

TROJAN HORSE

by Thomas T. Thomas

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Prologue
Ali Sahir
ONE BY ONE

The world was black outside the Plexiglas dome—and none too bright beneath it. Gamal Shahid had practiced with the miniature submarine in the bright sunshine of a distant Mexican lagoon. Now, under cover of darkness in San Francisco Bay, he handled the controls of this rich man's toy by touch and memory.

Despite the cold, murky water swirling under his chin, Shahid was comfortable inside his brand-new wetsuit. Because his training had been in warmer water, the suit was a recent addition to his equipment. However, his old belt weights did not quite balance the neoprene's natural buoyancy. Shahid kept bobbing out of the web seat, his feet drifting off the rudder pedals. Finally, to hold himself in place, he buckled the belt around one of the fuselage's internal struts.

Darkness and water in the unsealed cabin prevented his using a map. So Shahid carried his reference points in his head, like the experienced guerrilla he was.

Straight ahead, five hundred meters away, a string of bright sodium work lights lined the wharf, broken in one place by a dark bulk. The near end of the shadow was a superstructure lit by a constellation of portholes; its length disappeared into gloom. The rest of the night around Shahid's head at water level was a confused jostle of winking buoy lights, red and green markers on passing boats, and car headlights flashing along the waterfront. Shahid kept his attention fixed on the shadowed bulk, his target.

"Praise be to Allah," he intoned.

He reached forward and touched the shoulder of his partner, Muhammad Kebir. The other man turned, his face mask already in place. Shahid pointed at the shadowed bulk. Kebir glanced around and nodded to confirm their target.

Shahid adjusted his own mask and worked the valves and motor switches that submerged the submarine and drove it forward. A modest bow wave rose against the front of his dome. The water closed over Shahid's head.

Now came the hard part.

In the practice runs through that Mexican lagoon, Shahid could steer a straight course over three times the distance he now had to cross. But those had been calm waters. Here in San Francisco he must contend with vicious tides and the currents generated by the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems, which drained all of California. As his commando leader had explained, the combined outflow swept around a rocky point just north of the wharf where his target was moored. Under these conditions, driving straight in was nearly impossible.

The vertical distance between the target's laden hull and the bay's rocky bottom was no more than five meters over high tide. The river currents raced

through this confined space. Shahid had to approach his objective from astern, increasing power to his vessel's drive motors, releasing more air, and pushing down on the bow planes to sink lower. His tiny submarine came into position and settled on the bottom with a groaning scrape and a final thud. The two men were cloaked in utter darkness.

He tapped Kebir's shoulder twice this time—the go signal. His partner reached back and caught Shahid's wrist briefly, giving it a squeeze—acknowledgment, with a blessing upon them both.

Shahid sensed rather than saw when Kebir popped the latch on his own dome. The still water in the fuselage came alive with eddies from the current outside. He adjusted the motors to compensate for increased drag from the open dome.

Kebir snapped a chemical tube, bathing his face and hands with cold green light. He raised the tube above his head and the light disappeared into a curtain of dark seaweed. Shahid glimpsed the orange point of a starfish and a scuttling crab, both creatures living in the blanket on the ship's bottom.

His partner floated free of the hull, braced his knees against the turret ring, and began scraping at this curtain. As Kebir hacked, long shadows twisted and fled backward over his head. After ten minutes of this work, Shahid heard a shallow boom as the scraper struck bare metal. No one on deck would notice that sound, not through the tons of liquid cargo which muffled the spaces between source and hearer.

Kebir rattled around for another two minutes by Shahid's watch. Time was an important consideration—the state of the tide, the air supply in their tanks, and one other factor—but the situation was not yet critical. When Kebir was satisfied with the spot he had made, he ducked back into the fuselage and emerged with a flat disk cradled in his forearms. He lifted the thing over his head. The current caught at it and pushed him backward, but Kebir was strong, chosen particularly for this task. He guided the disk upward until it leapt out of his hands.

Bong! The magnets on its upper surface had found the patch of naked steel. Kebir's work was done. The package was already prepared, down to the timing of the fuse.

Shahid could only pray that his commando leader had been right, that the ship above their heads was indeed of the older single-hull construction, not one of the newer double-walled models. Tonight's mission would go for naught if their intelligence had been wrong on that point. But now the matter was in God's hands.

Kebir entered his turret, secured and latched the dome. Shahid raised the submarine off the bottom and drove forward against the current, turning slowly out of the danger zone under the tanker's hull. Once in clear water he fed full power to the motors to put as much distance between them and the target as possible. He also began angling upward on the bow planes.

Five minutes later, his dome broke the choppy surface of the bay. Shahid looked around to get his bearings for the run back to their mothership. The sodium work lights and the long black shadow were now seven hundred

meters astern. To the north was the lighthouse on Three Brothers, yes. To the west were the distant floodlamps of San Quentin Prison, yes. Around to the south was the great lump of Angel Island, backed by San Francisco's bright skyline. Shahid knew exactly where he was . . .

Or thought he did. An instant later Three Brothers disappeared under a blot that arose in the north. Had a fog bank come up? Moving so quickly? It ate up half the horizon. Only a single light, bright like a star, shone on top of this creeping void.

Shahid studied it. As his eyes focused he saw a curling white wave, creamy with bioluminescence, riding the forward edge of the black mass. Through the submarine's thin hull he sensed a surge of pressure pushing through the water, bearing down on them. He opened his mouth to cry out.

The shallowly angled bow of the oil-transport barge rode over the submarine's turrets at a speed of only six miles an hour. But the weight was enough to shatter both domes, turning the Plexiglas bubbles into rings of jagged knives and crumpling the hinges that held them in place around the heads of the two divers.

The transport's wide belly rolled the tiny vessel over and over, stripping off the dive planes and drive motors. The pummeling jarred loose air tanks, lines and cables inside the hull. It battered the two men senseless. Because the barge was more than four hundred feet long, this helpless rolling continued until the air inside their lungs gave out.

At last the barge passed on. The tugboat driving it gave the submarine's hull a last, flicking *ting!* with its bronze propeller. The ruined vessel hung upside down, five feet below the surface, riding out toward the Golden Gate on the ebbing tide.

* * *

Ali Sahir checked into the Hyatt Regency on San Francisco's Embarcadero at four o'clock in the afternoon, early enough that he could specify and get a bayside view. He had chosen this hotel because of its peculiar shape and orientation, and because rooms facing east and north were plentiful.

He registered under the name "Peter Bogosian." Over the years Sahir had found that most Americans felt a vestigial sympathy for the Armenians as a people—maybe it was the legacy of Turkish massacre, maybe the writings of one William Saroyan. But he had also found that they could not distinguish an Armenian face or accent from those of a Turk or Syrian. So in casual contacts the identity would pass an agent from almost anywhere in the Middle East. An agent like Ali Sahir.

It was a mark of his careful preparations that Sahir actually carried documents—a Nebraska driver's license and two credit cards—that matched the name. The cards would actually ring up charges in the computer, too.

Although he registered at four o'clock, Sahir did not go up to the room until eleven that night, and then he went without luggage. Neither did he touch the bed. Instead, he called room service for a light meal and a carafe of coffee and took them out onto the private terrace, which was another feature influencing his choice of hotel.

When he had eaten, Sahir pulled a chair around until he could see past the angled wall separating his space from the room and terrace next door. Then he settled in for the long wait. He took a small pair of Zeiss binoculars out of his jacket pocket, unfolded them, and focused on the far reaches of the bay. As he had planned, his view stretched past the winking light of Alcatraz and the dark lump of Angel Island, to the string of beads that was the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. To the right of this was his quarry: a long wharf lit with floodlamps and, behind it, shelving hillsides dotted with squat brown tanks. Each tank had its crown of red aircraft-warning lights.

The refinery at Point Richmond was not a purchaser of crude oil from Ali Sahir's country. True, the company that owned this facility did sufficient business with his sponsors—but that was neither here nor there. This particular refinery brought its crude down the coast from Valdez in Alaska, or across the Pacific from the Indonesian oil fields. True, Indonesia was a member of the OPEC cartel, the same as Sahir's country—but that, too, was neither here nor there.

In a marketplace where the price of sweet light crude had been hanging in the neighborhood of twenty dollars a barrel for the past decade, such niceties no longer mattered. Sahir's masters wanted certain results. They wanted their petrodollars flowing in at the old rate, and they wanted them now.

The action tonight would disrupt the refinery's operations by tying up its main offloading wharf. Sahir had given the matter much thought and study. He knew this approach was better than other attacks he might have launched.

He might, for example, have sent in a surface raid: his men climbing over barbed wire fences, carrying dynamite and grenades, targeting isolated manufacturing units laid out over a hundred acres of open ground. Each of those units was enclosed in a runoff berm and protected with foam-spreading equipment. The damage such a raid might do—at the nearly certain cost of his men being captured or killed—would be measured in the mere hundreds of thousands of dollars. It would be repaired in a week or two at most.

By contrast, sinking a tanker at the wharf would block the flow of crude oil in and refined product out for months. It would have the added benefit of creating an environmental stink. It might even force the politically sensitive Americans to shut down this major production facility. And all without reducing the sale of crude from Sahir's part of the Middle East by one drop.

For Ali Sahir, these tactical considerations were no more important than the emotional one. He was attacking the decadent West where it lived, in its energy supplies. As one of the faithful, he believed the international oil trade had been purposely designed to suck his country nearly dry. It had made a few sheiks at the top obscenely wealthy while increasing the poverty of the people. Such wealth, pouring so easily from the ground, had the effect of making his countrymen lazy, unscrupulous, and secular.

Tonight's action would not reverse that, he knew. But it was good to punish the Great Satan nonetheless, and to have his masters' blessing and support while he did it.

Sahir set the binoculars down and pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. Being so occupied, he missed the initial flare. It was just a smudge of light at the extreme range of his unaided vision. He checked his watch. Yes, right on time.

Through the glasses, Sahir saw a pillar of flame rising from the tanker's broken deck. In the gap at the fire's base, he could see the edges of the hull split apart, peeling back sheets of steel like the rind of an orange. Already the stern was settling into the water. The bow, being farther from the point of explosion, would take longer to sink.

Even the powerful glasses could not actually show him the crewmen running around on deck or scurrying off down the long wharf. But he knew they were there. He tasted their fear and panic and was made glad.

Finally Sahir broke away from the spectacle long enough to take care of his remaining duties on this mission. It would proceed without him, of course, but he wanted to maintain his authority, his aura of leadership. He rose from the chair, shaking the tingles out of his legs, and went back into the room. From the hotel switchboard he placed a ship-to-shore call to the vessel playing mothership on this mission.

It was a sleek yacht, eighty feet long with an aluminum hull, painted midnight blue like the tiles of his neighborhood mosque. That dark color had much to do with the selection, plus the fact that the roof of the aft salon had been reinforced—originally to take the weight of a tiny, two-man helicopter. The yacht had been built in Hong Kong, registered out of Portland, leased at Long Beach, and had spent the past three weeks somewhere north of Cabo San Lucas. For the last two days it had been berthed in the marina at Pier 39, a mile or so from this hotel. Tonight, it was standing out in the middle of the bay, somewhere to the east of Alcatraz, with its running lights turned off.

The captain answered immediately. Sahir knew he would be guarding the radiophone all night.

"Have our guests arrived aboard?" Sahir asked pleasantly.

"Not yet," the captain replied.

"That's—" The message sank in, overriding the encouragement Sahir was about to voice. "Oh well, it is early yet."

"Yes." The captain's tone said he wanted to handle this himself.

"Call me as soon as they arrive."

Sahir went back to his chair. The pillar of fire was taller now. Its upper edges were blurred with coils of black smoke, underlit by the orange glare. He watched until the sky paled in the east—the true east, not the false dawn he had made in Richmond—and a gray haze rose over the bay.

He went to call again.

"Are they aboard?"

"No sir," the captain said. "And, frankly, I fear the worst."

"Could the Coast Guard have intercepted them?" The activities of this agency, primarily concerned with marine safety, had always been an unknown element in Sahir's plans.

“No, we’ve been watching all night. Their cutters are distinctive, big and white. We would have seen any that crossed the path of . . . our guests.”

“After so long, would our people still have—” Sahir had to word this carefully, over an open radio frequency, speaking in the clear. “—the necessary *provisions* to reach you?”

“That is doubtful, sir.”

“Very well then.” Time for a command decision. “Proceed to the second rendezvous position. I will meet you there.”

As he hung up, Sahir regretted the loss of his team. He hoped that, if they still lived and remained uncaptured, they would have the sense to scuttle their midget submarine and swim for shore. They were trained for survival in hostile territory. They were supplied with dollars and documents. And they knew how to signal for fallback and retrieval. They were in God’s hands.

Still, he was frustrated. There had to be a faster way to cripple his country’s competitors and bring down the arrogant, wealth-sucking Westerners. Working one by one against individual targets like this was too slow, too tedious.

Chapter 1
William Clive
FIRST TIME IN WADERS

At quarter to four in the afternoon, William Clive turned off his computer and began preparing himself mentally for the upcoming interview with his agency mentor, Roger Isaacs. This might just be the big time, and Clive was ready for it.

He looked around his office for what he hoped might be the last time. It was nice enough, if not grand. It possessed four complete and solid walls. The wall six inches behind his chair back had cabinets and shelves going up to the ceiling, filled with his references on finance, management theory, and corporate law. The wall to his right had a window that framed a California liveoak which, from the way the tree stooped over, Clive had taken to calling the Wicked Witch of the West. The third wall, directly to the front, was his built-in desk module: seven feet of walnut veneer and Korean electronics. And the fourth wall on his left hand had a real door that opened and closed but did not lock. The floor space was no more than enough for Clive to stand up and turn around in, but it was all his. He also had a secretary whom he shared with four other account executives, although he sometimes had to queue up to get his correspondence printed.

Clive knew he had a good office space and a good job, as far as junior associate positions at Markris-Stone Consulting Services went. But it was not where the action was. After three months of scut work, even he knew that.

He left a note for Wanda and walked out of his building in the utilitarian D Quad. The coastal fog was just beginning to leak through the hills behind Palo Alto. By the time Clive got out of his meeting, the fog would be down among the trees, smothering the MSCS campus in a cold, gray cloud.

Isaacs's office was in the A Quad, a brown shingle and smoked glass chalet with a cathedral ceiling that soared thirty feet above the blond wood floors. The modern artwork in its central lobby, along with the lounges covered in butter-colored leather, were strictly for clients. Clive had paused here once, to examine a Mondrian he thought might be original, and the receptionist had actually cleared her throat at him. This time, however, he flashed his badge and she clicked the concealed switch to unlock the inner door.

Roger Isaacs had an office that was certainly big enough to turn around in. Hell, you could hold a square dance there, if you first rolled up the Bokhara carpet and moved the mission-style table that was his desk.

"William!" Isaacs said, getting up and coming around to shake hands. "So glad to see you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Isaacs."

"Please. It's Roger."

"Of course . . . Roger," Clive mumbled.

"Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. No ceremony among colleagues." Isaacs waved him toward the circle of guest chairs around a low, talon-footed table that looked like an antique. The man sat across from him,

crossed his legs at the knee, and folded his hands on his paunch. Then he glanced up as if remembering something. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"Can't offer anything stronger."

"I understand."

"So . . . where were we?"

Clive wondered if this was a test. "You wanted to meet with me," he said slowly.

"Oh, yes. Cumulus Biologicals. New client of ours. Heard of them?"

Clive stirred his memory and came up with a profile from a *Fortune* article. Cumulus Biologicals, Inc., was one of the first-generation biotech firms, specializing in genetic research aimed at "environmental solutions." Its original product had been a tailored bacteria that secreted enzymes supposed to inhibit the formation of ice crystals, to protect vineyards against early frost. Hysteria about some runaway science-fiction effect kept the State of California from approving it for testing in the field. But presumably Cumulus had other products in actual use. They must have, because they were making roughly a quarter billion a year in revenues.

"Sure," Clive said. "What do they need?"

"Ostensibly, support for analysis and upgrading of their management information systems. They want to go to a 100base-T LAN system with throughput to support full-motion video in hypertext. But first they need someone to weed through the equipment they've already got, document it, and find out who actually uses the stuff. You did your dissertation on hypertext, didn't you?"

"No, sir." Clive suppressed a grimace. "Theory of the firm in a globalized market environment."

"Then you minored in cybernetics?"

"No, foreign languages." Oh, this was not going well *at all*.

"Well, would you know a piece of wire if you tripped over it?"

"Yes, sir." Clive tried not to squirm.

"Then get with Bob Carstairs—it'll have to be in the evenings, because this one is popping that fast—and brush up on local area networks, Ethernet, RAID stacks, plug compatibles, and everything else you don't know about."

"Of course, sir."

"Their computers aren't the problem, you understand."

So this *was* it! Please, God, if you're out there. . . .

"What is their problem, then?"

"Some of Cumulus's best new ideas are getting copied by the French, sometimes by the Japanese, often before they finish testing in this country."

"They came to us about this?"

"Of course not." Isaacs frowned at him from under heavy eyebrows. "On the surface, the Cumulus people seem barely aware of the pattern. Our fellow travelers over in Agriculture gave us the heads-up. We have probes out to make sure none of the leaks are coming from Federal or state labs."

"And now you want someone inside Cumulus," Clive summed up.

“Exactly.” Isaacs raised his finger as if he had just discovered an important point. “This will be your first time putting on the waders and heading out for a deep hole, won’t it?”

Clive knew what he meant. Isaacs was a fanatic about fly casting and drew most of his metaphors from fishing. “Well, as you know, I’ve worked on half a dozen audits since coming to Markris-Stone. But they were all front-office stuff.”

“Not the same thing.”

“No, sir.”

“But you’ve been trained?”

“The basic introductory course, sir. With weekend follow-up classes.” Clive was still feeling the aches from those.

“Well, we’ll assign an angel to you all the same.”

“Do you think that will be necessary?” Clive held his breath, not sure whether he felt brave and glad, or a little bit afraid.

“It’s standard procedure—” Isaacs waved off his objections. “—with our probationers.”

* * *

In the culture incubator, under a bath of dull red light, the altered *Escherichia coli* bacteria went about their business.

Every one hundred and twenty minutes, a spindle silently grew out between centrioles lodged in the cell’s cytoplasm. Then the free-floating strands of DNA untangled themselves, ran off perfect copies of each gene, and aligned two-by-two across the spindle’s fibers. As those fibers contracted, the genetic copies were pulled into opposing bundles. Meanwhile, the cell membrane spurted into furious growth around the middle. When the genetic material had been duplicated at either end of the elongated body, the membrane pinched itself off like a sausage casing in a butcher’s nimble fingers. When the knot was sealed, the two new cells drifted apart, and the process started all over again.

One cell divided to become two. Two became four. And so on, doubling every two hours. The bacteria grew exponentially, provided there was nutrient to feed them. In normal *E. coli*, that nutrient was the dissolved food and dying cells in the lining of the human gut. But with this modified version, two tailored genes had been added to the bacilli’s nucleus.

The first, *enz2*, produced an enzyme that broke the covalent bonds in n-hexane molecules, effectively stripping the hydrogen atoms off the carbon chains in petroleum. The second, *met3*, altered the bacteria’s own metabolism so that it could directly absorb the newly liberated carbon atoms into its protein coat.

Sometimes, in the mess of compounds constituting raw crude oil, the bacteria found other molecules—those involving sulfur, for example—and reject the unwanted atoms. Helped by the modest heat of the cell’s internal chemical processes, that sulfur combined with the newly freed hydrogen. This was an undesirable, but so far unavoidable, side effect.

But in one particular batch of bacilli, something else had gone wrong—perhaps in the gene sequencing, perhaps in the activation. These modified *E. coli* were producing too much of the enz2 protein, more than they could possibly use in their anaerobic environment.

Edward Sedgwick opened the door of the incubator and took out the rack of test tubes he was culturing. He set them on the lab bench and went through them one by one, methodically categorizing the results in each against a matrix laid out in his computer spreadsheet.

At the very first culture, he frowned. He held the test tube up to the light and studied the effect. Instead of the clear liquid he was hoping to find, this tube held tiny lumps of blackish material swimming in murky fluid.

He took the Oom Paul pipe out of his mouth. Although smoking was not permitted in the laboratory, Sedgwick considered himself senior enough to break the rules. He pried loose the test tube's red rubber cap. Like any good technician who valued his olfactory nerves, Sedgwick wafted ambient air across the tube's open mouth instead of inhaling from the tube directly. The odor of rotten eggs was unmistakable.

"Bah!" he said, hanging the pipe back on his jaw. "Still the same."

He held the test tube up again and examined the black spots. Later he would put them under a microscope, but for now first impressions were important. "The bugs have simply curdled the oil," he concluded. "Like cheese. . . . This will never do."

He made a notation in his computer, capped the test tube, and proceeded to the next one. It, too, was ruined but in a slightly different manner: more fluid, less curds, but still unacceptable. And that odor of hydrogen sulfide! Who would accept an environmental remedy which brewed up a well known and deadly poison?

These bacterial cultures were all bad, but series E-32 was the worst. Very little liquid remained in that tube, all congealed in a crusty puddle at the bottom. The black lumps were fused into an almost solid mass, like soft coal. The smell struck him the minute the cap was off.

Sedgwick wrote up the entire batch as a failure. It was not, however, exactly wasted effort because he now knew at least one gene manipulation to avoid in tinkering with *E. coli*'s metabolism. But this morning's work put him no closer to his goal than before.

"Like old cheese," he muttered again, putting the rack of spoiled cultures into his refrigerator, thereby inhibiting growth. In a day or two, when the unit was full, he would dump the tubes in a biohazard bag. Until then it would pay to keep them, in case the suits from corporate had questions about his work. You always had to have something to show for your efforts.

* * *

William Clive's first day at the Cumulus headquarters in San Francisco started at eight-thirty with an interview with Charlie Palmer, Manager of Information Systems.

He had spent the previous night until three in the morning skimming and scanning the stack of literature that Isaacs and his technical expert,

Carstairs, had sent home with him. Clive now knew enough to bullshit his way through the first twenty minutes of this meeting. It would be his hardest test, fooling the resident expert in his own domain. After that, with the other executives, Clive would play things by ear.

Charlie Palmer was his primary client contact, the man who called in Markris-Stone in the first place and who would authorize payment on the invoices for whatever Clive did with their computers. As such, he would be Clive's most important ally. After their introductory handshake and a little fencing about the commute traffic, Palmer got down to business.

"You'll find these people pretty easy to work with," he said, settling into his high-backed, black-leather desk chair. That piece of furniture made an incongruous picture in Palmer's fabric-paneled cubicle, which everyone seemed to occupy except for the most senior officers.

"How so?" Clive asked. "Because they're all technical?"

"Lord no! Most of these are financial types, accountants. They wouldn't know a gene if one stuck to their shoe. What they don't know about biology, let alone computers, would fill a college library. You can tell them almost anything, and they'll believe it."

Clive did not let himself be encouraged by this. "So, what motivates them?"

"The bottom line. Keeping the pipeline full of projects. Getting and keeping market share. And maintaining quarterly revenues. The top man, Jefferson—he's a lawyer, by the way, started here as representative of the venture capitalist—believes in the stock price. What sends it up is good. What puts it down is bad. A nice clear vision."

"But he's willing to spend for adding video capability to your local network," Clive said. "That seems rather esoteric."

"Because it will improve the bottom line."

"Then let's make him happy, shall we?"

From Palmer's cubicle, they went on an orientation tour: to a nine o'clock meeting with Robertson, Chief Financial Officer and guardian of the computer system's accounting functions, then with Jefferson himself at ten. After a lunch in a four-star bistro—for which Palmer let Clive's meager expense account pick up the tab—they spent the afternoon meeting second-echelon vice presidents.

By four o'clock, Clive's head was awhirl with Baby Boomer names and clear-eyed white faces sitting behind identical teak-veneered desk modules in identical cloth-paneled boxes. His pocket was filled with their business cards. But he had given out just as many of his own new cards, prepared overnight in Markris-Stone's print shop with a plausible-sounding title for this assignment.

The only face that stood out in this crowd, the only voice that did not ring true, belonged to the International Marketing Vice President, Peter Shore.

For one thing, Shore's job appeared to be a sinecure, because most of Cumulus's products were developed with Federal grant money under contract to either the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Environmental Protection Agency. Foreign customers and contracts did exist, of course, but not in enough

volume to require a separate marketing division—or not according to the Markris-Stone analysis that Clive had absorbed. Besides, Shore's cubicle was too neat, with none of the clutter that identified the busy workspaces of the other executives. And his phone never rang once during the interview with Clive.

For another thing, the man seemed nervous. He squirmed in his chair, and he agreed too readily with everything Clive or Palmer said.

"Computer system?" Shore said, reaching around to pat the keyboard of the machine on the shelf behind him. It was turned off. "I couldn't get along without it. Staple of the business, yes."

"You should see an immediate improvement in throughput on the network," Clive said smoothly. "More complex documents, metafiles, wider access to on-line materials, video imaging—"

"Video?" Shore almost giggled. "You're going to pipe in *Baywatch*?"

"We're thinking more along the lines of desktop conferencing," Palmer said dryly. "Plus documents that will be able to exhibit video clips of experimental cultures, growth rates, electron microscopy—that sort of thing."

"Of course." Shore sobered up, but he never became what Clive would have called composed. "We're all looking forward to it."

"You might have special requirements from the new system," Clive put in. "Such as video compatibility with foreign screen formats and recording systems. Say, with the French or the Japanese."

"Good point," Palmer murmured.

"French? The Japs?" Shore seemed surprised. "Oh, I don't talk with *them*."

"I thought they might be big markets for Cumulus products."

"Competitors, is what they are. We keep our distance."

"My mistake," Clive said.

And yet he wondered.

Chapter 2
Juliana Troetelkind
A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP

On Clive's second day at Cumulus Biologicals, Charlie Palmer suggested they sit in on a typical product development meeting, to get a feel for how the company worked. "Miss T has a review session starting at ten. Why don't we crash that?"

"Miss T?" Clive asked.

"That's what everyone calls her. Juliana's last name is some impossible Dutch jawbreaker. It's worth your life to get it wrong."

"Sounds like a real dragon."

"Not at all. You'll love her."

A line of poetry, relic of his misbegotten education, drifted through Clive's mind: "For Juliana comes and she, what I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me." And then it drifted away.

The meeting was held in one of the "fish bowls," which was how Palmer described the conference rooms lining Executive Country in the headquarters building. One side of the room was floor-to-ceiling windows with a twenty-story view of the Bay Bridge and Mission Bay development. The other was a glass curtain separating it from the internal landscaping of office cubicles. The narrow end walls were decorated with projection screens and whiteboards.

When Palmer and Clive walked in, the people in the room were evenly divided by their modes of dress. One group wore business attire: dark suits and ties with shiny shoes. The other had on slacks or jeans, open-necked shirts, and sneakers. From the occasional white lab coat among the latter, Clive guessed they were the company's creative types, researchers and biological technicians. The two groups stayed apart, like oil and water. Then a woman in a business suit appeared, and the people settled along opposite sides of the table.

The newcomer was elegant. She was tall and lithe, moving with a ballerina's sense of "centeredness"—that quality the judo instructors had tried so hard to instill in Clive during his two weeks with them. This woman also radiated a personal poise which commanded the entire room. Her charcoal-gray business suit fitted her like a uniform, although she indulged in a silk scarf which hugged her throat on one side and draped across her shoulder on the other. The suit's pleated skirt floated around her knees above long, gracefully curved calves.

Palmer nudged Clive in the ribs and nodded.

Clive barely noticed. He was already in love.

Miss T's hair was the color of fresh wheat, and she wore it pulled up in a loose crown on top of her head—what Clive thought of as the "Gibson girl" style from nearly a century ago. He saw that old gold and a delicate purple seemed to be her colors. The room's overhead lights picked up glinting accents in her hair, and she repeated them through the golden trellis bordering her scarf. "Violet" best described the color of her eyes, which she matched with the tiny

flowers clinging to the scarf's trellis and the peculiar shade of polish that glistened on her fingernails.

She laid a leather-bound day planner in front of the end chair, scanned the room with those magnificent eyes, and stopped when she saw Clive.

"Charlie? Do we have a guest today?" Her voice was a mellow contralto, perfectly modulated and without any hint of surprise.

Palmer rose from his place among the suits, introduced Clive, and briefly stated his reasons for attending. The woman nodded once and turned quickly to other matters. Clive felt strangely hurt, as if she had dissected him and found him insufficiently interesting.

Miss T, whom Palmer had described as one of several senior project managers in the company, conducted the review meeting with cool efficiency. She had a number of projects in hand, so went briskly down the one side of the table, hearing each technician's report and taking notes in her planner using a fat fountain pen with an engraved, silver-and-gold nib.

The corporate people arrayed on the table's opposite side seemed to be listeners rather than talkers. Clive understood that they were all accounting or marketing personnel who would eventually sell the fruits of laboratory people's efforts. But no one bothered to ask questions. Everyone nodded at the right places. They all seemed to know what every word of the technical jargon meant.

Everyone except Clive. He felt that, if he was going to maintain appearances in this role, then he ought to at least try to understand what was going on. Finally, when an older man was firmly launched into a recital about his "C" series versus his "D" series, their successive enzyme generations, and the variable rates of hydrogen stripping he was experiencing, Clive found himself totally awash.

The old scientist appeared to be someone important. Despite San Francisco's strict laws against smoking in the workplace, he puffed at a briar pipe whose blue fumes had effectively cleared out the seats on either side of him. There wasn't an ashtray in sight, so he laid out a flat can into which he regularly knocked smoldering tobacco ashes.

"Excuse me," Clive said, raising his hand. "But I'm new here, you know . . . Could you tell me exactly what all this means?"

Miss T gave him another dissection with those violet lasers.

"Of course." She offered the briefest smile. "Dr. Sedgwick is working on the next generation of microbes designed to ingest crude oil. Once he fine-tunes their metabolism, these genetically tailored bacteria will break down hydrocarbon molecules under strictly anaerobic conditions, much like the bacilli living in the human large intestine. That means we could clean up an oil spill after it has seeped into the ground, or sunk below the surface of a bay or inlet. We can avoid the lengthy and environmentally damaging processes of mechanical extraction with dredges and steam hoses."

"I see," Clive murmured. The Corps of Engineers certainly could have used something similar to mop up after that oil tanker exploded and burned at Point Richmond. "Thank you."

“And, Edward?” the woman said to Sedgwick. “Our time is limited. Could you please make it march?”

“Oh, I did have some very entertaining results—” Out came the pipe. *Tink-tink* it went on the can’s edge. “—but nothing you’d call environmentally benign. Until I get the rate of enzyme-two production under control, we won’t see anything really useful. One batch in particular, however, produced a veritable monster which—”

“Edward?” Miss T prompted. “I’m sure this is all fascinating. Why don’t you circulate an e-mail for anyone who might be interested?”

“Sure thing.” And the pipe went back into his mouth.

* * *

With her customary efficacy, Juliana wrapped up the product review meeting as quickly as possible. By her watch, she had beaten the scheduled ending time by five minutes. People were still gathering their papers and standing up when she withdrew into the hallway.

“Ma’am? . . . Miss T?”

Juliana turned and saw the computer consultant, William Clive, signaling from across the room. Once he had caught her eye, he squeezed Charlie Palmer’s arm, clearly bidding him good-bye, and hurried to follow her out into the corridor.

She turned to face him. Clive was just a fraction taller than she was, but then Juliana was wearing pumps with two-inch heels. “Yes?” She kept her voice cool and light.

“I, yuh, wanted to discuss your data-logging needs, ma’am,” he began shyly. Juliana was accustomed to having that effect on men. “As part of my computer network study? I see that you still take your project notes by hand . . .”

“Yes.”

Clive gestured for her to continue on, to wherever she was going, and fell in alongside her. Juliana sensed he was matching her stride for stride.

“I think,” he said, “that we can find you a set of applications, maybe in a personal organizer or a palmtop, which will speed up the process.”

“Really?” She did not offer him encouragement. Not yet, anyway.

Juliana came to her cubicle and stopped in the doorway. Clive passed a step or two beyond her, then turned back, confused. Then his eyes fixed on the panel’s nametag, which read “Juliana Troetelkind, Technical Manager,” and his face cleared. Palmer must have said something to him, because she could see Clive sounding the name out in his head. He obviously decided it didn’t look too difficult.

“Look, Miss Trottle—”

“Troetelkind,” she said evenly.

He tried to follow the combination of sounds. “True—”

“Troo,” she corrected, then nodded for him to try it.

He pursed his lips just as she had. “Troo.”

“Turl—” She gave it the faint glottal stop.

He made the one syllable into two. “Turtle.”

“Kint,” she finished, shaking her head.

He aspirated the final dental. “Kin-*tah*.”

“Troetelkind,” she repeated.

“True turtle kisses,” Clive said with a boyish grin.

Juliana frowned. She would not let any man get away with making fun of her. But then, this was also her day to be unpredictable. Impulse won out, and she laughed aloud. “Close enough,” she agreed.

“So what kind of computer can I get you?” He sounded relieved.

“Something tasteful and unique,” she said. “It should be pure black, not mouse gray or that silly putty color. And it must be extremely powerful.”

“With lots of RAM?” he asked, getting into the spirit.

“Of course. And have a very hard disk.”

“Floppies are so passé,” he agreed.

“Why don’t you come inside,” she said, “and show me what you’ve got?”

Juliana stood back in the cubicle’s doorway. As he squeezed past, Clive’s knuckles brushed the back of her exposed hand. A spark of static electricity from the carpet stung her, sending a tiny thrill up her arm. Or maybe it was something more.

* * *

On the morning of his third day at Cumulus Biologicals, William Clive took up residence in the tiny cubicle that Charlie Palmer of Management Information Systems had arranged for his use. The space was, for reasons unexplained, in the Accounting Department two floors below Executive Country.

If he had thought the accommodations up there somewhat cramped, they were positively military on this floor where the clients and venture capitalists never trod. Instead of earth-toned fabrics, the partition walls down here were molded gray plastic. Every surface not covered with Formica was either a filing cabinet or a computer console. The desk chair was upholstered in cracked vinyl, and its pivot joint squealed whenever he tilted back—probably on purpose, to discourage idle lounging. But this cubby hole did have a computer, one tied into the company’s local area network, and that was all he required.

Clive had spent the past two nights working until early morning with Bob Carstairs from Markris-Stone. To short-cut his commute time, they had used a “safe house”—Carstairs actually called it that—in an apartment on Potrero Hill. The sessions alternated between a crash course in basic computer technology and hands-on training with an unlabeled floppy disk that Carstairs had brought along.

The disk’s files were small, some just a few kilobytes apiece according to the file directory. But the primary piece of software expanded with a zipper program like a paper flower in water. The result was a huge array of numbered subroutines, all of them armed with teeth and claws. Some were for infiltrating the general operations of a local area network without alerting the system administrator, while others went to work on specific applications. Carstairs had

made him practice launching each of the routines using a dummy system hosted by one of the Markris-Stone computers down in Palo Alto.

Mere possession of this disk was, Clive suspected, a *de facto* felony under one or more Federal communications laws.

He now turned on the machine in his new cubicle, logged onto his assigned drive space in the file server, and copied across the floppy's contents. Then he typed "unzip *.*," said a short prayer for himself, and pressed Enter. While the screen filled with expanding program activity, he sat back—causing his chair to shriek briefly. After a minute or more of automated clicking and scrolling, the computer screen said, "IDENTIFY FIRST TARGET LAST NAME FIRST."

Clive typed in, "shore, peter." His feelings about the man in charge of International Marketing hadn't changed. Shore was the clinker in a bed of hot coals. He drew attention to himself by being conspicuously less busy than everyone else, apparently less informed than anyone else, and having the one job at Cumulus that apparently paid well while contributing almost nothing to the bottom line. Clive pressed Enter again, and the screen got busy.

After another minute it said, "IDENTIFY SECOND TARGET LAST NAME FIRST."

That took a bit of thought . . . although, actually, not much. Clive typed, "palmer, charles." If anyone was in a position to extract and sell proprietary information, it would be the man in charge of the company's computer systems. Because he had access to secrets in all the company's many databases, Palmer might turn out to be the industrial spy. Of course, in any modern corporation, almost everyone had some kind of access. But Clive had to start somewhere.

According to Carstairs's description, the bootleg program was now combing through the local file server and camping on every piece of software which touched either Shore or Palmer, seeking out their access codes, mapping their various account identities, and tracing all their activities from this point forward. The program's field of view included, among other things, Cumulus's executive scheduler and appointment functions, e-mail received and sent, computerized phone records, and the contents of the two men's personal hard drive areas on the LAN server. The result of its researches was analyzed, compressed, and stored in Clive's own disk space. By pressing Enter those two times, Clive had definitely broken a number of those Federal laws, not to mention his client's sacred trust.

The screen requested a third target, and Clive canceled it with a last press of the Enter key. He could call up the program again, if and when other targets arose. Just as the screen was shutting itself down, leaving in place an innocuous window of word-processing a dummy memo, the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Clive wondered who might already have this phone number.

"It's me." The voice belonged to Juliana Turtle-kisses. "Do you want to ask me out to lunch?"

"Of course," he said. "My treat."

* * *

Over the Caesar salad and crab cakes at Postrio, Julia detected a gleam of intelligence behind William Clive's puppy-dog eyes.

As a man, he could not look at her for more than five minutes without showing glints of obvious longing. But whenever he turned away—to deal with the waiter or focus on his food—then his face relaxed and he showed a quiet competence that she found appealing. Clive had a clear forehead and a long, thin jaw which finished off a beautifully shaped head. His dark hair and eyes gave him the look of a serious and scholarly boy.

Unlike other men she knew, he seemed to be more interested in finding out about her than in telling about himself.

"Someone told me your name is Dutch," Clive said at one point. "Are you old Knickerbocker?"

"Knicker—?" She asked uncertainly. "Excuse me?"

"That's New York aristocracy, originally of Dutch extraction."

"No, neither. I am a *Nederlander*."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "Born there?"

"*Ja*, in Den Haag."

"But your English is perfect!"

Juliana tried to interpret this as a possible insult—she had lived in this country almost ten years, after all—and failed to find it. "Thank you," she said. "For most of us, English is like a second language."

At another point, Clive asked about her technical credentials, although here he was less direct. "I could barely keep up with the lab people at yesterday's meeting," he confessed, "yet you seemed to understand everything."

"I studied microbiology at the university," she explained. "But I took my masters in business administration."

"You didn't want to become a researcher, then, like the others? You could be making these wonderful discoveries yourself, for the benefit of all mankind."

Again, Juliana tried to be insulted. Didn't Clive realize that as a senior project manager she outranked almost everyone on the scientific staff? Perhaps he did not understand the company hierarchy, so she decided to be diplomatic.

"Not everyone has a calling for pure research," she said. "Or the talent. We also serve who only manage the function."

Later, during a lull in the conversation, Clive returned to her international status. "So . . . do you and your—family, whatever—get back to the Netherlands often?" he asked.

Ah! She interpreted that little hesitation intuitively. Clive was probing to see if he had romantic competition on either continent. Juliana did not wear a wedding band, but that signified nothing these days. "Family" was obviously meant to include a husband or a more-than-casual lover. Still, Juliana paused over the question. How truthful could she dare be with him?

The reality was that she would never return home. The state had provided her education through a series of scholarships, because her father believed that young women should raise babies instead of "fooling around with

germs and sea slime,” as he put it. The price of those scholarships had been a prolonged period of social service at minimal wage, either in teaching or in medical support. Juliana disliked children and hated the thought of emptying bedpans, so she had fled the Netherlands. When the expiration date on her visa had drawn near, she applied for and got U.S. citizenship. Now she wrote regularly to her mother and largely ignored her father.

“This is a land of such opportunity,” she said with just a flicker of a smile, “that I do not ever think of leaving.”

* * *

Just as they were settling into mutual-discovery mode, Clive sensed Juliana vanishing into a puff of smoke.

He had already guessed that Miss Troetelkind might be foreign born, because European women had always seemed to him to possess a natural self-sufficiency, a *savoir-faire*, and a reputation for sexual savvy that he found both mysterious and fascinating. Clive had also guessed at her technical education, because she had lobbed those questions at her staff the day before too adroitly to be faking her expertise. Yet all through the lunch, though he listened carefully, Clive could detect no clues to her romantic status: no unnamed “him” lurking in the conversational shadows, no telltale use of “we,” no hint of shared experiences.

When nothing was forthcoming on the subject, he had asked—too bluntly, to his ears—about her personal situation by referring to her travels. He was hoping she might describe a vacation in the old country and drop a hint about some of those shared moments. Instead, she had answered straight out of the Ellis Island handbook for patriots. *Poof!*

But the moment she smiled Clive was distracted by her elegant bone structure. For real beauty, he thought, a woman’s skin must be clear and her teeth fairly even. But skin was subject to gravity, and teeth only served to hold the jaws apart. It was the fine bones underneath that gave a woman’s face timeless beauty. And Juliana’s bones were perfect.

After he had failed to make conversation on all points, she in turn asked about Clive’s life and times. To questions about his education and past work, he gave excerpts from the “approved resume” for this assignment. He told how he had taken an unspecified degree from Cal Tech and had held several anonymous and virtually untraceable positions at companies like, but not actually identified as being, Hewlett-Packard and Novell. All of it was fiction, of course, because Clive couldn’t talk about his real work.

He attempted a recovery by asking, “Do you have any pets?”

Juliana shook her head. “It’s too cruel, don’t you think? Keeping them cooped up all day while we go to the office?”

“Of course.” Damn! All the single women of Clive’s acquaintance owned a cat.

“Are you reading any good books?” he tried again.

Another shake, this time with disappointment in her eyes. “I don’t have time. Just magazines, mostly.”

“Oh? Which ones?”

“*Fortune, Forbes . . . and Vogue.*”

“That’s interesting.” Clive was loyal to the heavyweight, *Harvard Business Review*, which had once published in its entirety a six-page letter he had written to the editor. He also read *BusinessWeek* for more mundane affairs, but that wasn’t stylish enough to be on her list.

He considered asking what kind of car she drove—everyone in California drove something—when he caught a sudden vision of himself as teenage geek discussing boy’s toys with this beautiful woman. So he finally gave up and simply stared into her eyes over coffee. Juliana didn’t seem to mind that. He just wished he could be honest with her and not have to tell so many lies, conceal so much of himself. It was a terrible way to start a meaningful relationship.

The check came after half an hour. Clive put it on his Markris-Stone expense account, even though the card had been issued to him “for emergencies only.” That definition certainly did not cover social occasions, such as what Clive had come to think of as his and Juliana’s first date. Later, he would have to think of a business reason for this encounter.

Chapter 3
Alexander Nayle
CLOSELY HELD SECRETS

When he got back to his tiny cubicle after lunch, Clive attended to business—his cover business as a paid consultant, not his real job. He checked his voice mail and found nothing. Then he looked in his e-mail in-basket and found one item, a message from “ejsedgwick.” After a moment’s thought Clive identified the scientist from the meeting yesterday, the old man with the smelly pipe and the failed bacteria.

He clicked on the message and instantly found himself hip-deep in the minutiae of *Escherichia coli*, which he remembered as having some unpleasant connection with intestinal flu. The text talked in the alphanumeric soup of genetic shorthand, sprinkled with obscure references to enzymes, proteases, and metabolites. There were also the names of bizarre compounds which Clive recognized from once having audited an oil refinery. The memo went on for three baffling pages. Having nothing better to do at the moment, Clive tried to read it. This was, after all, the meat and potatoes of Cumulus Biologicals, Inc.

From his initial fast skim, he gathered that Sedgwick’s modified *E. coli* was unable to perform the desired function—“ingest crude oil molecules under anaerobic conditions,” as Juliana had explained it. But no, on second reading, Clive sensed the bacteria were on the right track but were performing inconsistently. Some of the cultures turned up their noses and refused to touch the oil at all. Others snacked on it with a weak and pettish appetite, creating in their wake a mix of noxious jellies and poisonous gases. And one variety—Sedgwick cited its series number, E-32—picked crude oil to the bones, leaving behind an insoluble residue of pure carbon coke.

It took Clive a minute to figure out why this could not be considered a raving success. Then he realized that oil spills at sea, especially in an enclosed inlet or bay, eventually found their way onto land. Such a thing had happened in Prince William Sound, for example, after the *Exxon Valdez* went aground. A cleaning agent that left hard lumps of carbon in the beach sand or dribbled them over the oysterbeds was unlikely to become any environmentalist’s friend.

Then a darker thought occurred to him. A cleaning agent such as Cumulus Biologicals was trying derive to would be mass-produced and widely distributed. Packages of the bacteria, in water-soluble form, would be stored in canisters at petroleum loading docks, aboard oil tankers, at refineries, even in the oil fields. It would probably become an environmental regulation that the agent be on hand against possible oil spills and other emergencies everywhere in the world.

But what refinery manager would want a time bomb like that sitting in a shed outside his plant? Any disgruntled employee could pop the seals, dump the bugs down a hatch, and clog up miles of pipelines and cubic yards of tankage. Or turn a ship’s cargo into blocks of graphite before it could sail into port. Juliana had said the bug would function *anaerobically*, which meant it did

not need air or sunlight to do its dirty work. The insides of a holding tank, or even underground down an oil well, would fit that description perfectly.

Clive wondered if he ought to share these dire musings with anyone. Sedgwick himself? Juliana? Or someone higher up? He decided not to, because the ensuing discussion might put himself and his work in an unhealthy spotlight.

However, he did check to see who else had received this piece of e-mail. According to the distribution list, it had gone out fairly widely. Clive remembered Juliana asking Sedgwick to circulate it to the meeting's attendees. That was probably why Clive, who had no business knowing this level of technical detail, was copied on it.

And yes, Charlie Palmer, who had sat in on the meeting with him, also got a copy.

* * *

The housekeeper summoned Alexander Nayle from his bed to the telephone in the upstairs study. "A call for you," she said. "From California." That made the call important. Everyone he knew in California was a player in some part of his business.

Nayle glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. Golden dragons, rampant on a block of green serpentine, held the pale clockface erect in their claws. It was just before six. Not even gray dawn had yet touched the Paris sky. He counted backward: West Coast time was just nine in the evening. Certainly, his caller might have waited an hour or two longer, to let him sleep.

"Yes?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"I may have something for you."

He recognized the voice immediately as his primary contact at Cumulus Biologicals. He had made several profitable exchanges with this person in the past.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Environmental . . . at least on the surface. This culture was originally designed to break down oil spills."

Nayle made a face. He would have preferred another agricultural product, of course, because they were usually easier to market. The world's spreading famine offered him a virtually global clientele. Environmental products limited him to buyers in Europe and North America, the only regions that could afford to worry about ecology and clean water. In most such cases, the buyers were already served by the company he and his contact were defrauding. Still, Nayle remained quiet at this point. He had learned early on that, in these negotiations, a cold silence staked out the power position.

"Well, are you interested?" the voice asked.

"You'll have to tell me something about it," he said smoothly.

His contact entered on a detailed explanation of bacterial growth rates, accelerated carbon-oxygen metabolism, hydrogen-stripping enzymes, and other esoterica that really didn't interest Nayle. He stared through the study's tall windows, over the brown-gray waters of the Seine, to the rooftops of the Right Bank's Marais District. The sky was just growing light enough to bring out the

red of the tiles there. And the chimney pots were beginning to send up sober columns of gray smoke.

What Nayle gathered from his contact's extended monologue was that the bacteria in question ate oil. They could turn valuable crudes into useless sludge. This did not sound promising. If the bug had done something practical, like expedite the refining process, then he might be able to sell it to one of the oil companies. Or to an Arab state which wouldn't mind competing in the market for refined products. But this bug—what was it called? Escher's collie?—was still in the experimental stage. And it was a failure.

Still, Nayle hesitated to refuse any offer outright. This person had been too good a source in the past to be turned down lightly.

"It sounds like an interesting package," he said, keeping his tone neutral. "But I will have to look into the matter and get back to you."

"I understand," the voice said.

"A day or two, no more."

"Whenever . . ." And the line went dead.

As he set the phone down, Nayle wondered if anyone of his acquaintance might have an oil spill on his hands? Now or in the future?

The list was depressingly short.

* * *

The first thing Clive did on his fourth day at Cumulus was crank up that floppy disk full of secret programs and check on what he called his "trap line." He had not dared to leave the full panoply of contraband programs resident on his drive space in the file server, because it was not secure. The system administrator—Clive had been introduced to the current SYSADMIN, Bernie Heilman, on his first day—held peekaboo rights to anything stored there. Heilman would flip out if he saw some of the baggage Clive was packing.

The paper flower opened and reported that it held data on both of his current targets, Peter Shore and Charlie Palmer. The screen showed lists of messages sent and received, meetings scheduled and attended, calls made and billed—date, time, and phone number, but no voice recordings or transcripts. The software wasn't *that* advanced. Not yet, anyway. Clive noted that Palmer had duly received Sedgwick's memo about the oil-eater. He had presumably read it, then stored it off twice: once in his personal file space on the server and again in a subdirectory on his desktop workstation labeled \MARKETNG.

"Marketing"? What did Palmer have to market? He was one of the systems guys. At a corporation like Cumulus, his function would be almost wholly internal. He was as unlikely to be arranging sales to clients as washing out test tubes or mailing invoices.

Curious now, Clive used his package of programs to look at the entries in this directory of Palmer's. Judging from the date, Sedgwick's memo had been filed as CARBON.DAT. The others in the directory had names like BANANA.DAT, RICE.DAT, and weirdest of all, SLUG.DAT. The references meant nothing to Clive. He couldn't link them to the previous thefts that Markris-Stone had traced on Cumulus projects, which had been growth hormones for agricultural crops like sorghum and soybeans. Still, Clive took a

surreptitious download of this batch of files into his own drive for later analysis. . . . Then again, he mused, they might be something innocent, like a science fair project for one of Palmer's kids.

As an afterthought, before he closed up his collection of programs, Clive decided to add Edward Sedgwick to the trap line. Maybe someone else would show an interest in the oil-eater.

* * *

It took Alexander Nayle most of the day to track down the buyer he was seeking. Although such men were generally elusive, Ali Sahir maintained a high public profile—but as a merchant, financier, and civilian advisor to his country's quasi-military government. His nighttime activities were appreciated by only the handful of Westerners in a position to supply him with arms, contraband explosives, and other technological gadgets.

Because the man's phone was usually bugged by either the CIA or MI-6, or both at once, Nayle spoke in a kind of code. The two of them had used it before.

"I have a product that might interest you," he said offhandedly, once the connection had passed through the requisite layer of subordinates and Sahir himself came on the line.

"And what is that?" The other's voice was merely polite.

"Think of it as a detergent, for removing oily spots from your clothing."

"Spots? How big are these spots you propose to clean?"

"Quite large. From several cubic meters . . ." Nayle knew he was freestyling here. His primary intention was to gain Sahir's attention. They would iron out the technical details later. Once he took physical possession of the bacteria, they could perform tests to establish its value, and so a price. "Up to several metric tons."

"Ah! Occasionally, in my business, I do have to deal with such spots. So tell me, friend, is your detergent chemical in nature? Does it require the application of much . . . heat?"

"No, no. It is of organic origin. A bacterium, I believe."

"Such things are usually too delicate for my purposes."

"This one appears to be quite robust."

"Is it fast growing, then?"

"So I believe."

"Ah."

Nayle counted up to five in his head, giving the other man time to think. Then he pressed his case. "A bacterial would have the benefit of working silently and at long range. It would also be undetectable, if not actually mistaken for some natural phenomenon."

"But only if this material were closely held," Sahir reasoned.

"It will be," Nayle assured him.

"So . . . it is not yet at hand?"

That was a slip. Nayle prided himself on not making many. "Not yet," he admitted. "For a rare item such as this, I must secure a buyer before proceeding with negotiations."

“I suppose that is wise. Very well. You may act as my representative in this matter—with the usual retainer.”

On the basis of their past dealings, Nayle could expect one million U.S. dollars to be deposited in a numbered Swiss account before noon the following day. “You are most generous,” he murmured.

“Not at all. From you, I am accustomed to results.” That was as much praise and reassurance as Sahir would give. He broke the connection without saying good-bye.

Nayle grimaced. Twice in one day different people had hung up on him. This had better not be the start of a trend.

He pressed down the plunger and began punching buttons as soon as he released it. Paris time was now seven in the evening. That made it ten in the morning in California. He knew which number to use.

“Hello?” the voice of his contact came on at the second ring.

Nayle started right in, knowing his own voice would be recognized. “I may have a buyer for that product you mentioned.”

“I thought we agreed you were never to call me here.”

“Things are moving too fast. We need to establish our bona fides quickly, which means I need to take a sample of the product within, say, forty-eight hours.”

The other hesitated. “That may not be possible . . .” The voice seemed to fade out, an effect possibly due to atmospheric working on the satellite link.

“Where is the difficulty?” he asked.

“The cultures, as I explained, are still in the early stages of development. We do not yet have a dependable—or even a stable—strain. At this point, the bacteria’s internal processes are shooting all over the board. The effects are unpredictable.”

This made it sound as if purifying the culture might take weeks, perhaps months. But now, with Ali Sahir’s interest aroused, Nayle had just days to deliver on his promises. His voice dropped an octave. “I hear you,” he said, making each word distinct, like stones falling down a well.

“But our researcher is pretty sure he can stabilize the cultures. Eventually, I will have something reliable to send you.”

“Who is he, this researcher?”

“Sedgwick. Edward Sedgwick.”

Nayle made a note of the name. “Then we can take the material out by the usual route?”

“But it’s too soon, I tell you.”

“I understand. But look,” Nayle coaxed, “you must have one strain that performs well enough to exhibit. Something I can use to whet our client’s appetite?”

The voice on the other end sighed. His contact was not a person of strong nerves or great daring. “All right. In that case, the best sample would . . . thirty-two.”

Static on the line was growing worse.

“What’s that again?” he asked.

“The batch is-s-series E-three-two.”

Nayle wrote down what he heard, “C-32.”

“But you should really let me take care of it,” his contact said.

“No time,” Nayle replied. Then he relented enough to say, “Don’t worry. You’ll still get your commission. Everything is under control.”

And then *he* broke the connection. After all, he had everything he needed.

* * *

On the premise that you climbed right back on the horse after falling off, Clive asked Juliana out again despite their first disastrous lunch. To his surprise, she accepted—although she did so with a withering, sidelong glance that seemed to ask, Why bother?

He took her to Harry Denton’s, securing a window table in the east-side dining room. The restaurant was in a red-brick building, now a fashionable hotel, which had once been the local YMCA back when this neighborhood was San Francisco’s equivalent of the Bowery. Their table overlooked a narrow stretch of bay between the Embarcadero and Treasure Island, where an errant north wind was churning up whitecaps.

“Looks tricky out there,” Clive observed.

Juliana turned to stare at the water. “Tide’s going out,” she said. “The waves back up in the channel here when the wind’s in this quarter.”

“You’re a sailor!”

“No, windsurfer.”

“Oh,” Clive said, trying not to sound disappointed. Then he had a sudden vision of her supple body in a tight, black wetsuit and his heart turned over. He had never been out on a board himself, because the sport seemed too cold and exposed. And too dangerous, skimming over the gray water at what looked like fifteen, twenty miles an hour.

“But I used to sail,” she said.

“You just like surfing better?”

“No, it’s that sailing needs two people, for any boat big enough to tackle the bay.”

He nodded. “One to handle tiller and mainsheet, the other to haul the jib around.”

“Exactly! I used to know some sailing people. But now . . .” She shrugged.

“I have a sailboat,” he offered, almost too eagerly. “I mean, she’s nothing special, just a twenty-two-footer, plain sloop rig, lapstrake wooden hull with lots of varnish, but—”

“She sounds perfect. What’s her name?”

“*Soleil*. It’s French. It means—”

“Sunshine.” Juliana smiled.

“I’ll take you out. Anytime.”

“I’d like that.”

* * *

Frederick Wexler—familiar in certain London circles as “Freddie the Waxer,” and now with a growing Parisian reputation as “Monsieur Cire”—lowered himself into the seat of the British Airways evening flight to San Francisco.

While the other passengers pressed into the cabin, Wexler dug under the coattails bunched around his hips, looking for the ends of his lap strap. The damned airlines made these seats too narrow and then jammed them together front to back so that his elbows were always in somebody else’s ribs, his kneecaps in their kidneys. Nothing fit Wexler in economy class. But that was all right. A few more jobs like this one, and he could think about branching out on his own. Someday he would become as big a name as Mr. Alexander Nayle. Then he could travel first class, too.

The job at hand was simple. One, zip over to America and make contact with Nayle’s inside man at this biotech company. Not the bloke who was being so difficult over the phone, but the other one, who did the usual cash-and-carry on these jobs. Two, acquire some common medical supplies, available from any well equipped laboratory. Three, put the fear of God in an old bugger who was likely to take too much pride in his work. Someone almost guaranteed to talk later, too. And four, disappear into the night and fly home.

It was a cozy piece of work, involving zero risk, zero sweat, and a payout in the five figures. And those were good old English pounds, darling, not measly American dollars. At the current rate of exchange, that placed a fifty-percent multiplier on what Nayle usually offered. Thank God the old fart hadn’t gone over to francs, like everything else in his operation.

Relaxing for a moment in the glow of anticipation, Wexler performed a modest summing up. This work certainly beat his old dad’s life—which Freddie himself had been apprenticed to until he rebelled at the tender age of seventeen. Laying out the stiffs at ten quid per, wire through the jaw and plastic bridge a bob extra, so’s old Uncle Harry or Aunt Bess would “look natural.” Powder and rouge supplied at cost. What a life that was! No, *making* them paid a damn sight better than prettying them up, after.

At last Wexler found the aluminum buckle, let it out so he could click the thing across his stomach, and pulled the free end of the strap tight. As the plane pulled back from the jetway, he actually stopped to listen to the flight attendant explaining about exits and life preservers. She wasn’t a bad looking bird, except for tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

Just a dab of wax and powder, dear. Fix you right up.

Chapter 4
Edward Sedgwick
THE REASON WHY

Wisps of fog were drifting through the back yard of his Berkeley Hills home when Edward Sedgwick opened the door to let the cat in. The swirling vapor softened the two larger, darker shapes that came out of the bushes.

“Dr. Sedgwick?”

He paused, then straightened to confront them. “Yes?”

The men moved quickly now, taking the steps two at a time, hitting the door at exactly the leverage point Sedgwick was using to close it.

“What the—?”

They were inside the kitchen before he could finish the question. One of them pulled the drapes across the window; the other secured the door on its chain.

They were big men, football players or thugs, dressed from head to toe in dark colors: black watch caps that might stretch into ski masks, navy-blue windbreakers and black jeans, black high-top sneakers with the rubber inked out. Working-class clothes. In this middle-class neighborhood full of professors and administrators they were sinister figures, meant to scare. Only their skin was white.

Both men were clean shaven and clear eyed—except that one had a brown mustache of walruslike proportions. He was so big that he made the other, who was merely large, seem small by comparison. The second man had a weblike scar involving the corner of his left eye. These were features that the two men clearly meant Sedgwick to see and remember. And that scared him even more.

“What do you want?”

“Your cooperation, is all,” the Walrus said.

To ensure it, the man reached into his back pocket and took out a knife. No . . . a straight razor, which he opened with a flick of the wrist. It gleamed like old silver in the bright light from above the table. When he turned the razor edge-on, it vanished into the pattern of the floor tiles. The blade was that thin and sharp. Sedgwick had experience of such things, having learned to shave from his grandfather. That fine steel blade could cut you so quickly you wouldn’t feel the edge sliding under your skin until it was half an inch deep and its ice-cold sting woke up the underlying muscle.

From the way he twisted the blade, the Walrus promised to be an expert with such pain.

Scarface was carrying a black leather bag with square corners and tapering sides, exactly like a doctor’s. This odd mix of images, impending danger against life-saving aid, confused Sedgwick for a further instant. Scarface set down the bag, stepped behind him, and pinned his arms at the elbows. The man’s hands were strong. His thumbs found the surface nerves commonly called the “funny bone” and abused them.

Sedgwick yelped.

The Walrus slid in front of him and laid the razor alongside his nose. The rounded tip rested against his lower eyelid. With one flicking slice the Walrus could . . .

“Now, you’re going to be real quiet and cooperative, aren’t you?” The voice had a curious, lilting accent. Sedgwick finally identified it as a lower-class variety of British English, possibly frayed by years of living abroad.

He started to nod in response, thought better of that, and whispered “Yes,” without moving his lips against the blade’s edge.

“Good.”

His forearms and hands still paralyzed by the pressure of Scarface’s thumbs, Sedgwick went up the stairs sandwiched between the men. They turned left down the hall, heading for his bedroom.

“If you want the safe, it’s in the den behind the—”

“We don’t want the safe.”

“Then—?”

“Cooperation, remember?” The razor danced a lazy figure eight. “Sit on the bed, please.”

Tending his wife’s cat was the evening’s last chore, so Sedgwick was already wearing his pajamas and a bathrobe. Now this state of undress contributed to his timidity before these two, who were dressed for the street. The bed was already turned down; the house was quiet and vulnerable. Evelyn was away in Portland, visiting her sister. He had no living thing to defend except her cat.

Scarface carried his black bag out of the room. His shadow, projected from the ceiling light at the end of the hall, reached up for something high on the wall. Sedgwick heard a *clack!*

After a moment, Scarface stuck his head around the doorframe. “You ought to take more care,” he said.

“What?” Sedgwick asked, distracted from the razor.

“You know what this is?” He took an object small and square, black and copper-orange, out of the doctor’s bag.

“A battery?” Sedgwick guessed.

“A dead battery. You gotta watch those things.”

The man ducked back into the hallway and fiddled with whatever he had . . . the smoke detector, Sedgwick realized.

“You often read for a while before turning in, don’t you?” the Walrus asked. “What do you like? Mysteries? Biographies?” He squatted by the books piled on the nightstand and studied the exposed spines. His razor hovered in the general area of Sedgwick’s crotch. “It’s a really important choice tonight, you know?”

Sedgwick took his eyes off the blade long enough to glance at the books. On top was Albert Balow’s *Manual of Clinical Microbiology*, which Sedgwick had been reading for insight into the medical side of his profession.

“That book,” he said, nodding.

“Looks dull.” The Walrus frowned. “Bad choice.”

“Well, what do you want me to say?” Sedgwick asked, his voice rising.

“Okay, okay, *Microbiology* it is. Jesus, keep your hair on.” The man took the volume off the stack, opened it at Sedgwick’s bookmark, and read silently for a minute or two.

While he did that, Scarface finished in the hall and came back to the room with his bag. He set it on the bed—near the foot, out of reach—and opened it again. Something in there went *clink!*

Scarface reached inside, brought out a thermos bottle, and laid it on the bedspread. His hands went back in for a pair of heavy, white gloves. Next he took out a black zipper case and opened it to reveal a set of hypodermics made out of glass and stainless steel. They had wide, gaping needles—such as you might use on a horse, if you were a veterinarian.

“Oh, no-oo,” Sedgwick moaned.

“You really understand all this?” the Walrus asked abruptly.

“What?” Sedgwick looked up, puzzled.

“About bugs and germs and stuff. All these funny Latin names?”

“Certainly, it’s part of my job. Don’t you . . .” His voice faded.

Scarface had picked up the vacuum bottle. The muscles of his arms and shoulders tightened briefly as he twisted the cap. It came free with an audible *snick!*

He unscrewed the top and set it aside. The mouth of the thermos steamed lazily. Its contents were boiling hot. . . . Or rather, the reverse. Sedgwick watched the vapor curl downward, over the man’s hands, and dissipate against the surface of the quilt. He knew whatever was inside had to be cold. Really cold. Cryogenic.

“Liquid nitrogen,” the Walrus explained. “Say, you’re a smoker, aren’t you?” he asked irrelevantly.

“Of course.” Sedgwick glanced at the pipe rack behind the pile of books. The ashtray was half full of blackened tobacco and dead matches.

The Walrus laid the book, *Clinical Microbiology*, open and face up on the bed beside Sedgwick, then stepped across to the nightstand and gestured with the straight razor at the line of pipes. The blade’s end touched in turn the tooth-bitten stems of his cherished briars and meerschaums.

“Which one is your favorite?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, pick one.”

Sedgwick thought for an instant. “Second from the end, the red briar.” It was a lovely, fluted Danish design with a curved spur at the bowl’s foot. Hardly appropriate for the office, of course, but just the right shape to hold for an evening’s relaxation.

“Good choice.” The man grinned and waved the razor in his direction. “Take it out and fill it.”

“What, now?”

“Yes, now.”

As Sedgwick charged the bowl with Douwe Egbert’s Special Blend from the humidor, his eyes kept veering to the end of the bed, where Scarface

was busy. First, the man put on the gloves and extracted one of the needles from the leather case. He held the fuming bottle upright between his knees and dipped the steel spike into its mouth, holding the hypodermic barrel with one gloved hand, using the other to draw back on the plunger. The glass surface went *tink!*

Sedgwick paused, his fingers dribbling strands of tobacco.

“Keep going,” the Walrus instructed.

He finished with the pipe, put it between his lips, and tested the draw. The plug offered just the right amount of resistance to a slow inhale. Sedgwick’s mouth filled with the familiar, sweet fragrance.

“Shall I light it?”

“Not yet.” The Walrus was smiling amiably, leering at him.

While the moment held, the man sprang forward in one slashing motion and laid the edge of the blade against the side of Sedgwick’s neck. The action stunned him. It was the first time the razor had actually touched his skin since they had left the kitchen. He froze.

“Now,” the Walrus said in his ear, “you’re going to do *exactly* what we tell you or there’s going to be blood all over this nice room, hear?”

“Umm—” Sedgwick couldn’t move a muscle in his throat.

“Twist around on the bed. Now.” The Walrus used his free hand to guide Sedgwick’s shoulder until he was facing the nightstand. The hand moved up to the collar of his bathrobe and pushed it down, dragging down the neck of his pajama shirt, too. The razor shifted slightly against his skin. The Walrus’s hand pressed on the back of Sedgwick’s hair, tipping his head forward and holding it in position.

Although he was looking into the bright light bulb, Sedgwick’s entire attention was focused on the back of his neck. He felt a pricking there, just below the large bony knob at the top of his spine. He was about to suggest that, if they were going to break the skin, they should clean the area first with a cotton swab and rubbing alcohol. Then he realized it probably wouldn’t matter.

He didn’t actually feel the needle go in. Instead, there was a sudden cold, as if someone had opened a walk-in freezer and pushed Edward Sedgwick inside. Cold all over. Arctic cold. He couldn’t move his arms or legs. If his heart was still beating, he couldn’t feel it. The razor against his neck, yes. The breath in his throat, yes. The rapid blinking of his eyes. . . . Nothing else.

The blade retreated slowly.

“Gently now,” the Walrus said. “Real gently, or he’ll break.”

Together the two men supported Sedgwick’s head, pivoted his body on his flaccid buttocks, and swung his legs up onto the bed. They lowered his shoulders and neck into the pillows plumped up against the headboard. They arranged the sheet, blanket, and the antique patterned quilt that served as a bedspread over his knees and tucked them in around his waist. They laid *Manual of Clinical Microbiology* open on his lap. With his chin down, his neck held by an invisible vice, Sedgwick could only see the bottom corner of one page and its number, 237. That was farther into the book than he had yet read. Now there was no way of knowing what Barlow had to say there.

Scarface resealed the thermos bottle, laid the hypodermic in its zipper case, put everything back in the black bag. The Walrus picked up the Danish-design briar, already charged with Douwe Egbert's blend, and struck a match against the holder on the nightstand.

"It's been a long time since I did this," he said around the stem. "And never with tobacco."

The Walrus took short, sharp puffs, drawing the flame deep into the bowl. Between his savage breaths, a plume of smoke wafted up.

"I'm really going to be sick," he said, grinning.

When the pipe was going well, he withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped down the bowl and stem. The other man was using a cloth to wipe the edge of the nightstand, the doorknob into the room, the smoke detector in the hall, anything they might have touched.

Using the handkerchief as a holder, the Walrus brought the pipe down to the bed and pressed the briar into the cup of Sedgwick's nerveless fingers. He backed away. The pipe balanced for a instant, then fell over, spilling shreds of burning tobacco across the quilt's soft fabrics.

The man studied the mess for a long moment. He waited until the red-hot coals had ignited the edges of the first calico diamond. When the flames hesitated, he knelt at the bedside and blew gently until they revived. That done, he glanced over his shoulder at Scarface, who must have nodded.

"Don't mind us," the Walrus said. "We'll lock up downstairs. We can find our own way out."

They were gone as quickly as they had come.

Unable to move, useless to cry out, Sedgwick lay in the bed, watching the fire eat doilies of red lace and black ash out of the quilt's patterned surface. Even when the smoke stung his eyes and they watered to a blur, he was unable to look away. Soon the blanket was burning and, somewhere under it, his robe and the skin of his thigh. He could smell the barbecue scent of cooked meat, but he still felt nothing. It wasn't going to hurt then—not until the fire got to his face and scalp.

The two men had explained everything so carefully, so graciously. Everything except the question that mattered most. . . . Why?

* * *

The main laboratory of Cumulus Biologicals was located in industrial Emeryville, across the bay from the company's downtown San Francisco headquarters. The building was armored like a vault: bare concrete walls, no windows at all on the ground floor, and on the outer perimeter blank doors with no keyholes or handles. Personnel could get in only by touching a magnetic identity card to a receiver plate; motors inside then released the locks and swung the door open. All visitors had to be accompanied. This was supposed to make the building and the work inside ultra-secure, twenty-four hours a day. Or at least, that was the theory.

Joey Urbano was living proof that the theory sucked.

For the past two years he had worked in the Cumulus labs as a janitor. He came in every day, emptied wastebaskets, swabbed floors, did whatever

they had on the roster. His attendance record was perfect. Day shift, swing shift, graveyard, he worked whenever they told him. He was even a member of the service employees union and kept up with his dues. The work paid pretty good, too, for stoop labor. Still, what he made at the lab was peanuts compared to what he was actually paid to do.

This morning early, before the regular day crew came on, Urbano showed up for some unscheduled overtime. He let himself in with his magnetic card, knowing that the computer behind the door would record the fact of his entry. Someone might eventually question his being there out of turn. So let 'em. Urbano would say he forgot his lucky golf hat or something. They had nothing else to pin on him.

He walked down the long internal corridor to the lab where Edward Sedgwick worked. Or used to work. The ring on Urbano's belt held keys for all these doors. He unlocked the door and went right to the man's bench. The black stone surface—slate or some other material supposedly inert to most acids and bases—was empty. Sedgwick was one of the old guys, neat in his habits, orderly in his mind. Or had been.

Say, was it possible the old man had recognized him? Not that it mattered much if he had. Urbano had been watching his eyes and detected not the slightest flicker. Who remembered the face of the nighttime janitor? Even a face as deeply scarred as Joey's.

Urbano turned on the desktop computer and waited for the screen to stop telling him how wonderful its operating system was. When it finally settled down, the computer offered him a place to type in his password. Or Sedgwick's.

Now, anybody walking in off the street would have been stopped right there. But this was why Urbano had put in two years wiping crud off the floor, so he could use the eyes and ears God gave him. He opened the door of the cabinet over the bench—nice yellow wood, maple or birch, like in a kitchen—and glanced at the piece of notepaper tacked inside. It had a list of nonsense words, and Urbano guessed that "Nyleve" must be "Evelyn" spelled backward.

Bingo. The computer gave him access immediately.

Let's see now, if Joey had been a strain of oil-eating bacteria, where would he hide? The server directory labeled "ENVIRON" looked promising. And inside that, the subdirectory "PETROLM" was a dead giveaway. Edward Sedgwick's was such an orderly mind. Or had been.

Whistling between his teeth, Urbano logged on the subdirectory and scrolled through its list of files. They were laid out alphabetically, with forty-odd names all starting with the letter "C." According to the filename extensions, Joey guessed some were spreadsheets and others plain text. He opened one of the latter and scanned enough of it to learn that the sample he wanted was now in the refrigerator. He closed the file.

From his workshirt pocket he took a 1.44-megabyte diskette, stuck it in the computer's slot, and copied all the "C" files. This was for provenance, a word Nayle had taught him, meaning those files proved the microbes he was

stealing were the genuine article. Then Urbano typed “del C*.*” so that no one would know what was missing.

Turning off the computer, Urbano opened the refrigerator door. Inside were racks of test tubes all neatly labeled. He took out the ones marked “C” and left the others, pushing them around on the shelf to hide the gap his removal had made. He quickly identified test tube C-32, tucked it into his shirt pocket, and buttoned the flap. Even through his cotton undershirt, the glass felt cold against his skin.

Urbano checked the bench top and the rest of laboratory area, making sure things were as neat and empty as he had found them, then he left carrying the rack with the other “C” tubes. Down the corridor was the garbage room with its row of industrial-strength dumpsters. Urbano had a key for that door, too.

He lifted the steel lid on the first hopper that had a “Biohazard” trefoil and pushed the rack through the lips of its soft-rubber, one-way gasket. He listened with satisfaction as the tubes tinkled and broke against the assorted garbage inside.

Ten minutes after locking in, he locked out. So far as Joey Urbano knew, only one computer, the one that monitored door access, had noted he was ever in the building.

Chapter 5
William Clive
SOMETIMES YOU GET LUCKY

Juliana Troetelkind happened to be in her office cubicle when the phone rang. It was a good thing, too, because her caller was the manager over at the Emeryville lab, Jason Hubbard.

“Yes, Jay, what can I do for you?”

“I’ve got some bad news, I’m afraid. One of the people on your research team died last night.”

Juliana felt a sudden constriction around her heart. “Oh! Who?”

“Edward Sedgwick. We just heard about it on the radio.”

“What happened?” She seemed to have trouble breathing.

“House fire. . . . We were already worried, of course, because Edward didn’t come in this morning. Didn’t call or anything, and you know him—”

“Mister Punctuality.”

“Yeah, so when the news came over about a fire in the 1300 block of Euclid, I personally called the Berkeley Fire Department. They’re still investigating. The marshal hemmed and hawed, because they haven’t been able to contact the family yet, but finally said the proximate cause appears to be smoking related. Edward was in bed at the time.”

“That damned pipe,” Juliana muttered.

“I could confirm for them that Edward was a heavy smoker.”

“We warned him a million times.”

“So . . .” Hubbard paused. “Do you want to notify Human Resources, or should I? Edward’s wife is out of town somewhere. They might locate her from his next-of-kin form. Then Accounting will need to close out payroll and tally up Edward’s accrued vacation and sick days. He probably also had insurance benefits—”

“I’ll handle everything,” she said.

“What *I* need to know is something about his ongoing projects. One of our technicians checked his incubators but—”

“He wouldn’t have anything active,” Juliana blurted out.

Well, that was the truth, wasn’t it? According to her reading between the lines of Sedgwick’s last memo, the old scientist would have been plotting the next move with his oil-ingesting microbe. He would be hanging off a bit, thinking of new ways to splice *E. coli*’s genes, maybe even targeting a new bacillus altogether. At any rate, it was much too soon for Sedgwick to have anything in the cooker.

“No, doesn’t look like it,” Hubbard agreed. “What do you want done with the stuff in his refrigerator?”

“Um!” Juliana gave that a moment’s quick thought. “Leave it for a couple of days, why don’t you?”

“We’re pretty crushed for space over here,” Hubbard said. “I’d like to reassign Edward’s work area as soon as possible.”

“Well, just for a day or two? Give me time to get across the bay and sort out his things? . . . Please?”

“All right.”

“I’ll be quick,” she promised.

“Just let me know when. And—Juliana?”

“Yes?” She found herself holding her breath.

“Everyone at the facility is real sorry about this.”

“I know.” She forced herself to exhale. “Thank you.”

* * *

As Joey Urbano settled into the seat of the American L-1011 bound for Paris—another thing a simple janitor wasn’t likely to do any old Friday night—he wished he’d found someplace else to hide the test tube.

With some difficulty, Joey had laid the thing in the groove along his spine, up high, right between and below his shoulderblades. He held it there with one finger while he fixed it with a patch of tape, then wrapped his torso in an Ace bandage as if he had busted a rib. After that, it was no trick to breathe shallowly and walk as if his body was a little caved in.

Problem was, the damned test tube stuck out right where his back wanted to push into the deepest part of the seat cushion. So, afraid he might crack the glass and get the bugs all over him, not to mention cutting his skin in the process, Joey had to sit leaning slightly forward. The edge of the bandage gouged into his stomach with every breath and soon it was starting to burn, too. And he had to sit this way for the next twelve, fourteen hours—at least until he passed through French customs.

Oh, well, they were paying him enough.

But for what? He wondered about that sometimes.

Before taping himself up, Joey had stared into the inch of muck inside the little tube. It was yellowish and sticky, like snot when you had a really bad head cold. Floating above it was a layer of black stuff that looked like motor oil. Joey had shaken the tube, once, and watched the two surfaces intermix, black bubbles caught in yellow strands, then slowly separate into their own layers again.

From hanging around the Emeryville labs and keeping his ears open, Joey knew that some of the bugs the scientists worked on in there were really wicked: disease vectors like anthrax and typhoid. Although the samples he had brought out for Nayle those other times had been harmless growth hormones—for plants, yet—there was nothing to say that this time, in the vial taped to his back, Joey wasn’t carrying bubonic plague or something. Just one or two millimeters from his own sweet skin.

“Uh, Miss?” he said, putting out a hand to stop one of the flight attendants bounding down the aisle.

“Yes, sir?” The woman gave him a fixed, professional smile.

“Could I get a drink or something?” He rubbed his stomach, right where the bandage was cutting into his gut muscles.

“We’ll start beverage service just as soon as we’re in the air.”

“Then some water maybe?”

“Oh! Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Yeah, I’m a little woozy.”

“Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

His hand kept making circles, sneaking under the front of the bandage, trying to smooth his skin away from the elasticized wrapper. He tugged at the thing discreetly, fingers working through his shirt front. Maybe, if he could shift the binding, just a little, the pain between his shoulderblades would go away.

* * *

Because his *Soleil* was neither a sleek white yacht nor an imposing cabin cruiser, William Clive had been assigned one of the less conspicuous slips in the China Basin marina, in the far corner, barely visible below the sea wall that fronted the parking lot along San Francisco’s Embarcadero. He didn’t mind though, because the slip was sheltered from the wind as well as the waves. During the winter months the rock berm cast a long shadow that protected his beauty’s brightwork.

Clive was kneeling on foredeck, running a hand along the varnished side. He was trying to decide whether he could wait another year before pulling the boat, stripping her hull down to bare wood, and spending a day or three under a shed somewhere applying new varnish. Of course, he could arrange to have a boatyard do the job, but the prices they charged would easily pay for three months dock fees or two months rent on his Burlingame apartment. Better to save the money, do it himself, and see the work done right. But not this month.

With his head below the gunwale, Clive did not see the car pull into the parking lot but he heard it—the deep and angry growl of a high-performance engine. It boomed off the armor rock surrounding the basin and blatted back at him from the water’s surface. He stood up, holding on to the wire mainstay for support, and stared across the lot with his eyes at pavement level.

The noise was coming from a Porsche. Clive could never keep track of all the marque’s names and model numbers, but this one was expensive. It had squat fenders that flared out sideways to cover the wide racing tires, and every bit of chrome trim had been anodized to a deadly spider black. The bodywork was a violent purple that seemed to shimmer in the Saturday morning sunlight.

Clive recognized the color immediately.

“Juliana!” he called, waving from the deck.

The last syllable of her name pierced the silence after she shut off the engine, and Juliana looked over, then down. She smiled at his head and waved back.

She set the brake where the car had ended up in its one turn around the lot—skewed diagonally across two parking spaces—pulled a gym bag from the passenger’s seat, and skipped over to the ramp down to the dock. She was wearing tidy white sneakers, faded blue jeans, and a white knit pullover. Her hair was tied in a single thick braid that reached halfway down her back.

“You really do have a boat!” Juliana said as he met her at the foot of the slip. “I half expected that to be just another line.”

“I told you she wasn’t much,” Clive warned, raising his open palm toward the narrow transom. “If I had wanted to invent a fantasy, it would have been at least thirty-eight feet.”

“She’s beautiful.” Juliana handed him the bag and walked forward along the dock, stooping to look into the two round portholes set into the sides of the tiny trunk cabin. “You even have a little galley and a vee-berth the bow.”

“All the comforts of home,” he said.

“Good, because I need to use the head.”

“Um, it’s up the pier, actually. Coast Guard regulations.”

“Oh, not that,” she said with a grin. “I just wanted to change.”

“Change?” She seemed to be dressed appropriately for any sailing conditions likely to arise on the bay.

“I brought along a bathing suit. It’s warm enough for one, don’t you think?”

“Of course.” Clive tried to swallow in a suddenly dry throat.

She took the bag back from him. “You busy yourself with some ropes or something, and don’t peek through the ports till I come out.”

Clive led her aboard, handed her down the companionway, set the hatch in its tongue grooves, and pulled the sliding cover closed. While she rustled and bumped around below decks, he got the jib bag out of the cockpit locker, then went up on the foredeck again and set about snapping the luff toggles onto the headstay. He tried to remember if he had an old pair of swimming trunks aboard and thought he probably did.

By the time the sails ready to run up, Juliana slid back the hatch cover and stepped out into the cockpit. She was stunning. Her bikini, made of a thin, iridescent satin in her trademark color, was modest by the standards of the day. That meant a line drawn from her chin to her heel would cross at least four inches of solid cloth, collectively, no matter how circuitous a route it took. She was still wearing the sneakers, though, which indicated she was serious about sailing.

Clive remembered to breathe out.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked, basking in his gaze.

“Just give me time to put my own suit on.” He went below. But before drawing the hatch shut he warned, “And no peeking through the portholes.”

“Girl Scout’s honor,” she said, using her index finger to draw an airy X on the pale skin between her breasts.

Clive quickly found his own bathing suit—more like a baggy pair of shorts with a blue stripe up the side—and put it on. When he returned to the deck, Juliana was slathering sunscreen on her legs.

“Do my back?” she asked, pulling the braid forward over her shoulder.

He poured the fragrant white cream over his fingers and rubbed them into the smooth skin above her shoulderblades, not quite daring to touch the taut spaghetti straps and bandeau of her bra. He made a separate job of oiling her lower back, similarly keeping his fingers away from the waistband of her bikini bottom. The sweat was coming out on his forehead, and not entirely from exertion.

When he had finished, she did his back. She rubbed the lotion in with strong, businesslike movements, like a professional masseuse. But just feeling her fingers on his skin was enough to make his heart race and his groin begin to swell. He had to focus on the far horizon and think of cold water before he embarrassed himself.

Once they were both protected from the sun, it was time to get under way. He was sitting by the tiller and asked her to cast off the bow ropes. She scrambled over the coaming and around the cabin to the front deck, in the process demonstrating how narrowly cut her bottom really was. Clive had to look away in order to start the ten-horsepower marine diesel and single up on the aft lines.

It was going to be an interesting day.

* * *

The taxi ride into the city proper from the airport left the multi-lane motorway too soon and wound through so many narrow, clogged streets that Joey Urbano was beginning to think the driver was jacking up his fare. Then they crossed a stone bridge over a gorge of rough-cut blocks funneling a stretch of brown river and Urbano knew they were close to Nayle's residence.

The bridge angled across the eastern end of a small island, which Urbano had heard Wexler refer to as St. Louis. It looked like a dark and medieval place, full of crooked lanes paved with cobblestones. Instead of continuing on across to the other side, the taxi took a left and snaked down a one-lane street between a row of three-story houses and a low stone parapet that overlooked the river.

Nayle's house was the fifth one down. The taxi pulled up in front of its blue-painted door and the driver said something in French. Urbano didn't understand, but he could read the meter and guess that the amount was supposed to be in francs. He handed over the nearest equivalent and waved away any change. The car darted away in a cloud of oil-scented smoke.

Urbano studied the house. It didn't look like much: three stories, and no wider than the arched doorway and two pairs of windows at the ground level, with four plain unshuttered windows on the second floor. Like every other building he had seen in this town, the third floor was a slanting false roof of blackened tiles set with shallow dormers. Urbano guessed that the house might contain five, maybe six rooms in all, with maybe a kitchen around back, depending on how deep the lot was. This house, like all the others, came right up to the edge of the pavement. They certainly didn't waste any land on a lawn out front.

Some big dealer Nayle was, if this hovel was the best he could afford. It was shabby, too. The walls looked to be made of bleached stucco. Joey Urbano had seen better digs in the Tenderloin.

Then his eyes focused on the small detail of the downspouts. They were tacked onto the outside of the building, running down from the eaves and crossing over at the second floor. The pipes looked to be made out of cast iron, fluted and painted the same teal blue as the front door. But the junctures, where the separate pieces of pipe came together, were in the shape of fish heads. Each

fish had curved lips and rounded eyes, a fringe of fin and a webwork of scales that quickly smoothed out into the sleek pipe. These features, however, were picked out in bright gold.

Joey walked up to the fish head that was nearest to the ground and touched it. Be damned! It was real gold leaf. Joey had spent enough years in church to know the difference between leaf and paint by the tiny dents and folds in the wrought metal.

Before his eyes, the building took on a new dimension of wealth. The walls were not stucco but, seen up close, blocks of white limestone so finely fitted together that the joints disappeared. The windows were filled with tiny diamond panes of beveled glass. And inside them were curtains of white damask. The ceilings of the rooms had to be twelve feet tall. And the rooms themselves were deep and opulent. This wasn't quite a palace then, not showy from outside, but someone in there liked his money. Someone named Alexander Nayle.

"*Pardon, m'sieur?*" a musical voice called from the doorway. "*Qu'est-ce que vous voulez?*"

Urbano turned to see an older woman wearing a simple gray dress and white apron. She had to be the housekeeper. "Is this where Mr. Nayle lives?" he asked.

"It is, sir," she replied in English.

"Good, because he's expecting me."

"Yes, sir." The woman took him inside, into a vestibule of fitted stone with a mat of woven reeds on the floor. It was colder in here than outside on the street. "Please wait, *m'sieur*."

She disappeared through an inner doorway and was gone maybe five minutes. Then she reappeared and motioned for him to follow her across an interior hallway sheathed in gray marble and up a wide stair with a banister of wrought iron. The black iron was figured with lion heads that had curly, tangled manes, likewise covered in gold. Upstairs, there was one big room, four deep windows across the whole front of the house. It was filled with spindly furniture made of deeply oiled mahogany touched up with traces of more gold. The books in the shelves all had leather spines with gold lettering. Joey could literally smell the money.

Nayle was sitting behind a broad desk decorated with wooden oak leaves and golden acorns. Joey recognized him from the description Wexler had given: older, graying hair combed straight back, a pale face like candle wax, and eyes like dark smoke. His mouth had no lips that Joey could see. Then he opened it in a smile that showed incredibly regular white teeth. As a hater of dentists, Joey's own mouth was a forest of bent stumps, so he was conscious of other people's smiles. This one was so perfect it was either full-plate uppers and lowers or the object of expensive, lifelong care.

"Did you bring my package?" Nayle asked.

"Yes, it's right—"

"Let me see it." Nayle put out his hand.

“I have to remove it.” Joey glanced at the woman, who still waited in the doorway. She nodded and left.

Joey pulled out his shirttails, unbuttoned and removed his shirt. Nayle’s eyebrows went up, clearly amused. Joey unhooked the clips holding the edges of the Ace bandage and unwound it from his torso. As he suspected, it left a red welt across his stomach. He reached behind and dug the test tube out of the niche it had pressed into his back. He stripped the patch of tape off before handing it over.

“Very ingenious,” Nayle said, taking the tube. “Wexler did wonder how you would get it through customs.”

“Good thing it’s not metal,” Joey said, “or it would have set off alarms.”

“Indeed.” The man held the test tube up to the light that came through the windows. “And your system has the additional advantage of keeping our little friends warm and cozy. Any environmental stresses that might harm them would probably kill you first.”

Joey hadn’t thought of it that way. He stooped to dig the diskette with the “provenance” files out of his bag and handed that over too.

“If you’re satisfied, sir . . .” Joey hesitated. “There’s the question of my bonus payment?”

“In good time, Mr. Urbano.” Nayle held up a restraining hand. “First we must make sure your body heat hasn’t *cooked* this culture. Then we’ll see if it reproduces. And finally, we must know that it works as specified.”

“But I have to get back.”

“You can call in sick.”

“Unn . . . all right.”

“And this *is* Paris, after all.”

Now what was Joey Urbano going to do all weekend? He didn’t think Nayle would invite him to stay in this grand house, which meant he would have to find a hotel room, on top of paying the full air fare for this unplanned trip. Maybe they weren’t paying him enough after all.

“Why couldn’t Wexler bring this stuff over for you?” he asked.

“Mr. Wexler is a man of very specific talents,” Nayle hummed as he once more studied the layers of yellow and black liquid in the tube. “Playing courier is not one of them.”

“He went back to London then?”

“I cannot convince Freddie of Paris’s charms,” Nayle sighed.

“Um, now that you mention it, could you tell me the name of a clean hotel? Nothing too fancy, because I can’t afford—”

“Why, you’ll stay here.” The eyebrows shot up again. “Of course.”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t want to—”

“But I must insist, Mr. Urbano. Call it a pledge of your good faith. Just until our little friends have proven themselves. Mariette will take your luggage to your room.”

Joey was about to point out that he only had the carry-on bag at his feet, which held his razor, bottle of mouthwash, and a change of underwear, but

decided to save his breath. The man's attention had already turned back to the test tube, his eyes absorbed by the dividing line between the separate layers of motor oil and yellow goop. But now a frown was starting to pucker the smooth skin of Nayle's forehead. Joey sensed it was a good time to shut up and get out.

* * *

As soon as *Soleil* had passed through the marina's breakwater and headed into the channel, Clive cut the engine and went forward to the mast. Juliana slid back along the seats and took the tiller. He hauled up first the mainsail and then, while it flapped uselessly, the jib. Clive jumped down into the cockpit and sheeted home the main, pulling the sail tight against the wind. *Soleil* rocked gently but still made no headway, with the boom banging side to side on its shortened leash. Juliana was sailor enough to move forward now and take the pair of jibsheets in either hand. She glanced back at him.

"Starboard tack?" she asked.

"Depends on where you want to go."

"How about up around Angel Island?"

"Sounds good to me," he agreed. "Make it starboard."

She hauled in on the lefthand rope, letting the one on the right flop freely around inside the cockpit. As Juliana pulled the sail taut, *Soleil* gathered what wind there was, coming around the lee of the city, and began to point closer and closer into it. The boat heeled over on a starboard tack and increased speed.

Juliana planted her feet among the cushions that were slumped on the low side of the cockpit and leaned back on the high side, to get out of the shadow of the mainsail. An arc of sunlight cut across her chest and stomach.

Clive joined her up there, keeping a light pressure on the rudder with one hand on the tiller. It was so easy to create the balance that made every other part of the boat and its rigging work. Tons of air pressure against the sails were countered by 3,300 pounds of lead in the keel and more tons of pressure from the water pushing against it—all controlled by a few pounds of exertion on this little lever. That, to Clive, was the magic of sailing.

For half an hour they tacked easily back and forth up the channel. Juliana was a superb deckhand, releasing the jib quickly on one side and sheeting it smoothly home on the other at every change of tack. At last they were just east of Telegraph Hill and Pier 39. In another few minutes the fun would really begin.

Clive had lined up their approach so the last change brought them up on port tack, with the left side of the boat taking the wind. In that fashion they went across "the slot"—the broad gap between San Francisco and Sausalito where powerful winds blew perpetually from the west through the Golden Gate. If Clive's judgments about the wind, the currents, and the state of the tide were accurate, then one tack would take them all the way across.

As the breeze strengthened, *Soleil* rolled over on her beam ends and buried her starboard rail in green water. Juliana and Clive had to climb quickly, over the seat cushions and up on the coaming around the cockpit, until they

were sitting practically outside the boat. Despite the lead in her keel, *Soleil* needed their added weight outboard to counter the increased wind pressure.

Clive unhooked the extender bar on the tiller so he could maintain control from that position. He also kept one foot on the mainsheet where the rope was secured with a jam cleat. If a sudden gust took them and the cockpit started to flood, he could let the boom fly with a single kick. In an instant *Soleil* would stop sailing and right herself. Juliana kept the starboard jibsheet in her hand for the same reason.

They rode that way—arm to arm and hip to hip—for a mile or more, through the slight lee offered by the cliffs of Alcatraz and back into the full force of the westerly wind. Although the sun still beat down on them, the air was cold and damp. Clive was getting chilled and thought about putting on a shirt, although the only way to do that was release everything, sail downwind for a bit while they both dressed more warmly, and then pick up the port tack for the final stretch into Richardson Bay and Sausalito.

He rejected that notion until Juliana shivered massively against him, a whole-body shake that was unmistakable.

“Cold?” he asked, shouting in her ear to be heard above the wind noise in the rigging.

“I’m all right.”

To shield her, Clive put an arm around her shoulders. Her skin was prickly with goosebumps. He began chafing her back and offside arm, then just held her close. Juliana snuggled into him, making herself small against the wind’s force.

Presently, *Soleil* passed into the shelter of the Marin Headlands and settled back on a more even keel, and the two sailors climbed down into the cockpit. Clive let the mainsail out; Juliana eased up on the jib; and the boat’s track curved away east, heading up Raccoon Strait behind Angel Island. Still, the two sat close together, soaking up the sun’s warmth. It was then that Clive became aware of her scent, a mixture of lemon grass and wildflowers, reaching him through the strong salt musk of the sea.

Beyond the strait, *Soleil* flopped into the doldrums in the lee of Angel Island. This was a long stretch of light and contrary winds, disturbed currents, and other idling sailboats. They sat and bobbed for half an hour, lying next to each other on the seat cushions.

Suddenly Juliana sat up and studied the far shore, where the Berkeley Hills backed up beyond the edge of the bay. Her gaze held on one point long enough for Clive to take notice and become curious.

“Do you see something?” he asked.

“I’m trying to find the fire,” she said. “You should be able to see it from here.”

“What fire?” He sat up and studied the green hills in the general direction that she was pointing. All he could see were trees and the occasional white speck of a house or gray shadow of a roof line.

“Yesterday morning one of our employees’ home burned down. He lived right over there, in Berkeley. Oh, of course!” she said suddenly. “You met him that day, remember? Edward Sedgwick? The man with the pipe?”

“Yes, certainly,” Clive said. The man whose computer he had just put under surveillance, the scientist who had grown those oil-eating bacteria. He pictured the cranky old man at the table’s far end, during that first meeting. Clive also remembered that Juliana had been fairly brusque with him then.

“Was he insured?” he asked.

“Not that it matters,” she replied. “He died in the fire.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry!” Clive touched her arm. “What a terrible way to go.” As he said this, Clive was wondering if he ought to lift the software tap on Sedgwick’s computer. But there would be time to consider that later.

“They say he was smoking in bed. Apparently he died peacefully, in his sleep.”

“One blessing, at least.”

“I suppose so,” Juliana said. “Let’s talk about something more cheerful.” She held up a finger to the fretful airs that enveloped the boat. “Do you think we’ll be going again, anytime soon?”

“Not until the wind makes up its mind. . . . I could start the engine,” he offered.

“I was thinking, instead . . . did I see an anchor on the foredeck?”

“Yes, a Danforth, with fifteen fathoms of manila in the locker.”

“Is it safe mooring around here?”

He waved at the other boats. “A lot of them are doing it.”

“Good, because I’d like to go below and get out of this . . . sun.”

“Do you want to lie down for a bit?”

“You must come show me how the berth works.”

“Why, it’s simple,” he said. “You just pull—”

“Come and show me,” she insisted, sliding a finger into the waistband of his trunks and drawing him toward the hatch.

Chapter 6
Alexander Nayle
A FINE RED RAGE

Alexander Nayle surveyed the mess he had made of Mariette's always tidy kitchen. For the past two days he had been trying to culture the bacterial sample that Urbano had brought from California.

First, Nayle drew off the yellow liquor in the test tube with a pipette and divided it among his petri dishes, which he had lined with brown, musty-smelling agar from the chemist's shop. When those specially made dishes and their culture medium ran out, he used jam jars with a preparation of cane sugar in baker's gelatin. Next, Nayle added drops of a mixture of hydrocarbons as much like crude petroleum as anyone outside an oil refinery could reconstruct: a teaspoon of axle grease blended into a cup of crankcase oil, with measured amounts of gasoline, diesel fuel, and naphtha stirred in. Finally, he covered the dishes, set them under a string of low-wattage light bulbs—to reproduce the heat of a laboratory incubator—and warned Mariette to touch nothing. Then he waited through Saturday night and all day Sunday.

While he waited, Nayle used his laptop to study the computer files that Urbano had retrieved. Without a background in biology or any context in which to interpret Sedgwick's lines of reasoning, the notes remained pure gibberish. But that was all right. They would make good window dressing in his transactions with Ali Sahir—who wasn't likely to understand them either.

On Monday morning Nayle evaluated the results of his weekend experiment. Under the objective lens of his microscope he counted the tiny tubules in various random samples. There were certainly more of the bacteria than he had seen upon starting this work, so the culture must still be alive and reproducing. But none of the oil had been consumed. Brownish-black globules floated untouched on the gelatin's surface.

Perhaps something in the motor oil or gasoline had soured the mixture. That was one possibility, although Nayle's contact at Cumulus had been confident that the bacteria were nearly omnivorous and ate all forms of hydrocarbon without distinction. The bugs were also supposed to be physically hardy, immune to most environmental contaminants such as lead and other chemical additives.

Then Nayle remembered the separate bands of yellow and black in Urbano's test tube. He now guessed the black stuff had been crude oil, and the microbes hadn't touched that either.

This made the second possibility more likely: someone was lying to him. Perhaps his contact had intentionally misrepresented the sample. After a string of small but successful sales—all agricultural hormones, with a wide market but limited value for their weight—his agent had decided to dupe Nayle with a bogus bacterial that promised greater potential. In his greed and haste, Nayle would then blindly turn it over to his buyers. And when it failed to perform, they would become angry and take him out—but by then the agent's

fee would already be paid into a numbered account. Neat, replete, deal closed. . . . Except that it was in Nayle's nature to protect himself with homespun experiments like this one, even if they did disrupt the workings of his household.

The alternative candidate for clever boots was the courier, Joey Urbano. He might easily have switched the test tubes, hoping to make himself the pivot player in some kind of tiresome ransom deal. Oh well, that scenario could be quickly confirmed. Nayle sent Mariette to wake Urbano and bring him down to the kitchen.

The man came in rubbing his face. He stopped and stared when he saw the line of petri dishes. "Is that what we had for dinner last night?"

Nayle waved away the smart comment. "These microbes are inert. They will not touch the hydrocarbons."

"News to me. Maybe you're feeding them wrong."

"No, my guess is they never were the right bugs."

"How do you figure that?" Urbano said with a yawn.

"You brought them to me in a bath of oil. They were warmed by your body and supposedly hungry—yet they did not eat it."

"I brought them like I found them."

"You're sure about that? That's your final answer?"

"Look, what do you want me to say? You told me to get sample C-32 and I got it. You can check the markings on the tube. I brought it all the way through customs without a snag. So the rest is up to you guys. I just do what I'm told."

"I suppose Dr. Sedgwick can shed some light on our problem," Nayle said reflectively.

"Fat chance of that."

"What do you mean?"

"Wexler and me, we arranged for him to have an accident."

Nayle closed his eyes. "Yes, that would be Freddie's style."

"You told Wexler the material was to be quote closely held unquote."

Urbano shrugged. "He said that meant nobody should be left in a position to reconstruct the product after we snatched it. The solution seemed obvious."

"But very inconvenient if you happened to take the *wrong sample!*" Nayle flared.

Urbano didn't flinch. "So what were you planning to do? Call Sedgwick up and tell him we stole his stuff except, oops, we made a mistake? He'd blow a cork. The company would sound alarm bells from San Francisco all the way to Washington, D.C., and back. That lab would close down like a parson's sphincter in a prison toilet. I'd lose my job. So would Sedgwick, for that matter. You'd acquire a permanent tail like an organ grinder's monkey. Everybody loses. Nobody wins. . . . Get real!"

Nayle noted that Urbano was now nicely focused on the problem. He was watching the scar around the American's left eye, looking for a telltale flicker. Old wounds were the first to react under stressful conditions such as guilt and fear. But nothing moved in that face. So Urbano might be telling the

truth as he understood it. Which meant that, if a deception was being played here, its source lay elsewhere.

“I suppose you and friend Freddie saw fit to leave my contact person alive?” Nayle drawled.

“As if I ever knew your higher up!” the other man sneered. “Did you tell Wexler? He might have taken the guy out.”

“Then there’s a chance to recover this mess.”

“Yeah? Good luck!”

* * *

William Clive spent Sunday afternoon using his laptop computer to study the files he had surreptitiously pulled from Charlie Palmer’s personal drive on the Cumulus network: BANANA.DAT, CARBON.DAT, RICE.DAT, and SLUG.DAT. To begin with, he tried accessing them as plain vanilla ASCII files, and his display immediately filled up with asterisks, ace-of-spade signs, and smiley faces and beeped uncontrollably. There wasn’t a coherent word among any of them. That didn’t mean anything, of course; the output file from any advanced application, handled in the same way, would yield similarly coded garbage.

Next he had tried running one of the files through a set of filters that would turn it into text on a popular word-processing program, even if the original was a graphics image or spreadsheet data. No luck there, either, because the program’s writing area filled up with square blocks and brackets. He scanned the pattern of these symbols, trying to sense some sort of Morse or binary code embedded in them, but nothing suggested itself. The display showed about twenty-five blocks for every bracket, and every bracket was a righthand closing bracket. No message would survive in that kind of low-density data stream.

Still, the files names were suggestive, and the fact that the Manager of Information Systems was squirreling away obviously coded material troubled Clive. So on Monday morning he was determined to approach Palmer in person and see how he reacted.

When he called upstairs, Palmer had time for only a short interview at 11:30, just before lunch. As Clive was settling into the guest chair in the man’s cubicle, Palmer gave him a relaxed smile. “So, how goes the battle?”

“Well enough,” Clive allowed. “What I wanted to ask was—”

“And you’re getting a feel for our systems?”

“Yes, I think I am. But about—”

“A little bird told me you went sailing this weekend.”

“Ah, yes. I have a boat down at China Basin.”

“Sailing with the lovely Miss T.” Palmer leaned back in his chair, tucked his thumbs into his belt, and just about leered at Clive. He wasn’t making any attempt to keep his voice down, although the partitions were less than five feet high and Juliana’s cubicle was across the room.

“Your little bird travels fast,” Clive said with a reluctant grin. He felt caught out in a secret affair, although neither he nor Juliana had thought to hide their luncheon dates.

“We all like to keep a protective eye on Trotterkins,” Palmer said complacently.

“I see.” The grin dropped from Clive’s face. “I didn’t realize she was in any danger. Or are there personal interests to be protected?”

“Oh, no.” Palmer sat up quickly. “None at the moment.”

“Good then. Now, about my question. I’ve noticed a certain, um, *looseness* in your communications system. Particularly in the e-mail handling.” Clive was making this up as he went along, dropping loaded words and looking to see if any of them exploded on Palmer’s face. “One or two messages seem to have gone astray in the past. Particularly those dealing with the subject of plant growth hormones? Specifically soybeans and sorghum?”

Palmer never reacted. “That’s news to me,” he said when Clive had strung out his line. “We use a standard commercial mail package. If there are leaks, I can take them up with the vendor.”

“Maybe we should schedule a meeting with their people,” Clive suggested.

“Yes,” Palmer said. “Of course, you’ll be meeting with them anyway—after you’ve scoped out the parameters of the upgrade Markris-Stone is recommending for us, won’t you?”

“Certainly.” Clive decided it was time to cut and run. “I just wanted to get the subject out in the open.”

“You can always come to me.” Palmer tossed his left hand in a throwaway gesture.

Clive quickly excused himself and went back to his cubby hole in the Accounting Department. In the remaining minutes before lunch, he decided to run a check on his secret programs, to see if they had turned up any interesting activity over the weekend. That was a time when an industrial spy, with authorized access to buildings and systems, could do his best work without observation.

Palmer had added nothing to his \MARKETNG files. Peter Shore’s messages and phone bills all looked normal, too. The load of overseas calls was fairly high, although that was to be expected in the International Marketing Vice President. But the third tag Clive had placed, the one on Edward Sedgwick’s system, showed a logon and disk access from early Friday morning. That was odd because, according to Juliana, the man should have been dead by that time from smoke inhalation and subsequent incineration.

Dead men did not come in to use their computers.

For all its sophistication, Clive’s package of secret software had a few limitations. He could tell that certain commands had been issued at the time, but the snooper programs could not give him the verbatim text of those commands. What he had was an activity alert, not a transcript of Sedgwick’s—or whoever’s—dialogue with the computer. Well, there were fixes for everything, as his mentor Bob Carstairs would say.

He took a file listing of the disk drive, to see if anything leapt out at him. Right away there was a gap. A couple of dozen files scrolled by, all starting with the letter “A.” Then the “B’s” slid past, and most of them seemed

to have the same naming structure and file extensions as the “A” group. Next came the “D’s” and finally the “E’s.” Nothing beginning with the letter “C” showed up before the listing ended with its customary summation line.

Clive pulled up another of his toolkit programs. He thought of this one as his “x-ray glasses,” because it could look into a disk’s file allocation table and read what wasn’t normally visible to the command interpreter. Sure enough, Sedgwick’s subdirectory held about forty hidden file names that were tagged for deletion. All of them conformed to the same general naming conventions as his other groups, except these files began with a question mark—the x-ray software’s way of saying they were recently erased and the system was instructed to overwrite their allocated space when any new files were added to or created on the disk. Apparently this drive still had enough free space that Sedgwick’s area had not been overwritten yet. That was one break, at least, in Clive’s favor.

So . . . someone had gone into Sedgwick’s computer on Friday morning, erased all of his “C” files, then logged off and walked away.

Clive thought about calling up Bernie Heilman, the SYSADMIN, to discuss the situation. But by doing so Clive would immediately blow his own cover. Outside consultants—even computer jocks hired on to work with the client’s network, e-mail, and phone systems—weren’t supposed to go snooping in people’s disk space without permission. It was a violation of personal trust, and Heilman would be perfectly right in pitching a fit.

Besides, the erasures might be explained simple housekeeping. Someone, even Heilman himself, could have gone in and cleaned up the extraneous matter from Sedgwick’s account as soon as they heard the man was dead. Or maybe someone thought those “C” files contained embarrassing personal material, something which should be dumped quickly. Still, Friday morning—before the body was even cold—seemed a little too soon for the SYSADMIN to be weeding out Sedgwick’s file space. Clive knew the high-tech companies moved fast, but that was ridiculous!

He decided to shelve the disk access as an unexplained anomaly, strange but not suspicious. Anyway, with Sedgwick dead, no one was likely to show further interest in his oil-eating bacteria. As far as Clive could tell, the project had the odor of a border-line failure among the rest of Juliana’s team. They all seemed awfully bored when Sedgwick had brought it up at the review meeting.

Good riddance, Clive thought to himself.

* * *

Nayle called his contact person at Cumulus Biologicals in the middle of the evening, Paris time, even though it was still the workday in California. The occasion for such niceties as telephone security was long past.

“You have deceived me,” he said as soon as the phone was picked up. “That course can be dangerous.”

“You fool!” his contact husked. “How do you know you’re not speaking to my secretary?”

“You Americans don’t have secretaries anymore. You have voice mail. And don’t change the subject. The product sample you offered me does *not* perform. I give you thirty seconds to explain.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Nayle could hear shallow breathing in the mouthpiece and a squeaking sound that might be sweaty fingers writhing against the plastic handset. Finally a whisper came, “I can’t explain.”

“The bacteria arrived here alive and they will reproduce. That much I have determined. But they ignore virtually all forms of hydrocarbon. This is very bad, because our buyer will not be put off.”

“I told you once before that these strains are unstable.” The voice faltered. “I could discuss the matter with our researcher, except that he’s—”

“Yes, he’s dead. I know.”

“You know?” Shock traveled down the line in a palpable wave.

“Of course.” Nayle could not resist smiling to himself. “I know more about your company than you can imagine. I have sources of information you will never discover. That makes me a bad enemy. And now you have deceived me.”

“I didn’t! I swear!” his contact said, still in that husky whisper.

So . . . there was a danger of someone overhearing that end of the conversation. His contact was placed in a vulnerable position: caught between Nayle’s insistent verbal pressure and the listening silence of the surrounding office. A most delicate frame of mind. Interesting things were about to happen.

“Please! Let’s see if we can figure this thing out,” the voice said, almost begging now. “I gave you the batch code for what seemed to be the best performing sample, E-thirty-two.”

“Wrong. You told me batch ‘C,’ as in Charles.”

“No, ‘E’ as in Easy.”

“That can’t be—” Nayle shut his mouth.

“Is it that simple?” His contact’s voice was firming up, regaining its control. “One of us just heard wrong?”

Nayle, however, was not about to admit the fault. “Whatever! I still need that sample. My buyer is not the sort of person to wait.”

“Your courier could still go in and—”

“That is not convenient.” Nayle envisioned sending Urbano back, right into the middle of a coroner’s inquest. He wasn’t sure what exactly would happen inside a secret laboratory, one funded mostly by Federal appropriations, when a researcher turned up dead by misadventure. *Plausible* misadventure, to be sure, but a loose end all the same. Nayle was not eager to find out, either.

“Well, then—”

“This time there will be no mistakes. You will bring me the bacteria yourself.”

“Now *that* is not convenient. I have a busy schedule, too busy to play courier. Besides, we agreed that I would never have to *touch* the product in question. As I’ve explained before—”

“And I remind *you* that my client, our client, is quite serious about proceeding with this transaction. The tragedy which befell your Dr. Sedgwick is entirely reproducible.”

“All right! I’ll do it!”

“I’m sure you will.”

Chapter 7
Juliana Troetelkind
PERSONAL BUSINESS

Crossing the Bay Bridge to Emeryville took Juliana miles out of her way on the Tuesday morning commute. Worse, it dropped her right in the middle of the region's worst transportation corridor, Interstate 80, where she sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic with the prospect of being hours late getting into the office.

Of course, she did have an excuse for going over there: Juliana had promised Jay Hubbard, the lab's manager, that she would clean out Sedgwick's refrigerator and free up his work space. But this was definitely not the morning to run that errand, because she had a pair of uncancelable, back-to-back meetings with customers for her other projects. Standing up clients was a major career blunder at Cumulus Biologicals. But standing up the person on whose behalf she was making this trip would be worse.

Her magnetic card let her in through the lab's featureless, steel-sheathed doors. Inside, she faced an empty corridor of white tile and linoleum, brightly lit by fluorescent strips. Sedgwick's lab was at the far end.

On the long walk, Juliana tried to still her heartbeat and breathing, to move as if she had a valid purpose in being here. Along the way, various people came and went from side doors, all dressed in the ubiquitous jeans and white lab coats. None of them seemed to notice Juliana's Financial District street clothing, with sheer hose and a noisy pair of heels. No one recognized her.

In Sedgwick's lab itself, two men were talking on the other side of the big room. They both looked up, stared for one long second, then returned to their discussion. Juliana went over to Sedgwick's bench, which was empty, with not even a Bunsen burner left out. She had a sinking feeling that Hubbard had already sent one of his people in to clean up.

She yanked open the refrigerator door. Yes, the racks of samples were still there. The wire squares held the test tubes in upright rows. Each tube was labeled with black marker on a white enamel patch on its side. Each one was stopped with a red rubber plug.

Juliana noted that the racks were out of order, with the "E" series next to the "B's" and before the "D's." That didn't seem like Sedgwick's normally meticulous housekeeping. Nayle's gopher in the lab complex must have shoved the racks around when he took out the "C" series—the wrong batch, as it turned out.

She removed the test tube labeled E-32 from the rack. Before tucking it away, she took a moment to study its contents. They appeared to be caked carbon, like something you would see on a barbecue grill, with little bits of whitish crud sticking to the outside. More of this crud was gathered in the bowl at the test tube's bottom, so thick that it barely flowed when she twitched the tube back and forth. It was hard to imagine this mess could be worth so much to somebody. She slid the thing into her purse.

To cover her tracks, Juliana rearranged the last eight tubes in the rack's back row, so that E-33 was next to E-31 and the gap came at the end of the line. As a final touch, she twisted all the test tubes around in their places, so that none of the labels were visible from the front.

She closed the refrigerator, then paused. Whoever came later to clean out Sedgwick's work area might know about the man's penchant for tidiness. They would be disturbed at finding the racks out of alphabetical order; that would be a dead giveaway someone had been through here after Sedgwick. So Juliana went back in and reordered them, leaving an obvious gap where the "C" series had stood. Better a mysteriously missing set than an overall sloppy domain.

Having obtained possession of the product, she glanced back over her shoulder, to make certain the two men were no longer aware of her, and turned on Sedgwick's computer. She did not know his password, but that was not a problem.

Once, about a year ago, Juliana had needed to set up a group of drives on the network server for some new hires on her team. It was important that they get up to speed right away, and Bernie Heilman, harried as usual, had no time to partition the necessary space for them. As a favor, he had made Juliana a temporary system administrator and assigned her a magical password that would let her onto the system, down at the operating level, from any computer on the network. Afterward, Heilman never asked for the password back nor did he ever mention an expiration date.

Did it still work?

It certainly did. With just eight keystrokes Juliana was in total control of the system. She quickly paged over to Sedgwick's drive space and examined his file structure. Under the "ENVIRON/PETROLM" subdirectory she found what she was looking for. And yes, Nayle's courier had been here too, because someone had erased all of the research files prefixed with "C."

Now this was curious. . . . Erasing the files, instead of just copying them, meant the courier had not cared if the theft was discovered. It was damned careless, too. What if Sedgwick had *not* died and then come in the next day to find his files missing?

Juliana took a floppy disk from her purse and copied all the "E" files onto it. She understood instinctively that the purchaser of a new bacterial strain would want these notes as a form of insurance. Then, because it did not matter now, she erased those "E" files as well.

Later in the morning, Juliana would call Heilman and release Sedgwick's file space. She knew that, when Bernie went in to clean out the drive, he would be concentrating on items he had to remove and find the fastest way to erase them, probably with a global delete or a reformat command. He wouldn't be thinking—no person bent on such a task would be thinking—about files that might already be missing. So the obvious gaps in the "C" and "E" series did not bother her.

With her errand accomplished, Juliana logged off and shut down the computer. After checking that she was leaving nothing personal behind, she walked out of the lab and back down the long corridor to the exit.

“Hey! Juliana?” a voice rang out behind her.

She spun around, almost losing her balance on the freshly waxed linoleum. Jason Hubbard was leaning out of a doorway. “Yes, Jay?”

“Did you take care of Edward’s stuff?” he asked.

“Why, yes. Just now.”

“Oh good.”

“You can go ahead and toss everything else out,” she said.

“Will do. And thank you for taking care of things so quickly.”

She smiled for the first time that morning. “My pleasure.”

* * *

At midmorning on Tuesday, in between the interviews and focus groups in pursuit of his “legitimate” function of revamping the Cumulus Biologicals computer system, Clive managed to stop back at his cubicle and run his trapline software. The recent access of Edward Sedgwick’s disk space on the network server caught his eye immediately.

“That man’s directory is a virtual Grand Central Station,” Clive muttered. “Now that he’s dead.”

Once again, he took a listing of the drive’s contents. The “A” and “B” file names scrolled by as before, followed by the gap where the “C’s” should have been, then the “D’s”—and there the list ended with its totaling of bytes used and available.

So now the “E’s” were gone.

Clive massaged the drive’s file allocation table with his x-ray vision program, and found more of those “?” file names. Apparently, whoever had gone in did not add or change any files, just erased more of them. This time, the ones beginning with “E.”

Recalling why he had staked out Sedgwick’s computer in the first place, Clive dredged up his copy of the memo that had sparked his suspicions. Yes, the culture series of which Sedgwick had been proudest, the one that scarfed down crude oil like peanuts and left solid carbon particles in its wake, had been labeled E-32.

He turned back to the screenful of erased file names. There were so many to choose from. Well, what the hell. Clive copied the entire set to his own disk, where he could study them at leisure. In the process he turned them all back into “E” files again. Then he released his hold on Sedgwick’s disk, which was subject to network demands at any time, and settled down to his detective work.

Clive’s intuition suggested that the purloined file EOUTCOME.WK1 might be fruitful, so he began picking it apart. As he surmised from its three-character extension, the data were in a popular spreadsheet format and opened immediately with the right application software.

Sedgwick had used The A1..C1 cell range as a title block: “Observed Metabolic Results.” The second line read: “At 12, 24, and 36 Hours.” And the

third: “From E-variant of Escherichia coli.” Clive scanned down through the body of the table until he came to column 32, where the last notation said, “Nearly complete hydrocarbon dissociation.”

So. At least one of the missing “E” files—and presumably the others, too—annotated Sedgwick’s research into the oil-eating bacteria. That much was obvious. Also, someone was clearly taking their own sweet time in cleaning out Sedgwick’s computer, erasing first the “C” series and leaving all the others, then the “E” series. Unless . . .

Once more, Clive’s intuition spoke in his ear.

“Somebody made a mistake,” he said aloud.

Someone had wanted all record of the oil-destroying bacteria to disappear—for good, or so he thought, not understanding the computer’s file deletion process. That first time, on Friday morning, this person had mistakenly erased the “C” files, either through misinformation or a common typing error. Today, he came back and did the job right.

But who was it?

If Clive could examine the details of each transaction—which terminal in the network had made the access and what kind of password was used—then he would be in a better position to guess the identity of this “someone.” Unfortunately, Clive’s software package wasn’t powerful enough to tell him these things. To do that, he would have to subvert or manipulate the network operating system itself. Because modern systems were fully defended against such intrusion, Clive would ring alarm bells trying.

The only solution was to take the people who ran the system into his confidence. Clive picked up the telephone.

“Bernie Heilman,” said the voice on the other end.

“This is William Clive—the consultant from Markris-Stone?”

“Sure, Bill. What can I do for you?”

“It’s time we talked.”

* * *

Juliana was still patching up the holes in her smashed schedule when William Clive appeared in the doorway of her cubicle. “Knock, knock,” he said playfully.

“Oh!” she said, turning around. “Is it lunchtime already?”

“Straight up and down.”

“I’m sorry.” She spread her hands over the documents layered on her desk. “I should have called you.”

“You can’t make it,” he concluded, obviously disappointed.

Juliana stood up and came around to meet him. She took both of his hands in hers. “I really was looking forward our date. Honestly. But something came up this morning, then I got behind, and . . .” She shrugged. “Things just snowballed.”

Clive smiled through her explanation. “Well then, how about dinner tonight?”

“Oh, damn!” She let go of his hands. “I can’t.”

“More work?” he asked stoically.

“I have to go out of town.”

“It always ends this way.” His face was a study in tragedy.

“No.” Juliana touched his shoulders, then linked her fingers behind his neck. Making sure the two of them stayed behind the cubicle’s front partition, and so out of sight from the corridor, she drew close to him. “Not at all.”

After basking for a moment in the male scents of steam-pressed linen, warm worsted woolen, and a spicy aftershave, she drew back from him. “It’s just that . . . a client of mine called from Paris. He wants an emergency meeting, and I couldn’t tell him no.”

Clive seemed troubled by that. “In Paris?”

“You know, that place in France?” she teased. “Where they keep the can-can girls?”

Still with her hands around Clive’s neck Juliana turned one hip inward, balanced herself against his body, and kicked out with her free leg. The movement showed a sinuous length of thigh above the hem of her flying skirt. She grinned up at him as she twirled that dangling foot around her ankle, then she lay back in his arms and kicked again.

Clive stolidly would not join in her gaiety. “Of course,” he said. “It’s a beautiful city.”

Juliana dropped her leg, let go of him, and stepped away. She pushed with her palms against his chest for emphasis. “Oh *you!*” she grated. “You have no romance!”

“No . . . really.” He was trying to make up ground now. “It’s just . . . I’m envious. I wish I could join you.”

“Oh, yes!” Juliana said gladly. She had to think fast now; Nayle would never understand her bringing an outsider along on this trip. “But I’m afraid that’s simply not possible. This is going to be one hundred percent business. I’ll just be there and back. No time for sightseeing. Or lovemaking.” She touched his cheek at this point, to soften the blow.

“I understand,” Clive said. “I’m *disappointed*, mind you, but I understand.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, her fingers lingering on his face. “It won’t be for long, dear.”

* * *

That afternoon Clive had his appointment with Bernie Heilman. The SYSADMIN in charge of the network computers was a narrow-featured man with long brown hair, spiderlike fingers, and black-framed glasses that kept slipping down his nose. He did not seem happy to meet Clive again.

“You said over the phone that you *think* you’ve discovered a hacker in our midst,” Heilman said after shaking hands and waving Clive into a chair. Heilman was one of the few people in the company with an enclosed working space, even though it was a windowless closet filled with racks of computer equipment and the cables connecting them. “Please tell me how you know this.”

“It’s a long story,” Clive began.

“We have all afternoon.”

“Well then. . . .” Clive set his elbows the armrests and steepled his fingers. “As a consultant, you know, I use certain software which lets me monitor certain areas in your network servers. I need to do this in order to get a real-time approximation of drive activity, as a measure of—”

“That’s bullshit, of course,” Heilman said without particular rancor.

“Excuse me?” Clive’s elbow slipped.

“This system records user activity levels practically minute by minute. If you wanted details, you could have come to me.”

“I know, but it seemed faster—”

“To hack the system yourself. That’s not very ethical, Mr. Clive. Unless you, or whoever retained you—Charlie Palmer, was it?—thinks I’m padding my equipment requests. In short, you’re spying on me. Is that it?”

Clive could see that the man would give him no help at all in this frame of mind. Yet the destruction of Sedgwick’s files was an issue that could not be put off. It was time for a limited amount of truth telling.

“That’s *not* it,” Clive said. “What I’m about to tell you is a secret. Not even Palmer knows. So I’m trusting you to keep your mouth shut. Can you do that?”

“Sure.” Heilman shrugged in his chair.

“Don’t answer too lightly. You’ll be involving yourself in a Federal investigation into the theft of proprietary intellectual property from your company.”

“Are you with the FBI?”

“Umm . . . a different branch,” Clive said vaguely.

“Well, look—” Heilman suddenly seemed uncomfortable. “—it’s my job to handle confidential stuff. If you’re talking about someone breaking into our computers and taking out information, I *should* be involved.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“So, you’ve detected—?” Heilman prompted.

“An anomaly,” Clive finished for him. “Someone has been going into the disk space reserved for one of your researchers over in Emeryville. What I need to know is, on the two dates in question, which of the company’s terminals and what priority of password were used to break into his computer.”

“How do you know it wasn’t the man himself?”

“Because he died the night before all this started. I’m hoping the whole thing is a simple matter, just somebody, maybe yourself, cleaning up his file space.”

“What’s the name?”

“Edward Sedgwick.”

“Uh-huh,” Heilman replied, turning to the monitor and keyboard attached to his extended system. He brought up a text window on his graphical interface and started typing. “And the dates?”

“Last Friday and again today,” Clive said. “Both early in the morning.”

“Seven fifteen for the first access, and eight thirty-two on the other?”

Heilman suggested, peering at his screen.

“Sounds about right.”

“First one’s a dud. Sedgwick used his own password.”

“Not possible!” Clive protested.

“I know, but there it is. The computer doesn’t lie.”

“But I’m telling you—”

“Hey, chill! Everybody over there writes the password under they’re desk pad or somewhere,” Heilman said. “I’ve warned people about this.”

“So there’s no way to tell who went in?”

“As far as the system’s concerned, the access was valid.”

“What about the other one? Same thing?”

“No. This one is interesting. The person who went in used the identity of a temporary SYSADMIN.”

“Do you know whose it was?”

“Sure, Juliana Troetelkind.”

Clive felt as if a cold breeze washed over his face. “Oh? I didn’t know she worked for you, on top of her regular job.”

“It’s not like that. Juliana needed some housekeeping chores done that I—” Heilman screwed up his face. “—well, let’s just say I was shorthanded at the time, as usual, and I made an executive decision to entrust her with a simple disk-organizing task which seemed within the realm of her competence.”

“You gave her the run of your computer,” Clive summed up.

“Something like that.”

“And you never deactivated that identity.”

“It would appear so,” Heilman admitted glumly.

“Is there any way that anyone *else* might have gotten hold of that password?”

“Not unless she was stupid and told somebody. Juliana never did strike me as stupid.”

“No, you’re right there. Well . . .” Clive suddenly brightened. “It may not be a problem, after all. See, she went in and erased some files of stuff that Sedgwick was working on. But since he reported to her, she had the right to dispense with the product of his work as she saw fit.”

“Now there, you’re wrong,” Heilman said crisply. “Juliana doesn’t have that authority. On our network, a person’s file space is his own, like the contents of his desk. A supervisor has no authority to snoop, period.”

“But you *gave* her that authority,” Clive pointed out.

“Which I explained to her at the time was just temporary. I should have blanked it a month later. I just forgot.”

“Well, as I said, all she did was erase some files—”

The man turned back to his screen and typed something. “Forty-four of them, to be specific, with a single wildcard command.”

“So she was cleaning out his disk for you.”

“Well, not exactly.” Heilman leaned back in his chair with a satisfied expression on his face. “You see, before she erased those files, the system says Juliana made copies to the local floppy drive—again with a wildcard. This was all done from Sedgwick’s machine in the lab, by the way. Same thing with the

person who came in Friday morning, whether Juliana or somebody else. Copy and erase in bulk. You follow me?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Now here is the odd thing,” Heilman went on. “Juliana called me later—after ten o’clock today—and said I could reclaim Sedgwick’s drive space. No mention of her going over there earlier. Nothing about jacking around with her temporary password. So whatever she was doing, it wasn’t for my benefit.”

“Apparently not,” Clive conceded.

“But cheer up, Professor. You were right on one score: we’ve been hacked—and hacked royally.” Heilman played with his keyboard for a bit longer, but he was getting more and more frustrated at what the screen told him. “Do you happen to know what was in those deleted files?”

“Notes on a failed experiment. Sedgwick mentioned it at a meeting I attended. Even his colleagues seemed pretty bored.”

“Nothing anyone would want to steal?”

“Not as far as I can tell,” Clive said.

“So where’s the problem?”

“I’m not sure.”

Chapter 8
William Clive
LOOSE ENDS

From everything she had said, from everything Clive himself had observed, Juliana's job as a senior project manager appeared to be mostly internal and administrative. She sought funding grants to support her team, people like Sedgwick and other white coats over in Emeryville, and bartered lab space and budget dollars for them. She coordinated their research efforts, scheduled product reviews, and tracked release dates. If Cumulus was building a microbe on spec, as would probably be the case more often than not, then she was on call to meet with the client and troubleshoot his problems. So it was just conceivable that one of her clients might be located in Paris and that Juliana really did have to go out of the country.

Except that Clive had it on good authority, the Vice President of International Marketing, that Cumulus did not work for the French. They were the competition, and poaching in their backyard seemed to raise all sorts of issues—such as several of Cumulus's best new ideas having recently shown up in France.

So, given all that . . . why was Juliana flying to Paris?

Clive thought he knew one way to find out.

After his meeting with Bernie Heilman, he went back upstairs and took a right turn off the elevator, heading down to the part of the floor where the walls were solid and went all the way to the ceiling: the land of the senior vice presidents. Clive understood enough of the company's organization chart to know that Juliana ultimately reported to the Executive Vice President of Operations. If she was traveling, she would have to clear it with his office.

The secretary—at Cumulus, they used the term “administrative assistant”—was Millie Benbough. Her work station was a three-sided pulpit located directly in front of the big man's office, guarding his door like Cerberus at the netherworld's gates.

But, in this case, Cerberus was a big old puppy dog.

“Hello, Millie.”

“Oh, Mr. Clive!”

She remembered him from that introductory tour on his first day. Of course, Clive had made a point of nodding and smiling whenever he passed her station, as he did with all the secretaries. Sometimes a consultant's best friends were those in the lower ranks—the people who could either pass along a memo or lose it in a file somewhere, who could get you in for a timely interview or freeze you out solid.

“So . . . um . . .” He inserted just the right amount of hesitation here, because he was asking about things that did not concern him. “I heard that Juliana Troetelkind is flying out of the country tonight.”

The woman's eyes lit up. The whole company seemed to know about Clive and Juliana.

“Yes, she’s going to *Paris!* Isn’t that romantic?” Then her eyebrows came together. “But—you just heard about it? And I thought it was *you* who was taking her. Everyone here is so happy that Juliana is finally seeing someone nice. We just assumed the two of you were going together.”

“No . . .” It was Clive’s turn to beetle his brows. “She told me this was business.”

“Well now!” Benbough leaned forward and lowered her voice. “She told *me* it was personal. She still had week of vacation coming, she said, and her schedule was all arranged, so she was taking off. Just like that. Now isn’t it strange, that she would tell you something different?”

“Damn! And here I thought I was making progress.”

“Do you suppose she’s seeing someone else? On the side? Maybe a *Frenchman?*”

“Oh!” Clive wilted visibly—and theatrically—against the counter that fronted her pulpit. Then he recovered and glanced around, trying to look crafty. “I know I shouldn’t ask this, but did Juliana leave an address where she could be reached?”

Benbough sat up straight. Now she was whispering. “It certainly would be improper for me to tell you that, Mr. Clive. But . . . for the sake of *true* love.”

She reached under the counter’s ledge, drew out her Rolodex, spun it until a card lay open on top, and turned it toward his eyes. Clive read “La Cicatrice d’Or,” with an address on the Rue Amelot, and memorized it with a glance, along with the international telephone number.

“Thinking of surprising her?” Benbough asked.

“Don’t let on—okay?”

The woman made a key-locking motion in front of her lips.

Clive nodded once balefully and walked away. He was thinking about what, exactly, he had learned from the encounter.

That Juliana was telling half-truths and outright lies, at least to somebody, seemed a foregone conclusion. That she was using illegal computer passwords, and not just for the sake of expediency, thinking she could get away with it, was also inarguable. But none of this made her an industrial spy. There might be a logical explanation for her behavior.

Such as a secret lover in Paris.

Like any man, Clive hoped he was “the only one.” But, in his experience, women by their natures were devious creatures. They had to be. Love and sex were innate mysteries, which women were required to spin out with as much ceremony as spiders spun their gossamer webs.

Deep down, Clive wanted to trust Juliana. He wanted to go back to his office cubicle, let her do her job or have her fling or whatever, and wait for her to call him. She was an intelligent, dynamic, and exciting woman. Her independent spirit made her more appealing to him, not less. Clive knew he should be grateful for whatever of herself Juliana chose to share with him.

But another factor was driving Clive forward—the series E-32 bacillus. It scared him. Everyone at Cumulus might think it was a failure, an

environmental cleaning agent, a sponge, that didn't quite fit its product niche. But to him it was a time bomb, an environmental poison just waiting to fall into the wrong hands. Clive had to track E-32 and make sure, now that Sedgwick was no longer in charge of it, that the bacteria was destroyed.

* * *

The phone rang on Roger Isaacs's desk at three-thirty on a Tuesday afternoon. He picked it up himself.

"Isaacs."

"Sir? It's Clive." The voice on the line had a breathless quality that Isaacs did not like, as if Clive had just run up a flight of stairs. While Isaacs paused over this, the phone voice prompted, "One of your probationers?"

"Yes, of course—William. You sound winded. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sir. But I may have a lead that bears on the problems at Cumulus."

"So soon?" Isaacs was surprised. "That's good work indeed . . . if it amounts to anything."

"I *think* it does, sir," the man replied.

Clive proceeded to tell a rather improbable tale. His suspicions revolved around two sets of computer passwords, used under vaguely suspicious but still explainable circumstances. The hinge of his story seemed to be an accidental death, which really had nothing suspicious about it at all. And the kicker was a bacterium that merely seemed to be too good at fulfilling its rather benign environmental purpose. Of course, there was a beautiful woman involved. That would make all the difference to an impressionable young man on his first undercover assignment.

Still Isaacs listened patiently, letting Clive talk himself out.

"That's all very interesting," Isaacs said after a suitable interval. "But I think you're missing the essential element here: the nature of the property that is, you say, about to be stolen."

"I don't follow, sir."

"Obviously," Isaacs said dryly. "The previous thefts all involved agricultural products, correct? Hormones, as I recall. Now what you're describing is an environmental solvent. That's a totally different area. Did your this woman have any truck with the agriculturals from the previous cases?"

"I can check on that, of course."

"You haven't already done so?"

"Ahh . . . Juliana's team works on a wide range of projects. Besides, as a senior executive, she sees reports from the other groups. In fact, it would be better for her *not* to steal products that her own people worked on."

"Except in this case?" Isaacs suggested.

"Well . . . yes. But I think here the potential was just too good."

"*What* potential?"

Now Clive launched into a series of lurid speculations about how the microbe might be used to disrupt refineries, clog pipelines, and poison wells all across the industrial world.

“That certainly is scary stuff,” Isaacs said, keeping his voice as neutral as possible. Obviously the young man had let his imagination run away with him. “What do you propose to do about it?”

“I want to fly out tonight.”

“Oh? Where to?”

“Paris, sir. I need to follow Juliana to the—”

“You’re presuming she has the microbe with her?”

“Why else would she choose to go in person?”

“How about . . . for a vacation?”

“Not with her work schedule the way it is,” Clive insisted. “This whole thing came as a surprise—I’d bet my life on that. Something went wrong in the normal course of transferring the bacteria. Somebody made a mistake. Or maybe Sedgwick’s death upset the schedule somehow. I don’t know. But Juliana is now definitely involved.”

“In a theft of whose existence you have no proof?” Isaacs said.

“But even if there’s a possibility, sir—”

“May I remind you, William, that you have other duties at Cumulus? Your primary job is observation, pure and simple. Gather data, profile their business, the transactions and the players, and keep your head down while you’re doing it. Is that so hard?”

“It is if this product were to slip through our fingers. Besides, I’ll be gone only a day or two, at most. You could invent a cover story for me—a conference Markris-Stone wants me to attend or something.”

“Your expense account doesn’t cover flights to Paris, William.”

“All right then, I’ll put it on my own card.”

“I can’t convince you to let this alone?”

“No, sir. Not unless you order me to.”

“Well . . .” Isaacs considered his options. If Clive’s suspicions proved to be nothing, just a jumble of coincidences, then he only risked making a fool of himself. That might be bad for the overall operation, because Markris-Stone was unlikely to get another chance to infiltrate an agent. On the other hand, if Clive could be discreet, they just might keep all the kittens inside the bag. “You haven’t told anyone else about this, have you? About your true role in the business?”

There was a pause. “No, sir.”

“I see. . . . Whom did you tell?”

“Well, the network administrator, a man named Heilman, had to know I was hacking his system. So I let him think I worked for the Justice Department.”

“Worse and worse.”

“I swore him to secrecy.”

“And that makes it better?” Isaacs asked sourly. “Then there’s this Turtle woman, isn’t there? She’ll know something’s wrong when you confront her in Paris. If—when—all this turns out to be a mistake, that makes two people who can burn you.”

"I can handle Paris, sir. You see, Juliana and I kind of have a thing going. She'll think I came over to surprise her. And if she does nothing suspicious, then everybody stays cool."

"You're romantically involved. Why didn't I see *that* coming?"

"Everything will be all right, sir. You'll see."

"I'll be holding my breath, William."

"But you're not forbidding me to—"

"Good luck, son. Don't snag your fly."

After he had hung up, Roger Isaacs dialed the intercom line on his phone. "Martha?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Locate John Martel for me, would you?"

"He's in Baltimore, on personal leave."

"Then issue a recall."

* * *

Because he lacked the necessary credentials to get inside a secure facility, Clive had arranged with Bernie Heilman to meet him at the lab in Emeryville at the day's end. Clive would have taken a tour of the place eventually, as part of the orientation for his consulting assignment, but he wanted to check something now, before flying off on a wild goose chase that could easily end his career: he had to make sure Sedgwick's evil bacteria really were missing.

He had called Heilman and requested his help because Bernie was the one person at Cumulus who knew something of Clive's real identity and would not balk at any strange-sounding requests. As it turned out, Heilman had apparently called in higher authority as soon as Clive put the phone down.

Another man was standing in the parking lot with Heilman when Clive drove up.

"Hello, I'm Jason Hubbard," the new man said, reaching out to shake hands. "I manage the laboratory here."

"William Clive, computer consultant with Markris-Stone."

"So Bernie told me. You wish to inspect the work area of the late Dr. Sedgwick." Hubbard's smile sagged into a frown. "Under normal circumstances, I'd ask to see your search warrant."

"I'm afraid I don't have one." Damn the lies he had to tell!

"I didn't think so. Understand, then, that I'm doing this purely is a favor to Bernie, because he's been so helpful to my people in the past." Hubbard began ticking restrictions off on his fingertips. "You can't take anything out of the lab, that's final. You can't ask questions of any person without my permission. And you will not open or touch anything without permission, either. Do you promise to abide these conditions?"

"Of course. I just want to look around."

"So long as we agree on that."

By this time they had reached one of the building's doors, a gray-painted steel slab that Clive couldn't guess how to open. Hubbard took a card out of his pocket and touched a box with a red LED on it. The light turned

green, locks clicked somewhere, and the door sprang open. Heilman caught the edge of it with his hand. "After you, Bill," he said.

They were in a white-lighted corridor. Hubbard led him down to a room that reminded Clive of a high-school chemistry lab. Wide, black-topped benches ran the length of the room, with sinks inset into them every ten feet or so. In between the sinks were chrome fittings variously marked for natural gas, nitrogen, and other piped-in supplies. Underneath the benches, and hanging down from the ceiling above them, were wooden cabinets, some plain and others with glass fronts. Behind the glass Clive saw bottles, boxes, and carboys of what appeared to be industrial chemicals. Distributed along the benches were high-performance computers—mainframe power in pizza-box cases. Spaced between them, under the counters, were the white porcelain doors of the sort of mini-refrigerators that served as hotel "honor bars."

Because it was almost five o'clock, the lab stations were nearly empty. Clive had planned it that way. He wanted the conditions to match as closely as possible those Juliana had confronted that morning, and which she or whoever else had experienced on Friday.

Hubbard led him over to the middle of one bench. Unlike the rest of the work spaces, this one was scrupulously clean. Not even a pencil or a coffee cup was left lying around to show that someone worked there. A stool with a black-padded swivel seat was turned upside down in the middle of the bench space, like a barstool after closing hours.

"Dr. Sedgwick must have been a meticulous man," Clive observed.

"He was," Hubbard replied curtly.

Clive touched the door of a cabinet above the bench. "May I?"

Hubbard nodded.

The shelves behind it were completely empty, with not even water rings or a layer of dust to show where the contents had stood.

Clive went to the refrigerator. "And here?"

"Go ahead."

The shelves inside were likewise bare. Clive reached in and felt the metal bars, to see how cold they were and whether the unit was still working. It was.

"I assume," Clive said to the two men, "that Dr. Sedgwick had *some* projects under way at the time he died. I remember him mentioning work that he was doing."

"He did," Hubbard agreed.

"Make this easy on me, please," Clive said. "You've cleaned out his bench, haven't you?"

"Um, yes."

"At whose orders?"

"Mine," Hubbard said. "I assign space in the lab."

"But you must have gotten a release on his projects."

"I did."

"And who gave you the release?" Clive asked, knowing the answer already.

“Miss T.”

“When did she do that?”

“About nine this morning, when she was here.”

“She went through his things?” Clive asked.

“I asked her to, so that I—”

“—could clean out his bench,” Clive finished for him. “Yes, I understand that. Who did the cleaning, I mean, personally?”

“One of the day-shift janitors. Sandoval, I think.”

“Would he still be around?”

“Sure, they start at ten and leave at seven.”

“Would you get him for me, please?”

Hubbard nodded and left the room.

Heilman was leaning against the bench. “There’s nothing here,” he said, looking bleak.

“Not much,” Clive agreed.

After a moment, Hubbard came back with a burly man in gray pants and a workshirt. The embroidered patch on his right breast read “Patricio.” Hubbard made abbreviated introductions all around.

“When you cleaned up the refrigerator,” Clive began, “what was in it?”

“Test tubes, in racks.”

“How many test tubes?”

“Hundred.” The man shrugged. “Maybe more.”

“What did you do with them?”

“Into the dumpster.”

“Would you show me?”

Hubbard raised a hand. “No! You can’t go picking through our garbage, Mr. Clive. That’s a biohazard area. One way in and nothing comes out. It’s for your own safety.”

“All right. Then, Mr. Sandoval, do you remember the markings on any of the test tubes? Letters, numbers, any kind of codes?”

“They all got marks.”

“Yes, but did anything leap out at you?” Clive knew he was getting desperate. “Did you see the letter ‘E’ in any of the groupings?”

“No.” Sandoval shook his head. “I don’t notice.”

It was a dead end, Clive realized. If Juliana had taken the “E” series of cultures, either one or more of the test tubes, then she had covered her tracks with the laboratory’s normal operating procedures.

A sudden thought froze Clive’s mind.

What better way to do that—to engineer a complete and final closeout of Sedgwick’s affairs, and at the same time ensure that nobody would follow up on the promise of the E-32 microbes—than to kill the researcher and make it look like an accident? Something about the death that Juliana had described did not make sense to Clive, although he could not put his finger on what exactly it was. But, if the accident really was a cleverly disguised murder, then it defined window of opportunity for stealing Sedgwick’s lab notes and the live culture,

getting them away to Paris, and letting Hubbard and his innocent minions whisk everything else into the garbage.

But that was a terrible, a brutal solution to what was really a problem of loose ends. Clive did not actually believe Juliana was capable of such cold-blooded behavior. Just the notion that she might be was enough to prove, once and for all, the deadly potential that Clive—or Juliana, or anyone else who gave it a thought—had recognized in the bacteria of batch E-32.

Chapter 9
Alexander Nayle
MORE COMPLICATIONS

Clive's taxi from Orly circled halfway around the Place de la Bastille, with its winged figure shining naked and golden in the sunlight atop a tower of blackened bricks, then headed north up the broad Boulevard Beaumarchais. After half a dozen opulent blocks of broad sidewalks and set-back commercial buildings, the driver turned right and downhill. The taxi swung into a narrow, one-lane side street filled with small shops, *boulangeries* and *charcuteries*, fronted mostly in yellowing plaster and plate-glass windows protected by roll-up steel gates.

La Cicatrice d'Or was a tiny *pension*, no wider than any of the houses along this street. It had a plain wooden door and two casement windows that were shrouded in lace curtains with brown edges. Inside, where Clive expected to find a vestibule, the front desk lurked under a stairway. Across from the desk was the diminutive lobby: two chairs and an end table. The brocade on the chairs was threadbare but serviceable. It was not the sort of place an American tourist would choose—or even know about. It was accommodation for a European business traveler on a tight budget, or a Parisian *petit bourgeois* on holiday.

Clive set down his suitcase and rang the bell.

An old man with thinning hair appeared at the end of the hallway that ran the length of the building. From the way he brushed his hands, then the front of his trousers, Clive guessed he had been working in a garden somewhere out back. But, from his narrow black vest and white shirt, the man had to be the desk clerk. He edged sideways into the space under the stairs and turned the register around for Clive to use.

“*Oui, m'sieur?*”

“I'm looking for a friend, an American. She would have checked in this morning. Her name is Juliana Troetelkind.”

Instead of checking the register, the man glanced over his shoulder at the key rack. “She is here, *m'sieur*.”

“Which room?”

“First floor. Number . . . *quatorze*.”

Fourteen, Clive translated mentally. “Thank you,” he said. “I want to surprise her.” Leaving his bag in front of the counter—there was no one around to steal it—he started down the hallway.

“Upstairs, please!” the desk clerk called out.

Clive remembered that the French didn't count the ground floor in figuring the floors in a building. The phrase “a place for shoes” drifted through his memory. He nodded and turned for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

At number fourteen, he paused and drew breath. If Juliana *was* up to anything illegal or underhanded, he would know it in just a minute. He knocked on the door.

“*Un moment!*” came from somewhere inside. Clive recognized the voice but not its muffled quality. The lock rattled and the door opened. Juliana was standing there in a dark business suit—obviously her travel clothing—with her hands folded inside a white towel.

“Surprise!” he said with a grin.

Juliana’s face fell. “William!”

He knew immediately that she was deceiving him. But how? With larceny? Or with a secret lover? So, after all, what did he know?

“I had some vacation coming,” he said breathlessly, “and just couldn’t resist flying over and making a holiday of your business trip.”

“Oh, that’s sweet!” She recovered herself too quickly. “Really!”

Juliana dropped the towel, stepped in close, and raised her hands to embrace him. A powerful wave of herbal essence engulfed Clive, reminding him of the smell of her hair. He stepped back. Her hands were smeared with a drying, dull-green goop. It was her shampoo. Juliana looked at them and giggled. “I guess your kiss will have to wait.”

The mixed images sifted into place in Clive’s head. Here she stood, fully clothed, still wearing her jacket, her hair still pinned up in its Gibson girl gather and perfectly dry . . . but there was shampoo all over her hands? Just what had she been doing when he knocked?

Before the question had fully formed, Clive stepped around her and headed for the bathroom.

“William? Please don’t go—”

The Formica counter was spotted with shampoo. The tiny sink was spattered with it. The product’s wide-mouthed plastic tube lay uncapped in a puddle of green goop. Next to it was an oblong object wrapped in a polyethylene sandwich bag sealed with a twist tie. Clive picked it up and smoothed away the shampoo with his finger. The object was a test tube. Its enamel patch bore markings which, allowing for the quirks of handwriting and murkiness of the plastic film, might easily be “E-32.”

Clive discovered he was not as thoroughly prepared for the truth as he had thought. His stomach seemed very far away.

“I can explain this,” Juliana said from somewhere behind him.

He straightened up. “Why do you have something to explain?”

“Well . . . you obviously think that test tube’s important.”

“I just wondered how you managed to take it through customs.”

“I’m an *executive*, William. I travel with product samples all the time. It’s part of my job.”

“Except you had to sneak this one through.”

“Not everyone understands about bacterial cultures.”

“But you didn’t want any declarations. No paperwork.”

“We sometimes can’t travel freely. It’s a small deception to—”

“I recognize this code, of course.” He held up the tube with the enamel patch facing her. “Sedgwick’s oil-spill cleaner. This is the most potent of the batch.”

“How do you know that?”

“He issued a memo on it, remember? Sent it to everyone at your meeting. He cited these bugs by name, E-32. I remember you publicly dismissing his work. But I think, privately, you took an interest.”

Juliana regarded him with growing apprehension but did not try to defend herself.

So Clive plowed ahead. “Then Sedgwick died, and everyone was very sad about it. But now I wonder.”

“It was an accident! A fire—”

“Yes, he died in bed. You told me.” While he talked, Clive untwisted the plastic tie and dropped the sandwich bag on the counter. He wiped residual goop off his fingers before handling the test tube further. “Curious thing about your *accident* . . . No one ever mentioned Sedgwick’s being a drinker or a doper. In fact he struck me, that one time I saw him, as being a real sober fellow. Careful. Fastidious even. Not the kind to dribble hot ashes around.”

Clive waited then, forcing Juliana to comment.

“Sure, Edward was like that,” she said. “What’s your point?”

“Just that people who die smoking in bed are usually drunk or stoned. When the bedclothes start burning, an able-bodied person usually wakes up, leaps out of bed, runs for the door. . . . Wouldn’t he?”

“It’s—” Now she was piecing the story together for herself. From the sick expression on Juliana’s face, Clive knew that she understood. “It’s the smoke that gets them,” she concluded weakly. “Asphyxiation.”

“But they don’t just lie there, inert.”

“He was an old man. Maybe his heart—”

“He didn’t have to *die*, Juliana!” Clive was shouting now. “You didn’t have to kill him.”

“But I *didn’t!*” she shouted back. She covered her face with her hands, leaving traces of green crud on her cheekbones. “I could never do that,” she murmured.

“Someone did.”

“That’s not the way these things work,” Juliana said. She had herself in control now—but not enough to realize she was confessing to theft of property, and possibly to being accomplice to murder. “Don’t you see? A brilliant mind like Edward’s is more useful alive than dead. The payoff is in *milking* his talent, not butchering it.”

“Unless the product is so dangerous—”

“But that bug’s a discard . . .” She paused as realization hit her. “What did you say? ‘Dangerous’?”

“Why would you try to sell a failed product?” he countered. According to Clive’s information, none of the previous thefts from Cumulus, those agricultural hormones, had fit that description. “Who would buy it?”

“Our competitors,” she explained. “Sometimes they will pay to know about the wrong turns we made in developing a rival product.”

“You really believe that?”

“Why not? It’s the . . .”

He met her gaze with his own hard stare.

“All right,” she sighed at last. “I did recognize in E-32 a potential weapon. It would fit the bill for particular military purposes, especially in the Middle East, or for terrorists. You figured that out, too, of course.”

“Everyone saw it, I think. Except Sedgwick.”

Juliana held out her hand. It took him a second to realize she expected him to return the bacteria. “I can’t renege on this deal,” she said.

He tucked the test tube into his jacket pocket. “No.”

“I’m serious. You don’t know my buyer. He’s a very important man in the international black market—drugs, arms, high technology. He’ll go absolutely berserk if I don’t turn over that sample. He is not anyone you want to cross.”

“Neither am I,” Clive replied bravely. He pushed past her in the bathroom doorway. “Stay here,” he said, walking out through the bedroom and picking up her room key as he left.

* * *

Alexander Nayle was expecting his contact from Cumulus Biologicals to arrive at the house on Quai d’Anjou early in the afternoon. Instead, he received a phone call.

“It’s me,” the voice said, almost in a whisper.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“In Paris. At the hotel.”

“You must come here at once.”

“It’s not that easy. There’s been a complication.”

Nayle let out a noisy breath, hoping she would hear. “What has happened?”

“My . . . a man I know. He followed me over, on another flight. Trying to be romantic, I guess. Paris and all.”

“You *told* him where you were going?”

“Well, I had to say *something*.”

“I see. Now excuse yourself and dump him. Where’s the problem in that?”

“He found the culture. I had it carefully hidden and, as I was taking it out, he knocked on the door and—”

“How tiresome.”

“He thinks it’s some kind of contraband.”

“Why do you care what he thinks?”

“He took the test tube and won’t give it back.”

“Does he know about you? About me? Our dealings?”

“I think he guesses. He knows what the culture does.”

“Because you told him,” Nayle concluded. “You fool.”

“No, he’s . . .” She paused. “Well, he’s a consultant working for my company. He must have recognized the batch code on the test tube. He . . .” She paused again, and Nayle kept quiet, letting her mind work. “He must have figured things out ahead of time. He was *looking* for the test tube.”

“Then you are in great danger, my dear.”

“William won’t cause trouble. Don’t worry.”

“But that’s all I do,” Nayle replied. “Worry,”

“Look, I know how to handle him. I’ll have the test tube by this evening. I’ll bring it to you then.”

“Be very sure about that. You have already failed twice in this enterprise. Once by giving me the wrong code number—”

“But that wasn’t—!”

“And now by letting your *friend* get involved. You will not fail me a third time.”

Nayle pressed down on the plunger before she could compound her folly with more empty promises, but he did not hang up the phone. Instead, he dialed a London number known only to himself.

* * *

Clive went downstairs to the front desk. The old man in the vest was there, busy with his accounts.

“*M’sieur*, do you have a hotel safe? *Un coffre-fort?*”

The man shrugged and pointed to his feet. “*Oui.*”

Clive walked around the end of the counter and looked. Under a tray full of letters and papers was an iron safe with chipped black paint and faded gold striping. The door was ajar. Judging from the rust on its hinges, there was no guarantee it would even close. Still, it would have to do.

He reached past the clerk and pulled an envelope from the *pension*’s stock of engraved stationery. The man blinked at him. Clive wrote his name on the front, then drew the test tube from his pocket and sealed it inside. For good measure, he taped one of his Markris-Stone business cards over the flap.

“No one is to retrieve this except me. *Comprenez?*”

“But, *m’sieur*,” the clerk objected, “you are not a guest.”

“Then I’ll take a room.” Clive produced his passport and a credit card. “Do you have one available? *Pres de le numero quatorze?*”

The old man consulted his rack of keys again, took down the one tagged “16,” and handed it over. Only then would he accept Clive’s package. He bent down to the safe, slotted the bulky envelope into a pigeonhole on the upper shelf, closed the door, and spun the dial.

“*La, m’sieur.*”

“You are to give it back only to me,” Clive said. He took another business card out of his pocket. “Or to someone who gives you this. Please inform your staff.”

“*Je comprends. Personne d’autre.*”

“Now, do you have a public phone? One that takes calling cards?”

The clerk pointed down the back hallway.

Clive nodded. The placement was perfect, because it let him watch both entrances to the building while he conducted his business. Juliana could not escape him, unless she climbed out a window. He punched in his phone code, then the number in Palo Alto, followed by an extension.

“Isaacs,” came the familiar response.

“Sir? This is Clive. I’ve caught my fish.”

“What a stroke of luck! Can you talk?”

Clive proceeded to sketch in his discovery and the ensuing confrontation with Juliana, explaining that he now had possession of the test tube. Isaacs asked detailed questions about the bacterial culture E-32, focusing on the issues of special handling and particular environmental needs. To Clive's ear, Isaacs sounded a great deal more interested than he had been the last time they talked. That meant the man must have done some checking and confirmed Clive's suspicions.

"Shouldn't I just destroy the bugs, sir?" he asked.

"They don't belong to you, now do they?"

"No, but the Cumulus people were about to throw them out."

"Of course. That was before everyone understood their immense potential. You yourself showed us that. Tell me, do you happen to have Sedgwick's lab notes on the culture, by any chance?"

"They're on the hard disk in my office—the office at Cumulus," he added.

"Good. I'll have Carstairs slip in and download them tonight. So, the bugs themselves are safe? Nice and warm? Well protected?"

"As near as I can manage here, sir. But I don't know—"

"You only have to hold on a little longer, William. I'm sending your angel out on the next flight. Where are you staying?"

Clive gave Isaacs the name and street address of the *pension*, spelling everything out slowly.

"Good. Please book him a room."

"What's the name, sir?"

"John Martel."

Chapter 10
Juliana Troetelkind
THE WAGES OF SIN

After she finished her phone call to Nayle, Juliana sat for a moment on the edge of the bed. How had she gotten into this situation?

It was the money, of course. That and the excitement. Betraying the American company gave her a secret identity, a sense of independence, because she made herself answerable to no one. Not even Nayle. When she had stolen the bacterial out of the Emeryville lab, she felt very daring. Although, truthfully, the risks were small enough. The chance of the Americans discovering the theft and prosecuting her for it was vanishingly small. They would take the loss rather than experience the scandal of a trial. And Nayle, for all his threats, was an impotent Englishman. A bag of wind.

But Clive's arrival and confiscation of the test tube had complicated matters. It was time for a complete change of strategy.

That thought launched Juliana into furious motion. She cleaned up the mess in the sink and scrubbed all trace of the shampoo and its scent from her hands. She carried her suitcase into the bathroom and locked its door from the inside. Then she began preparing herself for Clive's return, whether he came in the next ten minutes or two hours.

She picked through her limited supply of clothing, silently cursing her habit of traveling light. Thinking this would be a business trip, she had packed nothing that was meant to arouse a man, nothing to ignite a bout of passion. She did carry a light silk robe in her trademark amethyst color, but it needed a foundation.

Juliana kicked off her shoes, stripped off her jacket and skirt, her blouse and hose. Then she stood back from the mirror to absorb the full effect in just her underwear. The pieces were color coordinated—but in neutral flesh tones that were not particularly designed to excite the male libido. Her bra displayed a lace edge above the cups, but not enough. Her briefs were cut for wear and comfort, not seduction. She shucked off everything then and chafed the skin around her breasts and across her hips and stomach to erase red marks left by the seams. That was better.

It was a part of Juliana's sexual credo that mere nakedness was not exciting. It needed an accent, a wardrobe, to heightened the male imagination. American men were taught by the pictures in their incessant advertising to treasure the female form only when it was slightly concealed. So, Juliana believed that wearing something skimpy and sexy was better than going naked. But nakedness was preferred to wearing utilitarian underwear and merely hoping that unhoneed male reflexes would kick in. Juliana had found that she must teach each man what he appreciated about her, and she only began teaching William last weekend.

So now she would have to improvise.

Start with her own nakedness. She ran a hand down between her legs and over the backs of her calves. If there was not time to give herself a fresh shave, Juliana would have to pretend to dawdle at the end, thus making the time. Next, she would wash and scent her newborn nakedness with every emollient found in her arsenal, which had been similarly reduced by the demands of travel. Finally, drape her body with a nearly transparent wrapper of sheer silk, so that her natural curves and hollows drew his eye as the two of them went through the dance of preliminaries.

As she set about this plan, Juliana replayed their confrontation, here in this room, not five minutes ago.

William had accused her of murdering Edward Sedgwick, or at least of conspiring in the killing. That was wrong of William, and very cruel. Sedgwick's death really had been an accident. Although the fire was untimely enough to be suspicious, there could be no link with Juliana's theft of Sedgwick's bacteria. But then . . . Nayle had known about the accident, had even used it as a threat against her. If Nayle had not ordered the fire, then how did he know about it? Well, he would have heard the news from his courier, of course—whom Juliana knew only as a Cumulus employee in a more humble position than hers, someone who would normally see and understand less than she did, but who could pass in and out of the laboratory building unobserved. A janitor or someone like that.

Clive had also known all about the bacteria—not just any samples she might be traveling with, but the E-32 batch in particular, because he was looking for it. His first question had been how she planned to sneak it into France. And his curiosity was too strong to have sprung from the references in Sedgwick's harmless e-mail. So . . . that made Clive some kind of detective or a policeman. At least he was more than simple a business systems consultant.

Could she offer him a deal? Might she pretend to turn state's witness, or whatever, and so lead him to Nayle? Juliana would then be in a position to sacrifice Clive to the Englishman and preserve her own skin. She nibbled around the edges of this thought, evaluating it as a lever with which to maneuver William, to refocus his thinking and feelings about her. She might even go through with the deception. Unless . . .

Then Juliana remembered that she had breached Sedgwick's private drive space using an expired system password. If Clive had been looking for that particular batch of bacteria, then he knew about the computer break-in. Which meant he had the help of Cumulus's systems administrator, Bernie Heilman. Which meant that the company must already know of, or suspect, her theft and would even now be backtracking her other contacts and resources. It would be a short trail, taking them straight to the stolen plant hormones. So Juliana's career was already terminated.

That was all the more reason for her to retrieve the test tube from Clive, make the exchange with Nayle, collect her final payment, and then find a safe place to live out her life. Nayle did not need his threats. A costly defense at a public trial, followed by a term of years in a squalid U.S. women's prison—

these were inducements enough. Juliana would make good on her promises to Nayle and then make her escape.

The first time she made love to Clive, on his sailboat, it had been for the sake of mutual attraction, maybe even for affection. It might also have been the beginnings of love. This afternoon's lovemaking would be purely business.

She was just putting the finishing touches to her grooming when her bedroom door opened with the key.

"Juliana?" Clive called.

"Be right there!" she answered, brushing out her hair and arranging it over the embroidered collar of her robe.

When she was ready, she silently unlocked the bathroom door and stepped out, making sure that the folds of silk fell back around one extended thigh. Without a word, she flowed up to Clive, placed her arms around his neck, and flexed the length of her body against him. She pulled his head down and kissed him full on the lips.

Clive responded by dropping his suitcase and clasping his hands across her back. Then his fingers slithered down to just below her buttocks, locked there, and lifted her clear of the floor. His insistent lips pushed into her mouth, forcing her jaw open, and their tongues dueled briefly.

Much as Juliana wanted to surrender to this passion, she forced herself to remain keenly aware of her surroundings. Something in the breast pocket of Clive's jacket was pressed against her right breast. Something long and hard. The test tube full of bacteria.

Rather than wrapping her legs around him, as would have been natural at this moment, she instead kept her knees together, pointed with her toes, and rolled her hips forward. Her body slipped down inside the silk wrapper, sliding right out of his grasp. As soon as her feet found purchase on the carpet, she pressed Clive backward, toward the bed, and tripped him at the ankles so that he fell across it. Then she began the process of stripping him.

The jacket came off first.

She tossed it aside, over the foot of the bed. Then came tie and belt, and she pulled them free with a delicious friction against the muscles of his throat and lower back. She unbuttoned Clive's shirt, unzipped his fly, and let his clothing hang loose at his sides while she kissed his face, his neck, his nipples.

Then it was time.

With the appearance of recovering her faculties, she released him, sat up, and smiled. "I've made a mess of your suit," she said, pulling one side of his shirt across his now-heaving chest.

Moving with plenty of hip action, she rolled off the bed, and knelt at his feet. She quickly took off his shoes and socks, arranged them beside the bed, and stood up. With the air of a neat housewife, she passed to the foot of the bed and retrieved his jacket. Holding it by the collar, she smoothed out the fabric with her hand. Clive watched her with slit-eyed languor. In the process of smoothing, her hand slid inside the left breast and felt the pocket.

What she found was a writing pen—a hefty model, like her own Mont Blanc *Meisterstuck*—not the test tube.

“It’s not there,” he said quietly.

Juliana thought she heard a sadness in his voice. She draped the jacket over a chair back. Keeping her tone light, almost playful, she asked, “Then where is it?”

“Someplace safe.”

“You know I need it.”

“It isn’t yours, Juliana.”

“Then it isn’t anybody’s.”

“Your company’s?” he suggested.

“They were ready to throw the bacteria out. You know that much is true, don’t you? Besides, they would have no use for a weapon such as this. They don’t have the connections to market the culture. I know someone who wants to buy it. In fact, he has already paid for it—a down payment anyway. So why not let the deal go through? Who is to know?”

“People are already on their way here, to take the bugs.”

“From Cumulus? Or your own people? Markris-Stone.”

“From my agency,” he admitted.

“You’re not a real consultant?”

“That’s my day job, in fact.”

“You are police?”

“A watchdog.”

“But where’s your bite?” She climbed back on the bed, smiling playfully. She straddled him and brought her face down close to his, baring her teeth. Then she sheathed them behind her lips and kissed him again, wetly, thoroughly, longingly.

When Juliana lifted her mouth to take a much-needed breath, he murmured, “You won’t get the bacteria this way.”

She considered his frown with half-lidded eyes and her most patient smile. “When did you say your people would be here?”

“Sometime tomorrow.”

“A lot can happen between now and then.”

“You’re wasting your time, Juliana.”

“Did you have something better to do?”

* * *

After a night of such lovemaking, Clive wanted nothing more than to order hot coffee and breakfast from room service, lie back among the pillows, and dally away the hours until the agency’s man, Martel, arrived. But La Cicatrice d’Or, their tiny hotel, had no kitchen and Juliana claimed she knew of a *crêperie* just around the corner. So they washed and dressed and ventured out into the chill morning light.

The shop was small and noisy, with a half dozen tables crammed onto a tiled floor between the plate-glass window and the kitchen alcove. Bare plaster walls decorated with travel posters reflected the chatter of other customers, the clatter of flatware, the clink of crockery. Juliana selected a table in the back corner and seated herself. When the waitress came, she ordered croissants, yogurt, blueberries, and a carafe of dark coffee. Juliana’s French was fluid and

precise. Her mood seemed bright and attentive. She might have forgotten all about the bacteria and the transaction that had gone awry. She also appeared to have forgotten that it was Clive who had wrecked it. Their relationship was made new by the sunshine of a new day.

While they waited for their food, the shop's clientele changed around them. The place was always full, so that two men who came in had to sit at a table littered with dirty cups and plates. They wore blue nylon windbreakers—workingmen's clothing. However, Clive noted the moue of distaste with which the larger one, who sported a broad, downward-curving mustache, pushed the heaping ashtray away from his elbow. The other man seemed perfectly nondescript until he turned his head, and then he displayed a web of damaged skin around his left eye.

Clive forced himself to glance away, to keep from staring.

"You need a good meal, after a performance like last night's," Juliana teased. "You look absolutely drained."

"I'll recover." He tried to smile.

"Good, because I have a lot planned for today."

"Oh?" He couldn't imagine where this was leading. "Like what?"

"Sightseeing. Shopping. . . . More love in the afternoon."

"Yes please!" Clive leered, getting into the spirit.

"And into the evening." She leered back.

Her fantasies were cut short by the waitress's bringing a tray of bowls and plates and arranging them on the round marble top of their table. Juliana picked up her spoon, put sugar in her coffee, nibbled the end off a croissant, then made a face.

"Back in a minute," she said and got up. She went over to the waitress and appeared to ask something. The woman pointed toward the back, through the kitchen. Juliana disappeared.

Clive was feeling more hungry than gentlemanly. He put half the berries on his yogurt, stirred them in, and started eating. When they were gone, he ate the other croissant. Still no Juliana. He looked up and noticed that the two workmen were gone as well. Perhaps they resented being kept waiting at a dirty table.

After fifteen minutes, when his share of the food was eaten and Juliana still had not returned, Clive wondered if she was feeling sick. The stress of a transatlantic flight, followed by the confusion and arguments of yesterday—and then the vigorous making up last night—might disrupt anyone's digestive tract.

He found the waitress in the kitchen doorway and asked her to check the lavatory. "*Pour ma femme?*" he explained.

The woman went into the back and quickly returned. "*Il n'y a personne.*"

"But . . ." Clive was confused.

"*Personne,*" she repeated, this time with a shrug.

He shook his head and went in the back himself, with the waitress following. The door of the unisex bathroom was ajar, clearly unoccupied. Next

to it at right angles was the door into the alley. Clive stepped out onto the cobblestones, looked one way, then the other. The place was deserted.

Juliana had given him the slip.

Clive took out his wallet, handed the waitress enough money to cover their tab, and left through the alley. Within a dozen yards he found himself on a plot of bare dirt with a narrow vegetable garden scratched into its surface. He recognized the stuccoed exterior of their *pension*. Clive entered through the back door, which was latched open, ran down the hallway to the desk, and glanced at the rack behind it. The room key still hung there.

“*M’sieur?*” the same old man asked.

“Has Miss Troetelkind returned, by any chance?”

The man pursed his lips and shrugged. No.

Clive took the key and went up to their room. The bed was still unmade, and his clothes from the day before were still scattered. He moved his jacket from the chair to the closet and sat down. Then he got up and checked the bathroom. Her suitcase was lying open on the floor in the corner. The clothes inside were disarrayed, as if someone had pushed them around—but then, they had been like that when Clive and Juliana left for breakfast.

He did not know what to do. If he went out, he would not know where to look for her. If he stayed in the room, he could not say what he was waiting for. And if he called Palo Alto now, for instructions, Clive knew he would look like a fool.

Still, he glanced at the phone—and jumped when it rang.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Clive?” The voice was low and cold.

“Speaking.”

“My name is Alexander Nayle. I believe we have a mutual acquaintance?” The accent was English, vaguely upper class. The enunciation was knife sharp.

“I don’t know who you mean.”

“Don’t be obtuse, sir. You have something we want. We have someone you want. I propose an exchange.”

“I can’t do that,” Clive said.

“Find a way,” the voice replied.

“Look, you people have already lost. So why don’t you just face up to it and stop playing—”

Click.

“—games,” Clive said to the empty hum on the line.

He was suddenly feeling very tired. Juliana and her friends had to know how pointless this gesture was. He had the bacteria sample firmly in his grasp and was not about to relinquish it on account of a silly piece of melodrama like this pretend-kidnapping.

Clive stared bleakly around the room. He wanted to go back to sleep. Actually, what he wanted was to go back to San Francisco and get on with a life that he understood, that of a strategic business consultant. He didn’t want to

play at being a secret agent anymore. But somehow Clive didn't think he was going to get his wish.

* * *

Juliana watched with growing apprehension as Nayle gently cradled the telephone handset. His face was set in a thoughtful frown. Without glancing at her, he turned to look out of the room's tall windows. They faced north, and morning light showering down from a lapis-blue sky brightened this room, which Juliana sensed was normally shadowed and austere.

She sat behind him, in front of a fireplace whose arch of honey-colored stone loomed well above her head. The chair that Nayle had set her in was made of plain wood, oak or maple, unlike the room's other more sumptuous furniture. Nayle had asked Urbano to bring it up from the kitchen. The chair was heavily built and runged with inch-thick dowels. She knew without trying that no amount of kicking or bodily wrenching would tip it over or break it. Urbano had tied her ankles to the straight, wide-set legs with a pair sturdy cotton stockings such as old women wear. He tied Juliana's wrists to the broad, flat arms with lavender-scented silk scarves. Those were stronger yet.

Her one bit of hope from these ominous preparations was that Nayle had instructed Urbano to pad the scarves with tea towels. Clearly, he did not intend her struggles to leave marks.

As a precaution against her calling to Clive over the phone, or shouting to alert some passerby in the street, Nayle ordered her gagged. Urbano had set a wad of half-risen bread dough between her teeth, held there with another scarf knotted behind her neck. Juliana could breathe easily enough through her nose. She could even scrape the edges of the dough ball with her tongue. But it would take hours to gnaw through and swallow the whole thing—enough time for Nayle to complete whatever business he had.

"Your gentleman friend is being obstinate," he said, turning back from the window. "You obviously were not as persuasive as you promised to be."

Nayle signaled to his associates. Urbano stepped behind Juliana and took hold of her shoulders.

"It's time to impose a bit of discipline, my dear," Nayle said, staring down into her face. "You must learn not to doubt the seriousness of my intentions. Your obedience must become instinctual, almost a reflex."

Juliana glared back at him. Who was this egomaniac, to talk to her about "obedience"? They had a deal. It fell through. That was all!

"The Yakusa," he continued conversationally, "with whom I've done business, have a way of disciplining members who fail of their duty. Normally, the miscreant himself inflicts the penalty, but I cannot expect such strength from you."

Nayle nodded at the other person in the room, the big man whose name was Wexler. That one bent over the desk, where a tea tray held an array of implements likewise brought up from the kitchen. He passed over a large bone-handled carving knife, fit for table service with a beef roast, and picked up a pair of pruning shears. They were a humble instrument, with simple green plastic grips, but the jaws were forged steel, sharply curved and quite strong.

Juliana's eyes opened wide in her skull. The room went gray around her.

"Where should I start, Mr. Nayle?" he asked, snapping the shears open and closed. They made a dull sound like a parrot's beak.

Juliana arched her back. She grasped the chair's arms and levered against the bindings at wrists and ankles. Although Urbano's grip tightened, she managed to lift her buttocks clear of the wooden seat.

"Left hand, I think," Nayle replied casually. "The third finger . . . for love."

Wexler nodded and loosened the tie on her left wrist. She tried to pull that hand free—to fight, to claw, to save her finger—but the big man pressed her palm flat against the chair's arm. Urbano shifted his weight, pushing down on Juliana's left shoulder.

"Now mind the rug!" Nayle warned. "Joseph, get ready with that towel."

Wexler giggled softly and bent to his work. First, he snipped away a flap of skin over the knuckle. With the adrenaline that was pumping through her body, Juliana hardly felt it. She saw the blood well up in the ragged hole and could almost believe it belonged to someone else. Urbano spared one hand to dab at the flow whenever Wexler paused between cuts.

Only when the big man began probing around the joint and severing the finger tendons, one by one, did the true pain start. It felt as if a red-hot wire was being thrust the length of her arm, past the elbow, through the shoulder.

Finally, when the field was clear above and below, Wexler turned and held out his hand, like a surgeon, for Urbano to pass him the carving knife.

Chapter 11
William Clive
CHANGE OF PLAN

Because he was bored, waiting around for his guardian angel to arrive on the afternoon flight, Clive took the Paris telephone directory from the nightstand and looked up the name “Nayle.” He was surprised to find a listing, with an address on Ile St. Louis. This was the most exclusive and patrician of the city’s districts, far above such distinctions as Right Bank or Left.

Because the island was only a fifteen-minute walk from his *pension*—offering one explanation for why Juliana had chosen it—and also because he was beginning to have the slightest of doubts about the extent of her play-acting, Clive decided to go around and see how the mythical Alexander Nayle managed for himself.

Walking along the Quai d’Anjou which followed the island’s north side, Clive quickly found his number on a small black tile cemented to the scroll-worked limestone beside a deeply arched doorway. The house took his breath away. Judging by the depth and spacing of the window casements, the mansion dated from sometime in the reign of the Sun King, seventeenth century or early eighteenth, although the highly ornamental fish-head downspouts might be a later addition. Clive was charmed.

The house would certainly have a history. Perhaps it had been the in-town seat of some minor duke or marquis brought up to the Court of Versailles. Then it would have become the residence of a subordinate minister in the Republic. Finally, the garret might have lodged a sensual novelist or painter of the last century. Now, the stone house on Quai d’Anjou was the showpiece of a member of the fading aristocracy, or some *nouveau* capitalist, or—if Juliana’s story could be believed—of a ruthless and highly paid trader in stolen industrial secrets.

The street had no place for Clive to hide himself. The narrow, cobbled quayside bowed outward into the Seine at just that point. Neither of the adjacent buildings, set several paces back from the facade of Nayle’s house, offered a sheltering doorway, and the nearest alley gave an adequate view of Nayle’s windows and front entrance. So Clive loitered across the street, leaning on the iron railing above the brown water, pretending to watch traffic on the bridges, and only occasionally glancing over his shoulder at the house.

Never, when he looked up, did he see anyone at the windows. The draperies never twitched. The house might have been empty. It was going on noon, and the streets were filling up with tourists and Parisians headed for lunch. With his hit-or-miss method of surveillance, Clive was unable to keep track of all the comings and goings on the street.

Once he thought he heard a door open and close over his shoulder but, when he looked, the house seemed unchanged. A second later he saw the back of a burly man walking away. Clive thought nothing of it, except he was wearing the same kind of dark-blue jacket as the scar-faced man in the *crêperie*

that morning. The height and build were about right, too—although Clive had seen him just once, and then out of the corner of his eye.

How many heavysset men in Paris wore dark-blue jackets?

Clive guessed maybe ten or twenty thousand.

So this was just a coincidence.

After another half-hour of lingering and watching, Clive decided he was wasting his time. Nobody was home. He walked around to the Pont de Sully, back up to Bastille, and on to his hotel.

* * *

Clive had collected his key and was halfway up the stairs when the desk clerk glanced up through the balustrade, did a double take, and called out to him, “*Monsieur!*”

“Yes?” Clive stopped.

“A parcel for you.” The man ducked under the counter and came up with a small box wrapped in brown paper.

Clive walked down and took it. “*Merçi.*”

On the stairs again, he examined the package. It was oblong, rectangular in cross section, and maybe weighed four or five ounces. Clive thought it might be perfect for concealing the test tube full of bacteria when he and John Martel took it back through French customs. Then he noticed the address on the wrapper: just his name, written in black ink with a spidery penmanship. The name of the hotel and the street number were missing. So the package must have been hand-delivered.

Clive thought about asking the desk clerk who had brought it, but by that time he was at the door of his room. It was easier to go inside and deal with the matter by simply opening the package. He sat down at the bureau, took out his penknife, and cut the paper around the end where it was folded and taped. He finally had to cut away most of the paper, because the box was hinged on its long axis. The outside was finished in black felt, like the presentation case for a bracelet or fountain pen.

Clive lifted the top and nearly dropped the thing.

Inside, lying in the groove where a pen would be displayed, held in place by the little elastic band, was a severed human finger. From the length of it, the tapering symmetry of the two remaining joints, the violet polish on the bulging almond-shaped nail—Clive knew exactly whose finger it was.

Suddenly, the morning’s melodrama came into sharp focus.

Juliana might try to trick Clive into handing over the bacteria. She might try to scare him with tales of ruthless and vengeful characters. She would certainly try seducing him and, when that didn’t work, stage a mock kidnapping to obtain his sympathies. But she wouldn’t maim herself. Not for money. Not her beautiful hands.

While Clive was thinking these thoughts, and crying inwardly for the hurt that had been done to her, the phone rang.

“Yes?” he said tonelessly.

“I assume we now have your attention,” came the same cold and detached voice.

Clive was astonished by the timing of this call. Then he realized that whoever had brought the finger would be waiting outside for his return. The rest was guesswork and insight.

“What do you want?”

“What I’ve always wanted. The bacteria in culture E-as-in-Easy three-two, which you are holding. Surely you remember.”

“I told you before. I can’t do it. The property is not mine to trade. Some people are already coming to get it, and if I don’t turn it over—”

“You already have one finger, Mr. Clive,” Nayle said patiently. “Would you like another? Or are there other parts of your lady that you would value more?”

Clive swallowed. He sensed the man was totally sincere.

“What are your terms?” he asked at last.

“An exchange. You get Juliana. We get a tube full of noxious fluids that, really, no one else gives a damn about.”

“Where? When?”

“Someplace private, of course. That will be difficult to arrange, in a public city such as Paris. Why not the Arena de Lutece? It will be on your map. Say, tomorrow at dawn? That’s a surely private time.”

“I’ll be there.”

“With the test tube.”

“Of course.”

“Do not involve the police or anyone else, or I promise you that Juliana will not survive the encounter.”

“I understand.”

The phone went dead in his ear.

Clive looked once more at the finger. The skin and gristle on the severed end had been nibbled away in a series of ragged cuts. The exposed flesh was already drying out, starting to crystallize. In the next eighteen hours—sometime after he rescued Juliana at dawn—the tissue would be necrotic. So there was no hope of reattaching the finger.

He mourned the loss of her physical beauty.

However, after a few minutes of this self-indulgence, Clive turned to more practical matters. He had to find a way to satisfy both parties in this dispute, the criminal Nayle and the angel Martel. Both wanted to take possession of the product. Obviously, someone was going to be disappointed. Of course, Clive would prefer disappointing the man who was going to hand the oil-devouring bacteria over to terrorists. With a cynical twist, he wondered briefly which of them that would be, the international black marketeer or the U.S. government agent?

Then he began seriously thinking through the processes of his deception. Clearly, if he and Juliana were going to survive the next few days, both Nayle and Martel had to believe that they had won. So each man had to get something he could think was the genuine article.

By now Clive was getting inside the psyches of his two antagonists. He sifted through what each man would know for a fact or might be trusted to

assume about the culture sample. Had either of them actually *seen* it before? No, for a fact. And which of them might recognize the test tube the bacteria came in? Well, one of them would, with a high probability. So might the other.

An idea began to form.

Clive touched the boxed finger tenderly and put it away in the bureau drawer. Then he went down to the front desk and retrieved from the hotel safe his envelope with the bacteria. Back upstairs, he took it into the bathroom.

He tore open the envelope and took out the test tube. The sample inside consisted of several blackened lumps in a fused mass, with a yellowish liquid oozing between them. More of this fluid was dried in a shallow lens at the tube's bottom. Clive thought it might be difficult to simulate the appearance of this material. Then he pulled out the red rubber stopper and got a whiff of the insides: they were redolent of a municipal garbage dump, heavy on the rotten eggs. He knew that odor would be impossible to duplicate with the materials at hand.

From his shaving kit, Clive took out the traveling container of his favorite hair mousse, dumped the gel down the sink, and ran hot water into the opaque plastic jar until the herbal smell was gone. For the next few days he would just have to comb his hair with water. He tried pouring the test tube's contents into the container, but they did not pour. Instead, he scraped the lumps and ooze out with a nail file, using its sharp tip to gouge out the lens of dried material in the bottom. He tapped the contents into the mousse jar, screwed down the cap, and hid the jar in plain sight among his other toilet articles.

After rinsing out the test tube, being careful not to blur the inked notation on the enamel patch, he tried looked around for a substitute. Well . . .

From the stucco wall outside his window, Clive chiseled a dark substance which might be either some classification of urban moss or the residue from a hundred years of soot. That would serve for the blackened lumps.

Under the bathroom sink, he discovered a rime of greenish-gray matter clinging to the joints of the water pipes. It might be either simple copper sulfate or a new antibiotic. Dissolved in tap water it made a gritty but presentable scum.

Clive mixed his ingredients, shook them until the lumps were on the point of dissolving, and replaced the rubber cap. Then he put the test tube in the drawer alongside Juliana's finger.

From his suitcase he took out his Michelin plan of the Paris streets. He found the "Arenes de Lutece" on the Left Bank, an inch or two east of the Sorbonne and the Pantheon. The bracketing Metro stops were Jussieu to the north and Monge to the south, both on the Nr. 7 line which ran LaCourneuve a Villejuif.

He tucked the map into his jacket pocket and headed out to survey the ground.

* * *

From the Metro stop, Clive arrived above ground by way of a tiled staircase that debouched onto a narrow sidewalk. It was a middle-class

neighborhood of five- and six-story apartment buildings fronted with small shops at street level. Like any other part of Paris. He went up the street, partly following the outlines of his map, partly using his own nose for direction, and turned instinctively at the nearest corner. Clive found himself in what, at first glance, appeared to be just another alleyway. But at the far end he saw a beige stretch of packed sand.

He hurried down the alley. The stucco and brick of the walls on either side suddenly gave way to ranks of square-hewed stones. They resembled paving stones from the city's older districts, although the weathering on them was much deeper, so that the outward surfaces were leached of color. A few feet farther along and he was standing on the arena's sandy floor.

The place was about as big as a football field, except that it was nearly circular and lacked goal posts and line markings. Still, three dark-haired boys, whom he guessed were Arabs, kicked a soccer ball back and forth across the middle of the field. It was not an organized game, just something for idle boys to do.

Clive turned and looked around. Ten rows of shallow grandstand seats, built of the same weathered stone, rose above the floor around most of the field's circumference. Beyond them were the windows and balconies of the surrounding apartment blocks, which cut off the late afternoon sunlight and plunged the sandy ground and the boys into semi-darkness.

The field's northern quadrant was more open, a low stage where one might expect the proscenium arch of a Greek theater. Here, instead, was a tiny park of half a dozen slender trees set among square stone crenelations that might have been either lately added planter boxes or the bases of fallen pillars. The space between them was green grass and dotted with park benches.

The irony was not lost on Clive. The Romans built the Arena of Lutece more than two thousand years ago, when they colonized the cluster of islands in this bend of the river and bivouacked their garrison on rising the ground along its left bank. The arena's enclosed sand lot had served their bloody sports in emulation of the ritual sacrifices of Rome. Yet Arab boys played soccer here in the cool evening. Amorous couples might stroll hand-in-hand over the grass where the Imperial box had once stood. Civilization had finally come to this place of ancient barbarity.

It was indeed a private place, as Nayle had said. For all the ranks of watching windows, at dawn the people behind them would be fast asleep. None of the early-morning pedestrians, hurrying by on the street outside, would bend their heads to look down the alleyway. Two men meeting to trade a test tube and the company of a fair and lovely woman would go unremarked in these shadows.

One detail of that meeting—as Clive planned to execute it—had been nagging at him. What if Nayle had some quick test for the bug, some way to know that he was not receiving a mixture of window soot and verdigris? What if he wanted to stop and run his test on the spot, before releasing Juliana. Then the game would certainly be over. Nayle might even kill both her and Clive.

But seeing the boys at play had given him an idea for the maneuver that would cement this last piece of the puzzle in place. Clive raised his hand and walked toward them on the sandy field.

“*Mes garçons?*” he called out in his most reassuring tone.

“*Les flics!*” shouted one boy, and all three poised for flight.

“*Non, non, pas de flic. Je suis Américain!*”

“Enh?” It was a nasal grunt from the oldest.

“*Voulez-vous . . .*” Clive was running out of French. “Speak any English?”

“*Un peu.*” A little.

“Want to make some money?”

The leader grinned. “*Combien?*” How much?

“*Cent francs.*” A hundred francs.

“*Chacun?*” Apiece?

“*Oui, chacun.*” Clive agreed.

“*C’est de la drogue,*” predicted the boy who had thought Clive might be the cops.

“No drugs,” he insisted. “Just a prank.”

“Enh?”

“*Une . . . farce,*” he translated lamely.

“*Une farce de tres cents francs? Merde!*”

“No, let me explain.” And Clive laid out his plan for the boys.

* * *

The last of his preparations took Clive back across the river, to the retail district around L’Opera. He entered a likely establishment and found the luggage department on the ground floor. The clerk who greeted him admitted to speaking English.

“I need a small duffel bag,” he explained. “About four liters.”

“Doo-fell . . . ?” The woman hesitated.

Clive started over. “*Un sac, s’il vous plait.*”

“Yes?”

“*Mais petit.*” But small.

“Of course.”

“*Et rond.*” And round. Clive made the shape with his hands.

“*Un sac a dos?*” the clerk suggested, pulling at her chin.

Clive guessed she meant a backpack. “*Non . . .* more compact.”

“*Petit et rond,*” she muttered, trying to imagine what he wanted.

“*Comme . . . pour un marin,*” he offered. For a sailor.

“Ah, of course!” She brightened. “*Un sac marin!* We have it.”

She went back into the storeroom and came out with a green bag made of heavy canvas, closed with a drawstring, and fitted with canvas straps on the sides. It was four feet long and almost as big around. A sailor might have carried every stitch of clothing he owned inside and still had room for sheets and towels. It would never fool Alexander Nayle.

Clive shook his head. “*Trop grand.*” Too big.

The woman tossed it onto the counter with disgust.

An idea struck him. "Do you sell bowling balls?"

"Boll—?"

"Never mind."

Clive made his way upstairs to the sporting goods department and negotiated *un sac* in leather and canvas that was suitable for *une balle de boules*. As an afterthought he bought himself a couple of cheap cotton sweatshirts, for padding.

Chapter 12
John Martel
THE BODHI CALM

The moment Clive pushed through the street entrance to La Cicatrice d'Or, he was aware of the stranger sitting in the tiny lobby. The man was physically huge, filling the crowded space. His head and shoulders rose above the high back of the brocade chair he was occupying. The head was dark and leonine, the hair graying at the temples and longer on the neck than was currently fashionable. From the back, it was the head of either a rock star or a thug, contrasting strangely with the conservative cut of the worsted suit and white shirt collar that Clive could see.

He gathered all this at a glance while mounting the stairs.

"*M'sieur!*" the old man behind the desk called out.

Clive turned on the fifth step, looked down. "What is it?"

"You have a visitor." The clerk tipped his head toward the man.

The stranger turned in his chair and regarded Clive with dove-gray eyes that he aimed like the twin barrels of an anti-aircraft turret. The skin around those eyes tightened in recognition. If this was Clive's guardian angel, he had been well briefed, with photographs. The man's lips came up in the barest grimace of a smile.

"You are William Clive." It was a statement, not a question, and came out in a baritone that could be heard at the far end of the second floor.

"I am," Clive said. He set the paper bag holding his recent purchases down on the step, walked back down the stairs, and offered his right hand. "You're John Martel."

The man just nodded, engulfed Clive's hand in his square paw, and shook it up and down once. Martel's grip was firm but not hurtful, though Clive sensed he could easily crush anyone's metacarpals.

"You were supposed to reserve a room for me," Martel said. His tone sounded neutral, simply making an observation, with no heat behind the words. "But when I asked, *he* said—" Martel tipped that massive head toward the desk clerk. "—there's nothing available."

"Oh, gosh! I guess I forgot. You see, it's been really busy here, starting from right after I called Mr. Isaacs last night. But you could take the room I reserved, because I'm sort of set up in Juliana's room."

Martel frowned. "Juliana is your friend from the company?"

"Yes, more than a friend actually. So she wouldn't mind."

"'Would not'? As in, she's not here to express an opinion?"

"I'm afraid so. That's part of the problem. You see—"

The big man took Clive by the elbow. "Why don't you explain this up in your room? In private?"

"Of course." Clive collected both sets of keys—Nos. 14 and 16, Juliana's room and his own unused one—from the hotel clerk and paused for

Martel to get his briefcase and other luggage from the floor beside the chair. "This way, please."

* * *

In John Martel's profession, success at the end of the day, and sometimes his very life itself, depended on the care with which he observed the world around him. So he did not fail to notice the shopping bag that Clive left on the stairs when Martel first spoke to him. He also noted the casual way the man picked it up again as they climbed to the second floor and hid it inside the room, setting the bag down on the far side of the bed. Presumably out of sight, and so out of mind.

The bag was printed with the logo of Le Printemps, one of Paris's biggest department stores, if not the most fashionable. Martel wondered what affairs Clive considered so pressing—"been really busy" were his exact words—that he failed to prepare for Martel's arrival, as Isaacs had instructed. Going shopping didn't count.

Clive's room, or his mistress's, was in keeping with the nature of this hotel: clean but small, with heavy furniture that might have come from a middle-class home, now scarred and shabby from use. The one window looked out on the street. The one interior door presumably led to a bathroom. Martel guessed it would have a bidet as well as a tub. The bed was wide for one person, narrow for two unless they slept virtually in each other's arms. The bedcovers were professionally made up, not just pulled together, so at least the maid service was adequate.

Martel noted that Clive's suitcase, a fold-over model that would keep a jacket and pants unwrinkled, open on the bed. A smaller, wheeled case such as a woman might use lay on the floor in a corner. So Clive had been the last to dress that morning—but only after the maid had already cleaned up the room. Unless something else was going on.

A midday change of clothes, perhaps? Clive was wearing a gray business suit. A dark-blue suit, still in its cleaner's bag, was visible inside the suitcase. Martel could see no sign of more casual clothing anywhere around. So that was one theory shot. For the moment, he decided merely to accept the paradoxical situation and allow it to remain unexplained.

"You have a package for me," he told Clive, once the man had deposited his shopping bag. "A bacterial culture."

"Yes, I *did* but . . . there's been a change of plan."

"This would be the problem you mentioned."

"The trader she was giving it to—well, selling it, actually—kidnapped her this morning. His name is Alexander Nayle. Have you heard of him?"

"Arms dealer. Among other things."

"Apparently, including biological weapons and breakthroughs in the Green Revolution," Clive said. "At any rate, he's holding her for ransom. He wants the bacteria."

"Nayle *knows* about you?" Martel let his voice register surprise.

"Yes . . . Juliana must have told him," Clive said. He was only just now figuring that out.

“She’s working for him.”

“No!” Clive seemed horrified.

“It’s obvious,” Martel said without insisting.

“But I can prove that she’s not. Maybe she had a deal before, but that’s over now.” As he spoke, Clive went to the desk and opened the center drawer. He took out a flat case, like for a bracelet or necklace. “If she was cooperating with Nayle, would she have done this?”

Clive opened the box and thrust it under Martel’s nose. There was a finger inside, held down with elastic.

“Is it hers?” he asked.

“I’d know it anywhere.”

“How?”

“The fingernail polish, for one thing. Juliana always wears that color—her scarf, her car, everything she owns is that same shade of purple.”

“Which makes it suspicious,” Martel said reasonably. “If I wanted to convince someone about a body part, I would cultivate such a fetish. Then I could cut the finger off a corpse, paint it up, and anyone who knew me would swear it was mine.”

“No. I’ve seen her hands, touched them, held them. It’s Juliana’s finger. You can’t convince me otherwise.”

“All right. I won’t try.”

“Then you’ll help me get her back?”

“Why would I want to?”

Clive seemed at a loss over the question. “Well . . . because she’s a woman in trouble.”

“Of her own making,” Martel said. “She played with fire and got burned. Where’s the problem?”

“It’s not that simple. She was all set to turn over the product, and then I interfered. That makes me responsible.” Clive closed the box and laid it back in the drawer. As he did so, something inside rolled up against the case, making a soft *clink*.

Curious, Martel bent to see what that something might be. He saw a test tube with a white patch on the side, just as Isaacs had described it. Clive was keeping a deadly toxin—maybe not to human beings, but to the oil supplies that made human civilization possible—in his desk drawer like a damned curio.

Giving the man a disgusted look, Martel reached in, took out the test tube, and tucked it into his own breast pocket. He would find a secure hiding place after they were finished here.

Clive started to protest. “Hey, we need that to excha—”

“Look! You’ve got to keep things in perspective.” The man’s behavior was beginning to make Martel lose his legendary *bodhi* calm. “We have the goods. Nayle has his courier. That’s not stalemate. It’s score one for our side.”

“But . . . don’t you want her for prosecution?”

“What on earth would we prosecute her *for*? Walking off with a tube full of pond scum? How are you going to explain that to a jury? We are not

here to make a legal case but to plug the leaks at Cumulus. That's been done. You did it. Congratulations. Now we go home."

"And just let Juliana rot?"

"Believe it, she's in cahoots with Nayle," Martel said. "She was, she is, and shall always be his creature, no matter what parlor tricks you may see—including that finger. It would be insane to even think of turning the culture over to them."

Clive was still frowning at this neat summation.

"Don't you agree?" Martel pressed him.

"Oh, certainly!" Clive exclaimed. "Absolutely. We make no deals. Nothing doing."

He said all this just a shade too readily. Martel heard the false note in Clive's voice but decided against following it up. He was tired. It had already been a long day covering too many time zones.

"Very well. . . . If you will excuse me," he said, picking up the key to Room 16, which Clive had left on the desktop, "we have a long flight ahead of us tomorrow. I'll go make arrangements."

"Of course," Clive agreed. "And thank you."

"*De nada*," Martel grunted. He gathered up his baggage at the door and let himself out.

* * *

When the secret agent had left, Clive sat down on the edge of the bed. His hands were clenched together and it felt better when he pressed them between his knees.

What was he going to do now?

Martel had possession of the faked test tube, the one Clive had been planning to give Nayle in exchange for Juliana's life tomorrow. No amount of argument would suffice to get the artifact away from the agency man. Even the truth—that the glop inside was phony—would not move him. Martel would remember that Clive had let him walk out with the counterfeit while the genuine article was hidden in his shaving kit. He would never trust Clive a second time.

Besides, Martel had already said he had no interest in helping Juliana. In his universe, she was simply a criminal, a baddy who was about to get her just deserts. He didn't even believe she was in trouble, because he would not admit that the severed finger might be hers. The subject was closed. Juliana was going to die. It would probably happen about the time he and Martel were boarding the airliner to fly back to San Francisco.

Clive stood up and walked over to the desk. He took out the case and looked at the finger one last time. Then he bent over and felt inside the drawer, just in case the last ten minutes had been an elaborate hallucination and the test tube was still there.

No such luck.

Clive was out of options.

He could only play the cards left to him.

Chapter 13
William Clive
BY DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

John Martel stayed awake through the night. He stayed awake despite the thirteen and a half hours of transatlantic travel he had suffered the day before, with sleep coming only in twenty-minute snatches as he perched upright in an airline coach seat. He stayed awake despite the fact that he was operating now in friendly territory, in contact with an ally from his own agency and, by all accounts, in firm possession of the prize for which he had come. He stayed awake because he was suspicious.

Martel knew that Clive was an amateur, a college boy with more degrees than brains, a probationer on his first time out, and a fool who had gone ahead and fallen in love with his primary target. That much was clear from Isaacs's situation report. He also knew, from his own observation, that Clive was one devious son of a bitch. The man had more angles than a pool table. And more balls in play.

If Martel allowed himself to take at face value Clive's protestations of—of what? His innocence? His loyalty? Acceptance of the status quo?—and gone off to his deserved rest, then the game would be lost. While Martel's head was in dreamland, the man he was supposed to be protecting would go charging out to get himself killed, or bargain away the energy future of western civilization, or do something else equally stupid. And all for the sake of a woman who was obviously playing him like a bass viol—one hand around his neck, and the other tickling him further down.

Martel had seen pictures of the woman. Isaacs had managed to smuggle her employee mugshot out of the files in Cumulus's Human Resources department. Even allowing for slow film speed, hard lighting, and the head-on stare, Troetelkind was a beautiful woman. A real heartbreaker. And all the more dangerous because of it.

And so, after making his phone calls and securing the test tube for the waiting period before they could travel, Martel retired to his room and made certain personal preparations. Then he sat on the floor and propped his back against the side of the bed. His one concession to comfort was to take off his shoes.

His state of mind was nothing like sleep, and yet it was not wakeful either. He recited the multiplication table in his head up to fifty times fifty—working out the numbers beyond the standard twelves as a pure mental exercise. Then he named all the saints, all the Hindu gods he could remember, and recited as much of the Egyptian Book of the Dead as came easily to mind. Then he identified every sin he had ever committed, mentally rehearsed the hundreds of moves from all thirteen *katas* of the first karate style he had ever learned, and recreated all of the postures from the Hatha Yoga.

It was near to five o'clock in the morning when his intuition and training paid off. The door down the hall—Clive's room, from the loudness and

bearing of the noise—opened and closed once. The ensuing footfalls were all carefully made, almost blending with the creaks and groans of the old building, the coughs and mutterings of other guests, the occasional hum of tires out in the quiet street.

But Martel heard and identified them.

He was on his feet in a second.

After counting to ten while slipping into his shoes, and adding five for good luck, Martel adjusted the one extra garment he had put on the night before and turned the knob of his own door. The hallway was empty.

He advanced without making a sound to the head of the stairs. They were empty as well, but the wooden street door at their foot was still closing on its piston arm. Martel went down softly, softly and held the door before it could latch. He made a crack and put his eye to it.

Clive, or a figure very like his in a dark suit, was halfway down the block and walking fast. The man looked over his shoulder as he went but did not see the crack in the door nor the eye that followed him. One oddity was that Clive carried a bowling ball, or at least the bag for one. Its pale canvas, crossed with brown leather straps, gleamed in the shadows between the street lights. From the way Clive easily held it, with no sag to his shoulder, Martel guessed there was no ball inside.

Where had this bag come from? It had not been in Clive's room when the two men talked there. Of course. It was from Le Printemps! It was in the shopping bag that Clive hid behind the bed.

Why was he carrying it on the streets of Paris at five in the morning? Unknown—or as yet unexplained.

Clive turned up at the corner, heading for the Boulevard Beaumarchais. Martel remembered there being a Metro stop less than a hundred paces north from the corner. Clive had to go there. Either that, or he was hoping to hail a taxi.

The taxi would be better for Martel's purposes. Then he could flag the next one and follow at a discreet distance. If Clive went underground, his job would be harder, because the station must be nearly deserted at this hour, and the only way to follow was get on the same train—a different car, of course, but only after crossing the same empty platform. Martel would have to avert his face, turn up his jacket collar, hunch his shoulders, and try to walk like a Parisian. And still Clive might spot him. Rats and cats! But this was what they paid him for.

After Clive had disappeared around the corner, Martel counted ten again, this time leaving off the five. Then he pushed the door open and started sprinting, knees high and light on the balls of his feet. The rubber soles of his unfashionable working shoes fell soundlessly against the pavement. At the far corner he stopped, pushed his head around an angle of brick wall, and saw that the connecting street to Beaumarchais was empty. He dashed on.

Martel's heart was pumping fast now, rapid but controlled, like an athlete's. He felt random surges of adrenaline, however, partly in response to

the complexities of this chase, and partly due to his delight at having his suspicions confirmed.

* * *

Clive arrived at the end of the alley just as the sky was beginning to brighten. The trees in the park on the arena's north side were still shadowed, but blackbirds had awakened among the branches with a raucous twittering. The arena floor's expanse of pale sand gleamed with the reflection of the dying stars.

As his eyes adjusted to that feeble light, Clive could make out a group on the far side of the circle: three large figures and a smaller one which might be a woman. That was more players than he had expected. Then the woman moved and Clive saw a flash of iridescent white which resolved, as his vision kept improving, into a bandage covering most of her left hand.

By turns Clive felt waves of anger and relief: anger that Nayle had really dared to cut off her finger; relief that Martel's arguments based on it were proved all wrong. Clive knew now that Juliana's motives—at least since the previous night's wondrous lovemaking—were pure, her allegiance secure. He had been a fool to doubt her for even a minute.

"Mr. Clive?" one of the men called out, an English voice. Nayle.

"Yes!" he shouted back.

"Bring us the sample, please."

"No. We're going to make this a fair exchange. I'll leave the bag here and walk toward you. You leave the woman there and come toward me. Each gets what he wants, free and clear."

"But, really—!" The voice sounded petulant.

"It's that or nothing, Mr. Nayle." Clive felt satisfaction at shouting Nayle's name into the darkness, just as Nayle had shouted his, even though any ears that might hear them belonged to a few sleepy French speakers.

"Very well. Begin your walk."

Clive set the bowling bag down at his heel. It was light enough, being plumped out and cushioned with the cotton sweatshirts, but he was still glad to be free of it. He started walking slowly toward the center of the ring.

The three men fanned out, away from Juliana, and began moving toward him. Clive was suddenly very alone and vulnerable. He wished he had brought a gun.

* * *

From his position, flattened against the stones at the side of the alley, Martel watched Clive put down the bag and start across the empty lot. So he was going to make an exchange with the arms trader after all, and for a woman who had copiously broken faith with her employers, if she had not actually broken any U.S. law.

The main question, of course, was what Clive had in the bag.

Back in the hotel room, he had been too ready to release the test tube and abandon the idea of an exchange. So either Clive had duped him then, because the bacteria were already transferred to some other container, or he

was duping Nayle now, because the bag was empty. The man was just too clever.

And stupid.

What was Nayle going to do if he opened the bag and found it empty? Let Clive and his lady walk away? Hardly. Shoot them both in the back of the head, was what Martel would do, in Nayle's position.

As the sky lightened over the field, Martel perceived that it was circular, laid out like a sports stadium, with stepped grandstands around three sides. In fact, the stones at his back were the ends of one set of bleachers. He was surprised that the builders would have used stone instead of concrete and steel, but the rough surface offered ready purchase for his hands and feet.

Martel turned, still hugging the wall so that no one inside the stadium could see his silhouette against the backwash of the street lights, and began to climb. At the top of the wall, he found the bleachers butted up against the wall of one of the apartment buildings which defined the city block enclosing this stadium. Martel crouched in the shadows there and looked out.

The angles were not good from this position. Clive was in his immediate foreground, shielding the others. Being only ten rows up, less than twenty feet above the stadium's sand-packed floor, did not give him a clear field over Clive's head and shoulders.

Martel moved along the row, circling around to the west. As he went, he left the protection of the apartment wall. Behind the next building a chasm opened: an internal alley between that apartment block and the grandstand's high side. For the rest of his walk, until he reached a position he liked, Martel was going to have this void behind him. It was one of the risks.

Finally, after traveling more than 120 degrees around the circle, he found his preferred field of fire. He was now somewhere behind the three men. If any of them turned to look in his direction, the rising sun reflected off the east-facing windows in back of him would blind the man. Clive was on the other side of the arena now, so that the bad guys shielded him. The woman was not an important part of the equation.

Martel drew his weapon. It was a plastic-bodied Glock 9mm. The gun had been extensively modified, replacing the steel barrel with a tube of tempered glass that was tightly wrapped with high-tensile aramid fiber. He would have to fire the gun sparingly, because the new barrel's interior degraded rapidly with the heat. But it was the perfect weapon for passing airport security. Broken into its component parts and with the clip unloaded, the gun showed up on x-ray screens as a jumble of common items: the barrel as a large ballpoint pen or an office stapler with a loosely wound spring; the grip and trigger mechanism, with the finger guard cut away, as the packed gadgetry inside a microcassette recorder; the clip as a dispenser for breath mints. Who could interpret such hazy images?

The bullets he had carried dispersed among various of his pockets. They were hard-plastic jackets that held copper pellets floating in a drop of Teflon. The cartridges were brass. Ferrous metal detectors registered none of these

substances. Only a phosphorus-sniffer would note the cordite, and none of the security people were using that system. Yet.

Martel racked the weapon's slider as quietly as he could, assumed his crouch, and brought the muzzle to bear on the back of the middle figure in the trio. Martel breathed out and awaited developments.

* * *

Clive passed the three going the other way at the arena's center. To his left was a broad-shouldered man with a full mustache. To his right, a smaller man with a scar around one eye. In spite of the dim light, he recognized them from the *crêperie* yesterday morning. This was more proof that Juliana had really been abducted, instead of leaving on her own. Both men averted their eyes rather than meet his scrutiny as they passed.

By contrast, the man in the middle—this had to be Nayle—bored holes in Clive as they came shoulder to shoulder. The trader's narrow mouth was set in a pout, but his lips worked silently around some comment he did not share with Clive.

And then, straight ahead, was Juliana. She stood in front of the arena's far entrance. Her head was down, her hair hanging loose and covering part of her face. But Clive noted with approval that her feet were spaced evenly apart, as if she was holding her ground. Her arms hung relaxed at her sides, in balance and ready to move. As he approached she lifted her chin. Her uncovered eye focused on Clive and blazed faintly with the coming dawn.

From behind him came a sudden flurry of running feet pounding across the sand. He turned his head to glance over his shoulder.

Right on time, the youngest and smallest of the three street Arabs broke from his cover among the planter boxes at the arena's north side. He raced over the floor, toward the bag.

The three men behind Clive tensed, unsure of just what was happening. They were confused, as Clive thought they would be, by the child's small size and by his diagonal approach. But only for a moment.

"Hey!" the walrus mustache shouted.

"Boy!" Nayle echoed in his patrician tones.

"Run!" Clive yelled at Juliana and moved faster.

She stood there, confused as well. Or maybe she had been drugged.

Thunk! came the sound of a foot hitting the side of the bag. Clive knew without looking that the boy had lofted it toward the south side of the arena. As Clive reached Juliana, he ventured a backward glance and saw the second Arab come out of the shadows at the foot of the stands. This boy met the falling bag and headed it up into the top row.

"Run, Juliana!" he yelled again.

Still she stood frozen. She seemed entranced by the diversion he had created.

By that time, Clive knew the situation was hopeless. He took her arm and tried to haul her bodily toward the exit gate. But she pulled away from him, her coat slipping down off her shoulder in the struggle. Her feet were planted against him now.

Clive turned around, intending to reason with her, and so he saw the outcome of the boys' game. The third and eldest popped up from his hiding place in the alley behind the grandstand. He was dancing back and forth along the top row, positioning himself under the descending bag. His job was to catch it and disappear between the buildings.

But by this time Nayle's people had recovered from their shock and hesitation. The scar-faced man drew a pistol from beneath his jacket, took aim at the boy, and fired.

Clive did not see the immediate effect of the shot. His attention was drawn instead to Juliana. She was taking passively absorbing the scene, just an onlooker. When the gun went off, she nodded as if the blast and the blooming fireball settled some question in her mind.

* * *

Martel was following the arc of the bag as it came down. The receiver was positioned about twenty yards away to his right, on the southern rim of the stadium. Because he had fixed his eyes on the prize—a lapse against which all of his training warned him—Martel lost track of what was happening down on the floor. The gunshot caught him almost by surprise.

The boy in the stands crumpled in on himself, taking the bullet close to the bellybutton. He fell to his knees, then rolled off the stands into the alley below.

Without thinking, indeed with barely a shift of his gaze, Martel returned fire. His bullet caught the gunman at the juncture of the neck and shoulder, flinging him back onto the sand.

The bowling bag thudded into the grandstand precisely where the third boy had stood.

What to do? If the bag contained the real bacteria, then Martel's duty was to retrieve it. But if the bag was a dummy, a diversion, he should leave it and focus on the human targets. The possibilities flickered through his orderly brain.

If Clive was handing over a dummy product, then why involve these children to kick it out of reach? It was possible the boys were outsiders, thieves bent on stealing this piece of luggage dropped on their playground. So the bag was probably genuine.

On the other hand, if the boys were part of some twisted plan of Clive's, then the bag might indeed be empty, a ruse to buy time while he grabbed the woman and escaped.

Dealing with a tricky amateur, there was no figuring the odds. But clearly, the safest course was to get the bag. Empty or not, that solution placed the outstanding piece of the puzzle under Martel's control.

It took less than a second for these thoughts to register with Martel and then for his limbs to surge into action. He rose from his crouch, fired two more shots in the general direction of the three men to keep their heads down, and began his run along the top of the grandstand.

* * *

Freddie Wexler could smell a cockup the moment Clive started getting cute with the bag. Dropping it and walking away was a bad sign. It just wasn't the way these things were done. It smelled of gunfights at high noon and other cheap theatricals.

So Freddie was almost expecting it when the first child ran out and kicked the bag. His gun hand was already inside his lapel, six inches from the butt of his .357 Magnum, when instinct stopped him.

The situation was still under control. So what if some child of the streets kicked the bag around the arena? Where was he going to go with it? Besides, Clive and the woman were still within takeout range. Hell, Freddie could run back and tag either of them with his fist. So play it cool. Gunplay was a serious business in France, which was filled with stiff-necked policemen who disliked Brits on principle. It was too serious a business to waste on children.

When the second boy popped up and the game began to acquire a sense of direction, Freddie was caught out, no longer sure of his instincts. But Urbano beat him to the punch, drawing and firing when the third boy appeared.

Then Urbano's shoulder vanished in a red haze.

Return fire.

Well, well.

Wexler stood his ground as two more bullets pocked the sand around his and Nayle's feet. Those shots were a tactical error, of course, because they pinpointed the opposing gunman for him. With dreamlike precision Wexler tracked the man moving along the top of the stands, took his time lining up front and rear sights, led the target by two full steps, and squeezed off three spaced shots.

As he came out of his trance, Wexler noticed that all the children had disappeared.

* * *

Martel was ten feet from the bag when he felt the white-hot punches. One took him just above the left kidney. The second slapped him at the nexus of his ribs, just inside his left elbow, and knocked the air out of his lungs. The third shot he felt as a cold wind in front of his face before he even heard it.

Under such impacts, he could not keep his footing. He stumbled, lurched to the side, and took a header off the back of the stands. The paving stones in the alley rose up to meet him.

Briefly, Martel wondered where the third boy's body had gone. He must have fallen somewhere near here.

Then Martel's head exploded in a white flash, followed by darkness.

* * *

Clive recognized the running man, of course. But how did Martel become involved? He was asleep in the hotel. This had to be a trick of the light, or a fevered amalgam of Clive's worst fears. Except the man fell hard enough when the Walrus shot him. So he was no illusion. Clive had managed to get his guardian angel killed.

He turned to Juliana. She stood there, wrapped in her own dream, with the collar of her coat still down around her elbow.

“Why didn’t you run?” he asked.

She was rearranging her clothing, paused, and gestured with her free hand—the bandaged one—at the wall where two people had been shot down. “What’s the point?” she said.

“You don’t get paid if you run, do you?”

For answer to that, she just shrugged.

* * *

Alexander Nayle was deeply disappointed. Half a dozen gun shots, dawn just breaking, lights coming on in the windows overlooking the arena, and there were bodies everywhere.

He looked down at Urbano’s. The man lay on his side, pumping arterial blood into the sand, like a gladiator with his neck hacked open. The ragged hole between his collarbone and the base of his throat was swamped in gore. There was nothing to be done for him, except . . .

“Get his wallet,” Nayle said quietly to Wexler. “Let’s not leave too many clues lying around, shall we?”

The big man nodded, knelt beside the American, and rolled him over. Urbano struggled to raise himself, trying to plant an elbow, to crawl, to get away. Wexler pushed his face into the sand and felt in his left hip pocket. He took out a leather billfold. The man’s passport was back at the house on Quai d’Anjou, in the wall safe.

“Now get the bag,” Nayle said.

Wexler stood up, stowed the wallet, and looked up into the stands. Cradling his big pistol against further unpleasant surprises, he ran to the arena’s southern edge, vaulted into the first row, climbed up, and retrieved the bacterial sample.

Nayle glanced back at Juliana and the man who had thought to save her. These Americans. Such cowboys. They made everything so complicated.

Chapter 14
Alexander Nayle
A SPOONFUL OF POND SCUM

Clive and Julia were driven back to the house on Quai d'Anjou. The party should have been a tight squeeze in Nayle's 190-class Mercedes, except that one of his thugs was lying on the arena floor, unmoved and apparently unmourned. From the muttered argument between Nayle and the big man, who sat in the front seats while their captives were held in the rear by child-guard locks, Clive gathered that the Walrus had wanted to take the body along, while Nayle wouldn't hear of soiling his trunk mats with that much blood. Besides, Nayle argued, if they took the body—belonging, apparently, to someone named Urbano—then they really ought to swing around and pick up those of “the interloper” and “the child” as well.

“This is a sedan, Freddie,” Nayle concluded, “not a coroner's van.”

By then they were on the quay in front of the house. Nayle was sitting in the passenger seat with the bowling bag on his lap, his fingers laced through the handles as if it might escape him even now. When the Freddie the Walrus pulled up, Nayle got out, set the bag in the foot well, and reached across the seat. The Walrus drew his massive revolver and handed it over to his boss. Nayle held it at the ready, under cover of his jacket, and released Clive and Juliana from the back. The Walrus drove off to park the car while the other three waited on the pavement.

When the big man returned on foot, carrying the bag, Nayle let him open the blue-green street door and lead Juliana inside. Clive followed her into a cold stone vestibule that reminded him of a cloister, down to the rush matting on the floor. There the weapon and the bag changed hands again, and Nayle escorted Juliana across an elegant hall that reflected renaissance gold and marble rather than medieval masonry. They went up a broad stairway together. When Clive made to follow, the Walrus stopped him with the gun barrel.

“This way, you.”

He showed Clive to a tiny door under the marble staircase. From the wooden threshold a flight of stone steps led down into a moist and musty darkness. The Walrus motioned for Clive to go first. If he wanted to run for it, then he was welcome to—headlong into the pit.

They went down two long flights of these steps, each with a pair of ninety-degree turns to the left, so that the stairway remained inside the perimeter of the narrow house lot. Finally they arrived in some kind of subbasement. When the Walrus turned on the electric ceiling lights, Clive saw walls that wept a green, algae-tinted moisture. So they must be down near the level of the river. Indeed, during the spring floods, the flagstones under his feet might well be submerged.

The Walrus prodded him down a short corridor with several deeply embedded portals closed by thick oak doors. The man stopped Clive at the one that happened to have an iron grating instead. The ancient padlock on it was as

big as his fist. His guard took a brass key off a hook on the wall, unshackled the lock, and motioned for Clive to enter the darkened space inside. When he had done so, the Walrus closed the grate and snapped the lock, making a rusty sound. Then the man's footsteps went away and the corridor lights winked out.

Clive was in a void so thick it was like black velvet pressing against his face. He put out a hand at waist level and turned 180 degrees as accurately as he could. The hand encountered nothing on this half-circuit. He took a step forward and touched the metal grate. His fingers quickly worked their way over to the padlock.

It must have had tumblers big enough for a Houdini to pick with his teeth. Part of Clive's training included an introductory course in locksmithing. Unfortunately, this padlock was on the wrong side of the door and the spacing between the bars was too narrow to get his hand through. Besides, he would need a stiff wire or other tool to attack the keyhole. And his jailer must have taken away the big brass key, because Clive never heard him hang it up again.

If Clive had been a smoker, he might have used his pocket lighter to examine his prison. But then, the tiny flame would usefully illuminate only his fingertips and his wrist. Instead, Clive explored the wall to one side of the doorway by touch. His hand soon came in contact with a wooden beam, a crosspiece at right angles, and . . . a dusty bottle. His fingers spread out and scurried up and down, side to side. More bottles.

He was locked in the wine cellar. Red wine, by the shape of the bottles. The other side of the room, Clive soon found, had a rack of whites. He almost laughed out loud. What made Nayle think he wouldn't, out of spite, start breaking these bottles of vintage Bordeaux?

Of course, he wouldn't. Clive was a civilized man, what passed these days for a gentleman. He would never stoop to childish vandalism. Nayle must have sensed that. Besides, Nayle had observed Clive in the arena. When his ruse with the Arab boys failed, when Juliana refused to run away with him, Clive submitted docilely enough. He knew when he was beaten and had let himself be taken prisoner.

So . . . what about opening up a bottle?

That was the temptation Nayle put before him.

The man would have guessed the kind of remorse Clive ought to be suffering now, with his fine plan blown up in his face. Clive had arranged to get one innocent boy killed. He had told extensive lies to his guardian angel—"the interloper"—and maneuvered him into the path of several bullets. That alone would alienate Clive's agency, or whomever Nayle's thought Clive was working for. Worst of all, Clive was mortified about his assessment of Juliana.

With everything else, Clive had thought he was saving her, at least. But she chose to stand by Nayle at the last minute. Right now she was upstairs, living in comfort, certainly unguarded. The pair of them were probably toasting each other with cold glasses of champagne, or a chablis from the rack on the opposite wall.

Nayle was right. Clive *was* feeling awful. If he had a corkscrew, he probably would have used it on one of these bottles instead of the padlock outside.

Except for one thing.

After the congratulations were said and the glasses drained, Nayle would want to examine his prize. He would take up the bowling bag, unzip the top of it, and find a layer of gray cotton sweatshirts inside. This would not disconcert him especially, because Nayle now understood Clive's abortive plan. The sweatshirt was to pad the glass test tube while a group of Arab boys kicked the bag around the arena.

He would lift out that first sweatshirt. Finding nothing underneath, he would pull out the second more quickly. Then the last one, and still nothing. Not believing, Nayle would feel in the corners of the bag, along the seams, looking for some kind of pocket. He would flap the shirts out by their shoulders, making sure the test tube was not caught in a fold. He might even turn the bag over and see if anything was taped to the bottom.

Clive was only sorry that his cell was so deeply buried, so far from that upstairs room, that he would not hear the scream that was coming right . . . about . . . now.

* * *

"*Monsieur? . . . Monsieur?*" the voice came from a long way off. It was accompanied by a more immediate irritant, a foot kicking him gently in the thigh. The kicks came almost, but not quite, in synch with the voice.

From the bright flashes of pain that accompanied each kick, Martel knew his right leg was broken. This pain fought for prominence with the ongoing aches in his ribs, his back, his head.

Instinctively, his right hand clamped around the weapon he had been holding when he fell off the grandstand. His fingers squeezed into an empty fist.

Martel opened his eyes and was confused by a pattern of rhythmically pulsing blue lights. Then he worked it out: a dozen yards down the alley from where he lay, a pair of those absurdly small French police cars were parked with their flashers turning. His eyes slid sideways, allowing for the angle at which his head was cocked, and took in the man who was kicking him. Both the policeman and his partner wore dark-blue uniforms, so they were either traffic *gendarmes* or agents of the *Sur t *. From the submachine guns tucked under their arms, Martel guessed the latter.

The partner was holding Martel's weapon. The man ejected the clip and cleared the chamber. Then he held the gun under his nose, sniffed once, and nodded. He offered the clip for the first man to inspect. They would certainly recognize the plastic bullets for what they were.

Martel craned his neck around. Something was missing from this tableau. "Where is the boy?" he asked in his passable French.

"What boy, *monsieur?*" replied the first policeman. He handed his partner the machine gun, for safety reasons, and bent to examine Martel's body. Fingers probed the holes in his jacket, then dug two flattened slugs out of his

Kevlar vest. The policeman held them on his palm for the partner to examine and nod over.

“A young boy, teen age, was shot back here,” Martel explained.

“Shot by you?”

“No.”

“We find no boy. Only a man, out there on the arena floor. His wound was very likely caused by *les explosifs*.” To explain the term, he wagged the loaded clip at Martel. “This looks very bad for you, *monsieur*.”

“I am an American citizen. I request that you take me to my embassy.”

“The good people of this building—” The policeman gestured toward the windows above the alley. “—reported hearing shots. We came and found you lying here, holding an assassin’s gun. You are also protected with the body armor. Your weapon has perhaps shot a man, who is now certainly dead.” He paused, as if arriving at a painful decision. “You will speak to your embassy, of course, but only after we have made our report.”

Martel moved his arm, which was still twisted under his body. It hurt but was not broken. He levered his head off the pavement. “May I get up?”

“If you can stand.”

“My leg is broken.”

“We have already called an ambulance.”

He hauled himself upright with the help of the policeman’s left arm. The movement set his head whirling.

The partner touched his own forehead. “*Monsieur . . .*”

Martel reached up and felt warm ooze from a patch of raw skin. The blood slick extended down his cheek and around his ear. The skull beneath, however, did not feel either dented or particularly mushy. So it was probably the least of his wounds, other than a persistent headache which now throbbed in time with the blue lights. Martel’s remaining hurts, except for the leg, he judged to be mostly scrapes and bruises. In the exchange with Nayle’s people, he appeared to have come off lightly.

“Am I under arrest?” he asked.

“You are, *monsieur*.”

“Then let’s go.”

* * *

Alexander Nayle split the last seam of the wrinkled gray suit that came from the luggage Wexler had brought back from the hotel room. In a rush of fury—which he saw as a natural reaction to his moments of anxiety with the bowling bag—Nayle had slashed Clive’s cotton briefs, dumped out his shaving kit, and destroyed his best wool suit. But the petty joy this minor vandalism gave him was wearing thin. Nayle eyed Juliana’s case, sitting on the floor beside the desk. Oh, well . . .

She sat impassively in the kitchen chair while he pawed through her clothing. He did not have to rip any of her seams, because the dresses, slips, and undergarments were all too sheer to hide anything. He felt around the bag’s fiberboard sides. They were too thin to conceal the test tube.

“Was this everything from their room?” he asked Wexler.

"I stripped it bare. Trust me."

"And Clive had no little hiding places?"

"I know how to conduct a search."

"You've got Sedgwick's files," Juliana said dully.

Nayle sighed. "My dear . . . Our buyers are military men, not research scientists. They are interested in your computer disk only as proof of authenticity. They do not expect to sit down and cook up the bacteria from a formula."

"I know that."

"Good. So what did Clive do with the test tube?"

"Maybe he gave it to the man on the grandstand," she suggested.

"Let us hope not, my dear—for your sake. Because if he did, then the bugs are truly gone. We don't know where this man came from or what he might have done with the culture. And we can't ask, because he's dead."

She shook her head. "So tell your buyers the deal is off."

"And never close another deal again?" He chuckled. "I have a reputation to uphold. I cannot be seen to make excuses."

"So give them a fake. A spoonful of pond scum should do it. They won't know the difference."

"And when it doesn't perform as advertised . . . ?"

"There are a thousand reasons why Sedgwick's bacteria would flunk the field trials," she said. "We never tested them, remember? The bugs could be rendered inert by—"

"Just more excuses, my dear. Besides, we will be required to test the culture. Our buyers are not complete fools." He glanced at Wexler. "Bring him up."

While Freddie was down in the cellar, Nayle neatened the two suitcases, doing his best to lay out the man's jacket so that the ripped seams would not show immediately. Then he opened his desk drawer, took out a slim gray automatic, a Walther, and laid it within reach. He meant to use the gun only for purposes of intimidation, but that did not mean it wasn't loaded.

* * *

The summons from Nayle came later than Clive expected, which meant something else might be going on. The Walrus led him into the upstairs room, an impressive chamber of high ceilings, tall windows, and heavy furniture full of curves and curlicues. On the desk in the middle of the room Clive recognized his own suitcase, sitting open. Nayle stood behind it, grinning.

"Are you enjoying the game so far, Mr. Clive?"

"I've been managing to amuse myself."

"We still have not found the bacteria."

"I don't think you will."

"Don't underestimate me, sir." The voice was cold. Nayle turned to the Walrus. "Freddie, *punish* Juliana."

The big man spun instantly and kicked out with the ball of his foot, straight between her breasts. Juliana coughed hard, once. The inertia imparted by the kick carried through her body and took the chair over backward. She

went with it in a pinwheel of flailing arms and scissoring legs. The chair dumped her into the huge walk-in fireplace, where she landed on her injured hand. Juliana would have cried out, except that her breath was gone. She lay there trying to suck air. Tears ran from her blinking eyes.

Clive started forward, his hands reaching for the big man's shoulders, when he was stopped by a *click!* next to his ear. Nayle held a pistol at his temple. "Please," the Englishman whispered. "*Do it.*"

Clive dropped his hands and stepped back.

"That's enough for now, Freddie," Nayle said conversationally, couching the gun. He glanced back at Clive. "You will tell me where to find my test tube."

"I don't have it."

"Where did you *put* it?"

"My angel took it away."

Nayle closed his eyes. "Freddie—?"

"No, wait! I mean the man sent to guard me."

"The intruder? The one at the arena?"

"Yes, him. He took the test tube from me last night."

"And what did *he* do with it?"

"I don't know," Clive said.

"Too bad," Nayle said. "Proceed, Freddie."

The Walrus carefully moved the chair aside, assumed a new stance, and launched another kick, this time aiming at Juliana's head.

"Anywhere but her face," Nayle said patiently.

The Walrus's foot paused in mid-flight. Making the change of direction smoothly, he swung his foot up and brought the heel down on Juliana's bandaged hand. Now she had the breath to cry out. Her scream might have been heard in the street, even across the river, unless the glass in those tall windows was double-paned.

"Is your memory refreshed now?" Nayle asked Clive.

"I really *do not* know," he insisted.

"Ah, but you are far too clever, sir, to have run out of tricks so early. Let me see . . . You gave your agent the test tube—even though it was your only bargaining chip with me. Then you tried to give me an empty bag—even though I might have foreseen your trick and opened it in the arena. To prevent that, you had those boys run out and kick the bag away, even though *that* might have precipitated an action which was likely to get everyone killed. . . . No, I cannot see the logic in your actions, Mr. Clive."

"I was scared. I wanted to give you the test tube, but—"

"Now there you are wrong," Nayle interrupted. "You *never* wanted to deal with me, or not in good faith. So . . . you were prepared to hand over the test tube . . . but not the bacteria. A trick of packaging that might well have fooled me, as it obviously did your agent."

Hearing his ruse explained so precisely, Clive made a fatal mistake. His eyes flicked involuntarily toward his suitcase.

“Ah! Of course,” Nayle said. He turned to where Juliana lay. “Get up, my dear. . . . Freddie, help her.”

The Walrus lifted Juliana out of the fireplace and half-carried her to the desk. Nayle hunted around in Clive’s suitcase for the former contents of his shaving kit. He gathered up the travel bottles, jars, and tubes of deodorant, sun block, aftershave, and hair mousse and spread them on the desk.

“Juliana, I believe you are the only person in this room, aside from our friend here, who has firsthand knowledge of the culture. If you will identify it for me now, all is forgiven.”

She hesitated, then slowly picked up one tiny bottle with her good hand. She unscrewed the cap with the thumb and little finger of her injured hand, grimacing at the pain this caused. She glanced inside the bottle, then lifted it to her nose. She sniffed, shook her head, and resealed it.

Juliana repeated this performance with all of the containers. When she came to the white-plastic jar of mousse, that sniff drew a flinch from her that was visible to Clive. In fact, the odor of rotten eggs reached him on the opposite side of the desk. Yet she gave the same head shake and closed the jar.

“I can’t find it,” she told Nayle.

“Can’t—or won’t?” he asked. “The distinction is an important one, my dear.”

“I tell you it’s just not—”

Nayle ignored her. He picked up a gun that was lying behind the suitcase and handed it to the Walrus. “Shoot her through the head.”

The big man took the weapon in his right hand, cocked it quickly, and held the muzzle against the base of Juliana’s skull. Nayle took a white nylon slip from her suitcase, draped it tenderly over her disbelieving face, and stepped out of the line of fire.

“Wait!” Clive said.

“Yes?” from Nayle.

Juliana might be an industrial spy and a thief. She might be deceitful and seductive. But at the last possible minute she had tried to conceal the goods from her colleagues. That had to count for something. Clive couldn’t just let her die.

“The mousse,” he said. “You can tell it by the smell.”

Nayle pounced on the jar, opened it, and reeled back. “How do I know this isn’t merely . . . pond scum?”

Clive had no surprises left, nothing else to offer this man. So he shrugged. “You’ll know that when you test it, of course.”

“What a clever fellow you are, Mr. Clive.”

“But you won’t kill either of us until you’re sure.”

Chapter 15
Ali Sahir
STRIKE FORCE

The helicopter with anonymous commercial markings flew low over the deep-blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico. It ran bare minutes ahead of the puffy thunderheads and the line of black rain squalls sweeping in from the west.

Ali Sahir checked his watch. He and the pilot had worked out their timetable back in Corpus Christi, four hours ago, basing it on the latest satellite weather images. The pilot had shown remarkable skill in intercepting the stormfront and getting ahead of it without becoming caught in the violent, swirling updrafts. Then he was required to fly a dawdling, zigzag route intended to suggest that a jet-turbine helicopter was unable to outrun a thunderstorm. And, at the same time, the pilot had to head straight for a tiny dot in the middle of the vast gulf—a concrete cylinder approximately 150 feet in diameter, rising 300 feet above the wave tops.

If they made their rendezvous, Sahir would gladly pay the pilot a bonus on top of his base fee of \$20,000. If not . . . then there would be nothing, and no one, to pay.

Sahir looked down through the chin bubble and saw an object bobbing in the fast-rising seas ahead. It quickly resolved into a boat driving headlong against the set of the waves, leaving a wake that the whitecaps devoured. The vessel had the truncated cabin and long, open cockpit of a supply launch. A dozen men crowded its rear deck, most of them sitting, but a few leaning over the side. Despite the jeans and colorful workshirts which were apparent even at this altitude, the men appeared to sit or move with the precise, self-contained bearing of seasoned assault troops. Praise Allah, no one was engaged in cleaning or checking his weapon. All equipment was still hidden below deck.

If everything was proceeding along the timetable Sahir had radioed to the boat's captain, who had been following a direct course since before dawn, the launch would only be ten minutes out from the target.

"Keep your eyes open," Sahir told the pilot over the intercom. "We are close now."

The man nodded in response.

Sahir was the first to see the concrete caisson rising from the light haze that veiled the horizon. He pointed it out for the pilot, who nodded and clicked his radio button.

"Gulf Spar, Gulf Spar, this is commercial flight November Three Eight Eight Whiskey Victor requesting an emergency landing, over." This was according the script Sahir and the pilot had agreed upon.

"November Three Eight Eight Whiskey Victor, this is Gulf Spar," came through the headphones. "What's your problem?"

"We're running an inspection team out to Pemex Four-Niner, and the storm kind of caught us by surprise."

"Can't you make your rig? It's only twenty miles."

“Ahh, you know how the brass are. They want me to put her down now.”

A pause. “Very well, we’re clearing the pad. Wind is southwest at ten, gusting fifteen. Come on in.”

“Thank you, Gulf Spar.”

Sahir turned in his seat to face the men in back and held up three fingers. It was their signal that action was three minutes away. In response, he saw them loosen their seatbelts and cock their weapons. Sahir drew his own pistol, tightened the silencer on the barrel’s screw end, checked the clip, and jacked a round into the chamber. Finally, he clicked off the safety. No more rehearsals. This was for real.

The Gulf Spar oil rig was an upright floating canister more than seven hundred feet long, with most of that length submerged. The top tier of its superstructure comprised the helipad and the traversing derrick that served the Spar’s system of exploratory wells. On the next level down were the rails of the bridge crane which supported the derrick, as well as offices, crew’s quarters, workrooms, and storerooms. At the superstructure’s bottom were the drilling works, with conduits for the splayed array of well heads, the rotary engines that drove them, and pumping equipment.

Below that, inside the caisson, were the winch platforms which secured the web of anchor cables positioning the rig above its drill sites. The rest of the caisson, extending far below the water line, was divided into cells which held oil brought up from the sea floor until tankers came to offload it. According to the reports Sahir had seen, Gulf Spar held a million barrels of crude at any one time. Other tanks, at the canister’s deepest levels, held bentonite sludge—the “drilling mud” used to lubricate the cutting heads in the bore holes—and oily wastes which could not be discharged at sea for environmental reasons.

As the helicopter swung around for its approach leg, Sahir studied the wave action against the caisson’s northern quadrant. That was where an iron stairway hugged the Spar’s sheer side, spiraling down to a narrow dock cantilevered to float at sea level no matter how full the holding tanks might be. By turns the storm surge rose foaming through the platform’s grate, then fell away to reveal a blanket of slick green seaweed. The swell and drop spanned at least twenty vertical feet, far outside the range of the dock’s float mechanism.

When the launch arrived, it would take the skills of a master seaman to unload the main body of Sahir’s troops with their lives and equipment intact. Difficult as that maneuver might be, it would be impossible to tie up there and ride out the storm’s duration.

Sahir smiled to himself. Retreat would not be an option for his assault force. They would either capture Gulf Spar or die in the attempt. This was like the desert warriors of old, who took up firing positions and bound their knees with hobbles so they could not run away. Do or die. The result would be in Allah’s hands.

The pilot flared out, and the skids touched down on the pad’s painted tarmac surface. They bounced once as a gust of wind lifted the rotor disk, then

the skids took the craft's weight. Still, the pilot kept the turbine turning in its power range.

Two men ran up the short flight of steps abutting the helipad and came in low, crouching under the whirling blades. They carried the ends of tie-down cables, ready to clip them to the skid carriage and work the turnbuckle levers to take up slack, pinning the helicopter to the pad.

Before they had quite reached them, Sahir released his harness, opened his door, and stepped out.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said gravely.

Phut! He shot the nearest ground man in his smiling face.

Sahir ducked under the fuselage and blew the kneecap off the second man. He collapsed with a faint cry, which the rising winds whipped away. Before he could fill his lungs to call out, Sahir put a bullet through the man's head.

The helicopter's side doors then slammed back and his strike force leapt out, weapons held at the ready. Sahir counted off two-man teams, sending them to their assigned tasks.

The pilot waved once, revved his engine, and took off into the teeth of the storm. Now Sahir himself was personally committed. No retreat.

He paired up with the odd man from the helicopter, a corporal in the Signal Corps of his country's military. For the past week this man had been monitoring radio traffic to and from Gulf Spar. His English was Americanized and colloquial. He knew all the call signs, the format of the daily reports, and the operator's usual small talk. He could keep the company which owned the Spar in the dark about events here for many days, perhaps even a week.

"Next level, third door on the left," Sahir said, pushing the man toward the stairway down to the radio room. He held the pistol at his side and checked his watch again. The mission was proceeding on schedule.

* * *

The fuselage of the executive jet—which Clive presumed was either owned by Nayle outright or commandeered for their departure from France—was a narrow space, barely six feet in diameter. The airline-style seats were laid out in groups of two, facing each other like bookends around the cabin's four portholes. Clive and Juliana were put in one pair, sitting practically knee to knee, while Nayle sat on the other side of the hip-wide aisle. Wexler, with his bulk, had gone to the single seat in the rear, against the bulkhead.

The joke was, that seat was the lid of the on-board chemical toilet. Clive had guessed as much on entering and seeing no door for a lavatory. The short curtain pinned back on either side of the Walrus's body was the giveaway. Clive had hoped then that this would be a short flight. But by now, after more than an hour in the air, most of it over blue water, he guessed they were headed for some part of the Americas.

Nayle had not discussed his plans with either Clive or Juliana. When the uniformed clerk under the sign "Douane" next to Orly's general-aviation ramp had smiled and asked their destination, Nayle replied vaguely, "Business." When the man requested their passports, Nayle handed over all four in a bunch.

The gesture was made to seem casual enough, just four associates traveling together on business, but Nayle had manipulated the exchange so that the passports returned to his own hand. Clive and Juliana were effectively his prisoners.

At every stage of their travels, the two of them were accompanied by either Nayle or Wexler. They were not permitted a moment alone. And they never touched their suitcases. Wexler repacked them at the house on Quai d'Anjou and had carried them everywhere since, along with Nayle's and his own.

In fact, their little parade seemed to be packing a lot of baggage. Clive at one point counted eight pieces and thought he recognized the two Martel had been carrying the night he showed up in Paris. But Wexler kept shuffling the luggage in and out of taxis and handcarts so that Clive never got a good look.

For the most part, Wexler and Nayle treated their hostages just like excess baggage, useful only until the E-32 bacteria either proved itself or failed. Until the bug reproduced and performed its trick with the oil, Nayle had no way of knowing they had not pulled yet another switch on him. Once the bug was cultured, however, he would obviously have them killed, because they had no more secrets to tell.

Clive tore his eyes away from the expanse of ocean below to look at Juliana. She sat with her shoulders hunched, her head leaning against the porthole's coaming, staring listlessly out at the clouds. Her left hand, which Wexler had bandaged afresh at the house, was cradled in her lap, supported by her right palm. The smallest motion, even the jostling as the plane passed through a patch of turbulence, obviously pained her.

His lingering doubts about Juliana had been resolved by that confrontation in Nayle's study. At the risk of her own life—and she knew a bullet would be coming, for she saw the gun—Juliana had ignored the jar containing the bacteria. She had taken Clive's side, irrevocably. Whatever reasons she might once have had for selling out Cumulus's secrets, it was clear she repented them now.

And how did Clive feel about that? At one time, he had pursued Juliana as the most beautiful and exciting woman he knew. Then he made love to her and imagined a long affair, perhaps a more committed relationship, in which the two of them sailed his boat every weekend, always under a golden sun. When his computer probe implicated Juliana with the bacteria, Clive followed her to Paris only hoping to prove his suspicions false. When she tried to seduce him in order to consummate her deal with Nayle, he was ashamed for her. When he had found her finger inside that box, he wept for her. When she would not run from the arena, he hated her—at least part of him did, more than a little.

And now?

Juliana was still the most desirable of women. She was cultured, intelligent, and knowledgeable—not to mention drop-dead gorgeous. Of course, Clive knew she was not perfect. She had an ambitious nature, which tricked her into taking impulsive, sometimes destructive courses of action, such as stealing the bacteria in the first place. Her personality also contained a core

of icy reserve, which she kept hidden under alternating layers of repartee and passion, like an oyster layering its pearly coat around a grain of sand. She had never allowed him to penetrate this mystery fully.

Clive could also sense that, from Juliana's point of view, *he* was the guilty party. If he hadn't interfered, forced his Boy Scout morality on her, then they would both be home in San Francisco by now. They would be free and relatively assured of a long life. And Juliana would be some thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands—of dollars richer. No one would need be the wiser; the two of them would keep the affair between them, a secret to share.

Perhaps Clive did owe her something for making a mess of things. Perhaps, if he could somehow extricate her from this debacle, Juliana would love him again, even allow him to get close to her. And he knew then that, whatever had gone before, he would return her love. He had no choice, really.

Something alerted her. Some tremor that passed out of his body, through the fabric of the airframe, and into her. Maybe it was just the psychic pressure of his eyes upon her face. She glanced up. She held his gaze warily.

If he dared, Clive would have reached out, touched her knee or her uninjured wrist, comforted her somehow. But he did not know how she would react—accept the gesture, or shake him off. And he would not give Nayle the satisfaction of seeing them in such distress.

Give me a sign, Juliana, he begged silently.

As if hearing him, she nodded with just her eyes, making a slow, downward glance then raising them to meet his again. In the shadows beneath the porthole, where Nayle could not see, her right foot moved forward an inch. Her instep grazed Clive's ankle, stroked once, then withdrew. It was enough.

* * *

Ali Sahir and the Signal Corps corporal found Gulf Spar's radio room exactly where the construction drawings had shown it would be. The corporal threw open the door, the radio operator turned around in his chair, and—*phut!*—Sahir shot him through the throat as soon as the target cleared any important-looking equipment. Sahir nodded to his companion. The man went to the console, pushed the chair with the writhing body aside, and resumed transmission. A brief burst of static from the approaching thunderstorm blanketed the interruption.

Sahir walked out on the bridge deck, one level above the well deck floor where the casing heads were managed. His advance team from the helicopter had taken position here to cover the roustabouts operating the drum hoists, walking beam, and other equipment that performed the actual work of drilling. Any sounds his men made were masked by the clatter of this machinery and the song of storm winds through the rig's superstructure.

The team from the launch—led by Sahir's second in command, Lieutenant Hussein Hasan—boiled up the outside staircase, burst through various of the Spar's internal passageways, and fanned out across the floor with their weapons at the ready. That was the signal for the advance team to show themselves.

The rig workers reacted with dismay, dropping hand tools and even letting the rotary drum that turned the drill stem run slack. After a pause, one worker found his courage and picked up a massive wrench almost as long as his body. With a wailing yell, he charged Hasan. Beside Sahir, one of the helicopter force took aim with his rifle and dropped the attacker. The wrench went *clang* on the steel deckplates. The rest of the workers immediately clasped hands on top of their heads, the universal signal for surrender.

“What’s going on here?” rasped a voice from behind Sahir. It belonged to an older man wearing a plaid shirt and white hard hat. He came out of an office on the same level as the bridge crane. The man held a clipboard in a way that suggested it would protect him from bullets. Obviously, one of the Spar’s managers.

Sahir turned to face him. “We are commandeering your rig, sir.”

“The hell you are!” The man dropped the clipboard and moved to lay hands on Sahir.

Phut! The bullet entered through his mouth and blew the hat off the man’s head, taking his brains with it.

From there, the assault moved into mop-up phase. Although Sahir had prepared his men to meet full-scale resistance—for did not every American cowboy wear a pistol on his hip?—the oil workers proved docile enough in the event. Off-duty personnel sleeping in the bunk rooms or watching television in the lounge filed out quietly as soon as his soldiers banged on the doors and showed their weapons.

Now these captives—there were thirty-seven of them, all Americans—presented Ali Sahir with a problem. They were large men, physically fit but poorly disciplined. They would have active imaginations, schooled in the heroics of the cinema. And they would know every inch of this rig. Anywhere he held them prisoner, they were certain to know a hatchway or ventilator shaft by which to escape. Sahir did not have either the time or the personnel to guard them for the duration. And, anyway, taking hostages was not one of his mission objectives.

“Assemble them down on the pump deck,” he told Hasan. “Make them stand together in some closely confined space. . . . Without lights, so that they become disoriented.”

Hasan nodded. They had discussed this eventuality, of course.

While the men detailed for guard duty herded the Americans off, Sahir turned his attention to the specialists in his group. These were men with experience in the oil fields of his country. As soon as the rig was secure, they undertook a rapid inspection, inventoried the holding tanks, and examined the drilling logs. Gulf Spar held 1.6 million barrels, they reported, a fair load. Fourteen production wells were currently bringing up oil, and seven exploratory wells were being put down around the edges of the oil dome above which the Spar was anchored. A number of those wells were now within an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 feet of penetrating the oil-bearing strata.

The lead expert, Yusif Hmar, sketched for him the star-pattern of exploratory holes on a seismic map of the dome. While they talked, a large

raindrop fell on the paper. Sahir and the specialist stepped back under an overhang. After a quick glance, Sahir picked out three of the bores. "Continue with these. Work in order one . . . two . . . three," he said, stabbing the map almost at random.

"Yes, Major," the other replied.

"In the next forty-eight hours, each of these bores must be brought within one shift of penetration—but without breaking through."

Hmar hesitated. "We cannot be so precise."

"Then do as much as you are able," Sahir said softly.

"We will try," the man promised. "And after that?"

"In that time, if certain other people hold up their end, I will have prepared a . . . an organic secretion. You will pump it down to each of the cutting heads just before they enter the strata. Can this be done?"

"We will mix it with drilling mud. Nothing could be easier."

"Excellent!" Sahir let teeth show in his smile.

From the well deck below, as if to punctuate his comment, came the crackle of automatic weapons fire. Hasan was executing the first batch of prisoners. This, too, was proceeding on schedule.

* * *

The executive jet touched down at a wide runway somewhere in the tropics. The lettering over the terminal announced "Benito Juarez International Airport," but Clive still did not have a clue about their destination—other than somewhere in Central or South America. When Nayle hustled his group through the gate marked "Aduana," the immigration official said, "Welcome to Cancun" in English. So they were in Mexico, on the Caribbean shore of the Yucatan Peninsula. When the man asked what business they had in his country, Nayle answered vaguely, "Pleasure."

They did not stay long. On the other side of the airport a helicopter was waiting for them with its rotor already spinning. The engine whined softly at pre-takeoff idle. Clive recognized the red-and-white body as belonging to the Jet Ranger class, but nothing else. There was no insignia on the fuselage, just the radio callsign on the boom: N388WV.

Nayle sent Clive and Juliana into the back, where Wexler piled the luggage at their feet and climbed in after them. Nayle sat up front with the pilot. As soon as the doors closed, the pilot yanked the collective and the machine leapt into the air.

They flew over coastal jungle shading to interior scrubland. After an hour, and a hurried stop for refueling somewhere on Yucatan's western coast, they were out over the water again. From the angle of the sun, Clive guessed they were heading northwest. From his knowledge of schoolboy geography, he knew that nothing lay ahead except more water and, eventually, the Mexican mainland. There was also Texas, of course, but he did not think this helicopter could make it that far.

If they were traveling to the mainland, then why switch aircraft? The jet could have landed them easily at any local airport, other than some drug runner's strip in the desert, and for that a light plane would have been a better

choice than this helicopter, faster too. He decided he didn't know enough to make any predictions.

Clive was just glad he'd insisted on using the chemical potty—first for Juliana, then for himself—back aboard the jet because it looked like a long time until they would be stopping again. The request had the further effect of discommoding Wexler, and that was its own reward.

* * *

As the helicopter approached Gulf Spar from the south, Alexander Nayle studied the truncated form. The rig looked wet, as with new varnish—clearly the residue of the storm passing blackly over the eastern horizon, having washed the Spar clean of encrusting salt. The concrete sides of the caisson were damp and dark up to the first ring of the steel superstructure. A pulse of activity was visible in the well deck below the helipad. Nayle saw workmen bent over machinery at the base of the derrick. A flat disk around the casing head could be seen to turn freely in the sunlight. So the endless drilling was proceeding normally.

But in whose hands, he wondered.

Nayle knew the bare outlines of Sahir's plan for the assault. Had it been successful? Or did the oil workers reach the arms locker in time? Could the rig's crew, no bunch of wilting violets, have beaten Sahir's force back as they climbed, one by one, up from the supply launch?

"Are our friends in control?" he asked the pilot.

"I assume so."

"But you don't know."

Of course not. The pilot, per his contract, had flown off before battle was joined, to make the pickup in Cancun. So the assault could have failed, and Nayle and his party might be flying into a trap. On the other hand, those workmen down there could be Sahir's group of oil experts, picked to replace the rig's employees and prepare the way for the bacteria.

"Call them," Nayle ordered, tapping the handset. "Find out."

"We're supposed to maintain radio silence. If I contact our friends, the people on shore will know something's wrong."

"Damnation!"

"I'm going in."

The edge of the landing pad abruptly cut off Nayle's view of the well deck, and an instant later the skids touched down. Wexler threw open the helicopter's side door and tumbled out. The pilot let the turbine wind down to silence. Or rather, the clatter of hoist and drum from below were now able to penetrate the sudden emptiness.

Still Nayle hesitated.

A man in khakis—a uniform? work clothes?—popped up at the pad's edge and ran, hunched over, under the pinwheeling rotor. His sun-browned hand touched the outside door latch at Nayle's elbow. The face emerging beyond the Plexiglas window was dark and aquiline. It could only be Sahir.

Nayle pushed the door open, stepped out. “*Marhaba, akhi!*” he said with relief, using the Arabic he had rehearsed for this moment. Greetings, my brother! He clasped Sahir’s hand.

The Arab leader nodded calmly, then disengaged himself from Nayle’s grip. His eyes were on Juliana Troetelkind and the man Clive. “Who are these people?”

“They are the ones who provided the bacteria.”

“And you saw fit to bring them here?”

“Let’s call their presence a form of insurance.”

“Why do we need this insurance?” Sahir asked.

“There have been—” Nayle paused. “—complications.”

“Do you have the bacteria or not?”

“Oh, I have it all right.”

“Show me.”

Nayle reached into his pocket and took out the white-plastic jar labeled as hair mousse. It was warm from contact with his body. Sahir took the thing with a suspicious frown.

“This is a cosmetic!”

“That’s just the container. Inside it is—”

“You said you were getting a *test tube*, from a *bio-engineering* laboratory. This muck could be anything.”

“Smell it,” Nayle said.

Sahir opened the jar, held it under his nose, drew back quickly.

“Not hair mousse, is it?”

“But that proves nothing.”

“Then mix it with some of your oil.”

“And if there is no reaction?”

“That’s why I brought these two.” Nayle pointed to Juliana and Clive. “She stole the culture in the first place. Then *he* transferred it to the jar—” Nayle fumbled for a plausible explanation of Clive’s actions. “—for safekeeping, to get it through customs. If there has somehow been a mixup, they will be made to produce the real bacteria.”

“I cannot spare men to look after your prisoners.”

“My assistant will watch them.”

“On your head.”

Sahir turned on his heel and led the way down a short flight of steps from the helipad. From there, he climbed down a ladder into the labyrinth of the Spar’s superstructure. Nayle gave Wexler a nod, consigning Juliana and Clive to his care, and followed the commando leader.

They descended through levels containing living quarters and machine rooms, went across the clattering activity of the well deck, and passed through a watertight hatch there. Below was darkness, lit by widely spaced electric bulbs in wire cages. Sahir traced a dizzying path, back and forth around bends of pipework twenty-four inches in diameter, under and around massive valve wheels, then down another ladder.

Sahir stopped at an elbow joint that came up through the lower deck. It had a steel cover plate normally secured by a dozen bolts from which the nuts had recently been removed. Sahir gestured to a man standing by, half in the shadows. This man flexed his muscles and lifted the cover away. A musk of crude oil, thick and sharp, assailed their nostrils. Sahir held up the mousse jar, unscrewed the lid, and poured the contents into the pipe.

Nayle started to protest. "But—shouldn't we test it first?"

"Why?" Sahir asked, eyes bland. "We are here now. This thing has gone too far for us to entertain such cautions."

"But at least divide the bacteria into batches for—"

"Is there some other oil you think would work better?"

"No, but . . ." Nayle subsided.

The thing was done as Sahir shook out the last drops. To get at the crystallized bits which would not flow, he tossed the jar down the pipe. It vanished, a white streak in the blackness.

"Now we shall see," Sahir said.

Chapter 16
William Clive
PRISONERS

White tiles lined the cell's six interior surfaces. Their thick glaze and rounded corners were designed to resist chipping with the prisoner's fingernails or an unconfiscated coin or button. Clear plastic sealed the grout to resist blood stains, vomit, or other bodily fluids. Glass bricks protected the fluorescent strip high on one wall, in case the prisoner decided to break the tube and stab himself or others with the thin shards. Aluminum slats in the ventilator on the opposite wall were three-eighths of an inch thick and welded to the frame, so the prisoner could not snap one loose, hone it against the tiles, and provide himself with a weapon. The air coming through the opening was cold and scented with the same disinfectant that the French used in public urinals.

The cell had no furniture, no human center of focus, other than a white-tiled bed platform molded into one wall with a toilet pan hanging from the end. This antiseptic, depersonalized atmosphere was designed to be psychologically debilitating, to break the prisoner's will.

But the police were fooling themselves.

Martel had endured worse. . . . Far worse.

They had been holding him for two days now.

On the afternoon of the first day, the police medics had split his trousers, pulled on his right leg to set the shin bone—without anesthetic—and encased it in an air cast. Then they left him, except for freeze-dried meals and a can of water delivered promptly at six o'clock, every twelve hours.

On the morning of the third day a detective of the Criminal Investigation Department, wearing an immaculate dark suit and chain-smoking dark French cigarettes, interviewed him in a room equipped with one-way glass.

The man finally took down Martel's statement concerning the mayhem in the arena. Per his standing orders for dealing with local police, Martel gave a politely worded denial of any involvement with or knowledge of the affair. He maintained his innocence in the face of any and all evidence to the contrary, including the modified Glock pistol which the police took from his hand. The detective simply nodded, as if he expected nothing less.

"I ask again that you let me contact my embassy," Martel said, still polite.

The man's lips drew down pout of regret. "Without your passport, I am afraid we cannot determine *which* embassy to contact."

"My passport is at the hotel. I already told your people that."

"Ah yes, the address you gave at the booking. But you are not registered there . . . *monsieur*."

Martel persevered. "The room was reserved by my colleague, William Clive."

"Who has since checked out. . . ."

Martel swallowed this news and tried to maintain his equilibrium. Clive was a rogue agent, of course, and by now was probably Alexander Nayle's captive as well. One or the other must have vacated the hotel and taken Martel's bags—including his passport—from the room. If they had also talked that befuddled desk clerk into giving them a certain parcel Martel had consigned to the hotel safe, then the E-32 bacteria were now in enemy hands.

Conversely, the test tube Martel had confiscated the night before the battle in the arena might have been a fake. This was the possibility he had first confronted as the bowling bag changed hands. The real bacteria would be in the bag or concealed somewhere in Clive's luggage. This hypothesis yielded the same result: the bugs were still in enemy hands.

Neither possibility, however, dealt with his immediate problem. For Martel to contact the embassy staff at 2 Avenue Gabriel without proof of citizenship—on the grounds that he was a simple American businessman caught up in an atrocious misunderstanding—would be a bad idea. His agency was attached to the U.S. Department of Commerce but ran on a long leash under the identity of an independent consulting firm. So his appeal would land on the desk of the third commercial attaché, who would have no brief on the firm's real activities. When Martel tried to present himself as a government agent operating undercover, the attaché would check the embassy's listing of Justice Department, CIA, Defense, and Treasury operatives currently working in France. Drawing a blank there, he would turn Martel back over to the police. Square one—with prejudice, because he had wasted everyone's time. No, someone from the agency would have to come over and vouch for him personally.

"You must contact my company," Martel told the detective.

"I *must*?" The man's eyes sparkled.

"I *request* that you contact Markris-Stone Consulting Services," he said patiently. "They have an office in London."

"How is that spelled?"

Moving slowly, so as not to startle, Martel reached for the man's notepad and pencil. He wrote down the name and number.

"This is how he spells the name?" the detective asked. "With . . . with *un trait d'union*?"

"A what?" Martel was perplexed.

The man circled the hyphen in Markris-Stone. "*Comme ca*?"

"With a hyphen, yes." As if it somehow mattered . . .

"We will call this person. Then we shall see."

After that, the detective left the mirrored room. Uniformed police took Martel back to his white-lined cell.

For the next twelve hours, he sat in a corner and contemplated his navel.

While they held him prisoner here, he was out of the game. He did not know where the E-32 bacteria was, who held it—Clive, Nayle, or Martel himself, with his envelope still in the hotel's safe—or where it might be going. So he composed his mind, not letting the white light or the cold air steal his calm. He was not bothered by the threat of failure. In his business, failure was

always a possibility. His duty was to plan for it, weigh the contingencies, and soldier on.

* * *

The Walrus confined Clive and Juliana in the same room. Either it was an oversight on his part, or Nayle no longer cared if the two talked among themselves. Anyway, what could they have to say?

“Juliana, I am so sorry about how this turned out,” Clive said as soon as the iron door closed and Wexler’s footsteps faded down the corridor.

She shut her eyes and nodded, then turned away from him and sat on one of the beds, for they were locked in the oil rig’s sleeping quarters. From the way she held her injured hand, Clive knew it still hurt her.

“Maybe there’s some aspirin around here,” he said. It gave him an excuse to explore.

The room was oblong but with a definite curve along its major axis. The outer wall seemed to be on the perimeter of the rig’s superstructure, with windows placed every ten feet or so and looking down on the sea. The inner wall had ten single beds with steel lockers spaced between the headboards. All of the locker doors were padlocked. Clive looked under the beds and found a collection of footlockers and trunks, also locked up, as well as a dozen pairs of shoes and some boxes wrapped for shipping. He considered ripping open these parcels but decided to save that for later—if there was a later.

A side door led to a communal bathroom with two stall showers, two open toilets, and three sinks below a long wall mirror. On a stainless steel shelf above the sinks someone had left his travel kit. From the dried foam on the mirror and the razor lying on the shelf, Clive guessed that the owner had been taken by surprise. He rummaged in the kit until he found a bottle of painkillers.

“See if these help,” he said.

“Thank you.” Juliana opened it one-handed, taking the cap in her teeth, then looked from the bottle to her bandaged hand.

Clive took the bottle, shook out three tablets, and offered them on his palm. “I’ll get you some water.”

Back to the bathroom he could not find a glass or cup. So he turned on the tap and, pressing his two hands tightly together, made a sort of gourd. The water dribbled out as he brought it into the bedroom.

Juliana swallowed the tablets and drank what remained from his fingertips. “You are kind to me,” she whispered.

He left her alone with her pain then and walked over to one of the windows. Beyond it was a panorama in blue—one depth of hue for water, another for sky, and a line of gray haze in between. He opened the casement and stuck his head out. The sea’s surface was a long way down, a hundred feet or more of sheer concrete wall. Maybe, if he and Juliana pulled the sheets off the beds, knotted them together, and let them down . . . they could go swimming. Besides, with her maimed hand she could never support her weight on a knotted rope. Clive wasn’t even sure he could climb down that far.

When he turned back from the window, Juliana had brightened visibly and was now studying their place of confinement. “Why did Wexler put us in here? This room is already occupied.”

“I don’t think so,” Clive said quietly.

She patted the blanket of the bed she was sitting on. It was hastily pulled up toward the pillow, not properly tucked in. “This is how a man makes a bed. Men living on their own.”

“They appear to have been moved out.”

“Nonsense,” she said. “I saw the crew at work as we landed. Come the end of shift—”

“That wasn’t the regular crew.”

“It wasn’t? How do you know?”

“Whoever Nayle’s buyer is—presumably the Arab-speaking fellow in the khaki uniform—he doesn’t own this rig. And the people on the drilling crew all have his look, don’t you think?”

“What? The dark faces? They could be Mexicans.”

“Maybe. But how about the men with assault rifles?”

“So they’re forcing the crew to work, under duress.”

“Not enough guards for that.” Clive shook his head. He was learning to trust his own powers of observation. “And the guns weren’t exactly pointed at anyone—except us, as we went passed. . . . Besides, drilling for oil has got to be a tricky business. Too much is left to judgment. A hostile crew could make themselves look real busy and still accomplish nothing, or damage the works. They might keep that act up for hours, and who could tell what progress they were making?”

“You’re saying the people out there are . . .”

“Shills. Outsiders. I don’t know what exactly.”

“So where are the real workers?” she asked.

“If I were taking prisoners, I’d lock them in their quarters.”

“But they’re not here.”

“Obviously.”

Juliana closed her mouth. She looked down at her right hand resting on the blanket, removed it. After a second, she stood up. “What’s going to happen to us?”

“Nayle still isn’t sure about the bacteria. If it fails to reproduce, or if then it doesn’t break down the oil, he’ll think we’re holding out on him. He’ll search our belongings again and probably our persons as well. You notice Wexler hasn’t turned over our luggage, after carrying it this far.”

“But Nayle already has the bacteria.”

“He doesn’t know that, does he?”

“And it still might not work.”

Clive raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’ve already told him it’s an untested culture,” Juliana explained. “Sure, it seems to detach the hydrocarbon chains under controlled conditions, working a couple of milliliters at a time. But that doesn’t mean the bug can

change a whole gallon of oil—let alone the fantastic amounts Nayle is aiming for.”

“We’d better pray it does just that,” Clive said.

“Why? This is a matter of science, not superstition.”

“How long does your *science* say the bug would take to reduce, oh, say a thousand gallons of oil?”

“According to Sedgwick’s lab notes, its metabolism operates pretty fast. A couple of days maybe—but I’m guessing here. Why do you ask?”

“That may be as long as we get.”

“To do what?” she asked.

“To get out of here. To go on living.” Clive shrugged. “Take your pick.”

* * *

Martel could not relax, not fully, until he was sitting in one of the deep red-leather chairs, secure behind the ancient mahogany paneling of Markris-Stone’s office in London. Once there, however, he stretched out his swollen leg and did not refuse a single-malt scotch when Roger Isaacs offered it.

“You’re safe now,” the managing partner said.

“Bloody hell.” Martel took a sip of the drink.

Only the anonymity of the corpse in the Arena of Lutece had saved him. Labels in the clothing and the coins in one pocket suggested an American origin. Without other identification, the French could not prove the body belonged to a French citizen or even a legal resident. This gave the American embassy, under Isaacs’s furious prodding, the thin end of the wedge. They had threatened to create a diplomatic incident and privately demanded a change of venue. Martel was whisked out of the country in six hours.

“How’s the leg?”

“Still hurts.”

“Of course. . . . Do those clothes fit at all?” Before flying out of San Francisco, Isaacs had stopped at Brooks Brothers and picked up a suit, shirt, and accessories in order to give Martel a change of clothing, as his luggage had been “misplaced” in Paris. Isaacs would have been working from Martel’s measurements on file, which meant they were at least ten years out of date.

“Sure.” The fit was perfect—his payoff for thirty minutes of calisthenics every blessed morning—although nothing would fit around the French cast on his shin and ankle. “Thanks.”

“We should have an assay of your test tube in about an hour.”

“I can tell you what it contains.” Martel had known the moment he retrieved the package from the hotel safe and tore off the wrapper. “A mixture of soot, hair grease, and something Clive probably scraped out of a drain. If you find any tailored bacteria in there, I’ll eat it.”

“So you think he went over?”

Martel sipped more scotch. “No . . . I think he got cute. He wanted to save his girlfriend. He needed a bargaining chip. Dumb bastard. He practically spelled the whole thing out for me, that first night, but I just wasn’t listening. My mistake. Sorry about that.”

“Is this matter worth pursuing?” Isaacs asked levelly. The neutral tone said he was willing to be swayed by cogent argument.

“Carstairs got the lab notes from his hard disk?”

Isaacs nodded. “The Cumulus people we tapped on a confidential basis say the notes appear to be genuine. They know what Sedgwick was trying for, of course, and the bacteria in your test tube—pardon me, *Clive’s* test tube—go way over the top. By a couple of orders of magnitude, at least. If the bugs survived all the rough handling, they should be pretty fierce.”

“Then I say go for it.”

“Cumulus warns me that their dissociative effect might fail in the field for any number of reasons: various contaminants particular to the type of crude oil, sulfur content, temperature ranges, even radionuclides—they sounded pretty pessimistic, in fact.”

“We still should follow up. Whoever wants to buy this material is looking for an industrial poison. If they’re dealing with Alexander Nayle, they must be willing to pay top dollar. So they’re backed by deep pockets, probably a government. That makes them our meat, right? If they fail here, they’ll try somewhere else.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Find out where Nayle went.”

“We could turn it over to Defense, or the CIA, they would have—”

“Not on your life!”

“I see.” Isaacs steepled his fingers in front of his lips. “John, you want to be careful about letting emotion cloud your good sense.”

“I am *not* getting emotional, sir. Clive is still my probationer. I want to find him, to help him if I can—”

“And maybe beat the crap out of him?”

Martel had to smile. “If I can, sir.”

“The trail starts in Paris, you know.”

“Of course. At the Quai d’Anjou. Nayle’s residence.”

“The French won’t be very happy to see you again.”

“Then I’ll go with an artificial identity. I assume this office can still provide one?”

“If you get in trouble again, don’t bother to call.”

“Understood.” Martel drained the scotch and stood up.

* * *

Clive and Juliana went to bed hungry that night and slept in the bed of a stranger. They made love tenderly, without any hidden purpose but also without hope. In the morning, they woke up even hungrier and shared the toothbrush from the abandoned travel kit. When he picked up his clothes, unchanged since that morning in the arena, Clive noticed their sour smell.

At eight o’clock by the angle of the sun, at ten minutes to the hour by Clive’s watch which was still on Paris time, the door opened. Wexler brought them fresh clothes—not from their own suitcases, but random pairs of jeans and khaki workshirts that obviously were scavenged from empty quarters elsewhere on the rig.

“See if any of that lot fits,” he said, tossing the pile onto the nearest bed.

“I want my own clothing,” Juliana said. “Is that too much to ask?”

“Sorry, off limits.”

“At least some fresh underwear?”

“I said no.”

Wexler stooped outside the doorway, retrieving something he had left on the floor of the corridor. He handed a box with a white circle and red cross in to Clive. “You know how to change her dressing?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Good. . . . Breakfast in half an hour.” Wexler closed the door and locked it.

They showered quickly and dressed themselves in the ragtag clothing. Juliana had to turn back the cuffs three times for any of the men’s shirts to fit. The pants hung on her like a sack. At least everything was clean.

“Now let’s see about your hand,” Clive said. He opened the first-aid kit and found the scissors, gauze, tape, and a tube of antiseptic ointment.

“No, I’ll take care of it,” she said, drawing away.

“With one hand? You’ll just make a mess. Look, I promise to be gentle.”

He cut the tape where it crossed the back of her hand and pulled the old patch of gauze gently forward, through the space between her middle and little fingers. Juliana looked away.

Nayle had not left even a stump. The amputation cut deeply into the web of her hand, incising her ring finger far back, at the third knuckle. Flaps of skin were folded over the end of the metacarpal bone in a ragged star, with red flesh glistening in the gaps between them. The edges of the cuts leaked a yellow-white pus. Although Clive couldn’t see any stitches, the skin folds appeared to be adhering to the underlying tissue—which seemed favorable. Still, the strips had an angry purple color.

The rest of her hand was moderately swollen. The other fingers looked stiff inside their girdles of tight, white flesh. More ominously, two faint red streaks crept up the back of her hand, tracing the wye of veins leading away from the wound site. This told him that Juliana would need professional help soon—antibiotics, cold packs, tissue flensing, whatever—or she might lose her hand to infection. Maybe even her arm.

“This looks good,” Clive lied as he squirted ointment over the red star, careful not to touch the tube’s metal tip to her wound. Then, using the old bandage as a pattern for the new, he cut fresh gauze, fitted it snugly around her hand, and bound it with tape.

“How does that feel? Tight enough?”

She gently flexed her fingers. “It’s fine.”

Clive repacked the first-aid kit—everything except the scissors, which slid into his pocket. They were fairly small, but the blades were surgical steel and had sharp points.

Right on schedule, Wexler came and escorted them to the rig’s cafeteria. From the litter on the tables, Clive guessed the Arab replacement

workers had already eaten. Wexler served them eggs and coffee. After they were through, he took them upstairs.

“Where are we going?” Clive asked.

“Nayle says you get an exercise period.”

“How thoughtful of him.”

Wexler let them out on a catwalk overlooking the well deck. He stood at the far end, the only way off, while his prisoners strolled back and forth in the sun.

“Where does he think we’re going?” Juliana whispered. “Stuck out here in the middle of the ocean.”

“I know,” Clive murmured back. “We can’t even get that far. It’s a long drop to the water. I checked. . . . Can you fly a helicopter?”

“No. But there’s a lifeboat.”

“Oh?” He struggled to keep his voice down. “Where?”

“Hanging off the side of the rig. Around to the north.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw it as we were landing. Didn’t you?”

“I was looking out the wrong window.”

“Can we use it to escape, do you think?”

“Well, first we have to get away from the Walrus here. Then dodge about two dozen of his Arab friends.” He shook his head. “Can’t be done.”

“If we had a diversion . . .”

“Such as what?”

“You’ll think of something.”

Clive glanced down the men toiling around the base of the derrick. The drilling process was going forward just as if these Arabs expected to bring in a well. He wondered why they would be working so hard at that. Somewhere on this rig, also, Nayle and the Arab leader would be trying to cultivate the E-32 bacteria. He wondered how that was progressing.

“All right you two,” Wexler called.

“Just a few more minutes?” Juliana pleaded.

“No. Come in now.”

Clive shrugged and took her by the arm. As they passed Wexler, he said, “Would you let us down on the deck next time?” He waved back at the catwalk. “I don’t like heights.”

“No,” Wexler said. “Too dangerous.”

“We won’t touch anything,” Clive promised.

“Damn straight, you won’t.”

Chapter 17
John Martel
AT THE QUAI D'ANJOU

Martel watched the address on the Quai d'Anjou for a full day. During that time, no person came or went by either the front or back door. The draperies did not twitch at any window. At two o'clock, the *courier de poste* went by without stopping. At dusk, no lights came on anywhere in the house. He satisfied himself that the place was empty. Martel would go in at midnight.

The front door was old, ribbed oak hardened by both weather and time to the consistency of steel plate. But the two locks were new brass, which meant their tumbler systems would be up to date and succumb to Martel's recently honed skills. He went through them both in thirty seconds. If a stranger in the street were to notice him standing there, he would think only that Martel was drunk and fumbling with his keys.

He left the outer door ajar, in case he needed to make a sudden retreat, and quartered the entry hall. In the tiny circle of his penlight, he surveyed the rooms at street level. Everywhere he looked were signs of domestic usage. The burners of a gas range leapt out of a cavernous kitchen at the back of the house. The spindled back of a narrow chair thrust itself like prison bars in front of a centerpiece of dried flowers in a dining room. Plump cushions of striped red-and-white satin and the dead-gray eye of a television squatted in a tiny parlor, which had been converted from a scullery. He would find nothing useful down here.

Martel went up the grand staircase one step at a time, swinging his damaged leg stiffly, thankful that the stone risers could not squeak and give him away.

On the second floor at the back he found a gentleman's sleeping quarters. The closed air smelled of cedar wood and old leather. He noted that the wide bed was stripped down its mattress pad—more evidence that the house was temporarily abandoned.

He opened the armoire, taking care lest the hinges made a sound, and counted the empty hangers. Martel calculated that at least three suits or jackets were missing. He pulled open bureau drawers that held shirts, socks, and underwear in unevenly depleted piles. The medicine cabinet in the master bathroom had vacant spaces where razor and toothbrush might have hung.

Obviously, Nayle had left town. Presumably, he had taken his hostages—or his playmates—along with him. But where had they gone?

Across the hall, on the front side of the house, was a large room fitted out as a library or study. Martel crossed immediately to the desk. The surface had been cleaned off except for the usual bric-a-brac: leather-tooled blotter, crystal inkwell with a pair of fountain pens in angled holders, a modern telephone. There was not a scrap of paper in sight.

He tugged at the desk drawers, but they were all locked. Martel was not ready, yet, to leave marks of his investigation. He looked in the wastebasket,

but it had been emptied. If Nayle had a housekeeper, she was clearly on her toes.

He tried the phone's redial button and all of the speed-dial buttons in order. Each time he heard only the standard dial tone. So the phone's memory had been zeroed out. Nayle was certainly careful about hiding his business.

On a sudden hunch, Martel lowered himself to his knees and swung the penlight's beam under the desk, parallel to the floor. He dropped his face close beside it, so that his eye would see what the light revealed. The sweeping viewpoint showed him nothing, not even dust rolls caught in the carpet nap.

He reversed the beam then and fanned it along the room's back wall. As the light passed the mouth of the fireplace, something white glimmered far back, under the logs.

"Ah!" The tiniest note of satisfaction escaped Martel's throat, and he thought, *Somebody's not as neat as he appears, Mr. Nayle.*

Martel crawled to the fireplace on hands and knees, keeping the thing roughly centered in the circle of his light. Needing both hands, he laid the penlight on the hearth's smooth outer tiles and, supporting his body on his left palm, reached in, toward the soot-blackened bricks of the rear wall.

His fingers brushed the crumpled edges of his prize.

* * *

A draft of cool air touched her cheek, and Mariette's eyelids flew up, rendering her instantly awake. She was very careful about drafts.

She slid back the covers and reached for her robe from the straight-backed chair that stood next to her bed. Moving slowly, so as not to set the box springs creaking and wake the master—except the master was not here, was he?—Mariette levered herself out of bed, stood up, and gathered the robe across her bosom. Using her nose as a weather vane, she followed the draft across the room, through the door, and out into the kitchen.

The floor tiles were cold under her feet, but some instinct warned her not to go back for slippers. Their leather soles would slap and scrape against the bare stones of this house, and Mariette sensed the need for silence.

Through the kitchen and into the main hall she followed the most meager differences in the temperature and currents of the air in each room. Once in the hall, she could see from the gleam of light that the front door stood ajar—as it should not, because she remembered double-locking it herself that evening, two clicks, as always. So this was where the draft came in. Cool air, up from the river. She started to cross to the vestibule when a faint noise attracted her attention. It sounded like a bureau drawer, in the master's bedroom, rubbing against the woodwork as a deft hand pulled it open.

Someone was in the house.

Mariette retreated to the kitchen with the same cat-footed pace she had followed the draft out. Blind in the dark, she needed to no eyes to tell her where every dish and utensil was stored. She considered her situation for three seconds, then reached up to the rack of brass pot hooks suspended from the center of the ceiling and lifted down a black iron skillet. It was twenty

centimeters in diameter and had a long wooden handle to protect the cook from intense heat during the last stages of the *sauter*.

Holding her weapon before her like a massive tennis racket, Mariette crept out again, into the hallway and up the stairs. As her head came above the level of the last riser, she could see into the master's study. In front of her eyes, a tiny spot of light flicked across the spines of the books along the far wall. She had found her thief.

Luckily, he had left the door open. All she had to do was walk forward, through the deepest part of the room's shadows, her bare feet silent on the carpet, and smash his skull with her little pan.

She was halfway through the door when the light dropped to the floor. The man was looking for something under the desk. Ah, now! If he turned the beam just a few degrees farther in her direction, it would catch the whiteness of her feet and reveal her. Mariette froze.

The beam flicked around.

Now the man was staring into the fireplace. She still held her breath, wondering what could possibly interest him there. He set his lamp down on the hearth so that it illuminated the logs piled on the lion-footed andirons. He was reaching for something underneath the logs. Reflected light from the lamp's beam outlined his broad head perfectly.

Mariette raised the skillet above her shoulder. At the top of her swing, she realized she was holding the thing flat, like a farm wife. When she struck, air resistance would slow it, making the blow less potent. She turned the pan so that its face was parallel to the force of her blow. Also, its lip would now split his skull like an axe. Well and good.

She brought the skillet down, employing the same muscle-snap she used in chopping open a tough capon with her cleaver.

* * *

Before his fingers could close on the prize, Martel's other senses screamed at him: *Up!*

His right hand drew back like a snake and he launched himself from his knees, forward across the pile of logs. A weight fell on his back, striking at his left kidney, which had taken a pounding from that first bullet in the arena. Martel bellowed at the sudden flare of pain, to release tensions that might slow his defense reaction. His voice echoed back at him from the fireplace bricks.

Before his attacker could aim another blow, Martel rolled sideways into the pocket between the end of the log pile and the hearth's side wall. He drew up his good left leg and kicked out, flat footed, at the figure looming above him. The axe or bludgeon or whatever this person was wielding swerved in its path and *thunked* against the logs.

He used the surprised pause that followed to extricate himself from the fireplace with a sloppy, diving roll that brought him out to the center of the room. With a broken leg, he could not spin into a roundhouse kick. So, instead, he turned on his undamaged heel, step-slid forward, and brought his right hand around in a chop that caught his opponent in the right mastoid process at the base of the skull. The figure collapsed across the hearth.

Martel was hardly winded, but the pain in his kidney made breathing difficult. It took him a moment to hobble over to the body and assess its condition. His penlight was still lit nearby, and he focused it on the face.

The attacker was a woman! And an elderly one at that. The object she had struck him with looked like a frying pan. Martel felt at the base of her throat. The carotid artery showed a pulse, clear and strong, and she was breathing regularly. That was more than some people who had taken a piece out of John Martel could say for themselves.

After a moment's thought, Martel realized he could never report this encounter. It would make him the butt of too many jokes—fighting for his life against a woman with a cast-iron skillet.

He untied the belt of her robe and pulled it free, gathered her hands behind her back, and tied them with an over-and-under knot that would require some minutes for her to work loose. Then he arranged her body face down behind the desk.

Reasonably sure that he was safe from further interference, Martel reached under the log pile and pulled out the crumpled piece of paper. In the circle of his light he read *Banc de L'Exchange*. It was a receipt—exactly the sort of clue he had come looking for. He put the paper in his pocket for later analysis.

The housekeeper complicated the matter of his departure. Martel would need a diversion to explain his presence in the house. He flashed the light around the room, looking for valuables. The crystal inkwell winked at him. A clock with golden dragons leered at him from the mantelpiece. One or two books showed gold in their leatherwork. He collected these things in his arms and went down to the front door.

The absence of signs there, indicating a professional entry, would worry everyone. He closed the outer door, made sure both locks clicked, and then set his booty on the pavement outside. After a minute's probing, he found a loose stone in the curb, pried it up, and used it to bash the doorframe and smash the facing plates of the locks. With the tools in his pocket kit, he pulled out the tumbler mechanisms and scattered the pieces over the doorstep. Any amateur could have done as well, although not as quietly.

He picked up the clock, inkwell, and books. He carried them across the road, heaved them far enough over the railing—to clear the jetty below at water level—and counted the splashes. Martel didn't want the junk, except that it should be conspicuously missing.

His work done for the night, he left for his hotel.

* * *

In the morning, just before checking out, Martel called the London office. After identifying himself, he said, "Put me through to the Economics Section."

"Economics, this is Henderson," said a cool English voice. "How may I help you?"

"Henderson, I need you to run a computer job."

"And what might this be regarding?"

Martel smoothed the receipt on the table beside the phone. "I'm looking at a receipt from a currency transaction. No exchange rate. No date, but I'm betting it's recent—within the last three or four days."

"Buying or selling?"

"Let's say . . . buying."

"What is the amount?"

"Five hundred sixty-seven French francs, ninety-two centimes," Martel read from the paper. "That's what the buyer paid."

"And which currency was bought?"

"That is the question, Henderson. I want you to multiply this amount through a run of the exchange rates for major world currencies over the past few days and see if you can get a round number."

There was a pause at the other end. "We will need to calculate the seller's fees and his profit margin," Henderson said thoughtfully. "Was this a commercial transaction? Or financial?"

"The receipt says *Banc de L'Echange*—if that helps."

"Very much so, thank you. . . . Um, do you want us to track down the buyer's identity?"

"Not particularly, just the currency he was acquiring."

"This may take a few hours . . ."

"Leave a message for me in California."

"Very good, sir."

Martel was about to hang up when another thought struck. "If you want to narrow the scope, you might start with the oil-exporting countries."

Chapter 18
William Clive
THE TOOLS AT HAND

Once more Clive and Juliana were taking their morning exercise. Despite Clive's civil request the day before, Wexler again took them out on the catwalk above the well deck. Although their chances of escape were limited, at least they were up in the warm sunlight with a fresh Gulf breeze blowing, and Clive was thankful for that.

They had eaten three meals aboard the rig by now, all comprised of reconstituted eggs and corn grits cooked in bacon grease. This seemed to be as much as the Arab commando assigned to feed them could manage. Clive had seen the man at work this morning, measuring dun-colored powders from various bins, mixing them with water, and puddling the resulting mush on the griddle. He went at it like a bedouin cooking on a flat rock.

The trouble with this diet was the internal distress it caused. Clive's guts were starting to feel . . . slushy. When he had to break wind—discreetly, as far from Juliana as he could arrange—Clive smelled about his person a vile, sulfurous stench. Whenever Clive burped he tasted partly digested eggs and stale grease. He was becoming an embarrassment to himself.

Now, as they reached the far end of the catwalk, his intestines gave out another gaseous rumble. It had to appear to the beautiful woman, his lover, standing right beside him. Clive turned his face away. "Pardon *me!*"

"For what?" she asked.

"For the . . . odor."

"Then you smell it too?" Juliana asked, craning her neck to peer up into his face. She touched his arm. "Why are you apologizing?"

"It's just so . . . humiliating."

"But it's coming from those pipes." She pointed to a row of upright steel tubes near the catwalk.

In passing, Clive noted that she gestured with her right hand, even though the tubes were on her left side. She cradled that injured left hand against the point of her hip, as if trying to immobilize it. He imagined how painful the wound must be, throbbing with infection, but could do nothing more for her.

He turned his attention to the tubes. He counted six of them. They looked like pipes in an organ loft except that, being all the same width—about twenty-four inches across—they would sound the same bass note. The metal ends were sheered flat, without flanges or fittings.

"I wonder what they're for?" Juliana asked.

He walked over and leaned across the catwalk's railing. By stretching and rising up on his toes, he could just about put his face on a level with the cut ends, still a couple of feet away. He couldn't see down into the pipes. Yet, as his nose got closer, the smell grew stronger: rotten eggs, cellular corruption, and thick, black oil—much worse than anything his own puny intestines were manufacturing.

“These are vent pipes,” he said.

“Venting what? It smells like—”

“—the inside of your test tube!”

“Oh, you’re right!” she said, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

He shifted his head and looked past her, to see if Wexler had noticed. But the big man was leaning against the railing on the other side, staring out to sea.

“Where is the smell coming from?” Juliana whispered.

Clive looked down along the outside length of the pipes. They descended two stories, threading the exposed steel framework of the rig’s inner structure, and disappeared through collars in the deck below.

“They originate inside the hull somewhere,” Clive said, figuring things out as he spoke. “I imagine a rig like this produces a lot of oil, thousands of barrels. They’ve got to hold it somewhere while waiting for a tanker to come and take it off. Nayle and his friends must have infected one or more of the holding tanks. And these pipes must vent the tanks, so we’re smelling the off-gases.”

“Why would you need to vent them?”

“Oh, lots of reasons.” He remembered details from that refinery audit. “Mainly to equalize air pressure in the tank while you’re pumping the oil in and out. Also, to let any volatile fractions escape before they can build up. That’s why the end of the pipe is up here, in the wind.”

“Volatile fractions?” she asked.

“Crude oil comes out of the ground mixed with natural gas and other stuff, which remains in solution because it’s under pressure down in the well. When you bring it to the surface, you release the pressure, and the gases come boiling out. If they were allowed to collect—” Clive’s voice trailed off.

“What?” Juliana demanded.

He was visualizing a pocket of explosive fumes, rapidly expanding inside a tight space. The glare of a red fireball against the blackness of the tank’s void was rather pretty. . . . Suddenly, he sensed Wexler’s eyes on the two of them. Clive turned slowly and looked out, across the water.

“Let’s talk about this later,” he murmured.

* * *

Juliana held her patience while Wexler walked them back along the circuitous route to their prison. She knew Clive would only explain what was so important about the pipes when he was sure their guard could not overhear. But, once they were alone, she seated herself on the bed and patted the place beside her.

“Now tell me what you’re thinking.”

“First, explain about the rotten eggs,” Clive said. “I read Sedgwick’s report and understand most of what the bug does. But not about the smell.”

“It’s hydrogen sulfide. Edward’s modified bacteria break down the long carbon chains in oil by stripping off the hydrogen atoms. Those atoms are like plugs, locking up the carbon’s tendency to form covalent bonds along the sides of the chain and capping off the ends. Without the hydrogen, the carbon atoms

try to close the circle by forming benzene rings, fail at this, and the chain falls apart.” She paused to see if he was following.

“All right.”

“Now, some of the contaminants in crude oil contain sulfur atoms. The stripping process breaks them out, too. With heat from the bacteria’s active metabolism, this sulfur combines with free hydrogen. The result is hydrogen sulfide—the rotten egg smell.”

“How much is produced?” Clive asked.

“The amount will vary with the oil’s sulfur content. This was one of Edward’s big worries, because H-two-S is a poison. He thought it might kill off his bacteria, thus halting the process.”

“Does hydrogen sulfide burn at all?”

“Somewhat, but not particularly well.”

“Oh . . . too bad.” His face fell.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was hoping for something that would burn.”

Juliana grew thoughtful, letting her mind roam over the chemical reactions that Edward Sedgwick had let loose. As she ruminated, the tip of her tongue crept out and gently rubbed her lower lip—an old habit that usually caused chapping. “Lizard scales,” her mother had called it.

“These bacteria are anaerobic, of course,” Juliana said, “thriving without oxygen. So they can’t oxidize all that stripped hydrogen. Still, it has to go somewhere. The hydrogen will form up in diatomic pairs and escape through the cell wall. Hmmm . . . Given the nature of the stripping process, for every molecule of hydrogen sulfide we can smell, there must be millions of colorless, odorless hydrogen atoms being released.”

“And hydrogen burns beautifully,” Clive said with a grin. “It makes a lively popping sound.”

“But you’d need a source of free oxygen for it to combine with,” she protested. “Where are you going to find that inside an oil well?”

“Not in the well. But in a vented tank . . . ?”

“Ka-boom.”

“Exactly.”

“How do we light it?” she asked. “If you held a match over the vent—if Wexler *let* you hold a match—then you’d only start a fire at the pipe’s end. A flare.”

“Right, we need to get the flame down into the tank. That’s the way to burn out the bacteria and destroy it once and for all. . . . You do agree with me—we have to destroy it?”

“*Ja!* Yes!” she said. “Burn the sucker!”

“Good!” Clive put both arms around her and pulled her close in what Americans called a “bear hug.” Juliana sensed that the emotions behind it were somehow deeper than any that had driven their earlier lovemaking.

“But how do we do it?” she asked.

“We start by opening these lockers,” he said, “and seeing what the former residents have left for us.”

* * *

Clive spread their treasure trove out on an unmade bed, where he could quickly throw a blanket over the items if Wexler came in unexpectedly.

It had taken them the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon to rifle the lockers. First, he had to remove a leg from one of the iron bedsteads. He worried the nuts loose with thumb and finger after starting them with the shanks of his bandage scissors, using them like a half-assed wrench. That work cost him the skin off a full set of knuckles. Then, with the metal bar he levered at the padlocks, one by one, first wrapping them in a terrycloth towel to muffle the shriek of popping rivets and tearing sheetmetal. As Clive went from one locker to the next, Juliana took out the contents and inventoried them. For desert, they opened the wrapped packages cached under the beds.

Clive had been hoping to find some real contraband. Maybe a stick of dynamite hidden away for blowing out a burning well. Perhaps some fireworks left over from the Fourth of July or Cinco de Mayo. If anyone had a loaded pistol, Clive would have cracked open one or more cartridges for percussion caps and cordite, keeping the rest for their original purpose: blowing a hole in Freddie Wexler. *Bang!* Dead.

With that thought in mind, Clive would have welcomed a hunting knife or switchblade, something honed and balanced that he could hold at the man's throat or, better yet, stick between his shoulders. Working on the bed frame had reduced Clive's little scissors to a twisted mess whose points no longer closed. But the best the lockers produced were a collection of Swiss Army knives and a Buck knife with a pearl handle, fit for a gentleman. Clive began to understand how the Arabs had managed to overcome the rig's crew.

After nearly eight hours of wrenching and tearing, they had found nothing that could be made to explode inside the vent pipe, and no weapon intimidating enough to force Wexler to do their bidding.

"Well, the day's not a total loss," Juliana said.

She picked up a bottle of rum from one of the packages. She unscrewed the cap, tipped the neck toward Clive in a casual toast, and took a mouthful.

Her face instantly changed color.

"Pah! . . . Gah!" she exclaimed.

Half the liquor came out of her mouth; half shot from her nose in a rainbow spray. It was only by chance she didn't drop the bottle. When Juliana could breathe again, she said, "What is this stuff? Paint remover?"

Clive took the bottle and read the label. "Diablo Azul," it said, which he knew was Spanish for "Blue Devil." The claimed "150 Proof" meant the liquor was 75 percent pure ethanol. He sniffed it. The fumes made his nose wrinkle.

A thought began to form.

"You know . . ." he began, then shut up and let his mind work.

From the crew's collected toiletries he had two containers that fit the bill: both aftershave bottles, with constricted mouths so the lotion sprinkled out instead of gushing. They were the right shape and size, too, for purposes of concealment: flat in profile, rounded at the corners. The glass was thick enough

to stand up to some knocking about, but not so thick it wouldn't break on impact after a fall of fifty feet or so.

Wicks would be no problem. He could cut strips from a sheet or blanket, roll them tightly, and force them into the bottle necks with the point of his scissors.

An ignition source was also at hand. Thank God for the few remaining smokers in the world, because they had left him a collection of butane lighters.

"But we'll need a binder," he muttered.

"What are you talking about?" Juliana asked.

"In the original formula for a Molotov cocktail," Clive explained, "you add sand. When the bottle breaks, the sand spreads the gasoline, giving it surface area over which to burn. That works better than a splash of undiluted fuel."

Juliana's stare went from the aftershave in his hands to the rum bottle. Her eyes lit up, then turned cloudy. "We don't have any sand," she agreed.

"Any granulated substance will do. Let's look around."

The first thing she found was a canister of foot powder, which had a base of talc. Juliana said this was magnesium silicate, a close chemical relative of sand. She thought it might work.

"Too fine," Clive judged. "It will just turn to mud."

"How about this?" She held up a bag of hard candy. "We could grind it to any consistency—"

"No, it will just dissolve."

"In 150-proof alcohol?"

"In the residual water, over time. I wish we had a still."

She made a sour face. "You are such a perfectionist."

"We have to do this right on the first try, Juliana. Wexler won't give us a second chance."

They rummaged again through the goodies. Finally, she opened a paper bag of mixed seeds. "What is this?" she asked. "Bird feed?"

"I don't see any birds around here." He took the bag, turned it around so that she could see the label.

"Wildflower Potpourri," she read. "Hmmm . . . on an oil rig?"

"Maybe somebody was homesick and wanted to plant a garden in a shoebox," Clive suggested. "Or something."

"Will the seeds work as a binder?"

"Rum will soften them, of course, make them soggy."

"But does that matter?" she asked.

He grinned. "Not for our purposes."

* * *

Now that they had a plan of action and a secret to keep, waiting out the night was torture. Clive and Juliana prepared their two bottles: a handful of seeds, a cup of rum, and the rolled wicks. Then they drank some of the Diabolo Azul themselves and made love for what might be the last time. Neither of them knew what the morrow would bring.

The worst part of waiting was not knowing what timetable Nayle and the Arabs were following. When were they going to harvest the bacteria from the holding tank? Did they already have a supply of the rejuvenated bugs on hand? How were they going to spread it? Clive could answer none of these questions. He could only chip away at the crack he had found—a bit of gas venting from a holding tank—and hope to make a dent in his enemy's plans.

Just before they were let out the next morning, Clive hid the bottles inside his shirt. Fortunately the borrowed garments were blousy enough that the bulges did not show. One of the butane lighters went in his pocket.

To keep the alcohol-soaked wicks from blotting through his shirt, he folded them back against his skin. At first the alcohol felt cool, then it began to sting. By the end of breakfast it was actually burning him. But Clive bit his lip and managed not to squirm and dislodge the bottles.

When Wexler took them up on the catwalk again, Clive drifted down toward the row of vent pipes. By pre-arrangement, Juliana lingered a few paces behind, watching his back, ready to distract Wexler if the big man took an interest.

As soon as he got close to the pipes, Clive saw the snag in his planning. There were six pipes but only two bombs. He had not thought through his attack at all. If he put the Molotov cocktails down the wrong vents, he would miss his chance to burn out the bacteria.

He tried to determine which pipe was giving off the smell of rotten egg. Without making an obvious move, like climbing over the railing, Clive couldn't put his face close enough to tell for sure. He thought the second from the left smelled strongly. But then, so did the last one on the right. The fourth pipe in the row was pretty rank, too.

Go with first impressions, he decided: hit pipes two and six. Anyway, it might not matter. A fire in any of the holding tanks would probably spread to the others and kill the bacteria.

Conversely, he might be on a fool's errand. Juliana said the bacteria thrived in anaerobic conditions. Even with venting, there might not be enough air at the pipe's bottom to ignite the hydrogen, let alone the oil. After the bit of air in his bottles went *pop*, the heavy oil fumes—explosive in their own right, but useless without oxygen—would extinguish the flame.

Clive might be about to get his head punched in for very little result. But it was too late to quit now.

Keeping his back turned on the catwalk's end, he pulled the two bottles from their hiding place, held them together in his left hand, took out the lighter, and clicked it. The alcohol in the wicks ignited with a tiny *poof!* and burned with a colorless waver that distorted the morning sunlight falling across his hand. The only clear sign of ignition was the way the white strips of sheet browned at the edges.

Clive dropped the lighter and held one bottle in each hand. He cocked his elbows back, preparing to toss them underhanded.

"Hey!" Wexler shouted. "What the bloody—!"

Clive launched his missiles. The bottle on the right landed dead center in the pipe's mouth and silently disappeared. The one on the left went *tick!* as it touched the rim, *clink!* as it struck the inside wall, and *tinkle, tinkle . . . tink* as it dropped. That last sound might have been the smash of breaking glass. And again maybe not.

He closed his eyes and stepped back expectantly. . . . Nothing happened.

Wexler had bulled his way past Juliana, who was still trying to stop him with her good hand, and rushed Clive. The paw Wexler laid on his left shoulder was big as a Christmas ham. His fingertips bit like pliers into the flat muscle under Clive's collarbone. Wexler turned him around to receive a punch that seemed a long time in coming.

Clive reacted with one of the moves he had practiced in those weekend training sessions. He brought his right hand up to cover Wexler's, securing the meaty edge immediately behind the man's little finger and opposite the thumb which was applying all of the hold's force. Clive dropped to his knees to avoid the punch and at the same time twisted Wexler's hand, peeling it away from his shoulder. When the man's elbow was turned out at maximum extension, Clive swung his own forearm up in a short, savage buck.

The bones in Wexler's elbow went *crack!* The big man's punch fanned the air above Clive's head. Wexler stumbled forward across his crouched body.

By golly, Clive thought, this stuff really wor—

Foom! sang the vent pipe on the right. A mushroom of black smoke puffed out of its throat.

BONG! went the one on the left. Clive saw that pipe rise out of the row of six on a pillar of yellow fire and turn at an abrupt angle, like a Tomahawk missile leaving its launch tube.

He launched himself from the region of Wexler's knees, heading back down the catwalk. His right arm cupped Juliana's waist and pulled her off her feet. She followed him, stumbling, out of the blast of heat and flame. Greasy smoke boiled through the walkway's steel grating and dissolved into tiny black corkscrews of ash. Clive carried Juliana through it all, right up to the stairway at the catwalk's end.

Whang! The ejected pipe came down across the railing just above Wexler's head. It rolled and fell off into the works below, making a series of clangs and clatters as it went.

"Now what?" Juliana asked, between gasps for breath.

"I don't know," he said. "I never thought we'd get this far. But I think we're in trouble."

"No shit!"

Clive saw Wexler rise from the smoke that was still pouring up through the grating. The big man shook his head and looked around.

"Run!" Clive shouted and pulled her down the stairs.

Chapter 19
Ali Sahir
FIRE FIGHT

Ali Sahir was standing on Gulf Spar's well deck, observing his drilling experts at the tasks he had assigned. Sahir's mission was now in slack time—the long period of tedium between moments of intense struggle. It was a time when a commander could contribute nothing useful but to watch, nod and smile, and encourage his men with the occasional word. It was a time he personally hated.

The drill stem turned with a hypnotic deliberateness. It sank into the casing at a rate the eye could not measure, slower than the minute hand of a watch, slower than the sundial's shadow at noon. Sahir's eye fixed on a smear of dark grease riding around the turning pipe. It had the shape of the Arabic letter *Zain*. Around and around it went, flashing, flashing, *zain, zain . . . zain*.

Sahir's chin touched his breastbone and his head snapped up in startled reaction. This was absurd. The day was still early. He had enjoyed his usual six hours of sleep and said his morning prayers. He had also taken coffee with his breakfast. There was no reason for this drowsiness.

He looked back to see if anyone had noticed. With his head thus turned over his shoulder, Sahir missed the first flash of the explosion. But he felt its hollow *thump* in his chest and the gust of air that flapped up his collar. Sahir turned into this wind, raising a hand instinctively to shield his eyes from flying shrapnel.

Somewhere in the maze superstructure, a pipe had burst and was now burning. From his rudimentary knowledge of the rig's components and their layout, he could assess that the fire had nothing to do with the engines driving the drill stem, for they were off to his left. Neither did it involve the crew's quarters and galley, which were higher in the superstructure. The pipes that seemed to be involved, where the initial yellow flare was quickly resolving into a smoky ball of burning oil, penetrated the deck on which he was standing. And the only facilities below this level—other than the anchor winches and the stubs of the well casings—were the oil holding tanks . . . one of which held his entire stock of mutated bacteria.

Yusif Hmar, the drilling master, waved a hand and his crew shut down the rotary drum. The drill stem instantly stopped turning. He approached Sahir with a questioning look. "*Ya sidi?* Sir! Should we—?"

"Keep working!" Sahir shouted. "Don't stop!"

Sahir ran to the hatch that gave access to below. When he pulled it up, a mushroom cloud of thin smoke lifted in its wake. He fanned it sharply with his open hand and then plunged down the ladder. Where before the Spar's between-decks had been merely dark and poorly lit, now they were foul with hanging soot.

He threaded from memory the route to the elbow joint that exposed the tank he had infected. On the way in, he met Amani, the soldier left there to guard the opening. Oil or smoke blackened the man's face. A burn or scrape

mottled his right cheek and the underside of his jaw. He seemed dazed—which was only natural, as he had been down here when the explosion occurred.

“Major! The tank is on fire!”

“Cap it! Smother the flames!”

Amani stared at him. “The cover blew off. It’s somewhere back—” He pointed through the maze of twisting pipes. “—there.”

“Then get a fire hose,” Sahir said, forcing reason and restraint, the tones of command, into his voice. “Begin by wetting down—”

“Foam,” Amani interrupted. “We should use foam.”

“Then find us some foam. There must be systems designed to deal with this.”

The air between the two men’s faces rapidly thicken. It was also heating up. Breathing became difficult.

“But, there is not time, Major.” The man’s eyes came into sudden focus. “We must dump the tank’s contents before the fire spreads. I saw such a valve—”

“No!” Sahir said. He was not prepared to lose his bacterial agent, the entire point of this exercise, just because some gas had ignited in the piping. The situation wasn’t *that* critical. Amani was not thinking straight. “Find a way to seal off the tank’s exit points,” he said. “Choke out the fire.”

“Yes, sir.” The man saluted and walked off into the maze.

Sahir climbed the ladder back to the well deck, where the smoke plume pouring out of the broken pipes noticeably filtered the sunlight. He signaled to Hmar.

“Get your off-duty men together and form a fire team,” Sahir instructed. “Half to plug up those ruptures. Half to locate the foam extinguishers and begin coating the equipment.”

The man nodded and sped away.

Sahir turned and walked to the nest of burning pipes to assess the situation for himself. As he approached, he held one hand before his face against the heat. With the other he pulled the lapel of his fatigue blouse across his mouth to ease his breathing. After a moment’s study, Sahir made out a gap in the deck where one of the pipes had been ripped loose by the explosion. A stream of clear air poured into this hole—the source of oxygen feeding the fire. Smoke billowed up from rips in the deck around the hole. If his men could plug both the hole and these slits, then the fire would strangle and his problem would be solved.

He moved back from the danger zone. Two men were already coming his way, dragging a canvas hose between them. Sahir explained briefly what he had seen and deduced. He ordered them to begin wetting down the area of the blaze.

Now, what could he use to fill that hole?

Mattresses! They were thick yet flexible, about the right size, and would soak up the foam.

He sent a group of men up to the bunk rooms. They were to strip the beds and *throw* the mattresses down here, not try to climb down the stairwells with their burden. The men understood. Speed was essential.

Sahir began to relax. The situation could be saved.

He turned toward the sun . . . and saw that the breeze was carrying the smoke plume out over the sea. So far, it was staying fairly low, hugging the water. But if it lifted, the smudge would be visible for miles around.

The Gulf of Mexico was a busy part of the world, crisscrossed by both surface and air traffic. The drilling platforms stood almost shoulder to shoulder across their leaseholds. Fire was a constant danger on an oil rig. Anyone who saw that plume would automatically put in a call for emergency assistance. It was the last thing Sahir wanted right then. Outsiders swarming over his rig. Officials outsiders. Competent men in a hurry, who would know at a glance that he and his commandos were not the Spar's regular crew.

So they had to work quickly, smother the fire, and get the drilling back on schedule.

* * *

Clive ducked through the first unlocked door he found on the next level down, pulled Juliana through, and yanked it shut behind them. The door was made of sheet steel, like everything else in the rig. His fingers scrabbled for the locking knob and couldn't find it, so he took a death grip on the handle lever and set his back against the door. His weight might be enough to keep Wexler out—depending on how furious the big man was and how many of the Arab oil workers he could muster to the job of digging out the fugitives.

Waiting in the dark for his eyes to adjust, Clive came to a sudden insight about the results of standing too near an explosion. If, two seconds later, your ears were ringing and your eyes dazzled by the flash-bang afterimage, then you knew you were still alive, despite any other messages your numbed brain was sending you.

He reached for Juliana's hand and squeezed it.

"Ow!" she said, trying to stifle the exclamation.

Clive realized he had her swollen left hand. "Sorry!"

"Hush!" she whispered fiercely. "He'll hear you!"

Clive pressed his ear to the door. Through the dull, ringing that still seemed to fill his head, he could hear faint sounds outside: clanging tools, pounding feet on steel decks above and below, a scream of orders in Arabic. With all that going on, no one would be able to locate them from a few whispered words.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he began to sense the closeness of their hiding place. He found a light switch at hand. Fluorescent strips in the ceiling buzzed to life, revealing a cul-de-sac with no way out, no angle or ell into which they could retreat. Three walls of gray shelving contained paint cans, folded tarps, and a case of brushes. This was the oil rig's paint locker. Not a safe refuge, he realized, with a fire raging somewhere below.

Clive walked to the far end of the room—all of eight or nine feet—looking for a weapon. A crowbar would do, or a heavy hammer. His back was

turned when the door banged open, throwing Juliana into the shelves behind it. Clive turned his head.

A bearlike figure stood in the white, daylight glare outlined by the doorframe. It had to be Wexler. He gave a snarl and charged the room.

Clive's hands dropped to the nearest thing in front of him, a five-gallon can of gray paint. His fingers curled around the bail and he turned, slinging it sideways off the shelf, into Wexler's shins.

The snarl rose to a scream, and the man went down.

Clive vaulted over him, gathered up Juliana again, and ran out into the bright light on the rig's upper level. He didn't waste time pulling the door closed, because he had nothing to block it with. Wexler would be on them in a flash, as soon as he regained his feet. Clive headed for the first descending stairway, off to his left, hoping to work his way down into the labyrinthine bowels of the oil rig.

* * *

A heap of mattresses, sodden with white foam, now covered the various holes in the deck. Ali Sahir stood as close to the pile as the residual heat would let him and studied the results of his handiwork.

The fire had to be out. No more black smoke came up from below, and the morning breeze was carrying the last wisps of gray haze out of the well deck and across the water, where it dissipated to the east. Clots of foam dripped out of the upper layers of bedding and sizzled fiercely as they skittered across hot steel. Otherwise, the pile was inert.

He turned to Hmar. "The danger point has passed. Assign your men to drilling. We must make up for lost time."

"At once, *ya sidi*," the man said. He waved to his crews, and they scattered.

In a minute, the rumble of donkey engines told Sahir that the teams were again at work. He walked over to the nearest well, studied the thick pipe as it sank into the casing. Everything seemed to be returning to normal.

After a few more minutes, however, a foreign sound began to intrude on his awareness. It was a . . . *sucking*. For a moment Sahir imagined an immense pair of lips laying a wet and passionate kiss on his earlobes. He leaned into the swirl of organized confusion around the casing head, seeking to determine if the sound came up from the well. Sometimes, when the drill stem punched through a dome, the sudden release of gas would reverberate up the column, arriving on the surface first as a great hissing. One could see this in an upward flutter of the scraps of mud around the head. But the mud was untouched.

Then his ears located the source of the sound: it was coming from behind him. Sahir turned, and his eyes zeroed in on the mattress pile.

He walked over to it, searching for any anomaly that . . . there! Most of the dripping foam still evaporated as it struck the deck but, as more of it was squeezed out now, a flood of hot, sudsy water crept across the steel surface. Some of this wave had found a crack in the deck—one Sahir swore had not been in that place before, when the mattresses were laid down. There the water vanished in a shimmer of inflowing air.

Sahir stood transfixed.

With leftover heat from the blaze Hmar's men had extinguished, air in the spaces below deck should be hotter than that above. Because hot air expanded, the flow of through that crack should be *outward*. Thus, the film of water should be bubbling *away from* the edge.

But this was not happening. Outside air was being *pulled into* the spaces below. That could only mean something was drawing it. Some pump or machine . . . or a survival of the fire, starved now for oxygen and drawing air from wherever the fire could find it.

Sahir's mind was still envisioning this process, arriving at this conclusion, when the well-deck hatch crashed open. No puff of smoke rose around the coaming this time. Instead, out tumbled Amani, the soldier he had assigned to close off valves and smother the fire in that maze of pipework. The man lay on the deck for a moment, gasping, having exhausted his strength in pushing upward against the reduced air pressure that existed below. Then he raised his head and saw Sahir.

"Major!" he shouted. "Come now! *Kull ishral*—the whole works—are on fire!"

* * *

It seemed that, as Clive and Juliana passed down the successive flights of stairs, they became invisible. Out there in the sunlight men were running back and forth, dragging equipment and hoses, screaming at each other. Not once did they look at the pair of fugitives. An Arab commando—unmistakable in his desert-camouflage fatigue blouse—even passed them on the stairs and did not stop.

Clive was not taking any half-measures this time. He led Juliana down to the bottom of the stack and then followed a long corridor, electrically lit and painted white, which his sense of direction said would take them outward, toward the caisson's perimeter shell. A water-tight door at the corridor's end let them into a dark, echoing space. Clive sensed huge machines moving slowly in the gloom.

He did not try for a light switch but walked forward with his hands cocked in front of him. Juliana came behind, her good hand resting lightly on his shoulder. Within a dozen paces, he found one of the machines.

It seemed to be a cable drum, about six feet in diameter, partly buried in the deck. Clive walked around to the back side, out of sight of the door. As he went his arm brushed the steel cable—two inches thick and rough with split wire ends—winding off the drum's top curve and disappearing out a hawse hole in the opposite wall. From the dim sunlight filtering through the hole, he saw bracketing rollers as big around a medieval church candles.

Clive touched the cable and felt the tension singing in it. While his hand rested there, the thing moved, paying out three feet or so. The drum next to him turned a few degrees of arc, then automatically stopped.

This was one of the six anchor winches spaced around the rig's outer rim, holding it in place above the drilling site. A computer system somewhere above controlled the tension in the anchor cables by taking readings from the

Global Satellite Positioning System and making minute adjustments to the drums. No one was likely to come down here unless the winches were fouled or the motors needed servicing. Anyway, Clive didn't think the Arabs up there had time to worry about such niceties.

He knelt between the drum and the wall, under a cable which would take their heads off if it snapped. He pulled Juliana down beside him.

"How are you doing?" Clive asked. He was concerned about the blow she took when Wexler flung open the door to the paint locker. That and her left hand, whose purple blush had grown beyond the edges of his inadequate bandage.

"I'll hold up," she said evenly.

They crouched there for several minutes, listening. Clive was trying to sort out the sea sounds coming through the hawse hole, the humming of the anchor cable, and the internal rumblings of the oil rig. It was vital that he separate this background noise from the possible sound of running feet out in the corridor. After a bad moment when the slap of a wave seemed just like a heel coming down on the steel deck, he gave up. Their first clue that this last hiding place was breached would be a crack of light from under the door. Nothing before that.

"So what's our plan now?" Juliana asked.

"Well . . ." Clive's embarrassed grin was lost in the gloom. "I wasn't thinking much beyond firing those holding tanks. I didn't suppose we'd get even that far."

"Brilliant."

Rather than continue this fight, Clive waited out her anger. Besides, if he was quiet, a notion—the kernel of an idea—would come to him eventually.

"You're right, of course," he said, when it came. "We can't stay here indefinitely."

"Just for the sake of asking . . . why not?"

"Because Nayle has already harvested the bacteria. We discovered it by the smell, didn't we? That means the bugs have multiplied through the tanks. By now Nayle and his friends will have samples of the contaminated oil—gallons of the stuff—ready to pour down the wells."

"So?"

"When the fire gets bad enough, they'll fly out of here and take the bugs with them. They will start over somewhere else. And who's to know where they go next? We have to stop them here."

"How?"

"If I can get to the helicopter, I can disable it."

"You think they won't have somebody guarding it?"

"That's the chance we have to take."

"We?"

"Feel the floor," Clive said.

While they talked, he had been crouching on the balls of his feet, ready to spring forward when the door opened. He was steadying himself with both hands on the iron frame of the cable drum. But sometime in the last minute, in

shifting his weight, Clive had inadvertently reached down and touched the deck.

“It’s hot!”

“Right. The fire’s spread to the other tanks. Soon the whole rig will be burning.”

“But there must be flame suppressors, foam equipment—”

“—most of which we blew out with those fire bombs.”

“But we’re near the water down here,” she said. “And we’re surrounded by steel. We should be safe.”

“Remember your chemistry? Steel melts around twenty-two hundred degrees Fahrenheit. It *burns* at—”

“All right! When do we go?”

“No time like the present.”

* * *

Even as Sahir’s men blew in cooling streams of white foam, the deck’s blackened edges were collapsing into the pit where the vent pipes had stood. Then the foam ran out . . .

Amani, who was leading one of the hose teams, turned the nozzle aside and struck it with the flat of his hand. A clot of frothy bubbles drooled out. Nothing more.

“Major!” he called. “We’ve lost pressure.”

“So I see,” Sahir murmured. He waved the man closer.

Amani dropped the hose and ran over. “If only we can get—”

“Forget about the fire. I want you to locate Lieutenant Hasan. Tell him to begin gathering his men. Then find—”

The shrill whine of a turbine engine starting up penetrated the crackle of burning and the hubbub of human voices on the well deck. The sound came down from high above them in the superstructure.

“Damn the man!” Sahir said, looking up.

Like any good mercenary, their helicopter pilot was preparing for his own escape. The tips of the rotor blades, swinging slowly now, clocked one by one past the lip of the helipad.

Sahir turned back to Amani. “Find Hasan and meet us up there. I will speak with the pilot myself.”

“Yes, sir.” Amani paused. “What about these others?” He gestured at the oil workers, still trying to fight the fire with flails and a bucket brigade dipped from a trough of drilling mud.

“There are not seats in the helicopter for everyone,” Sahir observed. “Do you think we should tell them?”

The man frowned. “Ahh, no, sir.”

“Very well. You have your orders.”

Amani saluted and dashed off into the rig’s interior.

Sahir began climbing toward the pad.

Chapter 20
William Clive
FLIGHT OR FIGHT

Clive knew they were too late before he and Juliana began climbing the last flight of stairs up from the well deck. The noise of the helicopter's engine was a piercing whine. As they cleared the superstructure's top level, just below the helipad, backwash from the rotor had already swept away the fire's enveloping smoke.

They doubled over and duck-walked to the near side of the pad, keeping out of sight of whoever was flying the machine. Clive gently pushed Juliana under the steel safety nets slanting out from the pad's edge. Then he moved to crouch at the foot of the steps leading up to it.

When he raised his head, he could see through the Jet Ranger's front bubble. The same pilot who had brought them here sat in the righthand seat. The Arab commando leader sat on the left. A cluster of his men stood at the side doors, filing on board with practiced, military precision.

Clive pulled his head back down and thought. He had no way of stopping the aircraft. In another minute it would fly off, and the oil-eating bacteria would be loose in the world. If he had a gun, he could conceivably shoot down the helicopter as it lifted off—and die valiantly when the professional soldiers on board returned fire. But he didn't have a gun.

He raised his eyes above the top step again. What he saw rattling against the helipad's tarmac surface gave him an idea. The trick, of course, would be to reach it without getting shot. Reasoning that the commandos were least likely to have their guns out and ready to shoot when they were in the final stages of piling aboard and strapping down for takeoff, Clive decided his best chance of success was right . . . about . . . now.

* * *

"Who is that man?" Sahir asked. The figure running toward the helicopter was bent over to avoid the rotor disk, so his face was hidden. Still, the man wore no uniform and could not be one of Sahir's picked force.

When the pilot failed to respond, Sahir turned and saw he had the radio headset over his ears, making him deaf to spoken language. Rather than connect himself into the circuit, Sahir jabbed with his elbow to get the pilot's attention, pointed, and mouthed *Who?*

The pilot yanked the headset off one ear and shouted, "Don't let him aboard! We're at max loading right now!"

Sahir nodded and swiveled in his seat, intending to tell Hasan or one of the others to block the door. But when he called out, no one in the rear heard him over the engine noise. With no one looking toward the front, he could not make eye contact. Sahir turned back to the pilot and with a sweeping motion with his hand shouted, "Run him off!"

The pilot pulled up on the collective. The pitch of the engine's whine deepened, and the world outside the windshield sank three feet. The pilot

pushed forward on the control stick. The cockpit tilted and the helicopter lumbered toward the crouching figure.

The man dropped out of sight.

* * *

When the helicopter started coming at him, Clive dove for the pad. He landed on his knees and the heels of his hands and scrambled forward. Something on the underside of the fuselage tagged him in the spine, but the impact did not stop him.

Clive crawled his own body length under the machine and laid his hand on the thing he had been heading for—the snaphook attached to one of the tie-down cables.

He had it, but what was he going to do with it? The helicopter was halfway across the pad now. The wire wasn't long enough to reach any part of the skid. And the craft was already airborne. In another minute . . .

* * *

The helicopter was hanging over the inner edge of the pad, spilling half its hover cushion into the void of the Gulf Spar's well deck. The pilot knew that, because the air down there was heated by the fire, it would be roiling with turbulence. Worse, hot air was physically less dense than cooler air, and so gave less lift. With this much weight aboard the pilot needed all the lift he could get.

Finding himself a headwind would be ideal. But the smoke was rising practically straight up into the sky, so headwind would not be a factor.

The pilot looked around for a patch of clear, undisturbed air that he could head into, so as to develop enough translational lift to be flying before his the craft got out over the sea. The outer edge of the pad was buffered by the Spar's upper reaches, which included a smooth area of flat roofs. The pilot decided to back up, turn around, and take off in that direction.

He eased back on the cyclic control stick to reverse himself. Just as he was pushing on the starboard pedal to yaw his machine around, he heard a soft *thunk* somewhere along the undercarriage. But he didn't think anything of it.

* * *

Clive snapped the billed hook across the tube of the righthand skid. He had no way of knowing if that was enough to hold the helicopter on the pad. But since the cable it was attached to was designed to secure the craft against storm winds, it should offer some resistance. What Clive was going to do after that . . .

Well, first he probably ought to get away from the center of the pad. In fact, get off it entirely. In about ten seconds the pilot was going to realize he couldn't take off and would set down. Then a dozen or so men with guns would come boiling out of the cabin and try to shoot him.

Except . . . the pilot wasn't stopping. The helicopter turned halfway around on its own axis and headed away from him, picking up speed. The tie-down cable paid out as far as it would go, then snapped taut.

The sudden pull on the leading skid flipped the aircraft on its side and slewed it around. The two blades of the spinning rotor dug themselves

sequentially into the roof of the administrative office and stalled the engine. Brought down so suddenly from its maximum revolutions, the turbine exploded in a shower of small, deadly pieces. One of them, the size and shape of a steak knife and gleaming wickedly in the sunlight, *whickered* past Clive's ear. Again he dove for the tarmac.

He lifted his head in time to see the fuel cells go up and envelope the cabin in an orange fireball veined with black smoke. As it rolled toward him, Clive scuttled backward off the helipad, bounced once on the steel netting, and flung himself over to the deck below. A gust of hot air fanned his hair as he went.

When the crash had settled down to a quietly burning pyre, he moved around to Juliana's hiding place and grasped her good hand.

"What happened?" she asked, coming out into the open.

"I just killed a lot of people," he said soberly.

"Oh . . . What are we going to do now?"

"Find our way to that lifeboat, I guess."

And do it, he added mentally, without running into Wexler. The big man was still somewhere below, searching for them room by room and growing madder by the minute.

* * *

The rig's central well was now fully involved with the fire. The heat of it drove Clive and Juliana back from the stairs that had brought them to the upper levels. He looked around, seeking another way down.

On the other side of the helipad, beyond the burning wreck, he knew was a sheer drop-off. The wall surface was composed of, first, the superstructure's curved steel and then, below, the caisson's concrete shell. Clive remembered that much from their incoming flight the first day. The steel section might offer hand- and footholds on window ledges and antenna brackets, but beyond that the concrete was smooth and seamless, with a fall of more than a hundred feet to the water. If he and Juliana tried to climb it, they would not survive.

Off to the left, however, about thirty feet from the downed chopper on top of the administrative offices, was what looked like a railing: a piece of two-inch pipe supported by vertical slats. From the way it bent over and disappeared at roof level, Clive guessed it was the top of another stairwell. He crossed the helipad with Juliana trailing behind.

The pipe rail entered a gasketed notch in an oblong door made of thin sheet metal set flush with the roof. Clearly, its only purpose was to keep out the rain, as it was not even locked. Clive pulled up on the door to reveal a flight of steps in concrete.

"Is it safe?" she asked, hanging back.

"Safer than waiting up here," he said.

"What about Wexler?"

Clive looked across the rooftop. Maybe, when the helicopter went down, one of the weapons had been thrown clear. He walked around the pyre keeping his eyes down, careful not to look inside the broken windows at the

blackened bodies of the men he had killed. All he could find was a bent piece of aluminum or some other white metal, about ten inches long and sharp enough at one end. From the crook in its back, it reminded him of a Gurkha's *kukri*, or ceremonial dagger.

The metal was still hot to the touch, so Clive tore a piece from his shirttail and wrapped it around the gripping end. He hefted his improvised knife and took an experimental swing at an imaginary opponent, at throat level.

Well . . . it would have to do.

Holding the weapon before him, Clive went down the steps. Juliana followed with a hand on his shoulder. At the bottom was a vertical door of varnished plywood.

He turned the knob and found himself in a familiar-looking corridor. The walls were white-painted sheet rock, the floor gray linoleum. At the far end he could hear the hum of powerful electronics and their cooling fans, along with an occasional *crackle*, like a spark discharge through a loudspeaker. Holding his knife at the ready, Clive walked down to the door from which these sounds were coming.

The console of a large radio transmitter filled the room. Along the walls hung clipboards with sheaves of messages, a girlie calendar, and a Texas State flag.

"Oh, good," Juliana said. "We can call for help."

"Have you ever used one of these things?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I know you can figure it out."

Clive laid his knife on the desk and sat down in the swivel chair in front of a chrome-mesh microphone. He knew enough to recognize the grip switch on its stand as push-to-talk. He pushed it.

The crackling stopped.

"Hello?" he said experimentally.

The universe whistled blankly through the set.

He let up on the switch, the loudspeaker clicked once, and the crackling resumed.

"I think you have to tune it," Juliana observed.

"I know that."

Of the modular boxes that made up the radio, the one closest to the microphone had a black panel six inches square with four large, red numbers glowing in it. There was a decimal point between the last two. Shallow buttons to the right of this panel bore up and down arrows; they clearly had something to do with tuning.

If only it were that simple. Other, smaller panels and buttons allowed him to choose between low, medium, and high frequencies, VHF and UHF, and various bandwidths within them. Other boxes controlled the rig's satellite positioning system, cable access via satellite, intercom, internal video monitors, and its on-board computer network. There was also a box labeled "phone patch," but he didn't think it would connect him to Southwestern Bell.

Clive realized he could push buttons and diddle frequencies for an hour and never reach anyone. It was frustrating. He could use a personal computer,

do sophisticated economic analyses, and write programs. He had even broken into the Cumulus network to track other users' disk access. Yet something as primitive as a radio—*analog voice communication*—had him completely stumped. But then, he could never figure out the preset buttons on his car stereo, either.

Finally, on the theory that whoever had last used the radio must have left it tuned to some kind of guard frequency, Clive pushed the talk switch again and endured that eerie whistling.

"Hello? I'm calling from an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. We're on fire here, and it looks pretty bad. There's no one around to—"

"Don't give them the story of your *life!*" Juliana protested. "Just shout for help."

He nodded and started over again. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. Anyone who can hear me. We're on an oil rig at latitude . . ." He looked at the satellite positioning module but got no clue. "Well, you'll see the smoke. Come quickly. Mayday, mayday—"

The whistling suddenly died away. Clive expected a voice to come on and answer him, but the loudspeaker was dead. The red-lit displays blinked out. From behind the components a buzzer sounded once and died. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling went out.

"Fire must have reached the generators," he said.

"Let's get out of here before we're cut off," Juliana said.

"Right. There's another stairs at the end of the hall."

* * *

That other stairway was narrow and utilitarian, walled in steel, with steel risers on the steps. The door at the bottom of it was a rubber-gasketed hatch secured by four brass levers, like the door on a Navy ship. In its center, at head height, was a bull's-eye window. Clive put his eye to the glass.

The space on the other side lay in clear sunlight with an expanse of blue water stretching beyond it to the horizon. The area was railed in by stanchions supporting four strands of heavy-duty wire, just like on a ship. In the middle of this space a canvas-covered lifeboat hanging from articulated davits. Clive and Juliana had arrived at their destination.

Someone else had got there ahead of them.

The unidentified man was bent over so that all Clive could see was his backside. He had already unshackled and dropped the railing wires that crossed in front of the lifeboat. He had cranked the davits outboard, so that the boat was suspended over the side of the concrete caisson. The man was now fiddling with the pulley blocks and skeins of rope that lowered each end of the boat to the water.

The lifeboat was a massive thing, almost thirty feet long and easily weighing a ton. The white-painted hull was rounded at both ends and made of heavily formed metal sheets, with rivets lining the seams. It had a box keel and a broad, curving rudder with a notch cut out for the tiny brass propeller.

Holding the ropes for the bow end and laying them out along the deck, the stranger was obviously trying to figure out how the winches worked. When the man turned around, Clive got a good look at his profile.

It was Alexander Nayle.

Slowly, so as not to make a sound, Clive twisted the door's locking levers and pushed it open as soon as Nayle turned away again. The pivots and hinges were well oiled, and Clive made it halfway across the deck before Nayle was aware of him.

The man whirled like a snake and whipped a long coil of the rope at Clive's face. The rough manila yarns burned his cheek, but Clive kept on going.

He caught Nayle around the waist in a sloppy, bear-hug tackle that bore him backward. Nayle tripped and fell against the side of the lifeboat.

The boat swung away with surprising ease. A gap of two or three feet opened under them, with nothing but the cold water far below. The two men froze instinctively. Only the pressure of Clive's shoes against the inch-high toe rail and the friction between Nayle's shirt and the hull's badly oxidized paint kept them from falling.

After an agonizing moment, the weight of the lifeboat slowly pushed back, easing them over onto the deck. Clive let go of the Nayle and stood up. Nayle steadied himself with a hand on the boat's still-swaying gunwale. They looked into each other's eyes.

Clive was the first to react. He remembered the very first judo throw the instructors had taught him: grab your opponent's lapels—or in this case the front of his shirt—with both hands, spin ninety degrees on the balls of your feet, plant your hip just below his navel, duck your head, drop your body, and pull. Done right, the move would throw Nayle over Clive's inside shoulder and lay him out on his back.

Nayle went over like an empty garment bag. He landed on the center of his spine, with his hips and heels following, coming down hard on the deck. He lay there a moment, stunned, looking up at the sun and gasping.

Clive bent to take hold again, but Nayle waved him off.

"No more, please," he panted.

"Do you give up?" Clive asked.

"Give up *what*, exactly? I was trying to launch the boat. That should be in *both* our interests, don't you think? Now that some bloody fool has gone and set the rig on fire."

"What you have to understand," Clive said stiffly, knowing he was the bloody fool, "is that you're going to jail. If you didn't kill the crew that was here personally, then you're an accomplice. That means—"

"It means nothing if we don't get this boat in the water. Or do you prefer to burn?"

"Well . . ."

"So, help me up."

Nayle offered his hand, and Clive pulled him to his feet.

He wasn't doing it for this criminal's benefit, no. But Clive realized that Juliana, with her hurt hand, would be unable to help him lower the boat, and it looked like a two-man job. Clive remained alert, however, to possible treachery on Nayle's part. Any good behavior the man exhibited was likely a delaying tactic. But what were the choices?

* * *

Freddie Wexler had combed the lower reaches of the Spar's caisson, following Clive and the woman after their escape from the paint locker, until smoke and fire drove him back up to the well deck. One glance into that burning pit told him the situation was hopeless. Besides, Wexler wasn't planning to join the firefighting. By this time his agenda had narrowed down to, one, revenge, and two, escape—in that order.

He was the last person to climb up to the level of the bridge crane, proceeding on the theory that if his fugitives were not hiding somewhere below, then they were on high. He heard the helicopter take off, then heard it crash, but dismissed the notion that Clive and Juliana might be aboard. They could not have made a separate arrangement with the pilot, and neither Sahir nor Nayle valued them enough to fly them out. So the man and woman had to be somewhere in the upper superstructure.

Wexler felt he was very close. His weapon—the .357 magnum revolver without silencer—was drawn and ready. When he reached the top of the stairs at the end of the main hallway and saw Juliana pressed against the door at its bottom, he knew that his moment had come.

She held onto the frame with her hands, with her head turned almost sideways against the door. At first Wexler thought she was resting, then he guessed there was a peephole in the door and she was looking through it. But at what?

He could shoot her where she stood, but that would alert Clive, wherever he was, and the search would be on again. Instead, Wexler clipped the weapon into his holster, untied his shoes, and set them down in the upper corridor. Then in stocking feet, careful so that his clothes did not brush against the walls, he crept down the steps. When he was two feet behind Juliana, and she still hadn't noticed him, he raised his hands so that one was immediately behind her throat, the other poised at her waist.

"Hello, dearie."

Juliana gasped and drew back from the door—coming right into his grasp. The upper hand clamped her mouth; the lower pulled her tight against his body.

Just as he thought, the door had a porthole. Holding the woman casually to one side, Wexler bent and put his eye to it.

Beyond the door, Clive and Nayle were working together on lowering a lifeboat. They seemed fairly chummy about it, too. The front end of the boat was already down a couple of feet, with several turns of rope around a winch at the davit's base. The rope's loose end was snubbed with a spring mechanism whose teeth worked against the pull of the boat. The two men were now moving to the other set of pulleys.

What to do? What to do?

For one thing, Wexler didn't need Juliana to announce his presence. Cocking her head with the hand cupped under her jaw, he swung her body in a short, vicious arc and smacked her skull against the wall of the stairwell.

Thunk!

She went limp in his arms. He looked through the porthole again to check that neither man had noticed the noise. Wexler laid Juliana on the bottom step and pushed against gently against the door.

* * *

Clive was bent over, winding the trailing end of the lifeboat's aft fall around the hand winch. Nayle stood above him, holding the line from the pulley block to take the weight off so that Clive could make the loop.

BOOM!

It was a huge sound against the gentle, seaside breeze. At first Clive thought something had exploded deep in the oil rig's caisson. Then he noticed the red spatter against the white curve of the hull.

Nayle let go of the rope and clutched the shreds of his stomach.

The rough hemp began to slide through Clive's fingers. Only his trained sailor's reflexes let him snatch a curl farther back and slip it into the jam cleat. The lifeboat dropped a foot on its aft davit and bounced, putting a noticeable bend in the cleat's bronze jaw. But the mechanism held.

With the boat's weight taken care of, Clive turned to Nayle. He had backed up, still holding his midriff, and leaving a bloody slick on the deck. His fingers were trying to push in the broken ends of his small intestine. He sat down slowly, staring off toward the horizon, and keeled over. He did not appear to be breathing.

Clive looked back behind them, where the shot had come from.

Wexler stood outside the doorway. The big man was smiling, all teeth below the bristles of his mustache. Juliana was nowhere in sight.

"Stupid git," he said pleasantly, nodding at Nayle's hunched body.

"Why did you shoot him?" Clive asked, genuinely curious. He did not think the killing meant Wexler had changed sides.

"Cause he's a fuckup, ain't he?"

"Are you going to shoot me now?"

Clive raised his hands to shoulder level, but he kept his thumbs tucked and elbows cocked. He was prepared to go down doing as much damage as possible. He wondered if he could make it across the deck against the blast of the huge revolver.

The gun's muzzle swung toward Clive, then stopped.

Wexler looked down at it wonderingly, as if the weapon were balking him of its own will. He raised it before his eyes, then pushed the gun inside his jacket, into his left armpit.

"A bullet will do for the likes of him," Wexler said, meaning Nayle. "Quick and painless."

Clive doubted that, having seen Nayle's face at the penultimate moment.

“But a tricky bugger like you,” the big man went on, “deserves something slower, more painful.”

Wexler waded forward, balling his fists.

Because it had worked once, Clive tried his patented judo throw again. He laid his hands on the front of the man’s jacket and—

Wexler swung his fists up into Clive’s forearms, shocking the muscles and nerves from fingers to elbows. Clive’s hands left the jacket as if they were spring loaded, flying up around his head. Before he could get them down into a guard position, Wexler jabbed once, twice with his left hand, solid blows that smashed against Clive’s mouth, splitting his lips on his own teeth.

Clive took a step backward as the only way to protect himself. He got his hands up to block his face, and Wexler battered them aside. Again he struck once, twice.

Another step, and Clive’s shoulders touched the lifeboat’s angled gunwale. He pulled back an arm to brace himself against it, and Wexler uppercut him once, hard in the solar plexus, lifting Clive’s heels off the deck.

The boat swung out, and Clive slipped through the gap. His hands scrabbled against thin air, then the front of Wexler’s pants, and slammed down on the turn of the deck. His fingers locked onto the toe rail, stripping away patches of skin, but his grip held. When the boat swung back, it would strike Wexler, finally hurting him.

The boat did swing back, but it was now too low to come inboard. Instead, it caught Clive squarely in the shoulders, its mass driving the breath out of him. But it also pinned him, saving his life.

Wexler laughed at Clive’s predicament. Then he caught the boat’s gunwale with his left hand and pushed it back. He reached down with his right, took hold of Clive’s collar, and hauled him up to the deck. It was an impressive feat of strength, and it showed the energy with which the big man would maul Clive before finally dropping him over the side.

Chapter 21
Juliana Troetelkind
HANGMAN'S BLUFF

John Martel stood under the barrel of the five-inch gun mounted on the forepeak of the Coast Guard cutter *Regan*. He was enjoying the wind that flapped his shirtsleeves as the ship made twenty knots over the blue waters of the Gulf.

They were heading south to pick up the next Pemex platform on their chain of inquiry. The currency-exchange receipt he had taken from Nayle's townhouse had worked out evenly in Mexican pesos. Therefore, Nayle was targeting the Mexican oil fields, which were centered around the Bay of Campeche. Martel's agency had arranged for this vessel with the Department of the Treasury, instead of the U.S. Navy, because everyone felt it would be less threatening to approach foreign nationals with a big white search-and-rescue ship than with a slate-gray destroyer armed to the teeth.

But the *Regan* was not totally unarmed. Her weapons included this forward gun, three torpedo tubes on each side, several pom-poms and machine guns mounted on the superstructure, and a chain-driven Phalanx gun on the transom—presumably in case the drug smugglers who were her usual fare tried to take her out with a guided missile. But if the present mission came to fighting, then the Coast Guard crew would respond with automatic weapons and sidearms rather than the heavy ordnance.

Martel had already spotted the smudge of black smoke off to port, rising over the horizon, where no smoke should be. At this distance, the cloud was much too large to be some cargo ship blowing soot from its tubes. So the source had to be a burning oil well. But, from its relative position according to the charts Martel had studied, it was one of the American platforms—therefore not part of their mission profile.

The deck suddenly heeled beneath Martel's feet, and the cutter's sharp bow slewed across the wind. He grabbed a stanchion and glanced back over his shoulder at the bridge windows. Then he looked forward along their new course: they were on a line directly intercepting that distant smudge.

Time to invoke his authority.

He climbed to the bridge and addressed the officer of the deck, one Lieutenant (JG) Rimmer according to his insignia and nameplate. "You changed course," Martel said. "Why?"

"We received a distress call, sir, from that burning oil rig. Captain wants us to investigate and offer any assistance we can."

"Not on my time."

"I'm sorry, sir. This takes precedence."

"Get Captain Barnes up here, please."

"He thought you'd say that, sir. I'm not supposed to bother him."

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because the captain's already made up his mind, sir."

“We’ll see about that.”

Rimmer smiled nervously but did not back down. “Captain Barnes said to tell you, also, that this isn’t about rank or orders from Washington or anything like that, sir.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Humanity, sir.”

* * *

Juliana came awake slowly, roused by the cold edge of the iron step biting into her cheekbone. But that was not the cause of the glowing sparks behind her eyes or the humming in her ears. Those came from a tender spot on top of her head. When she touched it, she felt a dampness in her hair, then the memory came back.

Wexler was here!

She forced herself up on her palms, got to her knees, and stood shakily. The outer door behind her was still closed. She found the peephole and looked through it.

The big man was right outside, with his back to her. One massive hand was clapped around Clive’s neck, the other drove upward into his chest. Clive just seemed to hang there, suspend on that driving fist. Nayle was nowhere in sight.

Wexler drew back his hand in slow motion and punched again.

Juliana eased the door open silently. When she stepped onto the deck, she saw Nayle. He was lying on his side in a puddle of blood. Something told her that was Wexler’s doing, not Clive’s.

The big man was totally absorbed in his work. His bunched arm swung like a piece of machinery, and Clive swayed to the punches like a sheet in the wind. In short order his breastbone was going to crack and his lungs collapse. Juliana had to do something, but she had no weapon.

On the deck, trailing past their feet, was the free end of the rope from the lifeboat’s tackle. Ducking under Wexler’s pumping elbow, she gathered a loop of it, doubled the rope over with a twist of her wrist, and stood on tiptoes to drop it around his head.

Wexler paused. The free hand let Clive go, where he slumped to the deck. Wexler’s hands caught the loop just as Juliana put her weight on it, digging the points of her elbows into his back for greater leverage. The pain from her ruined knuckle was intense. Wexler lunged to one side, trying to shake her loose, but she climbed up on his back and hung on. He lunged the other way, twisting from the hips, and slammed her against the upright portion of the lifeboat’s forward davit.

A flare of pain told Juliana that a couple of her ribs were broken.

Wexler used the framework as a bear might use a tree to scratch its back. With a hard right-left swipe, he wiped her off, wracking her shoulder and cracking her head in the process. Juliana fell at the davit’s base. The big man turned on her and drew his foot back. With one kick to the head he could finish her off.

Juliana's heels scabbled against the deck. Her hand flailed behind her, trying to get a grip on the davit so that she could raise herself. Her fingers closed around a hank of rope. She pulled on it.

Snap! The jam cleat released the fall line.

Whir! With the lifeboat's dead weight drawing it, the line wound back through the winch drum, going faster and faster. The hand crank spun above Juliana's head in a dizzying blur.

Wexler struggled against the inevitable. His hands clawed at the rope, trying to free his neck. His spine arched as he pulled back from the screaming winch.

Thud! The lifeboat's bow stopped dropping and flopped against the side of the oil rig. The hull was now hanging vertically up and down, its full weight suspended by the aft fall. The line from the bow went slack with Wexler still standing.

He grinned down at Juliana and began loosening the coil around his neck. In a few seconds he would be at her again, and he would have all the time in the world to kill her.

Twang! The aft fall parted from the strain. The stern of the lifeboat slipped away.

Wexler let out a bubbling scream and his hands clawed frantically at the rope as it tightened. His scream was cut short by the impact of his skull against the winch drum, just above her head.

The rope, under a ton or more of pressure, barely paused over the tendons and bones of Wexler's neck. Her improvised loop contracted to a mere kink and then snapped straight. His head flipped over the side, following the lifeboat down, vanishing from her sight. His spouting body collapsed across Juliana's knees.

She screamed once and passed out.

* * *

Clive pulled himself across the boat deck to Juliana. She was covered with blood from the neck down, but his probing fingers found no obvious holes in her body. Most of the gore seemed to have come from Wexler. Clive heaved the torso off her and rolled it over the deck's edge.

The body went into the sea with remarkably little splash. The lifeboat was down there, too, Clive noted. It was overturned and swamped but still afloat. During the boat's wild plunge, it had swung out to the side, breaking off the landing stage and a section of the iron stairs which spiraled down the caisson. Judging distances from this angle was difficult, but Clive thought the gap between the remaining steps and the water was about forty feet.

Juliana was already stirring when Clive returned to her. Her left hand was bare, the bandage ripped away. Dark blood seeped from the old wound.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

"Of course." She pulled her legs under her.

"We have to leave."

"Without the boat?"

Clive held her up, raising her left arm at the shoulder to stop the bleeding. He took her along the deck to the head of the stairs.

“We can climb down here,” he said.

“All right.” She did not look down.

Clive moved her toward the first step, but she hung back.

“The boat’s down there,” he explained. He would deal with the broken section when they came to it.

“Maybe things are not as bad—” she began.

As if in answer, a blast blew out the windows in the superstructure above them. Hunks of blackened glass rattled on the deck, and gouts of orange fire howled through the openings.

“Time to go,” he said.

They started down. Their faces were still above deck level when the door across from the empty lifeboat davits burst open. Half a dozen smoke-streaked men, the last of the Arab invaders, tumbled out. Clive pulled Juliana’s head down and quickened his pace. He had seen the automatic weapons in their hands.

He and Juliana were fifty feet below the caisson’s top when the Arabs spotted them. “*Shu ammal . . . ?*” cried one, the rest of it lost in a hubbub of voices.

The two fugitives ran down the stairs, their feet clattering on the iron gratings. The first shots sounded faintly above, carried away by the roar of the blaze. A single ricochet *spanged* off the railing ten feet below Clive and Juliana. How many more shots were fired in all, Clive could not tell. He pushed Juliana against the weathered concrete, noting how warm the surface felt, and tilted his head back. He could see the tips of the rifle barrels, the tops of the men’s heads, but nothing more.

It took a second for him to figure out that the angle was too steep. For a gunman to hit them, he would have to lean far over the wire railing, virtually hanging the upper part of his body out in space. These men were not so brave, or so motivated. They held their guns at arm’s length and fired blindly, sweeping what they could see of the stairs.

Clive took hold of Juliana’s arm and continued down. In another minute, they reached the last broken step.

“It doesn’t go all the way down!” she cried.

“Apparently not.”

“What are we going to do?” She turned to go back up.

Clive held on to her and felt the outside of the cylinder again. It was noticeably hotter here. He knew that reinforced concrete would not burn. But farther down, below the wave tops, there would be a steep thermal gradient between the cold Gulf waters outside and the raging fire inside. The caisson’s fabric would be under terrible stress.

“We have to jump,” he said.

“We will be *killed!*”

“You must push out, away from the wall. Hold your breath. Point your toes. Relax your arms.”

“No!”

Clive did not give her a chance to argue. He already had an arm around her body. With one spasmodic motion, he swept her off the step and thrust her as far out as he could.

Juliana’s arms and legs pinwheeled briefly. Then she got her ankles together and straightened her body, as instructed. When she entered the water, he jumped.

* * *

The saltwater burned at the hole in her left hand. The pain was almost as great as when they took of her finger. Only the cold shock, all over her body, after the muggy heat aboard the oil rig, masked the pain.

Juliana broke the surface after her deep plunge and took long, ragged breaths. She looked around. The overturned lifeboat floated ten yards away, its keel just a straight line above the passing wave tops. It bobbed into and out of sight as the surge lifted first the boat and then her.

She kicked out, feeling the dead weight of her shoes. They were originally some man’s sneakers which she had stuffed with socks to fit her smaller feet. Now they were filled with water. She dog-paddled against the set of the waves as best she could, feeling the fire in her hand with each stroke. Maybe the sea salt would kill off the infection growing there—it was the most hopeful thought she could muster.

After what seemed like a hundred strokes, she caught up with the lifeboat. Its gunwale was two feet under water, too low for her to comfortably hang on. The slick metal side gave no other handhold, except for a frayed rope that passed through a series of eyebolts near the keel—ten inches above her reach.

She tried to grip the gunwale, draw up one leg, and brace her foot against it. Several times she managed to lodge a toe against the rail. But each time she pushed down, the boat rolled toward her and her foot slipped off.

Juliana finally spread her right hand against the sheer side and rested as much of her body as possible. The pain and blood poisoning of the last week, then the beating she had taken from Wexler, had eroded her reserves of strength. Just how long would she cling here before electing to slip peacefully beneath the waves?

* * *

“Hang on, Juliana!” Clive called when he saw her head duck under the water next to the lifeboat. If she came up inside the hull, disoriented and in darkness, she might drown. He pulled harder against the waves, willing his body forward.

Clive was three feet from her, almost touching distance, when he heard a new sound. It was a ringing groan. At first he thought it came from the lifeboat, a trick of acoustics from the sea swell and air trapped beneath the hull. Then he realized it was much louder than that, and it came from behind him, not ahead.

He turned and looked over his shoulder.

The oil rig's superstructure was a torch now, burning across its entire top. The metal shell of the upper levels glowed with its own incandescence. The central derrick and the bridge crane supporting it had collapsed. A plume of smoke more than a hundred feet wide wafted off downwind, darkening the water underneath it.

Perhaps the groaning had come from the steel of the upper works as it fell into the burning pit. Clive was almost convinced of this, and then he heard it again, a deeper sound, like a giant saucepan left on the stove until its contents boiled away. With bare metal exposed directly to the heat, wrenching expansions would start and not stop until the pan was torn apart. This was such a sound . . . except a thousand times greater.

Clive reached Juliana and put an arm around her again.

"Help me up," she said. "If I can only rest—"

"No, we have to get away from here."

"I don't have the strength."

"Hold on to me."

She locked her arms around his neck. Clive struck off, around the lifeboat, heading for the calmer water in its lee.

He swam doggedly, helped by her kicking feet, not looking back, until—

Kee-RACK!

The sound thumped his chest cavity through the water itself an instant before it reached his ears through the air. In all, it was a modest punctuation in the continuing, roiling groan that was a background to his labors.

Clive paused long enough to turn his head and glance at the oil rig. The smooth concrete caisson, so far untouched by fire, now showed a jagged crack down one side, not quite reaching the water's surface. Clive turned away and swam harder, but in afterimage he could see yellow clots of twinkling flame burst from the seam, quickly obscured behind jets of black smoke.

He lifted his eyes to sweep the horizon ahead. How far away was far enough? When that split reached the water, the caisson would sink. The massive suction would pull the two of them under. Either that, or burning sludge from inside the rig would flow out over the sea's surface, coming fast, and engulf everything in its path, including Clive and Juliana.

The only thing he could do was plow on, trying to make distance.

Ahead of them, the plume of smoke reached down and seemed to touch the horizon. No . . . it was a gray curl, another color of smoke entirely. Lighter and thinner. And under it glinted a sleek, white shape with the telltale orange-and-blue band cutting diagonally across its bow.

But the vessel was half a mile away.

Too far.

* * *

For all his Buddha-like patience, John Martel was constitutionally unable to stay behind while others walked—or in this case, sailed—into obvious danger. When Captain Barnes ordered the cutter's Boston Whaler over the side, Martel had insisted on joining the crew. After all, he argued, the

criminals he was tracking *might* have caused the platform fire, and he deserved to be in at the kill. Barnes had nodded wearily and let him go.

Now, as the cockleshell boat pounded over the waves under that hanging cloud, and the motion punished Martel's injured leg, the odds seemed less promising. The platform turned out to be one of those new floating rigs, a deep-founded caisson with holding tanks that extended far below the water line. Somehow they had taken fire, and the whole thing was burning like an erupting volcano.

From the zigzag seam of smoke working its way down the side, Martel estimated the rig had ten, maybe twenty minutes more life, and then it would be gone. No hope for survivors.

"Swimmers to starboard, sir!" the coxswain called.

Martel followed his pointing finger. Two people in the water, clinging together.

"Get them," he ordered.

The boat was already turning and increasing its speed. The two other sailors in the rescue party were leaning over the gunwale, reaching down to the water's surface.

Then Martel recognized the face of the nearer swimmer. William Clive! Still alive after all! Martel elbowed his way between the Coast Guardsmen.

And the other swimmer was the woman. Martel had glimpsed her only briefly, against the dawn shadows in the arena. Her hair was wet now, dark and stringy, but the shape of the face was the same. Her eyes were downcast and nearly closed—that, too, was familiar from her dejected pose in Paris.

She had her arms around Clive's neck. Martel pried them loose, hauled her half out of the water, and handed her off to one of the sailors, who dragged her aboard.

Martel reserved Clive for himself. He took the folds of the man's sodden shirt in both hands, pulled and squeezed until Clive was a foot out of water with his collar closing in around his throat. Martel lowered his own face until it was the only thing in Clive's visual range. Then he spoke between his teeth, low in his throat, so that no one else could hear.

"Where is the bacteria?"

"Back there," Clive gasped, flicking his eyes toward the burning platform.

"Is it dead?"

"I . . . I think so."

Martel grunted and started to drop Clive back into the water.

CHUFF!

Both men turned their heads to look. A cloud of white steam was rising from the base of the rig, blotting out the smoke.

BOOM!

Like a landslide across a white cliff, the concrete cylinder split apart and subsided into the water.

HISS-SS-SS

The Gulf drowned the fire, sending up more billows of steam and spreading an oily sludge on the surface. The broken caisson disappeared behind it.

Clive's hands were gripping Martel's wrists now.

"Yes, it's dead! It's gone! It's over!"

Martel hauled him aboard.

Epilogue
Escherichia coli
UNDER A RED GLARE

As fire ate away at the oil's surface layers and its heat penetrated the carbonized material in the holding tank, the *Escherichia coli* bacteria further down underwent a curious metamorphosis.

The cytoplasm began producing a simple protein at a furious rate, and this protein migrated immediately to the cell walls. The response was so quick that the individual bacillus could not budget for it in the orderly processes of its metabolism. The mitochondria and Golgi bodies depleted themselves and went on to attack every other component of the cell's structure except the strands of DNA. They, after all, were the pattern for rebuilding everything when the cell found a more nourishing environment.

At the same time that the bacillus cannibalized itself to thicken its cell walls, it pumped out excess water. That way it might endure, without rupturing, the extreme heat which the current environment had signaled was coming.

Not all of the bacilli survived, of course, but some did.

When the oil in the tank burned away, these tough spores passed through the flame and floated away on the smoke.

Most of them drifted with the wind and eventually fell into the Gulf. There saltwater invaded and softened them, plankton ate them, death took them.

But a few spores lodged on some part of a distant oil platform: a valve casing, the inside diameter of a pipe, the diamond teeth of a standby drill bit. There the deadly spores rested temporarily. Some even fell into the trough of drilling mud which the crew was preparing to inject into their nearly completed well.

THE END