

INTELLIPHOBIA

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CHAPTER ONE: GROWING UP

Jake's parents had married later in life and his parents were thirty-nine and forty-five by the time Jake was born. Jake had never noticed that his parents were older until he noticed how much younger the parents of the other preschool kids appeared to be. About that same time, Jake also discovered that other parents played catch and other games with their children, while his parents seemed to supervise from afar. They readily offered guidance and praise for kindness, thoughtfulness and for neatness but they seemed unconcerned with athletic ability or social success with peers. And sometimes Jake felt that even his own parents were uncomfortable with the rapidity of his learning.

Jake often felt that his parents didn't understand him. Although he knew that both of his parents were very intelligent in their own way, he recognized that they really had no idea how his mind worked. At times, Jake believed that his sisters were overly concerned with frivolous things like appearance and popularity. Although Marie and Tina were very bright, Jake was critical that they didn't try to excel at much of anything besides being sociable.

Sometimes Jake felt so different from other people that he believed that he was totally alone in this world except for his two best friends, Karl and Thomas. Each was, in many ways, a stark contrast to Jake himself. While Jake was always preoccupied with his curiosity and inventions, Karl was in touch with feelings of anger, protectiveness and sometimes paranoia. Thomas was a sharp contrast to both Jake and Karl. He was the social one and also empathic and sensitive.

Jake became aware of Thomas when he was in the first grade at school. Unlike Jake, Thomas was more outgoing and made friends easily with the other children. He

was just as smart as Jake and they shared the same interests but Thomas learned at an early age to be very cautious in his interactions with other students and with teachers. He had trouble participating in class because, like Jake, other kids didn't seem to understand many of the words he used. But unlike Jake, Thomas learned to select a vocabulary appropriate to his age. He also learned not to raise his hand in class to answer a teacher's question because after a few responses that were always correct, the teachers ignored his raised hand to call on the other students.

As the school curriculum lagged behind Jake and Thomas' abilities, they learned to augment their progress through the use of library books and experimentation. They often knew as much or more about a subject than the teacher, and learned early that it was not beneficial to correct the teacher. Some teachers actually seemed to resent their intelligence or to be intimidated or even afraid of it.

Thomas entertained himself in class by creating sketches of new devices that might be useful. When he took tests he answered some questions incorrectly so that a teacher's expectations of him would not become an issue. As a skinny kid, Thomas was not athletic and kept to himself during recess. Because he physically lagged behind the other boys, he refused to skip a grade fearing that he would be taunted by other boys larger and stronger than he was. Throughout his schooling from kindergarten to PhD he learned to hide his intellect from others while Jake felt that that would be compromising his own sense of self and that the fear of intelligence was the other peoples' problem.

Thomas was always sensitive about his body. He was skinny for many years, and had a weak back and shoulders. He didn't think he was attractive enough even though as

a teenager he usually had a girlfriend while Jake and Karl did not. Jake and Karl were always too busy with one new invention or another.

Thomas's first girlfriend was Shirley. They met at a football game between his junior high school and one across town. They realized immediately that they were attracted to each other. Thomas would ride his bicycle ten miles across town to see her. They spent lots of time together. They went to the county fair, rode in the rumble seat of a friend's Model "A" coupe, camped with her folks at their summer cabin and went to school sponsored dances, sports events and hay-rack rides.

Then one Saturday when Thomas was at her home, she invited him up to her bedroom. Thomas was reluctant but didn't want to hurt her feelings. They started kissing and hugging which was fine with Thomas. Thomas didn't know what to think when she took off her blouse and bra and exposed her breasts. At first he was fascinated, as Thomas had never before seen such beautiful, firm, well-developed breasts. Thomas next noticed that Shirley's breasts looked strange with extremely enlarged nipples and dark areolas. He touched them briefly and then blushing, embarrassed, and slightly repulsed announced he had to leave for home to make it in time for supper. It was one time he wished he were more like Karl who might have grabbed one nipple in his mouth and another nipple in his hand without a second thought.

That was the last time he saw Shirley. She called several weeks later and told him she was dating a boy from her school. He breathed a sigh of relief and for a while avoided girls by going back to his hobbies.

Thomas' favorite hobby was photography. He acquired an enlarger, printing box, development trays, roll film development tank and a 35mm camera with funds from his

paper routes. . He thoroughly enjoyed working in his darkroom and was proud of his ability to manipulate a variety of films, chemicals and devices in total darkness.

He also had a chemistry set and a rock collection with beautiful quartz crystals. He could often recognize differences among rocks and minerals by their odor. He could examine a variety of objects under his chemistry microscope. While Thomas pursued his hobbies in the attic, Jake had a workbench behind the basement furnace where he could tinker with a variety of things. Each day before the trash was picked up, he would go through the alleys looking for things he might fix or modify. He found and fixed several clocks and two amazing radios.

One radio was an antique tuned-radio-frequency (TRF) radio with an electromagnet speaker attached to a large horn as the speaker. Replacing the two tuning capacitors, Jake was able to listen to a variety of programs. He used the antenna wire from a crystal radio he had previously built and took great pride in reviving this treasure.

Thomas also delved into Russian literature reading Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" and "The Brothers Karamazov". He was totally emeshed in both books for weeks although Jake and Karl both teased him about spending so much time reading fiction.

At the age of fifteen, unlike Jake and Karl, Thomas got a learner's permit so that he could drive to go on dates with girls. His father was an excellent driver, teacher and former racecar driver. He enjoyed scaring Thomas by driving so close to other cars that their outdoor mirrors would "click" as they passed.

As soon as he was sixteen Thomas obtained his license and was able to provide transportation for his mother and even take a date out for the evening. When driving, if

another driver behaved in an irresponsible manner, Thomas felt intimidated and wished he could be more like Jake's friend Karl who would probably honk the horn and give the guy "the finger".

Thomas became a bit girl-crazy and he knew that Karl and Jake were critical of his need to date. But he loved his time with girls because it was one of the few times that Karl and Jake were not hovering over his shoulder critiquing his every move and his every sentence, while implying that he was too emotional and too sensitive.

It was at age sixteen that Thomas had his second romance. A friend of his mother had an attractive and musically talented fifteen year old daughter Ramona. Although he wasn't especially attracted to her, he liked her and didn't want to hurt her feelings or disappoint his mother or her mother. He visited her several times in her home where she taught him to play some pieces on the piano. She invited him to go to a dance sponsored by a social club. She suggested that they double date with another couple she knew going to the same dance. Thomas would drive them all to and from the dance. Thomas was immediately struck by the girl Betty of the other couple. She had golden blonde hair, gleaming white teeth, a beautiful figure and a softness and vulnerability that Thomas could not resist.

Thomas felt like a total jerk but after they left the dance, he drove Ramona home first, then Betty's date and finally Betty. By this means he could spend the maximum time with Betty. He asked her out for a date and they were in love from that point until Thomas finished his first year of college. Their love was passionate, intimate and Thomas knew she was his soul mate and that they would be together forever.

It was during his second year of college that Betty called one night and said she didn't want to spend the rest of her time in high school without dating and was breaking up with Thomas. Thomas was devastated. He had planned to propose marriage when she finished high school.

Thomas didn't see Betty again until summer vacation when they ran into each other at a hamburger joint. She came up to him in tears and told him she was pregnant by a student from the same high school class as Thomas. Betty then ran out of the restaurant. Thomas turned to rejoin his friends in the booth, but discovered that he couldn't catch his breath. Within seconds, he started to sob so he made a quick exit to get outside to fresh air and privacy. This was the final slam and Thomas went into a deep depression that never quite went away. Jake, who walled himself away from emotions, had no reaction to Thomas' sadness while his friend Karl was livid and offered to "take out" the guy that had gotten Betty pregnant.

A few weeks later, Betty's father called Thomas to come over to the house and offered to pay all of his college expenses if they got married. But Thomas knew that he would never be able to trust Betty again. Thomas knew they still loved each other but his pride and hurt wouldn't let him reunite with Betty. He only saw her once again after a period of five years. By that point she was in her second marriage which also was failing. He did receive one more call from her years later and it was clear she was desperately depressed but Thomas couldn't speak openly with her because Jake and Karl were listening. Two weeks later he heard that she had shot and killed herself. Thomas lost his ability to trust others and vowed that he would never trust any female after that.

Thomas was one of those people with an incredible memory for certain past events. Thomas' memories were nearly all of those events that produced a strong emotional reaction. For example, he could still recall the pain and shock from being stuck by a pin while his mother changed his diaper. If Thomas thought about pets that he had had in past, he would feel a desperate mix of guilt, loss and sadness. He had a Bichon Frise that slept with him, her head lying on Thomas's head. Thomas could "communicate" with her through mutual visualization while their heads were in contact. He could feel her happiness when she dreamed she was running across the yard and could feel her sadness when she saw a pet cat get run over. Annie, the dog, could also sense Thomas's feelings and would snuggle closer when he felt sad and would then lick his face. Over the years, Thomas often used his love of pets to replace his high social needs.

Sometimes Jake thought that Thomas was overly sensitive. His emotions were so close to the surface that the slightest stimulus could evoke tears, laughter or fear. Music, it seemed, was his Achilles' heel. If he listened to an excellent vocalist, instrumental musician, or even a recording of a sister he would break into tears. Jake suspected that Thomas' failed efforts to master the saxophone, clarinet or piano somehow increased his appreciation for the accomplishment of other musicians. While Thomas liked to sing, he would only do so in the privacy of his shower when no one could hear him. He was hypercritical of his own voice and didn't want to be criticized by others.

Thomas and Jake's academic and professional experiences seemed to mirror each other as they grew. Through high school, Thomas was careful to hide his superior intellect because he had found that others were threatened by his ability to learn quickly.

Jake also tried to hide his intelligence but sometimes his impatience and intolerance of ignorance took center stage.

Eventually, both Jake and Thomas obtained doctorates and ended up as professors at the same university. They became life-long friends.

Jake never learned to hide his intellect and even as a professor he found that many colleagues appeared “threatened” by his logic, decisions and rhetoric. There seemed to be a real phobia of Jake’s superior intellect and Thomas feared being socially isolated by that same phobia. Jake and Thomas called it “intelliphobia.”

Thomas remembered when Jake needed to fire a group of programmers in one university. They had failed to develop a functioning accounting system after years of effort. Firing them could save the school nearly a million dollars by replacing them with an excellent accounting system already developed at another school. Thomas was concerned that Jake would simply give them notice without discussion or sympathy so although Thomas felt bad about Jake having to fire people that had worked there for more than five years, he asked Jake to give him the chore.

These dismissed programmers actually did not report to Jake but reported to a vice president who was livid with anger over the firing because Jake had gotten approval for the dismissal of the programmers directly from the university president. Thomas would have suffered terribly had the anger been directed at him especially since he already felt the programmers disappointment, so Thomas stepped back and let Jake be the target of the aftermath. Jake seemed oblivious to the pain of the programmers, as he totally believed that his decision had been the only rational solution.

Even among other doctoral level professors, Thomas recognized his superior intellect. Fearful of rejection, Thomas vowed he would be careful and would never flaunt his intelligence, creativity, or other special talents. He was most comfortable in the “back seat” observing Jake’s abilities and creativity.

CHAPTER TWO: KARL THE PROTECTOR

Karl had been a friend and protector of Jake for many years. It all began when Jake was five years old. Jake had gone to a local park just a block from his home to wade in a pool in the park. It was there that a larger boy, whom Jake had greeted in a Mandarin phrase, grabbed him and tried to drown him. Fortunately, a woman who was watching the children in the pool yelled for the boy to release Jake. Jake emerged, spewing water from his lungs. He had been attacked for no discernible reason. Before Jake dissolved into tears of fear or anger, another young boy, Karl, stepped in to protect Jake. Karl was comforting and at the same time appeared to be very angry. By helping Jake to stop his tears, Karl protected Jake from looking like a sissy. Perhaps it was Karl's anger that allowed Jake to pull himself together. As Karl walked Jake to his home, Karl continued to feel rage at the bully who had attacked Jake.

Jake trusted that Karl would take revenge on the kid who had attacked him and that Karl would take precautions to never let his guard down and to never let Jake be a victim again. Even at age five, Jake depended heavily on his friend Karl

Jake often found himself isolated from other children and even adults. When he spoke or saw an answer to a problem, others would often look at him in a strange way and go away as if he somehow frightened them. He didn't realize that his use of foreign languages as well as his creativity and problem solving skills might actually frighten people. He was growing up during the Vietnam War and he later realized that others may have thought he was the son of some kind of a spy or terrorist.

Unlike Jake and Thomas, Karl had no reluctance to quickly express his anger. He seldom stopped to analyze or temper his reactions or to worry that he might hurt someone's feelings. Ever since Jake was five-years-old, Karl has been taking care of him whenever he was bullied or at risk of being victimized. He would have taken care of Thomas too but he couldn't seem to judge the seriousness of Thomas' situations because Thomas cried so easily whether it was a beautiful song, a dead stray cat in the road or an actual threat.

In all the years, though, Karl's protectiveness had never gotten out of hand until they were about sixteen. The three boys were walking home from school minding their own business when a couple of known bullies pulled along side of them in an old beat-up car. The bullies started to yell slurs like "geek" and "nerd" and "turd face."

"No big deal," Karl told himself and just kept walking. And then a full can of soda pop was slung from the car in their direction. It hit Jake right in the middle of his forehead. There was blood pouring from the gash and Jake was holding his head. Karl lost all control and went ballistic. He threw open the driver's car door and pulled the boy from the vehicle. As Karl pummeled the much larger boy, the passenger in the car panicked and jumped out instead of applying the brake and the junker took out two mailboxes before it ran into a tree. Jake, Thomas and Karl ran all the way home. Jake and Karl quickly changed out of their bloody shirts and waited for the repercussions.

The two bullies reported to the police and then to the high school principal that Jake Schmidt had started the fight and caused the damage. Two police officers did, in fact, interview Jake but determined that he was too small to have caused all that damage and they believed his story that they had thrown a pop can at him and then jumped from

their car and chased him home. Jake never mentioned that Thomas and Karl had been with him.

The three boys discussed the incident and jointly they decided that they had had enough of high schools in their hometown. Thomas and Jake both had enough credits to graduate although they had both elected to never skip a grade. Karl needed a few more high school credits because he had spent all his extra time taking shop classes instead of core requirements. Jake's sister Kim lived with her husband and their new baby just a few blocks from a state university and Jake was able to convince his parents to let him graduate from high school, live with Kim and start his college career. Karl and Thomas went with him.

Karl's educational background was different from Jake and Thomas'. While Jake and Thomas pursued bachelors, masters and doctorates in science and engineering, Karl went to college to be a "shop" teacher. Often some of the most unruly teenagers took his classes but Karl had no problem with those students, as he could be a strong and convincing disciplinarian when a situation needed an intervention.

Karl was the "builder" of the three. He was the one in charge of constructing the equipment to protect his friends. He had skills in metal work, electronics, and construction that were invaluable for his tasks. For the most part, Karl had no trust for people. He had seen too many people take advantage of others out of greed or need for control or just plain cruelty.

While Jake, the professor, inventor and writer, learned to compartmentalize his emotions and social interactions as a means of maintaining his focus, his anonymity and his security, Karl worried about the possibility of break-ins. He was convinced that

secret government agents were plotting to steal Jake's ideas and inventions for military use. He also mistrusted manufacturers, patent offices and investors because he believed they were all bent on stealing the intellectual property of others for their own greedy purposes. Karl didn't see himself as paranoid, just extremely cautious based on his memory of past experiences.

As a young adult, Jake submitted his statistics software package for distribution by a major hardware and software vendor. Weeks passed after his submission with no word of whether or not it was accepted for publication. Several months later Karl discovered that the software was being distributed by another company. This other company even used the name Jake had given to the product. Further inquiry found that the original company, to which the software had been submitted, had gone bankrupt and that no files were available. The president of the new company distributing his software had been a former employee of the bankrupt company.

Karl saw this theft as proof that others were out to get Jake's inventions. Karl became even more paranoid and quicker to anger. He became an expert in security systems and became fascinated with weapons. Thomas felt horrible over Jake's bad luck while Jake rationalized that at least the statistics package had been made available to others.

Thomas, Karl and Jake became even more dependent on each other and spent virtually all of their leisure time together. Over the years, different roles had become assigned to the three different men. Thomas was in charge of feelings; Jake was in charge of logic and creativity; and Karl was in charge of protection.

Jake learned that he could trust Thomas's intuitive feelings. While Jake would accept many things as simply logical, Thomas would often have a "gut feeling" that something didn't make sense. Jake and Karl had learned through experience not to ignore Thomas' feelings.

Karl had been the one to convince Jake to transfer his money from local banks to a variety of offshore banks under pseudonyms. In addition, Karl purchased several properties under false names that were some distance from their current home. He knew that someday these alternative sites would be useful.

One was a simple acreage with an old barn. The other was a cabin in northern Florida. Karl also kept large sums of cash available as he mistrusted the banking system and predicted that one day it would all tumble down since they were lending money to people who would never be able to repay it.

One of Karl's responsibilities was to install security measures to insure that Jake's work was always protected. He encouraged Jake to invest in further safeguards for his ideas and devices. He was vigilant about protecting them from the many unscrupulous people who were "out there" just waiting to take advantage of vulnerable people.

Jake could sleep peacefully knowing that both Karl and Thomas would do the worrying for him. Jake would even smile as he slept while thinking about this strange triumvirate--- this "wholly three" as he liked to think of them.

Karl could openly admit to having been an angry and distrustful person his whole life. It was his character and little would ever dissuade him from that course. In general, he didn't trust people and he wasn't even sure that he liked people. He frequently had violent dreams in which, without a thought, he would kill evildoers. He was not even sure

why he associated with the intellectual Jake and hypersensitive Thomas. Maybe it was an attempt to assure himself that not all people are inherently liars and untrustworthy. Maybe it was because he felt needed. Maybe it was to escape his own existence while he was with them and could pretend that he was somewhat like them. In any event, he found a strange acceptance of his dark side by these other two. They had all experienced enough disappointment in their lives that his somber outlook on people and events kept them aware that Karl's pessimism and paranoia might be justifiable.

It is for that reason that Jake always trusted Karl to handle all of the financial planning, purchases, banking and other fiscal matters and to keep careful records. Jake was too busy to concern himself with such mundane activities and Thomas was too sensitive about hurting somebody's feelings and would have refrained from asking the necessary questions to insure that their needs were being met. Karl's mistrust of strangers, banks and people in general made him perfectly suited for this work and Karl readily accepted that he was in charge of physical, financial, and emotional security for all three of them.

Over the years, Karl and Thomas had grown to be more and more important to Jake. Although brilliant in most areas, Jake had never considered that he might be orphaned at an early age. His father died of a massive coronary at age fifty-six and his mother died of a stroke when she was only sixty-nine. Kim died of cancer when she was only thirty-three. By the time Jake was thirty, his family of six had dwindled to three and Marie and Tina were married with children and involved in their own lives. Jake's life had become one of mental gymnastics, inventions, and teaching. Jake felt that he was totally alone in this world except for his two friends, Karl and Thomas.

CHAPTER THREE: LASVIEW, THE TV OF TOMORROW

Undoubtedly, one of Jake's inventions that might become the target of an intruder was his "LasView" device. Because of its simplicity, its low production cost and its versatility, it could well result in the loss of millions of dollars by current manufacturers of television and video equipment.

Jake had conceived of this product years before. Like the hydrogen engine he planned back in his high school days, Jake had not actually built it because, as far as he was concerned, having conceived of the idea and constructing it in his head was satisfaction enough. He had no need for the actual device since he already knew it was feasible and would work. Hundreds of such inventions were catalogued in his mind with no intention of actually constructing them.

In fact, the only reason the LasView was ever prototyped was because Thomas had felt sorry for a struggling graduate student in need of a dissertation topic. Thomas convinced Jake to share his ideas with the student so the student could do a "Market Impact" study of such a device.

The device consisted of four lasers: a white, red, blue and green laser projected through a combination of a condensing and focusing lens. A decoding chip was used to take the color information and synchronizing signals from an input signal and feed the separate values to a "chopping" circuit to toggle the lasers off or on. The horizontal and vertical synchronization are provided by two small, transverse crystals that swing the composite of focused laser beams up and down and side to side to provide the "trace" of the image. Jake had settled on a refresh rate of 72,000 cycles per second to avoid the

problems that the previous CRT and LCD devices had encountered at 60 megahertz. The projected beams could be targeted on a 45 degree angle reflection mirror to produce a very thin monitor or could be directly projected on a screen or wall for large image size. Jake even experimented with "glow in the dark" paints as suitable surfaces to receive the laser beams and increase the persistence of the image should the viewers retinal persistence be insufficient to prevent perceived flicker.

At a cost of about \$100 for parts from Radio Shack, Jake had the prototype working in two days. The "wholly three" played with larger-than-life projections of the videotape of the swimsuit edition of Sports Illustrated for several days.

Thomas, although thrilled with the device, was also concerned about its safety to children and adult viewers. Karl was convinced the idea had probably already been stolen or that its mere existence would eventually lead to death threats from companies eager to protect their investments. He favored destroying the prototype and forgetting its existence.

The graduate student, convinced by his advisor that such a device would have already been built if it were feasible, chose a completely different topic to pursue. Unfortunately, the student had shared his original thinking with other faculty members who had no reservation about stealing such an idea for firms that had hired them as consultants.

In one of his helpful moods and remembering what happened with Jake's statistic package, Thomas submitted the plans and picture of the prototype to a patent lawyer and negotiated a retainer fee should it be accepted. Jake of course was aware of this activity on his behalf but couldn't care less. Karl, in turn, was convinced the lawyer would steal

the idea and run to a corporation to make a lucrative deal for the device. Karl anticipated further hassles should the lawyer actually be honest and if the patent were actually acquired. He anticipated lawsuits by the numerous corporations trying to protect their interests claiming that it infringed on their patents and ideas. None of them really thought they would gain anything by Thomas's activity except to provide additional validation for Karl's paranoia and anger.

As it turned out, the threat to the producers of CRT's and LCD's was real. In a somewhat unexpected turn of events, a consortium of these manufacturers offered a large amount of money to Jake for his patent. By buying the patent they could then bury the idea until, as a group, they developed common standards and equipment and fixed prices.

Jake logically accepted the offer to purchase the patent, as he had no interest in developing the product anyway. Jake, Thomas and Karl then had a large sum of money to support them for the indefinite future and allowed them to retire from their current frustrating employment activities. Jake had already retired mentally from his teaching job as he rarely found a student whose potential was of much interest to him. Thomas, however, felt some sadness about leaving aspects of his job that he had actually enjoyed. He had truly relished sharing new information with bright young students but he was also delighted that they would be rid of the petty workplace politics. Karl, of course, anticipated something would happen to their funds and they would all be in dire financial distress with no hope of reemployment.

Retirement gave Jake the time to develop ideas that he had had swimming in his head for years. The development of his anti-gravity machine was one of his first projects once he had the time to actually pursue his own ideas. His interests in astronomy,

quantum theory, Higgs boson and Einstein's theory led to his own analysis of energy, light, gravity, magnetism, electricity and mass. He reasoned that gravity was simply the attraction of atomic structures to one another and that this attraction was due to positive and negative charges of the atomic particles. These charges, in turn, were evidenced by electrical charges observed in lightning, static discharge, and induced "magnetic" force. Similarly, magnetic force was simply a unique arrangement of atomic particles which could exist in several phases much like water can be a vapor, liquid or solid depending on the temperature. Therefore it was possible for magnetic material to exist in natural minerals as well as in those artificially constructed. He reasoned that the fundamental attraction of particles to one another was also evidenced in heat and light as the particles re-aligned themselves through similar phase-shifts, which often occurred in waves of activity. Therefore light has both the characteristics of mass (particles) and frequency (waves).

Heat is the effect of particle attraction when particles are rapidly realigning. Jake rejected the "big-bang" theory and reasoned that there was not one but rather continuous big bangs as the universe of particles realigned themselves over time into a huge mass and repeatedly expanded over and over again. Each cycle could produce completely different atomic structures during the expansion cycle and quite different planetary structures.

His antigravity machine was designed on these principles. The device was a super cooled induction coil with the lines of magnetic force focused by a ring of electromagnets. Since, in his theory, magnetism is simply an arrangement of charged particles, they can affect the attraction of other particles either in a positive attraction or a

repelling direction. His anti-gravity machine was therefore a super-charged magnet that neutralized the attraction of objects in the focal plane above the machine.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MELCHER MANSION

Having acquired sufficient funds from the sale of the LasView patent, Jake decided to purchase a house large enough for himself and his companions. He had always admired large older houses that had some mystery elements about them. While taking a vacation trip through Ohio, he came upon a Georgian mansion, which had been abandoned. It was located on the Ohio River, just a short distance from the small town of Ripley. A filling station attendant on highway 52 thought it had been abandoned because no one wanted to pay the back taxes due on the property in addition to the considerable investment it would take to restore it. But Jake was intrigued.

It wasn't long after talking with local real estate people, county officials and local bankers that he was able to purchase the Melcher Mansion from the descendants of the original owner. Karl and Thomas both had some reservations about purchasing the home. They pointed out its poor condition, the lack of protection from outsiders, and the location of the property. Still, Jake was convinced it was a good buy and they could manage the shortcomings of the property.

Jake's property looked pretty sad in many ways. The twenty acres of grounds were overgrown with weeds and volunteer trees. The original gardens were hardly visible. The house itself had suffered years of neglect. Window casings were rotted, paint had peeled off, doors were sagging and, in general, it looked like a fire-trap. Still, it was amazing what a hundred thousand dollars could do in restoring a place.

Jake recruited Karl and Thomas's help in contracting for the reconstruction work. Thomas relished the work and within a year the house could be called a home. It had four stories above ground (if you included the massive walkup attic) and a huge basement area.

The first floor consisted of a large formal living room, a huge dining hall, a music room with a pipe organ with pipes that extended upward two stories, two sitting rooms and a library with floor to ceiling bookshelves. The woodwork was constructed of a rich cherry wood, much of it hand-carved into intricate patterns. Stained glass transom windows flooded the rooms with a soft blue-green light during the day. Thomas had the wood burning fireplaces in each room converted to natural gas. The marble and walnut mantels were carefully restored.

The rear of the first floor contained a large kitchen and servant's quarters. The kitchen contained a massive wood-burning stove, hand pumps for water, a separate faucet for rain water from a roof storage tank, and other amenities appropriate to the late 1800's when the home was constructed. Thomas retained those features that enhanced the vintage feeling of the home. The dumb waiters that led to the lower and upper floors were converted from rope pulley systems to electric lifts.

The second floor was the entertainment area. A large ballroom occupied at least half of the total second floor. In addition, there was a billiards room complete with pool table and a bar room with a massive walnut bar and glass-enclosed shelving for wines and other alcoholic beverages. A separate lift had been used to bring ice from the icehouse up to this floor and then was stored in a massive cooler.

The third floor was the sleeping quarters. Six large bedrooms, each with their own lavatories and walk-in closets were located there. There were three bedrooms on each side of an expansive hallway. Each bedroom had its own fireplace or stove. Of course, the gas lighting, lead piping, and direct-current wiring all had to be replaced throughout the entire house. Fortunately, the house was constructed with passages between the rooms large enough for a slim person to navigate into and maintain the equipment of the house. These maintenance areas would prove valuable in times to come for security equipment, escape routes and other uses.

The attic was a huge open area used primarily for storage. A large cupola in the center had steps and a balcony from which one could observe the entire estate.

It was the lower level which turned out to be the most intriguing. The basement had, for the era in which it was built, high ceilings and the floor was constructed of large slabs of native stone carved into four foot squares. In the center was a bellows system that was originally "hand-cranked" for the organ above it. Another section contained racks for wine. Below the first floor kitchen were additional cook stoves, storage for dishes, and food preparation areas as well as storage areas for canned fruits and vegetables. Clearly, the house had been build to accommodate large groups of guests.

What intrigued Thomas as he supervised the cleaning and restoration of this area was that there seemed to be a natural ventilation of cool air coming from slots arranged at intervals in the basement's floor? He wondered how this was done. Was there air shafts dug into the ground below the basement to provide this ventilation? Thomas did a "walk-around" the house to see if there were any ventilation shafts created to provide the cool

air that flowed up through the basement floor. Finding none, he sought the assistance of Jake.

Jake had Thomas acquire a used metal detector which he then modified. The modifications included a resonator that tapped the ground and a “fish-finder” screen that would display a shadow of objects below the ground level. The resonator was constructed to produce various frequencies selected on a rheostat. The intensity of the signal was also adjusted by a separate rheostat. With this modified instrument, Thomas could sweep the area around the house to identify the source of the air coming into the basement. Within an hour, Thomas discovered that the source of air was from a tunnel that lay approximately eight feet below the surface.

Thomas described what he had found to Jake and Karl. Jake asked Thomas and Karl to further explore the tunnel, its purpose and how it might be used. The tunnel appeared to be approximately five feet in depth and width. Thomas and Karl began to follow the tunnel from the edge of the house. The tunnel continued across the acreage to the river that ran west and east along the perimeter of the acreage. Thomas and Karl peered down the steep embankment of the river and saw that the tunnel ended in a pile of rocks that covered the entrance. Carefully climbing downward to the rock pile, they could feel a flow of cool air passing them. A-hah! The mystery had been solved. But why was such an elaborate tunnel devised years ago just to ventilate the house? Further investigation was clearly necessary.

Thomas did not relish the idea of moving rocks and traversing across acres of ground back to the house. Instead, he decided they should dig a hole next to the house above the tunnel and lower a ladder into the hole so he could observe the entrance of the

tunnel into the area below the basement. The old Ford tractor that Karl had purchased to mow the acreage had come with a post-hole digger that was perfect for the job. By using the digger to drill multiple holes closely spaced in a circle of approximately four feet in diameter, they were able to remove the majority of ground needed to create an entrance to the tunnel. To remove the remaining dirt, they laid a timber across the hole and used a windlass with a large bucket to finish the hole. To conceal the entry hole, Karl fashioned a cover of plywood with a layer of sod on top of it. By laying it next to the house, the house acted as a hinge base upon which he could raise the cover and prop it open enough to gain entry to the hole. A twelve foot long aluminum extension ladder inserted into the hole provided the means to safely enter the tunnel.

Step-by-step, Thomas and Karl descended into the hole and then into the tunnel with a battery-powered lantern hanging from his belt. When they were at the bottom, they turned with their lamps toward the house. They could hardly believe their eyes. Before them was a whole subbasement nearly as large as the basement level above it. The depth of this new basement was about six feet and the floor was packed gravel. Brushing away cobwebs hanging like sheets of gauze everywhere, they explored this area. The area they were in had a pungent odor of mildew and moisture. Each step raised a small cloud of dust. River rats scurried away at each step they took, escaping down the tunnel to the river from which they came.

They discovered an odd array of old clothing, boots, belts and shoes carefully stashed in old wooden boxes. And, they could see the slots in the ceiling that had let the cool air into the basement above. Next to one of the slots was a square of iron in which lay one of the large slabs used for flooring in the first basement. The remaining slabs

were resting solidly on massive wood beams supported by large wood pillars that rested on blocks of concrete. The subbasement was thereby carefully concealed from the main basement level. Clearly, however, the slab mounted in the square of iron was designed to be readily opened. Thomas and Karl began to understand what they had found – an escape route! But who needed this escape route? Perhaps this was part of the route taken by black slaves fleeing to the north. They could cross the Ohio River in small boats, enter the tunnel from its exterior access and hide within the subbasement until the next leg of their journey.

Thomas and Karl were thrilled with their findings and their love and pride in the house was so intense that Thomas was moved to tears. All three of the men took incredible pride in their home and in its restoration.

Karl, motivated by his paranoia and the need to protect Jake, immediately set out to install a pneumatic tube and air tank to open the secret slab leading to the subbasement. A button hidden in the wall would activate the pneumatic lift of the slab. The air supply tank was large enough to provide multiple openings and closings without the use of electricity – an important feature should someone interrupt the electrical system. A wood rack was constructed upon which to store emergency food rations, self-defense weapons, swimming and diving gear, and a modified aluminum barrel that could store blankets and other survival equipment and be towed under water. The subbasement floors and walls were sealed with an epoxy resin to restrain ground moisture seepage. A safe was installed in which financial documents were stored. Direct current lighting was strung from beam to beam and attached to large storage batteries for emergency lighting. Karl also modified the passages behind the maintenance walls to provide a direct escape

route to the main basement level. He carefully measured the time it took to move from any room to the main basement and then to the subbasement.

The twenty acres surrounding the Melcher Mansion (as the local residents knew it) had a grove of flowering apple trees, an orchard of cherry trees and an array of maple and oak trees. The odor from the blossoms of the apple and cherry trees was so sweet Thomas could spend hours lying in the soft grass in those areas, listening to the birds, admiring the butterflies and searching for four leaf clovers among the cleared areas.

While Jake worked in the lab and Thomas napped in the grass, Karl spent hours installing surveillance cameras around the entire perimeter of the property. He had the whole property fenced and then mounted deadly weapons that could be triggered remotely or with motion detectors. Laser guns were also strategically placed to protect the entire estate.

It took months and months to complete all of the restorations and to secure the property. When completed, all three men regarded the Mansion as their home and as a safe haven. Each had the freedom to pursue their own interests, the pleasure of each other's company, and a feeling of family. In most ways, all three men had everything that they had ever wanted.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE INTRUSION

Jake awoke with a start. While he stumbled toward consciousness and experienced that common feeling of partially dreaming while becoming aware of being awake, he had the sense that someone else was near. The room was dimly lit and his eyes began to focus while he scanned his bedroom. He could see his shot put hovering inches above his prototype anti-gravity machine located in the left corner. He could see the faint glow of his computer as it silently worked on his current solution for synthesizing DNA molecules. Slowly, he moved his arm in position to examine his wrist LCD control band. Pressing the security button, a thermogram appeared on the wristband showing the shadowy image of a person in the back of his storage room.

This was not the first time Jake had encountered an intruder. While he had been extremely cautious in testing his experiments in isolation, it seemed there was always someone observing from a distance to violate his privacy. He had long ago found it necessary to have protective devices located throughout his large house. Fortunately, Karl had been able to adapt some of his experimental laser devices to serve as self-defense mechanisms. It was one of these devices that now automatically tracked the intruder, waiting only for a signal to be engaged to trigger its lethal response to the intruder.

Karl had modified several industrial lasers and mounted them in heat-seeking swivels strategically located throughout his house. The lasers focused on the torso of an intruder. When activated, the heat was so intense that the burn hole was self-cauterizing, leaving little, if any leakage of blood. Jake activated the lasers. He heard a loud "thud" as the intruder fell to the floor. The faint odor of burning flesh entered his nose. Jake

switched on the black lights that bordered the carpeting, which had been scrubbed with a solution that glowed under the black light. He could see the intruder's body lying on the floor of the storage room.

Jake knew there was a strong possibility that one or more accomplices were waiting nearby for their cohort to return. He didn't yet know how the intruder had gained entry to his room but he now activated another button on his LCD band that resulted in additional dead bolts sliding into all the outside doors and metal shields dropping in place over all of the windows. Now the problem was to dispose of the intruder's body without leaving any trace that the individual was ever in the room.

Jake knew he couldn't handle this situation alone. He called out to Karl who slept in the adjacent bedroom. "Karl, I need your help. I've got another dead body in here."

Karl appeared within less than a minute. "What the hell is going on?"

"Another intruder but the laser nailed him."

"Why didn't the security system sound an alarm? I had it working perfectly."

"No time to worry about that now, Karl. Let's get this mess cleaned up."

Thomas had also heard the commotion and had come to the doorway of Jake's suite. He stood frozen in place and averted his eyes from the body on the floor. He knew that Karl and Jake could handle whatever the crisis was and he had never been able to deal with a dead anything. He quickly retreated back to his room.

Some years ago, Jake had developed a piece of equipment for complex medical surgeries. "DisintAway" consisted of a very small, high-powered laser attached to the end of a small diameter flexible tube attached to a powerful vacuum. The device was used to remove and disintegrate diseased tissue to a vapor that was then discharged

harmlessly into the atmosphere. Jake had further modified this equipment by adding multiple tubes. It served surprisingly well as a garbage disposal system, reducing virtually any material to a gas which could be discretely discharged into the atmosphere (although sometimes through additional "scrubbers" to decontaminate the gas.)

Karl knew he had to dispose of the uninvited visitor leaving no trace of his existence. The laser disposal system was the answer. Jake had turned on the "Glow Rug" carpeting and had raised the light level of the carpet slowly from his band rheostat only to the point that he could avoid tripping over something or someone. While Karl could have donned night vision goggles, he felt it safe enough at this point to move about the room in the dim glow of the carpet. He pulled the disposal system from its storage bin, attached the exhaust tube to the drain of Jake's bathroom sink and turned on the equipment. Guiding the laser tubes, Karl first disintegrated one leg, then another before beginning on the arms. He could see the vapor in the translucent tubes as it changed to varying shades of gray and tan and red and pink as he worked his way through shoes, clothing, flesh, bones and organs. The vapors were sucked down the sink drain, creating a whooshing sound not unlike that of a vacuum cleaner.

In less than fifteen minutes, all traces of the intruder were gone. Since the intruder had been wearing rubber gloves, Karl didn't feel it necessary to search for fingerprints. The intruder had no identification on his body - not uncommon for spies that might be caught in an illegal activity

Jake weighed his options. He certainly didn't want to call the local police and have to discuss why someone would be breaking into his home. Nor did he want to discuss the rather elaborate safeguards Karl had constructed for his bedroom. From past

experience he knew that federal agencies could possibly be behind the intrusion so reporting to local agencies was non-productive. His major concern was how the intruder had gained entrance. Clearly there had been a breach of at least one of his security systems.

There was nothing more to do at this point but to go back to bed and wait. Jake had learned to take these incidents in stride, hardly feeling shaken or distraught that such a horrendous activity had taken place. He had learned a long time ago while studying psychology and biofeedback along with self-hypnosis that he could compartmentalize such events and dissociate himself from the normal reactions a person might typically experience. Jake didn't even concern himself about the goal of the intruder. There were a variety of experimental devices in his storage room, any one of which could be employed for mass destruction or income generation. But he needn't concern himself with this; he could let Karl do the worrying. Jake learned at an early age to let the best-suited person handle different situations.

As an adult, Jake had continued to rely heavily on Thomas and Karl. Jake turned down the glow lights, remotely switched on some background classical music and fell asleep, awaking only occasionally by a nightmare of being attacked while sleeping. At some level Jake knew he was like a small boy with a room full of toys who feared that other children wanted to take his toys for themselves. They were his toys and he didn't want to share them.

After the intrusion and subsequent elimination of the intruder, Karl got together with Jake and Thomas the next day. Karl was adamant that their security systems needed to be improved. Thomas expressed his concern that any additional elaborate protection

devices might simply serve to draw the attention of other people. Karl assured them that he could hide the devices in a way that they would be undetectable and that future penetration would be impossible. Jake was totally comfortable with delegating that responsibility to Karl.

CHAPTER SIX: KARL'S PHILOSOPHY

Karl watched news events on the television and on his computer. The news was often alarming in nature. The wars, worldwide hunger, threat of a nuclear holocaust, animal neglect and a host of other events and situations stimulated Karl to begin writing his thoughts and solutions in a series of chapters which he posted on his "blog." It was likely this practice that led to federal agents being suspicious and the tracking of their activities. Jake knew about Karl's Internet postings but believed that it was a healthy way for Karl to vent some anger. Thomas had far greater reservations. He was surprised that Karl would expose himself and his friends to strangers and that he would choose such a public media by which to express his views. Thomas was convinced there could be serious repercussions of Karl's activities. This time, though, Karl's anger outweighed his own paranoia.

The title of Karl's book on his blog, Revolution D, reflected his opinion that there needed to be a worldwide revolution to distribute wealth on an international basis. His book included the reasons and need for such a revolution, the methods by which it might be attained and the consequences.

In his first chapter, Karl included seven major reasons for the state of affairs in the world. He listed:

1. Cultural identification (patriotism, historical conflicts, territory),
2. Ignorance,
3. Religious indoctrination and fundamentalism,
4. Political control by the wealthy,

5. Individual greed to possess things,
6. Intolerance for the ideas of others, and
7. Jealousy of others' possessions, marital partners and children.

In discussing each topic, Karl pointed out that they were all interrelated. In his discussion of the detrimental effects of religion he explained that “the vast majority of people within a given religion are in the same culture and have been indoctrinated into those beliefs their entire lives.” He stated that, “religious extremism often formed the basis for greed and control, created a political structure and limited educational opportunities.”

Karl believed that the treatment of women in many societies as property rather than as equals is tied closely to the culture and religion of those societies. “The ‘States Rights’ versus ‘Federal Government’ politics often reflect regional and cultural differences in the United States. Religious fundamentalism seems to spawn hatred and mistrust rather than acceptance and love and often results in great bloodshed and gets completely confounded with geographical entities.”

“The power sought by politicians, religious leaders and individuals for control over others exists alongside the greed for wealth and possessions. The wide disparity in learning opportunities is further reflected in power, greed and religious beliefs.” These observations by Karl festered in him like a growing boil and his anger continued to grow with each time he watched the news on television.

Karl entitled his second chapter “The Invisible Network for Change.” In this chapter Karl developed the notion of creating a worldwide network of individuals dedicated to a complete restructuring of humanity. Building on the success of other

efforts such as “Wiki-Leaks,” “Anonymous,” “PITA” and other groups, Karl suggested the need to construct an invisible network of individuals. He outlined the steps for developing such an underground as, “Recruitment, Communication, Secrecy, Anonymity, Coordination, Focus, and Commitment”. In this chapter, Karl developed the means by which a large group of anonymous people could communicate among themselves, sometimes in a coded fashion to coordinate activities that would create change in the areas outlined in the first chapter. Karl recognized that in many cases, covert activities would be tantamount to revolution, civil war, and civil disobedience.

In the third chapter Karl developed the methodology for change. Included were topics such as:

1. “Exposure of individuals and organizations causing harm (economic, physical, etc.)
2. Influencing political structures (reduce extremism, profit interests, etc.).
3. Changing economic philosophies (taxation, benefits, responsibilities, etc.).
4. Combining geographic and cultural groups (states, regions, zones, etc.)
5. Education (via internet, pamphlets, books, television, radio, etc.)
6. Pressures to construct connections (roads, railroads, air traffic, shipping, etc.)
7. Create “lynch-pin” mini-crisis situations that produce positive changes.
8. Elimination of billionaires and millionaires who exploit people.”

In Chapter 4, Karl developed the ultimate goals and consequences. His goals included: “The distribution of food, the distribution of protection, the distribution of wealth, the distribution of education and language, the distribution of control, and the

distribution of technology”. This chapter outlined the nature of a single, worldwide nation with one government – a true “United Nations”.

It was probably not only his book outline on his blog that could lead to dire consequences for Karl and his friends but also his tirade on various topics that raised the ire of, well, everyone! One must guess that he was in a foul mood when he wrote it and he pulled no punches. Karl posted:

“My loyal readers, here are some things that really piss me off.”

“First is that bunch of Right-To-Life people. They see the destruction of a woman’s fertilized egg (embryo) as criminal but do not hesitate to send their spouse, child or grandchild to intervene in some civil war half way around the globe. Have they forgotten our own civil war in which France tried to intervene to protect their supply of cheap cotton? Have they forgotten that more were killed in our civil war than in any war since? Why is the life of a embryo more precious than the life of a born person?”

“The second thing that has really rattled my cage recently is the Supreme Court’s decision that a corporation is a person. Now, come on! What on earth were they smoking or drinking? A person? Hardly! And now look at the consequences – fat corporations can contribute huge amounts of money to PACs and buy their legislators! And there are a lot of legislators for sale to special interests such as oil companies, manufacturers, banks, mortgage lenders and even colleges and universities!”

“Third but not last is my peeve with politicians. They don’t hesitate to vote for perks for themselves but would they be willing to have to buy all of their own insurance, buy all their own retirement benefits, pay for their own staff, etc., etc.? No! No! Would they stop padding bills (pork-barreling) with provisions for their special interests such as

military bases, bridges to nowhere, mining rights, lumbering rights, drilling rights, etc., etc.? Again, NO, NO! Both parties are equally guilty of financial mischief. The Democrats were as responsible as the GOP for the Fanny Mae and Freddy Mac institutions to make it possible for people to buy homes that they could not afford at ridiculous interest rates. They completely ignored the signs of the slow-down in home construction and the increase in mortgage defaults.”

“The next biggest irritant is the view of people that the land they own gives them the right to exploit it for their own profit. Shouldn’t the oil, minerals, archeological entities, burial grounds, lumber and historic buildings be owned by all? These are national (if not international) treasures that should belong to everyone. Farmers should not have the right to poison the land and water supplies with herbicides and fertilizers. Federal taxes should be based solely on land value. If a property is worth more because of its location or the resources in and on the land, they should pay a higher tax (without the many loop-holes that exist for the rich.)”

“A fifth thing that makes me sick to my stomach is the cruelty to other living things. Anyone who has lived with dogs or cats must know that they are intelligent, sensitive beings. Pigs and horses the same. Anybody that has fished knows they suffer when caught. Yes, we are by nature carnivores. But if we are going to eat animals, then raising and killing them should be done with the greatest of care to minimize their suffering. I would prefer we were all vegetarians. In one state there is even a law against reporting animal abuse by investigators who gain entry under false pretenses, to companies raising chickens, pigs, cattle, etc. for slaughter.”

“Now, let’s talk about the ‘fat cats’. By that I mean those who are millionaires and billionaires. They defend an erroneous ‘trickle-down’ economics philosophy. When the economy goes into the tank, do they suffer? Of course not! The sale of mansions, corporate headquarters, manufacturing plants and luxury automobiles continue unabated! Of course this only helps the economy of other countries because none of these purchases are in this country – they are simply done to avoid U.S. taxes! Major computer companies exploit women and children in sweat shops throughout the world rather than pay even minimum wages to our citizens. If I could do it, I would prevent any company producing for or buying goods from another country where a comparable salary, work conditions and labor laws were absent. “

“Shall we now turn to health care and costs? No one seems to be talking about the net income of physicians and health care administrators. Shouldn’t these be posted on the internet so everyone can see who is gouging the public? Why is Medicaid or Medicare paying companies for delivery and free supplies? Those people never even see the bill paid by the government and it is likely that those providers are billing for more than actually used. It is interesting that one can buy an electric handicap scooter for about \$1,000 dollars but the government is willing to pay nearly \$5,000 dollars for a wheel chair that provides no more for a handicapped person than the scooters!”

“And how many times have we heard medical personnel claim that the hospital and clinic charges are used to defray the expense of equipment? Come on now – how many times does the same equipment have to be paid for? An aspirin that you buy costs a few pennies but get one in a hospital and you will be billed dollars for a single pill! Of course these outrageous charges affect insurance rates. But you might have noticed that

these companies continue to expand and build expensive buildings at a rapid pace. For one thing, they manipulate state legislators to grant them the rates they charge and limit the competition from other insurance providers. Isn't it time that we create insurance cooperatives that are owned by those who buy the insurance? The cost of pharmaceuticals is another pile of worms. The cost of many medications is hundreds of times the cost for producing and distributing the meds. The expensive advertisements on TV for many products should tell us something, shouldn't it? Generic equivalents should be available within a year!"

It was when Karl began posting his methodology for change that he crossed the line and surely evoked the actions of the FBI, Secret Service, FDA, and other government agencies around the world.

He proposed "the elimination of persons that met the following criteria:

- a. Have incomes greater than five million dollars (or equivalent in other currencies) annual income, and
- b. Pay a lower net income tax than those in the lowest one-third of the population in their country of origin, and
- c. Contribute less than 50% of their annual income to organizations and activities that directly impact the welfare of the hungry and homeless, and
- d. Exploit people directly or indirectly through their corporations or activities such as use of child labor, falsifying economic instruments such as mortgages, price-fixing, etc., and
- e. Have multiple lavish (value exceeding one million dollars) homes, and

- f. Avoid their countries taxation by locating their home(s) and corporate headquarters in other countries with extremely low or absent taxation, and
- g. Contribute more than \$100,000.00 dollars (or equivalent) to the election of any government official in any one election.”

Karl stated, “The elimination of these people must be done discretely, by the least painful means and disposed of so no evidence of their existence or death can be ascertained. This requires long-term planning, surveillance, and swift action with no possible observers.”

Karl might as well have installed a red flag on the top of their beloved home stating “Dissidents Live Here.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: THOMAS' RESTAURANT VISITS

From time to time, Thomas liked some social interaction beyond the “wholly three”. He had even dated occasionally although he typically avoided any serious relationships remembering the hurt when Betty betrayed him while he was in high school. Jake and Karl’s social needs, however, were met vicariously through Thomas.

Rising about seven in the morning each day, Monday through Friday, Thomas would take a shower and put on a pair of casual slacks, a white shirt, black socks and polished shoes. He combed his hair carefully in a manner very different than the relaxed tangle that he typically sported in the house. He wore his tinted glasses that nearly concealed his eyes.

Thomas’s restaurant of choice was a small, locally owned establishment in Ripley. He drove his older pickup truck the ten miles to join the local citizenry that frequented the restaurant. He chatted with the retired locals and occasionally struck up a conversation with a newcomer. The restaurant had retained the flavor of a shop of the 1950s. There were round tables that could seat four people. The tables were covered with a plastic, check-patterned tablecloth. The chairs were made of tubular metal with a round, red vinyl seat. The waitress (owner’s wife) and the owner must have been in their 80’s. The odor of the shop delighted the senses – the aroma of fried bacon, the sweet smell of fresh pastries, and even the odor of the pine flooring and wall paneling. One could hear the quite hum of old, overhead fans, the murmur of people talking, and the kitchen clatter. Thomas savored those sights, sounds and smells for hours at a time. It was at one of these visits that his life began to change.

Occasionally a local young woman would stop in for a breakfast. Everyone in the restaurant would know her and say “hi”. But one morning was different. Thomas looked up as the bell hanging over the entry door gave a jingle. What he saw took his breath away! A woman entered that was more beautiful than he had ever seen. She was of slight build with a gorgeous figure. She wore a bright red dress, the length of which is best described as barely long enough to cover the essentials. It was of silk and clung to her frame as if it had been painted on her figure. The short sleeves exposed her flawless, light honey skin. As she moved across the room, her shiny black hair hung below her shoulders and glistened as if it had light coming from within. Her movement was fluid, almost as if she were in a ballet. She sat down at the table next to Thomas’s table. Thomas could feel his face flush bright red even as he attempted to take his eyes off of her. And then his eyes met her dark, almond shaped eyes and he could only mutter a weak “hi”.

She responded without hesitation saying, “Hello, I’m Jasmine and I just moved to this area. What’s your name?”

Thomas could only mutter as he grasped for breath “I’m Thomas Jentler and live just up the road apiece. Would you care to join me?”

Everyone in the restaurant had their eyes on her as she rose and sat, not across, but next to Thomas. Jasmine could clearly see the embarrassment that Thomas was experiencing but spoke in a soft, reassuring manner that helped Thomas relax. Thomas had reason for his embarrassment and slid his chair in closer to the table to more completely conceal the bulge in his slacks.

Thomas could not take his eyes off of her beautiful figure and face. He felt he must apologize for staring but did not know how to word such an apology. Finally he mustered up the courage to say, “Have you recently been employed in this area?”

Jasmine’s response was as sweet as her entire demeanor. “Yes, I work for a talent agency to find local artists, possible actors, and those with special talents in music, architecture, or hand-made artifacts. We represent a variety of groups that organize a variety of acts for talent shows on television. I may be here for several months to complete my search.”

Thomas’s response was, clearly, self-serving: “I hope you will have breakfast here on a regular basis.” Jasmine’s delicate smile said yes. He then suggested his favorite foods from the menu and asked about her favorite foods for breakfast.

Somewhat to his surprise she repeated one of his favorites, “an egg over easy laid on grits and a cup of strong coffee.”

Ever since he was dumped as a young college student, Thomas had avoided serious relationships. He had dated casually from time to time but was very careful to keep his feelings in check and even found himself routinely avoiding the women that he found most attractive. He believed that he could not survive another betrayal by a woman. But Thomas was clearly enamored by this beautiful woman, and she knew it. To Thomas, Jasmine seemed sincere, kind, and intelligent as well as exotically gorgeous. He didn’t have the slightest suspicion of her reason for being there or her choosing to join him in conversation. Maybe he should have.

Jasmine then asked a favor: “Could you spare some time to show me around town a bit and share what you know about the local area?”

Thomas's response was an enthusiastic "Sure!"

When they had finished eating, she asked "Do you mind riding with me in my car? I'll bring you back for yours when we are done." Again Thomas happily replied in the affirmative.

When they left the restaurant and moved to the parking area, Jasmine led Thomas to a new red Bentley convertible. The two front seats were very close to each other. Thomas held the door for her entry and went around the car and entered the passenger side. It was at that moment that he smelled the most intoxicating aroma of her perfume. He felt he had been transported to heaven and was being rewarded for any good deeds he may have performed. Jasmine drove to the apartment she had rented for her stay, just to let Thomas know where she was living in case he wanted to contact her. Then they drove and talked for the rest of the morning. For hours, Thomas's heart (and other bodily parts) was pounding with the excitement of her presence.

For two weeks, Jasmine and Thomas met every day at the restaurant and Thomas introduced her to many of the local people he had come to know from his breakfast sojourns. It took only a couple of days before they began to become more intimate, sharing kisses and hugs when saying goodbye. Finally, Thomas's greatest fantasies were realized when she started to regularly invite him into her apartment. Within a couple of weeks, Thomas and Jasmine were spending most evenings together talking, listening to music, and enjoying the best sex that Thomas had ever had.

Upon hearing Thomas tell of this new friend, Karl tried to suggest that this sudden infatuation seemed rather suspicious. "Are you even thinking with your brain? This woman just showed up and started flirting with you. Of all the men she might have

chosen she chose an unemployed, socially backwards guy who lives with two other men, drives an old pickup truck, and eats grits for breakfast. And she claims she wanted information about the town and the area. Thomas, you've only lived here for a year. Certainly you can tell that this is bull shit!"

But Thomas insisted that he was fully in control. With Jake's lack of romantic experience, he knew he had no advice for Thomas and he knew that logic wouldn't work in this situation. Plus Jake suspected from Thomas' description that he would experience the same attraction to this woman as Thomas had.

CHAPTER EIGHT: INVASION AND ESCAPE

It was within a month of Karl's posting on his blog and Thomas' meeting Jasmine that a number of cell phone calls and threatening letters started to appear. Jake had the forethought to have separate cell phone subscriptions for Thomas and Karl and none for himself. He preferred to be "invisible" to the outside world. The letters had no return addresses and the postings were from a wide variety of places throughout the world and from sites virtually impossible to trace the origin of the mailings.

The cell phone services had "caller ID" as part of the service but the caller identification for the calls only showed "Caller Unknown". The content of these calls and letters was usually short with phrases such as "I know where you live" and "The end is near," or "We are coming to get you".

Karl immediately suspected that Thomas' friend Jasmine had something to do with the threats but once again, Thomas would not listen. Karl began to expand the security system. Guns and Tasers were placed behind wall panels, in the basement and subbasement. Windows were replaced with bulletproof, one way glass. Vehicles were modified with steel plating and stored in a new underground garage. Sensors were hidden around the periphery of the home and acreage. TV cameras were mounted in trees and ornaments around the home and in the house.

In addition, Thomas began to notice that his breakfast environment was changing. The local sheriff, with whom he had had frequent conversations, now sat as far away from him as possible and seemed to be observing his every movement. There seemed to

be new people arriving at a greater frequency, often dressed in tailored suits. When Thomas reported these events, Karl's paranoia markedly increased.

Within a month of the threatening letters and calls, the sensors and cameras began to pick up the presence of intruders at night just beyond the property boundary. Radio frequency monitors that had been placed around the property also began to register the presence of radar scanners and scrambled telecommunications. Microphones picked up some speech. The voices spoke in several different languages, only occasionally in English. The infrared camera images showed people in a variety of clothing – military uniforms, dark suits, casual wear. Many were carrying cameras with telephoto lenses, radios and other unknown equipment. An occasional flash like a strobe light could be seen penetrating the dark.

As Jake studied these recordings he did not detect any weapons, per se. Each evening there appeared to be a different group of people and at different locations around the edge of the property. None of the “observers” actually entered the grounds but kept a distance of several yards or more. It struck Jake that this seemed to be a composition of representatives from locations in several countries. Interpol? M16? FBI? He could not discern any emblems, badges or insignia that would clearly identify the origin of the visitors.

Jake began to wonder if Karl's blog could have anything to do with the nighttime visitors, but when he confronted Karl with that possibility, Karl flew into a rage and went on and on about the freedom of speech and the right to bear arms. Karl insisted that their home was secure and that “the problems didn't started until Thomas started consorting with that foreigner.”

The visitations continued for three days. Jake pored over the data each of the following days. Karl's anxiety and paranoia were elevated. He began to double check the escape paths, the survival kit, maps of routes to escape and small weapons that one could easily carry.

After three days, there was no further indication of visitors. Jake considered alternative scenarios. Perhaps they had observed his security systems that were in place and decided there was too much risk for a direct attack. Or maybe, they were consolidating information and planning an attack at a future time. Was it possible they simply decided it was not worth the cost and time to invade one individual's home? Jake found some consolation in this last possibility but he also considered alternative means by which he might be assaulted. Only time would tell.

The night temperature had made an unusual plunge to about 30 degrees. Light snow was falling and the moon and stars were obscured by low-lying clouds. Jake had gone to bed at his regular time following the local news on television. He was sound asleep when he was abruptly awakened by the high-pitched intrusion detectors. Not one, but at least ten had been triggered by movement on the property. In the past, one or even two detectors had been triggered but the cameras revealed only a stray deer or other animal had entered the property. To minimize these types of false alarms, Karl had contracted for the installation of a ten-foot high chain-link fence with another foot of barbed wire on top.

The fence completely surrounded the property. Now Jake heard the ping, ping of their own defense lasers firing at objects detected on the grounds. He rushed to his video monitors to see what was happening.

Several bodies were lying on the ground, some still writhing in pain. A bloody severed head rolled across the yard. Jake saw blood spurting from large raw wounds on the legs, arms, and abdomens of several of the invaders. A man was running in circles screaming and holding his severed arm against his chest. The air was thick with the smell of blood, singed flesh, burning fabric and hair. The odor of ozone produced by the firing of laser beams was also detectable.

Then, as Jake listened, he could hear a muffled “flap-flap” of the blades of a small helicopter or drone circling above the house. He could also hear the “pop-pop” of silenced guns firing at the house. All hell was breaking loose!

Jake quickly dressed in the escape clothing he had strategically placed in his room adjacent to an escape panel in the wall. He was just about to enter the wall when he heard the loud sounds of objects dropped on the roof.

The roof had been carefully constructed in multiple layers. The original roof of plywood and shingles had been covered with a zinc-coated corrugated steel paneling. On top of that Karl had installed a sandwiched panel of photovoltaic cells encapsulated in shatterproof glass. (These panels provided energy independence by charging 24 volt industrial batteries which provided both 110 and 220 volt electricity to the home and grounds.)

Jake could see a flash that accompanied each sound and he knew it must be something like napalm that burst into flames as it hit the roof. The roof could likely withstand this onslaught for a period of time but what Karl had NOT considered was the fiery liquid splashing over the edges of the roof and sliding down in a hot ooze over the home’s siding. It was clear. They were going to burn them out!

Jake, Thomas and Karl scrambled through the panel and rushed to the hidden escape dumbwaiter and lowered themselves to the basement level. They quickly opened the hidden hatch to the subbasement and lowered themselves down the stairs, closing the hatch behind them and securing it with a steel bar. They knew what they had to do and began preparing themselves for the escape. Each quickly slipped into a wetsuit, wrapped a fully equipped belt tightly about the waist. Included on the belt was a 32 mm hand gun in a water-tight holster, a similarly encased bag of 32 mm cartridges, a water-tight flashlight, spare batteries for the light and a sealed package of dried fruits, crackers and beef jerky. All accessories weighed about fifteen pounds. Jake had designed a lightweight aluminum tube with a diameter of twelve inches that could be towed behind a swimmer. This contained financial documents, a first aid kit and a wool blanket.

As Jake headed toward the tunnel door, he flipped a master switch which cut off all current to the house and acreage plunging the entire acreage into complete blackness except for the fire which was now beginning to engulf the house. Jake, followed closely by Thomas and Karl, moved swiftly through the tunnel and made it to the river entrance within a record fifteen minutes.

Within minutes they had uncovered the entrance to the tunnel and carefully replaced the stones. The dark of the night and the slope of the land provided the needed protection from the intruders as they slipped quietly into the water. The modified tank was slipped in behind and tethered to the belt. Diving glasses were carefully wet before being placed on the head and then Jake, Karl, and Thomas submerged deeply into the river.

The current was not swift at this point and but carried them westward along the bottom of the river. Jake seemed to know instinctively that they must stay submerged for as long as the oxygen tanks would provide. Through the murky water, Jake saw searchlights flashing over the top of the river as the assailants must have determined that their targets had somehow escaped.

Skimming along the river bottom to avoid detection from above, travel had become more hazardous as the current was getting more rapid and the water more murky. Slime seemed to be attaching itself to Jake's body and he realized he was passing through a chemical dump site, probably Cincinnati's waste disposal outlet. The exposed area of his face began to burn as some chemical or waste washed across it. All of a sudden, there was a sharp pain in his jaw as he ran into a jagged piece of metal lying at the bottom of the river. By now the current was swift and his oxygen tank nearly empty. He knew that he had to get out of there and soon!

Both Thomas and Jake began to panic. Karl tried to push Jake toward the nearest shore line. But Jake was steadfast in trying to stay submerged as long as possible. The current was swift now and with additional movement of the flippers on his feet he moved downstream even faster. His goal was to make it just past North Bend, Ohio by morning. But pain and exhaustion propelled him closer and closer to the southern shore of the river.

Finally they could go no farther and they pulled themselves out of the river onto a flat shoreline. Jake could now see the city lights of Cincinnati several miles back. It appeared he was on the edge of a farm property and could see no visible buildings or lights in the immediate area. Jake immediately splashed some fresh water from his

canteen onto the gash of his face. He fumbled with the latch on the submersible tube that he had been hauling behind him. In the dark he found the first aid kit and with fingers nearly frozen, he opened the container and found antiseptic spray and tape. He sprayed the open wound on his face with the antiseptic (which stung like hell) and used tape to butterfly the gash closed. As he collapsed exhausted onto the ground, Jake thought, “That’s going to leave one nasty scar.”

It was nearly three in the morning. Their oxygen tank gauges indicated that they were nearly empty so they threw the tanks into the river again lay flat to rest and recuperate. Karl’s anxiety would not, however, let them fall asleep and Thomas was busy estimating the time it would take to get to their acreage about fifteen miles on the outskirts of North Bend, Ohio. He estimated it would take a minimum of three more hours to reach the acreage if the current continued at its current rate and they added the additional speed of swimming with their fins. They would now have to use snorkels to breathe from above the surface of the river. If daylight came around 7:00 AM they should reach their destination before dawn. Jake waited another fifteen minutes, rapidly ate two chocolate bars from the sealed pouch of rations attached to his belt, and began to move back into the river. His muscles were now aching and his face still stung from the antiseptic. There was no choice but to go on!

They moved slowly towards the center of the river, keeping all but the snorkels submerged. They alternately moved their legs in a scissor motion for ten minutes and then floated with the current for ten minutes, which permitted some moderate rest during those periods. For three hours this action was repeated but they were becoming more and more aware of reaching total exhaustion. Jake was now struggling to keep awake. From

time to time he stuck his head up out of the water to regain his senses and fight off the urge to sleep. Thomas and Karl were doing the same. It was Thomas who first spotted the shoreline of the acreage and pinched Jake to signal their impending arrival.

Jake struggled to the river's shore adjacent to the acreage. Crawling on hands and knees they moved to the old barn. With frozen fingers, Jake painfully found the key that locked the barn door entrance. He was shocked when he examined his hands which had become white and puffy from the effect of a prolonged exposure to the river water. It was painful to even handle the key and unlock the door. They crawled through the door and attached the board that locked the door from the inside. Blankets were pulled from the container and placed on the straw on the floor. Their wetsuits were quickly stripped and they collapsed onto the blankets.

When Jake finally awoke, his watch indicated it was 7:00 PM. The ache of his muscles was agonizing. He found two pain pills and quickly swallowed them with water from his nearly empty canteen. He lay back down for another twenty minutes to let the pills begin to reduce his pain. Karl was pacing and talking to himself and Jake heard him say over and over, "Could it have been my blog. No way, it had to be that bitch, Jasmine."

Thomas was quiet and sullen and lost in his own thoughts. "Have I been betrayed and manipulated by a woman again? Is this all my fault?"

Finally, in the rapidly fading light of the day, Jake was able to stand up and examine his surroundings so carefully planned and prepared by Karl. Over at the end of the barn was an old tarp that was carefully draped to conceal the Winnebago ERA that Karl had acquired and concealed in the barn with bales of hay. The smell of hay and dust

was both an irritant and a pleasure to the nose. Cobwebs hung from the loft and from the rafters of the barn. A few piles of bat guano littered the floor.

They moved cautiously to the draped vehicle and removed the bales and tarp. Karl immediately checked the space where he had hidden a large quantity of cash. Everything was as he had left it. The tank was full and the battery monitor indicated a full charge still available to start the Mercedes-Benz diesel engine. They now relaxed in the leather seats of the vehicle. Jake again opened his first aid kit to attend to the deep gash on his face. Using the mirror in the galley of the RV he carefully removed the butterfly bandage tape and re-applied antiseptic and bandages to the wound. He noticed he had at least two days of stubble hair growth on his face. He decided it would be best to let it continue to grow to a full beard to change his appearance. He then shaved all of the hair off the top of his head. His appearance was then significantly different from just a few days before.

Their survival equipment, financial records, and all other equipment they had brought for their river journey were carefully stowed in the RV storage areas. They waited and relaxed for several more hours before starting the RV, opening the large barn doors and heading toward the gravel road that would take them on their journey to Florida.

Driving only at night, they used highway rest stops during the day to eat and sleep. Occasionally they would camp at state campgrounds that had electrical hookups, sewage dump, and water supply to service their vehicle and relax for a day. While traveling, Karl took the time to cancel cell phone services for himself and Thomas and contract with a different carrier for new numbers using pseudonyms and a post-office box

with a fake address in Naples, Florida. By purposely taking a week to travel the distance to Florida, Jake's beard was now clearly changing his appearance – he looked at least fifteen years older than before.

As Karl and Jake discussed plans as to how they would investigate the demolition of their home and identify those responsible for the invasion, Thomas wallowed in his guilt and over the loss of his relationship with Jasmine. With tears in his eyes, Thomas announced, “You guys don’t even care that I have lost my girlfriend.”

Karl responded angrily, “You ignoramus. She was not your girlfriend. She had to be some kind of spy.”

Jake, however, logically reasoned that laying blame was illogical without additional information to support any theory. It was clear they would have to engage the help of others to begin the search for the truth. Those hired would have to be told a story that would clearly not suggest their personal involvement in any way.

Their cabin lay between Gainesville and Jacksonville, Florida. The cabin was accessed via a dirt road off the highway and was nestled among cypress trees heavy with the Florida Spanish moss. They arrived at night and parked behind the cabin out of sight of anyone that might meander up the road. The cabin had its own generator and water system which made it free from any utility companies. The sewage system was that of a grass-covered septic tank located 30 yards from the cabin. The cabin rooms were lined with cedar paneling which gave off a pleasant odor to the entire cabin. Most of the furnishings were hand-made wicker chairs, benches and beds. The total size of the cabin was approximately 900 square feet, but Jake, Karl, and Thomas quickly started to discuss expanding the structure and modernizing it. The kitchenette area was stocked with

canned food, plastic and paper dishes and plastic utensils. Once again, Karl had anticipated all of their needs.

Jake decided to spend at least a week in the cabin before beginning his plan for investigating the invasion of his property in Ripley, Ohio.

CHAPTER NINE: RETRIBUTION AND INTERROGATION

After the invasion and the destruction of their beloved mansion, Karl's anger, outrage, and need for retaliation continued to grow. Not only did he realize his own Internet behavior may have led to the assault but he was suspicious of the people Thomas had known at the restaurant in Ripley, Ohio. Throughout Thomas' affair with Jasmine, Karl had thought that it had moved way too quickly and it was just too convenient that Thomas had been in the restaurant exactly when the young very exotic woman had arrived. "Sure," Karl reasoned, "Thomas was cute but in a little boy sort of way. No one would call him sophisticated or charming." And yet, it did seem that Thomas was the one who seemed to attract the ladies.

Thomas was feeling sad and distraught over the loss of their beautiful home. For Thomas, though, the sudden evacuation also meant the end of his relationship with Jasmine. "Or was that relationship ever real?" Thomas wondered if unscrupulous people had used him.

Karl convinced Jake that a complex plot had been developed to destroy his inventions. For once Jake had no intellectual or rational explanations to dismiss the thought that they had been targets. He agreed with Karl, "someone must pay for this pain and anguish."

By now Jake had a full beard and a three-inch scar that showed through the beard on his chin. He kept his head clean shaven. He wore shorts and loose fitting shirts that were similar to those worn by local residents in northern Florida.

Believing that he blended in to the local population, Jake went to the local newspaper office and introduced himself as a fiction writer named Bill Johnson. He asked if they had any investigative journalists that would like to contract for some special work. One Gary Bradley introduced himself and indicated he would be interested.

“What do you want to investigate?”

Bill indicated that he was working on a novel that involved strange occurrences in various cities and states across the country. Gary was told he could do most of his investigation on his own computer in the office and probably would not involve much, if any, travel. Bill indicated he was particularly interested in the lack of local police, fire and emergency personnel to investigate property destruction and loss of life in smaller towns. Bill related that his own investigation had identified three situations of “under-reported” events and had found sufficient information on only two of these.

Jake told Gary that he had come across a note posted by a local resident of Ripley, Ohio on a popular Internet site that an old southern plantation house known by local residents as the Melcher Mansion had burned to the ground with no known survivors. Evidently several out-of-state travelers had called the local sheriff to report flames engulfing an old house mostly hidden by trees. It seems however that there were no responders to the fire until later in the day.

Gary indicated he would be glad to further investigate at a cost of \$30.00 an hour, the time spent primarily on his own time so as to not create a conflict with his current employer. Bill indicated he would stop in once a week for a report on Gary’s findings.

Gary began his investigation by calling the sheriff’s office in Ripley. It appeared the previous sheriff had obtained a new job soon after the fire and the new sheriff did not

know anything about the incident. The local fire department chief said that he had been contacted midmorning by a passerby who reported smoke and dust swirling up from the site of the old Melcher Mansion. When they arrived on the scene, there was a crew already bulldozing the dirt over the remnants of the old house. They said they had been contracted by the owner, a one Willard Clark of Dublin, Ireland to clean up the damage.

The journalist Gary also reported that apparently the old place had burned so hot that everything had collapsed into the basement of the house and nothing but a few pieces of molten metal could be found. A few trees on the acreage had also burned down. There were also several sections of the privacy fence missing.

Bill suggested to Gary that he might want to try and find the previous sheriff to interview and also track down the owner in Ireland. Were there any other reports in local newspapers from Ripley or perhaps Cincinnati, Ohio? Didn't he think it a little strange that no other locals were aware of what was happening since the house was only ten miles from the town? Gary himself was beginning to be intrigued. Perhaps there was more to this story than just a house burning down.

While Gary worked on investigation, Jake spent time making a variety of purchases at local electronic stores in the area. He acquired multiple lasers, condensing lenses, switches, rheostats, and rechargeable battery packs. Within the week he had assembled a portable laser gun that measured only eight inches in length and one and a half inch in diameter. It looked like an aluminum tube with wires that ran to a battery pack that hung from a belt loop on the back of his pants. When fired it emitted only a short hissing sound but could blow a hole through a half-inch thick board.

Gary continued his investigation by checking the presence of valid title and abstracts of the home. County and state records were obtainable online and appeared to be valid although signatures on the documents were faded and nearly impossible to read. He next contacted a newspaper in Dublin, Ireland for assistance in tracking down the mysterious Willard Clark. Within a day he received an email indicating there was no record of such a person living or having lived in Dublin or the surrounding area for over thirty years.

Next, Gary began the search for the previous sheriff whose name was James Underwood. His postal address for forwarding mail had been left with the new sheriff and was an address in Washington D.C. Using the Google maps, Gary was able to locate his location in a wealthy suburb of D.C. Using the online assessor's page for the township, he was able to determine its approximate worth was 1.3 million dollars and was titled to Mr. James Underwood and his wife, Jasmine. No telephone was listed in the online telephone book for those persons at that location.

By searching the telephone books for government agencies, companies and industries in the DC area, Gary found the name James Underwood in one: the US Agency for International Development, The Office of Military Affairs. This Office of Military Affairs was a primary point of contact with the Department of Defense. Representing the spectrum of USAID functions, OMA provides the focal point for Agency interaction with US and foreign militaries in formalized relationships through coordinated planning, training, education, and exercises. Program areas of common interest included among others, terrorism prevention, strategic communications, and counter-insurgency. If this were the correct James Underwood, his title "Assistant Executive Director" would

indicate a rather high paying promotion from his former county sheriff's job and in an agency that could wield considerable power.

In attempting to verify the correctness of this search, Gary made repeated attempts to phone the listed James Underwood but received only a recorded message that he was unavailable at this time. Calls to others listed in the agency were similarly unsuccessful with all recipients of the calls indicating they were unfamiliar with the person. Gary felt he had reached the limit of his investigation and wrote his report for Jake (alias Bill Johnson.) He did include a Google Earth picture of the home he had located for Mr. Underwood including the longitude and latitude, street address and surrounding streets.

After Jake picked up the report and paid Gary in cash, he returned to the cabin to study the report with Karl and Thomas. Of course he was not surprised that Willard Clark from Dublin could not be found since that was a name that Karl had created to acquire the property. What was unique was that someone else had used that name to supposedly contract for the cleanup following the fire. Like Gary, they likely obtained the name from court records of the purchase. Thomas was overcome with guilt as he realized that it was also painfully clear that the sheriff and Jasmine were co-conspirators in the invasion. "Oh my God, were they already married when I was sleeping with her?"

Thomas admitted to Jake that he had (carelessly) driven past their home on one of his many outings with Jasmine when she was allegedly doing her talent search in Ripley. He began to understand why the sheriff had become aloof and why there were more and more newcomers at the restaurant. He was ashamed and felt used and betrayed by Jasmine and Underwood. He felt like a fool for once again trusting a woman. Thomas

apologized vehemently and stated, “I am so sorry. I really screwed this up. It is my fault that Jasmine knew where we lived.”

Jake had a starting point for getting more information. He would have to interrogate both Underwood and Jasmine to find the additional culprits involved in the invasion. He began immediately to plan a trip to DC and the method by which he would capture and interrogate them. Karl would accompany Jake but they both agreed that Thomas was in no condition to make this trip. It was decided that Thomas would stay at the cabin in Florida.

The RV was again packed for travel and Jake and Karl immediately left for DC. When they reached Arlington, Virginia, they quickly located the house where Sheriff Underwood and Jasmine lived. It was a large home that sat on approximately five acres of ground. They drove past the house several times over the next few days. A car was rented under another alias so they could continue to observe traffic, people jogging, service vehicles coming and going and all general patterns of activities near the home. Careful notes were taken of all events and their time of occurrence.

Service people came to the Underwood house at regular hours to clean the pool, maintain the acreage, and for daily house cleaning. The appearance of a TV repairman during the time this housekeeper was there would not draw undue suspicion. The sheriff typically arrived home about six in the evening followed by Jasmine arriving within the next half an hour. Karl would have to gain entrance shortly before the maid normally left and wait for the arrival of each person. He would use a Taser to subdue each person, drag him or her to a bedroom and securely tie the suspect to a bed. They would be gagged so that their screams could not be heard. A separate room would be used for each

person so that what they reported could be compared. A small recorder would be used to capture their statements.

Karl found a uniform shop and purchased an outfit onto which he glued a TV repairman emblem on the back of the shirt. He also rented a service van and painted a professional looking TV Repair sign on each side with a water based paint that could be easily removed before returning the rented van. All of these preparations consumed their first three days in the area.

Late on Thursday afternoon, Karl drove to the sheriff's house and parked in the street. He strapped on his belt of tools and carried a toolbox of additional equipment. He walked to the house and rang the doorbell. The housekeeper answered the door. Karl announced he had been asked by Mr. Underwood to service the TV in their theater room.

"I am sorry but Mr. and Mrs. Underwood tell me, no one come in."

"That's okay by me, ma'am, 'cause I'd get off work early. But Mr. Underwood was very specific that he wanted the TV fixed for some speech the President is giving tonight."

The housekeeper let him in.

Jake told her that it could take up to an hour and if she had to leave before him, he would lock up himself. She gave an understanding nod.

Karl quickly surveyed his surroundings and, noticing stairs that went down, proceeded to the stairs and down. The lower level contained a fancy bar, family room, restroom and theater room as Karl had guessed. He went into the theater room and found an LCD projector system which he pretended to be working on after putting on latex gloves. A rapid tour of the basement also revealed that there were two telephone lines

which the installer had conveniently labeled with the number for each. He also spotted the security system box which he would later disable.

The housekeeper called down and asked him if he would like coffee, which he politely rejected. He continued this charade until he heard her announce that she was leaving. Karl thanked her and let her know he would probably be finished within the hour.

As soon as he heard the front door close, Karl placed the tools back in his belt and tool box and carried them up to the main floor. The house was a large, single story home with formal living room, den, hall closet, piano room, formal dining room, and kitchen with a gas range and a large eating area. A hallway led to four bedrooms, each with its own bathroom. The master bedroom was huge with its own sitting area, dressing room and large, luxurious bathroom. Karl could still smell the cleaning agents used by the housekeeper to clean the bathrooms and home.

He placed a call on one of the phones to the other phone line in the house. When it rang he was able to locate it and take the receiver off the hook so that both lines would now be busy if someone were to call. He went to the basement and disarmed the home security system. Following these actions Karl moved to the entryway. He removed the Taser from his tool belt and stood in a position that would be behind the opened door when it was entered.

Karl waited less than fifteen minutes before he heard the key enter the door handle. He waited until Underwood entered and immediately applied the Taser to the back of his neck. Underwood collapsed in a heap on the floor. Karl quickly closed the door which had remained open a crack. He dragged Underwood down the polished

cherry wood floors to the first guest room and hauled him up onto the bed. He quickly removed multiple strands of nylon packing strap from his bag and tied Underwood's legs and arms to the head and foot board of the bed. He used furnace tape to cover Underwood's mouth. James was securely bound as he lay on the bed. Satisfied, Karl returned to his position behind the front door to wait for Jasmine.

This time the wait was even shorter. Again, as soon as Jasmine was through the door, Karl applied the Taser to her neck. The whole process was repeated but with Jasmine dragged to the Master bedroom and tied firmly to the huge double bed in that room. As soon as she was securely bound, Karl returned to where he had placed James.

James' body was now jerking involuntarily as he began to regain consciousness. His eyes appeared glassy and he was having some difficulty breathing. Karl knew that his hostage could die in his own vomit if he could not regurgitate easily so the tape was briefly torn from his face so that he could breathe. His eyes blinked several times and then grew large with fear. "What in the Hell are you doing? I thought that you were dead."

"Surprise," Karl sneered.

Underwood started twisting and turning as he tried to free his arms and legs. Karl replaced the duct tape before he could scream or yell for help.

As soon as Karl was sure James was fully awake and not in danger of choking to death, he went to where he had placed Jasmine. She too was jerking involuntarily as she struggled to regain consciousness. The same procedure applied to James was applied to Jasmine. He waited for her to become fully cognizant of her situation and his presence and then he removed the tape from her mouth.

Karl quickly realized that Jasmine was an incredible actress when she said in a soft and meek little voice, “Thomas, you’re alive. Thank God. Honey, why are you doing this to me? I only married James because I thought that you were dead.”

“Cut the shit, bitch. I am not gullible like Thomas. You tried to have us killed. You destroyed our home. You betrayed my friend Thomas and you will pay.”

Jasmine’s meekness disappeared as rapidly as it had been created. Her eyes showed more anger than fear as Karl very firmly secured the tape over her mouth once again.

Karl spoke softly and plainly to her. “I am going to ask you some questions. If you attempt to yell or scream, I will apply this Taser to you again, but this time directly to your nipples or to your genitals. Nod if you understand.”

Jasmine stubbornly shook her head from side to side as she looked directly into his eyes with an expression of pure hatred and disdain. Karl ripped her shirt open and pulled her brassier down to her waist. He grabbed the pliers from his tool belt and pinched and twisted one nipple.

Karl repeated, “Do you understand?”

Again Jasmine shook her head, “No’ while tears ran down her cheeks.

“Feisty little bitch, aren’t you? Bet Thomas didn’t get to see this side of you.”

Karl then spread Jasmine’s legs apart and applied the Taser directly to her crotch.

Jasmine briefly lost consciousness. When she regained consciousness, again Karl repeated, “Do you understand?”

Jasmine reluctantly nodded in the affirmative.

Karl triggered the small recorder on his tool belt. Again, speaking in a near whisper, he explained that he knew she was involved in the invasion of the mansion and that he wanted to know the names and locations of all those involved, including the agency for which her husband was now employed. Again she was to nod if she understood. He peeled back the tape from her mouth but instead of beginning to speak, she spat in his face.

Karl applied the Taser to the nipple of her left breast. Her body jerked in excruciating pain and Karl quickly taped her mouth shut again. He waited patiently for the tears that flooded her eyes to dissipate and the flailing of her body to ebb.

Karl was unmoved by her pain and anguish. He knew it was the only way to get what he needed from her and he knew she was not an innocent player in the onslaught of his personal rights and freedom. He whispered to her again. “Now that you know I am serious and will not hesitate to cause great pain, are you ready to provide the information I need?”

A tearful and somber nod indicated she was ready. He explained that her husband was similarly disposed in another bedroom and that he would compare her answers to his. Again Karl began to peel back the tape from her mouth with one hand while holding the Taser in the other hand only an inch from her right breast.

Jasmine now fully understood her situation and began to speak with a hoarse voice: “I work for an international consortium of electronics companies located in China and the United States. You would call me an industrial spy. I easily recruited James Underwood by lavishing money on him and with sexual favors. The marriage, Thomas, is only temporary to keep in quiet. It is you that I love and we can be together again.”

Karl sneered, “Don’t waste your breath. I told you that I am not Thomas. I need a list of who else was involved in this plot to destroy us.”

“You don’t understand. If I give that information, I will certainly be killed.”

“It’s your choice, die now in excruciating pain or take your chances with the bastards that hired you. Maybe you can convince them of your undying love and loyalty.” Karl then reached for a large screwdriver in his tool belt and as he held it above her eye, he added, “I really don’t like the way that you look at me.”

Finally Jasmine got the message and started spilling her guts. “My military connections were made through Lieutenant Colonel Hatcher of the USAID Office of Military Affairs who had also been recruited by the Consortium. He was responsible for recruiting personnel to invade the property. I think the people he recruited were from China, Mexico, the Secret Service and a few dissidents from the United States. Money was not an issue since the Consortium has almost unlimited resources. The Consortium had connections in the U.S. patent office where they learned about a laser device, invented by Jake Schmidt that would replace current TV technology with a much cheaper device. One agent was able to take telephoto shots of other possible devices through a window of your house. A blog posted by Karl Stern raised the interest of the Secret Service so they were monitoring all Internet and cell phone connections to your house. That is all I know.”

Karl was taken aback for a moment as he realized that all three of them had contributed to the undue attention. It seemed that Jake’s inventions and Karl’s blog had both been at fault while Thomas had been used as a puppet, only to get their exact location.

Karl nodded and sarcastically stated, “Thank you madam,” stuffed a sock into her mouth and replaced the tape. He then whispered in her ear that she would be alone for a while, as he would now be interrogating James to confirm her story. He noticed it was starting to get dark outside so instead of going directly to the guest room where he had James bound, he instead went to the living room and turned on several lights to keep the appearance that people were at home as usual. He then went to interrogate James.

James was fully conscious and looked terrified. Karl immediately undid Underwood’s belt and pants zipper and pulled his urine-soaked trousers and underpants down around his knees so that his genitalia were fully exposed. Without a word from Karl, James knew what would happen if he did not cooperate and his eyes bulged with fear. Karl quietly spoke the same directions for information that he had given to Jasmine. He asked James to nod if he understood. James gave a rapid nod. Karl again turned on his recorder.

As the tape covering his mouth was slowly peeled back, James gave an audible gasp for air. “You don’t have to do this, Thomas. I will tell you everything you want to know. I had no idea they were going to organize a kamikaze attack. I thought that they just wanted Mr. Schmidt’s schematics.”

“Dammit, Underwood. You have me confused with that wimp Thomas. I mean business and I intend to get the information that I want.”

Again, James nodded and Karl asked him the same questions that he had asked Jasmine. James’ voice was shaky and the sentences spoken with gaps sometimes as great as thirty seconds. He was trembling and his hands were shaking like an old man with serious palsy. His account of how he became involved, how others were recruited and the

names of other people and agencies that were involved were essentially consistent with the information given by Jasmine. He had to be shocked on his genitals only once during the interrogation to remind him to give a full accounting of who was involved and how they could be located. James also confessed that he had taken some notes because he was afraid he might be killed for knowing too much. These notes contained details of the people and places that were important. He kept them in a concealed safe in the basement and provided the location and combination to the safe.

In a very condescending tone of voice, Karl praised James for his forethought while thinking “Now that is the frosting on the cake. Nothing like a written document.”

Karl retrieved a bottle of sleeping pills that he had bought over the counter. He fetched a glass of water from the adjacent bathroom and forced James to swallow a handful of pills, telling him that he was simply putting him to sleep for a while. James then began to beg for mercy and not to be killed. Karl did not respond to these pleas but simply walked out of the room.

Karl returned to the master bedroom and also administered some sleeping pills to Jasmine. The pills would take effect within twenty minutes.

Karl went to the safe location, opened it successfully and removed the contents, including the notes James had made and nearly a quarter of a million dollars. “All in all, a very productive afternoon,” gloated Karl.

Before going back upstairs, he went to the utility room, turned off the gas to the furnace and water heater, and loosened the connection of the gas line to the water heater until a steady stream of gas could be heard. Karl estimated it would take approximately

one hour to fill the house with the gas fumes. Once upstairs, he blew out the pilot light on the stove and oven, which also continued to emit some gas into the kitchen.

He found a candle in the living room and took it into the master bedroom, placing it on a nightstand. Jasmine was already asleep. Karl then went to the guestroom and waited a few minutes until James was also sound asleep. He removed the bonds from James and carefully slid him off the bed and dragged him into the master bedroom and deposited him in the bed next to Jasmine. He also removed the bonds from Jasmine.

Karl then lit the candle. When he returned to the front hallway, he could already smell the gas accumulating in the house. He picked up all of the gear he had brought with him and went out into the night air. He moved quickly to the rented van and drove away.

CHAPTER TEN: ELIMINATION OF ENEMIES AND THE DOMINO EFFECT

Karl drove to a park several miles from James and Jasmine's house. He quickly washed the water-based TV Repair signs he had applied to the sides of the truck. He was in the process of applying a cleansing wax to the second area when he heard the explosion and could see, even from this distance, a fire ball lighting the night sky. The first step had been taken.

Karl returned to the motel room that he and Jake were sharing and gave Jake a brief summary of his mission. Jake was thrilled with the document and accepted that the deaths of Jasmine and Underwood were necessary and rational.

Karl wanted to call Thomas and tell him what a horrible person Jasmine was and to also admit to his involvement in attracting attention. Jake said he thought that conversation was best done in person plus Jake said that he had tried several times to phone Thomas and that there was never an answer.

"With a grin, Karl offered, "He's probably outside feeding the birds or trying to domesticate the squirrels."

The following morning they returned the rented van and headed back to Florida in their RV.

Several days later in Florida, they would read in the newspaper and see on TV a story of how a gas leak had filled a rural home and exploded while the residents slept. It took the coroner several days to identify a small fragment of a body as that of James Underwood. The fire following the explosion was so intense that the entire structure was completely engulfed in flames by the time fire trucks had arrived. It had burned hotter than a typical crematorium.

No suspicion of arson could be found. Karl had a small smile on his lips for a job well done. Thomas, on the other hand, felt sad that he had lost someone he had felt he loved and was depressed that he had been so badly used by people he had trusted. Of course, he readily forgave Karl for not recognizing that it was partially his blog that had attracted attention in the first place.

Jake carefully pored through the notes Karl had taken from the safe at James and Jasmine's home. From his recordings of their confessions and the notes he began to assemble a list of enemies with whom he must deal. His list, in order of importance, was as follows:

1. J. H. (code name Honcho) of the USAID OMA. Residence in Chillum, MD.
2. T. K. (code name Source) of the US Patent Office. Residence in Alexandria, VA
3. K. K. K. (code name Middle) of the Secret Service Field Office, Houston, Texas
4. C. F. (code name Resource), Secret Service Field Office, Hong Kong, China
5. P. M. (code name Model) of the International Bureau of Investigation (IBI),
McLean, VA
6. C. K. (code name Snoopy) of the FBI, Pennsylvania Ave, Washington DC
7. J. M. (code name Collector) of the IBI Forward Operating Site, Sato Cano AB,
Honduras,

and twelve other known "Consortium" members from Ireland, England, Italy, Ukraine, Russia, India, China, Vietnam, Taiwan and Japan.

The first seven listed conspirators would be the focus of Jake's investigation and retribution perhaps for years to come. To accomplish this task, he would have to produce

multiple identities with matching passports to enter foreign countries or gain entry to various agencies.

The preparation activities consumed approximately nine months of the three men's lives. In addition, they would have to draw up plans for any necessary deaths to appear as accidents or attacks from unidentifiable assailants. He would need to acquire some additional equipment (pharmaceuticals, poisons, dart guns, etc.) to do his job. This required considerable travel to various dealers with questionable morals. It was a year and a half before he was finally ready to begin.

The three men drove to Georgia and Jake found a public telephone and placed a call to the office of "Honcho". He introduced himself as a friend of Jim Underwood who had sent him a strange package a number of months ago. Jake added, "Jim thought that he had made a major mistake of falling in love with an oriental woman in Ripley who convinced him to participate in the destruction of the old Melcher place because its occupant was a major threat to U.S. security. For his participation he was told that he would receive a high paying job in a government agency where he would be of further assistance in covert actions to protect the United States. As he learned more and more about the agencies involved, he began to become concerned about his own safety for knowing so much about who was involved and their methods. So he decided to write down all of the names and code names of people he knew were involved in burning down the Melcher Mansion".

Jake continued, "It all sounds pretty weird and I was even wondering if he were writing a mystery novel or something because it all sounded so crazy. Had you ever met Jim? He seems to know quite a bit about you."

“Honcho” was quiet for at least a minute on the phone. His reply was terse. “No, I’ve never heard of this Mr. Underwood. Who did you say you were?”

Jake replied “Just a friend of James. I guess I’ll just send a few copies of his notebook to other agencies he mentioned in his notebook. Sorry to have bothered you.” Jake hung up and they quickly got on the road again to Washington.

Jake, Karl and Thomas arrived two days later in Washington D.C. and found a campground for the RV. Jake again found a public telephone in Arlington where he attempted to make similar calls to “Source” and “Middle”. When he called “Source” there was a recorded message that Mr. T.K. had recently perished in a bad car accident. A similar message was available regarding Mr. K.K.: “We are sorry but Mr. K. recently suffered a fatal heart attack. If you would like to speak to someone else, press the 1 key on your phone.” Jake hung up. Two were down and five to go. It seemed clear to him that “Honcho” was beginning a “clean-up” process!

Jake decided it was time to send copies of Underwood’s notebook to a variety of places. He located a “Quick Print” shop where he could copy the notebook. His mailings including:

1. “Model” of the IBI
2. “Snoopy” of the FBI
3. The President’s Press Secretary
4. The Washington D.C. Chief of Police
5. The Washington Post newspaper
6. The chief of the National Defense Department

Jake returned to the RV and waited. Each day he picked up the local newspaper and searched for information in the police reports, death notices, and other possible places that might report about agency activities. His wait was finally rewarded three weeks later when he read the following report in the newspaper:

”A conspiracy plot was revealed today by a joint effort of the Washington D.C. police and the IBI. It appears that a gas explosion at the home of a Mr. and Mrs. Underwood may have been the result of a covert operation by the OMA of the USAID and one staff member has been indicted for the murder of the residents as well as two other co-conspirators.”

Jake was elated to discover his plan was bearing fruit. Of course, he knew there was a long way to go to finally get justice. And he knew that by now, others involved had already been alerted and would have heightened security. But he could be patient and thorough.

It was a month before news of the trial of those indicted began. The trial was closed to the public on the basis of national security. A newspaper “leak” indicated that one key witness was a woman who worked for the IBI and had personal knowledge of the conspiracy. Jake suspected that the woman might be P.M. with the code name “Model”. If it was, she might well have been a counter-spy to provide information to the IBI of possible violations of civil rights of U.S. citizens. Jake could only hope.

Karl made arrangements for him and Jake to fly to Honduras to see if they could locate J.M., the “Collector” who also worked for the IBI office in Honduras. They drove the RV to the outskirts of Tampa, Florida and parked in a national park. They arranged a taxi ride to the Tampa International Airport and scheduled a flight to Tegucigalpa,

Honduras. Jake had already purchased a high-powered infrared scope for “bird-watching” since it was impossible to take guns on a plane.

The flight was terrifying, as the plane was an ancient DC3 propeller plane. They landed on top of a mountain with just enough run-way to stop before falling off the edge of the mountain. A transport van carried Jake and Karl from the airplane to the terminal. At the terminal they made arrangements for a weeklong stay at a hotel in Tegucigalpa and rented a VW minibus at the terminal. Armed with maps of the city, they made their way to the hotel. Checking into the hotel was much easier than he had anticipated because the clerk and bellboy both spoke sufficient English to communicate with them.

After checking in, Jake arranged for a tour-bus ride of the city and surrounding areas to better familiarize him with the city. Jake was somewhat dismayed as he observed the number of young women who were “street-walkers” openly soliciting business in the downtown area of Tegucigalpa. The economy of the area reflected a lack of wealth as many buildings were in dire need of repair, the streets were cracked and the street traffic contained many old, rusty cars. The tour included not only the city but some of the surrounding areas, many of which were more wealthy neighborhoods within high security walls or fences. They passed magnificent Catholic churches and adjacent schools in prime condition and also passed some public schools that were clearly in need of repair.

Years ago Jake had consulted with the Honduran ministry of educational planning (the Office of Planemiento Integral) when he was a professor and in charge of a computing center. He was dismayed that little had actually changed in Honduras. It appeared that businesses from the U.S. were still exploiting the cheap labor there as well

as stripping the land of valuable Honduran mahogany wood without replanting. This would certainly provide fodder for Karl's blog on the distribution of wealth!

Conversation with the tour guide provided Jake with the location of the local IBI office. It was located on the outskirts of the city and in the same compound as the U.S. Embassy, the CIA and The Office of The International Trade Commission. The compound was surrounded by a high chain link fence with a top border of barbed wire. Several armed guards were easily spotted within the compound. If Jake wanted to confront the "Collector," he would have to entice him to meet at a location a considerable distance from the compound under some pretext substantial enough to convince him to meet.

Next, Jake found several gun shops in the downtown area and was able to purchase a high-powered rifle with a silencer and a 32-caliber pistol with a silencer. He mounted his scope on the rifle. Jake decided to call J.M. and tell him he had important information from the "chief" in Dublin, Ireland concerning the electronics consortium and that he could not discuss it over the phone. He asked him to meet him the next evening at 8:00 P.M. near an abandoned warehouse about five miles south of the city. He identified himself as C.K. (Snoopy) of the FBI.

J.M. nervously cleared his throat and muttered "Okay" and hung up.

The next evening about 7:30 P.M. Jake and Karl parked the rented minivan a half block from the destination for the meeting. Jake was wary that C.K. might have recognized him as the threat that he was and employed some local thugs to eliminate him.

Jake had brought with him the high-powered rifle with a silencer and infrared scope just in case he might have been set up for elimination. About 7:45 P.M. he spotted

a marksman atop the abandoned warehouse. A cold chill ran down his spine. Ten minutes later another vehicle could be seen approximately forty yards from the meeting site. The barrel of a gun could be seen peeking from the smoked glass window of the passenger side.

Jake started to sweat. Karl commented, “Relax man. I am going to take care of this. You can just sit here, all cozy-like and I will clear the area.”

“No, Karl. It is time that I step up to the plate. You have done way more than your share.”

“So, why did you bring me along?”

“You’re my backup and there will be plenty more for you to do, before this night is over.”

Jake’s first target was the sniper atop the warehouse. He quietly eased out of his vehicle on the passenger side, opened the tripod stand for his rifle, and zeroed in on the rooftop sniper. When he pulled the trigger there was a muffled “pop” hardly audible ten feet away. He could see the figure jerk back and disappear from the roof.

Jake didn’t think to question why he was such a good shot. Many times, Karl had asked him to go to the shooting range with him but Jake had always refused stating that he was in the middle of one experiment or another. And yet, his aim was impeccable with no prior practice.

The next target was the car down the street. To eliminate this assassin, Jake would have to walk the distance to that car, keeping out of sight and at least twenty feet from the driver’s side of the car. Jake was dressed all in black and his face was covered with a black hood. He strapped his rifle over his shoulder and checked his pistol that also

had a silencer on the barrel. He crept cautiously in the dark until he was immediately opposite the driver's door of the assassin's car. He moved very slowly toward the car and when only five feet from the car he could make out the figure crouched on his knees with his rifle pointing through the small opening in the passenger side window.

Jake took careful aim at the figure and while holding the pistol with both hands, fired two rounds at the figure. Again, the "pop, pop" of the pistol could not have been heard more than fifteen feet away. The figure in the car was now slumped down with the rifle clearly free of the window. Jake crept slowly to the driver's door, and with a swift action pulled it open and fired once again, directly into the head of the assassin.

Finally, at 8:00 P.M. sharp a black Mercedes-Benz arrived at the designated meeting spot. The driver cut the engine and the whole area was eerily quiet. Jake's infrared scope indicated there was a driver in the front seat and a passenger in the back seat.

Using the assassin's car as cover, he quickly targeted J.M.'s car. Jake quickly sighted the driver's silhouette behind the steering wheel. One shot with the rifle and the driver fell to the right side. Jake then sprinted to the Mercedes while J. M. attempted to climb over the seat to reach the driver's seat. Jake flung open the car door and while pointing his gun at J.M., he pulled the keys from the ignition and stuffed them into his own pants pocket. By then J. M. was cowering in the back seat of his vehicle. With his gun pointed right in J.M.'s face, Jake slid into the back seat. Jake flipped the button on his recorder hanging from his belt. He then began to question J.M. about the recruits that were hired to invade the Melcher Mansion, those he communicated with, how much money was involved, and who else in Honduras was aware of his role. When he finished

with his questions, he asked all the questions again to verify that J.M. could consistently give the same information without an error.

Satisfied that he had accurate information, Jake shot J.M. in the head and then in the chest. As chips of skull bone, blood, skin, and brain tissue splattered against the back windshield, Jake immediately realized that his first kills of the snipers had been the easy ones. A close range attack was in a totally different category. Jake quickly jumped from the car and vomited absolutely everything that had been in his stomach. All of his day's meals exploded from his body, ran down his clothing and puddled on his shoes.

Slumped over, Jake jogged back to the rented van where Karl waited. Jake's adrenaline rush had been so high that he was then trembling all over. Both men were amazed that Jake had completed the mission on his own. Karl had assumed that he was brought along on the trip to execute the violence but he had simply watched as Jake killed four evil men in cold blood.

Karl mentioned, "Jake, I could have done that for you."

Although Jake's voice shook, he managed to say, "I know Karl, I have relied on you my whole life and put you in jeopardy time and time again. This time, it was mine to do."

Karl then stated with authority, "You stay here and pull yourself together. I will go get rid of the evidence and clean-up your mess."

Jake pulled the Mercedes keys from his pocket and handed them to Karl and remarkably, he fell asleep and awoke only as Karl came jogging across the parking lot. Both cars were gone and it was the middle of the night.

Karl explained, “I dumped both cars into the Caribbean. The fish will be fed well tonight on the three bodies. I left the sniper on the roof. The scavengers will find it long before the authorities even know it was there.”

They drove back to the hotel and went straight to their room. Jake immediately headed for the shower. As the hot water poured over his body, Jake could hardly believe that he had done what he had done. Again he wondered where he had gotten the expertise with the guns but more than that he wondered where he had gotten the strength and audacity to do what he had done.

Always before, it was Karl who took care of the messy business. It crossed his mind briefly that the driver may have been an innocent. He may have had no idea about who or what J.M. was. He knew that Thomas might question if the driver had a wife or children. Thomas might even cry and would certainly be critical of the collateral damage inflicted.

Karl slept for a few hours while Jake cleaned the weapons and then paced as he planned his next move. They would have to dispose of his clothing and the weapons on their way back to the airport. In the morning, they quickly packed their bags and headed for the airport. Along the way, Jake dumped his rifle and pistol into a mountain ravine along with the soiled clothing and shoes. At the airport they returned the rented van and scheduled a flight back to Tampa.

Jake somehow napped for the three hours he had to wait for the flight. It was a short but scary trip back to Tampa. The old DC3 ran the entire runway on the mountain top and fell at full throttle off the mountain before gaining enough air speed to pull up

and level off for the flight to Tampa. During the flight back, Jake continued to plan his next excursion and how he would approach the head of the electronics consortium.

They took a taxi back to the campground where the RV was parked. It was late evening and Jake was still exhausted from his recent activities. He decided he needed several days of rest before further excursions and he needed to listen to his tapes of the confession by J.M. As he listened he realized that the tape contained enough information that honest federal officials of the IBI, Secret Service or FBI could handle this set of thugs.

It became clear to Jake that the invaders were solicited from illegal immigrants already in the U.S. who were being blackmailed by J.M. into participating in the invasion of his property. The threat of exposure and deportation were sufficient to recruit and train mercenaries to do the job. Individuals having fled from a variety of countries including Mexico, Haiti, Honduras, Argentina, Brazil, China, Colombia and others had been on a “watch” list for months by the IBI. It was this list that had then been leaked to the “Collector” J.M.

Back at the RV park in Tampa, it was Thomas who spoke up and said, “I think we have reached a sufficient level of revenge and can let the authorities now do their jobs”.

Karl also voiced his opinion that “the risks are becoming too great for any of us to safely pursue”. Karl continued, “It was one thing to push over a little kid into the sandbox when we were five or to beat up a bully when we were sixteen. But now Jake, there are six deaths on us—my two and your four, not to mention those that were arrested or killed as a result of Underwood’s documents. Our arrest, prosecution, and prison could be just around the next corner.”

Sniffling, Thomas whined, “I can’t watch this anymore. Jake, you had Karl kill Jasmine. I loved her and you simply put that out of your mind. We cannot be vigilantes anymore!”

Karl also stated that he was feeling guilty that his “blog” and tirade against the greedy and corrupt were possibly to blame for their situation. (Karl now recognized that it would be impossible to build an army of secret agents around the world to create a revolution against the class warfare, which permeated the world. It was too easy for a “spy” to infiltrate any organization, no matter how secret it was.) “Jake, if real changes are going to be made it would have to be within the framework of existing agencies, media coverage, investigations and civil protests.”

Karl continued, “You are on your own, man. Thomas and I are going back to the cabin and you can join us when and if you come to your sense. I am not spending the rest of my life in prison.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: RESULTS

Jake felt reprimanded and abandoned by his only friends. He had always thought that Karl and Thomas would stick with him through any crisis. He had also believed that he was the leader of the “wholly three,” the dominant personality and that he could control the other two. It seemed that his friends, after all, had minds of their own.

Jake decided it was best at this point to catch up on the trials in Washington D.C. The next day he drove the RV to the library in Jacksonville and pulled the D.C and New York newspapers that had covered the trials over the past few months. To his surprise and relief, he discovered that “Honcho” had been convicted of the murder of Jasmine and James and would serve a life sentence for his role in their death. Six of the seven co-conspirators had also been found guilty and would serve up to twenty years for their illegal acts.

There was only one name missing. The name Pamela Myers (code name Model) was missing from the accounts of the trials. Jake decided he had to do something about her. Why did she not get indicted along with the rest? How had she escaped prosecution? Jake decided another anonymous phone call was needed.

The next morning Jake drove around until he found a public telephone booth from which to make his call. To his surprise, the IBI operator was able to put him directly through to Agent Myers.

Jake stated, “I was a friend of James Underwood. I see that the notebook that Jim shared with me has resulted in the successful prosecution of a number of agents employed by the U.S. government. But your name was also listed in his notebook. Are you being prosecuted also?”

Agent Myers responded, “First of all, I don’t believe you were a friend of James Underwood. In fact, I think you are the sole survivor of the illegal invasion of the Melcher Mansion. And, I don’t appreciate the situation that you put me in. I was employed to infiltrate the Consortium and the group that plotted the invasion. It was YOUR property that was invaded, wasn’t it? And now you’ve blown my cover and I can no longer operate in that capacity. You have done considerable damage to my work!”

“I want you to know that we did an extensive search of the Melcher property several weeks after we heard of the event. We dug up everything and found no burned bodies. We also discovered a subbasement and a tunnel that lead to the river. The subbasement was pretty much still intact and we were able to identify finger prints on some of the items and structures in that basement. It is clear Dr. Jake Schmidt, that it was you who successfully escaped!”

Jake was stunned! “You couldn’t have had my fingerprints. I have never been fingerprinted.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Pam stated with a wicked little chuckle. “Do you remember when you were questioned for an incident when you were sixteen and some other boys claimed that you attacked them? Do you remember that your parents gave their permission to have you fingerprinted?”

Jake could not respond for several minutes. Never in his wildest imagination had he believed it was possible that someone could actually identify him as the proprietor of the mansion. He had never been arrested although he did vaguely remember being fingerprinted but he thought that juvenile records were sealed anyway.

When he did respond, his voice was shaking and hoarse: “Yes. You are right. I am Jake Schmidt. But I had no way of knowing that you were a counter-spy and had to assume you were a part of the invasion plot. But now that I know, I will send you an audiotape of another perpetrator who had the code name Collector. He identified those he recruited and trained to carry out the invasion, that is, unless you already have that information also. I only wish I had known you were working on my behalf and for others who were being exploited.”

Agent Myers replied, “Okay, Jake. I accept your apology and yes, I would like to hear the Collector’s confession tape. We already have some of the names but I would like to compare notes. And I won’t ask how you obtained it – I am already aware of some of your activities that occurred in Honduras. You have certainly been busy. You are the one who could be prosecuted. And by the way, we are aware of the many aliases you have used to purchase several properties, contract for services and to use the Internet so don’t try to play any games with me. I think we need to meet and sort out all of this.”

Jake couldn’t help but be skeptical. He had trusted people in the past but found that, sooner or later, they didn’t measure up to his standards or they would avoid him almost as if they were afraid of him.

But strangely, he felt some sort of rapport with Pamela Myers. She seemed bright and organized and got straight to the point without sugar-coating anything. He quickly responded, “I would like to meet you. Are you willing to meet me in a crowded restaurant in Washington? It will take me several days to get there. Can you give me a secure telephone number where I can reach you?”

“When you reach D.C. call me at my home telephone number listed in the Arlington telephone book. I use a special scrambler that blocks any attempt to listen in on a conversation on that phone. We’ll talk soon.” Then Agent Myers hung-up rather abruptly.

Jake was somber as he finished preparing his RV for the trip to Washington. Thomas and Karl had left and were obviously avoiding him. He felt truly alone for the first time in years and he knew that he was entering a situation where he had little, if any, control and no one would have his back. As he drove, he listened to the Josh Groban rendition of “You Raise Me Up” over and over and to recordings of El Divo. He attempted to lose himself in soothing music and regain his self-control and confidence.

When he arrived in D.C. it was nearly six in the evening. He traveled into Arlington via Highway 1. He found a public telephone booth and found the number listed for P.Myers. He called the number and when she answered he said, “this is Jake.”

She immediately responded abruptly and stated, “Call me at 1-999-876-5432” and hung up. Jake paused and then dialed the number.

Agent Myers answered with “Hi Jake. This is my secure number and we can talk without a trace. I have a suggestion for a lovely restaurant if you like seafood. It is the Arlington Seafood Restaurant at 2301 Jefferson Davis Highway which is also Highway 1. I’ll call and make reservations for two in a booth for 7:30 P.M. By the way, you may call me Pamela or Pam.”

Jake’s response was “Great, I’ll see you there.” Jake immediately pulled into the first hotel parking lot that he saw. He checked in and then asked the concierge to have a rental car delivered, as his RV was too cumbersome for city driving. With little time to

spare, he quickly moved his luggage to the hotel room and dashed off to meet Agent Myers.

Jake arrived at the restaurant about 7:15 P.M. and went to the bar for bourbon on the rocks and surveyed the restaurant. He was still cautious and looked for people that looked like they might be packing a pistol or other weapon in spite of the fact that there was a discrete metal detector at the entrance. At 7:30 he went to the headwaiter and said he had a reservation under the name of Pamela Myers. The waiter walked Jake to a private booth situated near the back of the restaurant.

To his surprise he found a very attractive, 30-something woman already seated in the booth. Jake extended his hand, introduced himself and apologized for his somewhat unkempt appearance, pointing out he had been on the road for a couple of days and had not yet had the time to clean up. Pamela smiled as she nodded an understanding and asked Jake to join her. Jake was immediately aware of her lovely fragrance. He also noticed her flawless skin and the plunging neckline, which showed ample breasts. Jake blushed, as he became aware he was gawking at her and mumbled an apology for staring at her.

Pamela again smiled and murmured “thank you”. She asked how he was doing and how was the trip. He described the boredom of the drive, a close encounter with a semi-truck and listening to classical music to sooth his nerves. Pamela smiled and patted his hand saying that she understood.

Then Jake could contain himself no longer. He blurted out, “I have so many questions and I’ve done some things for revenge that I’m sure I will someday regret.”

Pamela said, “all in good time. I also have questions and I want to be completely honest with you. I notice the scar on your chin under your beard. Did you get that during your escape from your home? Did your two friends get out? We only found one set of fingerprints in the tunnel and there were also two wetsuits and other survival equipment left behind.”

Jake knew that no equipment had been left behind but Jake didn't respond to the question about his two friends and thought that their escape was wisely kept to himself. Jake then nodded an affirmation as he spoke about his own escape. “It was a harrowing experience going down the river to an acreage where I had stored an RV for a way to get away. I scraped my chin on a piece of metal on the route to my destination. It was several weeks before my beard was long enough to partially hide the wound and to disguise my normal appearance. The hair on my head which I had shaved has, however, nearly grown back to its original length. I'm still a little afraid to shave the beard even though it itches and drives me crazy at night.” Suddenly Jake realized that he was babbling, cleared his throat and sat up straighter and firmly stated, “I need to know something. Why did I pose such a threat to so many people?”

Pamela quietly explained what had happened. “When your friend Thomas sold the patent to the LasView system, the patent officer in charge of the title to the device indicated to the Consortium that he was sure that you also had other inventions that could threaten the Consortium's substantial profits in the electronics area. It was at that point that they hired a spy to break into your home and photograph other devices that you had developed. Of course, they never got a report from the guy they hired and he seems to

have completely disappeared. You probably know something about that don't you?" she said with a smile.

Pamela continued, "It was at that point that "Honcho" became involved. He convinced others who had ties to the military's clandestine operations that you and your inventions posed a significant threat to the security of this country. I was one of the people that the Consortium recruited to help them. What they did not know was that I reported the situation to my superior officer in the IBI and was asked to be a counter-spy to keep track of what was taking place. I even participated in meetings of the Consortium. We often met in Japan, Hong Kong, or Taiwan as many of the companies of the Consortium were from those countries. Fortunately I had been trained in multiple Asian languages and was able to keep track of the illegal negotiations that were made."

"The notes that you obtained from Underwood were very helpful in identifying the participating groups in the invasion of your home. We do not, however, know the names of individuals involved or who the "Collector" recruited for the invasion or how. Your tape recording of his confession will be of great assistance to us. Did you bring it with you?"

Jake responded: "Yes, I brought a copy of it with me and you are welcome to it." Jake retrieved the cassette tape from his shirt pocket and handed it to Pamela.

She smiled and said, "I see you still have some doubts and have kept the original for protection. I don't suppose that you have any idea where The Collector is now?"

Jake shook his head, "No" and was very proud of himself for keeping a bland expression, while thinking, "He is fish-bait in the Caribbean."

And then, out of the blue, Pamela added, “Jake, would you be willing to consider joining my group in the IBI to continue the process of ferretting out those in the agencies of this country or others that perform illegal actions? It does not pay more than about eighty thousand dollars a year which barely meets the cost of living in the D.C. area, but I think you would be a valuable asset to this country. It would involve training in other languages for over a year as well as learning our methods of operation.”

Shocked by the idea that the International Bureau of Investigation might hire a vigilante, Jake was strangely attracted to the possibility of working for the IBI. In the past few days, he had felt terribly lonely. The loss of Karl and Thomas’ allegiance had deeply affected him. After a lengthy pause and feeling that all he had left was his inventions and experiments, Jake asked, “Would I still have time for creating some of my inventions?”

“Hmm, I really don’t know. That is a completely different department.” Pamela continued, “It would probably be a little difficult except on vacations or extended weekends. The training for an IBI agent is very intense and time-consuming.” She added, “Getting you clearance will also be a challenge, considering your past activities, but I think I could help expedite that. In addition, you would probably need a secret location for any laboratory work so that no one tries to invade it again.”

Jake responded, “That might work. I’ve been thinking about creating a new type of cell phone that embodies most of the advances already in the newest cellphones. Mine would have a built-in laser projector on the top end that would allow the user to project whatever is displayed on the screen onto a blank wall. It would also contain two wireless earphones at the other end that could be placed in one’s ears and enjoy the sounds and

conversations in private. It would also have sensors so one could project a full QWERTY keyboard and the phone would sense finger movements of keys pressed on the keyboard image. Finally it would contain a small microphone the size of a stick of gum and placed inside the mouth behind the lower teeth that one could converse in a whisper to another cell phone.”

Pamela was intrigued by Jake’s idea and immediately saw application for it in the IBI field operations. She leaned forward with a clear gleam in her eyes and in a soft voice whispered “By all means and I would be glad to be the one to help you assemble whatever you need to construct it. I think it would have tremendous value to the IBI.”

Pamela sensed that Jake was nervous. He had a “little boy” quality that she found charming as he obviously was trying to impress her as he lauded his own actions and inventions. Some might see him as bragging but she recognized his insecurity and his fear of rejection.

Jake was clearly enamored with Pamela. He could not keep from staring at her beautiful figure and mouth as she talked.

“Am I really that easily seduced” he thought to himself? His memory of Jasmine’s treachery sent a brief cold shudder up his spine. But he knew he was “hooked.” He also caught glimpses of Pamela examining him closely. “Oh, GOD! Is she the one”? Jake’s thoughts continued, “The one what? I never even considered being close to a woman.” Jake felt nervous and fearful but he also felt a deep curiosity, which was a more familiar feeling for him. “Can I let you know tomorrow about whether I want to consider applying for a position with the IBI?”

“Sure Jake, take your time.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: JAKE'S TOTAL MELTDOWN

Jake and Pamela said their farewells, agreed to meet the next morning and Jake returned to his hotel. After such a pleasant though nerve-racking evening, Jake was surprised that he was quickly plunged back into feelings of loneliness. He decided that he wanted to run his pending decisions past Karl and Thomas.

Jake phoned the cabin. There was no answer after twenty rings. He waited about fifteen minutes and called the cabin again letting the phone ring nearly fifty times with no answer. He next dialed Thomas' cell phone number, figuring that Thomas would be the more amenable to taking his call. He heard the faint sound of Thomas' ring tone coming from his own suitcase. As Jake softly muttered a profanity, he popped open the suitcase and found Thomas' phone in one of the side compartments of his suitcase. "Huh," he thought. "When did Thomas stick that in there? Is he telling me that he is severing all ties with me?"

With tears in his eyes, Jake then dialed Karl's cell phone number. He believed that Karl was too responsible to ever reject Jake completely. Again, Jake heard a ring tone coming from his suitcase and he found Karl's phone buried under his own clothing.

As Jake collapsed onto the bed, he was confused, agitated and trembling violently from cold chills. He was sure that he had not put the cell phones into his suitcase. And then he remembered that Agent Myers had said that only one set of fingerprints was found in the tunnel of their mansion. "How was that possible? Had his friends not escaped? But he had talked with his two friends and seen them virtually every day since their escape."

“Plus,” Jake reasoned, “we all three worked for months on the tunnel. There would have been three sets of fingerprints even if Karl and Thomas had not escaped that way.” And then Jake remembered that Agent Myers had also said that there were two wetsuits and other supplies still in the tunnel. It didn’t make sense. Jake knew that they had all three escaped and made the treacherous journey down the Ohio River.

“During all these months of revenge preparation, we have planned together, worked together, eaten together and Karl even went to Honduras with me. And Karl did the reconnaissance, interrogation, and rigged the explosion that killed the sheriff and Jasmine. Just days ago, they told me that they didn’t want to participate in my missions anymore. Karl seemed disgusted by my behavior in Honduras and Thomas was all emotional over Jasmine’s death. They were right there. They must have survived.”

Jake then emptied his whole suitcase. First, he found Karl’s leather jacket. Jake put it on, expecting it to be way too large but it fit Jake like a glove. As he dug through the pile of clothing on the bed, he found Karl’s wallet and then Thomas’ wallet. He pulled the driver’s licenses from the two compartments. Both of their licenses displayed pictures of Jake, not of Thomas and not of Karl. “Why are my pictures on their driver’s licenses?”

As Jake’s anxiety rose, he started reviewing the past few years. He even wondered if he were insane. Talking to himself, he instructed, “Slow down. Think this thing through. I know that Thomas and Karl were with me at the mansion. There is no way I could have arranged and contracted for all that restoration. There is no way I could have done all that work on my own. There is no way that I could have handled that first intrusion by myself.”

Jake then flashed on the feelings of embarrassment that he had felt during the restoration of the mansion. From time to time, he was struck by how much work Karl and Thomas had completed in one day while Jake would have nothing to show for his day in the lab. In fact occasionally, he had awakened with his head on the lab table while his best friends had spent their day installing security devices or moving rocks or supervising the workers installing plumbing or the new roof. And yet, neither Karl nor Thomas had ever complained.

Next Jake had the most frightening memory. He could see, in his mind's eye, Jasmine lying naked before him. He could recall the feeling of her skin, he could smell the fragrance of her perfume, he could feel her provocative touch on his body. "Had Thomas' descriptions ever been so detailed?" "No way," Jake thought, "Thomas was too much of a gentleman to ever 'kiss and tell'."

By then Jake was pacing around the small hotel room like a caged tiger. He couldn't resist trying to phone his only friends again, but the phone just rang and rang in an empty cabin. Jake was bordering on sheer panic and his confusion was overwhelming. He wondered if Thomas and Karl were still alive. He wondered if Thomas and Karl had ever been alive.

As the evidence started to accumulate, Jake found himself pulling at his hair until it hurt. One minute, he was hot and sweating profusely and then the next minute he was freezing cold and shivering all over. If Thomas and Karl had been figments of his imagination, then "I must have done all that stuff. Maybe I did date in high school, I did fall in love, I did defend myself in fights, I did cry when I heard beautiful music, I did

love my pets.” What had always been a “we” became an “I”. What had always been Karl or Thomas, must have been Jake.

Jake made himself sit at the desk and he grabbed several sheets of the hotel stationery and started to outline the significant events in his whole life. His earliest memories were from the months in foster care. He flashed on the cuts, scrapes, and bruises that he had received from the foster-father’s beatings and how he could never remember the actual events that led to his injuries. “How could I possibly not remember? I can remember almost everything that I have ever read and that I have ever learned.”

Of course, Jake had heard of dissociation and how abused people sometimes reported that they had no memory of a traumatic event while others would have violent nightmares or relive the details everyday. He had even read that Multiple Personality Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder could result from such abuse. During abuse, a person could dissociate from himself and from what he was experiencing and in some cases, it was as if an alternate personality was imagined or created to take the abuse. “Was that when Karl was born?” Jake speculated. “Did my mind create Karl to take the abuse?”

Jake then remembered that he had had an imaginary friend when he was very young. He would talk to Phooey-woeey and play with Phooey-woeey. Sometimes, his sisters would tease him about having an imaginary friend. He wondered if it were Phooey-woeey who took the abuse from his foster-father.

Jake then remembered that he had lost track of time his whole life. He used to think that he just got lost in his own thoughts and creativity and then would suddenly realize that hours had passed when it seemed like minutes to him. During those periods

of lost time, was he actually fully functioning but not as Jake. Was he actually fully functioning as someone else?

Jake next listed the dunking at the kids' swimming pool when he was five years old. Jake knew definitely that Karl had shown up and protected him. Even as Jake wrote that on his list, he wondered as he also suddenly had a vague recollection of a woman helping him that day, pulling him up from the water, and scolding the other boy.

Jake remembered that he had little interest in television or movies as a child but he never missed a show about super heroes who could transform themselves from normal persons to entities of superior skills and strength. Somebody like Karl? "Oh, God," he thought, "I wish that Karl and Thomas were here to help me figure out all of this stuff. Immediately, he added, "Now how irrational is that? I need my imaginary friends to tell me that they are imaginary."

As Jake continued to make his list of life events, he realized that he had memories of sleeping with Thomas' teenage girlfriend Betty. He wondered, "How was that possible? I would have never done that to Thomas." But when he asked himself, "When and where did I first meet Thomas?" he remembered that Thomas was in his first grade class but then for a while, he had no memories of Thomas. Thomas had just sort of suddenly reappeared when they were thirteen or fourteen and were first becoming interested in girls. Jake had always been shy around girls and he had admired Thomas' ability to meet and relate successfully to the opposite gender.

Rationally, Jake had to consider the possibility that there was no Karl and no Thomas; that there had never been a Karl or a Thomas; and that, in fact, he, himself, was Jake, Karl, and Thomas.

But then, who was it that moved with him to Kim's house when he was sixteen? He wished, desperately that Kim was still alive and that he could call her. He could clearly visualize Kim's small house with her husband and their little baby and another baby on the way. The house had only two bedrooms. Jake remembered studying at the kitchen table and waiting for Kim and her husband to go to bed so that he could sleep on the living room couch. There was no other place for Karl and Thomas to have been sleeping. Jake had to accept that Karl and Thomas did not move with him to Kim's house. Jake was beginning to realize that some of his memories were false and that he also had big holes in the memories that he did have.

As Jake started to systematically dissect memory after memory of his life with his two best friends, he wondered if he would go insane. "What happens to a mind that has to reevaluate and reassess every memory, every feeling, every piece of personal knowledge? Would that drive a person insane?"

"Or," Jake thought, is this the road away from insanity and back to sanity? Oh, my God, have I ever been sane?"

Jake had the courage to continue his quest and wrote "college and grad school" on his list. He could clearly visualize the eleven diplomas that he, Karl, and Thomas had proudly and carefully hung side-by-side in the den at the mansion. There were four diplomas in the name of Jake Schmidt, four in the name of Thomas Jentler, and three in the name of Karl Stern. He clearly remembered each of his own graduations, but as he tried to recall Thomas' graduations he expected to see Thomas walking across the stage. Instead, he recalled walking across the stage when Thomas' name was called. "Was it possible for one person to collect eleven different diplomas in a ten-year period of time?"

“Possibly,” thought Jake, “if the areas of study were similar enough such as three for three different high schools, three bachelors and masters in engineering and in industrial technology, and two doctorates in engineering. It was possible. I could have taken all the tests, written all the papers. Thomas and I were usually in the same classes and it would have been easy to schedule Karl’s classes so that I could have been there too.”

As Jake listed “death of parents,” he was nearly overcome with feelings of loss, loneliness, and bewilderment. He could remember his father’s funeral and his mother’s wake but he had no memory of his mother’s funeral. He was also stating to get angry at Karl and Thomas for deserting him. “Where were his best friends when he needed them?” He was having a major meltdown and Karl and Thomas were MIA

Jake hadn’t talked to his sisters in months and months. It was only 10:00 o’clock on the West Coast so he decided to call Tina. Tina picked up the phone on the first ring and said she was thrilled to hear from Jake. “I have been thinking about you, Jakie, a lot lately. Even tried to call you the other night in Florida but got no answer. How come you don’t have a cell phone?”

“I’ve been thinking about you too, and Mom and Dad, and Kim and Marie. It feels like we have drifted apart since Mom and Dad died. I miss you Tina.”

Tina was nearly bowled over. Jake never talked about feelings, although she had seen him cry and heard him rant any number of times. Tina managed to respond with a soft, “I miss you too.”

They chatted a while about Tina’s kids and the weather and how Marie was doing. Jake was rather proud of himself for being what he considered as socially

appropriate for once in his life and realized there was something strangely soothing and reassuring about the connection with his sister.

“Tina, was I at Mom’s funeral? I can remember the wake and the reception after the funeral, but I have no memory of the funeral service.”

“Of course, Jake, you were there. You know it will be exactly ten years ago next week.” After a pause, Tina added, “You cried the whole time. You were going to give the eulogy like you did for Kim’s and for Dad’s funeral but you said that you couldn’t do it. You totally lost it, Bro, and you even left the service a couple of times because you were sobbing.”

“Ah,” thought Jake, “Thomas must have showed up and Tina thought that I was still there. My own sister couldn’t even tell us apart.” Jake had always perceived that Karl and Jake were both taller than his five foot eleven. In his mind, Karl was more muscular, frequently wore his hair in a military cut, and had a strong square jaw and piercing eyes. To Jake, Thomas was skinnier and taller than the other two with longer wavy hair that fell across his forehead. His face was gentle with soulful eyes and he always looked younger than his counterparts. “How could Tina be unable to tell us apart?”

“Tina, what was I like as a teenager?”

“I don’t know. Like most teenage boys, I guess. One minute you’d be nice and sweet and the next minute you’d be angry at someone or about all the social injustices. Some days, all you could think about was one girl or another and the next day all you would care about was rebuilding a radio or reading the encyclopedia. But remember you

moved over to Kim's and started college when you were sixteen. We didn't see much of you after that."

"Tina, did I have friends?"

"I can remember a couple of friends when you were in grade school but I don't think that you had guy friends after you discovered girls."

"Do you remember a guy named Thomas Jentler or Karl Stern?"

"Those names don't ring a bell? Jakie, are you okay?"

"Sure, sure, I am fine."

Jake and Tina visited for a few more minutes and Jake promised to get a cell phone and to call more often. As he hung up the phone, he realized many things. There was no denying that Karl and Thomas were figments of his imagination or rather alternate personalities that he had created to handle the rough spots in his life. Perhaps, they had been created to deal with his cowardice or his loneliness. It had started when in foster care to handle the abuse. In tough situations, he had simply left the scene for a while and let the alternate personalities take over.

Jake lay awake most of the night as he grieved the loss of his friends. Although he now knew that they weren't real, it was still a very real loss to Jake as he thought of the strong, broad-shouldered protector Karl and the sweet, supportive Thomas. He then understood why there was only one set of fingerprints in the escape tunnel and why there was no answer at the cabin. Karl and Thomas had been an elaborate fantasy. While Jake sobbed into his pillow, he wondered if he could imagine them back into existence. Maybe he could self-hypnotize and recreate them. Maybe he could conjure them up like

a medieval sorcerer. And then Jake wondered if their absence meant that he no longer needed them.

If there were no Karl and no Thomas then Jake reasoned, “I am courageous, I am angry at times, I have some social skills and can get approval from women. I know how to defend myself and I found out in Honduras that I know how to handle a gun. I can be strong and forceful or soft and supportive. I can cope with the everyday management of my own affairs. All the characteristics that I attributed to Karl or to Thomas were actually parts of me.”

And there was his decision. Jake recognized that he had all the attributes, motivation, and cunning to be a great IBI agent.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A NEW LIFE

Within a few days, Jake shared his decision with Agent Myers. Without Karl and Thomas, Jake felt that he really had nothing left in Florida, no friends, no job and no purpose. “Washington D.C. and the International Bureau of Investigation seems as good a place as any to start my new life.”

The first task was to find a place to rent. Pamela said she rented a flat in a high-rise building that had apartments to rent and it would be convenient if he could live in the same building. Several other IBI personnel lived in the same building and it had a number of desirable amenities such as a gym, swimming pool, parking garage and rooftop deck for entertaining. Both one and two bedroom apartments were available for a reasonable price. Jake took no convincing and, with Pamela’s help found a third floor apartment with one bedroom that met his needs.

Jake also found a place to park his RV and posted for sale signs in its windows. He placed an advertisement for it in the local paper. He leased a compact car for personal transportation.

The next day he went to the IBI headquarters with Pamela and filled out the necessary application forms for employment with the IBI. Pamela took them immediately to her supervisor and Jake waited for nearly two hours before she returned to where he was waiting for her. They then returned to their apartments.

Jake had rented a furnished apartment. It was sparsely and impersonally appointed but Jake didn’t mind after the recent clutter in his life. Pamela invited Jake to her apartment for comparison. She had a larger unit with two bedrooms and had

furnished it herself. In the entry was a large mirror that was framed in a beautiful, hand-carved frame that she had inherited from her family. She had selected a comfortable sofa and chairs that were reminiscent of the 1950's era. Her master bedroom was tastefully furnished in a queen-sized bed with a hand woven coverlet that her mother had made. The pictures hanging on the living room walls were reprints of famous pictures by classical artists. The pictures in her bedroom appeared to be originals and they followed a theme of Native American traditions and artifacts.

It was clear Pamela had an excellent eye for decorating. The space was homey, inviting, and comfortable. Somehow, being there gave Jake a sense of comfort.

The guest bedroom was more of a surprise for Jake. It contained a large desk with a desktop computer and large LCD screen. Also in the room were several pieces of workout equipment, a gym bar mounted on the wall, a bench for sit-ups, and a treadmill for walking at various speed settings. Jake now understood how a thirty-five-year-old woman could have the body of a twenty-one-year-old. He felt slightly embarrassed that his own body had become somewhat soft by the age of forty and vowed he would get back in shape in the next few months.

Jake spent the next six weeks on various tasks. He transferred his remaining savings from his foreign accounts into a local bank, sold his RV, and drove his new car around the entire Washington D.C. area to become more familiar with it. Although at times, Pamela was mysteriously gone for days at a time, they had frequent lunch and supper dates together.

Jake visited museums, art centers, attended musical events and even went to a few movies. In his apartment he drew the schematics for his new cellphone.

It had been months since he had had contact with Thomas or Karl and surprisingly, he only rarely missed them. Some nights, Jake still dreamed about his friends. One night he experienced a remarkably vivid dream in which he saw the three of them standing side-by-side and then saw them meld into one person.

He spent some evenings on his computer and found that there were free Spanish language lessons available, which he consumed and practiced. Pamela also knew Spanish and was pleased to help Jake master the colloquial portion of the language. As a professor in his previous life, Jake had taught himself multiple computer languages such as Basic, Fortran, Cobol, Logo, C, C++, Algol, Comal, 8080 Assembler, etc. He now found learning a new foreign language much more challenging.

It was in his seventh week in D.C. that his life changed in a drastic way. He received a phone call that he had been accepted for service in the IBI and was to report for his training assignments on Monday morning at 7:00 A.M. He arrived at the headquarters building and with three other recruits. He was taken immediately by car to a building on the outskirts of the city. The building appeared from the outside to be an old, abandoned manufacturing plant.

The other recruits Robert, Conrad and Steve were as wide-eyed as himself when they entered the key-coded front door. Inside was a labyrinth of rooms consisting of a large gymnasium, a library, a lecture room, a swimming pool, and several rooms with padlocks on their doors. They were greeted by an “orientation” officer who led them to a small briefing room. The officer described the many training activities that they would pursue for the next year and a half. The schedule included:

1. Two hours each morning of physical training in the gymnasium including weight lifting, sit-ups, running, self-defense training and swimming.
2. Five hours of language laboratory instruction in four languages: Mandarin, Arabic, Russian and Hindi-Urda.
3. Two hours of instruction on IBI methods, communications, protocols, security and inter-agency cooperation.
4. One hour on use of IBI equipment and weapons.

They were informed that they would be picked-up at their various residences each day Monday through Friday. Their weekends might include other special activities to be individually arranged. All four recruits were stunned. They had no idea the training would be so extensive.

After the other recruits were dropped off at their homes, Jake was taken to another building several blocks from the IBI headquarters. This was a modern building with what appeared to be seven stories in height. He was taken directly to the sixth floor where he was introduced to the Laboratories Manager. The manager took him down the hall to a door and entered the password buttons on a thumb scanner. The door opened and they entered a “clean” room with controlled ventilation, spotlessly clean workbenches and hooded benches with sleeves for working on objects that could not be exposed to the user or to the atmosphere.

The manager announced that this was Jake’s laboratory in which he could work on his cellphone as well as any other equipment that might be of interest to the IBI. He pointed out the supply bins with wire, printed circuit boards, assorted micro-chips, and tools. Nothing was to be brought into the room or removed from the room without the

manager's prior approval. Jake was expected to use the lab as needed but on Saturdays only. Next, the manager closed the door and pointed to a panel on the back of the door. Jake was instructed to place his left thumb on a scanner device in the panel and enter his own eight digit code using whatever combination of letters and numbers he wished. The manager looked away while Jake entered the information. His driver was waiting patiently in the front of the building.

Exhausted and dying for a shower, Jake arrived at his place about 8:00 P.M. He showered, shaved and checked his phone messages. There was a short recording from Pamela to come up to her apartment when he got home. Though still tired, he dressed and went up. When he knocked at her door she opened it and invited him in. "How was your first day?" she asked. She could tell he was very tired and smiled a sly grin.

"I hate to admit it but I am bushed" he replied. Then Jake noticed a particularly delicious odor in her apartment – she had prepared a meal for him and was keeping it warm under heat lamps on her counter. He then looked at her and saw she was wearing an unbelievably sheer evening gown and had a particularly warm glow about her. At once he felt surprisingly refreshed. She murmured softly that they could practice his Arabic over a nice meal.

Jake could not take his eyes off of her as she moved from the kitchen to the table several times to place food on the table. Every time she bent over the table to place something, he could not help but glance down her gown and look at her breasts or butt. When the light from the kitchen was behind her, he could see she was wearing a lacy thong and her entire body was distinctly visible. It was as if she were standing naked in front of him. He was so moved by her beauty that he had to fight the urge to grab her in a

passionate move and make love to her on the spot. He controlled himself and sat down at the table.

Jake, although very attracted to Pamela, had been very careful about seeming so. He knew that there were rules about romantic relationships within the Agency. If a relationship were discovered, there was a good chance that one of them would be fired or given only desk jobs. He hadn't signed up for the IBI nor was he wanting to go through eighteen months of extensive and strenuous training just to sit in front of a computer for the rest of his professional career. He was totally dumbfounded that Pamela would take such a risk and also equally surprised that she would be attracted to him.

As if fully and conservatively dressed, Pamela asked, "What did you learn in your Arabic lessons today?" Without hesitation he responded in Arabic to what sounds like "nuh hub nirnahm" in English and means "I love you". She responded in Chinese with what sounded like "wo yee anlee" and is Chinese for "I love you too". Jake looked puzzled for a second and then she smiled and translated for him.

"Okay, this is too much," mused Jake. Jake hoped that he could resist his own urges but he hadn't expected Pamela to have them, too.

Jake rose from his seat and leaning over her, he held her face in his hands and gently pressed his lips to hers until they both gasped for air. Jake felt self-conscious and his hand went automatically to his facial scar. He knew he looked his age and was out of shape with skinny thighs and a potbelly. He silently hoped that the training he would soon endure would firm him up and make him more attractive.

He quickly admonished himself for his thoughts. "Certainly, Pam doesn't want to jeopardize her career either. Maybe he had misread her intentions. Maybe she didn't

realize how transparent her gown was. Maybe this was just a test that he had just flunked.”

Pamela rose from her chair, went to her CD player and started a slow dance song. She then went to the wall and turned the lights to a low glow that further enhanced Jake’s longing to hold her and caress her.

Jake couldn’t seem to help himself. He had been lusting after her for weeks, wishing that things could be different, wishing that they had met in a different context, wishing that he were more attractive.

Jake knew it was not his superior intellect that propelled him across the room. He moved next to her, surrounded her in his arms and held her close. She kissed his neck and gently rocked her body side to side against him. She could not miss the bulge in his trousers as she moved. She reached up behind her neck and with a pull of the string that held up her gown, she stepped back for a second and her gown fell to the floor.

“Shocked” only began to describe Jake’s thoughts. His mind raced to label his feelings. “Amazed, dumfounded, astonished, stunned, blown away, bewildered, enchanted, gut smacked.” Jake was beginning to regain self-control with his intellectualizing but then Pamela started to unbutton his shirt. Then she unbuckled his trouser belt. She slowly unzipped his trousers and they fell to the floor.

At that point, and perhaps for the first time in his life, Jake was incapable of rational thinking. He knew on one level that he should be explaining the risk that they were taking. He knew that he should be reminding her of the taboos against their being involved with each other. But he held her naked body close to his and slowly swayed to the music.

Once again they embraced but now fully skin to skin. Jake ran his now very warm hands over her neck, back and waist. He savored the smell of her hair and skin. Pamela could feel her breasts swell as Jake stroked her body. She began to feel wet and swollen between her legs.

Jake began kissing her lips, neck and breasts and then as he dropped to his knees, he kissed her waist and thighs. He could not restrain himself from burying his face between her beautiful legs and kissing her deeply. He sensed what was about to happen and for a quick moment realized that they were, indeed, going to violate the IBI rules.

With her arms around his neck, Pam gave a quick hop and wrapped her legs around his waist. She gave a short gasp and pressed her lips tightly to his. He continued to sway with the music as she moved up and down to the rhythm of the music. Jake was amazed that he lasted as long as he did but they both gave a low moan as they climaxed together.

Pam then excused herself and suggested that Jake help himself to a drink. He pulled on his trousers as he noticed that the drapes had been open the whole time. He could see the lights of the city but also the adjacent apartment building only a hundred yards away. With a simple pair of binoculars, neighbors could have been watching the whole time. Even the birthmark on his buttocks might have been visible. He quickly closed the drapes thinking that they would have to be much more careful in the future.

Jake pulled a beer from the fridge and sat at the island picking at the hummus that Pam had so carefully prepared. He grew more and more tired and decided to stretch out on the couch when he heard Pam talking on the phone in her room. He knew that she

frequently received calls from around the world and they could come anytime day or night.

The next thing he knew, he felt Pam nibbling on his ear as she said, “Secret-agent man. You are going to be late for work.” Jake startled into full wakefulness and pulled on his shoes. He looked around for his shirt but Pam handed him a freshly laundered and pressed shirt. He quickly recognized it as one of his own.

“When was Pam in my apartment? “Of course,” he reasoned, “she could get into anywhere whenever she wanted.” He didn’t have the time or inclination to assess how he felt about her going into his apartment but reassured himself that she must have done that only that one time to retrieve the clean shirt.

As Jake made a mad dash for the elevator, he didn’t notice the smug self-satisfied grin on Pam’s face.

The driver that picked him up couldn’t help but ask, “what is that huge grin on your face about?”

Jake managed to respond, “Ah, ah, I just had a nice phone conversation with my sister in Oregon.”

“My, she gets up early. What is it 4:00 A.M. out there?”

“Shit,” thought Jake, “I am no good at lying. I wonder if we get a course on that too.” He managed to say, “She was up with a sick kid and decided to try and reach me before I left for work.”

“Mm,” responded the driver obviously not believing a word that Jake had said.

The next night, Jake and Pamela went out for dinner at a tiny secluded diner many miles west of Arlington. Jake had never before been in that part of Virginia and was

spellbound by the beauty of the region. Forests, ridges, mountains, mansions, incredible horse farms and beautiful scenery were everywhere. For the first time since the destruction of his home in Ohio, Jake felt relaxed and wondered if the IBI would allow Agents to live so far from D.C.

It was late when they returned to Pam's apartment but they immediately made love again, that time on the couch with the drapes closed. Jake was near tears and continued to hold her tightly as he told her how he had loved her from the first time they met. She whispered that she had felt the same and could not explain why. Was it because they both recognized the intelligence, needs, and sensitivity of the other? Was it simply biology like pheromones? Whatever it was they both recognized that they were breaking a policy of the IBI about becoming romantically involved with a fellow employee. But the die had been cast and Jake knew that Pam would be his partner for life and that he could even give up his future with the Agency before he could end the relationship with Pam.

They went to Pamela's bedroom and made love for several hours in ways that Jake could only fantasize about before that night. It was nearly one in the morning when they both fell asleep wrapped in the other's arms and legs.

The alarm in Jake's wrist watch buzzed at 6:00 A.M. They both awoke with a start. Jake quickly dressed and kissed Pamela goodbye and said he would see her again that evening. He needed to hurry to his apartment, take a quick shower and meet his pickup ride by 6:45. He felt a little tired but the memory of the last evening was still swimming in his head. "Wow! What a fantastic woman."

The day seemed to drag on but Jake attended to every detail of his training. For some reason he felt even more motivated than he had ever been to learn all there was to know about self-defense, muscle building, foreign languages and agency activities. Again he arrived home around eight in the evening but went straight to Pamela's apartment where he was greeted with kisses and hugs!

As the months passed by for Jake's training, he and Pamela shared more and more of each other. Both recounted their past failed relationships (although Jake had to borrow from a few of Thomas's stories), the deep sadness they felt when they lost a pet, the isolation that they had felt as youngsters and their academic experiences.

With moist eyes Pam told of how difficult it had been to be raised in a "mixed" family with a white father and a brown skinned, mixed blood mother. She explained that her mother Immayhoka (she who conquers) was also called Ona (one who has attained) and that her mother was born out-of-wedlock to a young girl, only fourteen years old.

Pamela's maternal grandmother was a full-blooded Choctaw Indian. She had fallen in love with an older guy who was African American. Her parents forbade her to see him and when they found out she was pregnant, they threatened to file charges for statutory rape. To avoid prosecution, the young man had joined the army. Although he had promised to return for his girlfriend and baby Ona, they had never heard from him again. Pam's mother, Ona, had grown up without a father, living in poverty and ostracized because of her dark skin and unruly curly hair.

Ona had difficulty trusting anyone but was especially distrustful of men. Ona never dated until she met Charles when she was in her late twenties. Pam's father Charles was a kind man who met Ona at a rally to protest the treatment of American

Indians by the federal government. He was a shift supervisor at a manufacturing plant that hired many Native Americans. He loved fishing and hunting and he spent many days with his Choctaw and Cherokee Indian friends who taught him about their culture, their language and their beliefs. Charles and Ona lived on a modest income and could only afford a small house in a cramped neighborhood.

As a child, Pamela was teased about her mother's background and that her father was White. Pam told Jake that on the U.S. census, she would check all the boxes for race. With a laugh, she wondered about the poor computer coder because she had entered that she was White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American and whatever other race or ethnic group that the government had included for that decade.

Other girls would shun Pam and the boys called her and her mother derogatory names. As a consequence, Pam's life revolved around schoolwork, her parents, and a strong desire to live somewhere else. She had only one close friend in high school, a young woman who had suffered from polio and was paraplegic. Pamela would shuttle her around in her wheel chair and they would talk for hours about nature, parents, school and religion. While she was in college, Pamela learned that her best friend had died in an automobile accident.

Pamela had received a full scholarship to a private women's college in Colorado. She majored in Engineering and excelled academically but missed out on much of the college social life due to her mistrust of men and her expectations of rejection. When she graduated, her parents were upset to find that she had immediately signed up for the Navy for a three-year period. It was in the Navy that she had been assigned to the intelligence group located in Texas. During that period she also received the same training given to

the Navy Seals. Her parents were delighted that she had survived her Navy experience but disappointed that she would not be returning to Oklahoma but had instead been recruited and had accepted a position in Washington D.C. with the IBI. She also had been through the same training that Jake was now receiving. Jake was surprised when she recounted several classified assignments she had been given when she was so careful not to disclose her present assignments.

Pamela's parents, Charles and Ona, were still alive and lived in Durant, Oklahoma which is part of the original Choctaw Nation in southeast Oklahoma. Her father retired the previous year from the plant where he had worked and enjoyed a leisurely life of hunting, fishing, and spending time with Ona and their friends. People who had teased Ona as a child and as a teenager could later recognize her kind and giving nature as adults.

Jake recounted his elementary and high school days. He described how he avoided other students except the really smart ones, how his family had moved many times so that his mother could renovate and redecorate the newest home and make a profit on a resale. He described his father and how his dad had an accident with a hunting rifle that had left his right arm seriously damaged. His father made and distributed his own brands of skin and hair care products, wallets, and pens. He was gone during most every week and only home on weekends. He described how he and his sisters would work in their basement with their dad to fill bottles of hair oil that his father sold to drugstores throughout the state. He told her of the muscular dystrophy that had plagued his mother, aunt and uncle as well as other relatives and his fear that he might one day have the same symptoms.

Then Jake described the many inventions he had developed, planned and used. He described the mansion that had been destroyed and how he had survived since then. Jake admitted to her how he had sought revenge for the destruction of his home. He confessed to having eliminated enemies.

Pamela was not shocked. She had also killed several people on previous missions. She, too, could compartmentalize her feelings and survive in this secret world.

They continued these disclosures to each other for months. Their intimacy knew no bounds, except Jake could not bring himself to talk about Karl and Thomas and wondered why Pamela never asked about them.

They joked that they should revise the Indian Kama Sutra for the many positions and erotic experiences they had discovered. Pamela giggled loudly when Jake caressed her body from head to toe with his lips and tongue. They loved going to bed with Pamela lying fully on top of Jake.

But it was not all wine and roses. Pamela traveled frequently, and sometimes was gone a week or more. Sometimes, Jake would be sick with worry when she was a day or two late in returning. She received phone calls all hours of the day and night. Of course, she didn't tell him where she had been or what she had been doing.

Although Jake was busy with training and with his time in the lab, he often missed her. It was also during these times, that he also missed Karl and Thomas. Frequently, he would catch himself wondering what his friends were doing and even though he reminded himself that Karl and Thomas weren't real, he could still slip into a yearning for their company.

Jake was called into the Director's office for his six-month evaluation. All of the reports were glowing and he was at the top of his class in every area except for physical development. His schedule would be changed to increase his time in the gym while limiting the hours in the other endeavors. The Director also informed Jake that they were very impressed with his inventions and would like him to now spend Wednesdays as well as Saturdays in the lab.

Just as Jake started to relax, the Director added that they did have some concerns. His pulse rate doubled, as he felt sure they knew about his relationship with Pam. Instead, the Director stated, "Your scar is an identifying feature. We would like you to have it removed. Of course, the department would pay for whatever laser or plastic surgery is required." Just as Jake started to relax, the Director added, "I also understand that you have a birthmark on your buttocks."

"Oh, no," thought Jake "Here comes the dismissal. We must have been observed the first night that we had sex with the drapes open. I have wasted six months of training."

The Director continued, "We would also like you to undergo laser treatments on that."

"How do you know about my birthmark?" he asked with his voice shaking.

"You swim and shower at the gym everyday."

"Oh, right, sure I can have that removed. Any thing else, Sir?"

"And we are concerned about your lack of social activities and social relationships. Robert is married, Steve is engaged, and everyone knows that Conrad is a

lady's man. By all reports, you never leave your apartment building. Do you like women or do you play on the other team?"

Jake almost choked on his own saliva.

The Director quickly added, "It's okay if you are gay but we would ask that you make that known so there is no risk of your being blackmailed when you are on field assignments."

Jake didn't know what to say. It entered his mind that being regarded as a homosexual would be the perfect cover for his relationship with Pamela. But as he recalled their time together, he was pretty sure that he was blushing. After too long a pause, he stammered, "No sir. I am heterosexual. I just happen to be between relationships. I have been rather busy lately, you know."

"We need our agents to blend in, to look as normal as possible. A normal single man of your age would be dating, going to singles' bars, hanging out with friends. We would strongly encourage you to start developing a social life. Agreed?"

Of course, Jake agreed, thanked the Director for his time and feedback, and made a quick exit. He was alarmed that he had been under surveillance even around his own apartment building but greatly relieved that they had missed his interludes with Pamela. He realized that he would have to start going out in the evenings when Pam was out-of-town.

During the last year of his training, Pamela accompanied Jake to his laboratory almost every Saturday and sometimes on Wednesdays too. She seemed interested in all of his ideas and enjoyed assisting him in perfecting his inventions.

The projection cell phone was further improved with geo-positioning ability and it could directly receive pictures from the NASA spy satellites. An improved nickel-cadmium battery extended the phone's usage to nearly a week.

In addition to the cell phone, Pamela and Jake further refined Jake's laser gun. In the past it had required wearing a large battery pack. The new device was now placed in what appeared to be a large notebook used for taking notes at meetings. It was approximately one and one quarter inches thick and eight by eleven inches in size. The first few pages were typical lined notebook paper. Beneath those pages lay a battery and flat capacitor and coil. The coil could discharge 30,000 volts to a high-powered lithium ion laser capable of penetrating a sheet of steel $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch thick at twenty feet. The working mechanisms of the notebook were surrounded with drop-down panels covered with what appeared to be simply more pages of a notebook.

They also developed an exploding belt buckle that would launch a gelatin covered needle only $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch long that was filled with a poison similar to that used by South American native hunters in blow pipes. The buckle was $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch thick with a pipette that swung out for the discharge of the needle. It was charged with a high-pressure carbon dioxide cylinder before probable use. It could be used for a covert operation to kill an enemy without detection. The needle would penetrate deep enough without leaving a discernible entry wound and the gelatin coating would dissolve immediately into the blood stream of the victim.

Jake and Pamela were always under observation while at work. Their supervisor recognized that they had an extraordinary working relationship and notified them that, from this point on, they would be considered a team to work jointly on assignments.

They couldn't believe their good fortune and anticipated more and more time spent with each other.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THEIR FIRST ASSIGNMENT

The next few weeks Jake and Pamela were immersed in preparation for their first assignment as a team. For nearly a year, Pamela had been involved in the infiltration of a group of businessmen of questionable ethics and intentions. They called themselves a Consortium and they were based in Hong Kong. This group closely monitored new products, new inventions, and new patents all over the world.

Sometimes, members of the Consortium would simply purchase a new product and ignoring the patent ownership, they would then have their engineers recreate the product, mass produce it, and sell it for a much-reduced price. By rushing their products to market and because of subtleties in reverse engineering, some of these products were inferior and since the trademark was often counterfeited also, the consumer had no recourse. The product could not be traced back to the actual manufacturer. They were bootleggers of high-tech electronics.

The Consortium wanted to expand their control of the market of new products by legitimately purchasing patents from across the globe. They could then beat the competition by flooding the market with products or by burying the patents so that no one else could produce a new product that might be in competition with products that the Consortium was already producing. In order to identify new products and new patents, they had developed a network of industrial spies in other countries. Pamela had been able to convince them that she had contacts within the patent office and within a number of electronics companies.

It was now time to expose the Consortium and to put a stop to their illegal activities, their unfair labor practices, and their violation of unfair trade policies.

Jake and Pamela were to travel to Hong Kong with supposed representatives from a variety of high-tech businesses that were willing to betray their employers for a profit. All five were, of course, highly trained agents of the IBI.

They were to meet with a Mr. Xio Feng, CEO of the International Electronics Corporation. The goal was to inform Mr. Feng that the U.S. was aware of his role in the electronics consortium that was responsible for suppressing the development of many electronic devices through purchase of patent rights with no intent to develop the product. Feng was to be given notice that all trade with his corporation and others involved would be strictly prohibited by an embargo unless they were willing to sign international agreements regarding the non-suppression of new products.

Over the previous months of investigation, Pamela and other IBI agents had gathered information about the Asian companies, their relationships with U.S. companies, the shipping methods they might use to avert a possible embargo from the U.S. and to profile the nature of Mr. Feng and his coworkers. The meeting was designed to first inform Mr. Feng that he had been under investigation and then to insist that he cease and desist.

A charter flight was booked for the trip to Hong Kong and reservations were made for the Agents to stay at a hotel reserved by the U.S. Embassy office and located in Hong Kong. It was a western style hotel with high security. The flight would take nearly seventeen hours to make the 8,200-mile trip in the Learjet 60 aircraft and Jake and

Pamela wondered how they would keep their hands off of one another for that many hours.

They were met by an U.S. Embassy limousine at the airport and taken to their hotel. The five participants would stay in the hotel for a full day to recover from jet lag and to adapt to the change in time zone. Jake and Pamela had adjoining rooms but both were so tired from the trip that they slept in their own rooms.

Their meeting was scheduled for 10:00 A.M. the following morning. The Agents all met for a short breakfast meeting in the hotel restaurant. They agreed that Jake would be the initial speaker and use his projection cellphone to show the Asia representatives what they knew about their manufacturing plants, the treatment of their workers, and that members of the Consortium had purchased the patent for the LasView machine.

Following his presentation, the other Agents would, in turn, indicate the need for changes in order for the Consortium companies to continue to do business in the U.S. and the sanctions that would be imposed if they did not meet those conditions. It was anticipated that the meeting would consume at least three hours duration. Legal documents would be served by the U.S. delegation to be signed and notarized by the Consortium members.

The limo picked them up at 9:40 A.M. at the hotel and took them to the building where the meeting was to be held. The building was a modern eight-story structure with smoked glass windows on three sides of the building. The entrance portico was brightly tiled and lead to a curved set of ten steps leading to an ornately carved double wide door approximately ten feet high. The reception area itself was two stories in height and beautifully decorated with traditional Chinese scrolls, artifacts and museum quality

displays. The display of wealth throughout the building was impressive but also flamboyant.

An attractive secretary was seated at a large hand-carved desk. She asked that the Agents, posing as business representatives, be seated in the elaborately furnished waiting area. No expense had been spared to give the offices a rich and elegant appearance.

In only ten minutes, a well-dressed man appeared and escorted them to a private elevator that then opened directly into a large meeting room. They were seated at a large conference table, which was approximately fifteen feet in length and eight feet in width. The Asia representatives then ceremoniously entered the room. Leading the group was Mr. Xio Feng followed by his personal security guard and three other CEOs from other local electronics companies. With Mr. Feng in the middle with the other four equally divided on both of his sides, they sat directly across the table from the five-member U.S. delegation.

Mr. Feng was shorter than the rest of his delegation but he was dressed in an impeccably tailored suit. He wore a gold Rolex watch and several flashy rings. He reeked of power as well as wealth. No one spoke from the Chinese delegation but waited patiently for Mr. Feng to start the meeting.

In heavily accented English, Mr. Feng finally stated, "Let us begin."

Speaking in the Mandarin language, Jake introduced himself and the other members of the delegation. Jake noticed that there was a video camera located above and at one end of the table and a blinking diode indicated the meeting was being recorded.

Following his introductions, Jake paused for a moment and then carefully removed his projection cell phone from the inside pocket of his double-breasted coat. He

pointed it at a blank wall at the other end of the table from the video camera. There were gasps from the Consortium members as the phone projected a large clear picture on the wall.

The first dozen pictures needed little, if any, explanation. They were NASA satellite pictures of the manufacturing plants of each Consortium member. The details were so striking they could see individuals as they were entering or exiting the plants. In several pictures it was clear that workers were being rounded up like prisoners in a labor camp. It was obvious that many of the workers were old women and young children. They were being led by a group of what appeared to be guards from an adjoining dilapidated dormitory. Other pictures showed the movement of products from the plants to warehouses and from the warehouses to shipping containers, some of which were loaded onto ships and others onto freight trains.

Feng and the other three CEO's were staring intently at the pictures. Jake thought that they looked "guilty as Hell" and that the myths about inscrutable Asians were greatly exaggerated. They were clearly agitated and gave each other furtive glances following the presentation of the slides and video.

Jake paused for several minutes to let the message the pictures told have time to clearly register. He began to speak again in Mandarin to introduce the next speaker, the agent who would present an outline of the dire consequences should the Consortium choose not to cooperate. Before he could finish, Mr. Feng rose from his chair. His face was clearly flushed and his lips tight with anger. He spoke in a somewhat broken Mandarin, as Mandarin was his second language while Cantonese was his first language. He indicated that he would like his private translator to join them to help him understand

the conversation. He turned to his personal guard and whispered a message to fetch his translator. They all sat down and waited about five minutes for the translator to appear.

The guard reentered the room followed by a slender woman. The woman had horrendous burn scars on the right side of her face and her right arm and leg also were heavily scarred. She had short hair that was combed to the right to partially hide some of her disfigured head.

The interpreter sat down next to Feng where the guard had previously sat. The guard sat next to one of the CEOs to the left of Feng. As she glanced across the table at Jake, she abruptly stood up, visibly shaken and angry. Jake did not understand for a few seconds and then realized who she was. Jasmine! She had somehow escaped the explosion. She had probably awakened sooner than Karl had expected and, smelling the gas, was headed towards the window as the gas ignited. How she was not found and treated for her burns and cuts baffled Jake. It was clear however that she recognized him as Karl, the intruder at her home or as Thomas and was pissed as hell!

In clear English she shouted “You bastard!” “This time you WILL die!” Jake had already found the soft spot on his belt next to the loaded buckle. Without hesitation he pressed it and released the poison dart which struck Jasmine directly below her rib cage. Before she collapsed to the ground she pulled a retriever from her secretary satchel. Jasmine fired a single shot as she fell to the ground. The bullet hit Jake in his lower abdomen. As he bent over in pain and saw a red stain spreading across his groin he saw that the personal guard had also drawn his pistol and was about to fire.

Jake collapsed to the floor, grasping the entry to his wound and believing that he was dying. His mind was swirling with a myriad of memories with one in particular that

played in his mind before he lost consciousness. It was a poem that Karl had written in one of his despondent moments:

*The end of a life in this infinite time is but a blink of an eye,
Like a blade of grass bending in the wind when mowed down.
Or does the world note the passing and the earth give a sigh,
As it realizes a passing of a part of itself with a frown.*

*Will the earth be changed and a memory etched of a passing life
That others will recall and give thanks for the one now gone?
Or will the atoms that once had substance become but another
Object to exist for a short moment and cling to life's throng?*

*For time only exists by a measured event, without which time
Does not exist. Yet the lives which struggle to be and exist,
Give rise to a measure of one's existence and creates a line
That marks the events in some invisible way for us to persist.*

*All life wants to believe that the time mark that was made
Will add to the future of others yet to be and yield a measure
Of meaning to something that hopefully will never have to fade,
And give hope and endurance to someone or something to treasure.*

Pamela had already released the cover on the laser gun notebook and fired a shot that opened a hole in the guard's head the size of a fifty-cent piece. Pamela knew that there was a recharge time of at least ten seconds before the laser could be fired again so she reached down to her belt and quickly drew a short, double-edged dagger. Feng who had witnessed this chaos was now standing and drawing his own weapon from his belt behind his jacket. Pamela threw the dagger, which cut a large gash across Feng's neck, severing his artery. As he fell back with blood gushing from his neck his pistol fired harmlessly into the ceiling.

By then the other three agents had drawn their guns. The other four men of the Chinese delegation were scrambling to get under the table or running for the door. Pamela shouted for everyone but the U.S. delegation to leave the room which they quickly did. She locked the door behind the departing corrupt businessmen while one of the agents knelt to apply pressure to the wound on Jake's groin. She then dialed the U.S. Embassy and asked for immediate assistance in getting Jake to a U.S. based hospital facility and officials to pick them up from the building. She knew it was a race between Embassy personnel and local police to first arrive.

Unfortunately, it was a tie. Embassy personnel had dispatched an ambulance immediately to the building and other officials arrived at about the same time as the police. The Embassy officials argued that the people in the meeting room were all registered official U.S. delegates and had immunity from police arrest.

Pamela shouted past the locked door that the video recording should be impounded immediately as it would show the entire sequence of events. Finally, she unlocked the door and both Embassy personnel and local police flooded into the room.

Ambulance personnel quickly loaded Jake into their waiting vehicle. Jake remained unconscious and was bleeding profusely. The police called for their ambulances to take the guard, Jasmine and Feng to a hospital where they were later pronounced dead on arrival.

Further arguments ensued between the IBI agents, Embassy officials and police officers. The chief of the police was then called to help resolve the dispute. Pamela again emphasized the importance of the video recording to prove who had started the milieu. Both Embassy officials and police officers went to seize the recording and review together the entire recording. It was after this viewing that the Agents were allowed to leave with Embassy officials who then transported them directly to the Embassy office.

Arrangements were immediately made to fly the IBI Agents back to the States. Jake however was in critical condition in the hospital and given only a fifty- percent chance of survival. Pamela asked to be able to stay with him but was ordered to return with the other three Agents.

Within two hours, Pamela and the other three Agents were back on their Lear jet and heading home. Pamela filled in a few details about Jasmine and her role in attempting to previously kill Jake for the Consortium. And then on the long trip home, Pam started to relax and withdraw from her role as the organized, rational senior Agent on the mission. She tortured herself with the knowledge that she had recruited Jake; she had put him and the other agents in harm's way; she had seduced Jake and pursued and encouraged their romantic relationship; and now Jake could die, alone in a foreign country.

As soon as Pamela completed her debriefing and filed her report with the IBI, she officially requested a leave of absence. She returned to Hong Kong as an unarmed civilian.

Jake underwent an emergency operation to remove the bullet and to cauterize the wound. He received multiple blood transfusions and antibiotics. He regained consciousness a few hours after the operation but he was initially too weak to even speak. Pamela arrived four days later and rushed to the hospital.

Pam was relieved that Jake had regained consciousness and he could even sit up for a few minutes at a time. But soon her relief vanished as Jake seemed to be out of his mind with anger and blame.

“Why did you come back Pamela? You got us into this mess. You should have known that Jasmine would be there.”

“I am so sorry, Jake,” she said as she reached over to place her hand on his arm.

“Don’t touch me. You have no right to touch me,” Jake growled as he slumped back down into the bed, seemingly exhausted by that short outburst.

Pamela knew that it could be a week or more before he could be moved back to the States. She vowed to stay with him until he could be moved. She felt he was lucky to have gotten back in good shape before this disaster. During training Jake had gained nearly thirty pounds of pure muscle with all the physical activity and eating voraciously a diet of high protein and vegetables with fruit juice chasers.

But to Pamela, Jake seemed so changed. When he was able to talk, he was angry, temperamental, and sometimes even threatening. He would say hateful things to the nurses and other medical staff. He accused Pamela of wanting him dead and that that

was why she had put him into such a dangerous position. He almost seemed like a different person.

On the eighth day of Jake's hospitalization, he awoke in a good mood. When Pamela walked into the hospital room, he was even joking with a couple of the nurses. He then greeted Pam with a "Hey, Honey, how are you doing?" and opened his arms for an embrace.

Pam rushed to his side. "I am so glad that you are feeling better. You have been giving us all a pretty rough time."

"Huh," Jake quizzed. "I just woke up and the staff told me that I have been totally 'out of it' because of all the pain medication. It sure is good to see you. They told me that you have been here all week. Thank you."

Pam was totally baffled. She knew that he had had times of coherence. She knew that he had recognized her all week long. Mostly, though, she was just happy to have the old Jake back.

The next day an Embassy official filled them in on the events following the bloodshed. Many local newspapers had reported that three people at the International Electronics Corporation had been killed in an attempted robbery around closing time and that the robbers had not yet been apprehended. The other three corrupt businessmen had been arrested and were being detained but it was assumed that they would soon be released.

Finally, Jake recovered to the point that he could safely be transported back to the United States. The IBI had been closely monitoring his condition and Pamela arranged for a specially equipped private jet to return him home. Jake was very thankful but had

mixed emotions. Had he royally “screwed-up” his first assignment? On the other hand he was somewhat amused by the events and extremely proud of Pamela’s role in handling the situation. He was very, very eager to get home where he could hold her again.

Back in Virginia, Jake spent the next couple of weeks in the hospital undergoing a second operation to further correct damage to his intestinal tract. He underwent painful rehabilitation to rebuild the muscles of his abdomen. Pam visited him daily and plied him with the latest IBI activities. Both of them had extensive follow-up interviews with officials of the IBI in which they provided detailed accounts of the events of the assignment. They were gratified that the corruption of the Consortium was now out in the open as a consequence of their mission. The rest was up to the administration.

Pam had been kept active in a desk job involving screening of possible situations that might warrant IBI investigation. She also spent hours with Jake talking about his ideas for other inventions to explore in their laboratory and she would smuggle in Jake’s favorite seafood meals as he rapidly grew tired of the hospital menus.

On the day of his discharge from the hospital, Pam was there to escort him back to his apartment. Once there she led him directly to the bedroom and instructed him to undress and lie down on the bed. At that point she began the most tantalizing strip tease to the music of “Milord” sung by Edith Piaf. Jake was drooling with anticipation as his eyes surveyed every square inch of her delicious body. Pam moved gracefully into a position over Jake’s body as he lay flat on his back. She swayed teasingly over his erection while caressing his chest and face with her breasts. She then positioned herself and gently lowered her body until they were joined. When Jake started to move, “Pam warned, “You are still supposed to take it easy. Just lie still. Lie very still.”

Using only her internal muscles, Pamela then rhythmically squeezed and relaxed her muscles, keeping to the varying beat of the music. Before his arousal could result in an orgasm, she would suddenly stop moving and lie still across his chest and then begin again once Jake regained his self-control. As Pam with her chocolate brown eyes stared into Jake's crystal blue eyes, the play continued. After a while, Jake could resist her no longer and he grasped her hips firmly and held her tightly to him. The climax was explosive and glorious. Relaxed and sated, they quickly fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: GRAND CAYMAN ISLANDS

Jake and Pamela had had no assignments together for more than six months while Jake recovered. Pam had had several short missions and occasionally traveled while Jake spent most of his time in the lab.

At times, Jake and Pam had continued to work together in Jake's lab as they constructed some new products potentially useful to the IBI or the U.S. economy. They were pleased that a cell phone company had purchased the laser projection phone for a large sum of money which was shared with both Jake and the IBI. In addition, the government paid Jake a huge sum for his development and for the patent of the laser gun notebook.

Jake and Pam had then been together for over two years. In some ways their relationship was like an old married couple. They could read each other's minds; they could anticipate each other's needs; they could sit together comfortably without talking. In other ways, their relationship still had the fire and the energy of a new love affair. When Pam arrived home first, she might relax on the couch reading but the second that she heard Jake's key in the door, she felt a surge of anticipation like a charge of electricity. Even at work in the lab Jake was totally distracted when Pam walked in the door. It seemed like he couldn't get her into his arms quickly enough or discover how she had been spending the day fast enough. Neither had ever experienced such closeness, attraction, or comfort in a relationship.

Jake and Pam had been working on a high-powered laser “cannon” that could be mounted in a satellite and fired at specific targets anywhere on the globe. This work was put on hold, however, when they were finally given a new assignment in the field.

They were to investigate possible tax-evasion activities of corporations. They were to investigate, in particular, false headquarters used as tax shelters on Grand Cayman Island.

Pam and Jake were to pose as a married couple living in a luxurious vacation home on the island. They were to be known as Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Kohler of New York and have a successful diamond import and marketing business. The home they were assigned had an ocean view and was situated in the center of a three acre lot. A tall iron security fence surrounded the home with a keyed gate and expansive security system. The home had four bedrooms and bathrooms, a large formal living and dining room and a family room. The kitchen was immense and had granite countertops, an island and stainless steel appliances. A “breakfast-nook” provided a seating arrangement for four people. The kitchen opened up to a screened in patio with a large barbeque grill and luxurious furniture. A covered swimming pool and shower house lay beyond the porch.

Jake and Pam couldn’t believe their good luck. The house was like a fancy resort for honeymooners. The island was beautiful, the weather perfect, and the beach was gorgeous. Their expense account was enormous, as they were to give the impression of being very wealthy. It was hard to believe that it was a work assignment and not the greatest vacation anyone had ever experienced. Pam even wondered if it were intended as a reward for their work in Asia and recompense for Jake’s injury.

Not wanting to quibble over the Agency's judgment and motivation, Jake and Pam settled into a life of luxury. They basked in the Caribbean sun by the pool; they took naps in the cabana; they ate in expensive restaurants every evening; and they made love every chance they got. They looked forward to every conversation, every touch, and every smile they exchanged.

A whole week passed before they finally felt guilty and as if they were taking advantage of the generosity of the United States when they were supposed to be working. They set out to familiarize themselves with the entire island by visiting all the attractions and spending their days and evenings in public places. They had to be seen, they had to make contacts. After all, they were on assignment to investigate the possibility of tax evasion by American citizens.

Business representatives from the United States frequented one particular bar and grill. Jake and Pam became familiar with many of these men and their wives or companions. Several of these people had vacation homes close to the one Pam and Jake enjoyed. The beach was an excellent place to meet others from the U.S. and they began to share picnics on the beach with at least a half dozen of them. Within a month they were part of the social scene and were comfortable enough to begin their investigations.

As a British protectorate, residents of the Cayman Islands pay no income tax. Duty charged on imports and exports provide the needed funds to operate the government. Bank accounts are highly protected to the point they rival Swiss banks in keeping deposits and depositors anonymous.

Jake and Pam were able to follow their new acquaintances and to determine which buildings they frequented. Later, they would revisit these by themselves. They

discovered that in several cases, there were small one-room offices with door signs of an American corporation. Many of these offices were never open nor were there any visible lights or personnel in them. In other cases there were simply mailboxes with the name of a corporation lettered on them.

Jake and Pam kept a record of the vacant offices and postal boxes and listed their owners as prime suspects for fraudulent and illegal offshore activities. In addition to the information that Jake and Pam collected, it was gratifying to them that the British M16 group also had planted their own informants in several banks and the postal service. Their cooperation with the IBI investigation was priceless. Combined with the U.S. tax return information, which took weeks to scrutinize, Pam and Jake now had enough evidence to charge several major U.S. corporations with tax evasion. They transmitted the information back to the home base and decided to relax for an extra week before returning home.

Jake decided it was time to try out the outdoor barbeque equipment. He retrieved the marinated steaks from the refrigerator and took them out to the grill. Pam began preparing a Caesar salad. All at once she felt a hand clasped over her mouth and multiple hands grabbing her ankles, knees, wrist and arms. A gag was stuffed into her mouth and a black hood was slipped over her head while she tried to wrestle free from her captors. She could not twist, turn, raise her legs or cry out. Within a second she was being carried out and placed in some kind of vehicle which quietly drove away. She listened to sounds around her in order to try to determine where the vehicle was taking her and who her captors might be.

“Somehow, we must have blown our cover,” she reasoned.

She was securely bound and lay motionless in the back of the vehicle as it traveled for about twenty minutes. She struggled to stay focused and to concentrate on all the sensory input. She knew that her survival could depend on her awareness and that panicking could cost her life.

When the vehicle stopped, Pam was carried into a building that echoed sounds like an old warehouse. Someone untied her hands and fastened them to an overhead hook. She was standing upright as she stretched to support her weight on her tiptoes. Now she could hear some sounds coming from her captors. She decided she must be delirious with fear and exhaustion because it almost sounded like the Choctaw Indian language that she had heard years ago when visiting with her grandmother. All at once the black hood was yanked from her head and as her eyes adjusted to the dim light she could make out six figures in front of her. One was clearly Jake who had been similarly bound and gagged and was standing but three feet in front of her. The other five figures were tall, muscular men wearing masks to hide their identity. Pam began to shake with both fear and anger! “Who was responsible for this invasion? How could they have known that we were IBI Agents on assignment?”

Suddenly, one of the men spoke in clear English to Jake, ordering him to kneel down in front of Pam. Jake did not resist. The man removed Jake’s gag and then ordered him to “confess”.

Jake looked up at Pam and said, “You are my true love. If we somehow survive this ordeal, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

The five masked men then quickly removed all of his restraints and took off their masks. Pam immediately recognized them as the same men who had been both her and

Jake's trainers in their years of preparation for service in the IBI. The men then released the restraints on Pam and removed her gag. She screamed at Jake who now sported a wide grin, "You fucking son-of-a-bitch!" At that point Jake, who was now standing, felt an extreme pain in his testicles as a slender knee found its target. He doubled over in pain as Pam continued "You bastard – you set this whole thing up didn't you? This was the most poorly planned proposal in the history of mankind. How about an airplane with a banner streaming behind? Or a diamond ring in the middle of a crème brulee? Are you fucking nuts?"

Pam then turned to her "assailants" and with a scowl shouted "You bastards nearly frightened me to death and I'll get you for this charade". At this point she ran to the door of the abandoned plant, jumped into the van, grabbed the extra set of keys that IBI personnel always secured in a vehicle and tore away with tires screeching on the pavement.

Jake and his friends looked at each other with total shock as Jake uttered a meek "Oops." They had no idea that Pam would have reacted with such anger. They could do nothing at this point but call a taxi to take them back to the house where Jake and Pam were living.

Pam had also returned to the home and was stalking about while swearing like a sailor when Jake entered the house. Pam turned abruptly, strode up to Jake and slapped him hard across his face. Then she screamed "You are a pompous ass hole. And you guys can fix your own damn salad." She then stomped off in the direction of the bedrooms.

The six guys just stared at each other until finally one said, “Jake, I think you better go try to fix that.”

Jake didn’t have a clue of what he should say or do. He actually wished that he could suddenly turn into Thomas as he walked slowly towards the master bedroom. She wasn’t there but the slider to the swimming pool was wide open. Jake stepped out onto the patio and watched while Pam sliced through the water with violent strokes. He sat down and watched as she swam lap after lap.

The sun was setting and he could hear the quiet talking of his co-conspirators and the aroma of cooking steaks. As he watched Pamela, her strokes became more and more relaxed and she swam more slowly. Finally, he went to the edge of the pool and lowered himself into the water, clothes and all. As Pam attempted to make another term, Jake pulled her into his arms.

“I am so sorry that I am such a jerk. I am sorry that I scared you. I am sorry that I came up with such a stupid plan. I love you, Pam, more than life itself. You are my reason for living. I think about you every minute of every day. Will you marry me?”

Pam responded with a simple, “Yes.” She made no declaration of undying love. She made no statement of forgiveness. She made no promises. While she swam, she realized that much of her anger was about not being in control. Pam had always hated surprises whether good or bad. She needed to be in control and with Jake’s lack of social skills, she had thought that she was in control and that she would always be in control of their relationship. From the beginning she had seduced him. She had made all the plans. She had manipulated him and she had made him fall in love with her. She had never meant to fall in love with him. She had had other plans.

The seven of them finally sat together and attacked their meal. As they ate, Pam would occasionally step on Jake's foot or give him a sharp jab in his ribs. During dinner Pam discovered that Jake had made these plans before they had even arrived at Grand Cayman Island. He had arranged for his five cohorts to learn some Choctaw language in honor of Pam's heritage. He had obtained the permissions needed to bring the other Agents to the island for several days and had pre-paid for their trip and housing. Pam was impressed by the thoroughness of his plan and the manner in which he had pulled it off. She knew that she loved Jake. She just wasn't sure that she wanted to love Jake.

Pam was finally able to start forgiving Jake and the other agents for their outrageous plan. She remained very confused and disoriented but finally Pam had to admit that his proposal was most fitting for a couple of IBI Agents.

Soon the seven of them were not only enjoying a fabulous meal but were making jokes and singing familiar songs. It was the perfect ending to an imperfect day!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: SOUTH OF THE BORDER

On the plane trip home, Pam was quiet, pensive and distant. Jake had that terrible old feeling of anxiety in his stomach. He reminded himself that Pam had accepted his proposal but he kept expecting her to rescind that acceptance at any moment. Deep in his heart, Jake believed that he could never be loved in a romantic sense. He had always believed that he would never marry. He anticipated returning to years of aloneness and loneliness without Pam, without Karl and without Thomas.

This should have been the happiest day of his life but instead because of his own stupidity, he was struggling against falling into the deep abyss of depression. Finally, Pam reached over and took his hand in hers.

“Jake, I do love you. I forgive you. And I will be happy to be your wife.”

Jake breathed a huge sigh of relief and took Pam into his arms. As the plane landed in D.C., they were locked in a warm embrace.

Upon their return to Washington D.C. Pam and Jake reported to the Assistant Director and announced their engagement. The Assistant Director of course knew this was coming since Jake had included him in his surprise proposal planning. He explained that, of course, they could no longer work as partners, but that other arrangements could be made. He strongly suggested that Pam would continue as an agent in the field and that Jake could accept a desk job or work full time on his inventions for the agency. Both asked for time to consider his kind offer. He wished them the best and hoped they would be able to assist the Agency in some capacity in the future.

After much discussion, Pam decided that she wasn't ready to resign or to abandon fieldwork. Jake had no problem with concentrating on his lab work and inventions although he felt that all of that time that he had spent in training would go to waste. But he accepted that this solution would allow them both to remain in the Agency, although he couldn't help but have some trepidation about his future wife being in such a dangerous occupation.

Jake had no trouble dedicating himself to the lab work from seven to five and then rushing home to start dinner on the days that Pam was working locally. Their evenings were as special, intimate, and joyful as ever. Pam seemed to have forgiven him for the dreadful proposal and was re-energized with each new field assignment. Although they could no longer talk openly about her assignments, she found ways to give him a general understanding of where she was and what she was doing. Jake also talked openly about his projects and progress in the lab.

Jake could sense that Pam's next assignment was of special interest to her which Jake reasoned meant that there was some risk, some danger, and that her expertise was being utilized to its fullest. The night before her departure, Jake noticed that Pam was packing all the elegant clothing that she had worn in The Grand Caymans plus swimming suits and lots of attractive though costume jewelry. He knew immediately that she was going undercover and that she must be playing the role again of a wealthy tourist.

Jake drove her to the airport early on a Saturday morning and spotted Robert also waiting at the check-in counter. Robert approached Jake and calmly stated, "Don't worry old man. I will keep her safe and we both have GPS devices implanted. We should be home in a week."

The week passed with, of course, no contact from Pamela. Jake simply buried himself in lab work sixteen hours each day, grabbed take-out food, and was in bed by ten every night. He worried some when Pam and Robert didn't return the following weekend but he knew that it was difficult to predict the duration of an assignment.

Monday morning, Jake was called to the office of the coordinator of Pam's fieldwork. His colleagues Steve and Conrad were already there, looking concerned and agitated.

Jake sputtered out one sentence, "Are Pam and Robert okay?"

"Well Schmidt, we don't know," replied the agent in charge. "We have lost Robert's GPS signal and Pam's is located far from her expected location."

"What was the mission? Where were they? Where is she now?" Jake questioned trying to sound professional and rational while starting to sweat profusely.

"If we can all just sit down, I will tell you everything that we know. Robert and Pamela were posing as a wealthy couple vacationing south of the border in a location where there have been lots of kidnappings for ransom."

"So they were bait," Steve commented in an angry tone.

"Of course," responded the coordinator, "may I continue?"

The three friends glanced at each other and Conrad put his hand on Jake's shoulder. "Please, but could you possibly talk a little faster."

"Of course, we were tracking them and they were reporting in at predetermined times. They started missing phone calls early in the morning last Wednesday, but their GPS devices still indicated that they were in their hotel. On Wednesday afternoon, Robert's signal went dead. His device was implanted in his armpit and the kidnappers

may have simply removed it and disabled it. Other Agents have determined that there is no sign of violence in their hotel room, no blood, no bodies but their luggage remains except for the jewelry that Pam had in her possession.”

“So why didn’t you send a team in on Wednesday?” Jake demanded.

“We didn’t want to jump the gun. The plan was to let the kidnapping happen and then catch the thugs red-handed, preferably crossing a border or even leading us to their hideout. Plus these have all been ransom kidnappings. The gangs are after money and most of the victims are exchanged alive. May I continue?”

Jake paled and almost fainted with the comment “most of the victims are exchanged alive” but he nodded his head for the senior agent to continue.

“On Friday, Pam’s signal started to move at about forty miles per hour in a southerly direction. By late last night, the signal was being transmitted from Colombia. The kidnappers seem to have no problem crossing borders so they may use a vehicle that has a hidden compartment. So far today, the signal has not moved. We believe that she is in a remote location in the Andes Mountains and we hope that Robert is still with her.”

“Why Pam? Why did you send Pam and Robert there?” asked Jake, fighting to control his tears.

“Pam and Robert are both fluent in Spanish. We were gathering evidence. You all know how this works. Sometimes, Agents are in jeopardy.”

“How do you know for sure that the GPS is still on Pam’s body. I never saw any sign of surgery. I would have noticed. It is no secret that we are a couple.”

The senior agent started to blush and managed to stutter, “Her GPS was inserted as if it were an IUD. You know an intrauterine device. We are almost positive that it will not be detected.”

Steve asked, “So why tell us all this now?”

“We know how close you all are to Robert and Pam. We knew that you would be expecting their return and would figure out that something was wrong. And we need to send in another team. We want the three of you to go extract our Agents.”

“And if they are dead?” asked Steve, the realist.

“We honestly don’t think that that is a possibility. It is not these kidnappers’ MO. In the past they have always made a ransom demand, but only after a couple of weeks. They like their victims’ families to fear the absolute worst so that they will be so desperate that they will meet any demand. The problem is that, in the meantime, the victims are beaten, starved, and sometimes sexually assaulted. We want Pam and Robert back as much as you do. By now, they know everything that we sent them to discover. Will you three go, as a team, as the people that care the most about the captives?”

Conrad scoffed as he said; “You knew our answer before you called us in here. Is there a plan?”

“You would fly to Medellin, Colombia at 3:30 this afternoon, arriving at 11:30 tonight. You will travel as two graduate students and their professor backpacking into the Andes. Everything you need, including passports, is ready to go. Further, we have plants at customs in the airport. They will be putting a few things into your backpacks instead of removing things. We expect that you should reach the kidnappers’ camp by late on Wednesday or midday on Thursday at the latest. Whatever happens after that is

totally at your discretion. I will leave you gentlemen to discuss the mission. We need your decision within the hour.”

As the three men looked at each other, Steve firmly stated, “No need sir, we will go.”



“Robert, Robert can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Pam, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am all in one piece. What about you?”

“Some soreness and bruising here and there but I am okay. My armpit hurts like a son of a gun and it is oozing. Are you alone?”

“Yes, are you?”

“No, there is a young boy in here. He looks to be about twelve or fourteen. He is breathing but I have not been able to wake him. It is too dark in here to check for injuries.”

“I can’t see out of this damn hut. Do you have a visual, Robert?”

“I can see the remains of a campfire and some bedrolls lying about. Every once in a while I can see the shadow of a man with a rifle when he crosses between the campfire and the hut. Do you have a clue where we are?”

“I know that it is frigging cold in here. I don’t even know what day it is. I think that I was unconscious from the time they took us out of the hotel on Friday until a few minutes ago. Shivering and pacing to get warm, Pam added, “It is so cold, we must be at

a higher altitude. Maybe, we are in the Andes. My best guess is Colombia but that would mean multiple drivers and making really good time.”

“Have they found your GPS?”

“No way, Robert. It is still in there and it should still be working. I am sure the Agency is tracking us. So, I suppose we should just wait patiently,” Pam stated sarcastically.

“Definitely! Even though it is not your style. But now we have this kid to think about, too. There are three of us to get out alive.”



Jake was already exhausted and they were only in the lowest foothills of the Andes. Their backpacks had already been heavy with bedrolls, medical supplies (including a suturing kit, antibiotics, bandages, pain meds, and Rohypnol). There were also water purification kits, high protein and high caloric rations, hats, gloves, wool socks, down vests, flash lights, smart phones, bottled water, and a small box labeled dehydrated water (the supply clerks idea of a joke). At customs, the IBI plants had added grenades, Uzi submachine guns, a couple of 38's, and one of Jake's laser guns was slipped into Jake's pack.

Since the three men had left directly from the department, they were also all wearing brand new hiking boots. Jake's feet were killing him as he struggled to keep up with the much younger Steve and Conrad.

By early Tuesday morning, Steve offered, “Hey Professor, let's rearrange the packs. With that super laser gun of yours, you really don't need the Uzi or the grenades.”

As they sat to redistribute the heaviest items, Jake also got a breather. They each emptied a bottle of water and ate some of the provisions. Jake quickly bandaged some of the blisters on his feet and with a glance at his smartphone's GPS application, he was remotivated when he saw that the distance to Pam's signal really was diminishing.

"I think that we can make it by Wednesday at night-fall," Jake commented.

"Maybe old man," was Conrad's response, "but remember the terrain is only going to cut rougher and steeper. And we will need more rest breaks and even some shut-eye."

Momentarily defeated, Jake suggested, "Maybe you guys should go on without me."

"Yeah, right, then we could spend days searching for you," answered Steve.

Just then they heard the scream of a jaguar. All three of the men were quickly on their feet, headed up hill.



At first light, armed men, with bandanas hiding the lower parts of their faces, tossed plates of rice and beans onto the dirt floors of the two rooms of the huts. Robert and Pam both immediately knew these were positive signs. They weren't going to be starved and the kidnappers were protecting their own identity, which would not be necessary if they planned to kill their captives. The food was closely followed with cups of water and large empty pots to be used for their wastes.

Robert was able to wake the young boy who complained of a terrible headache. Obviously, he had been overdosed by whatever anesthesia or sedative that had been used to render all the captives unconscious.

Robert whispered to Pam that the boy was awake. Robert's statement was quickly followed with a warning from outside, in heavily accented English, "No talking damn Gringos."

In the worst way, Pam wanted to ask what day it was but she had been instructed not to let the kidnappers know that she was fluent in Spanish. The plan was to gather as much information as possible by eavesdropping without the kidnappers knowing that they were understood. Pam quietly positioned herself by the door and waited patiently. As she sat, huddled against the cold, she realized it was slightly warmer than at night but still she yearned for a coat, a poncho, or even a filthy blanket. It was the kind of cold that penetrates one's whole body, freezing the feet, chilling the bones. Pam knew that heat and fire were used to torture but this was the first time that she realized that cold could also be used to torture.

Pam was then fighting herself to stay awake. She knew that Robert was faring much better as he had been wearing slacks, shoes, socks and a long sleeve dress shirt when the kidnappers burst into the room. There were also two people in the adjoining room. Robert and the boy could huddle together if necessary.

After a couple of hours, Pam had heard very little discussion from outside and there seemed to be no one standing just outside of the hut. She risked contacting Robert, "You guys okay?" she whispered.

“Yes,” responded Robert. “The boy’s name is Spencer. He is fourteen and was traveling with his parents. They were staying in Managua. Around 7:00 P.M. he had gone down alone to the arcade next to their hotel and was grabbed by two men who shoved a gun into his ribs. He says that was on Saturday and that we were already in a compartment under the back floor of a full-size van. He remembers that the kidnappers then held a smelly rag over his nose and mouth and shoved a hypodermic into his arm.”

“Okay, so they were making really good time. It is about twenty-five hours from Acapulco to Managua. And then maybe fifteen hours to Panama City and another maybe ten hours to the Andes in Colombia.”

“That would mean that it is Tuesday morning. Certainly by now, there is an extraction team in play,” speculated Robert. “We just have to hang tight.”

“Fine for you to say but all I have on is the dress that I wore out to dinner Tuesday evening. I don’t even have sleeves. I am freezing. Are you guys cold?”

“Not too bad. Spencer has a lightweight jacket. And I had a lot more clothes on than you did. Mostly, my armpit just hurts and I am pretty sure that it is infected. Do you even have shoes?”

“No, I was barefoot when they broke in. My feet are like icicles. Have you heard much yet?”

“Nada, you?”

“A few first names, some requests for food, beer, drugs. Nothing much that matters. I think that our guards are not too high in the command hierarchy. I thought I heard something about ‘El General Carlos’, though. I’ll keep listening if I can stay awake.”

Pam then returned to her post at the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: RISKING EVERYTHING

With a lightened backpack and bandaged feet, Jake found it easier to keep up with the younger men. The proximity of the jaguar had also given him an adrenaline boost.

The climb was becoming steeper and all three had added walking sticks to their equipment.

By Tuesday dusk, all three men were tired but only Jake admitted to being exhausted and sore. They decided to make camp with the plan that Jake would sleep for six hours and each of the other two would sleep for three hours, alternating with guard duty.

Jake objected stating that he doubted that he could sleep. “I am too wired and too anxious to get to Pam.” Within minutes, he was soundly asleep on the hard, cold ground with the sleeping bag pulled over his head. Around 2:00 A.M. Jake woke with a start to the sound of Conrad talking on the phone. Crawling out of the warm sleeping bag into the frigid air was a challenge but he couldn’t stand the thought of the younger men thinking he was too old for the mission. He stood stomping his feet and hugging himself with his hands in his armpits while he listened to Conrad’s side of the phone conversation.

The Agency was tracking their progress as well as monitoring Pam’s GPS which was still stationary. They predicted that rendezvous would be on Wednesday at 2200 hours if they got moving.



When her serving of rice and beans was brought on Tuesday evening, Pam begged for a poncho or a blanket. One guard snickered to another and stated in Spanish that that was a good idea as El General like his women hot and comfortable. The guards

closed the door briefly and then opened it and threw in a heavy wool blanket. Pam wrapped it around her whole body as she quickly devoured the pan of food.

Later, Robert whispered, “Pam, did you follow that comment about El General?”

“Yes, but thanks for reminding me. I was trying to put it out of my mind and just feel grateful that I may not freeze to death.”

“Pam, I am so sorry. I promised Jake that I would take care of you.”

“Don’t worry, if we are not rescued in the next couple of days, I plan on busting out of here and you will get plenty of opportunity to take care of me then.”

“But Pam, what if you are raped, in the meantime? Oh my God, I can’t stand to think of that!”

“Robert, every female agent knows that that is a risk we are willing to take. And big guy, men get raped too.”

“I would fight to the death first.”

“Quiet, I hear someone coming.”

The hut door to Pam’s side was suddenly flung open. A large Latino, dressed in full military dress, filled the doorway. In perfect English, he said, “And what do we have here?”

Pam scooted to the farthest corner, trying to look small, meek, and horribly frightened.

“Oh, such a pretty little thing. But you are not Caucasian, are you?”

Letting her voice quaver, Pam softly whined, “I am Black, White, and Choctaw Indian” and hoped that the large man preferred pure White.

“Interesting,” he chuckled, “I have never known a Choctaw Indian. Close the door,” he ordered over his shoulder.

Robert was shouting threats and obscenities as the General crossed the hut in two steps and pulled Pam to her feet and then crushed her body to his as he let his hands roam all over her body.

As Pam thought, “Shut up Robert” she made her body go totally limp, let her head lull to one side and closed her eyes.

The General growled, “Now what fun is this? This bitch doesn’t have any fight in her at all.” And he let her fall to the ground. As he opened the door, he started barking orders in Spanish. “Cut her hair off and strip her naked. I will see to her later after I check on the boy.”

By that point, Spencer was cowering in a corner. And Robert couldn’t help but wonder if El General also liked doing things to little boys. Robert was standing in front of Spencer when the second door was flung open.

“You touch him and I will kill you.”

“God, you Americans are perverse” as he motioned for other guards to enter the hut. “I just want to check him for injuries. And I want your wallets, your belts, and your shoelaces. He handed Robert a small notebook and a pencil and added, “Please write the contact information for who will be paying your ransom. We need name, address, all phone numbers, and email addresses.”

The General then bypassed Robert and pulled Spencer to his feet. “Well, you look no worse for the wear. Do you need anything?”

Spencer mumbled, “I need to go home.”

The General slapped him full across the face with enough force to knock the boy to the ground. “When you speak to me, you will address me as ‘Sir’ and you will speak distinctly.” He then grabbed the tablet and pencil from Robert, who was surrounded by guards, and handed the tablet to the boy. “Write your parents’ names, addresses, and contact information, now.”

The General turned back to Robert. Robert glared at him with more anger and fury than he had ever felt before. The General laughed in Robert’s face. “You have no power here. Even if I have to kill you, I will still have my way with your wife. I will still get big ransoms for the boy and the woman. I will still escape into the rain forest. I will still strike again.”

The General then turned to the guards and in Spanish said, “This man stinks. Give him a bath in the stream with all his clothes on. In a few minutes, they should freeze quite nicely to his skin.” Several guards dragged Robert out of the hut.

As Pam lay on the dirt floor, she continued to pretend to be unconscious. Her hair had been shorn with sharp knives and she had felt several cuts to her scalp and yet she remained limp and did not jerk, did not flinch, did not react. Her clothing was quickly stripped from her body and she lay still on the ground. “Oh, how I wish I could grab one of those knives,” Pam thought.

The General returned to the open doorway. Pam could feel his eyes as he assessed every part of her naked body. He even pulled her legs apart and stuck a finger into her most private area. “Okay,” he announced in Spanish. “She is clean. Dress her as a boy. I want warm pants, shirt, jacket, boots, gloves, and a hat.”

Pam's heart quickened, as she thought, "Damn, he is going to take me with him. He is going to separate us." It was nearly impossible for her to lie still but she now knew that he wanted a fight. And she was determined not to give him what he wanted.

Pam next felt hands all over her as two guards started to dress her. She acted as if she was reviving and sat up. The General was gone and she heard horse hooves receding into the dark of night and realized that the General was actually leaving. Pam grabbed the rest of the clothing and finished dressing herself. About then, she heard the thud as a shivering, soaking wet Robert was thrown into the other room of the hut.

Both doors were then closed and guards stood posted in front of the doors while others seemed to be walking around the perimeter. Pam surmised that they had been instructed to be sure that the prisoners didn't talk to each other.

For the first time since their capture, Pam thought about Jake. She was now over two days late in returning and he must be worried out of his mind. She wondered if she had been totally insensitive to Jake by remaining on active duty. She had always been able to compartmentalize her life as an Agent from her life as a woman but it was different now that she had Jake.

Dreaming of being at home with Jake, Pam slept well in the comfort of warm clothing and the blanket until very early morning when she was awakened abruptly by Robert's loud wheezing cough. She quickly moved to the wall and whispered his name. After several tries speaking quietly, Pam finally raised her voice to be heard over his racking cough.

"Robert, can you talk to me?"

"I am so cold and I can't get my . . . breath."

“Spencer, are you awake?”

“Yes, Ma’am. What should I do?”

“Robert needs your body heat. Can you take off your jacket and your shirt and even your trousers? Have him take off the wet, icy clothing. Get as much of your body next to his body as you can. Move over beside this wall. Stay away from the outside walls. Rub his hands with your hands. Rub his arms. Cover up with your dry clothing. Is his hair still wet?”

“Not exactly, it is full of ice.”

“Can you pull off the ice?”

“I don’t think so. It is more like he has an ice helmet.”

“Okay, don’t worry about that now. I am going to try to get to you or at least try to get a guard to give you my blanket.” Pam went to her door and started yelling “ayuda, help, help, ayuda.” No one responded and then she pushed against the door and it opened about a foot against the sleeping body of a guard. She slipped through and opened the second door, which was almost completely blocked by a sleeping guard. She pushed the blanket through the opening and then her hat, closed the door, returned to her room, and closed that door.

“Did you get the blanket Spencer?”

“Yes, Ma’am and I already wrapped that around Robert and me and pulled the hat over his head. He’s not wheezing so badly now. He has been exercising for hours trying to get warm. Maybe he was just out of breath.”

“Okay, stay as close together as you can. Call me if he gets worse.”



By 3:00 A.M. on Wednesday, Jake, Conrad, and Steve were on the move again. Their progress was slower in the pitch-blackness and the climb was getting steeper and the ground was rockier. Moving safely would have been impossible without their flashlights and they all wished that someone had thought of packing night-goggles. They were thankful to have learned that a helicopter would be available for their escape and they wouldn't have to make this trek back down these slippery slopes.

Their path was so precarious that they had only gained about one mile per hour by noon, however they had finally reached a plateau and what looked like an excellent landing site for the evacuation helicopter. With the discovery of the plateau, they knew they were back on schedule. They would definitely reach their colleagues by 2200 hours.

They tried to reach the command center by phone to give them their coordinates but there was no signal so they left one phone in the middle of the clearing with the hopes that the GPS was still transmitting. They took a break for water and food and started walking due north towards Pam's signal. Barring any catastrophe, they estimated arrival by 9:00 or 10:00 P.M.



By the time the pans of breakfast rice were tossed into the hut on Wednesday, Robert was greatly improved. His breathing had returned to normal and he only rarely coughed. The guards were in such a hurry to get back to their eating, drinking and drugs that they didn't even notice that the blanket was now with Robert and Spencer.

Pam and Robert thought that it was now just a matter of playing along with their captors and waiting for rescue. Now that they knew that the guards were worthless in the middle of the night, Robert and Pam had been able to formulate their own plan for escape and agreed to wait only until the weekend before they implemented it. Pam was warm and fairly relaxed until she heard the sound of approaching horses about dinnertime.

El General went directly to Pam's door upon dismounting. He yanked open the door and leering, asked "Did you think that I had forgotten you?"

Once again, Pam cowered in the farthest corner. "I had hoped," she muttered.

"What did you say? And I expect you to address me as 'Sir'."

"No Sir, I did not think that you had forgotten me, she meekly responded. "I thought that you had more important things to do."

"How do you like dressing like a boy? How do you like your new haircut? Are you ready to act like a woman?" he quizzed as he raised his riding whip.

"I don't know what you mean, Sir."

"I will be back in a couple of hours to show you what I mean," and he stomped out of the hut.

Pam crawled to the shared wall. "Did you hear that shit from that bastard."

"I am so sorry Pamela. What are you going to do?"

"I am going to try to get my hand on one of his weapons that he so proudly wears and displays. I'm going to kill that maniac."

"You are the senior officer here and I will do whatever you tell me. But please, Pam, think about this. We have Spencer, now, to protect also."



By late afternoon Wednesday, Jake was struggling to put one foot in front of the other. Although the terrain was flatter, there was still an uphill slope, streams to ford, slippery ice-covered rocks and three-foot high drifts of snow.

Luckily, Steve heard the approach of horses before the riders spotted them. They ran for cover and hunkered down in a copse of stunted evergreen trees and watched as five mounted men dressed in military garb also headed to the north. “Reinforcements?” wondered Jake.

After their passage, however, the going was easier as they simply followed the trail and arrived at the guerillas’ camp on Wednesday at 1900 hours. Under cover of the dense underbrush, they watched and learned. Besides the five men on horseback, there were only seven other men in camp. They clearly identified which hut was locked and guarded. They were only fifty yards from their friends.

Jake, Conrad and Steve watched the camp for another hour and then retreated so that they could talk and formulate a plan.

“The seven guards in civilian dress seem pretty distractible to me. They seem like a bunch of flunkies and far more interested in whatever they are smoking and drinking,” offered Steve. “I think that the Rohypnol could come in really handy if one of us could sneak over to that keg and pour them in.”

“Good idea Steve but we would still have five worthy and armed opponents.”

“Not to worry Jake, we are well armed and I, for one, am a marksman,” boasted Conrad.

Steve found the Rohypnol and circled the camp to get to the beer keg. He was back in mere minutes.

“Okay,” said Conrad, let’s agree on some rules. “No one shoots until I give the order. Once the flunkies pass out, we toss two grenades towards the other side of the campfire, in the clearing but as far from the locked hut as possible. That’s our diversion.”

“And then what?”

“And then Jake, we open fire. You use your laser gun but not until Conrad gives the order. Conrad and I will open fire with the Uzi’s. Our 38’s are only for backup and close range. How quickly will the laser gun recharge?”

“I have it down to about a three seconds but that could be an incredibly long time if we are taking fire. I think that I’d like my Uzi back, just in case.”

“Okay, once everyone is down, we storm. Jake you go for the huts and get the doors open. Steve and I will keep firing to cover you and hopefully our target practice will pay off. There are five horses in the corral. Our trip back to the rendezvous should be much quicker and we can be out of here.”

“What if Pam or Robert are injured and can’t ride?”

Steve exhaled loudly and said, “Can the pessimism old man. We will deal with that if it becomes necessary. That’s why we have all of the medical supplies.”

The three Agents then crept back to their original vantage point, but separated and fanned out slightly. Steve and Conrad appeared calm and composed but Jake was aware of an increase in his heart rate. He was sweating and his breathing was rapid and shallow. He had been in dangerous combat situations before but never with Pam’s safety

so clearly at stake. He realized that he was risking everything in the world that mattered to him: Pam's life, his own life, and the lives of his only three friends.

And then Jake saw the General strutting towards the hut. The bastard was rubbing his hands together in anticipation. He reached down to his crotch and readjusted himself. Jake waited for the signal from Conrad but he couldn't stand it a moment longer. Jake fired the laser gun and the big man yelped, stumbled and then fell onto the ground with blood spurting from his other side. El General lay in a pool of blood as it spread across the frosted ground.

Conrad and Steve each launched a grenade and then immediately Conrad yelled, "Fire!"

All hell broke loose. Only two of the guards had passed out from the Rohypnol. Another two were writhing in pain from the grenade shrapnel. The other seven armed guerrillas started shooting haphazardly in all directions. They seemed to have no idea where their attackers were. With each shot from the single-fire rifles, came a burst of light and the Agents started picking off the kidnappers one by one with the rapid fire of their Uzi's. The camp was filled with the sounds of gunfire and yelling and moaning from the guerillas. The sound was deafening but somehow also victorious and glorious to Jake's ears.

Jake rose to his feet and bolted towards the hut. Conrad and Steve ran towards the downed enemies and took a few more shots of fire for good measure.

By the time that Jake got both hut doors open, the area had settled into an eerie silence as smoke hovered over the scene. The camp was filled with odors of gunpowder, defecation, and the mercurial smell of blood.

But all Jake knew for sure was that Pam was in his arms. Dressed as a boy with chopped hair, she was the most beautiful thing that he had ever seen.

The embrace, however, was short-lived as Pam approached the large body lying only a few feet away. She grabbed El General's saber from its scabbard and plunged it into his back over and over again.

Robert and Spencer stumbled out of the hut and surveyed the damage. Spencer started to cry and clung to Robert, as he reassured the young boy that "this is the rescue that we have been waiting for."

All of the guerillas were dead. Conrad approached Pam and while he hugged her, he quietly stated, "I wanted to interrogate that guy. We should have taken him alive."

"He was already dead, Conrad. You should see the size of the hole in his side. Jake's gun takes no prisoners."

The six Americans then stood in the clearing shaking hands and patting each others' backs. For several minutes, they were utterly speechless.

Steve brought them all back to action. "There are guerilla camps all over this area. We could have company at any time. Check pockets for IDs on these guys and grab anything that looks like evidence. Robert, take whatever you need to keep you and the kid warm."

"We've got to get out of here. Has anyone noticed that we now have six riders and two of the horses bolted?"

"We will double up, no problem. I'll ride with Spencer since I am the heaviest. We will fill you in on his situation later. Jake and Pam together since there is no chance we can separate you two now. Conrad and Steve ride together. Let's get a move on."

“Oh Robert, you don’t even know which way we’re going,” scoffed Conrad.

The six Americans were mounted and on their way in minutes. They could only hope that the helicopter would reach them before any of the guerillas from other camps tracked them down. They would be sitting ducks, mounted on horseback, once they reached the plateau.

Jake wondered, “What if the phone back on the plateau is not transmitting? Command center may not even know the rendezvous point.”

Conrad reasoned, “We know that Pam’s GPS is still transmitting and they will see that she is on the move. They’ll be there Jake. But you’re right; we are not home free yet. We could take fire at any time. Be ready to fire back and don’t ride too closely together.”

Progress on horseback was slower than they expected. The horses were much less sure-footed with two riders on their backs. The snow was now crusted over with hard slippery ice. With very little moonlight and only three small flashlights pointed at the ground, the riders and the horses were nearly blind.

It was 1:00 A.M. before they reached the clearing where they had left the smartphone. As they stopped and gathered in the shelter of the trees, it was eerily quiet. There was no sound of helicopter blades. They heard nothing but the howl of the wind, a distant yodel of a canine, and a brief scream of a jaguar. Nighttime in the Andes didn’t belong to three nervous horses and six shivering Americans.

They dismounted and set the horses free, hoping that the horses would lead any trackers away from their hiding places.

Conrad tried his phone again and was greatly relieved when he got a signal. He could barely hear the voice from the command center but thought that he was told that the helicopter was only thirty minutes from their location.

Ten minutes later, Spencer heard distant voices. There were men on the horses' trail coming towards the clearing. Only the laser gun could be fired silently, and only with a three-second lag between each shot. Jake reluctantly handed the laser to Conrad. Pam and Steve grabbed Uzi's and Robert and Jake remained with Spencer with the 38s and one Uzi for protection.

The three Agents quickly dispatched the three trackers with the laser gun and only one burst of fire from the Uzi. It was only moments later that they heard the silenced swish of the blades of an MH60 stealth Black Hawk . Upon landing, six heavily armed soldiers with night-vision goggles jumped out to guard the perimeter.

“And now,” Jake sighed, “we are home-free.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: BAD DRUGS

A few months later, Pam and Jake were asked if they could handle one more joint assignment. The Assistant Director stated that there was one assignment that had been in the planning for some months and the agency had decided that Jake and Pamela were ideal for it. Replacing them with a different pair would take additional months of preparation so they were willing to let Jake and Pam complete this last assignment,

together. Pam and Jake were skeptical. After their experiences in Colombia, neither was sure that Pam should continue on an active status and Jake had discovered that his endurance wasn't really up to par.

The senior agent saw their reaction and said "Wait, hear me out. This is local and there are no risks to life and limb. The FBI has become aware of what appears to be illegal medical practices taking place in Southern California. Several clinics are making suspiciously large orders of controlled substances for "medical" purposes. In addition, Medicaid and Medicare billing are suspiciously high. It appears that these clinics might be a front for illegal immigrants familiar with the U.S. medical services and are being used to provide drugs to other illegal immigrants and to street gangs."

"So you want us to go undercover with a bunch of drug traffickers in southern California. How is that without risk."

"No, Jake. A little patience please. We are not ready for that step." He went on to explain that the FBI asked the IBI to assist in the investigation since it involved foreigners on American soil. The FBI had already acquired some of the drugs being distributed by several clinics around the country and had the contents of these drugs analyzed by the Food and Drug Administration. It appeared that even legitimate clinics have been distributing illegal drugs without their knowledge and that many pharmacies were also selling drugs that did not meet the FDA standards. Since nearly eighty percent or more of the drugs sold in the U.S. are manufactured in other countries such as China and India and only about ten percent of those manufacturing centers are under inspection by the FDA, the problem of illegal drugs goes far beyond the illegal immigration

problem. It had appeared that the problem was much larger than the possible violation of immigration laws and medical fraud.

“We have decided to take you, Pam, out of field service and instead, have you coordinate a thorough investigation of the ‘Bad Drugs’ situation. You two will be the “centralized” investigation agents for the IBI. Your project will be titled “Bad Medicine” and will involve the coordination of all of the relevant U.S. government agencies.

Jake and Pam were both very disappointed. They had wanted their last mission to be something to remember, something with intrigue if not action. Pam, especially, thought of herself as more of the James Bond type and definitely not as a pencil pusher or an organizer. Her feelings went well beyond disappointment. She felt under-valued, discounted, punished for her relationship with Jake and downright pissed.

Later in private, Pam angrily stated, “This is bullshit, Jake, I think that they are giving us this crappy assignment to get rid of us. This project is doomed to failure. They know that I am going to be bored. They know that I will hate being inside all of the time. This is just a way to get me to retire. You wouldn’t believe how many fabulous and courageous agents are now sitting at desks just because the Agency thought that they screwed up one time or just because they are older. There are so many agents who risked their lives for this country with no acclaim, no praise, and no reward. And then maybe they did make one little mistake, like my telling Robert that I was going to kill that fat-ass bastard in Colombia, and they find themselves stuck with some boring administrative job.”

“What choice do we have? We can resign now or we can see where this goes.”

Trying to swallow her pride, Pam got started on the project. Pam and Jake identified twenty-two different federal agencies and departments that had some oversight responsibility related to the distribution, importation, manufacturing, and reimbursement for prescription drugs. (Appendix One) Pam and Jake were amazed that there appeared to be little or no coordination among the twenty-two agencies.

“It is an administrative and bureaucratic nightmare of inefficiency,” announced Jake. “The system is wide open to fraud and abuse.”

The next day the Director outlined the project more fully and instructed Jake and Pamela to hold joint meetings with representatives of these agencies to present the problems, solicit suggestions for solutions and coordinate investigations by several agencies including the FBI and IBI. He added, “There may be occasions in which individuals within these agencies may need to be investigated for conflicts of interest, unethical behavior or illegal activities. You will have your own team of IBI agents. Your primary goal is to understand how these illegal drugs get into the U.S., how they are distributed, and suggest solutions to the problem that the other agencies can implement.”

Although they still considered it incredibly boring, Jake and Pam immediately understood the enormity of their task. They knew there would be many weeks of “brainstorming” with one another to develop strategies, examine information, develop charts of relationships and interact with other agency individuals. There were also lots of rumors circulating around D.C. that the President was considering huge cutbacks in the number of governmental agencies. She wanted to eliminate agencies with redundant functions and to consolidate other agencies. Pam and Jake were suspicious that this assignment had as much to do with administrative changes as it did with the illegal activities of a

small number of pharmacies and medical clinics. Pam continued to try to convince Jake that this was one huge waste of time and that they were the fall-guys. “There is no way that all these different agencies are going to join forces and that’s all the evidence that the President will need to start eliminating and consolidating. This is all about her needing to reduce the budget.”

“You’re probably right, Pam, but maybe we can develop some guidelines to help whatever agencies are left after the cuts. And maybe there are too many agencies all trying to do the same thing.”

To begin their responsibilities, Jake and Pam developed a list of fifteen comprehensive questions to be answered by each of the twenty-two agencies. (Appendix Two)

“Geez, Pam, this looks like a list that Karl would make.”

“Maybe we can get him to do this stupid project and we could go lounge on a beach or put in for a more exciting assignment. Do you ever hear from Karl?”

“Nah, I heard he is involved with some woman and doesn’t have time for me anymore,” answered Jake and was surprised that he was still not being open about Karl and Thomas.

“Jake, do you wonder if we are being sent a message by being assigned to this project?”

“Hmm, what do you mean?”

“You know—if you want to get rid of someone but you don’t want to fire him or break up with him, you just start treating him like shit.”

“Are you trying to tell me something, Pam?”

“Hell, no. You are so paranoid sometimes. I’m just saying, what if the IBI wants us to go inactive? Wouldn’t this project be the perfect way to encourage that decision? Would you want this type of mission for the whole rest of your career?”

“No. I sorta liked it when you called me ‘Secret agent man’. I do like the idea of working full-time in the lab, though.”

“Yeah, Jake, but you could have your own lab. Make your own decisions and keep all the profits for yourself.”

“Sounds to me like you’re about done with the IBI.”

“I am if this kind of mission is all there is in our future.”

“Well, we made a commitment for this one and I am afraid that we are stuck for now.”

To begin the process of the project, Jake and Pam sent an invitation to the head of each identified agency for a joint meeting. They included the list of questions and requested that the participants bring a hard copy of their suggestions and responses.

On the day of the meeting, only eighteen agency representatives filed in by the time the meeting was to start and four of those attending were not the head of their respective agency.

As Jake and Pam looked over the participants, they noticed that they all looked irritable and already bored. Pam gave the welcome to the audience and gave a short slide presentation of the problem and its apparent scope. As the last slide was shown, there was dead silence in the room.

As Pam handed the microphone to Jake, she whispered, “This is a losing proposition.”

Next, Jake presented the format for the meeting. This included direct invitations to selected participants to give their agency's impression of the problem, how they would answer the questions and their suggestions for improving the situation. The first representative invited to speak was from the Food and Drug Administration office. He began his presentation by first giving some background on the charge of his agency, the number of staff available and their budget for their work. By the time he began to present his solutions, no one was paying attention. Several of the participants appeared to be texting on their phones or playing games. Some were visiting with each other. Two had left the room.

Just as Jake whispered to Pam, "This is like trying to teach eighth graders," a severely dressed older woman stood up.

"If I may, Agent Schmidt and Agent Myers, let's just get down to the nitty-gritty. Most of us believe that this meeting is just to pit one agency against another. We know that the administration is planning on some major cuts. Most of us think that it is not our job to justify our own worth or to "cook our own goose" so to speak. Nothing is going to be accomplished here."

Two more representatives slipped out of the room and others seemed to be closing their notebooks and gathering their belongings. Jake and Pam glanced at each other and with a shoulder shrug, Pam went to the microphone and announced, " We think it will be more productive to schedule meetings with only a few related agencies at a time and provide transcripts to everyone." The room was nearly vacant when Pam adjourned the meeting.

Small group meetings were scheduled over the next two weeks. Transcripts of the group meetings were then distributed to each agency and each agency was asked to provide a written response to the individual transcripts as well as suggestions for improvement of the control of the drug problems. A deadline of three weeks was given for the written responses. When all responses had been received by the deadline, Jake and Pam meticulously examined each and collated the areas of agreement, disagreement and suggestions for improvement. They also attempted to summarize the responses to each of the original questions and identify gaps in those to which there were inadequate answers provided. Each agency received this summary report and was invited for further responses if they felt necessary.

While Jake and Pam were involved with the agency meetings, transcript productions and summary reporting, other IBI Agents were quietly investigating individuals within the agencies to determine conflicts of interest and potential illegal and unethical behavior. They identified nearly a dozen people that could be prosecuted for dereliction of their duties, unethical behavior and illegal activities. The major problem they identified was the procedure used to hire or appoint individuals to the various agencies. Political favoritism, pressure by lobbyists, and a lack of clear criteria for the positions posed a major problem. Their report was then transmitted to the Attorney General's Office.

The next day, Jake and Pam handed in their letters of resignation to the IBI.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: WEDDED BLISS

As Jake and Pam's work on the "Bad Medicine" project was drawing to a close, they began planning for their wedding. Neither one wanted a church wedding and preferred a small gathering of friends for a civil service wedding. Pam wanted her bridesmaid to be a friend she had made while receiving her military training in Texas. Jake wanted his friend Robert to be his best man.

A short list of about ten fellow IBI agents, Pam's parents and cousins and Jake's sisters with their families comprised the guest list. The wedding was scheduled at a chapel in a local funeral home. Pam's mother Ona was critical of their choice of location but the bride and groom explained that it was a beautiful little chapel and that the marriage signified the death of their lonely single years. Ona didn't buy their explanation but she was thrilled that her forty-year old daughter had finally found her perfect match. Everyone had assumed that both Jake and Pam would remain single throughout their lives.

The May wedding was simple but beautiful. Each had written their own vows and with tears in the eyes of all attending, Jake and Pamela pledged their everlasting love to each other.

Jake and Pam worked on a number of decisions together. They decided they would purchase a home near the headquarters of the Choctaw Nation in southern Oklahoma so they could be close to Pam's relatives. It was a modest, ranch-style house on five acres with a large metal outbuilding that would serve as Jake's workshop.

They also decided to set up a foundation to provide college scholarships to deserving American Indians living in Oklahoma. The interest on Jake's considerable

funds would be enough to support at least six students a year and would probably expand as they sought additional contributors to the foundation.

In order to provide each with maximum flexibility and privacy for purchases, they set up separate bank accounts. While Jake preferred to work hours in his shop or at the computer, Pam enjoyed traveling to see friends and to see new places. Sometimes she would be gone for several weeks at a time.

With all of Jake's projects, he was surprised at how much he sometimes missed Pamela but he knew how much she enjoyed her travels. The homecomings were always joyful for Jake with their time together making love, openly discussing feelings and thoughts and sharing memories. But sometimes he was surprised and hurt when Pam chose to leave again. She never asked him to join her on her excursions and when Jake would look less than enthusiastic about her plans to go visit old military friends or to take a tour through Europe or Asia, she would belatedly state, "You're welcome to join me."

Jake would sulk for a day or two but was quickly immersed in an experiment or perfecting one invention or another. He also recognized that Pam had spent eighteen years of her life traveling and having adventures and he reasoned that the lifestyle was simply a part of who she was. And when Pam was home, their lives were perfect.

When not otherwise occupied, Pam would join Jake in his shop and help in building new devices and products. Jake loved that Pam was not only interested in his work but that she often asked probing questions and even made suggestions for improvement.

Jake developed a solar powered shredding and casting system for disposing of plastic containers. He sandwiched photocells to a copper plate to generate both

electricity and heat and added a parabolic reflector to concentrate the sun on the panel and a casting vat. The electricity ran the motor of the grinder, which shredded the plastic into tiny particles which were dumped into the hot casting vat. The vat had a light sensor to determine when the vat was full. When full, the vat emptied into a square, wood frame of four feet width and four inches deep. These paving blocks were then moved automatically along a plastic conveyor when the vat has been emptied. Jake built a complete patio and sidewalk with these blocks. He also constructed molds with to cast a variety of functional objects such as fencing, chairs, tables, and flower pots the free recycled plastic.

Jake had become enamored with the ease of interfacing a computer for control of systems when the Commodore 64 was first introduced. An array of solar collectors was automated on his roof and completely controlled by a simple interface to the C-64 machine. Heat sensors, which are attached to the “game paddle” inputs, regulated when micro-switches were activated to drain the solar panels to prevent freezing and when to engage the pumps to circulate the fluid in the panels. The panels, of course, are a sandwiched combination of solar cells as well as heat collectors.

Having been a professor who taught computer programming along with other subjects like statistics and electronics, Jake was fascinated by the potential of artificial intelligence programs to analyze and control. He wrote an artificial intelligence neural network program, including a Kohonen network, that provided multiple neuron levels with back propagation and multiple inputs and outputs.

One of his correspondents was a researcher in the authors of the Christian Bible. Jake showed him how the input of phrases from a book could be entered into the

Kohonen network to classify the authorship of the phrases. This was a useful tool for any linguist needing to verify the authorship of a written document. Jake also found his network useful for time series analyses of stock prices and prime investment and sale times – a tool useful in his own investment portfolio.

Robot vacuum cleaners had already been marketed, but scrubbing walls with a bucket of water on a ladder was tiring. Jake's robot wall cleaner with a self-contained rechargeable battery and suction plates, is capable of climbing walls, spraying the wall beneath it with a cleaning solution and moving the excess fluid to its own storage tank. Sensors on all four sides let it traverse an entire wall before it needed to be refilled or dumped.

Experimentation with various household products was also fun for Jake. The greatest expense for a printer is not the purchase of the printer (they are almost free) but for the refill cartridges. The cost of the printing fluid is greater than expensive perfumes. By combining the ground-up graphite from the core of used C and D batteries with a mix of alcohol and gelatin, Jake produced a mixture as good or better to refill his printer cartridges.

Jake's original "Glow Rug" consisted of light-emitting diodes inserted throughout the carpet in his bedroom and workshop. It was while picking up laundry detergent that he noticed one of the main ingredients of the cheaper brands was phosphorous. As an experiment, Jake did a deep cleaning of the carpet in their living room and embedded black lights in the baseboard. At night when he turned on the black lights there was a soft glow across the entire carpet. Here was a cheaper and equally effective solution for a glow rug.

Next Jake realized that those who use a microwave oven on a regular basis know that food splatters and can cover the interior with a layer of “gunk”. Mounted high over the stove, it is a chore to clean a microwave oven. To solve this problem, Jake developed a neoprene insert – essentially a square box sized for the inside of the oven. The top of the five-sided box has perforations permitting the user to punch out those areas that need to expose the microwave generator. When this box becomes dirty, it easily is retracted and cleaned in the sink.

Jake wondered why kitchen stoves always opened from the top down. It seemed to him that the logical way that an oven door should open is from the side and with a slot to push it completely out of the way. In this manner one would not have to navigate over the open door to place or retrieve objects from the oven and handicapped, older and clumsy individuals would be able to use the oven much easier.

Whenever Jake watched TV advertisements he saw ways that a product could be improved. While watching ads for television sets, he wondered why each one had to be hooked up to a cable or antenna as well as other devices. All that was really needed are thin LCD screens containing a transmitter and receiver to communicate with a base station that is hooked up to the incoming cable or antenna. Then those receivers could be placed anywhere in the room. This would permit hanging the TV like a picture and easily moving it from one position to another without a cabinet. Jake could not help himself – this need to invent almost consumed him.

Whenever Pam returned home, she was amazed and impressed with how much Jake had accomplished. She spent hours with him in his workshop examining his new inventions and listening to elaborate explanations of each new device and each new

computer program. Jake glowed in her praise and also loved hearing about her visits and adventures in other countries and with her old friends.

While Jake enjoyed his development of new devices, it seemed to him that he must be out of touch with progress because many of his new devices would suddenly appear in advertisements on the TV. “Of course,” he reasoned, “many inventors would see the same need for these devices as I do and many had corporate backing to move them rapidly to market.”

For Jake, it was just a hobby so he felt no discouragement that others were developing highly similar products. He had just finished a new home power system that involved a hydrogen generator to recharge hydrogen-ion batteries when within several weeks he saw an announcement by a Japanese car manufacturer for a similar system to be used to recharge battery driven cars. It made sense to him that a manufacturer of hybrid and battery powered automobiles would also be developing a similar device.

Shortly after their second anniversary on a bright summer day, Jake and Pam had just finished lunch when there was a knock at the door. Jake went to the entrance and opened the door to see their three IBI friends. Steve, Robert and Conrad were standing there with somber expressions. He was delighted to see them again and immediately gave each a hearty handshake as they entered.

Then Steve spoke in a quiet whisper. “Jake, we are not here to rekindle fond memories – we are here on business. Is Pam here?”

Jake was surprised and bewildered. “Yes. She is in the kitchen. Let me call her.”

“No Jake. We will go to her. We will explain everything in a few minutes.” The three agents went to the kitchen and surrounded Pamela. Pam was surprised and looked confused.

Steve then announced: “Pamela Myers Schmidt, you are under arrest for espionage, international spying and international trade violations.” Conrad, who was standing behind her, roughly placed handcuffs on both her wrists.

Jake’s mouth was hanging open. “What in the hell is going on here? Is this someone’s idea of a practical joke?”

Robert then spoke: “Jake, I know this will come as a shock to you. We have been following Pam’s movements ever since you and she left the agency. We suspected that Pam was doing more with the Consortium than simply spying for us as an IBI agent. We suspected she was a double agent a year before you retired and we now know that she continued to be involved with the Consortium. We have been following her every move. We have discovered that she was, in fact, selling your inventions to members of the Consortium.”

At first Jake couldn’t believe his ears. He tried to rush to her side, but Robert restrained him and calmly stated, “Jake, think about it. Haven’t you noticed that almost everything that you invent ends up in someone else’s hands? Did you really buy that Pam was traveling all the time to see friends and to take tours with a bunch of old retired folks?”

Jake was in shock. He had been used again! And this time by the woman he thought would be his partner for life! His sadness was overwhelming and he burst into tears. “Pam, how could you?” he cried.

Pam stood motionless and snarled “You thought you were so smart but you were the biggest fool of all! Did you really think that a woman like me would marry you after that ridiculous proposal?” she added with disdain.

Robert apologetically added, “Jake, we also monitored her bank accounts and found that she has amassed a small fortune. She purchased a property in Thailand and we believe that she was preparing to disappear within a couple of weeks. I’m sorry, man.”

The agents led Pam to a waiting car where she was placed in the back seat between Conrad and Steve who had also handcuffed themselves to Pam for additional security. Jake could only stand there in disbelief as they drove off.

It took Jake two days before he could gather his thoughts. He sat motionless in his recliner for hours at a time. He could not eat or sleep. Finally, he realized what he had to do. First, he had to notify Pam’s parents who, when they heard the news, were devastated.

Next, he went to his workshop and angrily smashed every cherished invention. He placed the piles of rubble into a large recycle bin. Jake realized that he would remain depressed and distraught if he tried to live in their home that they had made together; the first home that had made him truly happy in many years. Jake called a realtor and arranged to have their property listed for sale with the proceeds from the sale to go to Pam’s parents. Jake didn’t even want the money. Even that seemed tainted.

Finally, he gathered all of his personal belongings that could be placed in his car and packed the car for travel. Items that would not fit into the car were placed in cardboard boxes, labeled for shipping to Florida and arrangements made for their

shipment. Jake called a local charity center to pick up all their other belongings so seemingly carefully selected by Pam.

CHAPTER TWENTY: RECOVERY

It took two full days of travel to reach his Florida cabin. When he arrived he immediately fell on the bed, fully clothed and slept for hours. He spent the next two days in manual labor cleaning and arranging the cabin. He moved as in a trance moving from one task to the next. He felt nothing but an emptiness, a flatness with no anger, no hope, no trust.

He was done trying. He knew that from this point forward, he would have no interaction with anyone except when absolutely necessary. Books and the Internet would occupy the rest of his life.

Jake went to the post office and changed his mailing address and then to a local bank to transfer funds from his several accounts. He arranged with a grocery store to deliver food once a week from selections made on his computer. He arranged for cremation upon his death with a local funeral home. He had a will written and notarized by a local lawyer. All proceeds following his death were to be given to animal rescue leagues. He could think of no human being that truly measured up to his standards.

It was weeks before Jake once again could process what had happened. Jake brooded over his life and experiences. He felt anger, betrayal, sadness and loneliness. Where were Karl and Thomas when he needed them the most? Finally, his curiosity about the fate of Pam moved him to some action. He called his friend Robert at the IBI to let him know where he was living and to see what had happened to Pam.

Robert was surprised to receive his call but was anxious to talk with Jake. Robert told Jake that Under the Economic Espionage Act of 1996 Pam was sentenced to two

years in a federal prison. All of her money was seized as well as the property she had bought. Her fine amounted to nearly three million dollars. Robert continued, “Realistically, Pam will probably only serve about eighteen months so the baby will only be about a year old when she is released.”

Robert heard Jake gasp and mumble, “What?”

“Oh geez, Jake, you didn’t know. Pam was pregnant when we arrested her. Now she’s about four months along.”

Jake could hardly speak. “My God, Robert, she’s pregnant? She never told me that she was pregnant. And I thought she would be in prison for a much longer time.”

“You are as surprised as I was. I guess you have some decisions to make. I think you should make contact with Pam and see what she is thinking. Also I don’t know what her parents know.”

“I have to let this sink in,” croaked Jake. “I’ll have to talk to you later. Thanks for the information.”

Jake was totally confused. He had spent months feeling angry with Pam and deeply hurt by her betrayal. But, a baby? It was no longer just about Jake and Pam. Was there a chance that they could be a family? He could finally confess to himself that he had never stopped loving Pam and now hoped that somehow they could rekindle their affection for each other. Jake was energized with the possibilities. The dark clouds of his depression were receding.

Jake sat down and composed a letter to Pam’s parents, telling them of her pregnancy and his continued caring for her as well as his hopes for the future. He then located his lap top computer and searched for information about the federal prison where

Pam was incarcerated. He found the number to call and got her prison number and how to contact her by mail.

Jake then wrote one of the most difficult letters he had ever written. After filling a wastebasket with a pile of crumpled attempts, he finally thought that he had written a letter that accurately expressed his feelings.

“My Dear Pamela,

The last three months of my life have been filled with depression, remorse, and loneliness. Without you, my life is meaningless. Nothing else matters. There is no pleasure in my accomplishments; there is no pleasure in my memories; there is no pleasure in planning any future without you in it.”

“At first, I thought that I could never forgive you. I was focused only on your betrayal and let that override the happiness and closeness that I experienced when we were together. I know that I love you and that I have loved you since the moment we met. I believe that you loved me which perhaps is an even more amazing fact as it had been a very long time since I had felt that from anyone.”

“I forgive you. I want to be with you. I know that you will be released in only a little over a year. Can we be a couple again?”

“I know that you are expecting our baby. I wish that I could tell you that the knowledge of your pregnancy does not play a part in my plea but I know that I would love to be a father and I want to have the baby with me prior to your release. I would love to be a family with you and our child.”

“Forever yours, Jake”

He drove to the post office and mailed the letters special delivery.

It was excruciating waiting for a response from Pam, but it was only two days later that Jake received an email.

“Oh, Jake, how can you ever forgive me? I don’t understand how I got caught up in that Consortium crap. Maybe it was for the excitement and even maybe just to see if it could be done. For some reason, living back in Oklahoma flooded me with my memories of my high school experiences and my desperation to leave. Sometimes just walking the streets of Durant, I would recall the taunting and the teasing and wonder how my mother ever stood it. Many times I thought about running away to flee from those awful memories. It was only our love that kept me coming back.”

“I know you loved me and you have to know that I loved you. I know now that the money was not the reason because we were quite comfortable with what we had on just your savings alone.”

“You are the father of our child and I will sign anything to insure that you have custody while I am incarcerated. I know it will be nearly impossible for you to ever trust me again but I’m hoping in my heart that you will come and visit me or we can email.

“ I really do miss you. And I know that I love you with all my heart and with all my soul.”

Jake’s heart began to race. He could feel it pounding in his chest. He felt hot all over and his ears were ringing as he lowered himself to the chair in front of the computer and began to write with trembling hands.

“Dearest Pam,

“Thank you, thank you, thank you for responding. I have been so afraid that I would never hear from you again. Of course, I can forgive you because I love you and because I believe that we have something special.”

“Love, Jake”

Dear Incredible Husband,

“Please know Jake that I didn’t mean any of those things that I said at the time of my arrest. I was so angry at myself for my stupidity, for my betrayal, for risking our love that I struck out at you. You are the last person I should have tried to wound.”

“Shit, there is a long line forming over my shoulder. I’ll write again soon and please, if you can, come to see me.”

Jake quickly typed “I love you too” and hit the send tab.

Jake couldn’t sit still. His pulse was returning to normal but he still felt nervous and agitated and strangely rejuvenated. The confines of the cabin were suddenly claustrophobic. He had to get outside. Jake walked into the woods headed for the stream that crossed his property at the bottom of the hill. Walking helped and he was beginning to calm himself.

He recognized a large rock and since he had never walked that way before, he knew that the rock must have been a special place for Thomas. As he lowered himself onto the rock, he imagined Thomas sitting there for hours contemplating the beauty of the surroundings and thinking deep thoughts.

Jake found the sounds of the stream calming and comforting. Perhaps for the first time ever, he was aware of the scurrying animals under the ground vegetation and the birdcalls and the chatter of squirrels. For a brief moment, he wondered if there were alligators or snakes or boars or cougars in the area. “No,” he thought, “Thomas would not have been comfortable here if there were any dangers.”

As Jake sat trying to calm himself and contemplating his future, he wondered if he and Pam had any chance of getting back together. He also wondered if there was any chance that he could be a good and loving father.

Jake suddenly noticed a large animal swimming upstream. He was baffled but also fascinated. As it got closer, he realized that it was a huge animal probably weighing close to a thousand pounds. At first he thought that it might be a seal but if so, it was the ugliest seal that he had ever seen. It appeared cumbersome and awkward in the shallow water as it swam very slowly and at times seemed to be crawling along the bottom of the shallow stream as if it had legs as well as flippers.

Jake was enthralled and wondered if Thomas had also seen this strange creature. And then he remembered that the real estate agent, that had sold him this property, had gone on and on about all the animals that visited the area. He was sure that he was observing a Florida Manatee.

And then Jake noticed that the manatee was not alone. Behind her was trailing her baby, a smaller replica of herself. Just then, the huge animal, oblivious to Jake’s presence, stopped, rolled over in the water a couple of times and then turned and nursed the baby, right there, under water. Jake was so touched that he was moved to tears. He

knew that this was the answer to one of his big questions. Of course, he could be a good and loving parent. “It is only natural, after all.”

Later, Jake received a phone call from Pam’s father. Charles indicated that they had received a letter from Pam and that they knew about the pregnancy. Charles also added that he and Ona were concerned that Pam’s first pregnancy was occurring rather late in life as she would be forty-three before the baby was born. Jake had thought that his forty-eight years was a rather advanced age to become a father but had not considered that there might be a danger to Pam or the baby because of her age. Since Pam looked about thirty, it was easy to forget that she was actually also middle-aged.

Charles, too, was groping to understand why Pam had done the things she had done. He knew they didn’t have much money when she was growing up and that she was somewhat of an outcast from her peers. He said he felt sorry for Jake and knew how much he loved her and hoped that Jake would have custody of the child and that he and Ona could visit their first grandchild. At this point Jake did not try to hide his crying. He assured Pam’s father that he would move heaven and earth to get both the child and Pam back with him and then “we can all be a family once again”.

The next day Jake went to town to consult with an experienced lawyer. The attorney informed him that since he and Pam were still married that he would automatically be awarded custody of the child until his wife was released from prison, unless the mother objected.

Jake could not wait until the next day to write to Pam but figured any messages could just sit in her mailbox until she had access to the computer.

“Dearest Pam,

I have great news. I consulted with an attorney and he informed me that there was no problem with my having custody of the baby as long as you don’t object. It is still okay with you, right? Do you know if it is a boy or a girl? Either one is fine with me but would love to think of the baby as a ‘he or she’ instead of an it.”

Jake then told Pam all about the manatee and his time in the woods. “It was like I was in another world, or a world that I had never noticed before. It was both peaceful and alive at the same time. And every one of those lives mattered. Pam, I was awed about something separate from myself. Except for how I feel about you, I had never felt that before.” He added, “I would love the chance to hike the woods with you and our child one day.”

He signed his letter, “Your loving husband.”

The next evening he received Pam’s reply, “OF COURSE THAT IS OKAY WITH ME! I want you to be its father and I definitely want you to have full custody while I am stuck here.”

“Did I tell you that when I came here, they suggested that I could have an abortion? I told them, ‘definitely not’. Jake, I want this baby. The moment I found out that I was pregnant, I knew that I wanted this baby.”

With tears in his eyes, Jake wrote, “I know that I want this baby, too. I never before thought of myself as someone who would be a father but now I know that I want that. On some level, I believe that it was an omen that I saw the manatee nursing her baby. It was beautiful and so natural at the same time.”

Stifling her own tears, Pam wrote, “The baby will be perfect with your intelligence and my good looks.”

“Whoa, what about with your intelligence and my good looks?”

They chatted back and forth for the next hour. And then again, Pam asked Jake if he could come to see here.

It was a couple of weeks before Jake was able to get on Pam’s visitor list and to arrange a visitation with Pam at the prison. He was first searched and then led into a visitor’s area. In about ten minutes Pam was led to a chair opposite Jake’s chair. The rules were very specific. They were allowed a brief hug and kiss and they were allowed to touch hands, as long as it was not “overly romantic or erotic.” When Jake read that, he had to grin because he knew any touching between them would certainly be romantic and erotic even if it did not appear so to others.

Pam was visibly shaking and struggling not to cry. They both leaned over the table and kissed briefly as the guards looked on. They then joined hands and sat staring into each other’s eyes. Jake could only repeat over and over that he still loved Pam and Pam said the same to Jake. Pam’s pregnancy was quite visible on her slender, well-toned body. Jake was surprised that her baby bump somehow made her more beautiful. Jake also noticed how drawn and haggard she appeared and begged her to take good care of herself.

Pamela described some of her activities at the prison and how she was assisting with the literacy problem and English as a second language. Her fluency in multiple languages had come in handy. And in Florida, staff and other inmates especially appreciated her Spanish fluency.

Jake told her about the telephone visit with her father and how they were all hoping that somehow they could again be a family.

Pam explained that she hadn't been allowed an ultrasound so she didn't know the sex of the baby. Jake told her how he wished he could hold her and kiss her and help her through the ordeal.

Jake then took his biggest leap of faith. He told her a little bit about Karl and Thomas and about how for years, he had thought that they were real. Pamela sat quietly and listened attentively with only one comment, "I thought that they were just aliases and disguises."

"And I honestly thought that they were real people. They were my friends and my co-workers. When I finally realized the truth, the loss was like daggers in my heart. I had lost my best friends, my confidantes and I was suddenly totally on my own. Do you think that I am crazy like in 'Three Faces of Eve'?"

Pam squeezed Jake's hand. "I believe that we do what we have to do. Did I ever tell you that I met Karl in the hospital in China?"

Jake shook his head and looked very concerned.

"Yeah, when you first woke up, you were a mean, grouchy bear. You were bossy and critical of everything and everyone. And then several days later, you woke up and you were you. You didn't even remember that I had been at your bedside for days."

"Pam, it was like I was living three lives without knowing it and it is frightening that I remember so little of the other two lives. I had no control."

"I think that it wasn't in you to be angry or violent and so your mind created Karl. And maybe you were afraid to be vulnerable after you were abused by that foster-father

and so you invented Phooey-woeey. Thomas probably showed up when you outgrew Phooey. No, I don't think that you are crazy. Well, maybe you are a little crazy for loving me."

Their visitation time was nearly over before each could regain enough composure to talk about the pregnancy and the importance of Jake's having full custody as soon as the baby was discharged from the hospital. Pam fully agreed and promised she would do all she could to insure he would have custody of the baby.

At this point the guard came and stood by their table. They rose and embraced. They could have stood like that for hours but the guard tapped her on the shoulder and escorted Pam out of the room. Jake continued to sit for several minutes with his head resting on his arms on the table, until a guard informed him that he must leave.

After several weeks of writing back and forth via email, Pam mentioned that one positive thing about being in prison was that a person had a chance to think and to really do some soul searching.

Pam wrote, "I am beginning to understand why I did such a terrible thing to you. I don't mean it as an excuse, Jake. I have no excuse but I think that after eighteen years of living on adrenaline, it was as if I were addicted to danger and stress. Being little 'Holly Homemaker' was never going to be me.

Jake answered, "Hon, I never expected that of you. You could have pursued anything you wanted."

"I couldn't come up with anything that I wanted to do. I thought about going back to school and thought 'Boring'. I thought about joining the rodeo circuit and thought 'Ouch'. The local police department had some appeal but that meant nightshifts

and weekends and no flexibility for travel. You had your science and your intellectual challenges. I tried to settle into being the home decorator and the chief chef and to be satisfied with having a wonderful husband and spending time with my parents. It wasn't enough. And then a representative from the Consortium contacted me."

"They called you? Why didn't you tell me? Maybe the IBI would have let you have another assignment."

"Yeah, I realize that now but the Consortium had said absolutely no involvement with the Agency and that I would be under surveillance. They just wanted access to your inventions. I knew that you didn't care if you made any money from the inventions. So I got sucked in and figured that I might as well make money from selling them."

"Hon, I would have given you more money."

"But that's just it. That was your money. I thought that I needed my own money."

"So you wanted that so much that you were willing to become a criminal. I no longer care about what you did to me, but you broke the law."

"Jake Schmidt, who are you to lecture me on illegal activities? I know about your activities, too, you know."

"Okay, but that was about revenge, pay back, restitution. It was never about money"

"And I don't think that money was my major motivator. I missed the excitement and the challenge of taking risks." With a grin, Pam added, "I needed the adrenaline rush. Maybe our baby will be a little monster and all my needs will be met."

Jake and Pam continued to email every day, to occasionally talk on the phone and Jake was able to visit Pam once a week. As the months passed by, they grew closer and closer to the love they had once shared. He no longer feared intelliphobia to the extent he once had and actually smiled as he realized that he had spent most of his life being “intelliphobia-phobic”. He did fear rejection if anyone else knew about what could be construed as his mental health problem. From time to time, he even wondered if he should have told Pamela and worried that she actually did think that he was crazy. He knew that he wanted full disclosure and to base their relationship on openness and honesty but “Damn, that is really scary”.

Jake was able to speak directly with the physician who regularly visited the prison and asked about Pam’s health. Jake had worried ever since Charles had mentioned that Pam was pretty old to be having a first pregnancy.

The doctor reassured him that this was not the first prison pregnancy that he had supervised. He was blunt with Jake and told him that he was concerned about Pam’s health and the position of the baby in the womb. He had already made plans to have her transferred to the hospital in Tallahassee for the delivery upon the first sign of labor pains. Jake thanked him and asked if there were any way that he could be present during the birth to assist in any way he could. The doctor said he would try to arrange it but had not been successful in doing that for inmates in the past. He also suggested that Jake might make arrangements to stay somewhere close to the hospital as the delivery date approached.

Jake immediately arranged for a hotel room and moved there three weeks before the due date. Only a week later, the phone call came at 3:00 A.M. Pam had been

transferred to the local hospital and Jake was advised to get there as soon as possible. When he arrived at the hospital he went to the information booth to get directions to the room where Pam was delivering the baby. He was surprised that she was in an operating room instead of being in a labor room. A nurse escorted him to the room. He was told he could not enter but could wait in the hallway and she pointed to a chair about twenty feet from the room. Although Jake was tired, he was too agitated to sit. He paced most of the time as he waited.

It was after 6:00 A.M. before the doctor came out of the operating room and approached Jake with an unreadable expression on his face. “Jake,” he said, “I’m afraid there were some serious complications. Pam had a condition called placenta previa, which led to a massive loss of blood. It is a condition where the placenta, which is normally attached high in the uterus, is instead attached at the bottom and blocks the cervix. The placenta was delivered first so it was urgent to get the baby out as quickly as possible before it suffered a lack of oxygen. An emergency cesarean section delivery was necessary if we were to have any chance of saving the baby.”

“God,” thought Jake, “why is the doctor talking so slowly?” For minutes, Jake’s world seemed to be moving in slow motion. Every word that the doctor said seemed to be slow, deep, and drawn out like a tape-recorder running on “slow”.

“Is Pamela okay?” shouted Jake, much more loudly than he intended. “Is the baby okay?”

“She has had a really rough time but she will be okay. And you have a beautiful and healthy baby boy.”

Jake could not believe his ears. He began to shake and cry. "Please, let me see her and the baby," he pleaded. The doctor gave him directions to the nursery and told him that he could spend time with Pam in about half an hour. Jake easily found the nursery and the baby's bassinet was right in front of the window. He wore a blue stocking cap and a sign on the bassinet proclaimed "Baby Boy Schmidt." Jake could see lots of dark brown hair protruding from under the cap and framing his plump, beautiful little face. A nurse noticed Jake and motioned that he could come into the side room off the nursery. She greeted him and had him dress in gown and mask while she returned to the nursery to get the baby. She returned with the little bundle and positioned the baby in Jake's arms.

He was the most beautiful baby that Jake had ever seen and he could immediately see the strong resemblance to Pam. Jake swayed softly back and forth and tried to keep his tears from falling on the baby. A thousand thoughts raced through Jake's head. This baby would be his responsibility for almost a year before Pam was released from prison. "How do I take care of this precious life?" "What do I feed him?" "What if there is a problem and we are alone way out in the cabin?" Jake decided, right then and there, that he would move back to Oklahoma where he would have the help and support of Ona and Charles. "After all," he reasoned, "It takes a village to raise a child."

At this point the nurse interrupted his thoughts and held out her arms to take the baby. He reluctantly placed the baby back in the nurse's arms. She then smiled and said "Dr. Schmidt, we have a social worker here at the hospital who can give you a lot of help and answer many of your questions. The baby will be right here in our nursery until it is

time to take him home and we will take real good care of him until his discharge is arranged. You can visit with him at any time, day or night.”

Jake then quickly returned to the operating room to see Pam. Pam had been moved to a small room adjoining the O.R. A nurse informed him that he would only be allowed a few minutes with her and showed him the way.

Pamela was still groggy from the anesthesia, her hair was in disarray and matted with dried perspiration, her skin was pale, and she wore no makeup and there was bruising around her eyes. To Jake, she looked beautiful and he realized that he had never loved her more than he did at that moment. He cupped her head in his hands and softly kissed her lips. As he gently held her close, Jake cried tears of happiness and relief.

Suddenly, as he held Pam with his tears falling on her face, Pam snapped at him, “Get it together, Schmidt. Some big IBI agent you are. Shit happens. You have responsibilities. Our baby boy needs you. He needs your love; he needs your care. Do you even have a plan yet?”

“Would you be okay if I take him back to Oklahoma? I really need help from your parents.”

“Sure Jake, that’s fine. He will be part of a family and part of the Choctaw Nation too. Have you thought of a name?”

“I was thinking Pona, sort of after you and your mother.”

“That’s nice,” commented Pam as she drifted off to sleep. Jake sat for a while just holding Pam’s hand and watching her sleep. He knew that she would be sent back to the prison for her recovery. Because of his moving back to Oklahoma, it could be months before he saw her again. Sitting beside her was bittersweet. How he wished he could

turn back the clock. How he wished she had never betrayed him. How he wished she had never been arrested and charged. How he wished she would be returning to Oklahoma with him.

The soft knock on the door brought Jake out of his reverie. It was the social worker, who asked if he were ready to come to her office. She immediately gave him the reassurance that everything necessary could be handled.

Jake asked the social worker if she could arrange the birth certificate to have the baby's name entered as Pona Elijah Schmidt. (He chose Elijah for a middle name because the Bible said that Elijah could raise the dead. "In many ways, he mused, this little baby raised his parents' marriage from the dead.")

As Jake was wondering if those thoughts had come from Thomas since he, personally, hadn't thought about the Bible in thirty years, he barely heard the social worker's instruction on where to go to enter information on the birth certificate. Pulled back to the moment, Jake asked, "What's next. Can I feed Pona? What will he eat?"

Christine responded, "Pona will be started on formula sometime today. You can come to the hospital to feed him or visit him any time day or night. The nurses are available to give instructions and to assist you in any way."

Jake went back to his hotel and called Pam's parents. By that point, he was nearly giddy with pride and happiness. He told his in-laws all about the difficult delivery but that Pam was okay and in good spirits. He told them about the name they had chosen and that it was a combination of Pamela and Ona to honor both the baby's mother and the baby's grandmother. Ona seemed pleased beyond words.

“I’m also thinking about moving back to your area so you can be involved with your grandson if you think you would like that.”

Charles chuckled and stated, “Ah, so you are a bit worried about being on your own with the baby.”

“Well, that too,” Jake confessed.

Jake could hear Ona in the background, “Charles, don’t give the boy a hard time. Jake, we would like nothing better,” she shouted.

“Great, then I will head straight there as soon as he is discharged from the hospital.” Jake added “I love you both and will be so glad to see you again. Please take good care of yourselves.”

Next Jake called Robert at the IBI to announce the birth of his son. Robert was full of congratulations and good wishes. Robert also told Jake that he had always cared about Pam as a person and had admired and respected her abilities as an agent. He stated that he knew that he might not have survived his bout of hypothermia in the Andes if it had not been for Pam’s level headedness. “In many ways, Jake, I owe my life to Pam.”

Robert added that he and other agents of the IBI gave positive testimony at Pam’s trial with as much detail as they could about her contributions to the IBI in solving multiple cases. He was sure their testimony was a key in her getting a relatively light sentence for her post-IBI activities. Jake assured Robert that he was grateful for Robert’s help and would be in touch with his new address as soon as he got settled back in Oklahoma.

Jake spent the next two days practically living at the hospital. When he wasn’t feeding Pona, he sat and rocked him for hours. He often napped on a couch in a waiting

room and only returned to the hotel to shower and change clothes. Sometimes, he stood staring through the nursery window watching the baby's every stretch, every yawn, and tiny little grin as he slept. Jake knew that he was already totally in love with the tiny person that was part of both Pamela and him.

After informing the social worker and the nurses, Jake took a day to go to his cabin. He packed his personal belongings and arranged to have boxes shipped to a storage facility in Durant, Oklahoma. As he locked the cabin, he vowed to one day bring his son there to explore and to play in the woods. They would be heading for Oklahoma the day after his return when Pona was just five days old.

The day of the trip to Durant was a busy one. Jake packed a carry-on bag with diapers, baby formula and a new pacifier for Pona. He added some snacks for himself for the two-hour layover in Atlanta. He settled the hospital costs and said goodbye to the social worker, the nurses and the doctors.

The flight went well and Jake realized how much sleep a newborn needed, even though it wasn't always at convenient times for the parent. The few times that the baby cried helped to clear his ears from the changes in pressure. Jake cuddled with him whenever he could and watched as he slept in his secure baby carrier. Pona was awake during the stop-over in Atlanta but seemed to be focusing on things around him and cried only a couple of times. Jake was able to warm his milk in a microwave oven at the Atlanta airport and after feeding Pona, the baby slept nearly all the way to the Oklahoma City airport.

Jake had a rental car delivered to the airport entrance and he quickly installed Pona's baby carrier in the rear seat. They were on their way and within fifteen minutes of

highway driving, Pona was fast asleep. Traffic was not a problem and they made good time and arrived at Pam's parent's home by 9:15 PM.

As soon as Jake knocked on the door, Charles and Ona opened it and with tears running down their faces they greeted Jake and Pona with open arms. Jake himself burst into tears at this touching moment. They hugged for minutes while Jake held Pona's carrier with one hand. Pona was now fully awake and peering up at his grandparents. Ona unstrapped Pona from his carrier and placed him next to her cheek as she whispered in her native language what sounded like a poetic song. Jake knew that he was home.

Charles then spoke: "Jake, I know you must be exhausted. We would be so honored if you would agree to stay with us for a few days."

Jake threw his arms around Charles and said: "Bless you Charles. I can think of nothing more pleasing than to spend some time with my family."

Charles sat down next to Jake and with his hand on Jake's shoulder said "Now you ARE our family too and we look forward to you and Pona living close to us. Pamela will be home, too, before we know it." Charles announced "It is time for us all to get a good night's sleep. We borrowed a cot and a bassinet and set them up in Pamela's old room. I hope you won't be too cramped with Pam's old trophies and high school junk and all my fishing gear."

"I am sure it will be perfect, Charles. I hope that you and Ona know how appreciative I am."

Tomorrow will be a busy day so try and get some sleep. We will see you in the morning."

Alone in their room, Charles and Ona talked about how different Jake seemed. Charles mentioned that he knew that Jake was overwhelmed but that he was also showing compassion, warmth, and openness that he had never before seen in Jake. “You know I don’t think that Jake ever hugged me before. And I know for sure that I had never seen him cry before.”

Ona agreed and added, “Jake truly loves the baby and our daughter. He will take good care of them. Soon we will all be together again.”

Jake fell into a deep sleep waking only once when Pona whimpered. Before he could fully awaken himself, Ona was right there next to him picking up Pona and quietly taking him to the kitchen.

After a quick breakfast, Ona was cuddling and rocking Pona as Jake asked, “Do you think that you could take care of him while I go find a place for us to live?”

Ona responded with a quick nod and a possessive hug of the baby.

First Jake drove by the house where he and Pam had lived before. He was not surprised to see a “Sold” sign in the yard as his in-laws had told him that they had received an offer. He really wasn’t disappointed as he thought it would be nice for Pona to live closer to his grandparents and to other families with children. Jake quickly contacted his realtor who had several homes to show him. One met all of his requirements and he quickly made an offer on a beautiful four-bedroom home in a residential area with a fenced backyard, close to a school, near a park and walking distance to Southeastern Oklahoma State University. On his return trip to his in-laws’, Jake felt a tremendous weight had been lifted and he was becoming excited over the prospects of a new life with Pam and baby Pona.

By the time that Jake got back to his in-laws, the living room was filled with baby gifts. There were pastel-wrapped packages from Charles' co-workers, Ona's friends and relatives, Jake's sisters, Jake and Pam's IBI colleagues, Pam's military buddies, and high school and college friends of Pam's. Jake could hardly wait to tell Pam how many friends and loved ones that she had truly had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: FATHERHOOD

Two days later Jake was able to close on his new home. He drove Charles and Ona to see the property. He asked if they would be willing to help pick out furniture for the new home, particularly for Pona's bedroom, and they enthusiastically agreed.

They selected brightly colored upholstered furnishings that would be baby-proof not only for the nursery room but also for the living room, dining room and kitchen. To Jake's surprise, Ona had already located some Choctaw heirlooms and decorations to hang on the wall. Jake had arranged to have some pictures that he had of himself and of Pam framed for the walls.

The next day the furniture was delivered and arranged. Charles and Ona were there to help supervise and care for Pony. Jake made a hurried trip to a local hardware store to purchase a bottle warmer, toaster, microwave oven, kitchen utensils, silverware, a vacuum and mop, detergents and other household supplies. He also stopped at a grocery store and purchased breakfast cereals, milk, baby food, meat, vegetables, soft drinks and trash bags. He had forgotten how many things were needed for a household. In the past, Pamela took care of all of that. And in the distant past, that was one of Thomas's chores.

Finally that night, Jake was able to set up his computer and to check email. Pam reported that she was still in the prison infirmary but able to get around some. Jake had been so involved in caring for the baby and preparing their home that he hadn't thought much about how Pam might be doing. He was surprised to discover that his strong, no-nonsense wife had sunk into a deep depression.

“Jake, my darling, I don’t know if I can do this. The thought of eleven more months of not being with you and not being with our baby is unbearable. In the hospital, I only got to hold him a few times but I know that I already love him and miss him more than I could have ever imagined. I know that you and my parents will take good care of Pona but he won’t even know me! Please send pictures, lots of pictures. I will call every chance I get. I want to hear him coo and gurgle. I even want to hear his cry. I want him to hear my voice. How I wish I could lie in your arms with the baby asleep on my stomach. How I yearn to be a family.”

Jake felt deeply for Pamela but didn’t have a clue of how to make the situation any better for her as he was also miserable at times without her. Jake wrote loving words and words of encouragement. He sent pictures almost every day. They talked on the phone and Pona listened and sometimes Pony even made sweet little baby sounds. But nothing seemed to improve Pam’s mood and most phone calls would end with Pam’s sobbing.

At one point Jake emailed the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley (1849-1902) because Nelson Mandela reported that it had given him strength during his incarceration.

*“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”*

Pamela reported that that poem helped a lot and that she read it multiple times everyday but she still struggled with depression and guilt. There was merely slight improvement in her mood until Jake threw her own words back at her with an email written in desperation.

“Get it together, Schmidt. Some big IBI agent you are. Shit happens. You can do this. You are the strongest person that I have ever known. You have responsibilities. Our baby boy needs you. He needs your love; he needs you to be optimistic; he needs you to get through this. ”

As Jake and Pony got into a routine and the baby started to sleep through the night, Jake discovered that there was also lots of time for thinking and reading. He bought every psychological self-help book that he could find in their small town. He made himself take risks in trusting other people. He let himself become close to Charles and Ona.

Always there were lots of questions in the back of Jake's mind. "Had he created imaginary friends out of loneliness? Why had he chosen to be a loner?" "Why had he not stayed in touch with the few friends he had made in public school and college? Why was he not closer to his two surviving sisters, Marie and Tina?"

"Could and would he change his behavior to not offend people of average or below average intelligence? How would he teach Pony to respect and value the friendships of people quite different than himself? How would he teach Pony about bullying in school?"

"How do you teach a child about being safe from kidnappers and pedophiles without making him timid or paranoid? Who would teach Pony about friendships and school romances?"

"How much of his personal history should he share with Pony and at what age? Why was he not feeling more guilt over the revenge killings and for things that he had had to do while in the IBI?"

More than anything, he wanted Pony to have a happy and healthy life and to know the joy of friendships and fulfillment of giving and receiving love. At times, Jake was overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising Pony and by wanting to do everything right. He longed for the end of Pamela's incarceration and believed that she would be much

more adept at helping their son deal with the emotional challenges of life so that he would be happier and healthier than Jake had been.

And then Jake started to realize that Pony's childhood would be quite different from Jake's. First of all, Jake knew that Pony would never be in foster care. Pony had his grandparents and Jake's sister and, for that matter, Pony had the whole Choctaw Nation. And if ever necessary, Jake had arranged that Robert would be his legal guardian if Pony's family were not able to take care of him. Jake and his sisters had vowed that they would always make an effort to spend time together. Pony would have the chance to know his aunts and his cousins.

And then there was the Choctaw Nation. Jake had already recognized the strong ties that Charles and Ona had with Ona's relatives even though they had rejected her as a young child. Pony definitely had a village as in the ancient African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." Jake hadn't known his grandparents; there were no cousins in the vicinity; and certainly, there was no village. Pony's life experiences would be very different from Jake's.

Jake was a full time single parent. Almost everywhere he went Pony accompanied him. Ona's Choctaw friends had made a stroller of woven reeds, which Jake proudly used to stroll down the main street of Durant. As Pony reached the age of six months old, Jake was surprised whenever they went into the grocery store. Pony would point at his favorite baby food jars for Jake to fetch. He would also point at the groceries that Jake purchased for himself. How could such a young child be so aware of Jake's shopping habits? At the checkout counter, Pony would babble with the friendly clerk as if he were carrying on a conversation.

When Pam called, Pony seemed to recognize his mother's voice. He would grin and seemingly carry on a conversation. He could even say "hi" and "mama". In fact, one day Pony even said "shit" and Jake realized that it was time to clean-up his own vocabulary. Pam no longer sobbed on the phone but would talk baby talk and sometimes giggle with delight.

Jake was both the proud father and also worried that Pony could eventually feel separate from his peers because of his intellect. He continually reminded himself that Pony's life experiences would be very different from his or from his mother's.

Ona was more than pleased to baby-sit with Pony once a week so that Jake and Charles could go fishing with Native American friends. Jake found himself becoming more and more comfortable with that circle of friends and more and more fascinated by the cultures and the people that were so willing to share their history and so willing to include Pony and Jake into their community. For the first time, Jake was developing a circle of real friends without the ties of jobs or missions.

Jake and Pam started at day one hundred to start counting down the days until her release. When Pony was nine-months old, Jake and Pony flew to Florida to spend a week so that Pony could actually meet his mother. Special allowances were made because of the distance that Jake and Pony had traveled and as rewards for Pam's involvement in the teaching programs at the prison. They were allowed to visit as a family for four hours every morning for a week in a large room with only one guard and very few other visitors. Pam was permitted to hold Pony, to play with him, and some physical contact was also allowed for the married couple. Pony seemed to know immediately that Pam was the "Mama" that he heard on the phone and seen in pictures on the wall. He had no

reluctance over approaching her, hugging her, or drooling all over her prison uniform. At one point, Pony reached up, tenderly touched Pam's cheek, and said "Mama".

Jake and Pony repeated the trip and visits when the baby was ten-months-old. At that visit, Pony was even more talkative and active. He babbled continuously and beat rhythms with his hands on the table. Pam cuddled and laughed with the baby and then asked, "Who's been teaching him the Choctaw language?"

"Huh, he spends lots of time with Ona but what Choctaw language?"

"He has been labeling everything he sees and touches but in Choctaw. When he was beating on the table, he said the words for table and then for drum and then he said, "table-drum". He knows the words for nose, mouth, ear, hair, hand, clock and the list just goes on and on."

"Pam, I thought that he was just babbling in baby talk. I guess I better get started on learning Choctaw too."

When Pony was eleven-months-old, Pam was due for early release from prison. Jake made the trip alone leaving Pony in his grandparents' care. Jake had planned for a week alone with Pam but they were both anxious to return to Oklahoma to be with Pony and to start being a real family. Pam asked to directly go back to Durant. Jake's feelings were a little hurt but he certainly understood.

On the plane headed for Atlanta, they sat side by side. Their shoulders touched, their arms touched, their thighs touched as they sat closely holding hands. During the first four months that Pam had been in prison, they had had no contact and then for the fourteen months of reconciliation, they had been restricted to chaste brief hugs and a

couple of friendly kisses. They were starved for intimacy. They craved being able to express their deep love for one another.

And then Pam started drawing circles on Jake's palm and then she rubbed each finger of his hand up one side and down the other. Jake was going crazy. He wanted so much to hold her and to touch her all over.

As they were exiting the plane in Atlanta, Pam asked in a rather suggestive voice, "How long is our layover?"

"Almost three hours."

"Do you have a VIP card for the lounge?"

"Yes. Hmm."

Jake and Pam nearly ran towards the VIP lounge. They found a sofa in a fairly private back corner of the large room and fell onto the sofa in each other's arms. Acting like a couple of teenagers with excessive hormones, they snuggled and kissed, Jake's tongue penetrating Pam's mouth as she surreptitiously reached for Jake's erection.

"God, Pam, I can't take much more or I am going to make a scene right here in front of everyone."

"I know. Does this airport have any of those family rest rooms, a baby-changing room, somewhere private?"

"Yeah, come on. I used one of those to change Pony when we were here before."

The room was tiny with a fold-down changing table, a small sink, and a toilet. But most importantly, it was private and there was a lock on the door. No two people ever sloughed their clothing so quickly. Fore play was bypassed as Jake thrust his

swollen member into Pam's warm, moist throbbing womanhood. Just as the release came and Pam was stifling her sounds of ecstasy, the doorknob rattled.

Pam managed a "Just a minute" before they burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Now, I'd call that a layover," quipped Jake with a huge grin on his mouth.

"How about some real food now?"

"Sure we could grab something but what I really need is some clothing before I have to meet and greet relatives and friends. This stuff is hanging on me and everything I have in Durant will be too large, too. I saw some nice shops in the terminal."

"Geez, I should have thought of that. Let's go shopping!"

Even though Pam made quick selections, they still ended up having to run to their gate. As they plopped down in their assigned seats, they both exuded a healthy glow and they knew that their new life together was starting.

Pam loved the new house and spent several minutes in the baby's room touching everything Pony had touched and breathing in the sweet baby aromas. She then went to the master bedroom to change. Jake was already lying on the bed with a wicked gleam in his eyes. Slowly in the comfort of their new home, Jake and Pam made love. They made promises and said all those special words of reassurance, commitment, and deep caring.

They jumped into the shower together, dressed quickly and then headed to Ona and Charles' to collect Pony. They had called ahead from the airport in Oklahoma City to let Pam's parents know that they were coming home a week early so they weren't surprised to see cars up and down the street and Pam's parent's small home crammed full with friends and family.

Pam was surprised at how awkward she felt as she was greeted like some kind of hero, more like a soldier returning home than like a federal prisoner who had made huge mistakes and betrayed her own husband. Either no one had told these people where she had been or they were the most forgiving people in the world.

Then Pam heard the delighted squeal of her baby, as he toddled across the room and into her arms. With both his little arms around her neck, they clung tightly to each other while onlookers laughed and applauded.

After the first couple of weeks of Pam's adjustment back to normalcy, she had once again learned to sleep in a quiet environment snuggled next to Jake. Both Jake and Pam had had some concerns about becoming a family again but they settled easily into a routine of caring for Pony, family outings, visiting with friends and Pam's parents, and meeting basic living needs. Their love life also returned easily and naturally as they strove to satisfy their skin hunger that had been building for eighteen long months.

As Pony grew and began to toddle around the yard, Jake and Pam bought a variety of toys. There was a large plastic helicopter with a cockpit and a rotor that doubled as two teeter-totters with small seats at the end of the rotors. The backyard was soon equipped with a small basketball hoop, plastic balls, a small plastic bat, a sandbox, a swing set and slide and a miniature badminton court.

When Pony was almost three years old, Jake converted one of the double garage spaces to a small workshop with wood working tools and a small electronics bench. Pony watched every move that Jake made as he constructed a one-third scale playhouse that looked just like their house on the outside. It had a single large space inside that

would contain several small tables and child-sized chairs where children could have “tea parties”.

Pony was excited the day that Jake assembled the house in the backyard but as he watched the construction, Jake noticed that Pony was slowly losing his enthusiasm. Jake pointed out that the little house looked just like their big house. Pony seemed to be struggling to carefully pick his words when he finally managed to say, “I thought you were building an asi. Daddy, make me an asi, please.” Pony then ran into their house.

“What is an asi?” thought Jake as he followed Pony into the house. He found Pony sulking on the floor in front of the TV and asked, “Pony, what is an asi?”

“Call Ona, she knows what an asi is.”

Jake reached Ona immediately and discovered that Pony had told her that Jake was building an asi as a playhouse for Pony. Ona quickly described the structure that the Choctaw had traditionally built in the olden days. It was made by weaving river cane, vines, and wood into a round frame that was then covered with some kind of clay and topped with a thatched roof.

“How does he know about that?”

“Oh, Jake, I hope it is okay. I wanted him to know both of his heritages. He also knows about basket weaving, woodcarving, beadwork, and tools and weapons that were historically part of the Choctaw culture. I hope I didn’t overstep some boundaries.”

“Of course not, Ona. I think that is great but I guess I better be educating myself too, if I am going to keep up with him. I guess Pony will be the only kid around to have two playhouses in his backyard.”

Jake and Pam made friends with five of their closest neighbors who had toddlers and preschoolers. They frequently invited them for refreshments in the backyard so their children could also enjoy the toys and so that Pony could learn to relate to other children. Pony seemed to thoroughly enjoy the other children and had no trouble sharing his toys.

Two of the neighbors were professors at Southeastern Oklahoma State University and Jake enjoyed reminiscing with them about his own teaching experiences. It was during one of these conversations that he mentioned that he would be glad to give some free tutoring to students that might be having difficulty with their introductory statistics courses. He would be particularly interested in tutoring with Choctaw students in exchange for their giving him some lessons in their native language and tribal customs. In less than a week, he had a daily schedule of two hour long sessions with a variety of students. Pony loved to sit and listen intently to Jake's lessons and the instructions that the students gave Jake in return for his service.

By the time Pony was four years old, he began to speak more and more Choctaw that Jake did not understand. With Pam and Ona, he seemed to be having real conversations in the Choctaw language. Jake felt dumb because he was just beginning to understand some of the words that his students attempted to teach him. And then Jake had an insight. He had spent his life feeling superior to those who didn't understand science or math or engineering to the extent that he did but had never considered that others might know far more than he knew about other subject areas or about human communication or social connections. He had distanced himself from others as much as others had rejected him.

Pam and Jake had never been happier as individuals or as a couple. Although Pony was not the “little monster” that Pam had predicted, much of her time was still happily spent with playing, teaching, and supervising him. She even found that she no longer minded laundry, shopping and cleaning.

Every evening, after Pony was in bed, was also special. She no longer saw her husband as a geek or a nerd but rather as the most complicated, deep-thinking, and sensitive man on the planet. She was touched by his love for Pony, his love for music, his respect for animals, his interest in everything, his intrigue for the Choctaw culture and most of all, by his love for and acceptance of her.

When the new census form arrived, she proudly checked three boxes to represent her ethnic and racial background but under marital status, she ignored the boxes and wrote in “Happy”.

Jake was as enthusiastic about their evenings together as was Pam. He was fascinated by the way she thought and by how quickly she could learn new things. He had even learned to find beauty in her favorite country music and her love of talent shows on TV. He loved her openness and their deep conversations and he was enthralled by the way she could make a house into a home. Her enthusiasm for making love with him continued to amaze and comfort him. He had never expected this level of connection to another person and definitely not as he neared fifty-three years of age.

Jake also gave Pam credit for helping him to reconcile his relationships with his sisters Marie and Tina. She had insisted on yearly contact and many years, they visited even more often. Jake looked forwards to those times that they shared memories of their parents and of the eldest sister Kim. They even planned and enjoyed a large family

reunion of all of Jake's nieces and nephews and their children, many of whom were around Pona's age.

Jake and Pam wondered if they were spoiling Pony but they wanted him to have every means of expression and every opportunity to develop "normal" skills and interests. One day Jake brought home an electronic piano keyboard and was surprised to hear Pony picking out familiar tunes. By then Pony had also mastered riding a small bicycle without training wheels, and was developing skills at Choctaw stickball and soccer. Already Jake could tell that Pony's interests and talents were far more diverse than his had ever been. He was also proud of Pony's enthusiasm for playing with all kinds of kids: older or younger, boys or girls, thinkers or doers, quiet or rowdy, shy or outgoing. Pony simply loved people.

The one thing that Jake missed about his cabin in the woods was the contact with animals and the opportunity to observe and interact with them. Jake had grown up with pets but it was not until after he met Pam that he started to remember how important the pets had been to him. Before that, he had always thought of the pets as belonging to his sisters or to his friend Thomas.

Under the guise of "Pony needs a dog and needs to learn to care for and love a pet," Jake and Pony headed for the local animal pound. Immediately, Pony selected a young German shepherd mix and Jake thought that that was an excellent choice. The dog would grow to provide some protection for Pony and to be a great playmate.

As they headed to the front desk to make an application, Jake suddenly stopped in front of a small cage in which lay the most pathetic looking little dog. She had been shaved down almost to her skin. The sign on her kennel stated, "Two year-old female

Bichon Frise rescued from a puppy mill. She will need patience and kindness as she is not house-broken, is not socialized, and is easily frightened.”

Jake bent down to her eye level but the dog looked away and whimpered. Jake moved to the side of her kennel and she startled and moved to the back of the cage and started to howl loudly. As he examined the pathetic little dog, Jake suddenly remembered his childhood dog, Annie, and their special connection.

“Hey, Pony, what do you think of this one?”

“Daddy, you’ve got to be kidding. She’s a scardy cat and sorta ugly too. I want the other one.”

“What if we get two dogs, one for you and one for me?”

Pony nodded and then shaking his head in disbelief kept walking back towards the front desk. Under his breath, Pony stated, “Mom’s going to kill you.”

Jake filled out the forms at the front desk and asked Pony if he had a name selected. Pony reached over and wrote “AMOFI” in the space provided. And then Jake asked, “What about the little white dog?” and Pony wrote “NOTAMOFI”.

“Did you just make up those words or are they Choctaw?”

“Amofi is Choctaw for “my dog”. The other name I made up and it means “Not my dog.”

“You can do better than that for my little dog”.

“She’s yours, Daddy. You name her.”

And so the Schmidt family had two new members, Amofi and Lucy. Pam was certainly not as excited about the new members of the family but in a few short weeks, Jake would often find her cuddled with the animals or in the backyard throwing a tennis

ball over and over and over again. One morning, Jake found Pam cleaning up an overnight mess of dog diarrhea as Pam stated, “Well I guess that ‘Lucy’ certainly was an appropriate name for that dog of yours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: BACK TO THE LAB

Shortly after Pony started kindergarten, Jake spent many hours each day accomplishing very little. Pam seemed to know how to find interests of her own and spent lots of time with her parents, started doing beadwork, painting, and some leather working and leather tooling. She made beautiful jewelry, moccasins, purses, and was working on a saddle as she had also taken up horseback riding. (She reassured Jake that she was not going to runaway to the rodeo circuit.)

Everyday Jake was thankful that he had the company of Amofi and Lucy and both had turned out, with a little work, to be great loving companions. He had to chuckle though that Lucy turned out to be the guard dog while Amofi could be timid at times and at other times greeted everyone with wet kisses. Amofi never learned to discriminate between friend and stranger and it was Lucy who would sound an alarm when strangers approached the house or the occasional possum or raccoon invaded their backyard.

Jake had to admit though that his days were mostly spent looking forward to Pony's return from school and his evenings spent with Pamela. Jake was starting to get bored when Robert called with a proposition. After some small talk, Robert asked, "Would you consider going back to your inventions? The Agency needs your help. Our enemies are outdistancing us in modern technology and innovative weapons."

"I don't even have a lab anymore, Robert, and you know that Pony and Pamela are my number one concerns plus I have no desire to raise Pony in a big city. We will be staying right here in Oklahoma."

"Hey, man, you must be getting bored now that Pony is in school."

“Yeah, a little bit but I was thinking of doing some teaching at the University.”

“And how long before you would be bored by that?”

“Okay, Robert, what were you thinking you need.”

Robert gave a lengthy wish list of laser powered weapons and weapons that could be easily secreted and also get through metal detectors. He also listed some more sophisticated spying devices stating that the enemies often seemed to have better intelligence than did the Agency. They also needed to be able to better track Internet communications and cell phone messages and decoding and coding their own transmissions and detecting explosives and detecting poisons. And the list went on and on.

Then Robert chuckled, “Do I have your attention yet?”

“I’d need a lab, not too far from this neighborhood. It would have to have a clean room. And I need lots of equipment and materials and a couple of better computers. Yes, you have my attention. Give me a couple of days to think about it and to discuss it with Pam.”

Within two months, Jake’s new lab was up and operating, although Jake couldn’t believe how much slower his mind worked at fifty-two than it had forty. It was taking him almost as long to replicate the old weapons as it had to invent them in the first place. Granted, he reserved time with Pam and Pony and the dogs and his social circle and he wasn’t willing to sacrifice any of those for the IBI. He was still a patriot and wanted to help his country but his life was so much richer and fuller now than back when he was developing the original inventions. He limited his time in the lab to 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. while Pony was in school and Pam was involved in her many interests and projects.

By the following spring, Jake felt that he had made reasonable progress. He had recreated the original weapons that had been used in Asia and Colombia and had completed the schematics for several other valuable inventions and many of the prototypes. The D.C. lab had copies and prototypes of all that he had accomplished to date when Jake informed the Agency that he would be taking some time off to be with his son during the school's summer break. Jake never gave it a second thought that the lab would, therefore, be vacant for a while.

In the middle of June, Lucy woke them up barking loudly and growling. By the time Jake and Pam got out of bed, Amofi started to bark a ferocious bark as well. Jake quickly turned on the outside lights but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The phone rang and Charles excitedly said, "Bring Pony here to stay with Ona right now. Strangers have been spotted trying to break into your lab. A bunch of us are headed over there. We will be armed and we recommend that you are too."

The adrenaline rush hit Jake and Pam like a ton of rocks. All of their Agency training came back in a second. Dashing to his gun safe, Jake told Pony to get dressed and to leash the dogs. They were all dressed and the dogs and they were in the car in less than five minutes.

Pony's eyes were huge, as he looked at a whole other side of his father. At five years of age, Pony had never been told about Jake's or his mother's previous work. He had happily believed that his father was a teacher and an inventor and that his mother was a homemaker like other mothers in his neighborhood. As he sat wide-eyed in the back seat, he saw the determined set of his father's jaw and his serious, piercing blue eyes. He noticed that his parents were dressed in all black and that his Mother was holding a

virtual arsenal of rifles, handguns, and small weapons that looked like something from the future or from those reruns of “Star Trek”.

The two dogs were agitated and on alert. For the first time, there was nothing shy about Amofi and a deep growl also came from Lucy’s small throat.

They left Pony with his grandmother and headed for the lab. About half way there they saw a group of darkly dressed men, walking stealthily along the road. It was Charles and ten or twelve Choctaw. They were heavily armed but not with guns. Instead, the men carried tomahawks, spears, bows and arrows, and even a fishing pole or two. Jake parked his car and Charles was quickly at Jake’s side. He saw the collection of guns at on his daughter’s lap.

“Jake, guns make noise and attract attention. Attention requires explanations and ends up on TV news. Bring handguns or that laser gun if you must, but let’s keep this under wraps.”

Jake and Pam joined the procession. They learned that seven men dressed in dark clothing were seen trying to break into Jake’s lab. According to the young Choctaws who had seen them, they were speaking in a foreign language and appeared to be an organized team. So far, the barred windows and sturdy locks on the steel doors were slowing their progress. There were also two rented vans parked up the street but both appeared to be empty.

As Jake assessed the group of young men, he saw young men and middle-aged men and of course Charles was now an old man. He saw friends and the children of friends. They weren’t soldiers and they weren’t agents. They hadn’t signed up for this.

Softly, Jake stated to Charles, “This isn’t your fight. It is my lab and my work that brought these thugs here.”

“Son, your fight is our fight. Pony and Pam are Choctaw, so you are tribe, too.”

“But Charles, these spies may have high-powered weapons, assault rifles, maybe even grenades. You don’t know what you are getting yourself into. My God, Charles, that one guy only has a fishing pole.”

“Yeah, and that guy can cast a sinker into a Dixie cup at thirty paces. His line is equipped with a huge weight and a treble hook. And did you see the tomahawks? Some of those will sever an arm like it is butter. Bows and arrows can take down a “yvnnvsh”; I mean a bison, and all without making a noise. There are only six or seven of them and twelve of us and surprise is on our side.”

There was no more time to argue as the group of Indians started splitting into groups of two as they trotted ahead under the cover of darkness. The first thunk followed quickly and then a whack and a squish as the second intruder fell. Jake saw the fisherman make his cast and heard a yowl as the hooks found their mark and the line was quickly reeled in. He heard the zing of a bowstring and another spy fell to the ground. An older man whipped his bola and two stones flew right into the face of an enemy. As one of the intruders started to run away, a young man with an ornamental spear gracefully threw his family heirloom and impaled the runaway, back to front. Six enemies lay crumpled on the ground. There was no sign of the seventh.

Jake pulled out his laser gun and started to circle the building. As he turned the corner, he saw a man jump onto Pam’s back, his hands clasped around her neck. Even before Jake or Pam could react, Jake saw Amofi launch his body onto the assailant’s

back. With a fierce growl Amofi, Pony's cowardly dog, bit into the neck of Pam's attacker. As the spy fell to the ground with blood spurting from his jugular, Pam and Jake were jubilant as they praised and hugged the big dog and then each other. Jake beamed with pride as he stated, "And Amofi never even had IBI training."

Most of the spies were dead. The other three, writhing from pain as they lay bleeding on the ground, were quickly and silently dispatched with knives and tomahawks.

As Jake surveyed the area, he thought he had a new problem and asked Charles, "I suppose now we have to call the police to get rid of the bodies? There will be a night of questioning and maybe even charges brought against us."

"No need to worry 'Pale face'. The Indians police their own community. It is their land, the Choctaw Nation. These bodies will be in the ground before sunrise. Two warriors, for now they are warriors, already left with the confiscated car keys to move and dispose of intruders' transportation."

"Charles, if I didn't know better, I would swear that you are Choctaw too."

"Jake, I have been tribe for over thirty years and maybe one day, you will be too."

By morning, all evidence of the night's events was gone. Charles told him that the events would never be discussed, not even among the "war party". There would be no bragging, no rehashing what had happened, no questions, no reports.

Jake had decisions to make. Was he risking lives by having the lab there? Was he putting himself and Pona and his friends and neighbors in jeopardy? The lab had no elaborate security systems like those installed by Karl in Ohio and Florida. And of course that would be unsafe to residents in the middle of town, anyway. And where was the leak? Who knew the location of the lab?

Jake called Robert and told him that he had finished recreating all of the requested weaponry. He told him that the lab would be closed immediately and that the Agency was to contact him only with burner phones as he assumed the security on Agency phones had been compromised. He didn't tell Robert that he was moving his lab to his Florida cabin and that from then forward, he wanted his family to spend all of Pony's school vacations in Florida.

The next night, Ona called around nine in the evening with a desperate tone in her voice. "Jake, Charles has had a heart attack and we are at the hospital."

Jake responded in as calming a voice as he could and said he would get there as quickly as possible. Jake woke Pam and Pona and they headed for the hospital.

Ona had ridden with Charles in the ambulance and had watched the medical technicians as they attempted to treat Charles with oxygen and nitroglycerin. As a last resort they applied an electric shock to his chest. Ona tearfully reported that Charles had turned blue and was unresponsive although he was still taking shallow breaths and his heart was still beating, although sporadically.

Jake, Pam, Ona and Pona sat motionless for nearly a half hour before the emergency physician came out and stated that Charles was fading quickly and was in and out of consciousness but that he wanted to see his family.

Charles opened his eyes only once, grabbed Ona's hand and smiled at Pam. He managed to say; "I have loved. I have had good life. And now I am a warrior." The eighty-year-old Charles then closed his eyes and quietly passed away.

Ona collapsed into Pam's arms. Pony cried softly and held Jake's hand. Jake whispered to Ona that she could come and stay with them and that he would see to

everything that needed to be done. Ona nodded as she clung to her daughter, who was also crying.

Jake settled Pony into bed and assured him that Ona was strong and would be okay. “You know that your grandfather was very old.”

“Yes Daddy but you and Mommy are old too. What would I ever do without my Chishke and Anki?”

“Mommy and I will be around for a long long time. And there are lots of people who love you and will always take care of you.” He told Pona that he knew how much he loved Charles and how everyone would miss him greatly. Pona, somehow wise beyond his age, nodded an understanding and lay down in the bed to sleep.

Jake returned to the living room and waited quietly as his wife held her sobbing mother. They spent much of the night sharing memories about Charles. Jake openly stated that he loved Charles and felt that he was like a father to him. He recounted the gems of wisdom that Charles had shared with him like understanding the local population, bargaining with merchants, getting along with other people and providing guidance on how to raise Pony. Jake told Ona that he would love it if she would choose to live with them and if she chose not to, that they would always make themselves available to her.

Lying in bed that night, Jake was full of guilt. He couldn't help but wonder if somehow Charles' heart attack and demise were brought on by the night of defending Jake's lab. He blamed himself for putting his loved ones in jeopardy. It was his fault that the thugs had entered their peaceful community. It was his fault that he had not foreseen

the possibility of danger. In a flash, he knew that Charles would say something like,
“Boy, don’t whine over spilled milk. Find a solution!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: WATCHING PONY GROW

It was weeks before Jake shared with Pam that he wanted to start splitting their time between the cabin in Florida and their home in Oklahoma. Pam had always wanted to visit the cabin and suggested that they might first take an extended vacation there. “Is it okay if we also invite my mother? I think a change of environment would help her heal from Dad’s death. And if we start splitting our time, are you okay with Mom being a part of that, too.”

“Of course, that would be best for us and for Pony, too.”

The next afternoon Pam and Jake went to see Ona and to present their proposal.

“I know. Pony already told me all about it this morning, so I have had some time to think about this. I don’t want to sell my house. We need our separate space. I propose that when in Oklahoma, we live in our own houses and that I go with you when you go to Florida. I can rent an apartment there during Pony’s summer and Christmas breaks.”

“An apartment? You can live with us at the cabin.”

“But a cabin, Jake? We’d be in each other’s faces.”

“Ah, you think that it is a one or two room building with an outhouse. “Cabin” is a bit of a misnomer. It is actually a four-bedroom chalet with an incredible kitchen. It even has indoor plumbing,” he added with a wink in Pam’s direction. In fact, it has four bathrooms, a solarium, and a lab/workshop in the back. Fencing and various security systems surround the whole acreage. There is only one way to reach it by car. There’s a stream, lots of birds and animals, and I was thinking about adding a swimming pool.”

Pam and Ona were both shocked. They had both imagined something very rustic. Pam also realized that a secluded lab was probably one of Jake's biggest motives for wanting to spend time there. He would be able to continue his work without discovery and without risking the safety of his family or others.

"Pony didn't tell me that. Let's try it in August and see how it goes. I know that this year I can't face Christmas without Charles and without you two and my grandson. So I can commit to a trip during Pony's Christmas break, too."

The change of scenery turned out to be what they all needed. The first week in Florida, though, Ona cried herself to sleep most every night. She told Pam that she had become accustomed to Charles not being with her while in Oklahoma, but in Florida, she kept wishing that Charles were with them to enjoy the chalet and the woods.

By the second week, her nighttime crying had diminished and Ona became as involved as Pony in exploring the woods. Many mornings, Ona and Pony would be off exploring before Jake and Pam were even out of bed. They'd return for lunch with their notebooks full of drawings of birds and rodents. On one special day, Pony came running back into the house shouting excitedly. He and his grandmother had sat transfixed as they watched two manatees seeming to play in the stream. The manatees had rolled and splashed and at times seemed to be playing tag.

"Mommy, Daddy, I love this place! Can we stay here forever?"

Jake glanced at Pam who was subtly shaking her head and said, "Sorry, son, you have to go back to school in a few weeks and we have lots of friends to see back in Durant, but I think that you can count on coming here often."

Ona also resumed teaching Pony the Choctaw language. Pony now knew “issoba” for horse, “nita” for bear, “koi” for cougar, “chula” for fox, “shai” for raccoon and many more. This time, Jake was paying attention too and trying to learn all the new words that Pony knew.

Ona and Pam also wanted Pony to know the legends of the Choctaw nation and in the evenings and on rainy days, they told him the stories. They told him about the discovery of fire and how it was a spider that figured out how to bring the use of fire to the Choctaw Nation, after many other animals had tried without success. The opossum had lost the fur on his tail in his attempt; the buzzard had lost its head feathers and blistered its head; and the crow had turned black from the soot and was no longer able to sing but only croaked a hoarse cry.

Pony’s mother and grandmother also told him about how the Native Americans had first been born of the earth, emerging from a mound or a mountain. They taught him about the ceremonies and rituals like the Green Corn Festival and head flattening for boy babies and how they welcomed a new year in the middle of summer with a ceremony of purification, conflict resolution, and forgiveness.

And then they told Pony about the horrid Indian Removal Act under President Andrew Jackson in 1830 and the resultant cruel Trail of Tears. About a third of the Choctaw who started the trip died along the way. As Jake listened and watched Pony sob over the cruelty to the Native American tribes, Jake thought that his son was way too young for that piece of history.

That night, in bed, Jake shared his concerns with Pam and she gently responded, “He is not too young for truth. And Mother, Pony, and I are of African American, Native

American, and European American descent. We are not only Choctaw but we are of mixed blood. Not knowing about prejudice will only make him naïve. Knowing will make him strong.”

“Did you know, Jake, that the Choctaw agreed voluntarily to be relocated? A great chief, George Harkins wrote in 1832, ‘*We as Choctaws rather chose to suffer and to be free than live under degrading laws, which our voice could not be heard in their formation.*’ In school, Pony will learn about The Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the Revolutionary War. He will learn that New Hampshire’s state motto is “Live Free or Die” and he will learn about the Civil War but who will teach him about the Choctaws but us? No Jake, he is not too young to learn and you are not too old.”

Pam was impressed when Jake’s only response was a hug and a “Thank you.”

Prior to Charles’ death, he had made stickball (also called “Toli”) sticks and a bow and arrow set for Pona but had died before giving them to him. Ona had packed them for their time in Florida. Ona and Pam held lessons on their front yard and both Jake and Pony became quite adept at archery and Toli. Pony’s enthusiasm was contagious and Jake and Pam both learned to play, enjoy, relax, and even giggle.

By the end of August, all four had fallen in love with the Florida “cabin”. When Jake mentioned that Pam could have a corner of the workshop for her arts and crafts, they all made the commitment to split their time between the two homes that they loved so much. Summers and school breaks would now be spent in Florida.

By the time that Pony was ten years old, he was reading books designed for much older age groups. He was playing some classical piano music on the electronic keyboard. He was taller than average and more muscled than Jake had ever been at that

age. He was excelling in competitive games of soccer, stickball, and touch football. Jake had found a working Commodore Amiga computer at an antique store and Pony was already learning to program in the Basic language and the C language on the computer.

It was (sometimes painfully) clear that Pony also had a keen sense of humor and loved to play practical jokes on Jake. Pony would hide the remote control for the TV or remove the batteries from the remote and hide them. When Jake and Pam went to bed one night they found that they had been “short-sheeted” by Pony who had folded the top sheet in half so that when his parents got in bed they could only get halfway under the covers.

Pony’s most creative prank was probably the footstool prank. One Christmas Pam had given Jake and Pony remote controlled racing cars for competitive racing in a strip in the backyard. Pony removed the bodies one day from both cars, attached a plunger on the top of each car that could be pushed up remotely. He then placed the cars under Jake’s favorite hassock. Pony then sat down on the couch before Jake came in to watch TV and claim his favorite spot with his feet up on the hassock. Just as Jake’s feet were being raised to place them comfortably on the hassock, Pony pressed a button on the remote control hidden next to him and the hassock would quickly move away by “magic”. Jake was perplexed and would reposition the hassock only to experience the same thing again. Of course, Pony could not restrain himself from laughing out loud. Jake realized at that point that he had been “had”. He lifted the hassock the next time and discovered the modified racecars.

Jake’s revenge was to wrap a rubber band around the spray nozzle on the kitchen sink and wait for Pony to get a drink of water from the faucet. Pony was thoroughly

drenched by the time he turned off the faucet and realized what Jake had done. As Pam watched Pony get soaked by the spray, she could only wonder whether Pona at age ten or Jake at age 58 was more immature.

They continued to play these pranks on each other until Pona was about twelve years old and they finally made a truce before someone got too carried away and there was an injury or other serious accident.

One day at the cabin in Florida, Pona entered Ona's room to ask her a question. He had forgotten to knock first and simply entered her room. Ona was in the process of getting dressed and was naked from the waist up. Pona blushed and quickly closed the door. Once outside the door however, he began to sing loudly a song that he had heard other kids singing:

Do your boobs hang down?

Do they wobble to and fro?

Can you tie them in a knot?

Can you tie them in a bow?

Can you throw them o'er your shoulder?

Like a Continental Soldier?

Do you boobs hang low?

Pony then collapsed in laughter and he could hear his Grandmother laughing, too. Yes, Pony was much more adjusted and well rounded than Jake had ever been.

As Pony entered junior high school, it was clear to Jake and Pam that there were few classes that would be new or challenging for Pony. They thought about finding a

private school for accelerated students but neither could stand the thought of sending him to boarding school and they knew that that would break Ona's heart.

They decided to first talk to Pony about what he wanted. He clearly stated that he did not want to be labeled as different and felt he could enjoy helping other students learn the material and could pursue lots of activities typically taught in their local school. He pointed out that there was an accelerated program and he could start taking more advanced math and science in the next year or two. Jake told Pony how difficult his own experiences had been in public school and did not want him to experience the same problems. Pony was quite confident that he would be okay and his friends would accept him for who he was. With some trepidation Jake agreed to let Pony make his own decisions about his educational experiences.

Nearing Christmas vacation that year and their planned trip to Florida, Ona began to have several major physical problems. It was as if she had aged overnight from seventy to her true chronological age of eighty-five. They canceled their trip to Florida and moved Ona into their house. She lived with them for about six months when early one morning, Pam discovered that her mother had passed away quietly in her sleep.

At age twelve, Pony handled Ona's death extremely well given how close he was to his grandmother. He had always been able to combine the Catholic and the Choctaw beliefs about an afterlife. He believed that not only was his grandmother in a better place but that she was also reunited with his grandfather.

Pam seemed resigned to accept the inevitable. She had left Oklahoma when she was only eighteen and for the next twenty-five years she had seen her parents only

irregularly. She had loved being in Oklahoma the last eleven years but also knew that her parents' love and values would remain in her heart forever.

It was Jake who had a terrible time with Ona's death. He started reliving every loss that he had ever experienced: the death of his parents, the death of his sister Kim, the kidnapping of Pamela and Robert, Pamela's arrest and their near-divorce, the loss of Karl and Thomas, Charles' death, and then Ona's death. He didn't believe in an afterlife and he certainly didn't buy the concept that there was some higher Power who prescribed that everything happened for some reason. Bottom line, Jake thought that aging and death were flaws in the universe.

Jake handled it the only way that he knew. First he converted Ona's bedroom to a sophisticated microbiology laboratory. He began to study the aging of single-celled creatures such as those in the kingdom Protista, phylum Protozoa, subphylum Cilophora and class Cilateo, order Holotrichida, suborder Trichostomina, with a focus on genus *Paramecium* and genus *Amoeba*. He wondered if the macro and micro nuclei change as a function of effects of external forces or is the deterioration "pre-programmed" in the molecular structure itself or perhaps a combination of both. By bombarding the nuclei with magnetism, x-rays, heat, light, and chemicals, he could study the effect of external factors on the life span of these particles. If he couldn't accept death, the only answer was to cure it.

These experiments were time consuming. He developed a variety of devices for delivery of the external factors in precise amounts and duration and automatically recorded the physical and chemical changes that occur. Unfortunately, the study of cells

that divide requires constant attention because during mitosis, cells that have been marked by radiation or chemicals carry the markings into both new cells.

As the weeks passed, Jake started to reengage with Pony and with Pam. He slowly started to enjoy family activities, food, TV, and music again. To successfully complete his research on aging would require constant attention. He simply abandoned it when he realized doing other things was a lot more fun. Pam knew that this was a clear sign that Jake was healing.

Pony was able to take some college courses by special admission to Southeastern Oklahoma State College when he was in the tenth through twelfth grades. When he graduated from high school, he would have already completed nearly three years of coursework leading to a bachelor's degree. He was now ready for college attendance, had a National Merit Scholarship and had already begun to investigate additional scholarship offers from Harvard, UCLA, and other prestigious schools

One evening as Pona was struggling with his choices, Pam asked him if he had thought about a major, pointing out that not all schools specialized in the same areas of interest. Jake was all ears. He had always assumed that Pona would pursue engineering like he and Pam had done, or maybe medicine, or the law.

Pony responded, "I have given it a lot of thought and have narrowed it down to Marine Biology, Aquatic Biology or Veterinarian School."

Jake thought, "Huh?" but managed to ask, "What do you like about those programs?"

"I love animals, I love to take care of and to help others, I love to learn, I love to be challenged, and I love the water and everything that lives in water. I am totally

fascinated by whales, dolphins, sea turtles and seals. And of all animals, besides Amofi and Lucy, I love our manatees the most. In the sea and lakes and rivers, there is a whole other world to explore. When I snorkel or SCUBA dive, it is like I am on some distant planet, absolutely mesmerized by the alien life forms. I also think that it would be fun to work in a zoo or just to help people take care of their pets. I think that I would like to go to the University of Florida in Gainesville.”

“So no Harvard, no M.I.T., no Yale, no Princeton,” Jake asked while doing a very poor job of hiding his disappointment.

“Dad, I don’t think that that is what I want. And if you guys were at the cabin, I could still see you most weekends. At least until I get a girlfriend,” he said with a wink.

“Yeah, right,” thought Pam, “as if that has ever been a problem.” Pony’s six-foot tall frame with broad shoulders, slender waist and hips, wavy thick dark hair, beautiful smile, and big brown eyes with specks of amber that sparkled in the sunlight had always attracted all the girls a teenager could handle. He also excelled at academics and athletics. But most importantly, Pony was a kind, generous, caring, accepting young man with a terrific sense of humor. He had lots of close friends. “Somehow, he has turned out better than I could ever have hoped,” mused Pam.

“Hm, Gainesville is about an hour away from the cabin. I guess this means that you want a car.”

“That would be great, Dad. You know my scholarships will cover tuition and housing. So all I need is a car. A nice car would be great.”

Jake smiled at Pam remembering how they had argued over Pony’s graduation gift. Pam had wanted to buy an armored tank or at the very least, a Hummer or a Lincoln

Navigator. Jake had campaigned for a Maserati sports car or a vintage Corvette. Since money was no object with all of Jake's patents and their savings, Jake had finally sold Pam on a champagne colored Fisker Karma citing the excellent mileage and pretending that he didn't consider it a "babe-magnet".

With a grin, Pam asked, "Have you looked in the garage lately? You might find your graduation present there."

As Pony sprinted to the garage and whooped and hollered as soon as he opened the door, Pam said to Jake, "Guess we are still spoiling that boy."

"Sure, but he has worked so hard and he's a great kid. I think he deserves it."

Pam continued, "I'd love to live at the cabin full-time now, as long as we could also do some traveling. I have never been to Alaska or Russia. I've never even been to Paris. How about you? Are you up to the peace and quiet of the cabin plus some romantic trips to places we haven't seen?"

"Sounds like a plan, Babe, as long as you don't want to go to Asia or the Andes. You know, I have never seen the Grand Canyon."

"Okay, first trip is to Arizona, but let's skip the helicopter tour," Pam said with a grin."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: FLORIDA

For years, they had all enjoyed both winter and summer vacations at the cabin and knew it was a great location for frequent home visits for Pony. Pony packed all of his prized childhood possessions, clothing, books, music, keyboard, Choctaw decorations from Charles and Ona and pictures of all his loved ones. He left in his beloved Karma in late June and headed for Florida. Pam and Jake organized their move by selling and donating most of their furnishings since the cabin was fully furnished, shipping boxes of their most prized possessions, and putting their house on the market. They then notified the council of the Choctaw nation that they were donating Pam's parents' property in memory of Ona and Charles and would like to see it used as a safe haven for young abused Choctaw women and girls.

By early July, they were on their way to their beloved home in Florida. Once they were all settled into the cabin, Jake and Pam decided that it was time to tell Pony about the attacks on the house in Ohio, their lives in the IBI, her arrest, and the assault on the lab in Durant. It was a lot of history to cover and it took several days with all of Pony's astonishment and questions. They managed to give him all of the important details but Jake decided to withhold the information about his "friends" Karl and Thomas. He told Pam that he would tell him later privately. He was terrified that that information would destroy the respect that his son had for him.

They spent the rest of the summer enjoying the quiet and seclusion of their property with Pona, and secretly dreading the moment that he would head off for college.

Pony managed to finish his undergraduate work and also completed a few courses typically part of a graduate curriculum. During that two years, Pony did frequently visit home except when his parents were off gallivanting to some exotic location. Jake and Pam found visiting foreign countries as tourists very different than their earlier IBI missions. They often commented that they felt like honeymooners or young children seeing the world for the first time.

In addition to travel and relaxing at the cabin, the elaborate screened swimming pool was almost completed, Jake was back in his workshop and lab experimenting and inventing, and Pam was happy in her studio with paints, leathers, and beads.

Shortly after Pony returned to Gainesville to officially start his first semester of graduate school, Pam announced that she was headed for Starke to buy some leather working supplies and a couple of swimming suits. “I probably won’t be home much before dinner.”

“Swimming suits? I thought that we would just skinny-dip,” Jake suggested with a wink and a grin.

“And what about when Pony is home or he brings friends home?”

“Ooh, buy me a couple, too, would you? They kissed good-bye and both added their standard, “Love is forever.”

Jake returned to his work on some floating lounge chairs for the pool. He was adding automated controls, a reading light, stereo speakers, a retractable umbrella, and a sunscreen dispenser. He, as usual, was lost in his work and didn’t even realize that it was mid-afternoon when the phone rang. He didn’t recognize the caller ID but he answered anyway.

His heart started to race as soon as the caller identified herself as a nurse at the Shands Starke Regional Medical Center. In seconds he was fully in alert mode but struggling to stifle sheer panic.

“Is this Jake Schmidt?”

“Yes, my God, tell me what’s wrong and please do it quickly.”

“Is Pam Myers Schmidt your wife?”

“Of course, how else would you have gotten my name and phone number.”

“I am sorry to tell you but Mrs. Schmidt has been in an accident. A very serious accident. We would like you to come to the hospital immediately.”

“Of course, I will come immediately but what kind of an accident.”

“She was crossing the street. A teenage driver, who was evidently texting, ran a red light and hit her.”

“Is she conscious?”

“No, Sir, not at this time.”

“I am on the way. Please tell her that I am on the way. And if you wouldn’t mind, could you please also tell her that love is forever.”

“Sir, she is in a coma.”

“Please, just tell her anyway.”

Jake quickly dialed Pony’s cell phone and told him what he knew. Pony sounded totally composed as he stated, “I will meet you there in forty-five minutes.”

Pona and Jake arrived within minutes of each other and headed for the Intensive Care Unit. The sign on the door said that they were to call from the phone on the wall and that only two visitors were allowed at a time and for only ten minutes. Jake yanked

open the heavy door and walked straight to the nurses' station. "We are here to see Pamela Schmidt and I will need her chart," he barked with authority.

"Are you her doctor?"

Jake responded, "I am her husband and yes I am a doctor. This is her son." Pona was wide-eyed and startled by his father's false implication but knew that it was quicker than waiting for explanations from the busy ICU nurses.

They were shown to Pam's cubicle. Pam was beyond recognition. Her head was bandaged and appeared swollen. Her face was bruised and covered with lacerations. Her lips were swollen. There were wires and tubes coming from all parts of her body. There were leather straps securing her arms to the bed rails. Covered with a white blanket up to her chin, Pam looked like a tiny child lying in the hospital bed. The room was brightly lit and there was a silent monitor screen in the corner that matched the bank of similar monitors at the nurses' station.

"Dad, her brain waves are nearly flat. Is she going to make it?"

Tearfully, Jake flipped open the chart that was already filled with notations, x-rays, and CT scans. "Talk to her, Pony. Even comatose, some people have reported that they could still hear. Give me a couple of minutes to read this stuff."

There were notations about cerebral damage, brain swelling, extensive fractures of both legs and one arm, and paralysis to the whole left side of her body. The orthopedic surgeon predicted the need to amputate one leg above the knee and the other leg just below the knee. The neurosurgeon recommended surgery to immediately remove a portion of her skull to reduce the pressure from the tissue swelling. Lab results, x-rays, and scans all reinforced the physicians' findings. The final notation in the chart indicated

that the patient would remain on life support until the immediate family could be contacted.

Pona needed no answer from his father as he heard him start to cry and then to sob. Jake finally came to the bedside, trying to collect himself, and wanting so much to be strong for his son.

At only sixty-four, Pam should have had another thirty years ahead of her. Jake thought that he had known the depths of grief before, but they were nothing by comparison to what he felt standing by Pam's bedside. He felt like his heart was being ripped from his chest by the claw of some evil gigantic monster. The physical pain was nearly as great as the emotional pain. He wondered, "How much tragedy can one man endure?"

It was Pony's strength that pulled them through this catastrophic loss. "Mom wouldn't want to be kept alive like this. There is no change when I speak or even when I touch her hand. Dad, Mom is already gone."

"She is still alive as long as there are any brain waves, son," Jake pled, as he moved towards the headboard and took Pam's hand. As Jake hoarsely spoke words of encouragement and statements about his love, Pona quietly withdrew to the nurses' station where he could watch her monitor. To Pony's untrained eye, he could see no change and no response to his father's touch or to his father's words.

Pony turned towards the nurse also staring at the monitors, "She's not really alive is she?"

The nurse shook her head slowly and stated, “I’m afraid that it is only the life support system that is giving that illusion. Do you know if your mother has a DNR, Health Care Power of Attorney, or Advance Directives?”

“Yes, she carries a card in her wallet. We all do.”

“Your father is in there sobbing. Could you take your father for a walk or to the cafeteria? I think that he needs a break and time to think this through.” She handed him a beeper and added, “The doctors will do rounds again between five and six. I will beep you when they show-up.”

Pony returned to the cubicle and helped Jake to stand. “Let’s go get some fresh air. We will be able to talk to the doctors in an hour or two.”

“Son, I can’t leave. Maybe she can hear me.”

“She’ll be here when we get back. We both need a break and we need to talk.”

Jake and Pony had circled the medical complex multiple times before the beeper finally sounded. Pony had repetitively reminded Jake that this was about what Pam would want and not just about what her husband and son would want. Jake kept reiterating that Pam had often been in danger as an IBI Agent and that in some ways, he had been better prepared back then when he worried and considered the possibility of serious injury.

For years, he had thought that they were safe and in their golden years. It was as if he saw this accident, while only crossing the street, as an affront to Pam’s courage and cleverness. His anger at the unfairness along with his grief nearly crippled him.

When Jake and Pony finally had a chance to listen to two of her physicians, it was clear to Pony that they thought his mother had no chance of survival, let alone any

meaningful life if she were to awake from the coma. Pony was finally able to get his father to agree that if Pam did not respond to stimuli within three days that they would let her go.

Pona had been consumed with the efforts to help his father through this catastrophe and so much so that he had stifled his own feelings. As Jake followed Pona's car up the freeway towards the cabin, he was surprised when Pony pulled into a rest stop. Jake watched as Pony jumped from his car and ran into the adjacent wooded area. Jake waited several minutes for his son's return and then went to find him.

Pony was lying on the ground next to a giant cypress tree. He was curled tightly into a ball and sobbing, uncontrollably, as he beat the ground with his fist. Jake sat down beside him on the damp ground and pulled Pony into his arms. "Oh, God, son, I know, I know."

"I loved her so much, Dad. I can't imagine life without her. I can't imagine how you will live without her. How could this be happening?"

"I don't know but as your mother would say, 'Shit happens'. Somehow, we will get through this together."

On his mother's tombstone, Pony had a poem of his father's engraved.

*Life is a candle that when new burns so bright,
Casting shadows that dance like they are alive,
Yet the light starts to dim and gives little light,
And the shadows grow larger and press to survive.
As the candle wick now struggles to show a site,
The shadows are everywhere and life cannot thrive.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: LIFE WITHOUT PAM

Pony became very conscientious about visiting his father every weekend. He would arrive by Friday evening and stay until Sunday afternoon. He could tell that his father was losing weight and made a point of bringing some of his favorite foods with him and then taking him out to dinner on Saturdays and to brunch on Sunday mornings.

They went fishing in the ocean as they had done many times before. They spent time exploring the Florida landscape. They were both particularly captivated one night by a bright explosion of swamp gas only a half mile from the cabin and which seemed to hover over the ground so close you could almost have touched it. They reveled in the beauty of the magnolias, the Spanish moss, the occasional wild pig or deer and the quiet of the surroundings. The sounds at night of insects and animals were nearly as exciting as the daylight time and they would stay up late just to hear the serenade of the wild.

After a few months, Pony was able to involve himself in his studies and in a nearly normal college life. He started dating again and met a special young woman who seemed to be as enchanted by him as he was by her.

By winter, Pony noticed that his father seemed to be emerging from his state of mourning. Sometimes, Jake would show him a new invention or discuss a new theory or idea with him. Jake had noticed he was no longer able to smell sour milk or other odors that he wanted to be able to smell. He remembered how music could be digitized by recording an analog wave and then “chopping” it into tiny digital values that represented the wave. He devised a portable “sniffer” device that passed an odor through a pair of charged plates and recorded the change in the plate voltage to capture the chemical

“image” of the odor. He then created a digital chip with each odor that could be selected much like a digital tone can be selected on an electronic keyboard.

Pony also noticed that sometimes when his father thought that he was alone that he would talk to himself and then pause as if he were waiting for a response. Once he mentioned that to his father and Jake had responded with embarrassment and then said that he was talking to Lucy the dog. Pony didn’t buy the excuse because Lucy, at age seventeen was totally deaf, but he decided that his Dad was just getting a little senile or maybe he was imagining that he was talking to Pam.

Pony didn’t know about Karl and Thomas and he certainly didn’t know that Jake, in his loneliness, had resurrected Karl and Thomas. It had taken some concentration and some self-hypnosis the first few times. Thomas arrived first and allowed for the tender moments of mourning and remembering the wonderful and the awful times in his life with Pam. Karl showed up a couple of weeks later when Jake became furious at the teenager who had run over Pam.

With the help of his two best friends, one surviving dog, squirrels, raccoons and an opossum that he fed with scraps, the loneliness started to evaporate and he felt peace if not happiness between Pony’s visits.

By spring, Pony was only visiting a couple of times each month and explained to his father that he had met someone special. Jake was truly happy for his son and pleased that his son had always been able to have friends and a social life while also being very intelligent and excelling in many areas.

Jake had more than sufficient time to reminisce about his life. He thought about the many times that other children had rejected him. He thought about the many times

that other adults had avoided him and even seemed to fear his intelligence. He thought about the betrayals especially by the women that he had loved. As he thought about the phobia that many people had for his memory, creativity and problem solving ability, he began to wonder if it were his aloofness, lack of compassion for those who learned more slowly and his arrogance that had been judged inadequate. He began to realize that it was he, himself, damaged by the rejections, avoidance, and betrayals, had a phobia of close relationships with others, except for the others that he had invented and thereby could control.

Jake now realized that intelligence had many forms: social skills, intuition, and common sense and the ability to identify with and understand others. Of these he had been sorely lacking. He felt blessed that Pony had all of the desirable characteristics that he had only begun to develop after Pony's birth.

The night before Pony planned on proposing to her girlfriend, he decided to surprise his father with an unscheduled visit and drove to the cabin in the late afternoon. When he arrived at the cabin, there was no sign of his father. Pony searched the whole cabin, the lab, and had just decided to head into the woods when he heard the approach of a loud engine.

A man dressed all in leather drove up the lane on a huge black motorcycle. He wore a black helmet with a shiny reflective visor. As the man dismounted, he angrily shouted, "What are you doing here in the middle of the week?" He then lifted the visor and Pony was shocked to see that it was his father. Jake had never spoken to Pony with anger and he was sure that his father didn't have a motorcycle.

Totally baffled, Tony asked, “Where’d you get that thing Dad. Don’t you think that 70 is a bit old for a motorcycle?”

Jake remarked, “Oh, it’s not mine. It belongs to Karl, a friend of mine. Let me get out of these clothes. They really are hot and uncomfortable. Would you mind rolling the bike into the garage.” And Jake sprinted up the steps into the cabin.

Pony was totally confused. He stored the bike in the garage and then entered the kitchen through the adjoining door. Jake was already in the kitchen, dressed casually in well-worn jeans, a tee shirt, and moccasins “Great to see you, son. What a wonderful surprise for your old man.” Pony noticed that his father’s eyes sparkled with unshed tears and thought that it was touching that Jake seemed so moved by the visit.

And then Pony recalled arriving early for a visit a couple of months before. That day he had found his father digging a small grave at the edge of the woods. His Dad was crying as he dug and Pony thought, “Oh, shit. Old Lucy must have finally died.” Pony then had gone to his father to offer condolences. But it was an old mangy raccoon lying dead at Jake’s feet. He had thought then that his father’s reaction was overly sensitive but accepted that it must have been one of the animals that his father regularly fed.

The last few minutes had been too weird for Pony. “Dad, what’s going on? First there was the raccoon, then the motorcycle, and now you’re almost losing it just because I showed-up.”

There was an immediate change in Jake’s demeanor as he offered Pony something to drink and asked if he were hungry. Looking totally confused, Jake then asked “What raccoon, what motorcycle?”

“Dad, please sit down and tell me what is going on?”

“Yeah, I guess I have a lot of explaining to do but first tell me why you chose to visit today. Did I forget that you were coming”?

“I have made a big decision. I have decided to ask Emily to marry me.”

“Marvelous Pony, I loved her the first time we met and I know she is the perfect one for you.”

“Okay, Dad, now quit avoiding my question. What is going on with you.”

Jake reluctantly told Pony the whole history of Karl and Thomas. As the sun set, he admitted that he was so lonely after Pam’s death and as Pony got more and more involved in his own life, that he had brought Karl and Thomas back into his life. “I know that it sounds crazy but I raised them from the dead. I am not lonely anymore. This works for me.”

Months passed and then years and Pony became accustomed to his father’s three personalities and accepted that his father was truly happy and at peace. Pony could recognize when it was Karl who was expressing frustration or anger and that it was Thomas who would talk about how much he missed Pamela and about how much he wished that she could have known her grandchildren and seen how happy Pony was. He knew that it was Jake who continued to be organized, productive in the lab, and who loved to teach his grandchildren the legends of the Choctaw, along with a little math and science thrown in for good measure.

One day Pony, his wife, and their four kids were all swimming in the pool at the cabin when Pony noticed his father sunning on the deck. He seemed to be having an animated conversation with himself. He was smiling and nodding towards the pool. He

would speak a few words and then wait for a response. Pony knew that Karl and Thomas were also on the deck.

From the pool, Pony watched his father relax and close his eyes. At first he thought that his Dad had simply nodded off.



After the funeral, Pony went through his father's things and found his will and a letter. The letter outlined his wishes to be buried beside Pamela but with his own headstone. He requested that the headstone be equipped with the solar-powered motion detector that Pony would find in the lab. It was rigged to play John Lennon's great 1971 song "Imagine" whenever the gravesite was approached by an adult, a child, or even a bird or animal of the woods.

*Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try
No people below us, above it's only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do
No Need to kill or die for and no religions too
Imagine all the people
Living for today.*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

*Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing for the world*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
Take my hand and join us
And the world will live, will live as one.*

Jake also instructed Pony that his gravestone should read:

Here Lie

Jake Schmidt, Thomas Jentler and Karl Stern

Who died on April Fools Day of their 88th year of life.

APPENDIX ONE

AGENCIES INVOLVED IN OVERSEEING THE MANUFACTURE, IMPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF PHARMACEUTICALS

1. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
2. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention
3. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
4. The Department of Commerce
5. The Consumer Product Safety Commission
6. Customs and Border Protection
7. The Drug Enforcement Administration
8. The Federal Bureau of Investigation
9. The Food and Drug Administration
10. The Food Safety and Inspection Service
11. The Department of Health and Human Services
12. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
13. International Trade Administration
14. The National Drug Intelligence Center
15. The National Institutes of Health
16. The Office of National Drug Control Policy
17. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation
18. The Patent and Trademark Office
19. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
20. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
21. U.S. Postal Service
22. U. S Trade and Development Agency

APPENDIX TWO

QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED BY AGENCIES OVERSEEING THE MANUFACTURE, IMPORTATION, AND DISTRIBUTION OF PHARMACEUTICALS

1. How are personnel appointed to the various agencies, how are they vetted and how are they evaluated?
2. How are drugs shipped, inspected and distributed?
3. What reports are issued and to whom when problems are identified?
4. Which agencies are involved in interception and prosecution of those who violate regulations regarding drug traffic?
5. How much overlap of responsibility is there among the agencies?
6. What is the total amount spent across all agencies for the enforcement of drug laws and regulations?
7. Why are U.S. companies allowed to import drugs produced in other countries?
8. What are the barriers for U.S. citizens to directly purchase medicine from other countries?
9. How do other countries handle the problem of “bad medicines”?
10. Which sources of the problems are most likely to be easily remedied?
11. What should be the priorities of congress and agencies to minimize the problem of bad drugs?

12. What proportion of the problem of bad drugs may be attributed to lax inspection, illegal immigrants, the distribution by carriers like the postal service or private delivery services, lack of regulations and their enforcement?
13. What are the responsibilities of hospitals, clinics, physicians, and other medical personnel for insuring the quality of the drugs they dispense?
14. What would be the repercussions to the balance of trade, the cost of drugs, insurance costs, and the relationships with other countries if drugs could only be manufactured in the United States for sale to citizens of the United States?
15. Who or which agency should have the overall responsibility to coordinate efforts to reduce the problems?