahmed's voice crackled over the speaker again. "Don't worry, all is well. Just get moving. Over"

"Where are Ayeshah and Rebekah? I don't see their car yet. Over." Bilal had looked at the outside rear vision mirror as he spoke, but the daylight was still weak.

Ahmed's voice grated in response. "They're coming – they're in the garage getting ready now. Get going! OUT!" Now he was shouting.

Bilal moved the Uzi's muzzle up and down slightly and said, "Okay. Out." To Tommy, he said, "Drive. Take Route Twelve all the way to our destination. You know where it is — the main goods entrance at General Motors Cadillac Division, just north of Hamtramck." He grinned and motioned again with the Uzi. "Go!"

Tommy looked at him for a second, moved the gears and gunned the engine. The big Perkins rumbled and the truck took off smoothly down the long driveway, the headlights casting fantastic shadows through the blizzard. Tommy turned on the windshield wipers and the CB automatically.

With an oath, Bilal reached over, pulled the microphone from the casing and threw it out the window. "You can listen, pig, but don't think you can trick me."

The truck reached the end of the driveway and Tommy came to a stop. He looked at Bilal and said, "Which way?" He had a good idea, but he wanted to delay as much as he could. He added, "You brought me here blindfolded, remember? I dunno where I am." Calmly, he looked at Bilal, resting his hands on the wheel, in full view.

Bilal was too excited to notice the lie and pointed to their left. "That way. Go three miles, turn left. Then another three miles to Route 12. From there you know." He waved the Uzi again.

Tommy, stalling for more time, looked at him "So, what're we delivering to GM, asshole mother fucker?" *Get angry, yer fucker, and start talkin'.*

Bilal snarled and brought the muzzle of the Uzi closer, but not close enough for Tommy to grab. Then he giggled, in much the same way he had when molesting Verna days ago.

Tommy kept prodding. "Must be big stuff, reckon you're big enough to do it, whatever it is?" He looked ahead and back to Bilal, a slight sneer now on his lips.

"Big surprise for you, mother fucker asshole American. Very soon, no more Detroit!" Bilal's face contorted with anger as he shouted, and then he relaxed, perhaps realizing that he'd said too much. He waved the Uzi again. "Move or I will kill you now, and tell Ahmed you tried to kill me."

Not yet, asshole, but soon I will.

Now certain that he was hauling some kind of truck bomb, and a big one, Tommy engaged first gear and pressed his foot down, as the clock on the dash showed 06:30. He was happy, thinking that Verna was back at the farmhouse, but he was also troubled, wondering how he could distract Bilal for the three seconds he needed to get his Glock out and kill him without Ahmed knowing about it.

That distraction was soon to appear.



In the trailer, Ahmed had dragged Verna to the front and dropped her onto the floor. Around that area, Jusef had constructed a series of open tool cabinets, each about ten feet long and eighteen inches wide, which stretched in a continuous U shape around the trailer; various tool boxes and a host of different tools littered a lot of the shelves. Verna now half sat with her back against the bottom of the U and, working quickly, Ahmed loosened the ropes around her hands, stretched them out and tied one hand to one side of the cabinets and her other hand to the opposite side. The net effect was not unlike a person in the position of being crucified. He reached to her face and slapped her a couple of times until she woke, dazed and uncomprehending.

“Wake up, American bitch. Now you will learn what it means to die gloriously.” He looked at her, grinning, then pulled out a razor knife from a nearby toolbox. It amused him even more to see her look of terror as he brought the blade close to her face and then quickly cut through the duct tape that had circled her head for three days. With a jerk, he pulled it all off, ripping hair and skin off in the process. Then, he stepped back and looked down at her as she moaned and cried from the unrelenting pain.

“Now, tell me how you feel, bitch. How does it feel to know that you are soon to die here with me?”

Slowly, Verna brought her head up to look Ahmed squarely in his eyes. Her face was puffed up, the wounded eye was now infected and closed, with puss oozing down her cheek, and her nose was still blocked and broken. *Great*, she thought, *now he’s got his fucking captive audience*. She didn’t laugh at her own cruel joke, but merely licked her cracked lips for the first time in many days and said, thickly, “Fug you, yer fugin’ mudder-fuger, stinkin’ terrorist, jus’ go fug yerself.” For Verna, it was relief to swallow and to talk, even if it was to the terrorist.

Ahmed’s head went back in loud laughter. “Oh, you Americans – always making jokes, about everything, always stupid bravado.” He wagged his index finger at her. “You really should learn to have more respect, you know.”

Suddenly, the truck came to a dead stop and Ahmed almost overbalanced. He steadied himself and waited a few seconds, then picked up the VLF radio and held it ready to respond to Bilal. More seconds went by and he was about to call

when they started again and he felt the truck turning to the left. Satisfied, he put the radio in his pocket and turned to Verna again.

“Let me tell you how stupid you all are. Months ago, we allowed one of your spies to infiltrate our organization and fed him false information about a suitcase bomb, to act as a diversion; a week ago, your Customs Service allowed in the container that carried sixty kilos of U-two-three-five nuclear metal; your intelligence services have been fooled by a suicide squad sent in to divert attention from our mission here in Detroit; for the bomb, we are using these two bronze cannons that your gun-crazy country imported for one of your museums; and our servant here, Jusef, helped prepare this trailer using all the usual facilities in your cursed country. See,” he pointed, “Jusef even installed an emergency battery system for the lighting in here.”

Verna turned her head and saw a row of batteries, firmly fixed to one of the cabinet shelves; a mass of wires connected them all together. *Big deal*, she thought. But, as she turned back to Ahmed, she knew now that he wanted to talk and she wanted to find out as much as she could.

She licked her lips again and tried to move her buttocks, because the floor was hard against her as the truck rumbled through the snow and ice. In doing so, she felt a sharp reminder that there was a knife stuck down between her buttocks. *Now, that's nice to know again... Thanks, Marta, hope you're okay.*

Aloud, she said, “So, asshole, where're we gonna die together?”

Gleefully, he said, “Well, you know that saying: ‘What’s good for General Motors is good for America’?” He looked at her, but she said nothing. He shrugged, “*So also, what’s bad for General Motors is bad for America.*” His face twisted into snarl of fury. “With this bomb,” he patted the bronze cannon, “we will bring your economy to its knees, you Americans depend so much upon your cars and trucks, your roads, all of your infrastructure is built around the concept of the automobile.” He paused, breathing heavily, eyes blazing. “With Detroit in ruins for generations, America will lose its dominance — we will crush you forever!” His voice had risen to a scream as he finished; glaring at her, he turned and went to the rear of the trailer and knelt. Closing his eyes, he began to chant from the Koran, while just above him, the detonator switch dangled and swung to and fro with the roll of the truck.



Now covered in blood, Marta struggled to pull herself up the stairs. The first bullet had done the most damage as it passed right through her, leaving a gaping hole in her back. Blood loss and tissue damage were massive and she felt within herself that she hadn't long to live. The head wound alone, although still bleeding profusely, would not have been fatal but she was more concerned with keeping blood out of her vision than with thinking about dying.

She was a strong woman, mentally and physically, but it took all of her remaining willpower to keep moving, crawling, grabbing and pushing herself up the stairs. Dazed and bleeding to death, she kept going, gasping and muttering to herself and after five long minutes, she reached the top.

Leaving a long, bloody trail, she crawled on her hands and knees to the kitchen and then to the back door where she passed out, moaning and delirious with the pain, with her head on the floor, near the crack under the door. Seconds later, it was the continuous cold blast of air through that crack that brought her around.

Ahmed hadn't bothered to lock any doors, but it was still difficult for her to reach up, turn the knob and fall forward through the now open doorway. The outside door was also still wide open, banging and crashing against the wall as the wind and snow howled through the verandah. Gathering her remaining strength, Marta pulled herself up to a crouch and, holding her hand to her stomach, staggered out to the morning sun just now rising, and fell down the stairs to the snow, sliding for a few feet where she again lost consciousness.

The snow billowed and streamed around her, building up and turning red as it settled on her body, and while her life continued to drain away.



As he inched south along Britton Road from Route 12, Jake almost regretted deciding not to request assistance from the local precinct at Tecumseh; although lighter now, the air still swirled with blowing snow, impeding visibility. *Local cops woulda known the roads, but I would've had t'wait.*

The call he'd made to Stilts, before he left the house, was automatically routed to voice mail: "Stilts, it's just after 5.30AM, I going down to Macon, looks like I have a line on Verna and Tommy. But, not sure yet. When I know more, I'll call you back."

But right now with the blizzard and whiteouts persisting, the wind had increased in intensity and was almost deafening. Occasionally through the racing snow, he could see the morning sun low on the horizon but the storm gave it the appearance of a very bright moon. *Fuck, where the fuck am I?* Driving very slowly now, headlights full on but the light simply bouncing back and almost blinding him, Jake decided he'd made a mistake, picked up his cell phone and hit the 'On' button to call Tecumseh.

He didn't get a chance to dial out.

The road he was on was a typical rural route common to most farming areas in Michigan and the rest of North America — relatively narrow, loose shoulders, potholed all over, fences both sides and now mounting snow drifts — and not the type of road where he wanted to meet a tractor trailer bearing down on him, all headlights blazing and klaxon horns now blaring.

Fortunately, Jake wasn't going fast. Without even braking, he thrust the gear lever into reverse with a loud, expensive clunk, hit the window down switch, and tromped on the gas. Leaning out through the window to look to the rear, and with wheels spinning, grabbing, slipping, sliding and screeching, he gunned the car backwards, hoping that he'd find that driveway that he passed just a few seconds ago.

He almost missed it.

Wrenching the wheel to full right lock, the back of the car slewed into the driveway with only a second to spare. The big rig went by, slewed to the right, then to the left as the driver fought to control it, horn still pumping and somehow the driver managed to keep it on the road and finally brought it to a screeching stop, engine idling, thirty yards on; ten seconds later, Jake saw the brakes lights die and then it carried on. He watched its rear, cursing and fuming, as it quickly disappeared like a wraith into the white wall all around, a great cloud of blowing snow following closely behind it. He hadn't had a chance to see any identification and sat there, fuming for a few moments. *What the fuck is anybody doin' out now, takin' a load somewhere — gotta have rocks in his head!*

His car had stalled, so he restarted and put it into drive again and, with more squealing of tires, moved back onto the road and continued on, trying to find the entrance to Atlas Trucking. He looked around for his cell phone, but it must have fallen on the floor. *What the hell, get it later.* As he drove on, he flicked his gaze to the dash — 06:40 on the clock — then to his rear vision but, of course, he

had no way of being able to see the mangled remains of Bilal, lying in the ditch, his head reduced to gray and red pulp by three 9mm slugs.



Tommy leaned back with a sigh of relief — *whoever that had been in the car was one lucky sumbitch*. He looked in his rear vision and he could just make it out, sitting in a driveway, none the worse for wear.

“But then, I’m a lucky sumbitch too, whoever you are, ‘cos that distracted the asshole beside me, long enough for me to grab my Glock and send him to his Valhalla, or wherever, dumb mother fucker.” He cleared his throat and spat out the window, engaged a gear and pressed the gas pedal, making sure that he didn’t disturb the knife in his leg, now buried there almost up to the hilt. It hurt a lot, but he told himself to ignore it. Blood was oozing out, bright arterial blood. *Fucker’s probably cut the femoral artery. Guess I ain’t got much time left.*

When Jake’s headlights had appeared, Tommy had instinctively done three things: hit the klaxon horn, hit the red jake-brake button, thus causing engine compression to reduce speed quickly, and ripped at the door cover to get his Glock. Bilal, surprised and startled by the approaching headlights, was thrown forward violently and dropped his Uzi on the floor, and with no time to retrieve it, he grabbed his knife from its leg sheath and lunged at Tommy. But, on the third second, Tommy had the Glock in his left hand and fired across his own body three times — still holding the wheel in his right hand — just as Bilal plunged his knife into Tommy’s leg.

While Tommy braked, his first shot took Bilal in the neck, severing the carotid artery and sending arterial blood squirting, the bullet lodging in the door jamb; the second bullet shattered his front teeth first and snapped his head back as it traveled up through his palette to emerge through the top of his head and ricochet in the cabin area, barely missing Tommy. At that moment he was clinically dead but the third bullet caught Bilal at the throat, exploding through his hindbrain, completely demolishing his cerebellum as it exited his skull and shattered the side window. Pieces of bone and brains were splattered all over the passenger side and his body was thrown backwards to hit the door where it lay, arterial blood still squirting to the ceiling. When the truck came to a stop, with great effort and pain, Tommy moved across to that side, opened the door and pushed Bilal’s body out. “Don’t mess up my rig, mother fucker, and don’t mess

with me again.” As he closed the door, he saw the Uzi on the floor, picked it up, checked the action and put it on the seat. “Might need you later,” he muttered.

Now, he grunted with satisfaction, as he reached up behind his head and, after feeling around in the locker, pulled his hand out with his spare microphone. *Dumb fucker, didn't think I'd have a spare, huh?* He plugged it in and listened as he tested the mike. *Seems to be okay.*

As he drove on, he was thinking furiously. *Can't just stop the rig and run off, that Ahmed fucker'll just blow it all up... or just get in and drive himself, I guess.* He gave a grim chuckle. *I can't run anyways, not with this pig sticker in me.* He turned the windshield wipers to high as the snow was falling faster. *But, he doesn't know that I'm in control, thinks we're still goin' to GM. Okay, let him think that... Gotta get to a place where, if it blows, it ain't gonna do much damage.* His brow furrowed as he forced himself to concentrate, leaving his body to drive the rig. Then, he grinned broadly. *Well, lotta folks always said there shoulda been some use for that thing... guess we got one now.*

Carefully, he speeded up, heading for Route 12, now only a few miles ahead and hoped fervently that he didn't meet any more traffic.



When the trailer slewed from side to side and came to a stop, Verna thought she was about to die and screamed shrilly. It was supposed to be a loud scream, but all she could manage was a sound like the croaking of a bullfrog. She squirmed in her ropes, trying to break free, but Ahmed had done a good job. She heard what sounded like a door being opened and then just a faint thud, then the door was closed; moments later, the truck started again. She looked down the trailer and now saw Ahmed, lying in a heap at the end of the double-gun bomb; she could see a large bruise and cut on his forehead, but he was still breathing.

He'd been kneeling when we stopped suddenly, so he must have cracked his head on something. Dammit, why wasn't he killed?

Realizing she had an opportunity, she scanned all the shelves, looking for something she could use to hold between her feet to cut away at the ropes on one hand; with one free, she could then easily free the other. *But, can I twist enough to get to one of my hands?* Lifting one foot, she placed the heel of the shoe around one of the struts and made sure that the wood caught the heel securely. Pulling quickly and increasing pressure as she felt it coming, the shoe popped

from the heel. She shook it off and it dropped to the floor. Doing the same with her other foot, but on the opposite side, it took longer as that shoe was tighter on her foot. But, eventually, it too came off and fell to the floor. Both heels were bloody from scratches and splinters, but she forced herself to ignore them.

Now, she had all of her toes to use for grabbing and lifting.

Disregarding the noise she was making, she started to move every item she could see and reach with her feet and gave a shout of relief when her foot found a small hacksaw blade on the left shelf. She glanced at Ahmed and saw that he hadn't moved.

Working carefully, she stretched her right leg fully and turned her foot so that the toes brushed the blade; slowly, she brought it closer and closer to the edge of the shelf so that, at last, about three inches protruded. Putting the heel of that foot directly on the blade to hold it, she then squirmed her body around and brought her left toes up to the protruding blade and very slowly grasped it between her big toe and its partner. Increasing the pressure of the grasp, she then arched the leg back, with her knee almost touching her face, and brought the saw teeth into contact with the rope. Slowly at first, but soon fiercely as she saw the strands coming away, Verna clinched her teeth to ignore pain and speeded up.

She was so intent on her task that she hadn't noticed Ahmed wake up, look around groggily and understand what she was doing. So, she didn't see the fist that smashed into the right side of her head, knocking her unconscious and she couldn't hear his screams of rage, nor feel any pain, as he kicked her again and again for good measure.

With a final kick, Ahmed came to his senses and stopped; there more important things to think about. *What had happened? Where is Bilal?* He grabbed the VLF radio and said, "Bilal, Bilal, can you hear me? Are you there." He waited, unaware that the radio was still draped around Bilal's bloody body. He screamed again into the radio: "Bilal, pick up the radio. Talk to me!" In a fit of more rage, he threw it against the cabinet, where it smashed to pieces.

Still screaming, he staggered to the rear and picked up the bomb trigger, flicked the safety switch off and held the unit, his thumb a mere inch from the red button. Then he stopped. *Bilal must be okay, or the truck would have stopped completely and the American would have run off. There must be something wrong with his radio.* He flicked the safety back on and hung the unit back on the hook. *But, why did the truck stop in the first place?* He thought of the route to the main

highway, the one they'd taken a number of times already. There were quite a few turns, and the roads were narrow. The truck had to stop anyway, from time to time, and it's possible that there had been other cars on the road. *Why didn't Bilal get out and tell me that everything was all right? Fool... the American could have tricked us then and, anyway, Bilal knows there would be no time for any explanations...*

Suddenly, Verna gave a moan and started to move. Pushing the incident out of his mind, Ahmed returned to where she was lying and got some more rope. A few minutes later, he stepped back, satisfied with his efforts. He glanced at his watch and saw that they'd been driving slowly for fifteen minutes since they'd left the farmhouse. *We must be four or five miles from the farm, but not yet to Route 12... now is the time.* From his coat, he took the electronic detonator transmitter, and keyed in the numbers for each receiver. Extending the aerial to its fullest he pressed the button to send each number in sequence. Eight times, the LCD display showed 'DONE'. With a crazy smile, he threw the detonator down: *Goodbye, Marta, Ayeshah, Rebekah!*

Suddenly, the truck slowed almost to a stop, hesitated for a few seconds, then picked up speed again. *Perhaps Bilal slowed to have a look behind?* Shrugging with indifference, he knelt to pray and give thanks. *Soon, the rest of our work will be done.* He closed his eyes, rocking gently.

By the time she came to, Verna saw Ahmed once again kneeling and praying near the rear and saw also that she was spread-eagled again, with all four of her limbs now tied firmly and securely to the shelving.

Oh God, oh God... I can't move at all....

As she twisted and moaned in her grief and pain, she heard Ahmed laughing again in the far reaches of her battered mind and from her mouth the foulest of curses finally came, sending him into further bouts of ghoulish laughter.



As he headed in what he hoped was the right direction, Jake tried to keep his eyes on the ruts left by the rig's big tires — the one that just missed him, head on — and drove on steadily, now more vigilant against oncoming traffic.

Probably a lotta rigs around these parts, anyway....

Fortunately, the sun was now higher and, with each passing minute the need for headlights became less of an issue. Just briefly, the wind would change

direction, providing a momentary lull in its fury and allowing a slightly longer and wider field of vision.

That helped, but even so, it was difficult to see the light-brown, banner headline on the white billboard announcing Atlas Trucking. With accumulated snow sticking and covering the lower part, and swaying backwards and forwards in the wind, it stretched right across the open driveway. Jake brought the car to a complete stop and lowered the window to get a better look at it.

That's it... for sure...

He pulled out his Glock, checked the magazine, worked the action — and stopped: *that* was the sound he'd heard in the background noise when he'd phoned. Grimly, he flicked the safety off and laid the pistol on the passenger seat then spun the wheel and started down the driveway slowly, very slowly. At first there was nothing but blowing and howling snow but like some ghostly apparition, the worn and white clapboard exterior of a large, two-story farmhouse loomed into view, the light from windows giving it a menacing, Halloween effect.

Jake stopped the car and scanned the area. To his left, he could now just make out the outline of a large three bay garage, big enough to house three tractor-trailers; one of the bay doors was open, allowing blowing snow in. No lights were on in there. He looked to his right and managed to make out what looked like an animal barn, but no sign of life or light. Looking directly ahead, the ground floor lights and one basement light glowed with a haunting, dull yellow.

Anybody home now?

He sat, idling the engine, listening to the wind and watching. His hand shook slightly and he hoped it was just the cold.

I shoulda told Stilts to send backup...

House and car surveyed each other while the wind whipped the snow into crazy apparitions, blurring Jake's view of the house.

Nothing.

No activity inside the house, no figures passing in front of windows. He inched the car forward, watching the house, the garage, the barn, and now saw that the side door of the house was wide open and being whipped to and fro in the wind, making loud smacks as it hit the doorjamb repeatedly.

If there were anybody home, you'd think they'd close the door.

He drove a bit closer, stopping about twenty yards from the house and put the car into 'Park', leaving the engine idling. He picked up his Glock and got out, putting his head down against the wind and began beating a path to the stairs.

He never got there.

He saw the stain first, a dirty brown which gradually got brighter as he got closer and it wasn't until he was two yards from the mound that he realized he was looking at somebody who had serious injuries. He glanced up to the house, but there was only the door still whipping around. Satisfied, he put the gun on safety, shoved it into his holster, then quickly came closer and brushed away the snow and ice, exposing the gaping wound in Marta's back.

He could see that it was very recent and bent down to feel her neck pulse. His hands were cold, lacking feeling and he had to do it three times to be sure: she was just alive, but there was no way to tell for how long.

You're gonna die here for sure, lady, so you'd better come with me now.

Again, he looked up at the house, scanning quickly; still nothing moving except the flapping door. Lifting her as gently as he could, he staggered to the car with her in his arms, put her down for a few seconds while he opened the back door and then bundled her in and slammed the door. He got in the front and started to turn on the car police radio when he heard her take a gasp of air.

Twisting in his seat, he leaned over as she opened her eyes to look at him. Her face was white and her eyes were dull, but she was trying to speak.

He lent closer, turned and slammed his door shut to cut out the noise of the wind, and turned back in time to hear her say, "G... Go... d..danger. Truck bo...bomb, nu...nu... nuclear bomb." Her breath exploded from her throat on the last word and she closed her eyes.

Nuclear bomb... in a truck? Was it that truck that nearly ran me down?

Jake thought she was dead and once again searched frantically for his phone. Cursing with rage, he switched on the car's transceiver to call emergency services, but she cried out again. Turning back to her, he saw her arm was raised, pointing at him. Reaching over, he held her hand as she said, "Leave here... quick. Find Ibrahim Omar, *KILL* Ibrahim Omar!"

Suddenly, the whole area glowed with a fireball as the first of the eight C4 packages received the 'Go' signal from Ahmed and Jake saw the big garage begin to disintegrate before his eyes.

And, as the shock wave shattered his windshield, Jake knew he had only seconds to live, at best.

Covered with glass, he slammed the car into gear, as the second explosion ripped through the rest of the garage. As he tromped on the gas pedal, the third package, in the first of the terrorists' cars, reduced it to tiny fragments, and as the

tires shrieked in protest and his car shot backwards as fast as he could take it, the fourth charge did the same to the second car in the garage and also set off the RPGs. Now twenty yards further down the driveway and with his head out the window looking backwards, the fifth charge blew off half of the top part of the house, quickly followed by the sixth, adding enormously to the size of the fireball. Gathering speed and slithering almost out of control, Jake got to fifty yards from the house before the seventh and eighth charges erupted into a kaleidoscope of brilliant oranges, reds, greens and lastly to yellow.

By that time, the steel garage — what was left of it — was burning fiercely and the house had *disappeared*, blown to pieces, with bits of wood and debris now raining down with the blowing snow. Any vestige of Ayeshah and Rebekah was now drifting and tossing in the wind, lost forever.

Jake continued, foot to the floor, until he was just about to the gate with the billboard, then stood on the brakes. The car slewed around one hundred eighty degrees, all from its own momentum, and then came to a stop, nearly one hundred and fifty yards from what now looked like hell. He jumped out and ran a bit down the driveway, screaming, “Verna! Verna!”, but the wind cast his cries away. Coupled with the sound of secondary explosions and burning wood, it was impossible to be heard.

It wouldn’t have mattered anyway because Jake was now partially deafened by the successive blasts and was holding his ears in pain. He stumbled forward and fell to his knees, then staggered upright and ran back to the car. Getting in quickly, he lent over the seat again and held Marta’s hand in his. “Mrs Wahiz — Marta — can you hear me?”

In the distance, he could just hear his own voice. He shook his head, hoping to clear something. “Marta!” He shook her hand and pinched it hard between her thumb and index finger to try to get a response.

She opened her eyes, both of which now looked cloudy. He knew she was nearly dead but continued to pinch hard as he said, “Marta, listen, where is Verna? Where is she?” His voice shook and he was screaming at her now. “Wake up, damn you. You can’t die on me now — wake up, *FUCK* you!” He wanted to grab her and shake her, but he didn’t. But he knew he was losing her and he beat the top of the seat with his hands, mouthing obscenities.

With a supreme effort, Marta opened her eyes, and he bent forward to hear her faint “Tru..ck...bomb” before, with a long, low hiss, the last of her life left her body, and her lined face softened, almost to the beauty she was thirty years ago.

Struggling in the front seat, Jake took off his coat and spread it over her head and upper body then turned quickly to restart the car.

His foot hit something near the gas pedal; reaching down, he picked up his cell phone. He put it in his pocket, then reached for the microphone of the car radio. From Vicky's description of Tommy's truck, it was possible that the one that he'd missed in the blizzard earlier was Tommy's, but Jake wasn't sure; the truck was gone before he could get a good look at it.

But, it's all I've got to go on, right now.

Switching to the police emergency channel, he was soon passing on information as he sped back the way he'd come in.

If it was Tommy's rig, then Verna might be with him, Verna, I'm coming babe, I'll find you, bomb or no bomb...

The sun was now up and the wind and snow were abating, making visibility better and safer.

They're fifteen, twenty minutes ahead of me now, but where has the truck gone?

He stood on the gas, and glanced briefly in his rear vision at the burning and smoldering ruins as he sped away, hoping that Marta had been right, that Verna was still alive and not ashes now blowing in the wind.

With no windshield or wipers, he made sure all the other windows were up; but still, it was difficult to see, with snow and wind swirling in and out. Disregarding the risk, Jake pushed the car harder, heading for Route 12, the last known direction of the truck and, as he finished on the police channel, he switched to channel 19 and began calling: "Big Bazooka, Big Bazooka, this is Jake-Break, do you read me, good buddy, c'mon."



Ahead, Tommy could see the junction with Route 12 and began braking slowly so as not to cause Ahmed any alarm.

The fucker must still think that Bilal is in control; otherwise he woulda blown the truck already.

With a hiss of air, the truck came to a full stop and Tommy looked both ways. To the east, the Saturday morning traffic was just starting to build towards Ypsilanti and Detroit; to the west, some cars and more truckers were now heading out towards Clinton, Coldwater and beyond.

When I turn left now, is he gonna know we're goin' in the wrong direction?

Five seconds passed as he waited for a break in the traffic. Checking the rear vision, he caught sight of a billowing black cloud on the horizon, coming generally from the area of the farm. With a sick and angry feeling in his stomach, he knew that Ahmed had double-crossed him: *The farm's gone, he's blown it remotely, or with a timer...*

Tommy cursed himself for believing that Ahmed would keep his word, *but what choice did I have anyway?* He picked up the Uzi, and went to unbuckle himself, but hesitated.

If I blast into that trailer, he's gonna blow the truck and all this around here is gonna go with it...

He had to stick to his idea — get to that place where, even if it blows, the damage would be kept to the absolute minimum. *And hope like hell that I can get out before it does.* He looked down at his leg, and saw that the blood flow was increasing. *No more time for thinking, just get goin'.* Making up his mind, he put the truck in gear and moved off quickly, crossed over the traffic and accelerated into the westbound lanes. Easing into the rhythm of the traffic, he stayed in the slow lane, keeping to about 55mph, and held it there, hoping that he'd have no delays in the next 15 miles or so. *Keep it steady, keep it cool, and keep Ahmed happy.* With deadly intent, he grinned at the thought, as he passed through Clinton.

As he did, the CB squawked, "Big Bazooka, Big Bazooka, this is Jake-Break, do you read me, good buddy, c'mon."

Tommy gave a whoop of sheer joy and grabbed the mike. "Hey, Jake-Break. Where you been, ol' buddy? Been waiting for ya, c'mon back now."

No answer.

He tried again, pressing the mike button again and again. It seemed to be working, but it wasn't getting through. *Fuckin' piece of goddammed, fuckin' Chinese junk, just when ya need it t'work.* Again he tried, but it was no use. *That fucker broke somethin' when he ripped the mike out before.* Furiously, Tommy pulled the mike out and threw it out the window. *Go join your goddam brother.*

"Hey, Big Bazooka, this is Jake-Break, do you read? C'mon back, okay."

As he continued to drive, Tommy pounded the wheel in frustration.

"Hi there, Jake-Break, this is Blue-Eyes, how yer doin'? Come back."

Tommy stopped pounding to listen.

“Mornin’, Blue-Eyes. Doin’ okay, I guess, but still tryin’ t’find our mutual friend, c’mon.”

“Why, Jake-Break, Big Bazooka just went by, heading west on Route 12. C’mon back now.”

Tommy grinned and gave another whoop. “Yee-Hah!” He pressed his foot down and the truck surged willingly.

“Blue-Eyes, what’s your 10-20, c’mon?”

“Just come through Clinton, Jake-Break, headin’ for Motor City, you come back.”

“Thank you, Blue-Eyes. That’s a 10-4, back.”

“Anytime, Jake-Break. Can’t understand why Big Bazooka don’t answer? C’mon.”

“No info, Blue-Eyes. Best guess his CB is out. Hey, Blue-Eyes, thanks again, now I gotta keep track on Big Bazooka, okay. Clear.”

Without waiting for her come-back, Tommy heard Jake continue.

“Breaker, breaker, all good buddies -- this is a thirty-three, repeat a ten-thirty-three. Back off this channel while I’m tryin’ to keep track on Big Bazooka headin’ west on Route Twelve. Any good buddy there see him, come back with his ten-twenty, I repeat this is a ten-thirty-three — we need Big Bazooka’s ten-twenty urgently! Make way for Big Bazooka, he’s on the move with dangerous goods. Clear!”

Now that all truckers on channel 19 knew that Jake had issued an emergency call, the ether went silent and Tommy grinned again as he saw other rigs pass him on the eastbound lanes, lights flashing and horns blaring. *That’s fine, Jake, you can find out where I’m goin’, but don’t get too close, now.*

“Hey, Jake-Break, this is Catfish – just saw Big Bazooka, still on Route Twelve, heading west, passed Clinton. What’s your ten-twenty now, Jake-Break? C’mon boy.”

“Back to you, Catfish. Just now reached Route 12, a bit west of Bridgewater. C’mon.”

“Jake-Break, looks like you’re ‘bout seven or eight miles behind Big Bazooka. Back to you.”

“Thanks, good buddy, ten-four. Clear.”

Tommy looked at his watch; it showed 07:15, and the sun was now pushing through the low-lying blowing snow. From his vantage point high in his cab, Tommy would sometimes see cars in front disappear in white-outs, for a

couple of seconds, as the wind swept across the highway. He turned his headlights and flashers on fully and moved over to the fast lane, but he didn't use his horn, for fear of alerting Ahmed.

Fortunately, the westbound traffic was sparse, allowing him room to move around slower vehicles but he still went carefully, keeping the speed to just below sixty; the highway was slick and slushy, leaving no room for error, and he kept flashing his lights to get traffic to move out of his way.

He paid no heed, anymore, to the truckers who kept informing Jake of his location. All the while, he was watching closely for the exit he needed, the one that would take him to the Suffolk-Northern Rail Yards, two miles north of Route 12 and not far from a state park. From those yards, a long-disused railroad track branched north, and went for another mile to a tunnel that had been started, but left unfinished, sixty years earlier.

It was to that tunnel that Tommy was now heading.



Verna felt the trailer pick up speed first but Ahmed, who was praying and chanting, didn't notice until it swayed noticeably as Tommy moved to the fast lane and hit it. Then the increased RPM became very much louder as Tommy went through more gears and the engine settled back to a steady drone in top gear.

Ahmed rose and walked up to Verna, looking at her with contempt. "So, are you ready to die, American bitch?"

"Not yet, mother fucker, not if I can help it." Her voice was a hoarse croak, she had a pounding headache, and the pain from her infected eye was getting worse as the infection spread. She tried to work up some spittle, but she failed, her tongue and lips were too dry. Below her, she could feel the trailer bucking even more.

He laughed, but there was no mirth in the tone. "How stupid you are – lying there, completely in my power, and only minutes away from utter destruction in Detroit, where soon many thousands will die." He shook his head, bemused as the trailer lurched to the right, slowed considerably, and with some grinding of metal carried on, picking up speed again quickly, gears racing. But, he was so intent on Verna, he didn't appear to notice.

Verna cackled. "Who's the stupid one, asshole? When that bomb goes, it'll be taking the biggest Arab immigrant population in America with it, and most of

them are Muslims. *What a dumb fuck you are.*” Now she laughed again at the look on his face as the irony hit home.

Ahmed’s face contorted into something almost inhuman as he pulled out the Desert Eagle and leveled it at Verna’s head. The veins of his forehead were distended, his face was fiery red and his hand holding the gun shook with suppressed fury. Slowly he cocked the gun and bent to bring it closer, until it was almost touching her forehead.

“You want to die now, bitch? I *can* do it.”

She looked into his eyes and saw only death and closed her eyes, now resigned to meet whatever lay beyond. The gun boomed in the confined space and, even though she was tied down, the shock caused her to lift her entire body almost off the floor. Surprised to find that she was still alive she opened her eyes to see Ahmed now erect, the smoking gun at his side. Feeling a blast of cold air, she looked to her right and saw the splintered wood and large hole in the floor, through which she could see the ground flashing by and hear the hiss of rubber through slushy snow. Laughing with relief as much as contempt for Ahmed, she didn’t at first feel the liquid but when she turned back to him it hit her face.

He was urinating on her and screaming obscenities in English and his own language. “That’s all you are worth, American bitch — my urine. I urinate on you and your country, you are not even worth one of my bullets.” Verna gagged and nearly threw up as, still mouthing foully, he finished his disgusting deed and zipped up his trousers.

Just in time.

For, at that moment, Tommy crashed the truck through the gates to the Suffolk-Northern Rail Yards at sixty miles an hour, scattering employees and security people in all directions, braked to do a hard right a few seconds later — that caused Ahmed to bounce to the other side of the trailer and then skid all the way back to the rear — and then drove the truck onto the train tracks to see the lights of an oncoming freight train, a half-mile ahead, out of the Ford assembly plant at Dearborn and now fully loaded with automobiles, and approaching the yards at its usual speed of forty miles an hour.

Tommy knew he had four hundred yards to go to get to the disused siding and, at sixty miles per hour, he knew he would make it in fourteen seconds. The recent snow had built up all around the railway ties, but even so, the truck bucked and groaned on the tracks, causing the rig and trailer to slew and reduce speed.

Tommy cursed, dropped a gear and stood on the gas pedal, knowing that his margin was down to one or two seconds.



Jake, weaving in and around the traffic, at high speed, pumping the horn savagely and red light flashing, missed the exit that Tommy had taken, but saw two cars pushed into snow banks on the off-ramp. Braking and skidding to a stop, he rammed the car into reverse and burnt rubber to get back to the ramp, causing other cars to scatter in all directions. He gunned the car up the ramp and stopped halfway, opened the window and called out to the milling crowd trying to get the cars out of the ditch: “You see a big rig come up this ramp?”

One of the men, obviously a railway worker, came closer. “Yeah. You his friend or what? I’d like t’bust that trucker’s ass, I tell ya!”

Jake ignored the question. “How long ago? Quick, how long?”

“Two minutes, is all. Hey, what’s gonna happen... “

“Which way?” He revved the motor, showing impatience. “This is a police matter.”

“You’re dammed right it is, I wanna know... “

Jake snarled, “Which way?”

The man pointed. “Over the top, north, but he’s got nowhere t’go — that’s where the Suffolk-Northern has its rail yards. It’s a dead end, man.”

Jake looked around to the cars in the snow. “Anybody hurt?”

The man shook his head and started to say more, but Jake was gone, tires squealing, pumping the horn and shouting for people and cars to get out of his way. He got to the top almost flying, managed to keep control of the car as it hit the ground again and floored the accelerator along the only road in sight. Pounding the steering wheel, he kept the speed as high as he could, twisting and turning the wheel as the car slid and slithered from side to side, almost losing it on two occasions.

Cresting a low rise, he saw the gates of the rail yards — shattered and scattered about — and let off the gas pedal while pumping the brakes. Unable to stop in such slippery conditions, the car skated through the broken entrance to a stop finally when it broadsided a company car.

Fortunately, damage was minimal but Jake wasn’t concerned anyway. Railway workers were running about, some trying to clear away debris left by

Tommy's entry, others talking and gesticulating. Jake called out to a couple nearby. "Where's the rig that went through?"

They looked at each other and one said, "Yeah, coupla minutes ago, scooted off down the track fer fuck's sake." He pointed to the freight train now rumbling passed the rail yards. "Stupid fucker almost caused a major head-on collision, but he's a half mile or more down the track by now." He came closer and added, "I'm the manager of this yard, and I want the police to do somethin' about this... "

Jake snarled, "I *am* the police — FBI," showing his badge, "now you just listen, and shut up." He pointed down the track, "That truck is a mobile bomb, a big one, so you get all of your people out of this area, double quick time, okay, because I dunno just how much time we all have before it blows. And, I mean you get *everybody* out, and miles away from here, you got that?"

Both men nodded, and the manager said, "What're you gonna do?"

Jake gunned the engine and backed away from the other car. "I'm goin' after it, to try to stop it from blowin'."

He hit the gas and roared away, wheels spinning, and didn't hear the manager shout, "Watch out for hidden obstacles in the snow..." "

The two men watched him go, the manager shaking his head; he knew what could very easily happen. Then they both turned and started giving orders to evacuate the area.

The Suffolk-Northern Rail Yards covered an area of some five hundred acres, which, for a relatively small railroad company, was quite extensive. Jake, of course, had no knowledge of its size and was too busy trying to navigate between buildings, rolling stock, stacks of goods and supplies, maintenance vehicles and other bric-a-brac.

Getting more frustrated with the continual need to reverse, turn, take another route and the like, he decided to do the same as Tommy and put the car onto the tracks. Picking up speed to make sure he could climb the slippery slope up to the tracks, he didn't have hope of seeing the half dozen railway ties, left by a maintenance crew on the previous shift, and now covered by soft snow.

Jake hit the first one at sixty, ripping off the front suspension, and causing the car to nosedive. The rear of the car rose and momentum kept it going to allow the front to hit a second and then a third tie, crushing the front of the car and pushing the engine back into the body interior. The released kinetic energy continued its inexorable path as the rear continued to rise and the whole car

flipped in the air, like a gymnast, and landed on its rear with a loud crunch, to hesitate for a fraction of a second and then crash backwards onto its roof, sliding back down the gentle slope for a few feet and then stop, hissing and belching.

Jake, still strapped into the car, had cuts and bruises on his face and head but was just conscious, fortunately. Dazed and dizzy, he knew he had to get out of the car and felt a sharp, agonizing pain as he moved his right foot to help push himself out. Grabbing the door with one hand, he felt around with the other to release the seat belt, shrugged it off with great difficulty, and then dragged himself through the shattered glass of the door. Marta's body, thrown about in the car's rear was now jammed between the seats, still covered with Jake's coat.

Gasping with the pain in his ankle, he pulled himself through the snow, getting as far from the car as he could, fearing it would explode. It didn't and he kept wondering why he was so lucky to be alive, *it's so cold here, gotta get up ... start moving, what's the chopper doin'... landing here, where's Verna, Verna, where are you, babe...* and then it was just black.



Fortunately for Tommy, the freight train driver applied the brakes to his train when he saw Tommy's flashing headlights in the distance. The train driver knew there was no hope of stopping in the distance that separated them; the train's inertia was just too great. Not knowing what Tommy was about to do, of course, the best the train driver could do was slow down his whole system so that any impact would be at the slowest possible speed. By the time he saw Tommy slew off the track into the disused siding, the train's speed had dropped to 32 miles per hour; gratefully, the driver wiped his face, thanked his God that he was still alive and picked up his phone to call Transport Security.

Despite the roughness of the tracks and the sliding about, Tommy held the rig on course and reached the siding with three seconds to spare, wrenching the wheel to the left, down off the tracks and onto the disused section which was now devoid of all rail. Gunning the Perkins to full revs, he glanced in his rear vision and saw the freight train passing safely, and then settled down to get to the tunnel a mile down what was now a section of reasonably flat road.

"C'mon, baby, c'mon — move faster." He had his foot to the floor now and the engine was screaming as he came around the last bend to see the tunnel

entrance now blocked, *what the... a chain-link fence and gate, fuck... it wasn't there last year, too late to stop now, gotta go, baby, gotta go through...*

He put his head down as the big truck hit the fencing at over eighty miles per hour, the whole fence and his windshield disintegrating as the cab roof and wind deflector were torn off completely, allowing the trailer to follow through virtually unscathed; the radiator burst, hot coolant spraying all over, but Tommy had crouched down, most of it missing him as he looked over the broken dash, only one headlight thrusting its beam at a crazy angle as he pushed the engine harder... *Gotta get to the end...* the end of the tunnel now looming in the light, haul the wheel over... *Turn, you fucker, turn...* the tires screeching, protesting... *Gonna hit the side now...* the truck now rising on two wheels, overbalancing, the fifth wheel — weakened by the heavy pounding on the railroad tracks — now snapping and shearing away from the trailer which now continued on, pushing the rig now on its side and sliding, sparks flying, the trailer rising and riding on the rig, its front section now beginning to scrape the tunnel ceiling, both sections now sliding as one towards the end of the tunnel, and with a final grinding and shrieking of metal, the truck and trailer came to a shuddering, steaming, hissing stop.

The only light was at the entrance to the tunnel, now like a beacon, two hundred yards away. Broken glass and bits of metal tinkled and fell, coolant sloshed from broken pipes, making gurgling noises, and diesel fuel from one split tank began to turn the ground into a flammable swamp. No human sound came from the cab or from inside the trailer but, at least the engine had stopped, allowing the rats in the tunnel to perk up and sniff at the tinkling and crackling from the mangled wreck.



Suddenly, there was light, as the emergency lighting kicked in, bathing the interior of the trailer in bright neon.

Verna blinked, groaned and tried to stop swaying from side to side as she woke up. The lights had failed when the truck had crashed through the fencing, but all she knew was the sheer terror of knowing nothing while the screeching of metal and tires shrieked in her ears before something hit her head and the noise faded and was lost. Now, putting out her hand while still blinking, she grabbed part of one of the cabinets to steady herself and then looked... *down?*

Holy mother of God!

She couldn't believe what she was seeing at first: whatever had happened to the trailer had positioned the interior to look like the inside of an elevator shaft, with four virtually smooth walls. *We must be at an angle of over fifty degrees, maybe more.* She looked up to see one corner of the trailer crushed, the metal ripped away like tissue paper to expose what looked like large bricks poking through. The force had been sufficient to break and splinter the cabinetwork, including one of the struts that had held her left hand imprisoned.

Her legs and right hand, however, were still firmly tied to the woodwork.

She looked down again. The crash had done a lot more: most of the tools and toolboxes had fallen to the rear — now the bottom of the shaft — and had formed a jumbled pile. *That's where Ahmed had fallen and had been hanging on when the truck went crazy.* Verna remembered seeing tools and boxes of all types on most of the shelves, *so now they're all on top of that fucker down below, forty feet away.* Peering as best as she could with only one good eye, she tried to see Ahmed, but he wasn't visible.

Suddenly her pent-up emotions took over and she screamed, "I hope you're crushed, you're dead, you dumb FUCK!" Then the sobs came, great wracking sounds that shook her whole body as she realized that maybe, just *maybe* she might get out of this alive.

Oh God, oh Jake, Bobby, Bobby, where are you, I so want to see you both. And, what's happened to Tommy?

As loud as she could, she screamed, "Tommy! Tommy!" And waited, listening. Very faintly, she could hear sloshing, hissing, gurgling fluid; she could hear creaks and groans from protesting metal; she heard the moan of the wind.

"Tommy, Tommy, I'm here, Tommy...HELP!" she screamed again.

Sobbing, she realized he was probably dead.

Wiping her eyes — the left carefully, because it still pained her — Verna looked around her immediate vicinity. There were no tools anywhere — all the loose stuff had gone below. Above, she could see a long length of chain hanging down, two hammers still in their slings, but nearly falling out, a small chainsaw swinging on a big hook, some screwdrivers still held by spring-loaded clips, a hand saw also on a hook — *That'd cut the rope but I can't reach it* — a collection of spanners also on clips, nothing much else. She looked into all the shelving, twisting around as she hung there, but they were now empty.

The she remembered the knife tucked into her belt.

Dummy!

Reaching behind, she just got the tip of the haft between her thumb and index finger and slowly pulled it out, fully grabbing it as it came higher. With a sob of relief, she brought it round and looked at it for the first time: the blade was about four inches long and looked to be sharp.

Gonna find out now just how sharp, girl...

Two minutes later, and after some strenuous cutting action, the right hand was free. But now Verna had another problem: she was stretched out, with her legs still tied and she was lying on her back at more than fifty degrees on a wooden slope. It was now only by taking hold of one of the struts of the shelving that she managed to stop falling forward.

Directly below her was the double-gun nuclear bomb, still firmly attached to the floor of the trailer, and none the worse for wear after the rough ride. Jusef's work had indeed been well done — the supporting frame was still intact, there was no obvious damage to the exterior of the cannons, and she had to assume that its lethality was still present.

Only one thing to do, now.

Shoving the knife into her belt and inching down on her buttocks, Verna allowed her knees to rise to bend her legs, and by still holding onto the shelving with both hands each side, was able to get close enough for the knife to start attacking the ropes on her right foot first. Transferring the knife to her left hand and bracing her now free right foot against one of the shelving struts — all of which now faintly resembled two fixed ladders on either side of her — she had the left foot free in another minute.

Gratefully, she tucked the knife into her belt again and with a big sigh of relief, she straightened her legs as she hauled herself to her full length and rested against the wooden floor. For a few minutes she gathered her strength, breathing deeply as she had been taught, and trying to decide what to do next and how to get out of the trailer.

That decision was made for her when she heard a sound thirty or more feet below.

She bent her head forward until she was peering directly to the bottom, where the great mass of tools and equipment had fallen onto Ahmed. The sound came again and Verna's scalp crawled. Frantically, she peered around the double-gun, each side, trying to make out what it was, where exactly it had come from. The light was good, but still, in such a position, she couldn't see everything.

Suddenly the light caught the reflection of two bright red eyes and Verna gasped, and then almost laughed, as she saw a large rat emerge from the mess and scurry across the jumbled tools.

But her laughter died in her throat as Ahmed's head followed the rat, his face covered in blood, his arms beginning to flail around as he tried to free himself from the pile and the squealing rats, pushing and clawing upwards with his hands as he screamed at her: "You will die, bitch, you will die now!"



Just two minutes after the crash, Tommy regained consciousness, feeling colder than he'd ever felt before.

He could hear the hissing of the engine and smell the diesel fuel as his eyes began to adjust to the faintest of light now reaching the wrecked tractor-trailer. Just vaguely, he could make out the shape of the rig, on its side, with the trailer now riding on top and with the front section now jammed tightly against the roof of the brick tunnel; from his position, he couldn't see the end of the trailer but, logically he thought, it must be also jammed against the ground.

He felt the pain in his leg and reached out in the darkness to feel it and found the haft of Bilal's knife still there. But, he could also feel that the blood was now spurting out more rapidly. He undid his belt and, still sitting as he was with his back against the end wall of the tunnel, pulled and tugged at it until he had it all in his hand. Leaning forward, he wrapped it around his leg above the haft of the knife, pushing the end through the buckle and pulled and tightened the belt against his skin until he gasped with the pain. Holding it tight, he felt around the entrance wound and made sure that the blood flow had stopped. Then, locating the buckle's securing pin, he used all his remaining strength to slowly pull the leather until the pin slipped into the belt hole. Gasping again with the pain and effort, Tommy slumped back against the wall, his chest heaving, and pushed the belt end under the loop. Feeling again at the wound, he was sure now that the bleeding had all but stopped. Then he hesitated: *Leave it or pull?* For a few moments he was undecided then, taking a deep breath, he grabbed the haft , secured his grip and quickly pulled.

The pain made him cry out and a jet of arterial blood spurted up, just missing his face, but he ignored both, as he again pulled at the belt to squeeze it around his leg even more tightly, the blood sticky and wet and causing his hands

to slip... *Goddammit, hang on...* and with a final wrench, the blood stopped and he heaved and gasped, drawing in deep drafts of sweet, cold air and sat, feeling carefully around the wound and the belt, satisfied now that he was out of immediate danger of dying.

The tourniquet hurt like hell, but it was better than the alternative. Using his good leg as a balance, he put his hands to each side to help raise himself up, but his right hand brushed something hard, long and metallic: it was the Uzi machine pistol, thrown out of the cab when he'd been ejected also. He picked it up and held it, moving his trained hands all over it. Long ago, he'd been able to disassemble and reassemble one of those guns, blindfolded, in seconds; so, it was an easy matter for him to verify that everything was still there. *Might come in handy... dunno whether that fucker's dead or not.*

Keeping his wounded leg as straight as possible, Tommy then pushed his back against the wall and pushed with his good leg, digging in his heel, scraping his back against the wall, inching upwards using his elbows, pushing with his left leg with all his failing strength and, finally, managed to stand, leaning against the tunnel, again taking deep gasps of cold air.

It was in that position that he heard Verna's screaming insults to Ahmed, but her voice was muffled by the wreckage and continued hissing.

Verna's here? She's alive? That goddam fucker tricked me, but not how I thought, fucking bastard!

He tried to shout out, to make himself heard, but weakened by his massive loss of blood and close to passing out again, he didn't have the strength. Instead, he staggered along the wall, with his right leg dragging, feeling his way in the dim light, looking for an opening around the overturned rig.

But, it stretched across the tunnel with its front section smashed into the wall, making it impossible for him to get through. The rear section of the rig was lost in the gloom, but he didn't have the strength to find a way through that way, even if there was one. Weakly, he called out, "Verna", but he knew his voice didn't carry.

Only one thing t'do, Tommy... over the top.

He felt the tourniquet and made sure that it wasn't slipping, then slung the Uzi over his neck and down his back. He stood back a couple of feet and looked over the wreck and then decided to get over where the front was jammed against the wall. Using his hands mostly and his left leg when he could get leverage, Tommy painfully reached the right wheel and fender, and rested on it for a few

moments. In the trailer, he thought he heard more sounds and then muffled voices and called out again, "Verna, it's me," but he could barely croak the words out.

Now, he pulled himself up to the crushed engine hood and got to the other edge, all the while trying to make sure that the tourniquet was holding, peered over the lip and vaguely saw the ground below, and let the Uzi slip over and fall, and turned his body so that his legs dangled, grabbing onto his hood mascot, the side mirror, what was left of the roof struts, letting his arms extend, feeling for a foot hold, anything to take the weight off his arms, and suddenly slipping and falling the eight feet to the hard ground, seeing stars and having the breath knocked out of him and just lying there, on his back, gasping and coughing, the smell of diesel stronger now while a rat sniffed at his face.

Brushing the rodent aside, he rolled onto his hands and felt around for the Uzi, but it was lost somewhere, covered with mud and diesel oil. Struggling to his feet, but still keeping his right leg straight, he tried to make his way to the trailer, holding onto the wreckage for support.

It was then that he felt the pain of the knife wound come back to his leg and, reaching down, discovered that the tourniquet had obviously slipped down his leg and off, and now he was stumbling forward, the blood now pumping freely and he fell to his knees and forward onto his hands, reaching ahead, getting colder and colder... *Fuck, I'm tired, sorry, Verna...* and he flopped onto this face, came up gasping and spitting oil, and turned on his side, looking down the long tunnel to the light at the end, and now it was getting lighter and lighter... *Vicky, Vicky, I love you, girl...*

Minutes after his last breath, and now brain dead, his big heart kept pumping until it too gave a final push to the last drop from his gaping leg wound.

As Tommy died, the loud sawing noise, which now started inside the trailer caused the rats to scurry away to the edges of the tunnel and then to look back, sniffing curiously and squeaking to each other.



"Bitch, fucking bitch," Ahmed screamed, "as soon as I get to that detonator switch, you will be gone in a flash." As he shrieked at her, he was struggling with all the tools, toolboxes, and other equipment under which he had been buried. A particularly heavy toolbox, weighing two hundred pounds or more, had slammed into him and pinned him down, making it impossible to do anything except wait out

the wild ride. As the bucking and rocking had progressed, more equipment had landed on him, one large wrench hitting him full on the face, a smaller tool box squashing his left hand and breaking most of its bones. When the truck and trailer screeched to a final stop, the remaining loose items all came down upon him, effectively burying him under what eventually looked like some forgotten section of a junkyard.

It was the rats that brought him round as they started to chew at his toes and fingers. He had been lying on his back and had no idea how much junk was on top of him; from the combined weight it felt like tons, but of course, it was much less than that. The real problem for Ahmed was that the mess was all tangled together, making it very difficult for him to move, even though he could see light above and could hear Verna at work thirty feet above him.

Stealthily, he began to move smaller pieces around, co-coordinating his movements with those that he heard from Verna, thus trying to mask what he was doing. The whole while, however, the rats kept coming back, biting, scratching and chewing at him so that eventually, his mind snapped and, with an almighty heave, he thrust a hand up to feel emptiness, and using all his enormous strength, pushed his head through to start his final assault on the hated woman now above him.

“I am coming, bitch, I will kill you and all your kind. Soon, I will have that switch in my hands.” With his one useful hand, he began pushing and throwing smaller items away, gradually exposing more of his torso, and began laughing gleefully when he looked up to see the look of hopelessness on Verna’s face. He could now see the detonator switch, still on the hook... *by the grace of Allah...* and that spurred him on to greater effort.

Above him, Verna also could see that switch and could also see that it was too far away from her; not only that, she had no way of getting to it, as the hook that it was on was at least twenty feet below her. She looked along the trailer wall, but there were no handholds of any use because Jusef had lined the trailer with smooth sheets of metal.

Desperately, she looked around, up, down, in the shelves again, for something useful to thwart Ahmed’s efforts. No more tools to throw at him and maybe kill him.

Or was there?

She looked up again, and gave a silent *whoop*. Moving to the left side of the trailer, she now used the struts as a stepladder and made her way up to

where the long chain was hooked. Reaching up, she placed a couple of loops around her head and shoulders and then reached up and leveraged it off the hook. The weight was a surprise as it fell around her, rattling and scraping, so much so that Ahmed looked up and, realizing that she was trying to fight back, he screamed shrilly again and redoubled his efforts to get to the switch.

Verna looked down. Now nearly forty feet away, Ahmed frothed and screamed obscenities as he threw equipment from him wildly, but she could see that he was going to get to the switch before she would. Desperately, and now sobbing in fear and frustration, Verna looked all around again, searching, thinking and then she stopped and reached for the *chainsaw*.

She brought it down to her level and, hooking one arm around a strut for support, she then passed one end of the chain through the saw's carry handle and, making sure that the chain wouldn't slip from her body, she started to descend. A moment later she stopped, cursing herself, unscrewed the gas tank lid and looked inside; it was nearly full. *Thank you, Jusef...*

She restarted her descent and looked down again. At the same time, Ahmed looked up from his efforts and what he saw now sent him into a higher level of fury. "I will kill you bitch, I will find my gun and you will get a bullet yet!" And, with that, he screamed and screamed as more of his adrenalin boosted his strength, allowing him to lift and throw forty or fifty pound items like matchsticks.

The noise was now almost deafening, but Verna paid no heed, descending to the final strut of the "stepladder". She looked down again; the double-gun was still seven feet below and in the center. On each side of the guns, there had been a corridor about three feet wide, enough to walk through easily. Now it was just a narrow shaft. Ahmed was still looking for his Desert Eagle, but Verna couldn't think of that, because she was trying to figure out how to get down close enough to use the chainsaw on Ahmed and cut him to pieces. At the rate that he was creating a slope up to the detonator switch, she had to move *fast*.

Frantically, Verna looked for options: the steel wall was smooth, the chain she was wearing was too short to reach past the cannons, the wooden base upon which the cannons now hung was strong enough but awkward to hold onto, but...

She stopped and gave another silent *Yes!* as the idea came to her. Jusef had done an excellent job. The whole frame was made of hardwood, four-by-four beams forming a three-foot by twelve-foot rectangle bolted to the floor, with six two-foot legs on each side upon which Jusef had bolted another identical

rectangular frame. The rails and the cannons had then been affixed to the top frame.

Verna's idea was simple in concept: if she couldn't get to the switch or to Ahmed safely to kill him, she could disable the guns, making it impossible to result in a nuclear explosion. As she looked at it, she reasoned that, by cutting through the short legs progressively from the nearest point to her, the weight of the cannons would eventually snap the other legs and the whole lot would crash down about ten feet or so, thereby causing the central weld to crack or bend. Even the slightest warp would prevent the sub critical slugs from meeting for nuclear annihilation and, given the combined weight of the whole system — some fifteen hundred pounds — Verna felt that it was now the only course.

And, it might even fall on Ahmed and kill him in the process...

But, there was something about the internal design she wasn't aware of: when the smaller slug had been loaded, Rebekah had placed a large wadding ahead of it, putting it there to prevent any horizontal motion of the slug when oriented in a level position. As the design of all gun type nuclear devices is inherently unsafe, great precautions must be taken to ensure the masses do not meet prematurely and cause pre-detonation; hence the necessity to use wadding for the gun now hanging in front of Verna.

The wadding was sufficient to maintain safety for horizontal applications but, at an angle of fifty degrees, gravity demanded its due: when the shock of the final impact was transmitted to the entire trailer, the resultant force caused the thirty-six pound slug to push against the wadding. The entire mass then moved about four feet down the length of the inner stainless steel tube and stopped; hence, it was now within eight feet of the much larger slug, enough to cause the first faint blue glow of approaching criticality.

All that Verna could see, however, was the chance to circumvent the detonation of the nuclear bomb and a way out.

Ahmed looked up again and, screaming, shook his fist in his frustration. Verna had made a rough clove hitch with the chain around the last strut and then let it hang so that its end reached to about halfway down; then, using her belt, she'd hung the chain saw on it and was now lowering herself down to the first section of the wooden frame. Bracing her back against the trailer wall and pushing her feet against the wooden frame, she now readied the chain saw.

In that position, she was just over sixteen feet above Ahmed who, try as he might, could not scramble up the fifty-degree slope to grab at her. As the chain

saw eventually coughed and roared into angry life, Ahmed gave up the struggle to climb and went back to his efforts to get at the detonator switch. Picking up pieces small and large, he worked as a madman to build a ramp high enough for him to crawl to the hook where the switch hung and, by this time, he felt no pain from the crushed hand that now looked like an enormous squashed fly.

Verna had used Jake's chain saw occasionally, cutting fire wood, and she gave a yell when the first leg went; the saw was sharp and Jusef had oiled it regularly. Next, she cut through the opposite leg in fifteen seconds. The whole mass shook and groaned, and the remaining legs twisted downwards slightly. Forgetting about Ahmed and his gun, she inched her way down two feet and sliced through the second set and the system sagged more, while bolts and nuts began to stress, cutting into the wood and deforming both.

But it held.

Verna looked down. She was about halfway down the length of the frame and still about eleven or twelve feet above Ahmed who was now dangerously close to achieving his goal. He looked up at her and through the frame, his screaming interspersed with mad laughter. "You cannot destroy my bomb, I will destroy you instead."

"Fuck you, asshole, you're not gonna kill my Bobby, or Jake, or *anybody!*" was all she said as she began to haul herself up the slope, the chain saw still chattering in her hands. It took her another minute to go back the four feet to the end of the frame, revved the motor and then starting cutting into the wooden floor and the lower section of the frame.

With a *whoosh*, the bolt holding the frame snapped and part of the floor splintered and separated from the rest, flying just past her head, and now the whole system moved appreciably. Reaching through the now unstable section, she worked the saw harder on the floor and frame on the other side, smoke now thick around her as the saw screamed and wood protested.

She stopped to get a better grip on the saw and then it happened.

With an awful cacophony of wood snapping, tearing and splintering, the double-guns started to fall, with the top section falling outwards as the lower section began to collapse upon itself. Ahmed had time to look and receive, face on, the teardrop end of the bronze cannon which simply caused his head to explode as it gouged right through it, tearing it off his body and leaving that section of what had been a human being thrashing and jerking on the pile of tools and junk.

Verna managed to grip the chain and watch as the guns fell away. The chain saw slipped from her hand and followed, hitting the pile, sparking and screaming until it stalled.

She looked at the mess that had been Ahmed and screamed, “Die, you mother-fucker, die... *DIE!*” She stopped, shoulders heaving as great sobs wracked her battered body.

The gun system, however, which had been tilted at fifty degrees was now more or less vertically positioned, with the lower end buried in the mass of tools below and the top end now resting on the roof of the trailer. Looking at it through her tears, Verna realized, with a sick feeling, that the weld joining both guns was still intact.

Oh, God, no... no... NO!

The weight of the smaller slug, shocked by the fall, now overcame friction completely, pushed the plug before it and emerged from the tube to free fall to its waiting companion.

It took barely one-sixth of a second to fall the intervening six feet.

Hanging onto the chain, Verna had time only to see the deadly blue glow radiate rapidly through the bronze before she closed her eyes — knowing what was coming — and everything went *white*.

Ground zero.



Part Four: Aftermath

Chapter Eight

One Second Later

Achieving the calculated yield of any nuclear explosion is a crapshoot, plain and simple. The estimates for Little Boy, dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, have been variously put at 15, 17 and 20 kilotons; in reality it was more like 13 kilotons with a twenty per cent plus or minus margin for error.

The terrorists at Macon had calculated a yield of 25 kilotons for two main reasons: first, the U235 used was ninety-three percent enriched, part of a batch produced by the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and later stolen by Chechen rebels; in comparison, Little Boy's U235 was about eighty per cent pure. Second, the closing velocity of around two thousand feet per second would have resulted in an insertion time less than half of that for Little Boy. The faster the two sub-critical masses meet to achieve super-criticality, the larger the yield — all other things being equal.

Hence, any deterioration of insertion time has major impact on the size of the explosion.

In nuclear terms, the effect of the smaller slug simply dropping at a speed determined by gravity and friction meant that the entire system physically blew itself to bits before the nuclear explosion could produce a substantial yield. Instead of 25 kilotons, the effective yield of the U235 was less than one half of one per cent, resulting in an explosion, equivalent to around two hundred tons of TNT.

In the first few shakes of the nuclear interaction, much of the gamma radiation was absorbed by the surrounding rock, but some escaped down the tunnel to issue as a highly concentrated burst. Still, the fireball vaporized the tractor-trailer and all its contents in the first few nanoseconds; and the shock wave, also imprisoned by the thousands of tons of rock surrounding it, covered

the two hundred yards to the tunnel entrance at supersonic speed, closely followed by the fiery ball a second later.

Hence, coming as they did, nearly thirty minutes after Tommy crashed through the gates of the rail yards, the special Army demolition team reached the tunnel entrance at that precise moment: the two heavily armored trucks, two Army helicopters hovering nearby, six Emergency Services vehicles with rescue equipment and sixty personnel were all incinerated.



One Week Later

Jake sat at the kitchen table at Daley Street, emotionally drained, physically hurting and still in shock. Apart from a broken ankle, severe bruising, a few cuts and a massive headache, he'd survived the crash and was well away from the rail yards, on his way to hospital, when the bomb exploded. It was his mind that was going to pieces... still trying to figure out what had really happened that day. In the kitchen, he'd been going through all of Verna's papers, her books, her briefcase but had stopped often, overcome with the pain of his loss.

The only thing he knew for certain was that Verna and Tommy were still missing and were now probably dead. But, he had no proof, no proof at all.

Suddenly, the phone rang but he let ring until they gave up and just continued to sit, as though waiting for somebody to come through the door, while the thoughts kept milling around in his aching skull...

Where's Verna and Tommy now? Only Marta was at the house, so where was the person who said he was Joe? Driving the truck with the bomb? Was Verna in the house when it exploded? Were Tommy and Verna even there? If Tommy had been driving his rig, why didn't he answer the CB? There's no proof that either of them were there, but I know whoever answered that phone was lyin' to me... but why? If Verna and Tommy weren't there, where the hell are they? Whoever the terrorists were, they must have had connection with Jusef Wahiz. And, what was that name Marta said? Yeah, Ibrahim Omar...

Jake picked up a pen and wrote on a piece of paper in block letters: IBRAHIM OMAR? OMAH?

So, who's this Ibrahim? Is he the guy behind it all? There's no evidence about him, only what Marta said... and she's dead.

There was no proof that Tommy and Verna were there, no proof. It was his rig used, no question, but...

He stopped, dropped the pen and sat back, looking at the name. He looked again at the pile of Verna's papers and pulled them closer. As he did so, her recorder, freed from the pile, clunked onto the tabletop and he remembered that he hadn't had a chance to listen to the last message on it. He picked it up, switched it on and flicked to the third message on the list and hit 'Play', and stood it on the table.

At first there was no talking, just the sound of something happening in the background, followed by a clunking sound and the sound of scrabbling. Then a sharp intake of breath as the sound of heavy – *labored?* -- breathing and footsteps gradually grew louder.

And then a voice: *"If you scream, he dies."*

Jake blinked, the color draining from his face as he next heard Verna's voice.

"I won't scream."

Two seconds went by and Jake moved closer, not wanting to hear it and yet knowing that he must.

Then a voice that he'd heard before, when he'd called early on that Saturday morning: *"You will both come with us. Now."*

Sounds of scuffling, heavy panting again and then Tommy's voice: *"What the fuck d'you guys want? Money? A car? Equipment, what?"* He spoke with difficulty, as though partially gagged.

Sounds of movement, feet, a chair or table being moved, then a loud crash as Verna gave a cry of pain. Then silence, except for breathing and movement. Jake reached for the recorder, but stopped as the second voice came on again: *"Talk again, and I kill her now."*

The voice continued: *"You will come now, you and your woman. You will drive a truck for us, soon. If you resist in any way, she dies."*

The sound of papers being moved, then: *"Bilal, I'll watch this man. You pick up all the papers, wipe up the blood, then get Rebekah and get this woman into the car, while I wait here."*

Sounds of feet, movement, papers shuffling, heavy breathing, footsteps fading and then returning, angry curses in a foreign language – *Arabic?* – footsteps fading again, the front door closing with a loud noise, then the voice

again, "Turn around, walk to the front door, go outside, I am behind you and I will not hesitate to kill you and your woman if you try anything. Understand?"

A deep grunt of acknowledgment.

"Walk."

The sound of footsteps, gradually fading again, the front door opening, then a loud bang as it was slammed shut.

Silence, except for the ticking clock. Then it stopped too.

Jake leaned forward and picked up the recorder in his hand, looking at it, wanting to crush it but wanting to keep it and, for the first time in nearly forty years, his tears of anguish, pain and rage splashed onto it. As he gripped it, his shoulders started to heave and, finally, great sobs had to come out; even if he'd wanted to stop them, he wouldn't have been able to. Blinded by the tears, he groped for his gun, cocked it and placed the muzzle in his mouth, pushing it in as far as he could, heaving and almost choking.

The phone rang again, and kept ringing and ringing.

With a great shudder, Jake let the gun fall to the floor and picked up the phone. It was Bobby.

"Dad, is that you? I was down at the hospital to see you, and nobody knew where you were, you'd gone. So I called there, hoping... I've been calling all around. What's wrong with you, Dad? Where's Mom? Are there any leads yet?" He sounded close to despair and lost, his voice almost incoherent.

Bobby had been to see him and had talked with him, while he was in hospital, but Jake had told him only that Verna was missing, with Tommy, and that local police were looking for them. He hadn't the courage to tell Bobby of his suspicions, nor had he told Vicky, who was still in a state of depression, anxiety and post-operative stress. He hadn't told *anybody* of his suspicions...

But, now he had to say something.

Jake wiped his face, eyes and nose and said, "Bobby... *Bobby*... I... your mother... she won't be back, Bobby. She's gone. I think... no, I now *know* she and Tommy had been hostages... And I...we...didn't realize, didn't know..."

There was a long silence while Bobby tried to take it in.

Then, his voice cracking, he said, "What d'you mean, Pop, she's gone? Where? What the fuck's happened? What *happened* between you two? How could you let that happen, Dad? *You're* the fucking FBI, right? Oh, God, oh shit!" Now, *he* was sobbing, Jake could hear him and also now knew that Bobby needed *him* more than Jake needed Verna.

“Bobby, listen... *listen to me...* I *didn't* know what was happening until it was too late... I'll try to explain it to you more when I get bac... “

Bobby interrupted, “Fuck you, Pop! Just fuck you. I needed you both, you know... *both of you!*”

With a sob, he hung up, as Jake shouted, “Don't tell Vicky yet...I'll do that when I see...” But the line was dead.

After a few seconds, Jake put the phone down and then went to call him back but stopped, *No, there's somebody else you gotta call first, Cutter*, as he dialed Josh Adams's private number.

He remembered he had more names now: *Bilal and Rebekah*. He wrote them down too, underneath Ibrahim Omar; and he still had Andrew Blackwood's report about the cannons.

As he cleared his throat, wiped his face for the third time and listened to the ringing, he thought of Adams's request – no, *order* – of last Monday: *Fix up your marriage and then give me your answer.*

Now he could give that answer, with his full report, to Josh Adams. And now also he had another order: *Kill Ibrahim Omar!*



One Month Later

The FBI field car that Jake crashed was placed onto a tractor-trailer and take to the FBI pound where it sat, unattended and forgotten. The rear section had been so crushed that Marta's body, covered by Jake's coat, was not visible; Jake, barely conscious when he was taken to hospital, mumbled to a medical orderly that Marta's body was still in the car.

The orderly forgot to tell anybody, being too busy to trying to save the lives of rescue team members caught at the tunnel mouth; by the time he remembered, six weeks later, it was too late.

Bartlett, at the Detroit office, simply wrote the car off when he saw the report and photos; whatever had been salvageable from the wreck had been retrieved, but nobody had looked any further than the front seat and trunk. And, in the frigid Michigan air, the remains of Marta's body had completely frozen, thus preventing decomposition. After glancing through the report, Bartlett simply made out the necessary requisition for a replacement and promptly forgot about it.

At the end of the month, when reminded that the wreck was still awaiting final disposition at a wrecker's yard, he ordered it sent for crushing and recycling. Two weeks later, he was in office when a call came in from Josh Adams.

"Bartlett, where the fuck is that pathology report on Marta Wahiz?"

"Who?"



Three Months Later

When her son – Tommy Junior -- was three months old, Vicky sold up everything – the house, the contents, Tommy's 69 Mustang – and, using her GTO, drove out to Ely, Nevada, to live with her maternal grandmother who still managed to own and operate a small camp ground for travelers. There had been no insurance payout yet for the missing truck; the underwriters were just taken their sweet time about it, or so it seemed to Vicky, but she hoped they would pay up, eventually.

When she'd left the hospital — two weeks after the terrorist attack — and returned to the condo with Tommy Junior, Jake had come to see her, still on crutches, and tried to explain to her what he thought had happened — based upon what he'd found out and from his own deductions.

She was furious at Jake, cursed him for his jealous nature and uncaring attitude for all and sundry, sobbed with him when he played the recording through for her and used her fists on his defenseless face until he had to ward her off with one of his crutches.

Her anger spent, she cried quietly for another fifteen minutes, sitting at the kitchen table, and then made them both a coffee. Without a word, she drank the coffee while Jake fiddled with it, still dabbing his face and wishing he were dead.

"You'd better go now," she said, suddenly standing and looking down at him.

Jake hauled himself up, adjusting the crutches, and looked at her. He looked away from gaze and said, "I'll see you later."

She made no answer, but went to the front door and opened it wide.

As Jake went through, he paused a moment, looked at her levelly and said, "I'm sorry, so sorry."

“Just go,” was all she replied, her gaze still cold and hard, and watched until his car disappeared from view. Jake glanced in his rear vision in time to see her and thought, just for a moment, that their eyes met and then she was gone.

He eventually traced her to Ely and contacted her by phone, but she didn't return his calls, nor answer any of his letters. The money that he sent her in his letters, from time to time, she placed into a fund for her son's education.

She got a job at a local diner at the edge of town, as a waitress, and would often look out over the broad valley that stretched into the distance. Perched on the side of the sierras, the diner, with its picture windows, made it easy to see everything that was coming over the mountains, across the valley, from anywhere.

That's the way she liked it.



Six Months Later

In the spring thaw, Bilal's body, which had been covered with four feet of snow, was attacked by various rodents, crows and feral cats and, by the time the hot summer was waning, the young motorcycle rider who crashed into the ditch only landed on tattered clothing, scattered bones and a smashed radio transceiver.

The local police and pathologist found no identification and, apart from establishing that the murdered person was male, probably a foreigner and between thirty and forty years old, the final report listed Bilal simply as a John Doe, of no fixed address. None of the bullets that had killed him were found and his remains were cremated by the state of Michigan after due process; the case remained as an unsolved murder in that county.

No connection was ever made or found with Atlas Trucking or the events of Saturday, January 11th.



One Year Later, The White House, Washington, D.C.

The President finished reading, closed the file and pushed it away. Quickly, he glanced at his watch: 0615 — his first official appointment for the day was in forty-five minutes.

He stood and went to the east window and could now catch a glimpse of the rising sun. It was still weak but, as the sky was clear, it seemed to promise some warmth on another frigid January day. Mentally, he sighed and turned to face the man still seated opposite his desk.

“George, that report confirms what a lotta people have been saying: it was a total fuck-up, no question.”

“Yes, Mr President,” George said, and at the same time, moved his bulk on the seat, making sure that Andrew Blackwood’s report was safe in *his* inside coat pocket, and not in the file on the desk. At the same time, he hoped that he didn’t look as though he was squirming in the seat.

The President raised his eyebrows and looked down at him. “That’s *all* you can say, fahchrissake?”

The President’s face was blank but his nostrils were slightly flared and George knew that the President was fuming inside. *I guess he has good reason...* He said, “Well, Mr President, despite the fuck-up with intel, there *are* bright spots.”

“Such as... ?”

“We were very lucky that the terrorists lost their way and wound up in a disused tunnel. That in itself ensured that collateral damage was kept to the minimum.” The President opened his mouth to respond, but George carried on quickly. “*And*, the tunnel collapsed, thus trapping most of the radioactive fallout within it.” He smiled reassuringly. “We think they expected to get through the tunnel and move on to their target.” He shrugged. “That means we were doubly lucky, I guess. Maybe trebly lucky, because the yield was so low, the bomb must have malfunctioned — there’s no other explanation.”

“Okay, fine... now tell me something I *don’t* know.” The President sat at his desk again, lifted his legs and placed the heels of his shoes on the corner of the desk. He adjusted his trousers and looked at his shoes, sparkling in the morning sun. They looked great. Then he looked at George, his face set. “So, tell me... “

George raised his eyebrows and said, “Mr President, you’ll be happy to know that we’ve traced the actual U-two-three-five used in the device to a batch that was prepared in the Ukraine in the late eighties.” That information was in the attached scientific analysis, but he knew that the president hadn’t read it; *they never do*, he thought. “The Russian government has been especially helpful, over

the last ten months, in eventually providing that proof.” He paused, delicately. “And, we can now be equally sure that it was the action of Chechen rebels, in the early nineties, who actually stole the material...” He let his voice trail off.

“So, why would Chechen rebels attempt a terrorist attack here?”

“They wouldn’t, Mr President. What we think happened is that another organization either bought it or stole it from the Chechens.” Again, he shrugged. “That’s always a scenario, as we know, and that’s why we’ve taken extraordinary measures to make sure that known stocks are even more heavily guarded.” He added, “And now also, Russian intelligence is trying to track down the group responsible but, as yet, there is nothing definite.” He tapped the file on the desk. “The report details a host of possibilities, all of which are now being actively investigated.”

“Who’s in charge of that?” The President dropped his feet to the floor and added, “On our side, I mean?”

George ignored the gaffe and said, “For the CIA, we have Al Cochrane on site in Afghanistan. He’s coordinating all our efforts from Kabul, for this investigation. The FBI has sent Jake Cutter to Pakistan where he has a base of operations in Islamabad. The two are working closely together and we expect quick results, I can tell you, Mr President.”

The President’s eyebrows furrowed and he said, “Cutter? Isn’t that the agent who...?”

George nodded in anticipation and cut in. “Yes, Mr President — he’s the agent who was instrumental in stopping the attack last January. A true hero, Mr President and just the man for the job out there.” *Yeah, and far enough away that he won’t cause any trouble for me here.*

The President leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and formed a steeple with the fingers of both hands. Slowly he tapped his index fingers against his chin as he said, “George, let me say this carefully: since that attack last January, I’ve been just about crucified — unjustly, in my opinion — by every mother-fucking journalist and media mogul; I’ve been hounded by Congress and by most of my loyal supporters; we still don’t know who the attackers were, and we don’t know exactly why they tried — except to try to wreck our economy even further; there’s been plenty of theories about how the bomb got smuggled in — even some rumors about some cannons being involved...”

George interrupted, “That theory’s been put to rest, Mr President, and the two agents who provided that cockamamie analysis have been re-assigned.” He

paused briefly, and then added, “Actually, the main instigator of that bull-shit idea — Blackwood — resigned two months back, and is now teaching in California, but we’re keeping tabs on him.”

“So *who* gives a fuck? According to you, and others, there’s not one shred of evidence to support *any* smuggling theory, for fuck’s sake; the situation in the Middle East gets worse by the day, almost and, finally, *my* fucking popularity is sinking faster than the fucking Dow Jones!” His voice had risen sharply by the time he’d finished and, for a few seconds, he glared at George, who now was squirming in his seat with the color slowly draining from his face. The President drew in his breath and continued, softly and viciously now: “*And, you say there are some bright spots...*”

“Mr President...I...ah...I can assure you that...”

The President cut him off. “No, George, you can’t — not any more.” He pushed back on his desk and stood, looking down at the face of failure. “George, I want your resignation, this morning. Now, in fact.” He opened a side draw and pulled out a file, from which he extracted one sheet of paper. He scanned it again and then flicked it across the desk for the other to see. “Sign it now. I have a press release all ready. Your medical condition has worsened and, in the country’s interest, you’ve decided to retire.” He paused, then added, “George, we’ve been friends for a long time, but now it’s time for you to go...”

After a few seconds, George picked up the paper, read it quickly and signed it with his usual flourish. Then, without another word, he stood, adjusted his coat and tie and left the room, his face now an angry red, his mind now set: *I’m the only one with Blackwood’s report, Mr Mother-fucker President, so you can kiss your re-election good-bye...* Inwardly, he chuckled as he pulled at the door, without looking back.

As the door closed, the President sat, rubbed his face and eyes and turned to the third person, at the low coffee table, who’d been doodling all the while, saying nothing, and sipping on a coca-cola. “So, Cal... as my political strategist, what’s your assessment? How’s this *fucking* mess gonna impact my re-election bid, come November?”



The End



Acknowledgments

To the owners of hundreds of websites – government and private -- too numerous to list here, for the information and insight they provided; without them, the task would have taken much longer.

To Frank and Ann, for listening and not laughing at my idea, and for providing helpful tips.

To Sami, for helping me to understand the human body and how it works – especially when murder is involved.

To Chase, who gave me insight into what sort of an organization the CIA really is.

To Avery, for helping me to think positively about writing fiction.

To my children, who really didn't see much of me for six months as I pounded away at my PC, behind closed doors.

And, to my wife and partner, Lynn, who believed in me all the time, even when I didn't believe in myself.

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction, not a blueprint about how to construct a working nuclear device.

All fiction, however, has some basis in fact, as you know. All of the material in this novel was obtained from my own knowledge, and from all of the references freely available in libraries and on the World Wide Web.

The fictional places are the Museum Annex, the farm at Macon, the house on Daley Street and the street itself in Inkster, the equipment suppliers in Tecumseh, the Suffolk-Northern railroad company and various shops, gas stations and truck stops. All of the characters are fictional, entirely from my own imagination.

However, the information about nuclear materials, the construction of bombs, and the yields obtained is genuine and is all readily available at specific websites and within other reference works.

The concept of using a pair of 400-year-old cannons as a disguise and as a reflecting device is entirely a figment of my imagination, although the basic design for a double-gun device is not. That information is available, in detail, in some encyclopedias and websites. Whether the bomb design from my imagination would work, as described, I have no way of knowing for sure.

That, however, is not the point of my novel. Simply stated, the success of any terrorist attack relies upon many factors but a crucial one is *innovation*. The fictional criminals of this novel were innovative in the way they used old ordnance in an entirely new way. And, instead of using radio for long distance communication, they deliberately set out to use it for very short distance only, and in a way well suited for their needs. The use of a decoy is so old that perhaps I should not mention it, but that has always been part of warfare. Finally, knowing the culture of America vis-à-vis guns, the importation of old cannons would never present any problem and hence would be excellent cover for their smuggling.

With all of that information freely available for anybody to think about and use, what are the chances that actual terrorist groups can use the information to their advantage? Well, the answer is they probably have already, but not to the extent of attempting to use a couple of old cannons as the basis for a nuclear device; *not yet, anyway*.

And I doubt very much that they ever will...

Should you still feel that I'm providing terrorists with invaluable insight into a new method to wreak havoc, let me answer that by saying this: I included certain technical faults into the design that would render it useless as an effective nuclear weapon. So, the best any terrorist could hope for is a "dirty" bomb – something they can do easily, anyway, without any help from me.

Cyrus H. Milton
Brisbane, Australia.
March, 2004.