

Locked In

By

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In memory of my father, Ralph M. Dighton, a fine journalist who always wanted to write a novel, and my mother, Neelia M. Dighton, who was my first and most trusted editor.

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Chapter 1

I'm Here!

He awakened, with a sofa staring at him across a green carpet.

I'm on the floor. What am I doing on the floor?

Yellow plaid, soiled to a dirty mustard, and the sofa's scarred pine baseboard, filled his field of vision.

I must have fainted. But why?

A strand of the ancient shag carpet's yarn tickled his nose. He twitched involuntarily in response.

Nothing happened.

His nose still itched. The carpet still tickled it.

He twitched again. Nothing. Again.

He'd felt the urge to twitch, even sensed the signal his brain had sent to his nose to twitch; but his nose had remained as immobile as Washington's on Mt. Rushmore. The itch became increasingly insistent.

He attempted to rotate his head away from the irritating fibers.

It remained as motionless as his nose. The fiber's tickle was rapidly becoming painful, more like needling than tickling.

What's holding me down. Why can't I move?

He heard Fear tap softly at the door in his mind.

He tried to raise his right hand to his face.

It remained frozen.

No, not frozen. Limp. Lifeless.

No, not lifeless. He could feel it. He could feel the long tufts of the dingy-shag-carpet yarn wrapped around his fingers, pressing against his palm, and thrusting up through the hairs of his bare arm.

If his arm had been frozen or lifeless, he would not have been able to feel those things, he reasoned. And he definitely could feel them. It wasn't just his imagination.

He knew exactly where his arm lay in relation to his body even though he couldn't see it. He knew exactly where his left hand was, too, when he shifted his attention to it. In fact, he knew the exact position into which his body had fallen: face down; head turned right; left arm about thirty degrees out from his body and bent outward at the elbow about ninety degrees; right arm straight down and close to his body; left leg straight with toes turned out; and right leg slightly bent, about ten or fifteen degrees from his left with toes turned out.

As he reviewed his body's position, Fear pried the door open a crack. He slammed it shut, but not before a malodorous wisp had entered.

Always a strong boy, Toby Miller had prided himself on being like his father. Fearless. He had always been able to keep that door closed. Even when Fear had managed to ooze under the door like a poisonous gas, spreading its choking miasma, he had been able to defeat it—usually by doing what it told him not to do.

But now he couldn't do that. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't move. He was *paralyzed!*

The word reverberated in his head. The door flew back and admitted the black, suffocating cloud, choking him, making him gasp for air. His heart raced. He felt as if he were drowning, like that time when he was six and had fallen in the river. His vision blacked out.

Fighting for his life, Toby squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, not realizing at first that he had done either. Suddenly he became aware that he had.

He had closed his eyes!

He popped them open.

He had control of his eyes!

He had held his breath. He could control his breathing. He wasn't choking. He wasn't drowning.

Fear had done that. Fear had made him think he was dying.

Taking in a deep breath, holding it a few seconds, and letting it out slowly, Toby consciously controlled his respiration. He changed

the rate. He changed the pattern. Yeah, he had complete control of his breathing.

While he'd experimented, his heart had slowed to its normal, steady rhythm. The choking fog in his mind withdrew and dissipated like mist in the hot sun.

Okay, I've got some control. Not much, but some. And I'm not paralyzed, because I can feel things. Paralyzed people can't feel. But I can't move either. What's happened to me?

Toby felt Fear push on the door again. He pushed back. He wasn't going to let it take him. He was like his dad. No fear.

Toby didn't know how long he'd been out before coming to, face to face with the sofa; but he doubted it was more than a few minutes, probably less than a minute. He didn't know how he knew this; he just knew that he did. He couldn't see his watch or the timer on the VCR behind him, but he knew.

Actually seeing them wouldn't have been much help because he had no more than a general idea as to when he had walked into the living room. Sometime around ten to three in the afternoon, he thought. Dad had said he'd be back around three so they could go to the fair. He was rarely ever late. They had an agreement about that. If either said they were going to be somewhere at a certain time, they were. They'd made that pact the day Opal had left them. And they'd kept it.

He listened for the truck. Fear still pressed against the door in his mind...waiting. He could feel its pressure. The door had no knob, no lock, no bolt. Nothing to keep it from opening except his own pressure against it.

Fear pushed. He pushed back. It was that simple.

In his mind he still had all his physical strength and all his physical powers. They were concentrated on keeping that door shut. In reality he couldn't do anything except move his eyes and breathe. Listening for the truck distracted him and kept him from thinking about how long he might be like this, about whether he'd ever recover, about whether he'd ever be able to play football again. Or

tell his dumb jokes. Or kiss Janet—if he could ever get her to notice him.

At thirteen he had an entire life before him. He didn't know what direction it would take. He wasn't even sure what he wanted to do with it. But he did know he didn't want to be like this: helpless, locked inside his body, staring out at the world, watching people feel sorry for him and being unable to tell them what he thought or felt or cared about. He tensed every muscle, swung his arms, kicked with his legs and wiggled his toes.

He remained inert.

Frustrated and angry, he screamed at his useless body and flailed away at it with limbs that remained utterly still. So what if his father came home. He couldn't tell him anything. He had no way to communicate!

Yes, I do. I can use my eyes.

He thrust Fear's door back into its jamb and banished the insidious, stifling cloud that had wormed its way back into his mind during his self-pitying outrage.

He felt ashamed. His father would never have allowed himself to feel like that. Self-pity was shameful. Worse, it was dangerous. It let Fear enter.

Toby listened to the cars drive by. Some pulled up and parked. He listened to their doors open and close, and to the happy chatter with the occasional, odd grumble. He could only catch a word or two, and once, a phrase. People going to the fair were having to park on the side streets of the town and walk down to Madrone's two block "business district" of store fronts built in the 1870's and '80's.

Tonight a great bluegrass band from Eugene was playing. That's why he and Dad were going tonight instead of tomorrow. Sunday's entertainment was some local kids who called themselves the City Kickers. He'd heard them at school, and they weren't very good. They said they did country rock, but it was mostly just bad rock imitations played really loud.

Toby and his father lived close enough so they didn't have to go to the fair and pay the two dollar admission. They could hear the

entertainment from their front porch, but not anywhere near as well as being there. Besides, they would miss the food. And the food was the best part about the fair. They had all kinds of it: barbecue, Mexican, Thai, Chinese, even Greek and Middle Eastern stuff like falafel, dolma, and gyros, which Toby had already sampled for lunch. And the desserts: homemade cakes, pies, cookies, and every kind of fudge you could think of. And none of it restaurant food. These were all homemade goodies from family recipes. That was a fair requirement.

He knew Mrs. Schuyler, next door, had spent the last couple of days baking cookies. This and a dozen other events in Douglas County provided a lot of her income. And she always sold out.

Of course, there were other things at the fair, too. The Oregon wineries set up tasting booths, which he was too young to visit—legally anyway. Last year Harry had managed to get them a glass. What a waste. He couldn't see why anyone would want to drink sour cow piss. That was something he could definitely live without.

Besides which, Dad would tan his hide if he ever caught him drinking, even a little taste. He didn't hold with alcohol at all. He called it a mortal sin.

A bunch of artists, some from as far away as Medford, were there, too. They showed their paintings and pottery and such, but they weren't nearly as interesting as the food.

Their truck's familiar rumble brought Toby back to his immediate situation. He listened to it pull into the drive and heard its door creak open and slam shut with that hollow sound he'd always known. He could even hear his father's boots click-clack on the concrete walk. They pounded up the steps and across the wooden porch to the door. The knob rattled and the door swung open.

"Toby, I'm ho—. Toby! Oh, my God! Toby, what's happened?"

Toby couldn't see his father until he bent over him. Their eyes made contact briefly, but his father didn't seem to notice.

"Toby, can you hear me?"

He grabbed Toby's shoulder and started to roll him over, and then stopped.

“Better not move him till help gets here,” he said softly to himself, not realizing he’d spoken aloud. “Help. Got to get help.”

Toby felt his father’s boots pound away from him across the carpeted wooden floor and then heard them slap the kitchen’s linoleum behind him. He heard his father snatch the phone from the wall, spin the dial three times—one long, two short—and talk to someone. Then he ran back, bent over him again, and prayed to the Lord to take care of his boy. Out of the corner of his eye, Toby could just make out his father’s hair above the white knuckles of his intertwined hands.

Frustrated and helpless, Toby screamed in his mind at his father and tried to tell him what had happened. But even if he’d been able to talk, he wouldn’t have been able to explain anything. Worse, he couldn’t tell him he didn’t hurt anywhere, that he could breathe and feel and hear and see just fine. He just couldn’t move anything but his eyes. If his father would just look at him, he would be able to show him that he wasn’t unconscious; but that he was here, locked inside his body, but here.

He closed his eyes and faced Fear’s door. In his anger and frustration, it had opened. He had to concentrate on keeping it closed. He couldn’t worry about his father or the future right now. He just had to keep that door closed.

He became aware of the siren’s crescendoing banshee wail just before it choked off. Doors slammed and booted feet pounded up the same path his father had taken a few minutes ago. Voices surrounded him and produced a jumble of mostly incomprehensible words. He felt rubber-gloved hands squeezing, pressing and moving over his legs and arms. They felt his fingers, curled them, and let them go. Pressing gently, they worked up his back to his neck and his head. Other gloved fingers pulled his eyelids back and a bright light flared, blinding him. He felt himself try to flinch without success. The fingers let go and he closed his eyes. He tried to close them tight, but couldn’t.

He felt a band which had been wrapped around his right arm immediately begin to constrict and squeeze his biceps. He

recognized the feeling of having his blood pressure taken. The constriction eased, but the cuff stayed in place. He felt fingers press against the pulse in his wrist. Different voices shouted numbers as the hands left him.

Behind him a radio squawked and a voice ran through a rapid routine like an auctioneer. He picked out a few words.

Flaccid.

That means limp, doesn't it? Wasn't that what they said about the kid that got paralyzed in the ball game on the rescue show on TV?

PERL.

What pearl? Where? Did he say my eyes were pearl? What's he talking about? They're blue. No one has pearl colored eyes except Geordi, and he's blind.

Unconscious.

I am not unconscious! Look at me again! Look at me!

He opened his eyes and tried to look up, but couldn't see anyone. The effort made his eyes ache. He closed them again and tried to calm himself. This wasn't getting him anywhere. Somewhere on the periphery of his consciousness, Toby noticed that Fear hadn't been able to open the door even though he hadn't kept the pressure up.

A bulky, soft, but stiff roll was wrapped around his neck. Something narrow and hard was pushed up against his left side. He could feel it press against his arm and leg. Then hands grabbed him all over, pulled his limbs straight, and held his head while they rolled him over onto his back on a hard board.

Thank God.

Toby opened his eyes and tried to make contact with someone. No one looked at his face. Two men in dark blue shirts bent over him. One had a stethoscope in his ears, and he pulled Toby's shirt open. The other peeled large sticky dots off a strip of paper and stuck them to his chest. The first guy put the cold disk of his stethoscope on Toby's chest and listened. Then he moved it down to his stomach. At the same time Toby felt something wrapped tightly around his left arm. This was followed by a sharp jab. He tried to jerk his arm back, but couldn't, of course.

Must be an IV. Amazing what you can learn from TV. I just wish they'd look at me.

Straps were placed across his chest, arms, and legs and cinched tight. Then they picked him up, put him on a stretcher, and rolled him out to the ambulance.

All during the ride to the hospital, Toby continued to try to catch the attendant's eye without success. The medic looked above Toby's head at the wall from which Toby heard a steady beeping sound which he figured must be his heart beat. The attendant looked at the IV bag and drip chamber and fiddled with it now and then. He pumped up the blood pressure cuff and watched it. The only time he looked at Toby's face was when he flashed his light in Toby's eyes.

At the hospital Toby entered a roaring tornado of noise. In short order he was removed from the hard board, put on a thinly padded bed, stripped, pinched, poked, stabbed again, and violated by having a tube impersonally run up his penis by a woman in blue scrubs. She left the tube in and taped it to his thigh. He felt his bladder empty, but he continued to have an urge to pee. Then she put a patient gown over him, snapped its sleeves together around his arms, and pulled a sheet over him up to his chest.

Next he was wheeled to another room and put on a hard, cold table. Looking up, he recognized the business end of an x-ray machine. They moved him through several positions as if he was a side of beef, which didn't seem out of place because the room and table were as cold as a meat locker. While they twisted him this way and that, they talked about all kinds of things except what they were doing. Then they put him back on the stretcher and took him to yet another room with a long tunnel. They put him on a rolling frame. A girl ran him into the tunnel and told him to hold still.

"That's silly, Jessie," the girl said to herself. "He's comatose. He can't move."

No, I'm not! Look at me! I'm here! I'm here!

Chapter 2

Duck Swoop

Three great green baize-like mounds, each surmounted by stands of oak, madrone, and fir, cupped the house and barn in the fold between them. Across these mounds hundreds of biscuit colored sheep moved slowly back and forth, cropping the lush grass. From the road they looked like huge slowly rolling stones except that some of the stones rolled uphill. Others traversed the green felt sideways. Very few followed a stone's traditional path.

A straight, graveled drive bisected eighty acres of pasture dotted with more sheep and led to a copse of silver maples which protected the house from the late June sun. Across a graveled yard from the house stood the barn, a weathered, white-painted wooden structure covered by a gray, baked-enamel metal roof that looked new but was actually five years old. This year the owners planned to sheath the sides in the same material.

Nancy Brandauer, one of the owners, knelt on one knee in the barn and looked over the back of a recently shorn lamb she held with her husband, Ed, the other owner. Contented and at peace, she smiled happily at him.

Nancy loved this time of the year. The rains had slowed to a good soaker every week to ten days. The days in between were usually warm, but the westerly breezes kept it cool enough that stepping into the shade sometimes raised goose flesh. Today's breeze, carrying the scent of firs, pasture, and sheep through the barn, made her glad she'd worn a long-sleeved shirt.

She took a tighter grip on the lamb's neck as Ed lifted the ewe's right forefoot and examined the hoof. She'd been favoring it all day. It didn't look infected, but it wouldn't hurt to paint it anyway.

Ed looked at his daughter, standing by expectantly a couple of feet behind Nancy. In her hand was a can and brush. Baxter, their Australian sheepdog, sat attentively beside her.

“You paint it, Janet, while we hold her.” The girl sprang eagerly to the task. “Now, it will be your job to watch her,” he continued as she daubed a generous portion of the gook on the hoof. “If she’s still favoring this foot on Monday, we’ll have to get the vet out here. If it gets worse, we’ll have to call him sooner. That means we’ve got to keep her in the holding pen, and you’re going to have to feed and water her. I’ll put a bale out for you.”

“Daddy, I know all this.”

Ed looked affectionately at his daughter. Just finished the seventh grade and hasn’t been twelve for a full week yet, but she’s all grown up. “I know you’re going to be a vet, and you’ve done this before, but just humor your old man and let him feel like he’s doing his job.”

“Okay,” Janet said, resigned to the task of caring and feeding a father’s tender ego. They could be such pains about their little girls growing up. She gave it one more try. “Daddy, it’s not a problem. I’ve got it covered.”

“I know you do, Sweetheart. I just feel better when I’ve gone over everything. Helps me to know I haven’t forgotten anything.”

“Okay, Daddy. But you ought to know by now that it isn’t really necessary.”

“I do. But just humor me. Now, she’ll need to be checked four or five times a day, not just in the morning and in the evening.”

“Does this mean I can’t go to the fair?”

“No,” Ed grinned, “I think you can still take a couple hours out for that. Even vets get a chance once in a while to goof off.”

“Great.”

Last fall Janet had announced that she wanted to be a veterinarian. They weren’t sure how strong this desire was or how long it would last; but they treated it as they had most of her other enthusiasms and provided her with information on what it took academically to be a vet, arranged for her to go on rounds with their vet for a day, and increased her responsibilities for the animals.

Janet, in fact, had been the one to notice the ewe's limp and suggest not only the source of the problem but its treatment. Whether she ultimately became a vet or not wasn't what mattered. That she had the opportunity to fully explore the possibility did.

In her practice as a public health nurse, Nancy had seen a lot of children whose horizons had been limited by their parents' own narrow and foreshortened views. They frequently turned out as churlish as their parents who had suffered from the same upbringing themselves. She had always looked upon this as a validation of the old biblical passage about the sins of the father being passed on to the son.

She and Ed had agreed before they were married that their children would not be so burdened. They would be reared with a strong sense of responsibility and the freedom to go in whatever direction their abilities and interests took them. Being able to have only one child had not led them into the folly of forsaking that pledge. Neither had Janet given them cause to question or regret it.

A buzzer blared, startling the ewe. She bolted from Nancy and Ed's relaxed arms, knocked them over, and charged out of the building into the yard. Janet and Baxter ran after it.

Nancy hated that buzzer. It was so loud she swore her neighbors could hear it even though they were half a mile away. Every time she suggested that they shut it off, Ed said that he needed to be able to hear the phone when he was in the barn or yard. He hated answering machines, which was her alternative to the klaxon.

He'd finally accepted an answering machine only because it was the best of the three bad choices her boss had given her. They'd tried a beeper, but it always went off at the worst possible moment. A cellular phone, for which the county would reimburse only the cost of their own calls, had not even been a consideration. It was just too expensive.

If one didn't know the Brandauers very well, one might think that Ed resented Nancy's job. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He was very proud of his wife and her accomplishments. He just wished her job didn't intrude on their life as much as it did. So did Nancy.

She'd hated that beeper more than Ed had. At least the answerer allowed her to screen calls. Even Ed had come to appreciate that little service after a while. He just hated talking to them. Unfortunately today she couldn't screen calls. This was her weekend on call.

She got up, dusting off her jeans while she went to the telephone on the wall by the door. She picked it up just as the answerer kicked in.

"Thank God you're home, Nancy. This is Tom. We've got a Class One Emergency."

Great, just what I need on a Saturday afternoon, Nancy thought. "What is it, Tom?"

"This one is a real bitch. Four teenagers are in a coma."

"So why is that public health's problem?"

Even here in rural Oregon, drug abuse was a major problem. Crank, methamphetamine, was the most popular choice because it was cheap. Since it was manufactured in crude labs hidden in the thick forests that blanketed most of the area, the opportunities for a toxic batch were innumerable. The surprising thing, Nancy thought, was that there weren't more comatose kids.

It's a sad commentary when the first explanation I think of is drugs, she said to herself.

"I know, it sounds like they got a bad batch of drugs or something," Tom said as though reading her thoughts, "except that these kids aren't druggies and their toxi-screens came back negative. That was the first thing they checked. What's more, all of them have been with their parents today, except one, and his dad swears his boy doesn't do drugs."

Nancy accepted that information with a large dose of salt. She knew all too well how little parents knew about their kid's activities. As a Communicable Disease Investigator, she'd seen only too frequently how surprised parents were to find out their angel had hepatitis from drug use, or was HIV positive. And that didn't even begin to touch on the problem with the more common sexually transmitted diseases. But the fact that most of them had been with

their parents all day did make it less likely that they'd scored some bad stuff. Not impossible, but a lot less probable.

"Okay," she said reluctantly. "I'll admit it does sound like it might be our kind of problem. What are you thinking? Biological or chemical?"

"I don't know what to think yet. All I know is that we've got four comatose patients and a flock of terrified parents. You know what I always say, 'If it looks like a duck, and walks like a duck—'"

"—It's probably an Oregon college athlete. I know," Nancy finished his lamest joke. She was so tired of hearing it. But he was right. Health had to investigate. "All right, Tom. I'll leave as quickly as I can. Is the media onto this yet?"

"We haven't gotten any calls from them yet, but they'll be on it soon enough. Just keep a low profile. Once you get some idea of what's involved here, call me. Hopefully they won't show up till you've got a handle on this thing. If they do show up, just refer them to me."

"Don't I always? I hate talking to them. I'll call you after I've talked with the parents and the doctors. Will you be at home?"

"No. I'm in the office. I'll be here till I know what we need to do."

"Okay, I'll call from the hospital as soon I know anything."

"Thanks, Nancy. Sorry to wreck your weekend."

"No," Nancy said with elaborate courtesy. "Thank you. You saved me from checking a thousand sheep for foot rot."

Tom laughed. "Say hello to Ed and Janet for me."

"Will do. Talk to you later."

Nancy looked at her watch. 4:13. She turned around and looked at Ed.

"Big problem?"

Nancy nodded. "Sounds like it could be. Four comatose kids, all at once and no idea what the cause is."

Janet ran back into the barn with Baxter shadowing her, and Ed pushed himself up.

"Don't worry. I've got all the help I need to finish up," Ed said, looking at his daughter.

Nancy looked at Janet as she stood beside her father. She's like a time-warp mirror of myself, Nancy thought. Same plaid cowboy shirt, different color, but the same. Same jeans and boots.

Already nearly as tall as Nancy, but slim and a bit gawky, like most kids her age, Janet had Nancy's thick reddish brown hair, clear complexion, soft brown eyes, and generous mouth.

She's prettier than I was at that age. Still a tomboy, too, despite having become a real woman two months ago. She's going to be a handful when those hormones really hit and she realizes that boys can be a lot more fun than dogs and sheep. Sometimes.

Chapter 3

Falling Down

During the forty minutes it took her to clean up and drive into Roseburg, Nancy ran down a mental list of things that might cause four youngsters to fall into a comatose state almost simultaneously. The closer she got to Douglas County General Hospital, the more she concurred with Tom's assessment of the situation. If drugs and infectious process had been ruled out, which they seemed to have been already, then the remaining possibilities would not be easy to manage, especially from a public health standpoint. In fact, the only good thing she could say about most of them was that they were self-limiting.

In the waiting room of the six bed ER, a kind of organized chaos engulfed Nancy in a whirlwind of scurrying people in assorted forms of hospital dress. She wended her way to the clerk at the admissions desk, flashed her ID, and said she was here to talk to whoever was in charge of the comatose children's cases.

"Thank God! He's been asking about you every couple of minutes."

"Who has?"

"Doctor Stevens. Come with me," she said, grabbing Nancy's hand and dragging her into the alcove that served as the nurses' station. "Just wait here. I'll go get him."

Nancy sat on a chair and listened to shouted orders and vital signs. A corridor stretched before her with three curtained portals on each side. People hurried between these rooms, thrust the pale blue curtains aside, and pulled them back again. The clerk poked her head through one curtain after another till a tall, prematurely graying man in beige scrubs stepped out. She pointed at Nancy and he walked quickly across the room.

“You Brandauer? From the Health Department?”

“Yes. Communicable Disease Investigator. What’s going on here? Don’t tell me you’ve still got these kids down here.”

“No, they’re upstairs. Thank God, the ICU wasn’t full and they’re not in distress.”

“You call being in a coma not in distress?”

“I meant medically. That’s the part of this thing that’s so weird. These kids are all in great health except that they are comatose. No respiratory problems. No cardiac problems. No health problems at all, as far as we can determine, except that they’re unconscious and unarousable. That’s why we haven’t instituted any isolation protocol beyond the usual universal precautions.”

“So who are all these other patients here? Did you get some kind of accident?”

“No. These’re the parents, plus a three year old and her parents that just came in by ambulance. They all went into coma shortly after they brought their kids in. I was talking to one of them when it happened. Scary to see, let me tell you. Like watching dominoes tumble. First one, then another, then another. In less than fifteen minutes, nearly every parent dropped to the floor.”

“That may be scarier than you think,” Nancy said, shuddering involuntarily.

“No, Ms. Brandauer. I worked for WHO before I came here. I know what an epidemic is like. This is bad, but not anywhere near as bad as some things I’ve seen. It’s just scary to see them all fall like that.”

“And they’re the same as the kids?”

“Exactly. No health problems they didn’t have before. No recent infections, except one. We’ve been checking with each of their doctors and getting negative health histories. All the blood work has come back normal so far, not even an elevated white count, and the stat smears are all negative.”

“You mentioned one had an infection.”

“Yeah, cut his hand a few days ago and it got septic. He’s been on penicillin for a couple of days and the infection is already well under control.”

“And nothing else?”

“Nothing. If you want my best guess, I’d say it’s some kind of toxic exposure. I don’t know what or how, but nothing so far points to an infectious agent.”

“What’s the count now?”

“Eleven, I think.”

“How can you take care of that many?”

“We can’t. We’re sending most of the adults and the one three year old up to Lane Community in Eugene. We’re keeping the original four, which still stretches us pretty thin, but we can manage—*if* we don’t get any more cases. We checked with your boss before setting it up,” Stevens added when he saw Nancy start to open her mouth in protest. “He agreed that their care was more important than having them conveniently close for follow-up. Lane Community knows the situation and they will be working with their health department.”

“You said nearly all the parents collapsed. Does that mean that there are some who didn’t?”

“A father, that’s all.”

“Where is he?”

“In Two. He seems in perfect health, but then so did the others.”

“What’s his name?”

“Martin or Marler or something. Miller. That’s it.”

“Thanks.”

She walked as quickly as she could to the room, while dodging a lab tech with a tray of tubes and needles, a couple of nurses, and an orderly with a urinal. From the way he handled the urinal, she was sure it was full.

Inside, a man in his late thirties with collar length black hair and a bushy beard stared up at her with wide, frightened eyes. His torn, stained, striped shirt tucked into jeans with frayed cuffs cut off short suggested that he was a logger. His calf high lace-up boots which lay on the floor beside the bed added to that conviction. The triangular leather pad attached to the right shoulder of his broad, brown suspenders cinched it. Thick wool socks encased his feet and they,

like the rest of his clothes, needed a long soak in strong detergent. The sawdust in his hair suggested he'd come straight from the cutting site.

"Who're you?" he asked.

"My name is Nancy Brandauer, Mr. Miller. I'm a nurse and Communicable Disease Investigator with the Douglas County Health Department."

"You don't look like any nurse I ever saw."

Nancy looked down at her plaid western blouse, faded jeans and boots. "No, I guess not," she smiled.

At least these're clean. Should've seen me an hour ago.

"You're not gonna take any more blood are you? It seems like they already took a quart at least."

"No. I just need to ask you some questions about your child. Is it a boy or girl. They haven't told me."

"Boy. Why do you need to know?"

"Because several children and their parents have fallen ill. Was your wife one of them?"

"No. Don't have one. Ran off and left me with Toby."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't matter. Was a long time ago."

"How old is Toby?"

"Thirteen."

"And where do you live?"

"In Madrone."

"Tell me what happened with Toby."

"I don't know. I came home from work and found him passed out on the floor. I couldn't wake him up so I called the paramedics and they brought him here. They couldn't wake him up either."

"Has Toby been sick at all in the last week or so?"

"No. Just his usual self. He's a real good kid. Been real good since that slu—, since his mother left. Real good."

"Do you know if any of your neighbors are sick?"

"Not that I know of."

"What did Toby do today? Do you know?"

“Well, we was gonna go to the fair.”

“The Madrone Fair?”

“Yeah. We were gonna go tonight to hear the band. He mighta gone down there for some lunch. He loves that food there. It’s usually real good.”

“I know. Is there anywhere else he might have gone?”

“I can’t think of anyplace. He had a buncha chores to do. I didn’t check to see if he’d done ‘em or not, but he’s usually real good about that.”

“Where might he have gone besides the fair?”

“Only over to visit Harry; that’s his best friend. But he wouldn’t a gone today.”

“Why not?”

“Harry and his folks’re gone. Took off for Disneyland yesterday.”

“But he might have gone down to the fair for lunch.”

“If I was a bettin’ man, I’d put money on it. Is that what you figure it is? Some kinda food poisoning or something?”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to get as much information as I can so we can figure out what’s going on. What did you do yesterday? Where did you go and who did you see?”

“No one. We went out to my cutting site and worked all day.”

“Isn’t he kind of young to be cutting timber?”

“Oh, he don’t do no cuttin’ or nothing like that. He just helps me with changin’ chains and keepin’ the saws gassed and oiled. Then I don’t have to stop as much. I can get a lot more cut in less time. I get paid by the tree, not the hour.”

“I see. So you didn’t see anyone else, then? No one else working near you? Stop for gas, anything like that?”

“Nope. Didn’t see another living soul the whole time. Place is real remote. Way out past Driver Valley.”

“And you didn’t eat out last night, or stop somewhere on the way home.”

“No Ma’am. Eatin’ out is kinda spendy for us. We planned to eat at the fair today, so that kinda took care of any other treats for the month.”

“I understand. Now, Mr. Miller, please don’t take offense at this, but I have to ask. Has your son ever been involved with drugs?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“You’re absolutely certain.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Absolutely. Toby is a good boy. I don’t let him run with those boys.”

“I’m sorry, but you must understand, Mr. Miller, that I have to ask. It’s sad, but a drug reaction or overdose or some contaminate in a drug is the most likely explanation for this. I’ve been told that his toxicological screen came back negative, but that doesn’t necessarily rule out drugs. They just test for the most common ones.”

Miller’s voice took on a bit more edge. “I do understand, Ma’am, and my Toby would never touch that stuff. It’s a mortal sin. Same’s alcohol. He’s been raised proper, especially after his momma run off. He’s a Christian young man.”

“Thank you. I’m sure he is and I’m sorry I had to ask. I’ll let you know as soon as we have anything to tell you.”

Nancy left in search of Dr. Stevens. She found him leaving a curtained-off bed.

“Are you certain that you’ve eliminated drugs as a possible source?”

“As certain as we can be. That was our first thought. We not only ran the standard toxi, but had the lab check for any other toxins they could. All negative. And none of these kid’s parents look like druggies.”

“That doesn’t mean much, necessarily, but I know what you mean. Okay, so that means we can probably eliminate that as a source. Did any of the families mention where they’d been today?”

“No, not really. We didn’t ask, and most of them went bad so fast we didn’t have time to get anything like a decent history.”

“None of them mentioned going to the Madrone Fair?”

“Not to me. But I think I did hear one of the nurses say something about it. But I don’t know if she was talking about going herself or someone else going. Why?”

“The Miller boy may have gone to it. The father didn’t and he says that’s the only place his boy’s likely to have gone today. Just a hunch. Which nurse mentioned the fair?”

“Sharon, I think. At least it sounded like her.”

Nancy found Sharon and she confirmed that one mother had mentioned being at the fair before she collapsed. Checking with the other two nurses produced nothing further. Neither had heard any mention of the fair by a patient.

“But,” the male nurse said, “I did notice a receipt in one patient’s purse while I was inventorying her things. It was from a potter who is usually there every year. It was dated for today.”

“Thanks,” Nancy said.

None of them could give any more definite information about where the patients had been the last two days, or what kind of activities they had participated in. It was frustrating. She needed to establish a common link, some point where all their paths crossed.

In the nurses’ station, Nancy dialed Tom Cass’s office. He picked it up on the first ring.

Nancy didn’t even let him identify himself. “Tom, we’ve got a huge mess here.”

“Tell me about it. You find anyone who can still talk?”

“One father, only he doesn’t know anything. He came home and found his son in a coma. Nothing to indicate he was sick before. The only lead I got was that his son probably went to the Madrone Fair.”

“That’s where I was gonna go tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t.” She made a mental note to tell Janet and Ed to stay away from there, too.

“You thinking food poisoning?”

“Something. At least two other cases were there today as far as we can tell. I don’t know that the vector is food, but that’s the most likely since we’ve pretty well eliminated drugs. It’s the perfect setup for this kind of outbreak. It does look like some kind of toxin.”

“Yeah, I know. I talked with Stevens while you were on your way in. I gave him approval to transport those people. God knows we can’t take care of them all here. I’ll scramble a team to check the fair

out right now anyway. Maybe we can get lucky and nip this thing in the bud. The townsfolk won't like it, but I'll tell the team to be discreet. No one's died yet have they?"

"Not that I know of. In fact, none of them look sick enough to die. It's baffling. They are perfectly healthy, as far as anyone can tell, except that they're comatose."

"Weird," Tom said, humming the theme from the Twilight Zone. "Watch out for little green men. You know they always land in remote places like Douglas County."

Nancy laughed. "Right. A bunch of little green men ran around the Madrone Fair, snatched whole families at random, and pumped them full of God knows what; and nobody noticed."

"Happens all the time. Don't you read the papers."

"Not those papers. Speaking of which, I haven't seen hide nor hair of the our local press corps yet."

"They'll show. Have no fear, they'll show."

"Well, I'm going to get some names and numbers and see if I can find anyone else who can tell me anything. By the way, Tom, have you called Salem yet?"

"I was waiting for your report. I'll give them what little we've got now and ask them about calling Atlanta."

"Talk to you later."

At the admission clerk's desk, Nancy asked, "Can you put together a list of the families and their addresses and phone numbers for me? I've got to try to find somebody who knows them and can still talk."

"I can give you the admission info sheets. They should have all that. But I'll need them back."

"No problem. And is there someplace private and quiet, with a phone, where I can make some calls?"

"I'll get the nursing supervisor. She can find you someplace."

"Thanks."

Dr. Stevens stuck his head out the door and said, "There you are. We just got another one. Eight years old. Mother is with him now. We've got them in One. You want to talk to her?"

"Yes. Right now."

“I thought you would.”

In the room, Nancy established what the woman’s name was, where they lived, and that her son had not been sick recently.

“What did you do today?”

“We went to the fair. In fact we were on our way home from there when Teddy said he felt funny. Then he just kinda slumped down in his seat and passed out.”

“Did you eat anything there?”

“A little bit of everything I think. Except Teddy didn’t have any wine, of course. I had a couple samples. You know, those little taster’s cups that hold about a thimbleful. But Teddy had a fajita, and some kind of Greek thing. What do they call it? It’s a sandwich made with strips of broiled meat. Oh, I can’t think of it. And he had a couple of Cokes. I think he had a couple of cookies, too. I know he hung around the stand playing with the lady’s kid and his dog. Cutest little dog; just adorable. And so well behaved and friendly. At first I was surprised that they’d let the dog in, but when I got up close I saw that the boy and dog were standing on the outside of the rope next to the lady’s cart. That’s funny...I feel kinda faint all of a sudden...my arms. I can’t move’em. Why can’t I move my arms? Oh, God! Not me, too. I ca—.” Her voice expired in a rush of air, and she slid out of the chair like a Slinky.

Nancy yelled for help as she leaped forward to catch the woman’s head before it struck the tiled concrete floor. Her left hand provided a bit of a cushion, but did little to slow its descent. Her knuckles paid the price. The woman’s eyes held hers, seeming to plead with her in terror, which Nancy knew was just her imagination reading her own anxiety into the comatose woman’s stare.

A nurse rushed in. “Just stretch her out in alignment right there,” she said and snatched a pillow and placed it under the patient’s head while Nancy helped position her. “We don’t have a bed free yet, but I’ll get us a stretcher or something in a minute.” Snapping her stethoscope into her ears, she listened to the mother’s heart. Nancy stood up and grabbed the blood pressure cuff mounted on the wall and handed it to the nurse.

Dr. Stevens swept in, took in the scene at a glance, and said, "She passed out right in front of you, right?" Nancy nodded. The nurse looked up and gave him the vital signs she'd just taken. "Just like the others," he said. "Perfectly normal except she's comatose."

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the original)

Mission Time Reference: 2.032

We have arrived undetected at the observation site. This initial report is delayed because we became ill and unable to carry out the standard setup procedures shortly after insertion. Medical could not identify the specific problem. Best estimate, an unknown infectious agent of local origin. We are progressing rapidly toward recovery.

We may also have suffered some minor physical damage on insertion. The video and audio monitors are functioning poorly. Repair, if it is possible at all, is estimated to take at least until MTR 3.500.

A foray into the population was made at MTR 1.836. We recognize that this does go beyond mission parameters. Failure of the monitors and the uncertainty of their repair forced us to consider alternatives. In the course of a brief exploration of our immediate area, we became aware of a large public gathering and celebration which was taking place nearby. We believed that such a gathering would allow us to mix with the populace in complete anonymity, and we could not let this opportunity to gather direct data pass.

As expected, a great deal of invaluable data was gathered without exposure. Opportunities such as this are rare. A window, extending from MTR 2.714 to 3.218, during a continuation of this celebration, will allow us a second opportunity to observe and collect direct data. In the absence of our ability to use standard monitoring techniques, which we know are of limited reliability in fulfilling the mission objectives, we believe we have no choice but to make use of it, if the mission is to be successful at all.

Chapter 4

Help

After dispatching a lab team to the fair, Tom Cass placed a call to his opposite number at the State Health Department. He reached him at home and laid out what he knew, what he'd done so far, and what he intended to do.

"Sounds like you've got it under control," he said. "I'd send you someone, but I think we'd do better coordinating things here. Unless, of course, you need the manpower."

"No, I don't. Not yet. If I do, I'll let you know."

"Okay, good. I'll alert the other county departments and I'll put the lab on standby for whatever specimens you send up. Can you get them flown up here?"

"Should be able to. There're a couple of charters here."

"Good. Send us a sample of everything you get as quick as you can. I know you checked for the usual toxins so we'll look for some of the more unusual ones. But if this is something new or one of the rarer ones, then we'll have to have Portland Forensic run some specimens; so send some extra tubes if you can. If Portland doesn't come up with anything, then I guess we'll have to send some fresh specimens to Atlanta. Have you called them yet?"

"No. They're next on my list."

"Good. Maybe they've got something on this that we haven't heard about. Call me when you send your specimens and I'll have someone waiting at the airport."

Tom hung up and called the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, to see if they had any information on similar outbreaks. The person he reached searched the computer database without success.

“I can’t find a thing,” she said. “And you’re sure this is not some kind of drug thing. You know we don’t get involved in that sort of thing.”

“Absolutely. They ruled that out first thing.

“Well, if that’s really the case, then I guess we’ll have to send someone out there. Probably needs to be someone whose special area of interest is neurotoxins, which is certainly what this sounds like. I agree that it’s very unlikely that this is airborne. Got to be some other vector, probably food or drink. Sounds like your investigator is fairly sharp. Our man’ll enjoy having her on his team.”

Tom looked at the phone. His team? Not in my park.

“Whoa there. We don’t need you to send someone out here to run things. While we may seem backwoods, we are capable of running a competent investigation. What we do need is whatever information you might have and perhaps some lab analysis if our own labs come up dry. I thought you might be willing to provide that by phone and fax.”

“Well, I suppose we could do it that way, but our experience is that it’s better to have someone on site. Rather than one of our field investigators, we could send one of our technical staff. Dr. Keller might find this rather interesting.”

“Listen, let me make this as plain as possible. I don’t want an investigator. I’ve got two very good ones already. And I especially don’t need someone who ‘might find this rather interesting.’”

“Oh, Dr. Keller is a Ph.D., not an M.D., and technical staff are never allowed to run investigations. And his area is neurotoxins and neuro-biology so he would be more than interested I’m sure. He just loves a really good mystery and you certainly have one, don’t you? So it’s decided. We’ll get him out there as quickly as we can.”

“Well, if you think he can be of more help here than there, go ahead and send him.”

“He’ll be on the next available plane.”

Tom looked at his watch. Six o’clock our time. That makes it nine theirs. “Let him get some sleep and fly out in the morning.”

“I’ll see what the airline schedules permit. You know there aren’t that many flights to your area.”

“There aren’t *any* flights to Roseburg. The nearest he can get is Eugene. From there he can either rent a car and drive down—that’s about an hour and a half—or he can charter a flight. But finding a rental here on a Sunday afternoon will be difficult.”

“Then I guess we’d better reserve a car for him in Eugene. You do think *they’ll* have something, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Tom said as he grew very tired of this condescension.

“There’s at least one major rental agency right there at the airport.”

“Then he should reach you by tomorrow afternoon. Where should he go?”

“To the Health Department Offices. Its right off the freeway. Exit 124. Brown brick building on the left as he heads east. Can’t miss it.”

Chapter 5

Do You Feel Lucky?

The nursing supervisor closed the door of the tiny office on her way out and left Nancy in blessed quiet. She took a deep breath and bathed her mind in the peacefulness of the little room. She needed to marshal her thoughts, organize them, focus on the problem, and not let the swirling emotional turmoil of the crisis distract her. She had a hunch, but little else. She had to guard against making the mistake of trying to prove her hunch by ignoring data that led in a different direction. She didn't hold out much hope of proving anything tonight except that no one was home.

She looked at the tray of food she'd gotten from the cafeteria and took a bite. It tasted like hospital food. Nutritionally correct and flavorless. Perhaps she would try some later. She savored the thought of a Big Andy's pizza, laden with artery-choking cheeses. *Bet the cafeteria staff goes there.*

This investigation promised to be a good deal more frustrating than usual. She expected to make at least a dozen calls tonight, most of which she knew would go unanswered. Only if she were extremely lucky would she get any kind of a breakthrough, and she didn't feel lucky at all tonight.

She called home first. She had to warn Janet and Ed. The answerer delivered its brief message, and she rapidly gave the warning in case no one was there to pick up the phone.

Just as she had finished, Ed, a little out of breath, came on the line. "What was that? Is that you, Nancy?"

"Yes, dear, it's me. I called to tell you we may not be going to the Madrone Fair. There's a possibility that the emergency stems from there. Possibly some kind of food poisoning."

"What if we just don't eat anything?"

“Or drink anything. I don’t even know if food is the vector. It’s just a hunch. It could be something else, I don’t know. It might not even be that the fair is the source. It’s just that that is the only link between some of the cases that I’ve been able to establish so far. It’s a pretty tenuous one, I know, but I would just feel better if neither of you went there. Not until Tom tells me it’s okay. He’s sending a team over there right now to check all the food vendors, the water, everything he can think of.”

“You sound a little frightened, hon. How bad is it?”

“Twelve, no, make that thirteen people are in comas. One of them went down right in front of me while I was talking to her.”

“Okay. We’ll stay home. Janet won’t be happy about it, but I’ll see to it she understands.”

“Thanks dear,” she said, her voice softening. “Have I told you recently how much I love you?”

“Not since this afternoon. Ages ago. I love you, too.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to get back.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine. You just take care of this thing.”

“Thanks. Love you.”

She replaced the receiver gently, as though laying an infant in its cradle. They would be safe. She knew Ed would heed her warning. He was so different in that regard from many of the men she knew. Ed never felt threatened by her education or her professional ability or authority. He trusted her just as she trusted him. Though he only had a high school education, he had educated himself far beyond the narrow, mental confines of sheep ranching. She could discuss case situations with him, and his observations were nearly always helpful. He possessed a simple, practical sense and an unassuming wisdom, which had not only enriched her life, but had saved her many a heartache in their nearly eighteen years of friendship and marriage.

Heaving a sigh of relief, she picked up another forkful; she was hungry enough now that she could choke down the bland food. She turned her attention to the matter at hand to distract her. Taking the

admission forms, she wrote the names, addresses, and phone numbers on her pad for future reference. She finished and dialed the first phone number.

Chapter 6

Cloudy, Then Sunny

Ed stared at the wall for a moment, his hand still wrapped around the receiver in the wall-phone's hook.

Janet banged in through the kitchen's screen door and snapped him out of his reverie. "Who was that, Daddy?"

"Your mother. She said that emergency of hers might be coming from the fair. She told us to stay away from there. At least until they have it cleared."

"Great," she said, disappointment clouding her face. "Is she sure about this?"

"No, so far it's just a hunch."

"And that's all? What does she think it is?"

"She's not sure. It might be the food. Maybe the water. Or the drinks. I don't know."

"Well, can't we go and just not eat or drink anything?"

"I asked. She said she's not even sure if that's it. It's just that that's the most likely source. It could be something else. Tom's checking it out now. If he clears it, we can go. If he doesn't, there won't be a fair to go to anyway."

"So what now?" she asked

"You hungry?"

Janet nodded eagerly.

"Then I guess I'd better fix us something."

"No, you go clean up and I'll fix us something."

"How about we go into town and get a pizza?"

"All right!" she said putting her hand up for a high five. Ed slapped it, responded with the requisite low five, and lifted her off the floor in a hug.

With arms wrapped around his neck, Janet hugged him back and said, "I hope Momma's wrong, and I hope the cookie lady is there."

"I promise, my little darling, if Momma says it's okay, we're going to the fair tomorrow. My treat. You don't have to spend any of your allowance. Consider it a belated birthday present."

"I love you, Daddy. If we're going to Big Andy's I gotta get cleaned up. I can't be seen there looking like this."

Ed let her wriggle out of his grasp and race up the stairs to her room. She wants so much to be thought of as an adult, but she's still a kid, he thought as he walked up the stairs to clean up and change. I hope she never loses that, not entirely.

In the pickup, Janet looked across at her father. He had changed into clean clothes: chinos, navy polo shirt, and red nylon windbreaker. She'd opted for stone washed jeans and a baggy tee-shirt loudly proclaiming last year's Madrone Fair. Ed smiled at the subtlety, but said nothing.

He covered his thinning, sandy hair, just showing some gray at the temples, with one of his ever-present baseball caps. This one promoted the Farmers' Co-Op. The gray made him look older than his thirty-six years. His hands, though, looked like a teenager's, soft and smooth from years of handling sheep and their wool. Too soft. He always wore gloves to protect them whenever he had any rough work to do.

So like mother and so different, Janet thought—tall like her, but rangy and not as pretty. All the years of working in all sorts of weather had aged his face, though it had kept him strong and slim. Mom had put on a little weight; but whenever she complained that she needed to drop a couple of pounds, Dad always said they were in all the right places

On one point they were identical. When they agreed on something, they were immovable. In all her life she'd never been able to play one off against the other successfully. It was like they were linked telepathically or something. They always seemed to

know what the other thought. Worse, they frequently knew what she thought. Sometimes even before she did.

Chapter 7

Productivity

Nancy put the phone down. As she'd feared, most of the numbers had not answered. The three who did answer didn't even know their loved ones were in the hospital and had little patience for her questions. They just wanted to get in here and see them right now.

The only bright spot, if you could call it that, was that so far her fair theory had held up. All of the people she had managed to reach had confirmed that the victims were either planning, or had actually gone, to the fair. But they'd also gone several other places in the last couple of days: the market, the mall, the restaurant, the movies. One had even gone to Eugene yesterday. There were several places where some of the paths of her pitiful sampling of victims crossed, but still only one where they all crossed—the Madrone Fair. This was not in the least surprising. It was the premier event this month, one of only four major events during the entire summer. Everyone who could went to it.

Before she called Tom, she checked with the ER to see if they had any new cases. They did not. But the press had finally shown up and been their usual intrusive selves. Tom told her to stay out of sight till the vultures had left. He was preparing a statement and calling a press conference for nine o'clock. He figured they'd have to leave within the next ten or fifteen minutes in order to get set up in the department conference room and she could safely go home after that. He told her the fair had been swept and samples of everything edible and potable had been sent to the lab.

Nancy sat at the desk and tried to put her notes into some kind of coherent shape. It was a lost cause. The image of that mother sliding off her chair had played across her mind all evening while she'd made her calls.

To see yourself slipping away like that—helpless—I can't think of anything more frightening.

In frustration Nancy shoved the notes in her briefcase and left.

Ed greeted her at the kitchen door with a cup of hot cocoa and a hug. Janet bounded in from the living room, where she'd been watching TV, full of questions, most of them aimed at whether or not she would be able to go to the fair. Not much reassured, she returned to her program.

"Doesn't sound like it's been a very productive evening for you," Ed said.

"Oh, it was productive, all right. I produced a lot of incomprehensible notes and a mystery worthy of the great Holmes himself." Omitting only the names of the patients to preserve their confidentiality, she then proceeded to tell him everything she had learned.

Ed listened as he had innumerable times before when she could not solve a problem. Though he might understand only a tenth of the technical material, he always seemed to grasp the broad picture with the clarity of a Landsat photograph.

"The problem you have right now is that you just don't have enough information to draw any conclusions."

"And I'm not likely to get any more either. No one knows anything."

"Not yet. And you haven't spoken to everyone. Just the few family members you could reach who weren't affected. And there're still the lab tests."

"I've got an awful feeling they're going to come up negative. This is too unusual. Tom said the CDC didn't have any record of anything like this in their computer; and they have everything in there, not just from this country, but from around the whole world."

"I wouldn't put too much weight on that computer search. A lot depends on how they did it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I try to look up something I know is in ours, if I don't put in the right keywords, it won't find it."

“So you’re saying they just didn’t ask the right questions?”

“Maybe,” Ed said while taking her hand and leading her through the living room toward the stairs. “I’m also saying that it’s not hopeless.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” they said in unison to Janet. “Bedtime.”

With a sigh, Janet turned off the TV. Obviously she was going to have to work a lot harder on her inconspicuousness.

As she went past them up the stairs, Ed continued, “Let’s get some sleep, and you’ll be able to think a lot more clearly in the morning.”

“You’re right, of course. I’m so bushed I can’t be sure of my own name.”

Yeah, but you know what time it is and that I’m still up, Janet thought as she trudged ahead of them up the stairs.

Chapter 8

The Eyes Have It

Sara called her friend and partner, Tanya, into her patient's room. Both had been on duty for more than ten hours, since 7:00 P.M., and felt the strain of having all six beds of the ICU filled: four with comatose patients, one with congestive heart failure, and one in respiratory crisis. They did have the help of another RN and an aide, but the load had still been heavy. With the anticipation of a couple of kids about to be released from class on the last day of school, they looked forward to putting the end of this shift behind them in two hours. Unfortunately, school was not out for them. They both had to return that evening at seven.

At least they could expect the heart case to move out to PCU, the Progressive Care Unit, this morning. He'd been a royal pain—on his bell constantly for niggling little things he could have done for himself. To prepare him for PCU, they'd agreed to wean him off the bell at the beginning of the shift, just as day shift had done.

The respiratory patient was improving too, and might even go out by that evening if she continued to get better. That would leave just the four comas. If they didn't take any more admissions, that would be more than enough to keep them busy.

Coma patients took a lot of care, even on nights. The nurses moved in and out of the rooms constantly, especially in the first twenty-four hours. They measured urine output, checked vital signs and neurological responses every hour, and attended to the myriad needs of patients totally incapable of doing anything for themselves.

Having four such time-consuming and labor-intensive patients was exhausting enough without the additional burden of their being in isolation. Despite the Health Department's assurance that standard universal precautions would be adequate, Dr. Baron, the

neurologist in charge of their care, had insisted that they be kept in strict isolation until he, personally, was satisfied that they posed no threat to staff or visitors. In fact, he had denied them visitors at the bedside because he didn't believe that lay people ever followed the rules carefully enough to suit him. He'd only allowed them to stand, two at a time, outside their loved one's room and look through the window for five minutes.

Tanya tucked the elastic strings of a mask around her ears for what had to be the hundredth time. Then she pulled on a paper isolation gown, put her safety glasses on, and slipped her hands into a pair of rubber gloves. Like Sara, she'd worn a paper surgical cap since the beginning of the shift and changed it only when it became soaked with perspiration or contaminated by contact with the patient.

None of the coma patients' conditions had changed since admission, so she wondered why Sara needed her in here.

"Look at his eyes," Sara said. "I'm so tired I don't really trust myself."

"What am I looking for?"

"I don't want to say just yet. Just check them for me."

Tanya nodded, took the flashlight from Sara's hand and flicked it to and away from the patient's pupils. She measured the reaction with practiced skill. "Normal. Equal and reactive. Just like the others. Your other one the same?"

Sara nodded. "But watch." She took the flashlight and moved it across the patient's field of vision. "See that. I think he's tracking."

"Maybe. Looks a little like it," she said hesitantly.

"Walk around the bed. Toby, keep your eyes on Tanya."

Tanya watched Toby's eyes and walked around the foot of the bed to Sara's side. He held her eyes for the entire journey.

Sara said, "Look at me, Toby."

His focus shifted to Sara.

"Now look at Tanya again."

His eyes returned to Tanya.

"Now, Toby, I want you to blink for me."

He blinked several times rapidly.

“Slowly, Toby. Just once. Close your eyes and open them.”

Toby did as instructed.

“Now, I want you to blink once for yes, twice for no. Understand?”

Toby’s eyes closed and opened once.

Chapter 9

Good News of a Sort

Tom Cass rubbed the sleep from his eyes with one hand while he stumbled from the couch to his desk to answer the phone. He sat heavily in the chair and peered at the numerals on the clock. He couldn't see it clearly because he had left his glasses on the floor next to the couch, but he could see that there were only three digits glowing. He really should have gotten a cot in here from the disaster storeroom instead of just a blanket. The couch was too short and too lumpy. He grumbled a greeting and absorbed the news. The hospital's lab had found no toxins or pathogens in any of the samples from the fair. Taking extra care this time, they had repeated their previous stat tests on the patient specimens and had found nothing of a communicable nature. Whatever this was, it wasn't in the food or the water and it wasn't an infection, at least as far as the lab could determine; and they were the first to admit their testing resources were anything but exhaustive.

Tom asked if any new cases had been admitted. None had been.
Maybe it's over.

Nice thought, but somehow he doubted it. Salem hadn't called yet. He needed to wait for their results before he made a decision. Their lab could conduct more extensive toxicological tests than the hospital's could. They might find something, though he doubted it.

Well, I guess we'll have to wait and see what the CDC's neurotoxin expert has to offer, Tom told himself as he folded himself back up on the couch and felt jealous of the warm, comfortable bed he knew the expert had to be in right now.

Chapter 10

All the Comforts of Home

Zachary A. Keller's bed was neither warm nor comfortable. In fact it was no bed at all. It was a thinly-padded, vinyl-covered, plastic chair bolted into a row with four others in the waiting area of Portland Airport. A two-hour-and-forty-five-minute delay at O'Hare had made him miss his connection in Portland by a solid hour. He now had to endure a three-hour wait instead of a forty-minute change of planes. Contemplating his voyage and what further rigors awaited him, he sat in the chair, his eyes gritty, his body in need of a bath, and his clothes crumpled and smelly.

The flight had been bumpy into Chicago and downright frightening out of it. A freak storm had swept down out of Canada and tossed the plane around like a toy in a demented child's hands. If the supervisor who'd arranged this trip had been willing to wait till the morning flight, he would not only have gotten a good night's rest in his own bed, but missed that demented child's playtime. Now he had not only been denied a much needed good night's sleep, he'd also suffered the indignity of woofing his cookies. Fortunately he'd been able to grab the ever-present, but now politely unmentioned bag from the pocket in the seat in front of him.

He was never airsick. He'd never even been seasick. The only thing that lessened his embarrassment was that half of the other passengers seemed to be airsick too. Either that or Ralph was a very popular name in a lot of loud conversations.

This three-hour wait in Portland had been necessitated by the fact that Eugene was not a major destination on a Sunday. He doubted if it was on any day of the week. What could it have that would attract travelers? It called itself a city, but its population qualified it as little more than a suburb of a real city. And he was

going to an even tinier place, Roseburg—no bigger than a neighborhood. They had more people living in a single block in Manhattan. They'd just spread themselves out all over hell's half acre, so it seemed bigger.

He still didn't understand why they needed him out here. He could do a lot more for these hicks by phone and fax from his lab than he would be able to out here in the sticks with nothing more than a Bunsen burner and a test tube, if they even had such things.

Keller's pessimism about the trip, which had been rudely rammed down his throat, could have been blamed on his exhaustion except for one thing. He absolutely hated bucolia—any place that wasn't city. Even Atlanta was a little small by his standards. L.A., New York, Chicago, San Francisco, D.C.—these were fit places to live.

Well, if I'm lucky, by the time I finally do arrive they'll have discovered that they blew the diagnosis and it's nothing really terrifying at all and I can go home.

Bowing, however grudgingly, to the implacability of the weather and the airline's schedule, he set his priorities. Food was first. He was absolutely ravenous. The nausea had left him before he had even deplaned. Sleep, if it were ever to come, would have to wait till he got on a plane. One thing he knew you never did in any airport, no matter how big or small, was sleep, at least not willingly. Zack rose from the bench and headed across the terminal to where a yawning ticket agent gave him directions to a restaurant.

Chapter 11

Wake Up Call

The phone jangled next to Nancy Brandauer's head and played her spine like a xylophone. She lunged at it with her hand, not so much to answer it as to silence it.

The hot cocoa Ed had given her last night had helped her relax. But what had shut out the swirling questions about this case which threatened to keep her awake most of the night had been the hot shower he'd insisted she take. Actually, the shower probably would not have been enough on its own. His climbing in with her, however, had relaxed her as completely as a kitten sated by a huge saucer of warm milk.

"Yes," she slurred.

"Good. I'm glad I'm not the only one who feels like crap this morning."

"I don't feel like crap, Tom. I'm just not ready to wake up yet, so say what you want and hang up."

"No need to be testy. Salem called a little while ago. It wasn't the fair. At least not the food or the water. They tested for every toxin they could find a test for. All negative. Also there are no indications of infectious disease."

"I thought we'd already cleared that."

"We had on the basis of stat tests of the patients' specimens, but I had the fair samples checked as well. All clean. No pathogens."

"Great. Now what?" Nancy didn't really want to know, but she knew she was going to be told anyway, so she may as well sound like she cared.

"So now we go back to what you do best. Tracking diseases down."

"Thanks. Am I going to get any help?"

"CDC's sending someone out. Expert on neurotoxins they said."

“That’ll help a lot,” Nancy said without enthusiasm.

“Yeah, I agree. Somehow I can’t see him trotting around with you asking questions. That’s why I’ve got Peggy and Sue coming in to give you a hand with the interviews. By the way, you might be pleased to know that they haven’t had any admits since last night. Maybe this thing’s run its course.”

“Why don’t I believe that?”

“Because you’re a pessimist.”

“Several thousand STD interviews can do that to you. You ought to try it sometime.”

“No thanks. I prefer being boss to being a sex snoop.”

Nancy laughed despite herself, “Gee. Thanks, Boss. By the way, Sexually Transmitted Disease Investigation is how we professional sex snoops prefer to refer to our calling.”

“Oh, so now it’s a calling, like some kind of religious experience.”

“Not quite. Actually, I think it would be good for you to spend a day with me. Think of the thrill of discovering yet another sweet, innocent, thirteen-year-old girl who can’t tell you who gave her the clap because she’s not sure who all she’s slept with.”

“Well, this will be different.”

“Why? Because I’m not trying to find Steve Stud and Susie Slut?”

“Because we’re going to get some cooperation from the press.”

“Boy, you need some more sleep. You’re starting to fantasize. Why don’t you go to bed and call me at a decent hour.”

“This is a decent hour.”

“Not for a Sunday morning. The sun hasn’t touched my window yet.”

“Your window faces west.”

“Okay, I can see I’m not going to get any peace till you tell me everything. So just what form did this cooperation take? Did they promise not to run the story? Or are they just going to bury it in the want ads?”

“Girl, we are cynical this morning. No, they’re going to run the story on page one.”

“Great. Now we can have panic in the streets. At least it’ll close the fair down.”

“No, it won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t mention the fair as a source.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t. We had no concrete evidence that the fair was involved. As it turned out I was right. There is none.”

“So how’s the media going help me? Are they going to do my interviews for me?”

“That’s not a bad idea, but no. They’re going to ask anyone who knew the victims to call us here. It’ll save you having to run all over the county. You can do the interviews on the phone right here in the office.”

“Only if their friends and neighbors read today’s paper.”

“Not just the papers. The radio and TV stations are going to run the request on every newscast, even the cable bulletin board will run it.”

“Well, that may help,” Nancy said doubtfully, “but I’ve got a feeling we’re going to get a lot of panic and crazy calls.”

“Inevitably. That’s why I’ve got Peggy and Sue coming in. Sue can screen the calls and you and Peggy can do the interviews.”

“Terrific.” She did not relish the thought of spending the day cooped up in her office. She had actually been looking forward to roaming the countryside in her Jeep Cherokee. It was one of the pleasures of her job, especially on a beautiful summer’s day. Now all she had to look forward to was another day on the phone.

“Atta girl. See you around eight-thirty?”

“What time is it now?”

“About quarter to eight.”

“Make it nine-thirty.” Nancy said, as she hung up and rolled back into Ed’s arms.

Chapter 12

Mind Blast

The elation Toby Miller felt at having finally made contact with someone lasted for about five minutes. As soon as Sara and Tanya had established his consciousness to their satisfaction, they hurried out of his room, while they chattered about checking all the others. Sara, at least, had said she was sorry she had to leave him, but she'd be back as quickly as she could and had given his hand a little squeeze with her gloved fingers.

How he hated the feel of those gloves. The rubber pulled at his skin and felt alien. He longed for the touch, the feel of human skin against his own, just so he wouldn't feel like some kind of freak, an object to be feared. He felt isolated enough without the additional barrier of the fear that he could somehow pass this disease on to others.

He had overheard them talking last night about what the odds were that he would come out of this. They were pretty grim. He wondered if they had boosted those odds any, now that they didn't think he was comatose. The only consolation he could draw from what they'd said, if you could call it that, was that most patients like him died in a relatively short time, so he wouldn't have to live like this very long. Terrific.

His thoughts grew blacker as he contemplated dying slowly, his body wasting away from lack of use. Dying quick and clean was definitely preferable at this point.

Sara pushed through the door and interrupted his rumination. She came directly to his bedside without having put on gown, mask, or gloves. Her eyes sought and held his all the way across the room till she stood beside him.

“They’ve lifted the isolation, Toby. Whatever it is that happened to you, there’s no evidence that you can pass it on. And there’s more good news. The rest of you are all just locked in, not comatose. Dr. Baron’s coming in to check all of you and confirm our diagnosis. What that means is he’s going to examine you and ask some questions. Just follow his instructions as best you can. I’ll be here with you, so don’t worry,” she said, while patting his hand.

Images exploded in Toby’s mind. Blinding him like bright flashes of light, they blasted his consciousness with each momentary touch of her fingers. Her hand withdrew and they were gone. He searched her face to see if she’d felt it too, but she seemed completely unaware of it.

He tried to recapture the images and to recall them in some kind of order so he could make sense of them. He was only able to grasp a fading collage of faces and places—all of them strange to him, except one. His head. Lying on a white pillow, his face strangely slack, without expression, his eyes locked on himself, he looked down on himself.

He had seen himself through someone else’s eyes.

Sara’s?

But how? What was going on here?

Before he could pursue the thought any further, a man in casual clothes strode into the room and Sara turned around to greet him.

“Dr. Baron, you got here very quickly.”

“Your message left me little choice. You say all four of these patients are locked in, not comatose?”

“Not just me; Tanya agrees with me.”

“So you said. Do you have any idea what you’re suggesting? Ventral Pontine Syndrome is a rare phenomenon. To have four patients, all locked in, all struck down within minutes of each other, is completely unheard of. This is very exciting.”

Toby didn’t find it exciting at all; and Sara, as though reading his thoughts said, “I wonder if it’s as exciting for the patients.”

“I’m sorry,” Baron said as he stepped around her to look at Toby. “Of course it’s not exciting for you.”

With that Baron began a quick, but thorough, evaluation of Toby's neurological status. Whenever he touched Toby's skin directly, Toby experienced the same flash of images he had with Sara's touch. If the contact was prolonged for a few seconds, he picked up feelings and thoughts as well.

The excitement Dr. Baron spoke of underscored his feelings but was not the primary feeling Toby sensed. The primary, overall feeling was one of impatience and doubt, mixed with intrigue despite his natural skepticism and pessimism. Or rather, despite Dr. Baron's natural skepticism and pessimism.

This telepathy thing could get very confusing, Toby thought.

With the feelings, he acquired a sense of why the doctor felt the way he did. Nothing clear, nothing dramatic, just a subtle, subliminal understanding. He also learned that Dr. Baron was definitely completely unaware of the telepathic link. His thoughts and feelings were too unguarded. This gave rise to feelings of embarrassment and even shame in Toby. It was the same kind of shame he'd have felt if he saw a man and woman making love or overheard an intimate conversation.

He tried projecting a thought into Baron's mind while the doctor held his arm and tapped his elbow.

No response. He was as deaf as a block of stone. Or whatever it is when you can't read someone else's mind. Hearing just seemed the best way to describe it, except that Toby didn't hear Baron's thoughts in his head. He couldn't really describe it. He just knew what the doctor thought as he thought it.

The link stopped as though severed by a knife when Baron dropped his arm onto the bed. He was a stranger again and as unreadable as he had been before. Well, not entirely. Toby could now interpret the doctor's non-verbal cues much more accurately. His body language took on considerably more import than it had before. But at least he was free of the unbearable intimacy of his unwilling invasion into the doctor's mind.

Baron leaned over Toby and focused the ophthalmoscope. The light reflected back from Toby's cornea and gave him a brief, ghostly

glimpse of his own retina. Since there wasn't any direct contact, he could not see through the doctor's eyes. When Baron shifted to the other eye, he brushed Toby's nose with his hand and recreated the link and then broke it. The image of his magnified eye flashed in his mind, swallowed by the brilliant white light that crossed into his eye.

Baron leaned back and said, "All right now, Toby. I want you to follow this light with your eyes."

About eight inches from Toby's face, Baron moved the ophthalmoscope in a vertical arc, from his chin to his forehead and back to his chin. Toby followed it without difficulty.

"Good. Now the other way."

He moved the light horizontally and Toby followed it again.

"Very good," Baron said, surprise obvious in his voice. "Please blink your eyes slowly for me."

Toby did as he had before for Sara and Tanya.

Baron had him blink once for yes and twice for no, and asked a series of questions to check his orientation. Toby passed with ease. Then he had Toby count by blinking. Then add and subtract.

Toby eyes became tired with all the activity, and he closed them for a few seconds. Baron seemed to understand, for he said that was enough for now. On his way out, Toby heard him tell Sara that his being able to move his eyes laterally was a good sign. He wondered which direction laterally meant. It didn't matter that much. The important thing was that the Dr. Baron thought it was good.

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the original)

Mission Time Reference: 2.622

Recovery from our illness appears to be nearly complete.

The video monitor has failed completely. Both audio and video signals in this area are weak. The transmissions seem to be hampered by the local topography, and we attribute much of the video failure to that. We will have to attempt to boost signal gain and sensitivity. Full restoration, if it is possible at all, is still estimated to take until MTR 3.500.

The audio monitor seems less affected. We have been able to intercept a brief message suggesting some sort of local plague on one of the bands. We will continue to try increasing reception on the other bands.

The possibility of a plague has forced us to reconsider our plan to mix with the populace at the celebration a second time. Though our immunization program makes it extremely doubtful that we might be infected or transmit an infection, the fact remains that we did suffer from an attack by what appears to have been a local infectious agent, an agent which we still have not been able to identify. These facts demand that we exercise prudence.

This celebration, however, is a singular opportunity, as we have explained before. It is one which we consider vital to the mission's success, especially in light of the fact that we can not use monitoring as our primary source of data. For that reason we are considering a limited excursion, one in which we will keep contact to a minimum. We will continue what audio monitoring we can in an effort to determine the extent of the danger.

While it is recognized that first missions are the most difficult for which to anticipate variables, we believe that the testing of the immunization program, as well as the monitoring equipment, was

not as rigorous as it needed to be. It is noted that these failures have not been incapacitating, but they may well have endangered the accomplishment of the mission goals.

Chapter 13

Another Fantasy Bites the Dust

With mounting excitement, Janet Brandauer hurried through her morning chores. She checked the ewe for the third time. It was walking fine now. The gook had done its job just like it always did.

Her mother had given her the okay for them to go to the festival. She had done so very reluctantly and only with a warning to be sure they only bought food and drink from people they knew. Mom could be a pain about some things, but she'd never been one about food, so Janet had asked why she was being one now. When Nancy had explained it all, it left Janet a little apprehensive. The best part about the festival was the food. Now she had to ask Daddy for permission to eat or drink anything there. This meant, of course, she would be thinking about falling down in a quivering, drooling mass with every bite. Gross!

Maybe it was just as well Mom wasn't going with them. She'd be a real drag as she checked everything out to see if it had bugs, or smelled funny, or whatever, even though she'd told them that Mr. Cass had said everything had checked out okay. She was like that sometimes.

Walking out of her bedroom in white pants, bright multi-colored top, and her "dressy" white Reeboks, she started down the stairs to wait for her father. He was always late and always slow to get away. It drove them nuts. But he was so apologetic about it that they could usually get him to do something special for them as a way of making up for it, so they tolerated it. Of course, they would never ruin a good thing and tell him that.

About ten minutes later, Ed came downstairs in the same outfit he'd worn last night when they'd gone to Big Andy's and asked her if she seen his wallet. Janet pointed to it on the dining room table. He

retrieved it and announced himself at last ready to go. It was almost eleven-thirty. A girl could starve.

On the way, he apologized and suggested she keep her eye out for something special for Mom's birthday. "And maybe we can find something for you, too."

With a solemn smile, Janet said she would and struggled not to laugh. *Have we got him trained or what.*

Janet sneaked a sideways look at her father and saw his grin. It didn't look like the kind you had when you were just ordinarily happy. It looked like the kind you had when you'd just pulled one off.

He knows. Daddy, you sneaky old devil. And another fantasy bites the dust. If this keeps up I won't have any childhood fantasies to last me through the rest of my childhood.

Chapter 14

Getting an Earful

By a few minutes after noon, Nancy had realized that she had woefully underestimated the pain she would endure by spending the day on the phone talking to well-meaning, but essentially uninformed people. Both of her ears ached. She knew that if she looked at them in a mirror, she'd see the square imprint of the receiver on them. She envied Sue's earphone with its little microphone. Weighing almost nothing, it just hung on her ear and let her move around and use both hands freely. Unfortunately, these were custom fitted like hearing aids and could only be plugged into her console. At this point she would have settled for a speakerphone, if she could have found one that didn't make everything sound like radio reception in an electrical generation plant.

Peggy sat across from her. She was resplendent in a shirtdress of bright geometric reds and blues, which contrasted sharply, as usual, with Nancy's cream cotton blouse and tan pants. She watched Peggy move the phone from one side to the other while she nodded and made a note on the interview form in front of her.

Their desks faced each other, separated by a narrow aisle. Nancy signaled Peggy that she was going out to get some fresh air when her phone rang. Picking it up with a sigh, she gingerly touched it to her ear.

"This the detective that's lookin' into what happened to the Townsends?"

The voice was female, of indeterminate age, and had recently been used to etch glass.

"This is the Nurse Investigator for the Health Department."

"What's your name, honey?"

“Mrs. Brandauer. And yours is?”

“Alice.”

“Well Alice, how may I help you?”

“You can’t do nothin’ fer me. It’s me what can help you. Ain’t that why you asked us to call?”

“Yes. You mentioned that you have some information about the Townsends? Is that Mrs. Gloria Townsend and her son Theodore? Teddy?”

“Shore is. Don’t surprise me in the least that she done got herself in trouble. Her son too. Nope. No surprise at all.”

Nancy sighed inwardly. Not another gossipy old lady of Appalachian ancestry. I thought the county was supposed to be thirty or forty percent immigrants from California and Colorado. Seems like all I’ve talked to today have been transplanted hill folk.

“Alice, they’re not in trouble. They’re sick, but—”

“Dang betcha they’s sick. The things they do would pop your skull.”

“Alice, I meant they are physically ill. They and several other people passed out yesterday and haven’t awakened yet.”

“Druggers. I knowed it.”

“No, drugs were definitely not involved. We’ve already ruled them out.”

“So if it weren’t drugs, what was it?”

“That’s what were trying to find out. We’re trying to find out where they were and what they were doing for the last couple of days.”

“Well, why din’t you say so? I can tell you all about ‘em. Whatcha wanna know?”

Nancy took the receiver away from her left ear for a moment and looked at the ceiling. She put it back, winced, and changed quickly to her right ear.

“We have a few specific questions. If you don’t know an answer, please say so. The information needs to be very accurate.”

“Okay, honey, whatcha wanna know?”

“First, do you know what places either of them might have gone to on Friday?”

“That’s easy. They didn’t go nowhere. They just stayed around the house ‘cause she had a gentleman caller.”

“Do you know who he might have been?”

“Well, they don’t see fit to confide in me, but I know he’s kinda a regular a hers. Just beats me how she can carry on like that with the boy right there in the house with ‘em.”

“But you have no idea what his name is.”

“Well, I think I onced heard her call him John,” she said with a giggle.

“Okay, so they stayed home Friday. Do you know if they went anywhere Saturday?”

“Well, I know they was goin’ to that Madrone Fair. We useta go ever year ourselves till they let them godless painters set up their pictures of naked women and such. No surprise that they went. No sir. None at all.”

“Did they mention any place else that they might go to you?”

“Well, like I said, they don’t exactly confide in me, but their drive is right nexta my kitchen winda and they’s always talkin’ about where they’s goin’ while they’s gettin’ the car outta the garage. Can’t help but hear ‘em, ya know. I mean they’s right unda my winda.”

“Yes, I understand. Where else were they planning to go?”

“To the market.”

“Do you happen to know which one?”

“Well, they’s only one that worth goin’ to, honey. Rolley’s.”

Of course, how stupid of me, Nancy thought.

“Did they mention anywhere else they might go?”

“Well, they was talkin’ about goin’ to a movie after the fair.”

“Anywhere else? Before the fair?”

“Not that I heard ‘em say.”

“Thank you very much, Alice.”

“You mean that’s it? You ain’t gonna tell me what this is really all about?”

“I did. They are both in a coma, and we were trying to get some information about where they might have been.”

“No, I mean the real reason. I mean I’m their neighbor an’ gotta right to perteck myself if they’s got sumpthin’ catchin’ or sumpthin’.”

They should be so lucky. “There is no other reason, and I doubt very seriously that you have anything to fear.”

“Well, if you’re shore they’s nothin’ else,” the woman said obviously hoping Nancy would break down and give her the real story.

“Yes, I’m sure. Thank you,” Nancy said, hanging up quickly and walking outside.

She paced for a couple of minutes trying to put the tidbits of information she’d gleaned into some kind of coherent whole. The problem was that the interviews had only revealed how little these people’s friends and neighbors knew about their recent movements, and how much intimate information (read gossip) they possessed. Many had said they thought the victims were going to the fair, or had planned to go, like everyone else. Several had said they’d been there with them. They’d also given a list of other activities and places that covered every venue from fine arts to the dump.

Maybe the fair isn’t the source, she thought. Maybe I’ve just fixated on that. Maybe there was some kind of toxic aerosol released yesterday, and they all drove through it before the wind dissipated it too much to do any more harm. But where? These people lived all over the county. One of the families lived on the coast in Reedsport. And what about the other counties? Is this just our problem?

Shaking her head as much to clear it as to indicate her bewilderment, Nancy went back inside. Before returning to her desk she knocked on Tom’s door.

“Have you checked to see if Lane or Josephine or Coos counties have had any reports of this problem?”

“Salem alerted the whole state, and I haven’t heard anything from anyone. They said they’d call if they did get any reports. How are you doing?”

“About what I expected. Most of the calls have been well meaning, but not much help. There isn’t any common denominator that’s a hundred percent. The front runner is still the fair, but Rolley’s is a close second.”

“I’m not surprised. Those are the two places most of the county goes to. The primary difference is that Rolley’s is open every single day of the year, even Christmas, and the fair’s open just one weekend a year. We all shop at Rolley’s because it’s the cheapest place to get groceries and most of the other stuff we need all the time. But if the problem was there, there’d be more people getting sick over a longer time frame. No, it has to be something that’s here one moment and gone the next.” Tom looked up at Nancy and shook his head, “Look at me lecturing you of all people.”

“It’s all right. It’s got me going, too.”

“You hungry?”

“Yes,” Nancy said, a little surprised. “I never realized how much energy talking took. I always figured it was all the driving and walking that made me hungry.”

“Talking and listening intensely can burn a lot of energy. How’s Chinese?”

“The Rice Merchant?”

“It’s Sunday. Remember? They’re not open on Sunday.”

“Sorry, I forgot,” Nancy said, her disappointment plain.

“The Peking Palace is open.”

“What about pizza? They’ll deliver.”

“Okay,” Tom said, with less enthusiasm, “a medium supreme for me and a couple of Cokes.” He reached into his wallet and extracted a bill.

“Sorry, Tom, I just can’t eat truckstop Chinese after I’ve had the real thing.”

“It’s okay, I understand. I just can’t afford their prices.”

“It’s like I told you, they’re not really more expensive, they’re just better. You need to try it sometime, instead of letting the takeout menu prices scare you off.”

“Maybe sometime later.”

“Let me check with Sue and Peggy. I think we might all be happy with a couple of large supremes.”

“Okay by me.”

Nancy left to talk with them both and returned. They’d agreed on the pizza and had given her drink orders.

“Okay, I’ll call Salem and check in with them on any new cases, while you get our pizza order called in.”

“Okay. I’ll give Peggy a break while I’m at it. She looked like she was developing an urgent need to poison her lungs.”

Nancy returned to her office, confirmed Peggy’s need for nicotine, and let her satisfy it. She had scarcely finished confirming the pizza order when the other line rang. Sighing, she answered it.

Chapter 15

What a Lovely, Fair Day

Most people didn't bring their dogs to the fair because they were not allowed past the gate into the area where the food was sold. But Janet loved to take Baxter with her everywhere she could. He had gotten so used to going along that he had jumped into the truck cab as they got in to join them in another adventure. Ed thought about taking him back to the barn, but he didn't want to make them any later than they already were. He knew Baxter would stay in the truck for the couple of hours they would be cruising the fair's booths, so he let him stay.

As they pulled into the parking area, Janet had spotted a boy and his dog standing near the entrance. For some reason the dog captivated her. She bounded out of the truck and raced up to them. Baxter leaped out after her and panted happily at her side. Ed followed at a more leisurely pace, taking the boy's clothes. He was dressed in tan chinos, green plaid, button-down short-sleeve shirt, and new cordovan penny loafers. He looked like a miniature version of a fifties college senior. Only his hair looked natural for a kid—brown and somewhat unruly, though not as much as his age. He couldn't think of the last time he'd seen a kid dressed like that and not on his way to church. Maybe that was it. He'd just come from church. After all, it was Sunday.

Baxter placed himself protectively in front of Janet and leaned forward sniffing. The boy's dog was a scruffy cream and tan character with bright black eyes that looked like a cross between a Maltese and a poodle. He sat quietly till Baxter had satisfied himself that he posed no threat and then stood and sniffed back with a kind of reserve and dignity that Janet had never seen in a dog before, especially one confronted by another dog. With noses twitching and

snuffling, they turned and sniffed each other's rear ends. Satisfied that neither posed a threat, they turned back to face each other. Baxter's nose brushed across Scruffy's, and he leaped back with a yip as though he'd been stung. Scruffy didn't react at all except to sit down beside his master. Baxter, completely cowed, ran behind Janet, parked himself and looked around her legs at the little dog.

This was most uncharacteristic behavior for Baxter. He had never shown fear of another animal. After all, he was a sheep dog, trained to herd and protect Ed's flock. If a thousand sheep didn't scare him, a scruffy little ten pound mutt certainly shouldn't. Yet there he stood, cowering behind Janet's legs.

Ed had watched this entire performance as he trailed behind Janet. He arrived at her side just as Janet bent over and offered her hand for the little guy to sniff. He gave her hand a polite, dry lick, and continued to sit on his haunches at the boy's feet.

Janet scratched it behind the ears and said, "Isn't he the cutest little thing you've ever seen, Daddy?"

Ed nodded, "Yes, a fine dog."

"He's so well-behaved. How did you train him to be so good?" Janet asked the boy and looked down at her normally happy-go-lucky clown who had now moved tentatively to her side.

"He's very smart," the boy said matter of factly, "and I've had him since he was born, so it wasn't very difficult."

"What is he?" Janet asked. "He looks a little like a Maltese, but he's got these biscuit patches and the face isn't quite right."

"He's a little of everything, I guess."

"A mutt. Oh, I think they're the greatest. Right, Daddy?"

"Most of the time. For pets and companions they can't be beat," Ed said.

She straightened up and scratched Baxter behind his ears. "It's okay, boy. See? Just some static electricity."

Sniffing the space between the strange dog and himself intensely, Baxter leaned forward. Seemingly satisfied he sat back, but ventured no nearer the boy or his dog.

As interesting as the dogs were, Ed found the boy even more interesting. Although he was a good looking boy a year or two younger than Janet, he spoke like an adult. Not just his choice of words, but his way of speaking was adult. Janet spoke well, often very much like an adult, but there was still that unmistakable quality in her voice and manner which said child. This boy had none of that. He sounded like someone twice his apparent age. And he carried himself the same way: easy, assured, with none of the deference or insecurity that a child his age might be expected to show when meeting a strange adult.

Then there was his tan. It didn't look like a tan. The golden perfection of it was too smooth, and his skin showed none of the dryness associated with summer tans. But if it was his natural color, it wasn't quite like a Mexican's or Indian's. Not as coppery.

Listen to me! Ed said to himself angrily. I sound like some goddamned Neo-Nazi. Who the hell cares. He's a beautiful child. Well-mannered, intelligent. What does it matter what his race is?

"What's his name?" Janet asked, standing up.

"Nick. Mine's Billy." He stuck his hand out to her.

"Where're you from?" Janet asked, taking his hand and giving it a brief, firm shake.

"Utah. This is our first time to visit this area. It's really beautiful. A lot different than home.

"That's what a lot of rain does for you."

"Where are your folks?" Ed asked.

"I'm not sure right now. They're around somewhere. We kinda lost track of each other. That's why we're staying here. I know they'll have to come back this way on the way to the car."

They stood at the western boundary of the downtown area that had been roped off for the fair. People strolled in and out of stores and through the booths set up on the street. Ed cast his eyes over them and searched for that same golden color of skin. No luck.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you, Billy—"

"—And you too, Nick," Janet interjected.

“Yes, and Nick,” Ed continued, “but we have to get moving if we’re going to see everything.”

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you, too. Both of you. Enjoy yourselves. Be sure and try Mrs. Schuyler’s cookies. They’re the best I’ve ever had.”

“We know,” Janet said. “We get some every year.”

Chapter 16

Rumpled of the CDC

The pizzas Nancy ordered arrived in their familiar red and blue vinyl case, carried by the usual delivery boy. A tall, thin, rumpled man in a suit came in with him carrying their drinks and a briefcase.

Nancy turned, looked up absently, waved them to an empty desk, and returned to her interview form to finish her notes. Her head snapped up and she spun around to face them.

“Zack?”

The rumpled one looked at her a moment, his face shifting from bewilderment through recognition to shock. “Nancy?”

Peggy, who was standing in front of Nancy’s desk, watched the color drain from her face, and then looked at the rumpled man and said, “Kinda overdressed for your work, aren’t ya?”

“What? Oh, yeah. I mean... Uh, I’m not the delivery man. I was, uh, just helping out. Uh, here.” He set the cans down next to the pizza boxes and attempted to straighten and button his double-breasted suit but was hampered by the briefcase in his hand.

“Forget it,” Peggy said. “I think that suit’s a lost cause, unless the unstructured look is coming back.”

“Yeah. I mean, no, it’s not. I mean...” His voice faded in to a helpless mumble.

“That’s okay; it’s been one of those days for us too,” Peggy said.

Rumpled took a deep breath and pulled himself together, “Dr. Zachary A. Keller, CDC.”

“Ms. Margaret F. Richards, BSN, PHN, DCHD.”

She stuck her hand out across Nancy’s desk and forced Zack to step forward. His briefcase struck Nancy’s knee and jolted her out of her torpor.

“Zack? Is that really you?”

“That’s what I was about to ask.”

“You mean you don’t know if you’re really Zack?” Peggy said.
“Maybe you should go out and try again.”

“Ignore her,” Nancy said. “She loves to keep people off balance.”

“She’s very good at it.” Zack said, setting the briefcase at his feet. He fumbled with his tie for a second, then dropped his hands and heaved a frustrated sigh.

Peggy shot Nancy an exaggerated look of wounded pride and took the money off her desk. Handing it to the delivery man, she said, “Next time just bring the pizza.”

“What are you doing here, Zack?” Nancy asked.

“I’m the one they sent out from the CDC. I’d have been here sooner, but my Chicago connection was delayed, which made me miss my Portland connection. I’ve been on a plane or in an airport for the last,” he checked his watch, “nineteen hours, except for the two-hour drive down here from Eugene.”

“And you look every minute of it,” Peggy said as she pulled out the chair behind him at an unused desk perpendicular to Nancy’s. “Sit down, kick your shoes off, put your feet up. No! Wait a minute. Don’t kick your shoes off. We don’t need another toxic spill. You can put your feet up, though. That’s Cheryl’s desk. She’s on vacation, so she won’t notice any scratches. Actually I doubt she’d notice any if she were here.”

“So you’ve been able to identify the source. I’m impressed,” Zack said taking a seat in the chair. He made no attempt to remove his shoes, nor put his feet on the desk.

“Don’t be,” Peggy said. “We’ve only been able to determine what it isn’t. Pretty much, that is. Looks like you had a little toxic spill of your own. Rough ride, huh?”

Zack’s coat had opened when he sat and revealed a telltale stain on his white shirt. His cheeks reddened.

“Very rough. I’m surprised I made it here at all. And what is it, or should I say, isn’t it that you’ve sort of eliminated?”

“Biological.”

“As in infection?”

Peggy nodded. "Looks kinda like it got the tie too, unless that's part of the pattern. Can't really say with that pattern, though. At least it's not chunky, so it's not really obvious."

"It's the pattern," Zack said after a brief examination. "Have you considered biological toxins?"

"You mean like tetanus?"

"Well, not that one specifically. It doesn't fit the profile I was given, but there are a lot of naturally occurring biological toxins. A lot more than the artificial, chemical ones that grab all the headlines. If you knew how many and how widespread they were you wouldn't step foot out of a clean room."

"Then how come most of us survive in the wild?"

"Beats me."

"Well, listen. You can just sit right there and contemplate that little conundrum while you join us for lunch before it gets cold. Nothing I hate worse than cold pizza. Unless it's warm Dr. Pepper," Peggy said as she lifted a sweating can from the pack with one hand while she passed a box to Nancy.

"You've obviously never been through Texas," Zack said.

"Huh? Texas? What's Texas got to do with anything?" Peggy asked.

"They serve Dr. Pepper hot, like coffee, there. They boil off the carbonation and serve it in a mug."

"Yuck. I always knew there was something sick about those good ol' boys. Now I know what it is."

"What what is, Peggy?" Tom asked as he entered the room with Sue trailing behind him. She grabbed a can and two slices of pizza and returned to her desk to answer the phone. "Tell them we're all out at lunch and to call back after one," Tom yelled at Sue's retreating back.

"Never mind, it'd spoil your lunch."

"I saw the boy leave, but you didn't call, so I just came on in." Spotting Zack at Cheryl's desk, he walked over and said, "Tom Cass."

Zack turned in the chair and stood up, nearly falling over his briefcase. Catching his balance half a degree before toppling into

Cass, he took Tom's extended hand as his face turned red, "Dr. Zachary A. Keller, CDC."

"Been one of those days for you too, huh?" Tom smiled, enveloping Zack's hand in a hearty grip. The contrast between the two men was striking. Tom stood nearly as tall as Zack, but was nearly twice as wide and little of it was muscle tissue. His dress was every bit as ruffled as Zack's but far more casual: battered tennis shoes, wrinkled khaki pants, and a faded blue tee shirt advertising a beer produced by a bear in the woods while standing behind a tree. He stopped jacking Zack's hand up and down and said, "Well, sit down and put your feet up. Cheryl'll never notice the scratches."

While they ate, Tom gave Zack a brief update on the situation and Zack mentioned the biological toxin possibility.

"To tell you the truth, we don't have the facilities to identify hundreds of rare biological specimens."

"Very few places do. Actually it sounds as if you have basically been doing the right things. Not being able to talk to the victims is your real problem at this point."

"Tell us about it," Peggy said.

They sat silently for a few moments and contemplated the frustration they all shared. Nancy noticed Zack slump in the chair.

"Do you have a place to stay yet?" Nancy asked.

"Sorry," Tom said. "I should have thought of that. You look wasted."

"Thanks. No. I came straight here. Well, as straight as I could. Had to get directions a couple of times."

"A couple of times?" Peggy said. "We're right off the freeway."

"Well, I see that hasn't changed," Nancy said.

"No directional bump, Zacky?" Peggy said.

He nodded.

"I was gonna ask why it took you two hours to make a drive I routinely manage in about an hour or so."

"That's not a fair standard to judge by, though," Nancy told Zack. "Supersonic ground travel is still not the norm."

Peggy cast an aggrieved look at her partner and pumped Zack for a capsule version of his life's story. Zack kept his answers brief and to the point, his fatigue now nearly overwhelming.

While she jacked Zack's personal history handle up and down, Tom arranged a room at the Travelodge across the street. Taking him by the arm after hanging up, he hustled Zack over to the motel amid repeated thanks for his rescue.

Tom left the exhausted CDC investigator in his room saying, "Now you just get a shower and some sleep and I'll come by about seven to pick you up for dinner."

Peggy buttonholed Nancy as soon as the others left and demanded to know exactly who Zack had been in her life.

"We knew each other when I was in nursing school."

"From your reaction, I'd say he was a little more than just a classmate," Peggy said with a lascivious grin. "More like a roommate."

"No, not roommates," Nancy said. "But we did go together for a while."

"I knew it! Come on now, tell your Auntie Peggy every single disgusting detail."

"There's nothing to tell. We went together for a few months and broke up. It was a long time ago. Ancient history."

"Not that ancient. Not from the expression I saw on your faces."

"What you saw was the shock of seeing someone I haven't seen in almost twenty years."

"What I saw was the shock of seeing someone special after twenty years. Someone very special."

"Not that special. Like I said, we went together for a few months and broke up."

"After you met Ed?"

"When was Ed ever in Southern California?"

"I don't know. I just assumed..."

"You assumed wrong."

"Not about you and Zack. You think he's still carrying a torch?"

“Not likely. We ended on a rather bitter note,” Nancy said, a memory playing across her eyes. The phone rang and she grabbed it. “Douglas County Health, Nancy Brandauer speaking.”

Peggy couldn't miss the look of relief on Nancy's face when the phone rang. There's a lot more to this than just an old flame showing up, she thought, though that's juicy enough all by itself. Who'd ever have thought Nancy had a secret past and that there'd ever been anyone but Ed. I wonder if Ed knows.

Chapter 17

White Shoes

They had been to every booth and in every store. They'd sampled almost every food available because all the vendors were known to them. A few were neighbors. Most were friends. Janet had been pleased and surprised that Daddy had not been a pain about the food. He hadn't sniffed at it, or licked it, or done any of the things she'd imagined him doing to meet Mom's injunctions about the food.

The only thing neither of them had tried was the wines. She, of course, was too young. Besides which, she'd had a little taste of that stuff once when Emily had sneaked some out of her house one Thanksgiving a couple of years ago. She couldn't understand why anybody'd drink it. Gag city. Daddy didn't have any because he didn't drink any kind of booze. Neither did Mom. Just as well, she thought, thinking about what she'd seen it do in some of her friends' families.

They were just coming out of Banducci's, *the* restaurant of Madrone. The only restaurant actually, if you didn't count the tavern which served sandwiches and chili with their beer. Because it was justifiably famous for both its soda fountain and its food, people traveled from Eugene and Grant's Pass to eat there. Tour buses even stopped there for lunch. Its prices were a little high for the area, but everyone chose it for that special meal or treat.

The marble counter and iron stools bolted to the floor had been fixtures of the place since Raphael Banducci had first opened in eighteen ninety-eight. Carlo and his son, Rick, still made their own ice cream, though they had long ago been forced to give up the old, hand-crank, oaken tubs installed behind the brick building by Raphael. The disbanded army of eager young hands who had turned half a dozen wooden handles for minimum wage and a free scoop of

each product they produced were immortalized in a mural on the wall opposite the gold-traced mirror behind the counter.

Janet's special treat from her father had been the sundae of her choice. Naturally, that had been the Hot Fudge Banana Supreme with her choice of flavors. A fitting cap to a most excellent day.

She looked west, towards the place they had met Billy and Nick. She'd been doing that all afternoon, though both the boy and his dog had disappeared shortly after Janet and her father had walked into the crowds.

Trying to work out whether the boy or the dog was the attraction, Ed had observed her behavior in a bemused spirit. He finally decided it was a toss-up. Boys were becoming an attraction, though she had by no means shown any signs of being ruled by her recently emancipated hormones. Yet. Dogs were a different story. She loved them all, all sizes, all shapes, all breeds. If they hadn't had a sheep ranch, and therefore had to exercise a great deal of caution in not only the number but kinds of dogs they kept; he could easily have been the owner of the largest unregistered kennel in the state.

She turned back to face him, disappointment visible around the corners of her mouth.

"I think his parents must have come by just after we left, honey."

"I know."

They turned east to return to their truck. Ed stepped out in front of her because the narrow sidewalk and oncoming foot traffic made walking abreast impossible.

Over his shoulder he said, "Unless there's somewhere else you want to go, I think we ought to be getting home. Your mother's probably going to be home soon, and I think we ought to try and be there to greet her after her long day, don't you?"

No answer.

Ed turned around. Janet was nowhere to be seen. A small clot of people, gathered a dozen feet back, grabbed his attention immediately. Stepping into the street to get around the crowd, he ran to it. White Reeboks stuck out of the clot into the street.

"Janet!" he shouted.

The clump of fair-goers opened, and he saw Janet lying in a loose-limbed sprawl on the concrete.

“Call 911!” Ed yelled, kneeling beside his daughter. “Someone call 911!”

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the original)

Mission Time Reference: 2.941

Observation site security remains intact.

Monitors have been repaired to the extent possible. The equipment tests within the ninety-ninth percentile. Reception continues to be considerably less than optimal. We can only conclude that this is due to the local topography.

NOTE: Future missions should take into account topographical interference with EM monitoring. Selection and gain must be markedly increased to overcome these conditions.

We are able to monitor audio transmissions with some degree of consistency, and we have initiated full spectrum audio monitoring. Visual monitoring is still too unreliable to be of any use. We will attempt to improve signal capture efficiency, but do not expect it will overcome the topography.

Our second excursion to the pageant proved well worth the, as it now turns out, negligible risk. As a precaution we kept our contact with the populace to a minimum and simply observed and recorded. This, with the previous incursion data record, has provided a rich database. We are projecting a two MTR unit period will be needed to properly analyze and correlate the data.

Chapter 18

Give and Take

After lunch the phone calls tapered to a trickle and allowed Nancy and Peggy to begin the laborious process of tabulating and comparing the answers—over Peggy’s protests.

She would have preferred to discuss Zack and Nancy’s mutual past with special attention paid to any and all salacious details. She’d stated this in clear and certain terms.

Several times.

Without success.

Nancy steadfastly stonewalled her. Even her most subtle entreaties, such as, “Now it’s interesting you should mention shopping at Rolley’s, because Zack certainly needs to upgrade his wardrobe. Did he always dress like that?” met with either silence or a rebuff.

This shouldn’t have surprised Peggy. She knew Nancy could be very stubborn at times, especially when Peggy went digging after personal little tidbits like Nancy’s sex life.

Nancy was a very private person. Infuriatingly so. But she was also the best friend Peggy had ever had, so she put up with her friend’s annoying little quirk.

Well, sort of.

Peggy could be stubborn too. And she figured if she just worked on Nancy long enough, she’d get her to unload that immensely heavy burden of privacy. That would in turn allow Nancy to loosen up and enjoy life and make her more fun. Not, of course, that Nancy didn’t enjoy life or wasn’t fun, in her own narrow sort of way.

If only she would cough up a little bio on Zack. It didn’t even need to include anything about them, just something on him. That would at least give her a clue as to what had gone on back then.

“Okay,” Peggy said in her best wheedling voice after her umpteenth metaphorical bloody nose from running into Nancy’s stonewall, “Let’s forget about the two of you. Just tell me about Zack. Nothing intimate, just general stuff like where he was born, what his major in college was, favorite rock groups, how many times he’s been married—”

“San Francisco, California. Biology. The Kingston Trio. I don’t know. How many said they’d had lunch at McDonald’s?”

“Two, twenty, what’s the difference. It wasn’t anywhere near enough to be the source. So who was The Kingston Trio? Some garage act?”

“How old are you?”

“And you don’t want to get personal. What’s my age got to do with anything?”

“It would explain a great many things.”

“Such as?”

“Such as how you would not know the name of the only group ever to have five *albums* in the top twenty simultaneously. Unless you are a lot younger than you look, you should have heard of them, even if you never listened to them. And by the way, they were not a rock group. There are other forms of music.”

“Not popular music.”

“Oh, yes. Very popular music. Folk music. They started the entire folk music craze of the sixties.”

“Ugh! You mean like long hair, beards, beads, and flowers?”

“No. I mean like good-looking, clean cut guys, wearing matched, button down, short sleeve shirts over dark pants and penny loafers. I don’t know why I’m even telling you all this. I didn’t even like them that much. I liked Peter, Paul and Mary.”

“I won’t even ask. Okay. So Zack was a folk geek. Actually it kinda fits. He doesn’t look like he’s grown up that much since. So how did you two meet if he was a biology major and you were in nursing? Did you share a required class?”

“How many of yours went to Taco Bell?”

“Two thousand eight hundred and seventy-one, not counting babes in arms.”

Nancy gave her an exasperated look.

“Look. You aren’t going to get me to drop this by ignoring me. All the time I’ve known you, you’ve been little Miss Priss. And I mean that as a compliment. Your standard of personal conduct is unquestionably safer and a whole lot less hassle than mine, or almost anyone else’s that I know. But it ain’t as interesting. You’ve never given the slightest indication that there was ever anyone else in your life except Ed. It’s like you and Ed were put together as babies and never separated. So naturally, when I find out that there was someone from your dim, dark past, I gotta know about him, and I gotta know what he meant to you. This is a whole new dimension about you that I never suspected existed. So cough up!”

Nancy set her pen down very carefully and folded her hands. She spoke in a strained, quiet voice, forcing Peggy to lean forward and listen intently.

“Zack’s particulars are: Born 1947—”

“—You mean he’s younger than you? That’s a flash.”

“—in San Francisco where he grew up,” Nancy said, speaking through her comment.

“Wait a minute. I didn’t hear that.”

“Be quiet and you can. I will repeat only this once. Then we are through with this discussion. Born in San Francisco where he grew up. No siblings. Got better than average grades, but had to work hard to get them. Father died of cancer just before we met. Liked folk music. Not particularly political or religious.”

“That’s it? What about you and him? I mean it’s obvious that you two were some kind of item back then and that there’s still a lot of strong feelings between you whether you want to admit it or not. So what was it with you two?”

“I’ve already told you everything I intend to. This discussion is ended.”

“You said you went together for a few months and broke up. And that it wasn’t a friendly breakup. I remember you said that it was

bitter. So what did you break up about? How come it was so bitter? Did he cheat on you? Beat you? What?"

Nancy stared at her with a perfect poker face.

"You can't drop it like this. You haven't told me any of the good stuff."

"I don't intend to. You want any more, talk to him. It's late, I'm tired, and I'm going home. Good night."

Nancy pushed away from her desk, stood up, grabbed her purse, and turned to walk out. Peggy's hammering at her about Zack had sucked the last bit of energy out of her. While not the most dispiriting day in her life, it certainly ranked among the top five. All she wanted now was to go home, fall in a tub of steaming hot water filled with cloyingly sweet-smelling bath salts, and then sleep for a week. In her present mood, she figured all she'd actually be able to accomplish was a short, saltless bath and a few hours sleep. The obligations of hearth, home, and motherhood would see to that.

Peggy, though she often came across as having the sensitivity of an armadillo, knew she had gone too far. She ran around the desk and wrapped her arms around her best friend.

"Nance, I'm sorry. Really. I had no idea." Nancy remained as stiff as a store mannequin in her arms, though she made no attempt to escape her embrace. "Listen, I promise, not another word. It's a taboo subject. Never mention it again. Go home; get Ed to give you a big hug. Listen to me. You never have to *get* Ed to give you a hug. Then send Janet on a long errand or better yet, send her over to a friend's house. For the night maybe, so you two can relive your wedding night."

Nancy melted and laughed. "Please, not our wedding night. But thanks for the thought. See you tomorrow?"

Peggy opened her mouth to say something, strangled the first word, shut it, and swallowed. "Still friends?"

"Yes." She returned Peggy's hug and headed for the door.

The phone rang and Peggy picked up, "Douglas County Health, this is Ms. Richards."

Nancy turned to wave good-bye and saw the news imparted by the caller play across Peggy's face. She stopped with one foot through the door, hand on the knob.

"You're sure."

Brief confirmation.

"There's no question?"

A louder confirmation.

"When can we talk to them?"

Two words.

"We'll be there in two seconds."

Chapter 19

By the Evening's Early Light

The late afternoon sun stabbed through the miniblinds into Zack's eyes. His sleep had been profound, deep, and dreamless. The sun's brutal intrusion into that blessed void, as unwelcome as a sword thrust, brought him back to the present. He turned away from the window and tried to find the emptiness again—an emptiness without thought.

Too late.

She was here. He should never have written that letter. It had been cowardly. Worse, it had been childish. He was absolutely certain it had merely confirmed for all time her opinion of him—the opinion she had expressed that afternoon she'd walked out of his life forever, or what had seemed like forever. Now, here she was again. Perhaps an extremely kind and beneficent God had seen fit to grant him a chance to make amends. Maybe even... No. She was married. The simple band on her left hand had been one of the first things he'd looked for.

He had changed since those days. He had grown up. But how would he ever be able to convince her of that after all this time? All this time during which the wounds he knew he had inflicted must have festered. He'd seen the hurt that had flashed across her face when she'd recognized him.

He threw off the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. Sleep was impossible. He looked at his watch. Four-thirty. Time enough to take a long hot shower to scrub off a day's worth of air travel crud. Then he could hang his clothes out and dress to meet what's-his-face. Tim—no. Tom.

What was his last name? Did he ever say? Probably. I just wasn't paying much attention to what anyone said. Except maybe to that

other one. Richards. Peggy Richards and her string of initials. Now she was definitely a unique piece of work. Funny, I can remember her last name, but not his. Maybe they don't use them here. God, I hope not. How can you know who people are if all you know is their first name? And Nancy. I never got her last name.

Chapter 20

Good News, Bad News

It took them a few seconds more than two to reach the hospital, but only because Nancy had insisted that they keep their speed sub-light. She wanted to live long enough to solve the mystery. Think of it. Now they could talk to the victims. They might be able to wrap this thing up by sundown.

Peggy complied with Nancy's injunction, but only because the hospital was less than a mile away.

In the ICU, Julie, one of the day nurses, met them as they came in and explained their discovery.

"When did you first find out?" Peggy asked.

"Early this morning. The night crew suspected it and had Dr. Baron come in to confirm it."

"Well, it couldn't have taken all day to do that," Peggy said. "Why didn't you call us earlier?"

"Because it did take that long. At least to Dr. Baron's satisfaction."

Nancy nodded her understanding. She knew Dr. Baron. Peggy didn't. Before Peggy could waste more time asking pointless questions about the Dr. Baron's competency, she posed one of her own.

"Have you checked with Lane Community to see if this is universal?"

"Yes, we have. They said their team had begun to suspect it as well, but have not yet gotten their doctor to confirm it officially. There's little doubt he will. The nurse I talked to was positive. She said our confirmation should make it unanimous."

"I don't understand what his problem is," Peggy said. "Doesn't he want them to be better?"

“It’s not that,” Julie said. “It’s that this is actually a very rare condition and the prognosis is in some ways worse than for coma. Most locked in patients die in a few weeks to a few months. It is extremely rare for them to ever recover, and then it is usually a minimal recovery. Just the use of the face and neck as a rule. Full recovery is almost unheard of.”

“Yeah, I see,” said Peggy. “With a coma, you at least have a fighting chance to get better. Sounds like with this you not only don’t ever get better, you know you’re not going to. I think I’d take the coma.”

Julie nodded. “Dr. Baron is more hopeful with these people than I would have expected, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“Several things. They all have lateral movement of their eyes. That is always considered a very promising sign in these cases. The other is that there is no indication of trauma, or infarct. That’s one of the reasons we couldn’t tell you earlier. Dr. Baron’s had every one of them down for every imaging test we’ve got. They’ve been through complete CAT scans, MRI, even angio’s, even though the risk with those is higher. He felt that we needed to know as much about them as we could. He’s also ordered a bunch of blood studies, most of which had to be sent to Portland and won’t get back till Wednesday at the earliest. He suspects it’s some kind of toxin and it might actually metabolize out, or possibly be reversed or blocked, if it can be identified. In short, he doesn’t think there’s any physical damage to the pons, just some kind of chemical blockade of certain ventral pontine signals. If he’s right, full recovery is possible. Maybe even spontaneously, if it metabolizes out. And if, and this is a big one, we can keep them in reasonably good physical shape.”

“You’re talking about basic stroke care,” Nancy said.

“Exactly. Prevention of contractures, range of motion of all the joints, that sort of thing. But we also need to keep their spirits up, and that is the most difficult thing of all. If this goes on for very long, they will give up hope, and we will lose them.”

“Well, can we talk to them?”

“Yes, but they are very tired after their ordeal of testing. I would recommend that you just go around and introduce yourselves, and tell them you’ll be back tomorrow to talk with them. I’m assuming that what you have to ask can wait till then.”

“Yes,” Nancy said, hiding her disappointment. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Peggy open her mouth, and then close it. Good.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

Nancy recommended they see them together tonight, and then split them up between themselves tomorrow. Peggy agreed and led the way into the first room.

Chapter 21

Recriminations

In the ER, Ed hung up the phone after getting the answering machine. He left a message again and then shook in frustration.

Where was she?

He was completely frazzled. He'd been playing the "If only I'd..." game without let up since he'd first spied those Reeboks poking out of the crowd in front of Banducci's. He'd handled thunderstorms that had blasted trees, killed sheep, and started small fires; all manner of mechanical breakdowns of cars and tractors; wool prices so low they threatened their financial solvency; and even a hungry cougar once without qualm.

He'd dealt with them with reasonable calm, and the occasional cussword for his bad luck, because they were all things which had been outside of his control. He could no more keep lightning from striking or wool prices from plummeting than he could stop the rain, and he accepted that.

But today he'd had control of the situation. His only daughter was lying in a coma in a bed not twenty feet from where he stood because he'd failed to keep her safe. It wasn't an act of God that had put her there. What had put her there was his own carelessness. He'd been having too good a time, not paying attention, careless of the threat he knew existed, and his precious, irreplaceable Janet had paid the price. He should be the one on that bed, not her.

He needed Nancy. He needed her reassurance that things would work out. That Janet's condition wasn't irreversible. That she would wrap her arms around his neck and squeeze him so tight it would almost choke him once again. That he'd be able to hold her thin little body in his arms and tell her how much he loved her and how much

she meant to him. And how sorry he was that he had let this happen to her.

He told himself to stop wallowing and do something. With an angry brush at the tears that threatened to roll, he picked up the telephone and tried Nancy's direct line office number again. Sue answered, said she thought they'd been gone about half an hour or so, and put him through to Tom.

"She's in the ICU. She just called me. All the people are not in comas; they're just locked in. She's up there talking with them right now."

"Thanks," Ed said, punching another line open without hanging up and cutting Tom off. He looked on the extension list beside the phone and tapped in ICU's number.

A nurse answered, confirmed that Nancy was there, and went to get her.

"Honeyit'sJanetShe'sgotitShepassedoutrightbehindme."

"Take a deep breath and tell me again. I couldn't understand a word you said."

"It's Janet. She's got it. We were walking back to the car, and she just passed out."

"Where are you now?"

"HereIntheER."

"Slow down. She's in good hands. I'll be right down."

Chapter 22

Into the Zone

Zack heard the phone ringing as he stepped out of the shower where he'd been trying to put his finger on what was different about Nancy. She stilled had the same intensity he remembered, but it had been tempered by something. Something profound. Her husband? Her work? What ever it was, he knew that if offered him a chance to make amends, *if* he could find the courage to do so, *and* the right moment.

He wrapped one towel around himself and used the second one to dry his head and torso as he crossed to the bedside table and the phone.

"Zack, this is Tom. We've got some great news. They're not in a coma."

Zack sat down on the bed and stopped rubbing his arms. The goose flesh rose quickly. He'd set the air conditioning to keep the room around sixty-eight. Impatiently, he brushed the remaining water off and threw the towel around his shoulders.

"Are you there, Zack?"

"Yes. I heard you. Are you telling me they all came out of their comas together too?"

"No. They were never in a coma. They're just in locked in syndrome."

Zack shook his head slowly. He really doesn't understand, does he. "Listen. Being locked in is not a 'just'. Not to the patients."

"No, of course not," Tom went on to explain what Peggy had told him after Nancy had gone down to the ER. "And Nancy's kid's got it, too. I thought we were through with it. That it was all over."

"Are there any more reports of this anywhere?"

“As of two hours ago, no. There was one new case reported this morning from Lane county where we sent our overflow, but it happened yesterday and they didn’t think she was part of this because she had some kind of viral infection last week and were calling it Guillain-Barre before they heard about our little mess.”

“Have you confirmed the report?”

“The doctor there is willing to change his diagnosis on the basis of these other cases. He says she looks just like the rest of them except for that flu history which he figures is just coincidental.”

“We can’t make that assumption. We need to send someone up there to check it out and interview everyone involved. Don’t send Nancy. I’ll need her here. If she can still function. Send Richards. Send her right away.”

“Zack, it’s nearly five. All of us have had a long grueling day and it’s almost an hour’s drive to Cottage Grove. There’s nothing that anyone up there can tell us that won’t keep until tomorrow. I’ll send Peggy up there in the morning.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know that they don’t have something. They well may have the key to this whole thing.”

“If they do, it’ll keep.”

“How can you say that?” This backwoods, laid back attitude was going to drive him nuts.

“Because their condition hasn’t changed one iota since they came down with this.”

“I wouldn’t say that. They’re in ventral pontine syndrome instead of coma. That’s a major change.”

“That’s not a change in condition, just a change in diagnosis. They are no different now than they were yesterday, except for being very tired from their ordeal with Dr. Baron’s tests. He put them through everything he could think of to make sure they had no physical injuries.”

“Which, I suppose means that we can’t talk to them either.”

“Not tonight. Nancy and Peggy went around and introduced themselves and confirmed that these people are exhausted. They’ll go back tomorrow to talk with them.”

“What about Nancy’s kid?”

“She appears to be in the same condition as the others. They established her as being locked in right away.”

“And we’re not going to talk with her either.”

Tom drew a deep breath. This was getting very tiresome. This guy was an adrenaline junky. “Nancy will talk to her when she thinks Janet’s up to it. How about I come by in half an hour and we go find some place quiet to eat.”

“Make it forty-five minutes. I need to get a shower.”

Tom agreed, and Zack, shivering, hung up the phone. He raced back into the bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as he could stand it. It seared his skin, but stopped the chill. In a couple of minutes, sunburn red, he stepped out of the shower and grabbed one of the towels he’d thrown on the toilet. It took a moment for the chill of the damp towel to penetrate his skin’s heat.

In anguish, he raced across the room to his suitcase, fumbled the locks open and yanked his terrycloth robe out and flung it around his shaking body. Then he went to the thermostat and turned it up high.

Beet red goose flesh. Another impossible phenomenon. Have I stepped into some kind of twilight zone out here?

Chapter 23

A Little Healing

Ed held Nancy's hand as they sat at Janet's bedside. She'd been full of questions when she'd come down to the ER, questions that sounded to him more like accusations. The accusations hurt. Hurt because he agreed with them.

He'd failed. Failed to protect his little girl. Failed Nancy's trust in him. Failed his daughter's trust as well, though there'd been no such accusation in either of their eyes.

He looked at her now with her eyes closed in sleep.

Why not him? Why just her? They'd done everything together: eaten the same food, been in the same stores, and talked to the same people. She hadn't been out of his sight the entire day till that last moment. One second she was fine, chatting happily beside him, the next she was on the ground helpless.

Nancy looked at her husband. His sagging features spoke eloquently of the guilt he felt. Guilt she realized she had unintentionally reinforced.

She'd let her passion for solving the mystery override much more immediate and, ultimately, more important concerns. She'd loved puzzles and mysteries all her life. She'd pursued their resolutions avidly, sometimes to the exclusion of more important matters.

That had been part of the problem with Zack. They'd each worked on their endeavors with the fervor of true believers, but they had never worked on anything together.

Probably a good thing, she thought, because we never agreed on anything except our primal attraction. And that we worked on with our usual zeal.

Ed had taught her to relax and to accept that the world's fate didn't rest in her hands. And he'd done it without an unkind or reproving word.

She squeezed Ed's hand and smiled at him. "It's not your fault. I know you did everything you could to prevent this. I thought the danger had passed."

"We could have stayed home."

"We don't know that that would have made any difference. We still have no idea what the cause is or how it's spread."

"If I'd kept her home, she wouldn't have been exposed. She'd have been separated."

"Isolated? And how long do you think we should have isolated her? Through today? How about tomorrow? What about next week?"

"I don't know," Ed said, turning to face her.

The pain in his eyes squeezed her heart till she couldn't breathe. She was doing it again, jumping on his pain and his guilt and trying to beat it to death to get rid of it, not giving him a chance to unburden himself.

She didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to hear his self-recriminations. She had too many of her own. She should have stuck by her guns and not let them go to the fair. She could have lost them both. It was a miracle she hadn't.

She was incredibly lucky to have Ed with her, alive and functioning normally to help her get through this. She relied on him so much for her own emotional stability. Quite simply, she doubted she'd be able to do the job she did without his patient listening to her babble. He always let her ventilate, and then he did something more. He always helped her work the problem through.

How often had she done the same for him? Not nearly as much, though, to be honest, Ed hadn't seemed to need that kind of support as much as she had. But that still didn't excuse her from shutting him down now when he needed her more than at anytime in their nearly two decades together.

"I watched her so carefully."

“I know you did, Darling.”

“We did everything together. I never took my eyes off her. Not for a second. Not ‘til we left Banducci’s when the crowd separated us.”

“I know, dear.”

“Do you suppose someone could have stuck her or sprayed her or something? Just picked her out at random and given her something. How about a nerve gas? Maybe it’s some kind of government experiment. Maybe it wasn’t at random. How do we know that there isn’t some connection between all these people?”

“We don’t.” Despite herself, Nancy let a chuckle escape. She’d had the same thoughts all day and had rejected them as being as ridiculous as Tom’s little green men. “I’m sorry, dear. I’m not laughing at you. It’s just that I’ve had the same thoughts off and on all day today. That’s what reading too many thrillers does for you. Besides which, none of the others collapsed at the fair. They all got sick afterwards. As far as we’ve been able to tell, most of them were at home or headed there. In fact we’re still not sure that all of them even went to the fair.”

“How about a delayed reaction?”

“We’ve been considering that, along with half a dozen other theories. Some kind of gestation period. The problem is that we’re not dealing with an infectious agent, as far as we can tell, which would tend to eliminate such a thing.”

Tanya came into the room and said, “I’m sorry, but we need to limit the amount of stimulation for Janet tonight. She needs rest right now more than anything. And from the look of you two, I’d say you do too. Why don’t you both go home and get some sleep. Janet will be fine right here. She’s not in any real danger and Dr. Baron is even more hopeful, since there’s been no deterioration in anyone’s condition.”

Ed looked at her and searched her face for some sign that she wasn’t really going to make him leave his helpless baby girl.

“Really, Mr. Brandauer, she’ll be fine.”

“How can you say that? She’s helpless.”

“At the moment. But not necessarily forever. As I said, Dr. Baron is very encouraged. What will help Janet most right now is for you two to get some sleep so that when she wakes up and sees you in the morning, she’ll see someone who looks less ravaged than you do now. She needs to know you both are all right so she can concentrate on her own health.”

“How about a cot? Couldn’t you set up a cot in the corner here?”

“We can’t do that in ICU. There’s not enough room and you’d be underfoot.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’d stay out of the way.”

“You couldn’t, Honey,” Nancy said. “Look around in here.”

Ed looked around, and realized that there really wasn’t even room for the cot, much less him. “You’ll call us if anything happens,” he said.

“Absolutely. But I don’t expect anything will. She really is doing very well.”

Nancy smiled at her and nodded. “Thank you, Tanya. We know you’ll take good care of her.”

Leaning over the bed, she gave her daughter a kiss on her forehead and stepped aside for Ed to follow suit. Taking his hand, she led the way out.

As they exited the double doors of the unit into the waiting area, Ed suggested that she go home and get some rest. He would stay at the hospital and wait.

“No, she’s not some ewe you have to sit up with all night. She’s not at death’s doorstep. Tanya’s right. Janet needs to see us refreshed and relaxed in the morning. If she saw us like this or worse, which we certainly would be if we stayed here all night, she’d worry about us. You know she would.”

Ed nodded his head sadly. “Yeah, she would. She’s just like you. Always more worried about someone else than she is about herself.”

“She didn’t get that from me. She got it from you, just like I did.”

“I just feel guilty leaving her alone.”

“I do to, but I know Tanya’s right. Hanging around here won’t do anyone any good.”

“I just thought she ought to see someone who loves her when she wakes up. If not you, then me.”

“That might be nice, but it’s less essential than that she see us looking well and rested. There really isn’t anything our staying here can do for Janet. It might massage our guilt, but it won’t help her. Actually I think Peggy had a good idea. Of course she offered it before we knew Janet was sick, but it does have a certain appeal.”

“What was that?”

“She said to go home and give you a big hug and relive our wedding night.”

“Oh, no. Not that,” Ed said with the first smile he’d worn since he’d turned around on the sidewalk in front of Banducci’s.

“That’s what I said.”

“You sure she’ll be okay?” he said, turning back toward the doors they’d just exited.

“No, I’m not absolutely, one hundred percent certain. I can’t even be that certain about you or me. But I am sure that she’s getting the best possible care; and that if anything does go wrong, it won’t be for lack of their ability to watch over her, or for our not hovering anxiously at her bedside. There is nothing that you or I can do for her that they’re not already doing. I am equally sure that our staying here, trying to sleep in one of these chairs, will not help. What good would it do for her to see two exhausted parents in the morning? She’d just feel guilty for having caused us so much trouble. You know she would.”

Reluctantly, Ed nodded in agreement, though he still hesitated to move away from the door.

“And there’s something else.”

Ed looked at her questioningly.

“I need to be held tonight. It’s been a very frustrating day with a nasty shock thrown in for good measure. I don’t need to make a night worth reliving, or even to be made love to. I just need to feel your arms around me, especially after this perfect cap to a perfectly awful day. I need your strength, and I think you need mine. We can’t do that here.”

“Well, we probably could,” Ed said with another smile, “but I think they’d kick us out and might not let us come back.”

“Which would be kind of self-defeating, I suppose.”

“Kind of.” Ed put an arm around her shoulders and asked. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes, famished now that you mention it,” Nancy said, surprised to discover her stomach growling. “Are you?”

“Surprisingly, I am, though I’m not famished. We ate quite a lot at the fair.”

“Well, I didn’t. Just a couple of slices of pizza and a Dr. Pepper.”

“Then let’s get something to eat at the Horseless Carriage across the street and get a room for the night.”

“Can we afford that?”

“Can we afford to take the time to drive all the way home and back if there is some sort of emergency?”

Nancy nodded her head in agreement.

“What about Baxter?”

“He’s in the truck.”

“Do you think Arnie will let him stay with us?”

“I’m sure he will. He’s still after me to stud him to his Charlotte. Anyway I want to watch him tonight. He’s been kinda down all afternoon.”

“He knows something’s wrong with Janet. He always gets like that when she gets sick.”

“I know. But this seems like more than that. I don’t know, maybe I’m just getting paranoid and seeing problems where there aren’t any, but if he isn’t any better tomorrow, I’ll take him to the vet’s.”

“Speaking of the vet, how’s the ewe?”

“She’s fine. No limp at all. So what do you say?”

She turned to face him, put hers arms around his neck, and pulled his mouth down to hers. “God, I love you.”

After securing a room, notifying Tanya of where they could be reached, and seeing to Baxter’s needs, they went into the Carriage House Inn’s restaurant. Arnold Graves, the owner, personally saw

them to a table in a quiet corner, offered his best wishes for Janet's health, and left them with their menus. They both ordered the roast chicken special—one with soup, one with salad, so they could share—and lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Neither felt able to speak aloud the myriad of negative possibilities that whirled through their minds, as though to do so would make them happen. Both struggled silently and in vain to find a subject they felt able to discuss. Their soup came. It was a hearty beef vegetable that was almost a stew. The waitress had given them a large bowl rather than the customary cup, since they were sharing it. Likewise she used a dinner plate for their salad. Each murmured their thanks and she told them it had been Arnie's idea.

Nancy took the soup, eating quickly, its rich aroma reminding her of how hungry she was. Ed munched his salad without enthusiasm and traded with her when she'd reached the halfway point. She wound up with most of the salad, which she didn't protest, the soup having stimulated her already voracious appetite.

She met his eyes during the exchange, smiled and mouthed a kiss. He smiled in return and briefly squeezed her hand.

"The soup is wonderful. You'll love it," she said, falling upon the salad with unconcealed fervor.

Ed nodded and slurped a spoonful. She was right.

They returned to a silent savoring of their dishes and finished together.

While they waited for the waitress to clear their dishes, Nancy reached across the table and took Ed's hand.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For this. It's just what I needed. What we both needed."

"What? Dinner?"

"No, not just dinner. Staying here. I never would have thought of it. It was brilliant."

"It just seemed the best way to go."

Ed turned her hand over and held it with both of his. He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them gently.

“I need more than that,” Nancy said.

“I know. You told me.”

“No, I mean I need more than just that, important as it is.”

“So I’m not the only one who feels guilty.”

She nodded and looked down at her plate. Taking her hand back, she picked up her fork and toyed with a curl of carrot. “I keep thinking I’m the one who’s really to blame.”

“How so? What could you have done?”

“Kept you away from the fair.”

“But you said you don’t even know if that’s where the problem is, or was, now that it’s over. It is over, isn’t it?”

“Seems to be, though we can’t say for sure. I just keep thinking that I should have been able to do something to keep her safe. After all I’m the one who is the public health nurse. I ought to be able to protect my family.”

“Why? Because you know more? Not in this case. You told me yourself that you don’t know anything at all about this thing.”

“I know, but that doesn’t stop me from thinking what if...”

“I know. It’s the same thing I’ve been doing. But I realize that you were right. Neither of us is to blame, and beating ourselves up over what we might have done differently isn’t going to change things.”

“And she’s not dying,” Nancy said, taking absolution from Ed’s words.

“That’s right. She’s not. The nurse said Dr. Baron is...how’d she put that?”

“Very encouraged. He’s a good neurologist. If he’s hopeful, then we should be. It’s entirely possible that this thing will pass on its own. That whatever’s causing the problem will simply metabolize out, as he said.”

Taking a deep breath Ed voiced the fear they both held. “Do you think that’ll happen? That she’ll just suddenly get over it?”

“It’s very possible, especially since there’s no physiological damage. It just seems to be chemical. That’s one of the reasons I’m glad Atlanta sent us the kind of expert they did. I just wish it wasn’t the person they sent. It was quite a shock. They sent Zack Keller.”

“You said you’d had a nasty shock today. I thought that you meant Janet.”

“I did,” she said quietly. “but I also meant Zack.”

The waitress brought their chicken and removed the empty plate and bowl. While she served them, Nancy looked into Ed’s eyes and read the care and the love that resided so comfortably within. The anguish he’d felt today was quite out of the ordinary for him, for he was an unusually tranquil man. That was not to say he was unfeeling. Not at all. His empathy was one of his many strengths. But it was tempered by a deep well of serenity. Like the sea, storms might roil the surface, yet in the depths, all remained calm. That he was a man thoroughly comfortable in his own skin had been one of the things that had first attracted her.

Zack had never been serene. Brilliant, but never serene. Like so many men she’d known in college, he’d never seemed satisfied. That was not unusual. The college environment is frequently highly competitive. But Zack competed with himself. From what she could tell, that drive to always do better had been instilled by his father. No accomplishment ever merited unreserved praise from him. There was always a “but you could have done this,” or a “you could have done better,” attached. She remembered Zack telling her about his father’s only comment when he’d phoned him in the hospital to tell him a paper he’d written for a class had been accepted for publication by a respected journal in the field. His father had asked why it had taken him so long to get published. He ignored completely the fact that undergraduate papers were rarely ever published. It was the last thing his father ever said to him. He died a week later.

Originally, it had been that brilliance that had attracted her. His insecurity, though, had destroyed not only the attraction, but whatever love had grown from it. It took her three months to see past the dazzle to the man behind it. It took another six weeks to cut herself free.

Not very bright, were we girl?

Maybe yes, and maybe no, she answered herself. Insecurity sometimes seems to be as much a characteristic of males as their genitals.

No, that's not true. Women are just as insecure. It's just more acceptable for them to acknowledge it.

Some feminist you are.

Ed loaded a fork with mashed potatoes and put it in his mouth while he watched her carry on her internal conversation.

"They didn't tell us who to expect. He just showed up with the pizza like a bonus of bread sticks or salad," she said, taking a bite of her chicken.

"Not much of a bonus. Did you think to ask for a refund?"

Nancy snorted, almost choking on the chicken. "No, though it's not a bad idea."

"I mean twenty year old breadsticks are completely unacceptable, even when they're free."

"Twenty-one."

"Yech! Talk about hard and crusty. I take it he recognized you as well."

"If you mean did his eyes bug out, his breathing stop, and his face turn a sickly gray-white, yes he did."

"How'd you know his breathing stopped?"

"Because mine did."

He nodded. "So, how is he?"

"I don't know. We never got a chance to talk. Once he'd recovered, he looked all right, for someone who'd spent the last nineteen hours of his life in the clutches of the airlines."

"That bad. Seeing him at all would have been shocking enough. Seeing him like that must have been overwhelming. No wonder the news about Janet hit you so hard."

Nancy smiled. A little laugh escaped her lips. "Me? You're the one who wanted to camp out in her room like you were going to save her single-handedly."

He laughed back. "I guess I did make something of an ass of myself?"

“No, my dear, you were just a very concerned father and I love you for it. I wouldn’t want you any different. And I do want you. For all time.”

“You’ve got me. So how’s it going to be for you, working with him.”

“I don’t know. Frankly, it’s a distraction I don’t need right now.”

“It seems to me it’s a distraction you don’t need at anytime.”

“True, but especially not now.”

“Maybe you’d better try to get things hashed out with him right from the start.”

“I was thinking that too, but I was also thinking that we’re two professionals and we should be able to work together regardless of our personal differences.”

“You know that’s just so much sheep dip. Personalities always intrude on any relationship. I think it would make things go a lot smoother between you two if you got the air cleared and found out what each of you really thinks and feels instead of relying on what you remember about each other. I know you’ve changed a lot since those days. I would be surprised if he hasn’t changed some as well.”

“Possibly. I just hate the thought of a confrontation.”

“Why does it have to be a confrontation?”

Nancy opened her mouth to reply automatically that it had to be, but the words never cleared her larynx. Once again Ed had suggested a heretofore unconsidered alternative. Small wonder she loved him so much.

“You’re right, of course. There’s no such need. I just assumed it would have to be one because of the way we parted.”

“That’s what I mean. You need to put that all behind you and start by establishing what your feelings are right now.”

“I’m not sure I know what they are.”

“Then you need to find out.”

“Think it can wait till after dessert?”

“I think so. What do you have in mind for dessert?”

“Well, at first I thought a hot fudge sundae would do nicely.”

“You are your daughter’s mother without a doubt.”

“But as we’ve sat here talking, I’ve thought of something infinitely more satisfying.”

“And what is that?”

“You.”

Chapter 24

Going Exploring

While Ed and Nancy enjoyed their meal and reaffirmed the depth and strength of their love, both for each other and for their daughter, a different sort of exploration of relationships occurred at the Sizzler.

Tom had returned and picked Zack up promptly at 6:30, by which time Zack had been able to recover not only his body temperature equilibrium, but his mental equilibrium as well. They went to the Sizzler because Zack wanted seafood and Tom said they had the best in town. Zack's reaction, "Of course," flew right by Tom, who hated anything that swam or crawled in water. Give him a nice, thick, juicy steak anytime.

Over their salad bar cullings, each tried to establish their individual agendas. Tom wanted to impress upon Zack that while they were possibly backwoods by CDC standards, they were really quite adequately prepared to deal with the majority of public health issues and they had solid resources within the state upon which they could call, if needed, to augment their own. Zack, on the other hand, had nothing to prove; he just wanted to know about Nancy.

"...so you can see," Tom said, while forking the last onion ring into his mouth from his second salad bar plate, "that we really do have things under control and your coming out here wasn't really necessary, not that I'm not glad you're here. All we really needed was to network a little."

Zack cringed at the old buzz word which had long since fallen into disfavor in his normal circle of influence. More than the antiquity of Tom's language, though, he had been amazed at Tom's ability to talk so steadily and still stuff his mouth with the veggies, tacos, corn fritters, onion rings, tostados, and pasta in marinara

sauce he'd mounded on his two plates. The performance had given Zack plenty of time to enjoy his pickings, which had been confined strictly to the fresh vegetables and a cup of seafood chowder. He'd barely been able to inject an occasional "uh huh" into Tom's monologue.

The waitress brought their main dishes and Tom asked for two more clean salad bar plates. Zack seized the initiative while Tom shifted plates.

"Okay. It looks like you're pretty well set up, but what about your staff?"

"Good people," he said around his first bite of blood rare beef.

"I've no doubt of that," Zack cut in before Tom could take off on another monologue. He wasn't going to lose control of this conversation again. "What's their background?"

"Well, Peggy is our pediatric diseases investigator. She's been with us about six years now I think. Real sharp. Great with the kids. Can get them to tell her almost anything. Real good with their moms, too."

"Where'd she go to school?"

"Oregon University. She's a local girl, sort of. Born up in Albany. Her folks moved to Eugene when she was in high school and she just went on to college right there. Funny thing is she didn't really start out to be a nurse. She just got a job in a hospital as a ward clerk because it was the first job she could find."

"And she decided to become a nurse. How about the other one?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly that way. You see, her mom got sick. Cancer. And she needed a lot of care towards the end, and so Peggy kept asking the nurses what she should be doing. And then she'd go home and do it till pretty soon she was doing it as well as the visiting nurse. And she found she kinda liked it, so after her mom died, she decided to go to nursing school."

"Okay, so what about Nancy?"

"But you might be asking yourself how come she went to a four-year school instead of a two-year one like most nurses, and the answer is that she didn't like what all those nurses had to put up

with in the hospital. Too much bowing and scraping was the way she put it. So she figured the best way to stay out of the hospital was to get into public health and that took a four-year degree so that's what she did. And we're very lucky to have her, let me tell you."

"I've no doubt of that. She seems very capable. Now if you could just give me a little background on your other nurse."

"Oh, sure. She comes from down around Los Angeles. At least that's where she got her degree. Then she moved up here to Oregon and kinda bounced around till she landed in Roseburg. Been with the department longer than anyone, including me. Real sharp. Can put together a trail like nothing I've ever seen. And believe you me, tracking down STD trails can be a real test of skill."

"If she's just an STD investigator, how'd she get assigned to this investigation?"

"Oh, we aren't that specialized. Can't afford to be. We just got one for the kids' diseases and one for the adult diseases. And there's a lot of overlap, especially in this area, know what I mean?" Tom said leaning over the table.

Zack nodded as a shiver ran up his spine. Scenes from the movie *Deliverance* ran through his mind. What a hell hole, he thought. I wonder how many families actually have any branches on their trees. Aloud he said, "I think I've got the picture. Okay, from what I can figure out, Peggy's not married and hasn't got any kids and Nancy is married and has a daughter. By the way how is she?"

"Janet or Nancy?"

"Both."

"Janet's no different as far as I know. Nancy seems to be taking it pretty well. Ed's like a rock. One in a million. Nancy's real lucky to have him to hang on to at a time like this, especially with Janet being their only kid. Only one she could have and it almost killed her. See that's another difference between them."

"Between who?"

"Nancy and Peggy. Nancy wanted kids in the worst way and couldn't have any; and when she finally did, it almost killed her. Peggy likes kids, which is why she's the pediatric investigator, but

doesn't want any of her own. She says she likes rent-a-kids. You can always give 'em back. But I think she'd have a flock of 'em if she met the right man. Of course, then I'd probably have to find me a new investigator because she wouldn't want to waste any time working away from home, unless I miss my guess, but I wouldn't mind all that much as long as she was as happy as Ed and Nancy are."

Zack absorbed this information quietly, while concentrating on his broiled shrimp, which he'd been surprised to find on the menu and even more surprised to find acceptably tasty. Tom polished off his steak and fries and left to get a third plate of goodies from the salad bar and his first helping from the dessert bar. Zack worked on his pilaf and the second skewer of shrimp.

Returning with a laden plate and glass bowl mounded with ice cream and several toppings, Tom asked, "So what's your plan of attack?"

"Attack?"

"Yeah. How're you planning to take care of this thing?"

"I'm not here to take care of this thing. I'm here to study it and offer suggestions. I'm not a physician. Which reminds me, I haven't met your health officer. Where's he been during all this?"

"Alaska. He's on vacation, fishing in Alaska. Goes every year. Goes to one of those places where the only way you can get there short of mooseback is to fly in."

"And you haven't contacted him?"

"Can't. No phones, no radio, nothing. That's why he goes up there. So he can't be reached."

"Well, can't you call the people who flew him in and have them take him the message?"

"Only if they could find him. See, he doesn't stay in just one place. They drop him off at some lake or other and he goes off on his own. Only thing he's got with him is a radio beacon he can use to signal when he's ready to leave. They home in on it and pick him up."

"And how long's he going to be gone?"

"Usually goes for a month. Says it's the only thing that keeps him sane. First time he went on one of these trips he stayed at a cabin

where the plane came twice a week with supplies and messages. And every trip there was some little emergency that the folks down here felt he had to deal with. This was before my time, you understand. So when he got back he set things up so everything was covered and he could go off and not have to be bothered.”

“So how long before he gets back?”

“About five more weeks. He took an extra long time this time. Just got married again, so this is his honeymoon.”

“Okay, then. Who’s covering for him?”

“Well, normally it’d be Doc Peters, but he had a bad stroke last month. So we’re using Lane county’s doctor when we need him.”

“Have you contacted him?”

“Well, he knows about this, of course. Whole state does. But we haven’t done anything yet where we need him to come down here.”

“So basically, then, you’re the one who’s in charge.”

“Pretty much. Even when Doc’s in town, he leaves all the administrative stuff to me anyway, so I wind up making most of the decisions, except about the strictly medical things.”

“And the nurses just do what they need to by protocol.”

“That’s about it. I think I need me a little of that apple cobbler. Maybe a la mode.”

“Okay, that brings up a point. How’re you going keep this investigation rolling with just one nurse?”

“One nurse? We’ve got two. Honey? Could I have another dessert bowl. Better make it two. Thanks. You think Nancy’s not gonna work on this thing because her kid’s sick. Hell, I won’t be able to keep her off of it.”

“But how’s she going to be able to concentrate with her kid in the hospital. I would think that would be a major distraction.”

“For you and me maybe, but I expect it will improve her concentration. She was motivated before, but now she’s committed. She’s gonna find out what did this to her little girl and what’s gonna fix it, and she’s not gonna rest till she does.”

“She sounds like she might be a rather formidable woman.”

“Formidable? You mean like a bulldozer? Not Nancy. No, that’s not her way at all. Oh, I guess you could say she’ll be formidable because she won’t quit. But she doesn’t bulldoze. She doesn’t need to. I’d say she’ll be more like a bloodhound on the scent. If anyone can figure this thing out, it’ll be her.”

“Then you think I should work mostly with her.”

“I think you should work mostly with both of them. Peggy’s just as much a part of this investigation as Nancy. They are like a pair of hands. Right and left. Know what I mean?”

Zack nodded, even though he wasn’t completely sure. “So I guess I’d better be at the office first thing so we can decide on our assignments.”

“Well, you’ll probably find it kinda lonely because they’ll be at the hospital interviewing the patients. Besides which, they already know what they’re gonna do. You’re the only one that’s got to figure out what he’s gonna do.”

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the Original)

Mission Time Reference: 3.139

Full spectrum audio monitoring has proven fairly reliable; however, we are still experiencing some dropout.

The plague seems to have abated. Only two more cases reported, one locally, one in a neighboring locality. No deaths have been reported with this plague and none seem to be expected in the near future. An official from the senior government body responsible for investigating these kinds of events has arrived but has issued no statement.

There is mention now of the plague victims being locked inside their bodies, which has been greeted with excitement because it is considered an improvement over their previously reported unconscious state from which they could not be aroused. Historical research indicates that these people have never been able to leave their bodies at will. A search of the historical data found a few reports labeled "out of body experiences" in some contemporary sources. However, these are almost always referred to as curiosities and considered unsubstantiated by authoritative sources.

One interesting coincidence has been identified by the latest report. The latest plague victim is also one of our last contacts. We have not suffered any renewal of ill health as a result of this contact. We will monitor further reports closely. We will also endeavor to obtain a list of other victims. It would be interesting to know if there are any other similar coincidences.

Chapter 25

Speak to Me Only With Thine Eyes

Wearing a brilliantly colored, floral pattern top that would have made any self-respecting Hawaiian wince, Peggy met her friend and co-worker in the ICU Monday morning. She supported her bouquet on a stalk of kelly-green stirrup pants stuffed in purple socks around which were wrapped the unofficial Oregon State shoe, the Birkenstock Arizona sandal, which Peggy frequently said the company should change the name of to honor the shoe's status in the state.

At one time, Nancy might have quipped that her partner was planning to test not only the patients' color vision, but their hearing as well. Now she was so used to Peggy's wardrobe that she only noted that the socks looked new. Peggy, on the other hand, noticed immediately that Nancy was wearing the same clothes she had worn the day before.

Peggy studied Nancy's glow as she pulled a chart out of the rack and said, "I see you took my advice."

Pointedly ignoring Peggy, Nancy bent over the chart, but couldn't prevent a smile from pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, it was that good," Peggy said. She craned her head to see Nancy's face better. "Excuse me. It was even better than that. God, there are times when I am so jealous of you."

Nancy looked her friend in the eye.

"Oh no! Not about Ed. No possible way. No. I meant jealous of what you two have."

Nancy smiled in complete satisfaction and started across the floor toward Janet's room.

"But that's no reason to be so insufferably smug about it."

Ed stepped out of Janet's room. "Smug about what?"

Peggy blushed bright crimson and sputtered.

Ed looked at Nancy, who smiled broadly *and* smugly, and he said, "Never mind. I don't want to know."

"Don't want to know what, Ed," Tom said as he walked through the open door to the Unit with Zack trailing behind him. The two were nearly as great a contrast in sartorial style as Peggy and Nancy. Tom wore his normal working uniform: polo shirt, navy today, gray poplin work pants, and black Rockport Pro Walkers. Zack wore a charcoal suit, white shirt with maroon paisley tie, and plain black oxfords.

Tom caught sight of Peggy's red face, peeking through her fingers. "You mean someone finally got her? Well I'll be damned. Who did it? I want to shake their hand."

"Then you better shake hers," Nancy said. "She did it to herself."

"You want to explain that?" Tom asked.

Nancy took Tom's arm and said, "Excuse us." She guided Tom back towards the door he'd just come through. In a stage whisper loud enough to carry across the entire unit she said, "She's got the hots for Ed. She swears she doesn't, but she just confessed to me how jealous she is of me; and when Ed asked her about it just now, she turned into a stop light."

"No, Nancy. Really," Peggy said rushing over to her, "I told you it's not Ed. It's what you two have. He's too old, too tall, and too thin."

"I think she protests too much," Nancy said with wicked delight.

"I do not!"

"I think we've bedeviled Peggy enough," Zack said, joining the group. "Whatever your petty jealousies are, we've got a job to do and—"

"—And we'll get it done," Tom interrupted. "But you have to understand what a momentous occasion this is. Peggy has embarrassed the hell out of each and every one of us at some time or other, but not once has anyone ever been able to get her back."

"Well if I understand the situation correctly," Zack said, "that's still true."

“Maybe so, but the fact remains that this is the first time in recorded history that anyone has ever seen Peggy blush.”

Zack wrapped a protective arm around Peggy’s shoulder and drew her out into the waiting area saying, “Treasure your moment. We have more important matters to take care of.” As the doors swung shut behind them he said, “There’s a young girl in Cottage Grove that we need you to interview.”

“We? Who’s we?”

“Tom and I.”

“Okay. Who put you in charge? Tom’s the boss of this outfit.”

“He seems a little distracted at the moment. We talked about this last night and decided you would be the best one to go under the circumstances. After all you are the pediatric investigator and this patient is a child.”

“Not to mention that Nancy’s daughter is lying in a bed in there.”

“That is, of course, a consideration.”

“How grand of you. Listen, Keller, under any circumstances I would be the best one to go, and Nancy knows that and wouldn’t have any problem with it. One thing you’ve got to realize is that we don’t go sneaking around here, even when we think we’re doing the other guy a favor.”

“We’re not sneaking.”

“Tom’s not, but you are. And I doubt the two of you decided anything together. If Tom felt it was necessary, which he almost never does, he’d give me my marching orders himself, no matter how distracted he was. I know why you’re so hot to get me out of the way.”

“What are you talking about? Why on earth would I want you out of the way?”

“So you can have a clear shot at Nancy.”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that wounded, innocent look. I know all about you two. About how you two were a very hot item back in college, and then you broke up. Only I don’t think you ever heard the fat lady singing.”

Zack had been leaning over and pushing his face into Peggy's till their noses almost touched. Had they been electrodes, the air would have reeked of ozone from the blue arcs snapping back and forth. Now he straightened up, relaxed, and grinned. "I see I'm not the only one with a good imagination. It's very clear that you do not know all about Nancy and I."

"Okay, maybe I don't have the whole story, but I still think I'm right about your hearing."

Zack looked at her quizzically for a moment and then nodded in understanding. "Look, once and for all, I have neither a desire nor any need to have a 'clear shot' at Nancy. What happened, happened a long time ago and there's not a thing wrong with my hearing. She sang Wagner. My only concern here is to provide whatever assistance I can."

"Good. Then you can assist me in Eugene. We still have several patients who need to be interviewed."

"But how can I help with that?"

"You know how to ask questions, don't you?"

"Of course, but this sort of thing really is outside my scope."

"What? Asking people where they've been and who they've seen? What's the matter? That too technical for you?"

"No, of course not. I just thought I might do more good going over the lab results and querying our database for matches."

"When the time comes, I'm sure that'll be a big help, but we aren't going to get any lab stuff back till late this afternoon at the earliest. Probably not till tomorrow morning. And most of that is not going to be of any help because it mostly duplicates what we've already got which is zip. The really useful studies had to be sent to Portland and San Francisco, and'll take three days minimum to get back, and they only went out yesterday."

"So what you're saying is that the mammaries of the boor hog and I have analogous utility quotients."

"Not quite. Right now, his tits have definitely got the edge."

Zack's eyes popped wide open as did his mouth. He shook his head and chuckled. "You are without doubt the most outspoken person I have ever met."

"And you're almost the most pompous one I've ever met. The only reason you're not number one is that we've just found out you do have a sense of humor. Not much of one, mind you, but it's enough to keep you out of first place. Maybe, if we work on it, we might be able to get you down to fourth or maybe even fifth on the list."

"Long list. I take it you don't believe there's any possibility of my getting off the list entirely?"

"I've seen stranger things happen, but you'll excuse me if I don't hold my breath."

Tom walked through the swinging doors.

"Glad you came, sir," Peggy said. "We were just discussing work assignments and their relative value."

"I take it, then, that Dr. Keller has already told you about the little girl in Cottage Grove. Nancy's going to take care of the ones here, of course."

"Fine," said Peggy, "What about the ones in Eugene?"

"Well it seems to me from what Nancy said, that it's going to take a good deal more time than usual to do these interviews, so I thought I might ask Eugene's people to lend us a hand by doing them. They've got three times as many people as we do."

"And four times as much work. That's why I thought Zack could help. There's nothing else for him to do right now."

"True. No offense, but right now you're about as useful as tits on a boor hog."

Peggy and Zack burst out laughing.

Tom stared at them both as, faces contorted, they struggled to regain a measure of their composure and thus restore what little dignity they felt they still might have in his eyes.

Shaking his head, Tom said, "Okay, go do them all. But you be careful around this girl, Dr. Keller. She's dangerous. I can see the signs already. You're beginning to develop a sense of humor, which

at the moment is a little displaced—which also doesn't surprise me, considering its source. Just a friendly warning."

Strangled snorts spewed from their mouths and caused Tom to look more concerned.

Zack regained control first, since he had more experience than Peggy with its maintenance. "Thank you, Mr. Cass, for the warning. It is much appreciated. I shall exercise due caution," he said in an exaggerated British accent.

Now Tom chuckled. "I'm sorry, Zack. I really didn't mean to be insulting or anything. It's just that you've been kind of...of...uh..."

"Pompous?"

"Well, not exactly—"

"—Yes, exactly," Peggy said.

"Well, whatever. It's good to see that you aren't. So if I haven't said it before, welcome."

"You have," Zack said, "but now I know you mean it. Thanks. I think the problem was that none of us wanted me to be here."

"Enough analysis," Peggy said. "We've got a lot of questions to ask a lot of people whose only way to answer is to blink their eyes, and it's going to take forever. Let's get going."

"I agree," Tom said. "Zack could you use your car and maybe give our taxpayers a brea?"

"No way, Tom," Peggy said. "How do you expect me to make my payments if I don't rack up some mileage this month? I've already lost two-days' worth on this thing by sitting in the office to answer the phone. I gotta make that up."

"Sorry, I forgot."

Tom walked away towards the elevators.

"Great," Peggy said, taking Zack's arm and following Tom. "Now the first thing you've got to learn, Zacky boy, is that we don't use the Sears Roebuck catalog anymore."

Zack stopped and looked at her in complete bewilderment.

"Outdoor plumbing? We haven't used the Sears in years, even before they got rid of it. The paper got to be too slick and it had too

many color pictures. Personally, I like an old phone book much better.”

Zack snorted. “Am I to take it that my attitude has been that condescending?”

“Close. Well, Okay, maybe not that close, but I did want to prepare you.”

“You don’t mean there are still people who live that way.”

Peggy nodded. “Not many, but a few, and we might meet one of them.” Slowly shaking his head, Zack stood at the open elevator door. Peggy stepped in and held the door. “Come on, we’ve got a long day in front of us. Including some major surgery, maybe.”

“Huh?” Zack said, his head spinning. He could not keep up with her leaps from subject to subject.

“Yeah, that pig of yours needs a mastectomy.”

Nancy began her interviews with Ed. She took him through everything he and Janet had done Sunday in minute detail. Then they went backwards through Friday to Thursday night as they tried to remember everything they could about Janet’s activities.

Ed helped tremendously. Without the burden of guilt he’d felt the previous night, he remembered small details which suggested previously unconsidered pathways to follow in her questioning of the others.

Then she went in to Janet. The nurses had provided a spelling board, but she didn’t have time to point at each letter of the alphabet till Janet blinked and finally spelled out a word. Structuring the interview to accommodate primarily “yes” or “no” questions took some getting used to, but both Janet and Nancy got into the rhythm of it fairly quickly. After an hour Nancy felt satisfied that she had as complete a picture of Janet’s activities for the last three days as was humanly possible. More importantly she also had an equally complete picture of Ed’s activities, which she hoped would provide a clue as to the source of this plague.

As she prepared to leave, Nancy took her daughter's hand in her own and held it tightly. Janet's eye's opened wide, and her pupils dilated briefly. Keenly attuned to any changes in Janet's condition, Nancy noted these with some alarm. Quickly she checked Janet's heart rate and blood pressure on the monitor. Both had spiked.

"What is it, darling? Are you all right?"

Janet blinked her eyes once. Yes.

"But you seemed startled. Are you sure you're all right?"

One blink. Yes.

Janet's monitored vital signs slid back toward normal.

Maybe I'm just imagining things, Nancy said to herself as she took another look at the monitors above Janet's head.

"Okay, if you're sure." Janet blinked once again. "I have to go now and talk with the others. You've been a big help. I'll see you later. Daddy will be here for awhile."

She leaned over and kissed her cheek. Then she turned to Ed, gave him a kiss, and left the room. Ed sat down in the chair and took his daughter's hand. The spike this time was smaller. Ed didn't notice it. He had eyes only for his little girl's face.

Now the real challenge lay before Nancy. The other patients wouldn't have an Ed to fill in details, one of which she didn't want overlooked. She went to the desk, made a couple of calls, then pulled out a new interview questionnaire, and went into Toby Miller's room.

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the Original)

Mission Time Reference: 3.624

Something very disturbing has shown up in the monitored transmissions. The coincidence referred to at MTR entry 3.139 is not an isolated one. We have obtained a list of all the plague victims from a monitored transmission and every one mentioned was a contact. We have conducted a thorough review of the data and confirmed this.

The implication is clear. What to do about it is less so. We need to consult on a course of action. We are suspending analysis of the data we have gathered. We must ascertain the extent of our involvement and develop a response commensurate with that level of involvement.

Chapter 26

Eureka!

A weary Nancy looked up from her littered desk when she heard Peggy's unmistakable voice in the hall. She looked at the clock. Quarter to four. Chattering non-stop, Peggy entered the office. Zack followed right behind her—suit coat over his arm, tie missing, collar open, and sleeves rolled up—and listening.

Listening?

Yes, he's really listening to her.

Nancy didn't ever remember Zack actually listening to anyone. He'd always seemed to pay just enough attention to what someone else said to formulate his rebuttal. But now his face betrayed an absorption she'd never before witnessed in him.

What's she saying that's so engrossing?

Nancy listened to Peggy's prattle about a cousin and her endless search for the perfect baby sitter.

Zack finds that interesting? He has changed.

Without breaking stride or pausing in the fascinating saga of Becky Sue and the great baby sitter hunt, Peggy dropped the interview forms on Nancy's desk on her way to her own desk. Zack stayed on her heels and parked in Peggy's "customer" chair. Peggy dumped her purse on her desk and began to tie the tangled strands of her story together into something that might pass for a coherent whole.

Nancy had suffered through innumerable similar accounts in their years together. She knew that there was a good fifteen more minutes before this particular tracing of her family's twisted river of history would reach its conclusion, if she didn't wander down some tributary, which was entirely likely now that she had a new audience.

Nancy picked up the top one of Peggy's interviews and started reading it.

There it is.

She picked up the next one.

And here it is again.

She grabbed the next one.

It's in this one, too.

She took the whole pile and set it down in front of her. Scanning through the the next report form, she found the item. Same thing. Scanning for the same reference, she ran through every report quickly. It was there. It was there in every single report.

"I think I've found it," she yelled.

Peggy stopped mid-word and said, "What?"

"I think I've found the common point. But I'm damned if I can see how it connects unless we've missed something in the lab studies. I mean we've ruled out infection, haven't we?"

Zack said, "What are you talking about, Nancy?"

"The one point where every one of them intersects. It's a boy. Maybe nine or ten-years old. With a dog. It's the only thing that stands out in every single case. They always mention the boy and his dog, but I can't see how they could be responsible for this."

"Just a minute," Zack said coming around to Nancy's desk. "Let me get this straight. You're saying that the only contact that shows up in one hundred percent of the cases is a ten-year-old boy and his dog?"

"That's right. At the fair."

"How can you narrow it down to just one boy? There must have been hundreds of people there, even in a place like this."

"Thousands, actually," Peggy said sardonically. "Usually attendance is four or five thousand over the whole weekend."

Zack took the jibe with grace and apologized to Peggy for his condescension, "I am trying. Really. But that just makes my point even stronger. How can you decide that one little boy is the only contact in a place jammed with people? Didn't they all visit the vendors and the stores?"

"Yes, but not all of them visited every vendor and every store."

“How can you be so sure? Even for an event of this size—no put-down intended, Peggy—there must be, what? A couple dozen vendors and at least as many stores?”

“There were twenty-seven vendors and there are only eight stores in Madrone that are open for business. It’s an economically depressed area. And no, not every case visited every vendor and every store. I checked that very carefully. Let me start from the beginning, and then maybe it’ll make sense to you.”

Zack nodded. “Please do.”

“From the beginning I’ve had a gut feeling that the fair was the source. The primary reason is that it is the most likely place that all these people’s paths would have crossed. But I didn’t just go with that. I checked it by trying to disprove it. And I couldn’t. It was the only place that every single case visited. Once I had that narrowed down, I focused in on what places they went, who they saw, what food they ate, and what stores they went into. While most of them went into most or even all the stores, not all of them did. There’s a couple of stores that are actually outside the cordoned off area of the fair. The locals know about them, but the out-of-towners don’t. No single vendor provided food to all of our cases.”

“What about the vendors who don’t sell food, but sell products. Didn’t you say they had some artists there too, Peggy?”

“There were eleven this year,” Nancy said. “Five painters, two potters, two wood-carvers, and two sculptors. They all passed by them. They couldn’t help doing so the way the fair is laid out. But only seven of the cases actually stopped to look at every one of them. Only two of those bought anything. None of them, except the two buyers, had any direct contact with the artists. A couple did handle some of the pottery. But the point is that even if all seven cases shook hands with the artists, it doesn’t account for the others.”

“So what you’re saying is that there was no single person or place that every case contacted except this boy.”

“Right, Zack. And that’s the strange part. We weren’t looking for him. Yet every case brought up this boy and his dog.”

“Wait a minute,” Zack said. “How could they bring up something if all they can do is blink ‘yes’ and ‘no’?”

“The people I talked to who were with the victims, but not victims themselves, all spontaneously mentioned him. I didn’t pick up on it till I talked with Ed this morning and he mentioned it. So I included it in the questions I asked. And every one of them said they had stopped and talked with the boy. Ed said he was a very attractive boy, who was very appealing and friendly. You almost felt compelled to stop and say hello, he said. His dog was some kind of irresistibly cute mutt, that was very friendly, well-behaved, liked to have his head scratched, and kind of kissy.”

“Kind of kissy?” Zack asked.

“Sorry, I forgot, you’re not a dog person.”

“Oh,” Peggy said, “you like cats.”

“I’m not a pet person at all.”

“Well,” Nancy continued, “a kissy dog is one who licks hands and/or faces.”

Zack grimaced.

“It’s a sign of affection, she tells me,” Peggy said, “but I can’t stand it either. That’s why I like cats. They don’t slobber.”

“To get back to my point. I asked every one of the cases if they had noticed the boy and his dog, and if they had, whether they had stopped to talk with him.”

“So that’s why you called to have me ask about him,” Peggy said.

Nancy nodded. “And your questionnaires all show the same answer.”

“Wait a minute,” Zack said. “It can’t be the boy. Ed’s all right. Are there any others who talked with him and are okay too?”

“Yes, at least four that I know of. That’s what’s so puzzling. It’s the only point where everyone intersects, but not everyone who intersects is sick. The only thing I can think of is natural immunity, except that we’re not dealing with an infectious agent as far as we can tell.”

“You’re sure of that?” Zack asked.

“There’s not a single shred of evidence that any kind of infectious agent is involved. All the labs have come up negative on pathogens. None of the cases have any signs of an infectious process—no elevated white counts, no fevers, no histamine responses. No immune response at all, except the one you went to see today who had the flu.”

“Then maybe it’s something that was near the boy,” Peggy said. “Do we know who he was? Where he lives? Anything at all about him?”

“Not much. Ed said that he told him he was from Utah and was here with his parents on vacation. He said he spoke with a touch of an accent which he couldn’t quite place. It was too soft, like someone who was raised in a bilingual home. He also said the boy had a perfect golden tan, except he didn’t think it was a tan. He thought it was his natural coloring. Said he’d never seen anyone who looked quite like him before.”

“You mean something like a mulatto?” Zack asked.

“I’ve never liked that term,” Nancy said with a sour look, “but yes, racially mixed parentage.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it as a slur.”

“I know, I’m just very sensitive about that subject. Ed said he felt like some Neo-Nazi thinking about his possible racial background.”

“But that might explain why everyone remembered him,” Peggy said. “He would stick out in this WASP country.”

“I think we’re getting off the subject here,” Zack said. “If he was standing in the same place with each of the contacts, then it might have been something near him, like Peggy suggested. Was he?”

“No, I thought of that too. Most of them reported that he was near Mrs. Schuyler’s cookie stand, which was next to the east fence. Some of them thought he might have been her grandson, and that he couldn’t come into the fair because of the dog, so he just stood nearby. But Ed said they met him over by the fence next to the bandstand, which is at the other end of the street.”

“Okay. What about the dog?” Zack asked.

“The dog?” Peggy asked.

“Yes, the dog. You said he was kind of kissy?”

“That’s what Ed said,” Nancy confirmed.

“So maybe we should be looking for the dog. Did they all let it lick them?”

“I don’t know. I never thought of the dog. Everyone was so intrigued with the boy because he was so intelligent and polite. Ed said he acted more like an adult than a kid. Everyone said the dog was cute and they all, at least I think they all scratched its head. Maybe it licked them when they scratched it.”

“Then how come Ed’s okay?” Peggy asked. “I know he would have scratched it. He loves dogs and they love him.”

“I don’t know.”

“I guess we’d better check with everyone about this,” Zack said.

Nancy said, “I’ll call Ed right now.”

“And I’ll call Lane Community and Cottage Grove,” Peggy said.

“Can you beat that? A toxic dog.”

Chapter 27

Know It All

The nurse came in and told Ed he had a call from his wife. With a squeeze of Janet's hand, he let go and left the room. She breathed a sigh of relief.

She had been an unwilling party to his tortured mind for almost the entire half an hour the nurses had let him visit. She'd shared, intimately, his guilt, his love for her and her mother, his concern about the sheep, and the ranch's seemingly myriad problems. She'd never realized there were so many things to running a sheep ranch. They were all little things, but they all had to be taken care of.

In addition to her father's thoughts, she'd had to deal with everyone else's. Everyone who touched her shared their most intimate secrets with her. It was oppressive. She had no desire to know the things to which she had become privy. She'd become squeamish about being touched, but was helpless to avoid it. Her skin crawled at the mere thought of another hand touching her skin. It was like being tied down and having some incredibly slimy creatures slide all over you and get inside your head and take over your mind.

Stop it! It's not that bad. You're letting your imagination run away with you again.

But it *was* bad. Sharing people's most intimate thoughts—thoughts they weren't even aware they were thinking—was like invading them. It made her feel like some kind of sicko, like one of those people her mom had warned her about.

She shivered—in her head. The most her body could do was produce a little goose flesh.

When her mother had returned from her interviews with the other patients, she'd taken her hand and talked to her for a few

minutes. She'd been trying to reassure her before she left. Of course her mother didn't know that she already knew everything in her mother's mind, including what she was going to say before she said it.

As close as she was to her mother, as close as she had always enjoyed being with her, in someways like a sister or a very best friend, she had never in her life had the slightest desire to share the intimate details that had flooded her mind today. It had made her queasy, which was bad enough all by itself, but what had really made her heartsick was that it had changed the character of their relationship.

No longer were they simply mother and daughter. No longer were they like big sister and little sister. No longer were they best friends. Now they were spy and victim. Their intimacy wasn't necessarily that much greater than might be found between sisters or very close friends except for one thing. It was all one way, and the friend didn't have a clue that the relationship had changed. It didn't matter that she couldn't help it, that she couldn't prevent it, that she had no choice in the matter at all. It still made her feel dirty.

Then there was that other little thing.

If she'd been asked, Janet would have said that nothing could have made her mother's attempt to calm and reassure her any more of a failure than the involuntary intimacy she had been forced to endure—before she became aware of that second voice. A voice as distinctly different from her mother's as a violin's is from a trumpet's. On a scale from one to ten, the whole matter of her changed relationship with her mother had been a firm twelve. That second voice had pushed it down to a seven.

None of the "voices" she heard, whether it was her father's, her mother's or one of the nurse's, actually sounded like anyone's real voice. They didn't have any real sound at all. They couldn't. They weren't real voices like you heard with your ears because there wasn't any real speaking going on. No sound waves had been generated by vocal cords to resonate against her eardrum. So they

weren't real in that sense. But Janet couldn't deny that they were real just because she hadn't heard them with her ears.

The first time Janet heard one of these voices, she recognized it as Tanya's, except that Tanya wasn't talking right then. When Tanya finally did say something, Janet had already "heard" it.

So it's like her thoughts? she'd said to herself. No way.

But she'd gotten a really good, close look at herself through Tanya's eyes at the same time.

So, yeah. Okay, maybe it is her thoughts. It's better than thinking I'm crazy and hearing voices and seeing things. But maybe thinking you can read someone's mind is just as crazy as hearing and seeing stuff.

That thought had been frightening. But she'd decided that she couldn't be going crazy because she only "heard" these "voices" when someone touched her. No, that wasn't exactly right. They had to make a skin-to-skin contact, and the voices lasted only as long as the contact lasted.

Another reason she knew she wasn't going nuts was that she got a lot more than just a voice in her head with the contact. Her mind was filled with images—a great jumble of fleeting images like an MTV video on speed search, except that some of them stayed on longer. She knew they weren't her imagination and that she wasn't seeing things. She knew this because these images were frequently of herself, in this bed, and from the viewpoint of the person who was touching her. And not just from Tanya, but from everyone.

Of course there were other images, too. Most of them routine and mundane things like buttering toast, or driving down the street in a strange car. Regular, everyday stuff. Which was weird, but didn't make her squeamish. But mixed into them were the ones that made her feel like a peeping Tom. Thank God they flew by as quickly as the rest.

And she got feelings, but not her own feelings. There was no way she could mistake these for her own. She got "their" feelings—the feelings of whoever was touching her. And this was definitely,

without question, the worst part about this whole mind-reading thing.

After a couple of these strange experiences, Janet had begun to realize that the voices were different. It was as if they each had their own signature or something, like handwriting. Whatever it was, it told her exactly whose voice she had heard, even when she didn't know the person's name. Like the time that nurse's aide had come in with Ruby and she'd known Clara's name and everything else she didn't want to know about her in an instant, as soon as Clara's arm had brushed against her bare leg. It was like downloading a computer at a baud rate of one million. Janet knew she was right about this because Ruby hadn't introduced Clara until after they'd finished making her bed.

That's when Janet realized that the voices matched the person touching her. It also convinced her that she wasn't crazy, but cursed.

This knowledge provided her with little comfort. Her head was invaded every time someone touched her, and she couldn't stop it. She'd tried everything she could think of: mentally covering her ears, thinking of something else, and screaming at them to shut up. Nothing worked. The unbridled thoughts, visions, and emotions washed over her like tidal waves. She hated it. It made her sick to her stomach.

She learned what each person's true feelings were towards her, their co-workers, the patients, the doctors, and everyone they met or thought about. And she discovered that many of these feelings were in conflict with the person's thoughts.

No wonder people are so mixed up. How does Troi stand it? Easy, fool. She's not real. She's just a Star Trek character. Still, it would be nice to know her secret.

But none of this explained what Toby Miller was doing in her mother's head.

Great. Just when I've convinced myself I'm not crazy for hearing voices and feeling feelings when people touch me, I get voices that don't belong to them. What's next? A direct line to God?

She had to figure this out before she really did go nuts.

Okay, Toby's a patient here. I know that from the nurses. I also know he's got the same problem I've got. And I know that there are three other kids here with this problem. I even know their names, and how well they're doing, and a whole bunch of stuff I never wanted to know about anybody ever, thanks to this little gift.

Okay, so Mom talked with them all and probably touched every one of them, right? Yeah, definitely, she'd touch them. She'd hold their hands to make them feel better. She always does that. So she would have touched Toby, right? Yeah, no question. So that means that Toby, if he can read thoughts too, knows I'm here. Maybe he decided to try and send me a message through Mom because he knew she was going to come back to me before she left. Yeah, that makes sense. It does? That's more nuts than all this other stuff!

Janet thought about what Toby had said to her through her mother. He'd directed the message right at her and had used her name so she couldn't mistake it for something else. What on earth she could mistake a telepathic message from a schoolmate delivered through her mother for, she didn't even try to consider. She had enough trouble dealing with the whole idea of being forced to read other people's thoughts and feelings. He said he was sorry she was sick, and he thought everything would work out okay and not to give up hope. He also asked her to try and send a message back to him through someone, like one of the nurses maybe.

And there had been something else—a feeling. It was more like just the hint of one, really, like her mother's perfume on her clothes when Janet put them in the wash the next day. She wasn't sure of it, but this feeling seemed like affection. But not her mother's. Nancy's affection for her daughter came through unequivocally. This feeling was a lot fainter. But whose affection was it? Toby's?

Ed came into the room and Janet steeled herself for another onslaught of unwanted and unbidden thoughts and feelings.

The boy? And his dog?

Yeah, he licked me. Remember, Daddy? Oops. Forgot to blink. This is getting more and more complicated. Got to remember that he can't hear me. I can't believe it. They think the dog did this to us.

Ruby came in and told Ed they needed him to leave, because they were going to be putting Janet through her range of motion exercises, and then she needed to rest.

You bet, Ruby. You have no idea how bad I need a break. Not that I'm going to get much of one from you because you're going to be all over me. But at least I know you mean well, and you don't know what you're putting me through. No one does. How could you? Unless I told you, and how am I going to do that? And just how crazy would you think I am if I did tell you? No. No way. I ain't telling you nothing.

Ed started to protest that he wouldn't get in the way, but Ruby gave him no chance. She reminded him that he did have a ranch that needed looking after. Reluctantly, he left after giving Janet a kiss on the forehead.

Ruby took Janet's right arm and started flexing and extending each of the fingers. Then she asked Janet to grip her hand if she could. While Ruby worked smoothly through the routine, Janet decided it wouldn't hurt to try to send a message back to Toby. She knew he would be the next patient Ruby saw, and she didn't know if the message would weaken or grow fainter over time or not. But what to say?

Keep it simple. Isn't that what Daddy always says? So just say, "I got your message. I'm sorry you're here too. Do you know what's going on with us? Do the other kids have this same problem or are you and I the only ones?"

Janet concentrated on this message, repeated it over and over in her mind and willed it into Ruby's brain, not even sure if she really wanted it to work. Ruby finished the exercises, and left with a cheery, "See you later."

Chapter 28

A Dog's Life

"It's the dog," Peggy said, hanging up the phone. "That was Lane Community. The nurse checked the dog theory with all her patients. They all touched the dog, and it licked them."

"Great," Zack said, "now all we need to do is put out a pick up on the dog with a warning to be careful not to let it lick them. Maybe they should just kill it on sight. That would be safer."

"Now wait just a minute, Keller," Peggy said. "I may not be a dog-lover, but I can't go along with just killing the dog on sight just because we think it might be the source of this problem."

"Might be. There's no question about. It has to be the source. Look at the evidence."

"I agree with Zack that the dog is the source," Nancy said, "but I don't think we have to kill it. From what I have gathered, it is an extremely well-behaved animal and could probably be picked up in a carrier without any danger. But the first trick will be to find it. Which means we have to find the boy."

"Did anyone ever get a name for him?" Zack asked.

"Ed said the boy's name was Billy and the dog's name was Nick," Nancy answered.

"No last name?"

"We don't use them much around here," Peggy said. "Everyone sort of knows everyone else and we just go with first names."

Zack shook his head. He could hardly wait to get back to the city where everyone wasn't everyone else's cousin.

"Listen, Zack," Peggy said, "it's not that big a deal. We'll just put out a call for anyone who knows where the boy is to call us."

"On what pretext?" Zack asked.

“No pretext. We don’t need one. For your information, Zacky Boy, people here are friendly and helpful—”

“—and ignorant and liable to panic if they hear that were looking for a Typhoid-Mary mutt.”

“I hate to keep saying this,” Nancy said, “but Zack’s got a good point. If we are going to involve the press and the public, then we’ve got to give them a reason that the press can’t sensationalize. Personally, I think we’d better limit ourselves to having the police search first. We can tell them that we believe the boy is a runaway that we came across in our interviews, and we’re concerned for his safety. Then, if they don’t have any luck in say the next twenty-four hours, we can ask the press to help, and we’ll have a consistent story.”

“Okay,” Peggy said, “I can go along with that. How about you, Zack?” He nodded. “Now all we need is a picture.”

“Which, of course, we don’t have.”

“But which, Zack, the police artist could make up from a description Ed could give him,” Nancy said.

“Get him in here and let’s go.”

“Slow down, Zacky. What’d you have for lunch? Eighty cups of coffee? Listen it’s nearly five.”

“So what?”

“So we have to see if the artist is available and set a time with him that Ed can keep, which means we need to find out when Ed’s free. As far as a search goes, it will most likely be dark before they can get the pictures distributed, and I can just about guarantee they won’t find him in the dark.”

“You mean just because it’s dark they won’t look for him?”

“No, Zack,” Nancy said a little wearily. She remembered vividly now his maddening single-mindedness, and how destructive it had been, not only to their relationship, but to others as well. “They will look, but we don’t have streetlights out there in the woods. And we are not talking about a raging epidemic which is threatening to wipe out the population. Furthermore, he’s not a lost and helpless child. Ed said the boy told him his parents were with him.”

“But he never saw them.”

“He never saw them, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t there. He could well be out of the state by now. Ed said he lived in Utah. They could well have gone home.”

“And you believe him?”

“Ed? Of course I do.”

“The boy. You believe the boy?”

“Whoa, Zachary A. Keller,” Peggy said. “This kid isn’t a murder suspect. He didn’t spread this disease or toxin or whatever around purposely. He’s just a kid on vacation with his dog.”

“How do we know that?”

“You’re not serious.” Peggy said.

Zack stopped and thought a moment. He was doing it again. Taking the bit in his teeth and running off. “No. I’m sorry. I just get carried away sometimes.”

Peggy nodded vigorously and said, “Amen to that. Anyway, even if we do find him, what good’s it gonna do? You gonna make a vaccine out of the dog’s drool?”

Zack shook his head. “No, but we might be able to identify the toxin and develop an anti-toxin.”

“And how many years is that gonna take?” Peggy asked. “And then you have to get FDA approval and that’ll take more years. They’ll all be dead, buried, and decomposed by the time any of that happens. Besides which you ain’t gonna find funding because it’s too limited of a problem.”

“Which does bring up a point we’ve all neglected,” Zack said. “There haven’t been any new cases since Nancy’s girl went down. It’s possible that this epidemic is self-limited.”

“Good point,” Peggy said. “The threat of this thing spreading through the populace does seem pretty slim. It’s not like Legionnaire’s where fifty or sixty people get sick, and there is the definite chance that hundreds more could. We could definitely have seen the last case already.”

Nancy nodded thoughtfully. “That is a distinct possibility, but we can’t proceed on that assumption. We’ve got to work on the

assumption that the dog is still capable of transmitting the toxin, or whatever it is, until we can prove otherwise.”

“Which means, of course, that the only thing left to do is try to find some way to reverse the effects of whatever it is that has caused the problem,” Zack said. “And in order to do that, we have to identify it, even if it takes years, which I doubt it will, which means we have to find the dog.”

“Okay,” Nancy said. “Let’s get Tom in here and tell him what we’ve got and what we need.”

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the original)

Mission Time Reference: 4.165

Monitoring has picked up a police alert for a boy and his dog. The description clearly identifies us. For the time being, we are secure in our current location and will refrain from leaving it for more than is absolutely necessary.

We cannot but be concerned that we may have inadvertently harmed these people. The fact that every victim of this rare disease process is a contact leads us to the inescapable conclusion that we somehow are involved, if not the cause. If that is true, then we must try to rectify the situation. In the absence of guidance from Mission Central, we will consult amongst ourselves and determine the best course of action to achieve that objective.

Meanwhile, we have started an exhaustive review of our actions. In addition we have given ourselves as complete a medical examination as we are capable of performing here. The analysis of that data is continuing and we expect to have the results shortly.

Chapter 29

Another Long Day

Tuesday was an exhausting day for everyone except Janet and Toby.

While the Health Department team waited anxiously for word from the various police departments that Billy and his dog had been found, they caught up on their other cases and duties. Zack, having none, reviewed the lab results which had come in and spent the day talking with his co-workers at the CDC in Atlanta. None of the tests he requested they try proved helpful, except to eliminate yet another blind alley. Between calls to Atlanta, he talked with the Salem, Portland, and San Francisco labs which had been sent specimens. Those conversations proved to be no more enlightening.

Ed spent his time catching up on his ranch chores, which were not made any easier by Baxter's strange behavior. Baxter had been unusually quiet, even standoffish, Sunday night and Monday. Ed put it down to his reaction to not having Janet around. He acted like that when she started school every fall after a summer of her nearly undivided attention. But Monday afternoon, when he'd finally gone home with Baxter, the dog had avoided him after Ed had ruffled the fur on his neck, which was something he'd always loved.

Tuesday morning Baxter continued to mope around while Ed attended to the various and sundry jobs around the house and barn. He avoided Ed's attempts to comfort him or show him affection by petting and scratching his head. This Ed continued to attribute to Baxter's missing his favorite person on the face of the earth, Janet. Nancy had once joked that Baxter merely tolerated the two of them because he seemed to understand that they, not Janet, were the ones who actually provided him with a home and his food.

After lunch, Baxter finally showed some enthusiasm when Ed signaled to him that they were going out to the fields. It was a good thing, too, because Ed had decided that if he didn't perk up, he was calling the vet.

Baxter shot out of the kitchen into the yard as soon as Ed mouthed the magic sounds that told him the plan. He raced across the yard to the field's gate and circled impatiently. Panting happily, he waited for his master to open it and let him get to work.

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon finishing the job he and Janet had started Saturday afternoon. Baxter herded the flock into the west pasture and then ran them by Ed in small groups so he could inspect them. The last thing Ed needed right now was an epidemic of foot rot. Fortunately, they all seemed healthy.

At five, he left Baxter in charge of the house and drove into Roseburg to meet Nancy and sit with his daughter for a while.

The county's law enforcement officers spent the day tramping around the cities and the countryside, alternately staring at boys, with and without dogs, and at the artist's drawing that had been handed out at the morning briefing. All they knew was that the boy might be lost or a runaway and that the dog might bite if they tried to pick it up or grab the boy. The boy was supposedly known to have pretty good control of it so that biting shouldn't be a problem. But just to insure everyone's safety, if the kid and his dog were spotted, they were to be kept under observation until animal control arrived.

The ICU nurses spent a busy and exhausting day in a full unit. Ruby and Minnie, the regular day shift nurses this Tuesday, were grateful for the extra staffing to help with the additional load, but it still proved to be a physically and emotionally demanding twelve hours, actually closer to thirteen by the time they gave report and finished their charting.

Yesterday, they had taken to referring to the locked in patients as VPS (Ventral Pontine Syndrome) patients. One patient being locked in was depressing enough, especially when it was a youngster.

Caring for five locked in youngsters was simply too overwhelming without the little bit of emotional distance provided by using the less personal medical designation.

Ruby elected to take Janet and Toby. She'd come in extra yesterday to help out and had taken Janet and a new patient, a possible heart attack. The heart attack had proven to be a real pain, so she gladly handed him off to the floater this morning and took Toby who was next door to Janet. She thought it would mean a lot less chasing back and forth.

She was wrong, but never stopped to think about it until she sat down to give report at seven that evening. When she mentioned it, Minnie reported that she had not spent nearly as much time bouncing back and forth between her two, but that it was probably just because she'd taken the two youngest VPS'ers and there wasn't as much to do for them. The float nurse said she understood why Ruby had given her the heart patient. Then she added with a smile, "It's a good thing you've got the next couple of days off."

Ruby readily agreed with that and said all calls would be screened by her phone answerer.

"It's probably just my imagination anyway. These VPS'ers just seem to take a lot more time."

"That's not your imagination. They do. And it doesn't help, I'll bet, that you've got a boy their age."

"No, it doesn't. I just keep thinking what it would be like if he was in there instead of one of them."

Toby had received Janet's message the evening before and had sent one back. It took about twenty minutes for the conversation, such as it was, to be completed.

"Glad to hear you're all right. Get some rest tonight," he'd said. "We can talk tomorrow."

Janet's first message to Toby Tuesday morning had been, "Good morning, Toby. Have a nice night?"

Ten minutes later she received her answer:

“Okay, I guess. Kept being woke up by them when they checked on me.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Sleep had become a victim of their “gift.” Every time they tried to sleep, someone came in to check on them and invariably touched them, invaded their minds, and woke them up.

“Listen, we can’t waste too much time on small talk because we don’t know how often Ruby’s going to visit us, so we need to stick to important stuff. The most important thing to me is what are we going to do about this when we get better?”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Janet sent back fifteen minutes later. “Do you think we’ll lose this ability when we get well? Do any of the other kids have it?”

“I don’t think the others do. I’ve tried to talk to them, but none of them has sent anything back, so I don’t think they can. As for whether we’ll lose this, I don’t know. I hope so, ‘cause it’s a real pain, though I have noticed that I’m beginning to be able to screen out a bunch of the stuff from the people who’ve been in here a lot. It seems like I’m getting used to what’s going on in their heads and can pick out just the important stuff. Is that happening with you, too?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it. It’s kinda like a different smell. It’s real strong at first and then it gets to where you don’t notice it at all unless you think about it. I sure do hope this thing goes away. I don’t want to know everything about everyone I shake hands with. It seems unfair, almost dirty somehow. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, though I can’t honestly say I think it’s dirty, though we do get that stuff mixed up with their other thoughts and it’s kinda embarrassing. Thank God they don’t know about this. That brings up a point. Should we tell our folks about this?”

“Not right now,” Janet said. “It’ll just confuse them. They might even think we’re crazy. Besides, how’re we gonna tell them?”

“You’re right. I know my dad wouldn’t be able to handle it. He doesn’t believe in any of this stuff.”

“Mom and Dad would probably do okay with it, Mom more than Dad, I think, but I know they’d be trying to figure out how to help me use it properly and not take advantage of people and stuff.”

Ruby went to lunch, and they decided to take a nap while she was gone to take advantage of the opportunity to catch up on their sleep. Neither mentioned to the other that their messages seemed to contain more than just words. Both felt that they were getting some emotional content as well, almost like the non-verbal cues one picks up in ordinary face-to-face conversation.

It was subtle, nothing like the emotional download they got from everyone who touched them, yet both recognized it and identified it as belonging to the sender, not the messenger, Ruby. It was for this reason that neither felt the need to bring it up in their “conversation.” Each sensed the other knew about it and they didn’t need to waste their limited time exploring it. For this same reason, neither one felt that need to explore their fears. These they knew and understood more completely than they would have if they’d been happily married and intimately involved with each other for fifty years.

When Ruby returned, she had little time to see her patients because she had to cover for the other nurses as they went on their lunch breaks. It was one-thirty before she got back to them.

They kicked around how to deal with their mutual problem, neither considered it a “gift,” and came to the conclusion that they would just have to bide their time and pray that it disappeared when they got better. Neither was willing to give any consideration to the idea that they might not ever recover. It was simply too terrifying an idea to give life to by admitting the possibility.

Toby asked when he sensed they’d exhausted the what’re-we-going-to-do subject, “Say, have you noticed how often Ruby’s been coming and going between us today?”

“Yes, she’s been in here a lot more than she was yesterday. Do you suppose she’s being influenced by our conversation?”

“Possibly, though I haven’t been able to consciously change anything she does, and believe me I’ve tried. I don’t know, maybe she’s just got more to do today.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it. She’s doing more with me today.

“What do you think about the dog Mom said was the cause?” Janet asked after dinner. She, like all the VPS patients, didn’t get dinner in the traditional sense. They had no way to eat it. What they got was a liquid diet through a feeding tube that ran through their noses into their stomachs.

“When was that? What dog?”

“I guess she didn’t visit you. She didn’t say it out loud, but the boy I met at the fair, the one with the cute little mutt, he’s the dog who made us sick. They aren’t sure how, just that he seems to have licked everyone who’s sick, so they think he must have some kind of toxic stuff in his drool. I hope they’re wrong. I really liked him.”

“Yeah, I did too. The kid was kinda different, you know, but okay. He just acted too much like a grownup, like he was putting on an act or something.”

“My dad thought that too. Not that he was putting on an act, but that he was like an adult inside a kid. Speak of the devil, he just came in, and Mom’s out at the desk talking with Minnie. Talk to you later.”

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording.
(Translated from the original)

Mission Time Reference: 4.908

We have completed our medical evaluation. We believe we have developed a way to reverse the course of this disease process, but putting it into use represents a major challenge. To complicate matters, time is also now a very significant factor. We only have a few hours.

The course we have chosen goes beyond the parameters established for this mission, but we see no other way. We have considered the risks of the options available and have chosen those with the least risk which will still allow us a reasonable possibility of achieving our goal.

The overall mission objectives have been achieved and are recorded. One primary objective has not yet been achieved, but it is also the one we all felt would have the least likely chance of successful completion. While it may still prove possible, it is now of a much lower priority than the current objective of neutralizing the effect of our presence here.

We will try to return in time for our scheduled withdrawal.

Chapter 30

Home, Home on the Ranch

John Searles' ranch extended over 2500 acres of rolling, oak-and-fir-studded hills that formed the eastern edge of Driver Valley. His father had cleared about 400 acres on the western end of the property for pasture and his home. John had added another two hundred to that when he'd harvested a fine, four-hundred-acre fir grove twenty years earlier. He'd replanted half and saved the other half for his expanding herds of sheep and cattle. The back half, as he called the most remote section of his ranch, he rarely visited.

A thick forest of Douglas and hemlock fir, with some oak, maple, madrone, and aspen stirred in, covered the steep terrain. No roads, not even graded paths, ran through this rugged country. A tracery of deer trail provided the only marked passage.

He'd thought about harvesting the trees, off and on over the years, but had always come to the conclusion that the terrain was too rugged and reseeded would be next to impossible without hiring a crew, which would eat into the profits so much that it wouldn't be worth it. But the real reason he'd never logged any of it was he had grown to love the view those magnificent trees gave him every morning when he arose and looked out his window.

But now his wife lay helpless in a hospital bed in Eugene. She'd been there since Friday evening. Locked inside her body, they said. Possibly for the rest of her life, they said. She would need special care in a special place, they said. It would cost a fortune. It was more than his insurance would pay for, if they didn't drop him, which he thought was more than likely. It certainly was more than he could mortgage his ranch for. The bills were already staggering. Twelve, fifteen hundred dollars a day.

They'd told him that the cost of extended care in the kind of facility she would need would be two thousand a month or more. And that was one of the cheaper places. A really nice place with a larger and better trained staff would cost three thousand minimum.

All of which explained why Searles had saddled his horse when he'd come home from the hospital Tuesday afternoon and had ridden up into the trees. The restrictions on logging in the northwest had created a seller's market for timber.

He followed one trail after another through the forest with the hope that he might be able to selectively cut enough to pay for Gracie's care and still have a view of something other than barren hills.

The problem was how long would she need that care? A couple of months? Six? A year? Two? He had no way of knowing and neither did the doctors.

He turned up a narrow canyon and let the horse have its head. Breathing the heady scent of the firs, they followed the dry stream bed as it wound its way up the hillside. Searles had, by this time, ceased looking at the trees as sources of income. He'd stopped trying to gauge the board feet in their spires and the collateral damage felling the largest ones would cause.

Instead, his mind was filled with calculations of what it must be like to be stuck in a useless body. His vision was blurred by an unexpected increase in lachrymal secretions. He hadn't cried since his mother had died when he was eleven and his father had told him that it was unmanly.

He rounded a sharp bend in the stream bed and the horse reared.

Chapter 31

No Show

The police had come up empty. Quietly and discreetly, they had looked in every crossroads of the county from Reedsport on the coast to Toketee Falls in the mountains. When discretion had failed to yield any information, they had begun questioning citizens directly. They had shown the drawing to every country store owner and patron they could find. The boy and his dog remained lost.

At two o'clock, the sheriff, after consulting with the other departments, went to the media to ask their help in locating them. The local TV station broadcast the police artist's sketch and directed anyone with any information to call 911 where a special operator had been set up. The radio stations followed suit with verbal descriptions and the admonition to call 911. The county's only paper said they would squeeze the story into its only edition that evening. As it turned out, it was a slow news day and they ran it on the bottom of page one.

Chapter 32

Home Alone

Back in the stable, Searles pulled the saddle off his mount and dropped it on the straw-strewn floor. He made sure grain and water were available in the stall before bolting the mare into her home.

That he hadn't been thrown by her was more a matter of luck than skill. That dog had come out of nowhere. It had happened so quickly that he'd barely gotten a look at it. If it hadn't been for the boy calling to it, he might have thought the horse had reared at a snake or raccoon or something. He wondered what a ten- or eleven-year-old-kid was doing up there. If he hadn't had to control his horse, he might have asked him. If he could have found him. Both of them had disappeared into the woods like wisps of smoke.

Tired and sore from the unusually long ride, he hobbled toward the house and a hot bath. He'd spent most of the morning at the hospital with Gracie and would return there tomorrow morning. It was just too far to drive both ways twice in one day. And he couldn't stay up there for God knows how long. He still had a ranch to run.

An evening alone in front of the TV loomed before him. The thought did not delight him. All it meant was that he would be able to watch the ball game tonight without any carping from Gracie. Nearly incapacitated by the guilt he felt at that thought, he stopped, his hand on the back door's knob. Tears threatened to overflow the banks of his eyelids once again, and he brushed them away angrily.

He'd always prided himself on being a strong man. Strong men didn't cry. Yet here he was blubbering like a baby every time he thought about Gracie. His inability to do anything for her only made it worse.

He pushed through the door and went straight to the bathroom. He'd decide about the game after dinner. Maybe he wouldn't watch TV at all.

And what else are you gonna do, he asked himself as he put his dirty clothes in the hamper, sit around and cry all night? If you don't watch the game, watch something else. Watch the news. Watch a movie. You know she wouldn't mind.

Chapter 33

Lancing a Boil

When Peggy had suggested dinner for the four of them at her apartment, Nancy had been dubious at best. First of all, Peggy didn't cook anything that couldn't be poured out of a can or a jar, or popped into the microwave from the freezer. Secondly, her apartment could barely provide seating for herself and a guest for dinner, and lacked anything like adequate ventilation, especially in the summer. And finally, Nancy had no desire to share an intimate little dinner with Zack, even with Ed present. Especially with Ed present.

Nancy and Zack had actually spent very little time together; and none of it, thank God, had been alone. Either she'd been out somewhere, or he had. When they had been together, Zack had been polite and scrupulously avoided any reference to their prior relationship. It was a time she'd thought she'd put behind her. But, just by being there, he reminded her of the most painful period of her life.

True, he seemed to have softened a little. The abrasive edges of his personality had been smoothed a bit, and he had developed some polish in his style of dealing with people. But he remained...Zack. No amount of smoothing or polishing could change that. He would always be Zack.

And Peggy knew how she felt. What in the world did she think she was she doing? Playing little Miss Patchmaker? What was there to patch up? He'd be out of here in another day or so, hopefully never to be seen again. And she knew that, too. So what was it? Why'd she insist that they all needed a quiet little dinner together to unwind and get to know each other better? And why had Ed not only backed her up on it, but offered their home?

Ed knew who Zack was. He'd always known. Zack's sudden arrival back in her life had not worried him in the least. In fact, Ed had welcomed him with a smile and a firm handshake when they'd finally met, and Zack had responded in kind. They could have been old school chums the way they acted. So Peggy hadn't needed to pour oil on any supposedly troubled waters between them.

And that brought up another point. Ed had embraced the idea with what seemed like ignorant relish. Nancy knew without a doubt that he knew exactly how she felt about Zack, so how could he not realize that being in the same room with Zack all day today had just about exhausted her "make-nice" reserves. Or that an entire evening in a tiny, stifling apartment, choking down canned spaghetti and trying to remain civil would definitely push her over the edge.

Well, he must have realized something, she thought as she stood before a sink-full of dishes, because he gallantly rode to Peggy's rescue and offered our home and my cooking as more convivial. I didn't even know he knew that word. It's almost as if he's playing matchmaker.

Wait a minute! No! No possible way. It's ludicrous. It's absolutely ridiculous. Ed, my dear sweet darling, you couldn't be more wrong. They can't stand each other. They are like oil and water.

Peggy came into the kitchen and said, "Get out of here. I'll do those. Go entertain your company."

"I don't want to entertain my company," Nancy replied through clenched teeth. "I came in here to avoid my company. Let Ed entertain him. He *likes* him."

"So do I."

"Really."

"My, we are bitter. Must have hurt a lot more than you let on. I've never seen you carry a grudge."

"I don't have a grudge."

"No more than the Arabs and Jews."

"No, really. It's just that uh..."

"You hate his guts."

“No!” Nancy said, shocked by the thought. She had never consciously considered her feelings as hatred. She’d always prided herself on never having harbored hatred towards anyone, although she had felt disgust and revulsion many times. It was unavoidable considering the things her job exposed her to, but hate? Never!

Nancy stared out the window over the sink. She didn’t see the deepening purple of the late evening sky as it lowered itself to the tree-covered hills. She saw bright sunlight on her hand as she opened a letter. She blinked rapidly to rid herself of the image and saw Ed lead Zack out to the barn. What was he doing? Zack couldn’t stand being around animals.

Peggy took Nancy’s hand and led her to the kitchen table. “C’mon, tell your Auntie Peggy all about it. It’s time you lanced this boil.”

Nancy sat with sagging shoulders in silence.

Peggy said, “C’mon. You need to do this. You know you do.”

Nancy heaved a sigh and stared at her limp hands in her lap, but said nothing.

“It’ll be good for you. And who better to unload on right?”

Except for a tear quivering on the edge of Nancy’s eyelid, she made no response.

“C’mon. Give. I promise you’ll feel a lot better once you unload this sack of crud.”

The tear traced a course down Nancy’s cheek to her neck. She made no attempt to wipe it away. In a flat voice she said, “Zack and I met my last year at Campbell. He was a year behind me. We shared a required class that fall, and he asked me out. I almost said no. I had a date that night, but he’d asked me to an afternoon performance of the college’s play because he had to work that night, so I accepted. I’d been very impressed by his intelligence. He was truly brilliant. I don’t know what it was, some kind of chemistry or something, but we hit it off. It was like sodium and water. Intense light and heat. Explosive. We burned brighter than the sun.

“By the spring semester, though, we began to fade. I realized that all we had was that chemistry, that reaction, and we’d used up all the substance of it.

“Zack didn’t see it. He was talking marriage and kids and where we would live, and I knew that we couldn’t build a life together based on blinding sex alone. We didn’t agree on much of anything, and we rarely found any middle ground in our disagreements. When I pointed this out to him, he said it added spice to our relationship. It was hopeless. So I told him that I needed some time to think. Some time alone.”

“You mean you were living together?”

“No. He shared an apartment with another student and I lived at the dorm. The other student was very understanding and stayed at his girlfriend’s place a lot of the time.”

“You surprise me, Nancy. I never had any idea you’d ever been a liberated, sexual revolutionary.”

“I wasn’t. Zack was the only man I ever slept with out of wedlock, and it’s one reason why I believe so strongly in chastity and fidelity. Of course, this job has confirmed the validity of that belief daily.”

Peggy nodded, “Yeah, I can see how it could, especially from your viewpoint. So what happened?”

“He couldn’t let go.”

“You mean wouldn’t.”

“No, couldn’t. It was like an addiction. God knows I felt it too, but I could see where we were going and that was nowhere. Our arguments had gotten nastier and meaner even before I tried to break it off. Afterwards it got worse.”

“You mean he hit you?”

“No, he never once touched me in anger. He got morose. After I told him I wanted to break it off, he didn’t show up at school for five days. I asked his roommate where he was, and he said he’d been in bed on death’s doorstep. He said that Zack had been refusing to see the doctor, was throwing up almost everything he ate, and was running a fever. He knew something was up between us; but he said that whatever it was, if I cared at all about Zack, I needed to see him,

if for no other reason than to get him to go to the doctor. Against my better judgment, I went. It was a mistake. He looked like hell, and I felt so guilty because I knew I had caused it.”

“What? You gave him the flu?”

“No, it wasn’t the flu. It was me. I had cut him loose, set him adrift. I had been the center of his life, and he just couldn’t handle the idea that I wouldn’t always be that center. I was the first woman who’d ever told him she loved him. He’d had girlfriends before, but none of them had ever said, ‘I love you.’ He was twenty years old, and all his friends were either shackled up or married. He thought there had to be something wrong with him, so when we happened it was a revelation, almost a religious experience for him.”

“Did you realize all this at the time?”

“No, I came to understand it all later.”

“Was he suicidal?”

“I don’t think so. I do think he didn’t see any reason to live, but I don’t think he wanted to kill himself either. That would have been very much out of character, I think. It was more like an extreme reaction to a life-threatening experience. You know, like when something you’ve always counted on is suddenly and inexplicably taken away from you. Like losing your job without any warning.”

“Yeah, I know how that feels. You can’t breathe. It’s like getting punched in the gut. And then you want to throw up. You actually have to. Your whole world has been destroyed, and you don’t know how you can go on or even if you want to.”

“Exactly. You’ve been there.”

“More than once.”

“But the first time is always the worst, right?”

“Yeah, probably. And you didn’t know when you told him good-bye that he would react this way?”

“No, I had no idea. I knew he would be hurt, but I didn’t expect such an extreme reaction.”

“Why not? I mean you two had been practically living together for what, three, four months, and you had no idea he’d blow apart like that?”

“That’s right. That was one of the reasons I wanted to leave. We never talked.”

“What? You never said anything to each other, just jumped into bed and got sweaty?”

“No, I mean we never discussed anything that was really personal. He was always either silent or just kept telling me how much he loved me. He never really revealed very much about himself.”

Peggy nodded. “Okay, I get the picture. So you went back to him.”

“Sort of. We went out a few times, but always with a group and I refused to go to bed with him. I stretched the time between dates out longer and longer and tried to ease my way out gradually. Our last date was just before finals, and I told him it was. He surprised me and took it pretty well.”

“But. I can hear a ‘but’ coming.”

“He’d taken to writing notes to me.”

“Love letters? He doesn’t seem the type.”

“Oh, he is, believe me.”

“Were they any good?”

“They were beautifully written. Believe it or not, he can be quite eloquent.”

“Why do I have trouble believing that?”

“Because you don’t really know him. He’s not the greatest talker, but if he has the time to sit down and write out what he wants to say, to make his case, he is truly eloquent.”

“Funny. Doesn’t seem like the tongue-tied guy I spent my day with yesterday, but then ours was not a written correspondence.”

And it wasn’t much of a two-way one either, Nancy thought, as she remembered the non-stop Becky Sue saga her friend had been narrating when they returned yesterday afternoon.

“Just take my word for it. One of those letters almost destroyed my resolve, but he still couldn’t really open up to me and let me know what was really going on inside of him except that my leaving him was tearing him apart. I guess it was that he just couldn’t be intimate with me.”

“You mean emotionally intimate.”

“Right. And intellectually.”

“Sounds like he was pretty insecure.”

“I didn’t recognize it then, but you’re right. Anyway, during finals I told him that after graduation I was leaving town, moving away. I refused to tell him where I was going. I didn’t want him tagging along after me like some lost puppy. I also told him what kind of woman I thought he needed to make him happy.”

“Oh, that was good.”

“In retrospect, I suppose it wasn’t the best thing to do.”

“You got that right, Ms. Freud. What kind of woman did you tell him to get.”

“I don’t think that’s pertinent.”

“Oh, no you don’t. It’s pertinent. It’s probably the most pertinent thing you could say. And you’re going to say it. Aren’t you.” Peggy nodded her head in an exaggerated up and down movement, Nancy following her. “That’s right. What kind of woman did you tell him to go after?”

Nancy tore her gaze away from Peggy’s face and stared at her intertwined hands wrestling in her lap.

Peggy reached over and stilled her hands. “What kind of woman was it? C’mon. You know you need to tell me.”

Staring at their hands, Nancy held her breath. In a very small voice she said, “I told him he needed to find someone younger than he was, not older. Someone who would be utterly devoted to him and never question him. Someone who would make him the center of her universe. I even suggested an age range that I thought wouldn’t have a lot of difficulty with those requirements. Then I told him that I bore him no ill will, and hoped he’d find his perfect woman someday, and kissed him good-bye on the cheek, and went to my room.”

“That was good. Very subtle. Did you happen to suggest any grammar schools where he might go looking for little miss perfect?”

“I know it sounds awful now. As if I was telling him he wasn’t man enough for a real woman. In a way I guess that’s what I was

saying, but I wasn't thinking that. Not at all. I was just trying to help him. I really believed that was the kind of woman he needed to be happy."

"It never occurred to you that he might grow up and that he might be able to mature and accept adversity and a woman with a mind of her own?"

"Not at the time."

"And it didn't occur to you that you were condemning some poor child to a life of virtual slavery if he ever got lucky enough to find her and stay out of jail?"

A short, harsh laugh burst from Nancy's lips. "No, I never considered myself the protector of innocent children. At least not until I came to work here. And I certainly never considered myself to be some kind of protector and liberator of women. I was just a young, stupid girl trying to get rid of a man I had come to dislike very intensely."

"And to fear."

"Maybe. A little anyway."

"We haven't gotten to the 'but' yet. It's still in here somewhere. I can feel it. Have we come to the crux, as they say?"

Nancy nodded. "After the graduation ceremony, his roommate handed me a letter and told me Zack had left for home. It was no love letter, but he was no less eloquent. It was mean and vicious. It cut right to the bone because a lot of what he said was true. He could have said it without trying to hurt, but he didn't. He deliberately chose words that were the most painful possible."

"Sounds kinda like you were lucky he didn't deliver his message in person."

"Actually, I would have welcomed a face-to-face confrontation."

"So you could get some of your own back?"

"Maybe. It's interesting, now that I think back on it, how much we disagreed about things."

"I thought you said you never talked."

"Not about us. Not about how we really felt about each other, or what made us happy or sad, or what we liked about each other."

What we did talk about was everything that was external to us. Politics, world events, things like that.”

“And you didn’t agree about them.”

“He held very strong opinions about everything, often ill-informed opinions...”

“Meaning different from yours?”

“No, ignorant.”

“And yours were always right on because they were such well-informed and considered opinions.”

“Yes. No! I mean...” Nancy heaved a sigh. “I see what you’re getting at, and you’re probably right. At least partially. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“At what?”

“That we agreed on little except our all-consuming passion for each other.”

“Which wasn’t enough for you.”

“Would it have been enough for you?”

“No. I mean it’s great at first, but it gets old.”

“Exactly. But that’s not love. That’s just hormones. It took me a while to learn that. Zack never did. At least he hadn’t by the time I left.”

“And you never saw him again till last Sunday.”

“That’s right. I moved to Redding, and then to Portland, and then here. After I met Ed I forgot all about Zack.”

“And his showing up brought back all the bitterness and hate you’d buried.”

“I guess.”

“I think there’s something more. I know you.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I guess maybe I’d like to be able to forgive him. Say I’m sorry for hurting him. Achieve some kind of closure.”

“Forget the psycho babble; what you want is to settle things. Well, you’ve got the golden opportunity, why don’t you use it?”

“Because I’m afraid of opening old wounds.”

“Seems to me they’re already open.”

“Well, I don’t want to rub salt in them.”

“How about rubbing a healing ointment on them?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Has this got anything to do with Ed? Does he know about Zack?”

“Yes, I told him about it before we got married.”

“How’d he take it?”

“It made him angry, at first. But after he’d thought about it, he said all he could really do was feel sorry for the jerk.”

In the barn, Ed and the jerk talked aimlessly, neither willing to open the can of rotting worms that lay between them. Zack’s reluctance stemmed from an unexpected discovery. He genuinely liked Ed. Initially, he’d harbored a secret aspiration, one he scarcely allowed himself to consider lest he betray its existence and ruin all hope of it coming to pass.

He’d cherished the fantasy that Ed was a complete ass, an ogre who beat his wife and child or at least made their lives miserable with his parochial attitudes and backwoods ways. He’d nurtured that dream despite Nancy’s obvious devotion and love for Ed. He’d told himself that she protested too much. No one could love someone that much, be that devoted, and that happy. After all, he had never experienced anything like that in any of his relationships. Only that brief, intense time with Nancy had even approached what she seemed to claim as her normal, everyday experience.

To suggest that he might be jealous would have shocked him. He was only interested in her happiness. Whatever it took, he just wanted to be certain, to be absolutely assured, that she was truly happy. He still cared deeply about her. She’d been his first experience of love requited, and as such it had never quite been equaled, though Lord knows he’d tried.

Now he found himself in the awkward position of having to agree that Ed was indeed everything he could have hoped Nancy would find in a man. Or more honestly, in himself. His highest aspiration now was that he didn’t compare too unfavorably with Ed in her mind.

What really preyed on Zack's mind was whether Ed knew what an ass he had been, and how that knowledge might change Ed's attitude towards him. Continuing to be in Ed's good graces was important to him, though he couldn't say why, possibly because he didn't have that many friends who were men. If he wanted to be brutally honest with himself, and today definitely seemed to be that kind of a day, he didn't have that many friends period. Certainly none of them were of Ed's caliber.

Ed had carefully observed this old boyfriend. He wanted to know whether this man was the same boy who had tormented his wife. Toward that end he'd made a special effort to ingratiate himself with Zack, which, surprisingly, had not been as onerous a task as he had expected for one, simple reason. He liked Zack. Zack probably would never be his best friend, but he was still a lot more likable than Nancy had made him out to be. He could not help but notice Zack's suffering this evening. That he'd come with certain expectations had quickly become obvious, but nothing had fulfilled those expectations.

He saw that Zack was strung tighter than a line hooked into a fighting trout. He needed to be taken off the hook, so Ed invited him to go with him on his evening rounds. The meandering and desultory conversation had gone on long enough. He cut the line.

"You can relax, Zack. I know what happened between you and Nancy. She told me a long time ago. Before we ever got married."

"She told you everything?"

"Everything, as far as I know. Your affair. The breakup. The letter."

"She showed it to you?"

"No, she burned it the day after she opened it, but she never forgot what it said. She could almost quote it word for word."

Zack stood rigidly tense and asked, "And you don't hate me? You're not mad?"

"If you'd been around when she told me about it, I'd probably have decked you." Zack took a step back. "But after I thought about it

a bit, I just felt sorry for you. I figured anything I could dream up to do to you would just reinforce your own opinion of yourself.”

“What opinion was that?”

“That you weren’t worth very much as person.”

“That’s exactly how I did feel. I felt like a piece of garbage dumped by the road.”

“And you wanted to hurt the one who’d dumped you.”

“Yes,” Zack said in a small voice.

“But you didn’t think enough of yourself to do it in a way that allowed her to defend herself or hurt you again.”

“And I’ve carried that burden around for a long time. You don’t know how many times I’ve wished that I’d never written that letter. How many times I’d hoped that Scotty hadn’t been able to deliver it.”

“I can guess. Have you told Nancy that?”

“No, we’ve kind of been staying out of each other’s way.”

“Well, I can tell you she’d sure like to have the chance to forgive you.”

“You mean she’s said that?”

“Not in so many words, but I know she’d like the chance.”

“But she hasn’t actually said so.”

“No.”

“Then how can you be so certain she would if things worked out that way.”

“I know.”

Zack stared at his feet for a long time, not sure he could accept Ed’s assurance, yet unable to refute it because he had seen how closely connected he and Nancy were. It was the kind of connection that he’d fantasized he and Nancy had once shared.

“Thanks. I wondered.”

More silent ground staring followed. Ed remained at ease with his hands in his pockets, and his back leaning against a post. He watched Zack shift his weight from one foot to the other.

“So she doesn’t hate me?”

“No, she was hurt. Deeply and bitterly. I think what she’s come to feel most is pity.”

Zack nodded. "I used to say that the worst thing one person could do to another is pity them."

"Sounds like a line from an old movie."

"Probably hundreds of them. Doesn't change the truth of it though. Being pitied is the pits."

Ed laughed. "That's a better line."

Zack smiled and looked up. "Yeah. Maybe I should give up bug chasing and write screenplays."

"If that's a sample of your best stuff, maybe you should ease into it and hang on to your day job."

Zack joined Ed's laughter, "Yeah, you're probably right. My writing talents have been pretty limited. You know it still surprises me that I could have written that letter. I look back and I can hardly believe that was me. I'm really not a vicious person, you know."

"I know that. And I think Nancy does too. Gonads have a way of making us do and say things we wouldn't ever do if we stopped to think. But that's the thing about gonads. They don't think, they just react."

"But we tend to use them for thinking a lot, don't we?"

"Unfortunately."

"Excuse me," a young boy's voice said, "are you Dr. Zachary Keller?"

Chapter 34

Line of Sight

Toby watched the television without much interest. He and the nurses had worked out a system by which he was able to tell them what programs he liked, and they tried to get into his room and change the channels on time. Even though there was little on except reruns, it had proved to be an effective distraction with all the other things going on. But tonight was crud. It was the lousiest night of the week, even during the regular season, and he was bored. Sara and Tanya provided the only break from the monotony when they visited his room. They almost always touched him; and when they did, he usually got a message from Janet; and he'd send one back.

When he'd first awakened, unable to move even his nose, the stench of fear had filled his nostrils. He'd fought it off and kept that door in his mind closed tolerably well. His dad would have been proud of him if he'd known. If he ever could know.

Then the overwhelming flood of everyone's thoughts and feelings had so distracted him and filled his mind with their hopes, joys, worries, and fears that there hadn't been any room for the insidious vapor. As he'd learned to filter the flow somewhat and had settled into a routine, he'd begun to get a whiff of that unmistakable stink every once in a while. It usually came when he was alone and had started thinking about himself, his situation, and what was going to happen to him.

By that time, though, he'd also learned who the other patients were from the stuff the staff communicated with their every touch. He'd learned about their families and how they were taking this. He hadn't learned very much about the patients themselves, though, because what the nurses knew about them wasn't very much. About all the personal information he got was whatever the families might

tell the nurses, like what their favorite TV show was, or food, or stuff like that.

Then Janet's mother had come in, put her hand on his arm, and given it a squeeze. In those couple of seconds, he'd been flooded not only with her thoughts and feelings, but Janet's as well. He couldn't explain it in a million years, but he knew that he'd gotten something directly from Janet, and it was unfiltered by her mother. It wasn't her mother's impressions or interpretations of Janet. It was Janet herself, but different somehow. It was her thoughts, but not like words or messages such as he got from the nurses. It was more like her personality. Whatever it was, he knew that it was something distinct and separate from her mother, something she wasn't even aware of.

After she'd finished with her questions, Janet's mom had given his arm another squeeze and had passed on to him that she was going back to see Janet. He'd known he had to try to reach her and to let her know things would be okay. Even though he didn't know for sure himself that they would, he had to tell her that everything would work out. Maybe it was just a way to reassure himself. He didn't know and didn't much care. He just knew he had to tell her he cared, even though he wasn't sure she'd get the message. When she'd said hello back through Ruby, that door in his mind had slammed shut and sealed out the last wisp of Fear's nauseating stench.

Together, they'd nearly run Ruby ragged yesterday. He felt rather bad about that now. They'd had different nurses during the day today, which had cut down on the telepathic traffic, but had yielded a bonus. They'd discovered they could send longer and more complex messages in essentially the same amount of physical contact time. This evening they both had Sara so communication was steadier again.

Throughout the day, they endeavored to find out if the other locked in patients could send messages, or even read minds. As far as they could tell, they couldn't. With that question resolved, they fell upon their second most pressing question.

“Do you think if we could touch each other, we’d be able to read each other’s minds?” Janet asked.

“Probably. I don’t see why not. We seem to be able to do it through someone, so it makes sense that we could do it directly.”

“What about after we get well, will we still be able to do this?”

“I don’t know. There’s no way to tell. At least you still think we’ll get well.”

“Of course I do,” Janet replied with a hint of indignation. “How can you think anything else? If we’re still able to read people’s minds and stuff, do you think we should tell them? You know, kinda warn them?”

“I suppose it would be the right thing to do,” Toby said, “so we can’t take advantage of them, but I don’t think they’d believe us. They would probably say we were crazy. And if we proved it to them, they’d be afraid of us, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, probably. But not telling someone that they would reveal their innermost secrets to you with the slightest touch seems to me to be grossly unfair, not to mention a real pain in the neck.”

“You mean head. Yeah, I feel like a Peeping Tom as it is. But I have noticed lately that I’ve gotten better at filtering out a lot of stuff.”

“Me, too,” Janet said. “Both things. I still feel like a creep, but at least I can keep it down, most of the time, to what’s on their minds right at the moment. Can you imagine living with someone like us? There’d be no secrets and no surprise parties. Christmas would be totally ruined.”

“Yeah, unless the other person had the same ability. Then it wouldn’t be so bad, maybe, because they could share stuff, you know?”

“Maybe, but I still think that a person needs a certain amount of privacy, and this just like totally takes it away. I suppose it could work if they agreed on some rules or something.”

“Like what? Not touching?” Toby replied. “That’d get to be a real drag, especially if they were married, you know?”

“And what about their kids? Would they have this thing too?”

“I don’t even want to think about that. It’s tough enough just thinking about what we’re gonna do when we get well. You gonna tell your mom and dad?”

“I don’t know. Probably. It only seems right.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how my dad will take it. He’s gotten into this real religious thing. He might think it was the work of the devil, or maybe that I’ve been touched by God, or something weird like that. Let’s just hope we lose it.”

“You got it. I could live a whole lot easier if I didn’t know everything about everyone I bumped into.”

“Me too. Let’s just concentrate on that for now. Let’s just get well, okay?”

“Okay. Goodnight, Toby. Talk to you in the morning.”

Sara delivered this final message as she went through her usual routine. Glad of the break, he wanted to think about what they were going to do about their telepathic situation. It had been preying on his mind more and more. He knew Janet was as concerned as he was. And just as perplexed about what was the right thing to do.

Before he could consider the questions any further, Sara asked if he still wanted to see the next show they’d worked out on the schedule and he blinked yes absently. He didn’t really care what was on, and probably wouldn’t watch it, whatever it was; but he didn’t want Sara to get all wound up because he’d changed their routine. He didn’t need her hovering over him right now. He had a lot of serious thinking to do.

Sara moved to the side of the bed to press the remote control and moved out of his line of sight.

That’s strange, he thought.

He usually could see her when she stood there. He tried to rotate his eyes to the other side, but couldn’t.

What was it the doc said? As long as I have lateral movement there was hope.

And he’d found out what lateral movement meant. The faintest hint of a foul smell touched his mind’s nose.

He tried to look toward Sara. He couldn't. Finally, she stepped into his field of vision by walking around the bed. She held his eyes as she always did and came to his other side.

"Can you see me, Toby?"

Two blinks. No.

"Follow my finger."

Her head came into sight as she leaned over the bed and held her index finger in front of his eyes. It was a familiar routine, repeated hourly, though this was not the usual time for it. She moved her finger up and then down. He followed it without difficulty. She moved her finger to his left and he lost it long before he usually did. She moved her finger back across his face to the right. He lost it again. A strong whiff of an incredibly rotten smell brushed across his mind.

"Watch your program. I'll be back to change the channel when it's over," she said, giving his hand a squeeze.

A chasm opened in his stomach, and he teetered on its brink. He had lost lateral eye movement. She'd just unwittingly confirmed it.

All along they'd been saying that since he could look side-to-side he would get better. Now he couldn't. Now he wasn't going to get better. He was going to lie here, locked inside his useless body till he died.

How long will that take? Weeks? Months. Years? No way! I'd rather die than be like this forever. Please God! Take me now if that's the way it's going to be. Take me! Take me!

The door flew open, nearly blown off its hinges by the explosion of the choking, stench-filled cloud that enveloped him and swept him down into the chasm that had once been his stomach.

When Sara came into Janet's room, Janet knew something was up. She'd become very good at reading all the staff's faces. Her ability to know what they thought and felt had made them nearly transparent.

They'd better never play poker with either of us.

Sara looked her usual calm self: little smile, professional bearing, and sure movements. But her eyes betrayed an anxiety that hadn't

been there on her last visit. Whatever was bothering her, Janet knew she would know it in a moment.

Toby! No, not Toby.

And one of the others.

They were among the first ones admitted. That means that the others are probably going to lose it too.

Toby. I'm so sorry. But don't give up. There's still a chance. There's always a chance. Hang on! Just hang on.

Chapter 35

Local News

After his bath and a couple of aspirin, John Searles prepared a simple dinner. The long soak in the tub had done much to relieve his aching muscles, but the relief dissipated as he prepared his small sirloin and microwave baked potato.

As he ate, sitting in his recliner before the TV, the aching increased to its former intensity. Out of habit, he turned on the news to distract himself. He especially liked ABC's local affiliate. They seemed to be thorough and fair, though he couldn't say for certain because he didn't live in Denver, Colorado. The topography of Driver Valley served to block almost all the TV and radio signals from Roseburg and just about anywhere else except straight up. So John, like all his neighbors and a large percentage of the rural population, had to rely upon his satellite dish to view the world through his television set.

His only source of local news was the newspaper which was sitting in its delivery box next to the mailbox nearly a half of a mile down the drive. On an average summer evening, John would have walked down to the road to pick up his mail and the paper and enjoyed the cooling evening breeze. In the winter, he usually drove out and back. On the days he went into town, he picked them up going or coming, depending upon the time of day.

Tonight, he could not work up any enthusiasm for either a long walk or a short drive. The Denver Five superstations would have to suffice as his only news source for the evening. And a short evening it would be.

Bored with the reruns and finding nothing of interest on TNT or TBS, his other two favorite stations, he took two more aspirins and

crawled into bed a little before eight just as a boy and his dog
walked into Ed Brandauer's barn three miles south, as the crow flies.

Chapter 36

Revelations

Baxter surprised Ed because he hadn't sounded an alarm. He usually set up a ruckus as soon as someone entered the yard. Instead, not quite cowering, but not his usual bold and carefree self either, he went to Ed's side and leaned against his leg.

Nick approached and Baxter lowered his head to show subservience. Ed bent over and stroked Baxter's head. This just made him lean in closer. If he hadn't had his feet spread apart, Baxter would have pushed him over. Nick sat squarely in front of them, looked up at Ed and held his eyes. Not knowing why, and before he even realized he was doing it, Ed squatted down and scratched Nick's extended head behind his ears. He noticed that the dog made no move to lick or nuzzle his hand as he had Janet's when they had met at the fair. Far from reassuring him, it made him more anxious.

It was as though the dog knew his saliva was dangerous. But that was ridiculous. That would mean he was intelligent. Not just smart, but intelligent like humans.

The boy restored Ed's confidence somewhat by acting just as he had before—quiet, respectful, and self-assured. His manner of dress hadn't changed either, just the color of his shirt. This one was a blue plaid. And he wore a tan cotton windbreaker to ward off the evening's chill.

He approached Zack like an adult, just as like he'd acted at the fair, showing none of the deference a child routinely gave an adult, yet still with an obvious respect for the man. Nick turned his attention to Zack who immediately reached down and petted the dog, and then snapped his hand back as if bitten.

“He’s not dangerous. The virus is gone and so is the toxin,” Billy said.

With his mouth open and silent, Zack held his hand and stared at the boy.

Scratching Nick behind his ears, Billy added, “Dr. Keller, we know that you are a neurotoxin expert sent here by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, and that you believe you have identified the source of these recent cases of Ventral Pontine Syndrome as the secretions from Nick. In that respect you are correct. We commend you for your considerable accomplishment. It could not have been easy. Your belief that study of his secretions will yield a cure, however, is incorrect. Or more precisely, impossible, given the state of your analytic facilities. Worse, it is too late for such a study. There is no trace left in Nick of the virus or the toxin it produced.”

Zack stammered, “How... What...”

“Excuse us, we know this is something of a shock for you. Do you think we might go into the house and discuss this with the other members of your team. It is getting rather cool out here.”

In the house, Nancy greeted them warmly, if somewhat nervously. The boy was exactly as Ed had described him, only more so. And his dog, scruffy and cute, in a mutt sort of way, was so affectionate it was easy to see how he had infected so many people. Petting him was an almost irresistible impulse, even if you knew that he might be toxic. She’d patted his head and scratched his ears without thinking, and then snatched her hand away. Billy assured her, as he had Zack, that there was no danger. Assurances aside, Nancy decided to keep her hand to herself.

It was not so with Peggy. She squatted down in front of Nick and ruffled the fur around his neck, scratched his ears, and stroked him all the way down his back. She looked at Billy, eye level with him now, as he reiterated his assurances that Nick posed no threat to anyone.

He’s such a gentleman, Peggy said to herself as she looked at Billy. He’s self-confident without a trace of arrogance, intelligent,

and obviously knowledgeable far beyond his apparent years. And this dog—he's unbelievable.

Peggy, as previously established, by no means considered herself a dog fancier. She preferred the independence of cats and the fact that they didn't need to be taken care of constantly. But this little guy was different. He seemed to be almost as intelligent as his master.

They all moved to the table, each taking a chair. Nick followed Billy and sat beside him without Billy giving him a single command or hand signal. Peggy, Nancy, and Ed took note of this and looked at each other. Zack seemed oblivious, which didn't surprise the others. For one thing he still seemed to be in shock, and running on autopilot. For another, he had already made clear his feelings about pets, and couldn't be expected to know about dog handling or obedience training.

His mind a whirl, Zack sat down between Ed and the boy. Here they had searched everywhere for this kid. They had enlisted the aid of the police, the newspapers (well newspaper) and even the local TV and radio stations. And they had all come up with zip. Nada. A total washout. He'd been ready to write the whole thing off and catch a plane back to Atlanta. They weren't letting him do anything here anyway. He was just wasting his time. And then, of course, there was that other little thing with Nancy, which was even more reason to leave.

At least it had been until he'd talked with Ed tonight. Now things had changed. Whether for the better or not, he couldn't say just yet, but they had definitely changed. He couldn't just walk out on her again. He had to clean this up before he left. Even if he never saw her again, he had to at least try to make things right. He had no idea how. He was kind of hoping maybe Ed would give him a hand with that.

In fact he'd just been about to bring that up with him when this kid walked right up to him with his dog at his side. He'd been so flabbergasted all he could say was, "Yes, I'm Zack Keller." He hadn't even used his title, which he always used with strangers. But the

really unbelievable part had been when he reached down and petted the dog.

I never pet dogs. They're dirty and they bite people. And this one's toxic!

A week ago, he probably would have stuffed the dog in a box and raced up to Salem without considering such mundane questions as how the kid knew his name or where to find him. He wouldn't have given a thought to how the boy might react to having his dog taken from him. And probably most important, he wouldn't have considered whether or not sacrificing the dog would give them any real answers much less a cure. He knew that this child was absolutely correct about the labs here not being capable of doing the job. He even wondered if the lab in Atlanta could, at least in time to do some good. What he didn't know was *how* the boy knew it. How could a ten-year-old kid know so much?

The same question dominated everyone's thoughts as they looked across the table at Billy while he rested his hand on his dog's head. He looked at each of them in turn.

"We can see that you are all concerned about how we can know so many things, things which you believe are privileged knowledge. You are also wondering if what we have asserted is true and how the truth of those assertions may be proven. Are we correct?"

Stunned heads nodded mutely.

"We cannot offer any irrefutable proof. We can only offer such evidence as we have and hope that your minds are not clouded with preconceptions or prejudices. They would invalidate any proof we offered, no matter how incontrovertible."

Peggy blinked, her vacant look replaced by her usual animation. "You said your dog is no longer a threat."

"That is correct."

"You said he isn't toxic anymore. How do you know that? How did you know that we thought he was toxic?"

"To be precise, we did not say he was no longer toxic. You drew that conclusion from our statement that he was no longer dangerous. He has never been toxic. He was infected by a virus

which, in turn, produced a toxin which had no effect on him. However, it is true that Nick no longer carries either the virus or the toxin. We know this because Nick has undergone two complete bioscans. We are also aware, through electromagnetic monitoring that was confirmed by direct contact, of your belief, which was correct, that the source of the illness was Nick.”

Zack woke up. “Wait a minute. In plain language, you’re saying you’ve been watching us? How? Why? What are you doing here? What do you want?”

“We understand your concern. Please be assured that we have no aggressive or hostile intent. In simplest terms, we have simply been monitoring the electromagnetic spectrum which is what you use for telecommunication. We have been doing that to understand you better. To gain a more accurate and more complete understanding, we found it necessary to establish a means of direct contact and observation.

“So that’s what you were doing at the fair,” Ed said.

Billy nodded. “What occurred was an accident. We thought that we had provided protection from any kind of contamination.”

“To yourself,” Zack said.

“To you. We went to extraordinary lengths to immunize ourselves against all known infectious agents so that we could not act as carriers of disease. We know from your history that whole populations have been decimated by infections unwittingly carried by explorers to previously isolated peoples who had not developed defenses against those agents.”

Zack asked, “So you claim you’re explorers. From where?”

“I should think that’s obvious,” Peggy said.

“Maybe to you,” Zack replied. “Not to me. Rural America may be primitive by twentieth century standards in some regards, but it certainly isn’t an uncharted land, and he certainly isn’t Columbus.”

“Maybe not here, but he might be somewhere else.”

“Oh, no, Peggy. You’re not going to get me off on that tangent. Just forget it.” Turning to the boy, he continued, “You keep speaking about ‘we.’ Who is we? Are you saying there are more of you here?”

“No, there is just Nick and myself. By the way, my name is actually William. Or at least that’s how it translates. I used Billy because it seemed more appropriate for a boy of ten or eleven in your culture.”

“And, of course, you’re not a ten-year-old kid.”

“I should think that’s obvious, Zack,” Nancy said.

“Not you too.”

“Not me too what? It’s obvious that no ten-year-old, even a prodigy, could demonstrate the maturity Billy has. He might have the knowledge, but I seriously doubt he could convincingly portray the depth of experience this young man obviously has. Besides which, however interesting this question of his age may be, I think it’s really irrelevant.”

“Irrelevant?” Zack asked. “How can it be irrelevant?”

“I think it’s a great deal more relevant to know why he came here tonight. He has to have known that we’ve been looking high and low for him,” William nodded as Nancy looked at him for confirmation, “and without the slightest success. He can’t have known why we wanted him because we never discussed that with anyone, but I can bet that he didn’t think it was to give him a check from Ed McMahan. Still, he came to us, and, as we have already shown by our own actions, he did it despite the risk to himself.”

“What risk?” Zack asked “What have we done that’s threatening to him?”

Nancy ignored Zack and asked the boy, “You came here tonight for a specific reason, didn’t you? Please tell us what that is.”

William smiled. “To give you the remedy for your people. Medical has identified the toxin and compounded an antidote. A single dose should not only block the toxin, but destroy it.”

“Ah ha. I knew it. There are more of you.”

“I have not lied to you, Zack,” William said with utter equanimity. “Medical is a specialized computer with artificial intelligence. One of its capabilities is full molecular analysis and synthesis. Once we had learned of the nature of the illness and identified ourselves as the

origin, we underwent a complete biological analysis to discover not only what the toxin was, but how it was transmitted.”

Zack started to say something, but Nancy raised her hand and looked at him. For a fleeting instant he thought of protesting, but Billy—William—was continuing.

“...Nick had contracted a mutated virus. We have identified it as one which normally attacks fowl. We have developed immunization techniques for dealing with mutating viruses, but we hadn’t considered that one might mutate enough to cross such disparate species. This is the first instance, to our knowledge, that such a thing has happened. The virus produced a substance which was secreted in his saliva. When he licked someone, the toxin was transferred and absorbed through the skin where it broke down into several harmless compounds and a free radical which had an affinity for receptor sites in the ventral pons. The bonds it forms are quite strong and normal metabolic activity will not destroy them. The antidote we brought is designed to break those bonds and bind the radicals, creating an inert compound which can be excreted by the kidneys.”

“That’s all very interesting,” Zack said. “Have you tested this antidote?”

“By computer model. Obviously we haven’t been able to test it on any of your people.”

“Then how can you know it won’t kill them or make them worse?”

“We understand your concern. Your experience with the computers you have developed thus far has made you distrustful of them, with good reason. Ours are far more advanced. We rely upon them for many routine functions and especially for analytic work. They have proven to be invaluable in this regard, but we do not accept their results indiscriminately. We checked the findings against our database on human biochemistry and metabolism which is far more exhaustive than your own. We could find no way in which this antidote could cause a worsening of your people’s condition or their death.”

“That’s all very well, but I only have your word for that. I don’t know where you come from, or even what you really are.”

“Is that important, Zack?” Nancy asked.

“Of course it is. He could be some kind of...of...”

“Of what? Alien?” Peggy said.

Zack gulped loudly. “Well, no. I mean, that’s ridiculous. I just meant that he could be...”

“What, Zacky Boy,” Peggy said. “An enemy agent? Of what country? Russia? They’re in chaos. The Arabs? The Japanese? Hell, they already own the country. I think we’re looking at this whole thing bass ackwards. If he intended to do us some harm, he would have kept spreading his toxin or whatever and we’d all be lying around helpless as fish out of water. We didn’t have clue one as to who he was or where he was. He just disappeared off the face of the earth. Which he may well have done for all we know.” She looked at William with a smile which he returned, but gave no other indication as to the accuracy of her assertion. “The point is that he voluntarily came to us and offered to help us. He’s made no demands, no threats, and offered no deals. I think that speaks pretty well for his integrity. I think we ought to trust him. Besides, I don’t see that we’ve really got a whole lot of choice.”

“Oh, we have a choice all right. We can arrest him and his dog and take them and his antidote to Salem and test them.”

“How? And on who?” Ed asked. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to say something here. Everything William has said has made perfect sense. It is logical and consistent. Killing Nick to study him under a microscope is not going to make Janet well.”

“Who said anything about killing him?” Zack asked.

“You did, Zacky Boy. In the office when we identified him as the probable carrier.”

“And I rejected that idea.”

“Yeah, after we argued you out of it. But you never said you wouldn’t do it if you got the chance.”

“Well, I’m saying it now.”

“The point is,” Nancy said, “Ed’s right. I know what the Salem lab is capable of, and identifying this toxin and its metabolites isn’t possible for them. If it was, they would have done it already. They’ve had more than enough specimens and time to do that. As for testing William’s antidote, there’s no way to do that except use it. An analysis of its chemical structure won’t really tell us if it will work. I guess what I’m trying to say, Zack, is that there comes a point where we have to trust our instincts and make a decision. We can’t just go on gathering data and hope that at some point the data is going to make the decision for us. Very few things in life work that way.”

“If I may interject something,” William said, “we believe time is of the essence. The effects of the toxin will become irreversible in the next five to six hours for the first ones exposed to the toxin. That is an estimate based upon an average metabolic rate. If the person’s rate is higher, the time is shorter. Also the closer to the deadline we come, the less complete the recovery is likely to be. It is possible, though unlikely, that we may already be too late for some of them.”

Chapter 37

Failings

Dr. Baron walked into Janet's room and straight to her side. Without preamble he took her hands and said, "Squeeze." Quickly he went through the routine they'd done every morning and evening since she'd been admitted.

Janet read his concern immediately, before he had even touched her. Like the rest of the staff, he had become quite transparent to her.

Maybe I should take up poker, flashed through her mind just before he grabbed her hands. No! Not little Kelly, too.

She'd expected him to be upset about Toby's condition, but she hadn't expected the rest. Six-year-old Kelly had lost her lateral eye movement, too. Baron thought it might have happened to her first and had just gone undetected until after the nurses caught Toby's loss and checked everyone else. And to make matters worse, Jimmy, a seven-year-old who Baron thought of as the third victim chronologically, looked like he was going to join them. He'd just failed his eye test for the first time.

Worse still, the optimism which Janet had always found so comforting in Dr. Baron's mind had become very guarded. He still wanted to hold out some hope, but he knew he wasn't being honest with himself if he did. In all truth, deny it as much as he might try, he didn't think any of them would make it now.

Janet looked at her own situation in a fresh light. She'd been the last to be afflicted, which probably meant she would probably be the last to die. She would have to lie here in this bed as everyone unknowingly poured their frustration and utter helplessness into her with their loving touch. Strangely she didn't fear her own death

so much as she did having to be a repository for everyone else's anguish.

She thought she might even be able to accept being permanently locked inside a useless body. It would be difficult, she knew that. And she knew that someday would be worse than others, that she would rage against God and fate and whatever else she could think of for the lousy deal life had handed her, but ultimately she was sure she would learn to live with it for however long she had left. As long, that is, as she wasn't also going to be forced to be the repository for everyone's thoughts and feelings.

Of course, she thought, I could always tell them about my special little problem. But that might only make things worse. I can just see the headlines now. "Miracle Child Knows All!"

A stream of images ran across her mind's eye of an endless line of people coming to her bed for "readings." Or even worse, coming to her with expectations that, because she could read their minds, she must also be able to tell the future, or heal them of God knew what. The only thing she knew for certain was that it would be absolutely horrible. Her picture spread across the front of every checkout tabloid with those stupid headlines touting her miraculous powers.

It gave her the shivers, as though she could actually shiver. She felt herself try, but felt no muscles contract and no limbs move. Nevertheless, she still felt liked she had shivered. It was so weird.

And then there was that other little thing she'd noticed lately.

She'd become certain that the other locked in kids were communicating something through the nurses. Not conscious thoughts like Toby had sent to her. This was more like simple, basic emotions.

She'd become aware of these emotions when one of the relief nurses had come to her when Sara had been on a break. She'd been taking care of Kelly, and there'd been an emotional undercurrent that was very childlike, nothing like what an adult should have. Later, she had picked up the same kind of thing from Sara after she'd

been in with Jimmy. She couldn't really put her finger on why, she just knew that these were the other kids' feelings, not the staff's.

What she feared more than anything now that things were definitely going downhill, was that each one of those kids would cry out one last time and cease to exist, and she would be forced to hear their silent cries and be the final repository of their unspoken anguish.

She'd been intending to talk this over with Toby and see if he'd picked up the same feelings, but it seemed less important now that he was fading. She might not be able to do anything for the kids, but she could try to help Toby. She had to let him know he wasn't alone, that she cared about and would pray for him. That she loved him.

Before Dr. Baron let go of her, she sent a message to him. She repeated it with Sara and everyone else who came into her.

Don't give up yet, Toby. I know Dr. Baron's not hopeful, but he's always been an old poop about things and looks at the bad side first. Don't give up hope. I'm praying for you, Your Dad is praying for you. Mom and Dad are too. It'll work out. I know it will. Just hang in there. I need you. I love you.

Chapter 38

Sharing

When William had announced the time factor, Nancy had called the ICU and gotten Sara. The look on Nancy's face confirmed William's estimate. She told the others about the loss of lateral eye movement in the two children and in Toby.

Peggy stood up and said, "Well what are we waiting for? Let's get down there and give this stuff to those kids."

"Wait a minute," Zack said. "Not so fast, Peggy. What do we know about this kid? What do we know about his supposed antidote? How do we know it'll work? How do we know it won't make them worse or even kill them?"

"We've already been through that," Peggy said, "We don't know, but what other choice do we have?"

"We can trust in what we do know. Nancy? Ed? Are you really willing to risk Janet's life on this boy's claim that he has a cure?"

Nancy looked at Ed who said, "I think I need to know something more before I'm willing to risk Janet's life."

"I agree. Neither of us means any disrespect, William, but you can see how all of this is a little hard to accept."

"We expected that it would be very difficult for you. Your prudence is quite proper."

"Well, it's all very well and good of you to be so humble and recognize that," Zack said, "but it doesn't change the fact that we still don't know anything about you except what you aren't, which is a ten-year-old boy."

"Oh, Zack," Peggy said, sitting back down in her chair. "I should think it's obvious what he is. You're an alien. Right? From another star system. Right?"

“Now that’s just the sort of thing I was hoping we could avoid,” Zack said. “We don’t need any supermarket tabloid crap. Next you’ll be wanting to take a ride on his spaceship.”

“I do, as soon as we get these people cured.”

“Well, I just want the truth. You’re from Japan. Right? You have an oriental cast about you. Though it could be China. They’re still a communist country and an enemy, even if it isn’t officially.”

“Stop it, Zack,” Nancy said. “While it’s obvious to me he isn’t a ten-year-old boy, it’s equally obvious he isn’t some secret agent or terrorist assassin. Peggy was right about that. The cold war is over.”

“Please, we are very distressed by all this suspicion and animosity. We are even more distressed that we have, however inadvertently, been the cause of it. It was never our intention to cause anyone any harm. Indeed, we didn’t want anyone to even be aware of our presence.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Zack, please just shut up,” Nancy said. “I’m sorry, William. Where you come from is unimportant. Please just tell us what makes you believe you have the cure for these people.”

“No! Where he comes from is important.”

“More important than Janet’s life?”

“No, of course not. But just because he seems to be more than what he looks like doesn’t mean he is who he says he is, which he hasn’t actually said, or that he actually has a cure for Janet. Maybe where he comes from isn’t all that important, but what or who he is definitely is important.

“Why, Zack?” Nancy asked. “Why is what he is more important than what he’s brought. Shouldn’t we be evaluating the message instead of the messenger?”

“That’s just the point. We can’t evaluate his ‘message,’ as you put it, without putting people at risk. So we are left with evaluating the messenger to see if what he has to say is consistent and makes sense. If he can prove that he knows what he’s talking about, then I might be willing to go along with using his so-called cure.”

“I think he’s already given us a very good explanation of what caused the problem and how his antidote will fix it,” Peggy said.

“Yes, it was a surprisingly cogent explanation, especially for a ten-year-old kid. But that doesn’t mean it’s true. It just means that he can spin a very good tale. Maybe he’s some kind of prodigy. And while we’re talking about it,” Zack said turning to face the boy, “why do you keep talking about yourself like you’re more than one person?”

“Because we are part of an organic whole.”

“Who? You and who else?”

“Nick and myself. We have spent almost our entire lives together. To think of myself as separate from him would be analogous to your considering your right hand belonging to a separate entity from your left hand. We do not refer to ourselves singularly unless we are referring to something that specifically concerns one of our bodies.”

“Now wait just a minute, this is where I get off,” Zack said. “Are you trying to tell me that your dog is a part of you?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“How?”

“Our minds are joined.”

“Yeah, right.”

“This is very difficult to explain because you are not telepathic. You are isolated from each other.”

“Especially right now,” Peggy said. Zack, Ed and Nancy cast identical looks at her to shut up. “Well, maybe not all of us.”

“You three shared the same thought at the same moment just now,” William said. “You said nothing, yet Peggy correctly interpreted it as did we. Now, extend that concept a little and you may be able to grasp the concept of shared intellect, shared thought, shared minds.”

“But if what you’re saying is true,” Peggy said, “then Nick is sentient. Intelligent. Like you.”

“That’s impossible,” Zack said.

“Why?” Peggy asked. “Why is it we have to be the only intelligent species?”

“Friends,” William said, “we said the concept would be difficult to explain. Suffice it to say that we are linked telepathically.”

“Okay, if you’re telepathic, what am I thinking right now?”

“I could tell you that, Zack,” Peggy said.

Everyone broke up laughing, even Zack after a second or two.

“I guess it was pretty obvious, wasn’t it?”

“No more than what we were thinking a moment ago about Peggy,” Nancy said.

William said, “Yes, it would have been no challenge to read your mind at that moment, Zack, but the truth is that we would not have actually been telepathically linked because we were not in contact with you.”

“What do you mean? You’re sitting right next to me?”

“But we are not touching.”

Zack grabbed William’s wrist and said, “Okay, now what am I thinking. I’ve got a series of numbers in my mind. What are they?”

“Not me. Nick. You must touch Nick. Rest your hand on his head.”

Hesitantly, Zack let go of William and lowered his hand towards Nick. He held it over the patient dog’s head, then finally dropped it on him for a couple of seconds, and then pulled it away. William put his hand on Nicholas’ back.

“Actually you are not thinking of one string of numbers, but three. Three sets of four numbers each. They are what you call PIN numbers for your bank accounts, and you use them to access those accounts through an Automatic Teller Machine.”

Zack stared at Nick.

“It is all right. Do you wish us to reveal these numbers to everyone or would you prefer us to tell them to you privately?”

“I think I can trust everyone here,” Zack said, looking around the table at everyone.

“Very well, but just to ease your mind I will say them without reference to which account they access. Five, six, nine, one. Eight, three, four, nine. One, four, four, four.”

Zack nodded resignedly. "Of course you could have found them out some way or other. Particularly if you're as good with a computer as you claim."

William said. "We are aware that in your history there have been a large number of charlatans who have claimed telepathic ability. Interestingly, some of them have had real abilities. Even more interesting is the fact that there have been several who possessed great ability, but kept it secret. Very wisely, it would appear. But Dr. Keller, what if we could arrange it so that you could read someone else's mind?"

"That's impossible."

"No, it is not. Nick is a conduit for thought. If you and Mr. Brandauer were to touch him at the same time, you would be able to read each other's thoughts."

"No way."

"What's the matter, Zacky Boy? Afraid he'll make his point, and you'll have to admit what you won't even consider?"

Zack looked at Ed who returned the somewhat hostile glare without expression.

"I'm willing," Ed said, "if it will move us any closer to doing something other than arguing over whether we can trust William and his antidote. Put your hand on him, Zack."

Ed stood up and walked around behind Nick. He squatted down and laid his hand gently on the dog's neck. He scratched him behind the ears while Zack gingerly put his hand on Nicholas's head. Both men jumped back as though they'd grabbed a high voltage line. Ed landed on his backside and Zack knocked over his chair in his backwards rush to escape the assault.

"We're sorry. We hadn't considered that you're not used to this. Try again, but this time try to control your thoughts. Just focus on saying hello."

The two men eyed each other warily for a few moments, and then Zack nodded slowly. Ed returned to his former position while Zack righted his chair and sat down again. With their eyes closed with

intense concentration, both reached for the dog with their index fingers.

At the first touch, they pulled back, and then stabbed forward while maintaining contact this time. Nick bore the jabs serenely. Braced for the powerful flow of images and feelings, neither man pulled his finger away. After a moment, they relaxed their fingers, let their hands lay on the dog's back, opened their eyes and looked at each other.

Nancy and Peggy watched the men's eyes glaze and beatific smiles spread across their faces. Looking at each other, the women engaged in their own kind of telepathic communication.

Nancy's message: It's amazing. I never would have dreamed.

Peggy's: Look out girl, he looks like he's just found something better than sex.

William added his hand and thoughts to the mix.

Are there any doubts now about the truth of our assertions?

No. I'm sorry I doubted you. There's no way you could fake this, and there's certainly no way you could lie to me this way. Let's go cure those people.

Chapter 39

Faith & Healing

The phone's boisterous bell drowned out the fervent words of the gesticulating man in an exquisite blue suit on the screen. He held up a white book with gold-edged pages and slapped it with his right hand as he implored a vengeful, but forgiving God to remove Brother Perry's afflictions.

A camera zoomed in on the expectant face of a man in a wheelchair. The ever-present phone number obscured the man's lips as he uttered something Mark Miller couldn't hear because the telephone rang out its second call for his attention.

Reluctantly Miller got up and went to the kitchen and snatched the receiver off the wall just as it began to ring a third time. He said hello absently as he watched the man slowly push himself up out of the chair and stand. Two assistants appeared at his side and steadied him as the frenzied, blue-suited man with flowing silver hair took Brother Perry's hand, placed it on the white Bible, and pronounced him healed by the power of God flowing through his servant, Pastor Bob.

"What was that?"

"I said, I'm sorry to have to say this, but it appears Toby's condition has begun to deteriorate."

"Who is this?"

"I told you. Dr. Baron. He's not in any immediate danger, but he has lost lateral eye movement, and that is not a good sign in terms of recovery. Though it does not preclude a full recovery, it is usually indicative of the deficits becoming more permanent."

Miller tore his attention away from the healed paraplegic and focused on the caller. "Just give it to me in simple terms, Doc. Is Toby dying?"

“No.”

“But you think he’s worse.”

“Yes. I think it would be best if you came down to the hospital as soon as possible so we can discuss this fully with Toby.”

“You haven’t told him anything, have you?”

“Not yet. I wanted to wait until you could be here with him.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Don’t tell him anything. Not till I get there.”

Mark Miller hung up just as Pastor Bob finished explaining the urgent need for the offering pledges to reach twenty-five thousand dollars by the end of the hour so his ministry of healing could continue. Mark dialed the number on the screen and gave the sweet-voiced woman the number from his credit card and an appeal.

Chapter 40

Well Laid Plans

With Zack's conversion, the only question remaining was how to get William into the hospitals to administer the antidote. All assumed it had to be given through some exotic device which only he could operate.

"Wait a minute," Zack said, "we can't take him with us. His picture's been all over the TV and the newspaper. He'll be recognized the minute we walk in there."

"Friends," William said quietly, "it is not necessary for me to accompany you. You are perfectly capable of giving the antidote yourselves." Reaching into his pockets, he produced two round, palm-sized objects. "All you have to do is hold one of these inoculators in your hand and press it against the person's skin for about two seconds. The forearm would probably be the least conspicuous place."

"Okay then," Peggy said, "who gives it?"

"I think Nancy should give it to the patients here," Zack said. "Peggy and I can go up to Eugene."

"Why should you go with me?"

"Because I can help you get in to see the patients if there are any objections to our visit at this late hour."

Peggy nodded. "Good point. Nancy won't need any help here, but I sure might because they don't really know me and I'm out of my jurisdiction. There's hope for you yet, Zack."

"Don't forget about the girl in Cottage Grove," Nancy said.

"We can get her on the way back," Zack said.

"Okay. What about William and Nick?" Peggy asked.

"They should stay here in case we run into any problems," Zack said.

“You mean like it doesn’t work or something?” Peggy said.

“We will wait here, if that is your desire, but you should know that you will not be able to tell whether or not the antidote has worked for at least three to four hours.”

“No miraculous cures,” Ed said. “Very smart.”

“We thought it best if the first signs of recovery were delayed until a few hours after your administration of the antidote, even though no one should be aware of your having given it. It has been designed to appear as much like a natural recovery as possible. The only immediate effect it will have is to stop any degeneration that may have occurred. After about three to four hours, they should begin to have some voluntary movement of the facial muscles. By the twelfth hour, there should be some extremity movement, such as the ability to wiggle their toes and flex their fingers. After that recovery will proceed rapidly to where they should be able to stand with some assistance within eighteen to twenty hours. You can expect complete recovery, except for the normal muscle weakness caused by their inactivity, after about twenty-four hours.”

Peggy looked disappointed, but said nothing and nodded with the others at William’s explanation. Zack noticed and moved to her side. He leaned near her ear and spoke quietly.

“If the miracle were dramatic, how would you explain it?”

“That’s right,” she said. “How are we going to explain this?”

“Why should we have to?” Ed asked.

“Well, somebody’s gotta explain it.”

“Undoubtedly, several somebodies will try. The question is why does it have to be any of us here?”

“He’s right,” Nancy said. “None of us, with the possible exception of Zack, has to explain anything. That’s not our job. Let Dr. Baron and the others work it out.”

“Actually,” Zack said, “I don’t have to explain anything either. I’m not a physician. I’m a biologist. I’m sure I’ll be given numerous samples to test back in Atlanta, but no one will ask me to explain how the victims got sick or how they got better. All they’ll ask me for is the test results and how they correlate.”

“Perfect,” Peggy said. “then you can make sure that they don’t point at William.”

“No, I won’t do anything but run them and report the findings exactly as they come out. Any attempt on my part to falsify the findings will be spotted and cause a great many more uncomfortable questions to be asked.”

“But what if they find something that points to William?”

“So what? He won’t be here. What can they do?”

“But they could come after us?”

“Excuse me, Peggy, but you have nothing to fear from the discovery, unlikely as it may be, of our presence and/or assistance. We will be gone, as will all evidence of our ever having been here, except for the metabolic residue of the antidote. That residue, if Zack’s laboratory is even capable of detecting it, should not appear out of the ordinary for this disease process. It is our belief that the doctors will decide that the toxin was tenacious, but that the body’s own natural defenses finally broke it down. We cannot imagine any circumstance under which any of this testing will lead to the conclusion that some kind of non-natural process was involved.”

“Peggy, I think it’s time you changed your reading material,” Nancy said.

“Yeah, maybe I’d better give them a rest. But they’re so much more interesting than the straight papers.”

“The point is, folks,” Zack said, “we are the only ones who know the truth, and it’s so fantastic no one would believe us if we told them, so we might as well keep our mouths shut.”

“Well said,” Ed agreed. “Now, we need to get going.”

“We?” Peggy asked. “Where are you going? You’re staying here with William and Nick aren’t you?”

“I thought I’d go with Nancy and see Janet.”

“But who’s going to stay with them?”

“Why does anyone need to stay with them? They’re obviously capable of taking care of themselves, and I don’t think I need to worry about them stealing the silverware or stereo,” Nancy said.

“I just thought maybe someone should, Nancy. That’s all.”

“We will be quite secure here. We can see no harm in Ed going to see his daughter, especially in light of the new developments in these patients’ conditions. Indeed, it might look strange if he were not present. Now, please go. You have much to do and time is an increasingly major factor in the success of your mission.”

Chapter 41

The Going Rate for Miracles

“I need to look in on everyone,” Nancy said in answer to Sara’s unspoken question as she pushed through the ICU door. “This is such a bizarre case that we are keeping a very close eye on all developments.”

“And Janet’s being here has nothing to do with it,” Sara said while looking at Ed.

“Of course it does,” Nancy said. “But whether she were here or not, I’d have to be here now.”

“Well, you’re not the only worried parents here tonight. Toby’s dad showed up about half an hour ago with a Bible in his hand. He tuned the TV to one of those religious stations with some faith healer asking for money with every so-called miracle. It’s like he’s decided only a miracle will do now.”

“Who’s to say he’s wrong?” Nancy said. “Have we done anything to make him think we’ll get his boy well?”

“No, I suppose not,” Sara said, lowering her eyes. “It’s just those TV preachers. They’re so bogus. All they do is talk about sending money. I mean some of them at least seem to show a little class, but this one. I just heard him say how he’d gotten a request for a healing, and the person had only pledged twenty-five dollars, and how could God even consider a request of such magnitude for less than a hundred. He said it was an insult. Yeah, an insult to anyone with a modicum of intelligence. Sorry. It just really gets my goat, you know?”

Nancy and Ed nodded.

“Well, anyway, Janet’s still awake. She’s having trouble sleeping tonight. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she knows what’s going on, except we haven’t told her a thing about the changes in the others.”

“Haven’t you ever noticed how perceptive patients can be, especially when they have nothing else to do but watch you?”

“Sure.”

“Then I suspect that’s what’s happening. She knows something’s up just by the way you act. Janet’s always been very perceptive. Ed and I can’t keep anything from her.”

In the room, Ed bent over and kissed his daughter on the forehead while Nancy took her hand. Janet felt something foreign in her mother’s palm and a tiny pinch. The touch of her fingers explained everything.

This is awesome. Totally awesome. That little boy. And his dog. I sure hope this stops the mind reading.

She’s going to give this to everyone. I’ve got to warn her.

She didn’t know if the others could read minds, but she couldn’t take the chance that they could. She had to keep her from touching them. But how? The board. The spelling board.

Janet blinked rapidly and prayed they would see.

“What is it, Honey?” Ed asked. “Is something wrong?”

One blink.

Nancy turned around. “Do you hurt somewhere?”

Two blinks.

“Do you need Sara?” Ed asked, starting to pull away to get the nurse.

Two blinks, and then three.

“Oh, you want the spelling board,” Nancy said. “It’s right over there, dear. On the bedside table. Just a second, I’ll get it.”

Chapter 42

Murphy's Notable Absence

Tires squalling in protest, Peggy rocked her car to a stop, disconnected her seat belt, and opened the door in one smooth motion. Zack followed, albeit less dexterously.

“Grab my clipboard,” Peggy ordered. “Nothing makes a bigger impression than someone with a federal title carrying a clipboard.”

“Not where I come from. It just says you're a stuck-up ass.”

“Well, you're in the sticks, remember? Feds with clipboards still mean something here.”

“I doubt that, but I'll play along.”

Inside, Peggy introduced Zack in his official capacity. Zack kept the clipboard as inconspicuous as possible and the doors still opened.

The ICU staff were pleased to see that the federal government had finally seen fit to get involved. Long overdue, they commented. Zack offered no response except a sheepish look and a shrug—a victim of the federal malaise himself.

The first patient's family objected to the lateness of the hour. Pointing out the health department's meager contribution to the recovery of their daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild, they questioned the need for the visit now instead of in the morning.

Zack demonstrated a side of his personality Peggy had never seen, but one which she told herself she should have expected. Using guile backed by his official position, he convinced the parents into giving them a few moments. He assured them that the CDC had been working diligently behind the scenes. That this visit was urgent, and could not be put off because they believed they were very near a solution to the mystery.

Grudgingly, they relented but insisted on watching from the door. Zack took up a position which effectively blocked their view of

Peggy while she performed a quick examination. Prominently using his clipboard, Zack took notes as Peggy quietly called out numbers and arcane medical terms. Even though he watched her closely, he could not be sure if and when she'd inoculated the daughter.

Taking the stethoscope out of her ears, she said, "Not as bad as I thought. Let's go see the next one."

"Not as bad?" the father said as she pushed past him through the door. "But Doctor, they told us she was failing. That they were all failing."

"Loss of lateral eye movement can be an ominous sign," Peggy said. "However, it must be accompanied by other sequela to truly be indicative of a pessimistic prognosis."

It must be contagious, she said to herself as she left the room. I sound just like Zack.

She went into the son-in-law's room and immediately began an identical exam. This time Zack allowed the hovering parents a somewhat less obstructed view of Peggy's very professional exam. He thought he knew when she'd done it, but still couldn't be sure. At no time did he ever see the device.

"Essentially identical."

"Is that good?"

"I don't want to raise any false hopes, but it is encouraging."

With the grandchild, a girl of eight, Zack decided to risk full disclosure and stood to one side. Peggy performed flawlessly.

"Well?" the anxious grandmother asked.

"No difference. Very encouraging. Now if you'll excuse us we have to see the others and get back to the lab. Thank you."

The next patient, a woman in her sixties, had no family present, but Peggy went through the sham exam anyway, just to avoid any appearance of a discrepancy. They went on through the patients, reassured the families and gave the antidote without a hitch until they reached the last patient. The family needed a target for their frustration and anger and Zack and Peggy provided the perfect bullseye. All of Zack's persuasive skills fell on deaf ears. Literally.

The patient's father could lip read, but found it heavy going until Zack simplified his language. But by that time, the father had become so enraged that he refused to let them into the room. He scribbled furiously on a pad that Zack's behavior had been insulting and condescending.

Peggy stepped forward and tried her wiles. With considerable patience she explained that Zack was not used to talking with real people. He only talked to computers and people who thought like them. It wasn't his fault he wasn't articulate. It didn't mean he wasn't brilliant. It just meant he was a social cripple.

Zack could not help but hear Peggy's loud, clear enunciation at the nurses' desk where he'd retreated to peruse the patients' charts. Somehow he managed to keep his face from turning bright red as the imprecations escalated.

Finally, the father allowed Peggy to go into his son's room. Zack, however, remained persona non grata. He chose to stay at the desk.

Silence reigned between them on the way down in the elevator and through the halls to the front door.

As it swung shut behind them, Zack said, "You enjoyed that."

"Got the job done. That's what's important."

"I'm not denying that. I'm just saying you enjoyed it. What was it you called me? A social cripple?"

"Yeah, I think that was the term. I don't remember very well because it all just flowed so smoothly and naturally. I really didn't have to think about it all that much."

"Thank you very much. I think I've just been insulted again. Gratuitously."

"You're welcome."

"Well, at least I didn't pretend to be a doctor."

"I did no such thing. I never said I was a doctor."

"But you didn't correct them when they called you one either."

"I didn't think it was the right moment. Anyway it worked. Get in. We've still got that kid in Cottage Grove."

"And I think we'd better hurry," Zack said as he snapped his seatbelt into place.

“Why?”

“Because this has all gone too easily.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so. I didn’t think it was so easy, especially that last one.”

“No,” Zack said, “those were easy, believe me. Even the last one, though I am pleased to know that you found him difficult.”

“I suppose now you’re going to tell me that your performance was a walk in the park.”

“Not at all. I was as nervous as that long-tailed cat in the rocker-filled room.”

“But you looked so confident.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I kept waiting for a tap on the shoulder or someone to say, ‘Check them out at headquarters,’ or something like that. I wasn’t the least bit confident, not until after you’d done the first one. When I couldn’t even see you give it, and I was watching you very closely, I began to believe we might actually pull it off. But that last guy, he just blew my whole game plan. I couldn’t figure out a way to get around him, and I just fell apart.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“But you saved the situation”

“Only because I had you to pick on. He liked the fact that I thought you were such a jerk, too, and that letting me in and keeping you out was the greatest insult he could deliver, short of punching your lights out.”

“Well, the important thing is we got it done, so you are forgiven your transgressions.”

“My what?” Peggy said, thrusting her face at him. “Listen you pompous bag of swamp gas, I don’t have any transgressions that need forgiving. You can stay in the car on this next one. I don’t need you. They already know me there. It’s a done deal.”

“A done deal? What are we? Yuppie traders now?”

“Don’t push it or I’ll cuff you to the door or something.”

“Cuff me? With what?”

“These,” she said, as she pulled a pair of handcuffs out of her purse.

“Where on earth did you get those?”

“An old boyfriend. I found them after he left and just figured I’d keep them. Never know when they might come in handy.”

Zack broke up. “You are nothing if not surprising. I just hope you’re right, and this next one is a done deal.”

“It is. Trust me. Why are you being such an old poop?”

“Because nothing ever goes this easy for me. I am the quintessential field test of Murphy’s Law.”

Chapter 43

Don't Touch

Sara looked at the clock. Ten-thirty. Ed and Nancy had spent nearly an hour with Janet. So long in fact, that she'd been at the point of going in and asking her to finish up when Nancy came out.

"May I see the charts?"

"Sure, anything in particular you're looking for?"

"Just want to check the lab work."

Nancy took the first chart and thumbed through the lab results quickly, while making a couple of notes on a scratch pad.

Sara took the chart when she handed it back and gave her another one. "Janet sure had a lot to say."

Nancy took the new chart and bent her head down to look at it. "She was just worried, like you said. I tried to reassure her, but it took a lot."

"You any closer to fixing this thing, whatever it is?"

"I think so. Dr. Keller from the CDC seems to think they have a real handle on it now. He was really encouraged by some news he got this evening."

"What news? Have they got a cure?"

"He didn't say specifically, but I got the impression that they've got it figured out. In fact that's part of why I'm here now. He went with Peggy up to Eugene to check on the patients there."

"He couldn't do it by phone?"

"I guess not."

"Pretty closed mouthed, isn't he," Sara said, suspicion touching her voice.

Nancy looked up while exchanging charts, "Oh that's just his way. He's always been quiet."

"I didn't know you knew him?"

“We were in school together a long time ago.”

“Well, I sure wish he’d open up a little and let us know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tanya added, coming up to the desk. “This is getting a little scary. They’re all starting to go downhill.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say all of them,” Sara said quickly and pointedly.

Tanya picked up the cue and said, “Right. Janet’s doing very well. And Baron’s such a Chicken Little type anyway. With him everything’s a big deal and the sky’s always falling.”

Nancy smiled. “Thanks, Tanya, but he could be right. Loss of lateral eye movement is not a good sign. Well, I’d better go see the rest of them.”

She walked into the room next to Janet’s. She had her stethoscope around her neck with the diaphragm end in her pocket. She stood at the bedside, looked at the child, and tried to decide how she could give the antidote without touching her.

It’s so fantastic. Janet has been reading our minds all this time.

A flush crept up her neck as she remembered the night Janet was admitted. She’d seen her the next morning and Ed had been uppermost in her mind. No wonder Janet hated it. It was too intimate. How did William’s people stand it?

Nancy looked at the girl’s arm. Maybe she could take a fold of the sheet. She slipped her hand into her pocket and brought the device out, dropping it into a fold of linen next to the immobile arm. Taking the fold, she pressed the device to her arm.

It worked.

She fumbled the device into her hand and back to her pocket without making contact. Then she started to turn towards the door to leave.

Wait. Got to make this look like an exam.

She put the stethoscope in her ears and listened to the child’s chest. Then she moved her index finger back and forth in front of her eyes. Satisfied she’d made a good enough show of it, she went to the next room.

Chapter 44

Murphy Shows Up

It took them just over twenty-five minutes to reach Cottage Grove Hospital. Peggy marched in, confident that she would have no difficulty gaining access to this last patient. They went straight to the ICU.

The Intensive Care Unit in this thirty-five bed hospital consisted of two beds in what had once been the only four-bed room in the hospital.

A single nurse took care of these patients. This evening she had only one patient and was giving report to the night shift nurse when Peggy and Zack came in.

“Don’t let us interrupt you,” Peggy said. “We’re just on our way back from Eugene and thought we’d check on the progress of Robin.”

The night nurse looked up and said, “Excuse me. Are we supposed to know you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess you don’t. I’m Margaret Richards with Douglas County Health and this is Dr. Keller from the CDC.” They showed their ID’s to the skeptical nurse. “We’re here to follow up on Robin, your VPS patient. Has her condition changed in the last twelve hours?”

“Yes, it has,” the evening nurse said.

“I was afraid of that,” Zack said gravely.

“Could you describe the change, please?” Peggy asked with a sinking feeling.

“She began to experience some respiratory distress.”

“How serious?” Peggy asked.

“Serious enough that we had to send her to Portland.”

“Which hospital?”

“Children’s, of course.”

“Of course, should have guessed,” Peggy said, feeling the maw in her midsection yawn wider.

“Then I guess we’ll have to see her tomorrow,” Zack said, taking Peggy’s arm and steering her toward the door. “Sorry to have bothered you. Have a good night.”

They left trying not to appear hurried. Thankfully the halls were nearly deserted. Neither spoke till they reached the car.

In the car they both spoke at once.

“Sorry, you go first,” Zack said.

“No, you go.”

“No, you first.”

“Stop it! Okay, what now?”

“When was she struck down?” Zack asked.

“Saturday evening, around seven or seven-thirty I think. She’d fallen asleep in the back seat, and her parents couldn’t arouse her when they had pulled into the truck stop here for gas and something to drink.”

“How long would it take them to get here from the fair?”

“I don’t know. Maybe thirty-five minutes.”

“And when did the fair close?”

“Six. Why?”

“Then they must have gone somewhere after the fair closed, assuming that they left at closing. They could have left earlier. How late did William say he stayed at the fair on Saturday?”

“I’m not sure that he did say. What are you getting at?”

“We need to talk with William. Where can we find a phone?”

“The truck stop at the freeway. What are you driving at?”

“It’s just possible that she isn’t part of this.”

“Of course she is. She’s locked in just like the others.”

“No, she isn’t,” Zack said. “Not just like the others. None of them has had the slightest respiratory trouble. And remember, she’d recently had a cold or the flu or something and they thought she had Guillain-Barre syndrome.

“That’s why they didn’t report it right away.”

“Exactly! And when you gave them all that other history, they changed their diagnosis.”

“So you’re saying they had it right the first time?”

“Possibly. Probably. I don’t know. I’m not even sure it makes a difference.”

“Of course it does. If she isn’t one of our cases, then we don’t have to drive all the way up to Portland.”

“No, I’m betting we do. Either way. But first we need to talk to William. Just to make sure.”

Chapter 45

Miracles Do Happen

You did what? Dad! You can't afford that. Besides it's a total waste. Listen to him! He's a rip-off artist. Where in the Bible did God put his price list for miracles?

Toby raged in mute frustration at his father's folly. They'd always been a Christian family, even Opal, going to church every Sunday, but they'd never been fanatics about it.

Until this happened.

Everyday, Toby had picked up more stuff about these TV preachers from his father. He was watching them every minute he was home now, especially this Pastor Bob who was supposed to do these healing miracles. Today his father hadn't even gone to work. He'd just stayed home and watched TV.

Now he was here and praying over him. But he wasn't praying to God. He was praying to that white haired phony up on the screen.

Janet's mother pushed open the door to his room and stepped in, concern mixed with hope on her face. Funny how much you could read in a person's face once you really got to know them.

Nancy looked first at Toby, who had an almost pained expression in his eyes, though she knew that had to be her imagination. He couldn't have any expression in his eyes or face or anywhere. He couldn't move anything but his eyelids.

His father, Mark, knelt beside the bed on both knees, gripped Toby's hand, and droned unintelligibly. Above her head and to the left, a rapt, nearly hysterical, yet curiously well-modulated voice exhorted Jesus to free a woman from the bondage of her uncontrolled shaking.

Nancy went to stand beside Mark.

Mark looked up. "What are you doing here?"

She placed both hands in her pockets, "I didn't mean to disturb you, Mark. I just need to check your son."

"You don't need to. He's going to be healed."

Trying to keep her face neutral, Nancy nodded, but said nothing.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I think there's an excellent chance that Toby will recover."

"I'm talking about healing. Complete and total healing."

"I understand."

"But you still don't believe."

"In what, Mark?" Her voice was gentle and concerned.

"That he'll get better. That he'll walk, run, and play football again. That he'll be completely well. Healed!"

"No, I think he will. I think there's an excellent chance of it."

"But you think it'll be because of something you do."

"Not necessarily. He might just get better on his own." Nancy turned to look at Toby. "From what Dr. Keller has been able to figure out, it looks as if this thing will just metabolize out and be gone. It's just taking longer than we want it to."

"So when he's healed, you won't have to admit that it was something else."

"Like what?"

"A miracle."

Mark stood up, while still holding Toby's hand and pointed at the TV. The excited, white-haired man on the screen shouted, "Hallelujah! Praise God!"

"I see miracles almost every day, Mark."

"But you don't believe in them."

"Not the kind you're talking about for Toby. If I understand things correctly, you want God to perform some magic trick and make Toby all better."

"And you don't think that's possible."

"Stranger things have happened. I just don't think you should limit Toby's chances for recovery to that kind of miracle."

"So you're saying I'm wasting my time."

“No, Toby needs all the help he can get. There’s nothing wrong with your praying. Just don’t prevent us from doing what we need to do to help him, too.”

“What is it you need to do?”

“Right now, we just need to do a quick check. Pulse, reflexes, eye movement, that sort of thing.”

“Can I stay here with him?”

“I don’t see why not, but I think you could use a break. Why don’t you get a cup of coffee while I do the checks. I’ll stay right here with him till you get back.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll stay.”

“As you wish. Why don’t you sit in that chair? That way we won’t be in each other’s way.”

Mark looked at the chair in the corner by the door. “You’re not a believer. Why should I trust you?”

“Are you saying the only ones who can help Toby are those who share your belief?”

Mark opened his mouth and started to say something and choked on it. He looked at Nancy without seeming to see her. Then his eyes cleared and he held hers in an intense stare, as though trying to fathom her soul.

She held his gaze, remained calm under the desperate scrutiny, and tried not to send back any signal except acceptance. She knew that he would read whatever he wanted, or needed, into what he saw there, regardless of what she tried to communicate.

Finally, he lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I know you’re doing your best. It’s just that Toby is all I have. He has to get well.”

“I can’t promise that what we’re doing is going to make Toby well. I can only promise that all of us are doing the very best we know how to make that happen. And I know that, in your own way, you are doing the same thing. Does it really matter how Toby gets well?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you sit in the chair over there and say a prayer for us while I check Toby over.”

Sighing he nodded and backed up to the chair, sat down, folded his hands in his lap, and bowed his head.

Nancy took her hand out of her pocket and picked up Toby’s arm. While checking his pulse she pressed the inoculator against his arm. She made no effort to avoid contact. Janet had told her about their strange communication through the staff members and Nancy herself. She wanted him to read her mind.

Toby’s eyes opened wide.

Yes, Toby. I know, and now so do you. Everything.

Chapter 46

A Quiet Evening at Home

The phone rang three, four, five times, and then it stopped.

William looked at Nick. The dog had placed his head under William's hand while they sat on the couch, and watched the TV. So many choices and so little of value among them.

Suddenly the phone blared, "William, if you're there, pick up the phone. We need to talk. It's urgent."

He picked up the receiver, "Yes, Zack. What is it?"

"How late did you stay at the fair on Saturday?"

"We're not sure. Let us think." It took a moment to remember the approximate MTR.

"Come on. This is important. Vital."

Then he had to convert that to local time. Not an easy process, MTR being based on a decimal system that started at the moment the mission began.

"I think it was about five-thirty your time."

"My time? What other time is there. Never mind! Okay, do you remember if you contacted a little girl named Robin Dorchester? About six years old. Red hair, pale white skin with freckles."

"You do know that not everyone we contacted became ill. Why is this so important?"

"Yes, we know. Or at least we figured that out. Did Nick lick her?"

"Please, tell us why this is so important?"

"This little girl has been taken to Portland. If Nick didn't lick her, we don't have to chase after her. If he did, we do."

"It doesn't matter, Zack. The antidote will not hurt her. It might even help, even if she didn't assimilate the toxin. You need to give it to her in either circumstance."

“I was afraid you’d say that. Okay, thanks. We’ll leave from here immediately. Everything all right there?”

“As far as we know. Nancy and Ed have not returned yet.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be too long. I expect they spent quite a bit of time with Janet. Just stay put. Don’t forget there’s a police alert out for you. You’re in the safest place right there.”

“We have no intention of leaving until you have all returned.”

“Good. Tell them where we’ve gone and that we’ll be back by breakfast. We hope. Thanks.”

Chapter 47

A Long Walk

He turned over one more time and punched his pillow.

“Damn! I hate this,” John Searles said.

He could not sleep any more. He checked the clock again. Eleven thirty-seven. He’d awakened about twenty minutes ago and had been trying in vain to go back to sleep. He was still tired, but he couldn’t drop off. He kept thinking about his Gracie.

Perhaps a cup of hot cocoa. And maybe I can get the newspaper. That ought to be dull enough to lull me back to sleep.

The kettle whistled, and he absently mixed his cocoa. The aroma made his stomach growl. He popped a couple of slices of bread in the toaster and dug margarine and jam out of the fridge.

God, how he missed her. Six hours from now on any normal day, the two of them would be sitting down at this table with cups of steaming coffee cradled in their hands. They would discuss the things that needed doing today and make their plans.

They would each tend to their separate chores for the morning. Around noon, he’d come back and they’d share lunch. Then it was back out for the afternoon if everything hadn’t been taken care of that morning. It was a rare day when something wasn’t left over, usually enough to fill the afternoon. It took a lot of effort to run a ranch, more than most people thought.

John tossed down the last of the cocoa and swore. He missed her. He wasn’t used to sleeping alone. She’d lain beside him every night of their forty-two married years, except when she gave birth to their children at the hospital and one night when he’d been stuck in Portland by a snow storm. That was one reason why he couldn’t sleep. Why he hadn’t been able to sleep much at all these past few days.

It wasn't just the worrying about her, though he'd sure done plenty of that. He just plain missed her, not just the warmth and comfort of her under the covers on a cold night, but the warmth and comfort of her smile across this table in the morning. If she didn't come home, he wasn't sure he would want to carry on without her.

Stop that! You just stop that! Of course you'll carry on. It won't be easy, but you'll do it. Now go get the paper and quit being such a maudlin old fool. Think what Gracie would say to such nonsense as you're thinking.

John shoved away from the table and trudged into the mud room for a jacket. While he continued his self-castigation for considering suicide, he pulled on the worn Levi coat and looked at his slippereed feet.

Better put on something a little stouter. Gravel'll chew'em up for sure, and she'll raise hell with me about ruining a perfectly good pair of slippers.

He smiled at the thought of her giving him a good chewing out as he reached for a pair of thick wool socks laying on top of the laundry basket. Her voice filled his mind as he slipped them on, bringing a swelling in his chest that was both warm and pleasant as well as uncomfortable. He pulled on his rubber mud boots, tucked his pajama legs into them, and stood up. He closed his eyes, squishing a tear over the rim onto his cheek, and heaved a sigh as he opened the door for the long walk down to the mail box.

Chapter 48

What Do We Do Now?

As John Searles walked out his backdoor, Ed and Nancy Brandauer entered theirs. They saw the lights on in the living room and heard the soft murmur of the TV.

In the living room they found William sitting on the couch, an afghan pulled over his legs, apparently absorbed in a sleazy movie. Nancy knew it was a sleazy movie because the channel's logo appeared in the lower right corner of the screen. This satellite station only showed sleazy films at this time of the night. Actually its selection of films was trashy at any time, but the after-eleven fare was especially so.

Baxter raised his head and looked over Nick at them. Most of the time, he would have come over and put his head under Ed's hand for a pet. Tonight he just exhaled a deep sigh and laid his head back down. Nick made no move other than opening his eyes.

William looked at them and said, "This cannot be the typical behavior of your people, can it?"

Nancy smiled and took off her coat. "Sadly, it does represent a fairly significant portion of our society, but it is by no means typical. What you're watching is a film designed to do only one thing. Titillate. It's garbage, a step or two removed from pornography."

"We understand. Our monitoring showed that there was a great deal of this type of behavior being reported, but we could not be sure how much was real and how much was made up."

"Thankfully," Ed said, "a lot of it is made up. The trouble is that the standards of behavior shown in films like this are becoming accepted by many as desirable."

"You have some severe problems."

“We know that,” Nancy said, sitting down on the couch. “Where are Zack and Peggy? We thought they would be back by now.”

“They called a short time ago. They are going to Portland.”

“Portland? Why there?”

“The child from Cottage Grove was taken there.”

“I see. So they won’t show up until morning. Okay. Well, we’d hoped they’d be here, but this just can’t wait. Did you know that this bug of yours has made at least two of the victims telepathic?”

Startled, William turned to face Nancy. He found the remote control and killed the image of roving hands and mouths on the screen.

“How do you mean telepathic?”

“Just that. Janet and a boy named Toby can read the thoughts of anyone who touches them.”

“How do you know this? Did she implant the thought in your mind?”

“No, they can’t project their thoughts into someone else’s mind. They are only able to read minds. She warned me not to make any skin-to-skin contact with the other patients because they might be able to read my mind.”

“You said they might have this telepathic ability. Does that mean you are not certain if they possess it?” William asked.

“I guess so. Janet was only sure that Toby did.”

“How was this? And how was she able to tell you these things? Had she recovered so quickly that she could talk to you?”

“No, we’ve worked out ways to communicate by her blinking her eyes and using a spelling board.”

“So she is still without movement. Tell us everything she told you.”

Nancy related it all: the embarrassing flood of thoughts and feelings with very touch, the strange communication with Toby through others, and the dread that they would continue to have this ability after they recovered.

“I’m sorry,” Ed said, “but I’ve got to bring up a point here. Peggy and Zack don’t know anything about this. If the people they’re going

to visit can read their minds, then they're going to know about you, William. Don't you think that puts you in greater danger?"

"Not necessarily. It will be several hours before they can talk. It is unlikely that they will try to relate this knowledge before they recover their vocal ability. They may not wish to relate it even then."

"Because that would mean that they would have to reveal their telepathic ability," Nancy said.

"Yes," William said.

"And they won't want to do that because they might be considered crazy," Ed added.

"Quite possibly. They might also think, as you said Janet did, that they were hallucinating. In any case, it is unlikely that any of these people, if they have in fact experienced this phenomenon, will be anxious to share it immediately upon their ability to speak. And, did you not say that neither the boy, Toby, nor Janet had experienced any success in establishing a telepathic link with any of the others?"

"That's true," Nancy said.

"Then it is entirely possible that none of them developed this ability."

"Why not?" asked Ed. "Why would Janet and Toby be the only ones?"

"We cannot say with any certainty at this time, but it may have something to do with their ages. They are the only adolescents, are they not?"

"Yes, everyone else is either an adult or pre-pubescent."

Seemingly satisfied with Nancy's answer, William smiled and nodded.

"But that still doesn't answer the question about what happens after they get better," Ed said. "Will they still be able to read minds?"

"We cannot say. We have no record of anything like this ever happening. We don't have enough data to make a projection as to whether it will pass with the metabolism of the toxin or not."

"Well, I can tell you that neither Janet nor Toby want it to continue," Nancy said. "It's too embarrassing, too intimate. In some ways it's like that movie you were watching. It makes you feel like a

voyeur, like you're watching someone during their most intimate moments through a two-way mirror or something. Only this is worse because you get their feelings as well. How do your people stand it? Can you teach Janet and Toby how to control what they're exposed to?"

"We are sorry, but there is no way for us to do that. It seems very likely that you are under some misapprehension that all of my people are like us. That isn't true. Only a small number of us have this ability, and we can only use it through our dyad mate. Having direct telepathic ability is unknown amongst us."

"So you're special then," Ed said. "Do the rest of your people know about your special abilities?"

"Yes, we are what you might call prodigies. We have the ability to learn almost instantly through telepathic transfer from one generation to the next. That is why, at what is roughly the equivalent of ten or eleven years of age—and our years are essentially identical to yours in absolute terms—we can have the knowledge, experience, and, hopefully, the wisdom, of someone three, four, or five times our age."

"Is that why you were chosen for this mission?" Nancy asked.

"In part. Not all explorers are like us, but many are. All those chosen for direct observation are telepathic pairs."

"You mean there are other pairs on Earth right now?"

"No, we are the only ones at this time. But there are other worlds."

"How many?"

"Hundreds."

"With intelligent life?" Nancy asked

"If you can call us intelligent," Ed said.

"Yes. Many. Actually yours is a pretty intelligent species. You are still fairly young, though, and have much to learn, especially about your true nature."

"Then you believe there is hope for us."

"Unquestionably. Actually, we were a people very much like you, divided by all kinds of artificial barriers. But we came to understand

that we were in essence one single people, a single race that had many beautiful variations, like flowers do.”

“You mean that red roses and yellow roses and white roses are all still roses,” Nancy said.

“Yes. Once we learned that lesson, the rest came much more easily. The political barriers, which were really just institutionalized ethnic and racial divisions, disappeared. We learned to cooperate, and to help each other instead of trying to degrade each other. We began to unite families of different backgrounds through mating bonds; what you call marriage. The children of these bonds did the same thing so that within a few generations, there were no obvious racial differences. We became a single race with the strengths of our many varied ancestors.”

“Is that when you telepaths showed up?” Ed asked.

“No, actually there were always a few. They lived quietly. Many, probably most, were not even aware that they possessed this ability. Remember, we do not communicate directly. We must have a medium like Nick. No one is quite sure how it happened, but a kind of loose network of us developed. They kept their abilities secret for generations.”

“I’ll bet they did.”

“Yes, though we had discarded most of our prejudices, we always seemed to find a new one that we needed to work on. This was a very difficult one, but eventually it, too, was overcome and they became accepted. When that happened, we discovered that these people had a great deal to offer our society.”

“So you think that even if Janet and Toby continue to have this telepathic ability, they will be able to use it properly and it won’t drive them nuts.”

“It is difficult to say, because their ability is different from ours. They will face much greater challenges than we did.”

“Especially in regards to not misusing this power,” Ed said, “for that is what it is. A power. If they were able to keep it secret, they would have an overwhelming advantage in their interactions with others. That’s a lot of temptation for a kid to ignore.”

“Yes, it is. But we think you should also consider that your projection assumes that they will have learned to control and filter the input enough not to be overwhelmed by it. It appears more likely that they will wish to avoid physical contact, which may cause them considerable trouble in the future.”

“That was Janet’s biggest concern. The last thing she wanted was to know everything about someone as soon as she shook hands.”

“Then let us hope that it passes, for we have no way to help other than to offer encouragement. If it is of any consolation, we do think that you are excellent parents and that you do have the capacity to help Janet deal with this gift successfully.”

“How can we? It’s completely outside our experience.”

“Was not having a child also outside your experience?”

“Yes, but not like this. We had the experiences of others and our own experiences as children to provide some clue as to what worked and what didn’t. This is without precedent.”

“Yes, in some ways one could consider that to be the case, but only in degree. Actually, all of us face challenges for which we have no specific experience upon which we can rely for guidance. However, there are basic principles that can be applied.”

“Like what?” Ed asked.

“Universal truths. What you call moral laws. They are found in every society, and they are always the same, though they may be stated differently.”

“Are you talking about religious laws, like the Ten Commandments?”

“They contained some of them. You know what they are, though you may not think of them as such. The most recognized one is what you call the Golden Rule. Its application here is obvious and Janet has already indicated her concern about how she can apply it in her life, as have you. With such awareness, we have no doubt that you will succeed.”

“How can you be so sure?” Nancy said, “I feel completely overwhelmed by this.”

Ed yawned and stretched his arms. "I feel completely overwhelmed by exhaustion. We aren't going to solve this now, Nancy. We're too tired to think straight anymore. We need to get some sleep."

"We are in need of rest as well, and you are correct, Ed."

"But what about Zack and Peggy? Shouldn't we stay up for them?"

"It is unlikely that Peggy and Zack will return before sunrise."

"And I can't keep talking, Honey. Let's go to bed and let our guest get some sleep as well."

"I'm sorry," Nancy said, "I'm not being a very good host, am I? Let me show you to the guest room."

"Thank you, Nancy, but we are quite comfortable right here," William said while stretching out on the couch and drawing the afghan over himself.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Please get your rest."

"If you're certain you wouldn't rather sleep in a bed. It really would be much more comfortable."

"We will be fine right here. Thank you."

"See you in the morning then," Nancy said reluctantly as Ed took her arm and guided her to the stairs. She turned as she put her foot on the bottom one and said, "Feel free to move in there if you wish."

"Thank you."

"Baxter? Come along boy." Baxter opened his eyes, but didn't move. "That's funny," Ed said. "He shied away from Nick before; now he won't leave him."

"He's all right where he is," William said.

"You're sure he's not a bother to you," Nancy said.

"Not at all. Now please get some rest. We are fine."

Chapter 49

Mr. & Mrs. Murphy

They cleared Salem in record time, Peggy having set the cruise control at eighty. Beside her, Zack had dozed for awhile, but kept waking up. The seat was just too cramped to allow him to relax comfortably.

Peggy glanced over, "Can't sleep?"

Zack shook his head. "Can't get comfortable enough. Don't worry about it. There'll be plenty of time to sleep later."

"Well, I'm having trouble staying awake, so talk to me."

"What about?"

"I don't know. World domination, the health care mess, why my mother's cherry cobbler always tastes better than mine even when I use her recipe."

Zack laughed. "You always get me to do that."

"What?"

"Laugh."

"You don't do it that much?"

"I guess not. I thought I did. I thought I did it enough anyway, but now I'm not so sure."

"I can accept that. When you first showed up you acted like you'd sat on a broom handle all the way up to the straw and, while it wasn't real comfortable, you'd come to accept it as the way things are supposed to be. Maybe even come to like it."

Zack let the picture she'd painted play in his mind a moment and nodded. There was a fair amount of truth in it, with one exception.

"Well, maybe not like it so much as be unsure if I wanted to risk knowing what it would be like without it."

"That suggests a meager life."

Zack didn't respond immediately and Peggy let the thought hang between them. Finally he said, "More austere, I would say."

"And that suggests that it was self-imposed."

"Parentally imposed."

They rode on in silence, both sensing that they were close to an intimacy that neither was sure they wanted to share.

"You're not doing your job very well," Peggy said, shaking her head.

"Huh?"

"Talking to me to keep me awake. Your life's at stake here."

"Sorry. Why don't you tell me about this place we're going to. How difficult will it be to get in and see this kid? What to expect. That sort of thing."

"I'd rather talk about austerity, but we are getting close to Pill Hill so I guess I'd better fill you in."

"Pill Hill?"

"Several of Portland's major hospitals wound up on a hill."

"So Pill Hill, of course."

Peggy nodded. "So now, as to what to expect? From the staff very little other than cooperation. As you've already seen, we aren't as paranoid a lot as you big-city folks. We show them our credentials, tell them we need to see the girl's chart, and make a quick exam. Same drill as we ran in Eugene."

"What if someone asks why it's so important that it be done at one o'clock in the morning instead of during regular hours?"

"Tell them the same thing you did before. It's the truth."

"With the tiny exception that the cure isn't coming from CDC. It's coming from a ten-year-old, golden colored alien and his dog."

"Did you tell them the CDC had a cure?" Peggy asked.

"No."

"That's right. You didn't even mention the word 'cure.' You just said you were close to figuring this thing out and you expected to have a solution shortly."

“I see your point. Let them draw their own conclusions. Just give them enough of the truth to point them in the wrong direction. You’d make a fine addition to any politician’s staff.”

“Thank you so much. There it is.”

She swung into the parking lot and found a place near the front door. Zack chose to forget the clipboard this time. It really hadn’t been that much help. Peggy cast him a dirty look as he closed his door, but said nothing.

Inside, they were directed to the ICU by a blazer-clad security guard who looked up the girl’s location for them. He didn’t even ask for their ID’s.

Zack began to relax.

Maybe Peggy’s right, and it won’t be a problem.

In the ICU, the charge nurse met them at the desk, glanced briefly at their ID’s, and told them the child had gone into respiratory failure and arrest just before she arrived.

“They bagged her till she got here, and we intubated her. She’s okay now, but still on full assist.”

“Sounds bad,” Peggy said.

“It is, but not hopeless. I know you think she’s part of your group with this mysterious VPS thing, but I’ve got to tell you she looks like a classic case of Guillain-Barre syndrome to me.”

“Well, that’s what we’re here to check out,” Zack said. “We aren’t so sure either anymore. And with her failing like this, we can’t take the risk of making any further decisions based on second-hand knowledge.”

The nurse nodded. “I don’t blame you. As many times as that doctor of hers flip-flopped on diagnosis and treatment, I’d be leery of accepting anything he said without checking it out myself first.”

“So, can we see her? We promise to be as quiet as possible.”

“Oh, don’t worry about waking her. She couldn’t possibly be asleep. Her parents are with her,” she said rolling her eyes.

“This late?”

“Yeah, I know. I should have made them leave, but the mother is ah...assertive, I guess is the best way to put it. Very assertive. She

refuses to go. Lots of guilt. Well, actually, she keeps blaming her husband, but to be fair she blames herself for listening to him. Personally, I find it hard to believe that she's ever listened to him. Anyway, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Peggy and Zack nodded sympathetically.

"I was about to ask them to leave when you showed up. To tell the truth I'm afraid I've let this go on too long and they—she—may not leave without making a major fuss."

"I know exactly what you're talking about, and I think we can help. Come on, Zack, let's see if we can't give everyone a break."

Acutely uncomfortable, but bolstered by his previous success, Zack followed the two nurses to Robin's room. In the room he found the parents smothering the child with their guilt-ridden affection. The mother, a formidable woman of heroic, Wagnerian proportions, sat on the left side of the bed. Fiercely gripping her daughter's hand and wrist, she murmured a litany of incrimination, recrimination, and hope. The father, a tall, thin, stoop-shouldered man, sat on the right in an attitude of penitence.

"Excuse me," the ICU nurse said. "We really need you to leave for a while so Robin can rest."

"No!" the mother hissed with the ferocity of a feral cat protecting its young. "She needs us here. I will not abandon her. Tell her, Harold."

"Isn't there some way we can stay?" Harold mewled.

"I'm sorry, but we must insist. You can wait in the waiting area. We will keep you informed. As a matter of fact, Dr. Keller here is from the CDC and would like to talk with you."

"Who's she?" Mother said suspiciously, while looking at Peggy."

"This is Ms. Richards. She's a nurse with the Health Department. She's assisting Dr. Keller."

Zack said, "Please, it is important that I talk with you both."

"Can't you talk with us here?" Harold asked.

"It would be better if we could talk where there are fewer distractions. And your daughter does need her rest. She knows you

love her, and I'm sure she'll understand if you leave her for a little while."

"How would you know?" Mother asked. "Do you have any children? Did any of them have to endure a living death like this?"

"Now, Mother. Remember what we agreed. No negative talk."

"Shut up, Harold, and do your duty. Get rid of these people."

"But they are here to help, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, we are. But in order for us to be able to help your daughter, we need some information. If you could just spare me a few minutes. Ms. Richards will stay with her."

"And what's she going to do while we're gone?"

"Now Mother..."

"Don't start that, Harold. Well? What's she going to do?"

"She's just going to check Robin. Then she'll just sit with her till we return."

"Why aren't you going to check her? You're the doctor, aren't you? Shouldn't you check her and let your nurse do the other stuff?"

"She is a highly trained nurse, more so than many doctors in this field. I trust and rely on her utterly."

"Well, I don't. We'll talk to her, but you are going to do your own examination. I won't have second best for my Robin."

Zack turned and looked at Peggy. He'd never done anything like a physical exam. Peggy stepped up to him and took his hand. She placed her stethoscope in it and something else. He felt the inoculator being pressed into his palm and quickly closed his fingers around both items.

Reluctantly, Mother stepped outside the room. She waited and watched Zack through the door as though he might be some kind of child molester. Harold followed meekly, taking up a position behind his wife. The two nurses followed quickly, the ICU nurse pulling the door closed behind her.

"Leave that door open!"

"I will be right here. Please go with Ms. Richards. I'm certain that the information she needs is very important or she wouldn't be here at this hour."

“We’ll go, but only as far as the lobby. I want you in there with him.”

“I can understand your concerns,” Peggy said, “but you have nothing to fear and a great deal to hope for. Dr. Keller is one the CDC’s leading experts on neurotoxins. He came all the way out here from Atlanta, Georgia just to check on the people who’ve been taken ill by this disease. He believes we are very close to understanding what’s happened.” As she talked, Peggy led the pair toward the door to the waiting area. She pushed the door open. Mother stopped and turned back. “Please, the information we need is vital. It may not only help Robin, but the other victims as well.”

“What other victims?” Harold asked.

“Are you saying there’s some kind of epidemic?” Mother asked. “Why wasn’t I told? Have I been exposed?”

Mother bustled through with Harold following at his accustomed two paces back. Peggy walked through and gestured towards the chairs. Mother took a seat. Harold stood behind her. Peggy sat facing Mother.

“Now what’s this about other people being sick like Robin?” Mother asked brusquely.

“Several other people, children and adults, came down with an illness last weekend. Dr. Keller has been working on the problem since it first started and believes he has the answer to what happened.”

“And what was that?”

“A toxin appears to have interacted with a very small number of the population’s immune response chemistry. Have either of you had cold- or flu-like symptoms in the past week?”

“Harold did. I didn’t. He always gets whatever’s going around. I never get sick.”

Peggy nodded, unable to imagine a germ that would have the fortitude to attack this woman. “And Robin had the flu just before she collapsed, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, for several days. Up until the day before the fair, in fact. We almost didn’t go to the fair because of it, but she felt better Saturday, so we finally went.”

“And at what time did you notice that Robin was sick?”

“Sick? Is that all you can call it? You people amaze me. She’s all but dead. Why, if we hadn’t been there tonight, she would be. Those incompetents at that two-bit quack emporium they call a hospital down there hadn’t even noticed that she was dying. I had to tell them.”

“Now Mother, that’s not exactly true.”

“Shut up, Harold.”

“I in no way meant to imply that Robin’s illness is not serious. It is. Could you just tell me about what time you noticed she wasn’t well and what was wrong.”

“We’d just pulled off at that truck stop there for gas. I turned around to ask Robin if she wanted anything from the store, and she was passed out on the seat, and I couldn’t wake her up. Harold, of course, was next to useless, so I got directions to the nearest hospital, and we took her there.”

“And what did they say they thought was wrong?”

“They said she was in a coma, but they couldn’t say why. Damned fools.”

Peggy nodded noncommittally and scribbled a note on her pad. She wondered how Harold could have sired Robin after his gelding on their wedding night. Perhaps she’d waited till after the honeymoon, though it didn’t seem likely.

“And just to prove his incompetence, the doctor decided the next morning that she wasn’t in a coma, but had some French disease. What’d he call it?”

“Guillain-Barre, dear,” Harold offered.

“Yes, that’s it. Damned foreigners. Never trust them. Isn’t that what I always say, Harold? Never trust them. Now they’re trying to kill my little girl.”

“Ma’am,” Peggy said. “It’s not a disease.”

“What?”

“Guillain-Barre is not a disease. It’s a syndrome. A group of symptoms that describe a patient’s condition. Syndromes are usually named for the doctors who first describe them. In this case, Guillain-Barre is a condition which sometimes follows viral infection. It causes progressive paralysis of the voluntary muscles and can come on very quickly.”

“Well, it sure did that. One minute she’s fine and the next she’s nearly dead.”

“She is not, Mother,” Harold said with more force than Peggy would have imagined he could muster against her. “She’s just locked in. That’s all. That’s what the doctor said. Just locked inside her body.”

“Listen to him, will you. ‘Just locked in.’ I tell you. Have you ever heard such nonsense. Can you imagine for one moment what it would be like to be locked inside your body, Harold, never able to speak?”

Peggy had no doubt he could. What she wondered is whether he’d like it or not. “Well, that is the question that we’re trying to answer.”

“What question?” Harold asked.

“Whether Robin has Guillain-Barre syndrome or is locked in like the others.”

“You mean there’s a difference?” Mother asked.

“Yes, definitely. At least in terms of cause. None of the other patients has had a recent viral infection or any of the other precursors for Guillain-Barre, as far as we can tell. Also, none of them has lost respiratory function.”

“So you’re saying that my little Robin isn’t one of your victims.”

“I’m saying that’s what we’re here trying to discover. In either case, the treatment is the same. And the prognosis is too.”

“And what is that?” Harold asked.

“Pretty good. Most Guillain-Barre cases make it, though it can take several weeks to achieve a complete recovery.”

“And what about the others?”

“Theirs is promising too. Though it’s harder to say because we don’t have a history of cases to look at for comparison. But they have been doing quite well and a couple of them are beginning to show signs of recovery.”

Zack walked through the door, and Mother jumped up.

“Well, Doctor?”

“She’s a very sick little girl.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I know that. Is she one of your victims?”

“I don’t think so. There are several significant differences that lead me to believe the original diagnosis was correct. You did the right thing bringing her here. This is one of the best pediatric ICU’s in the northwest.”

“So is she going to get well?”

“In all likelihood. She’s getting excellent supportive care and that makes all the difference in these cases.”

“Then how soon can I take her home? You know we live in Albany. It’s a long drive.”

“I understand the hardship this is for you, but I can’t give you a definite answer. It could be a few days or two or three weeks. There’s no way to predict. I can say that what she needs most right now is a good night’s sleep. She’s had a very rough day and is undoubtedly exhausted as, I suspect, are both of you.”

“That we are, Dr. Keller,” Harold said.

“Then I suggest you find some place nearby to get some rest.”

“I’m not leaving my baby,” Mother said.

“She’s in good hands, Mother. Let’s let them do their jobs, and we’ll do ours.”

“My job is to stand by my baby. To be there for her, no matter how big the sacrifice.”

“Really, there is nothing you can do for her right now that’s more important than getting some rest. It won’t do her any good to wake up in the morning to see you looking haggard and exhausted. That would only make her worry more about you.”

“And how do you know she’s worried about me?”

“All children, especially ones who are obviously as well loved as she is, worry about their parents. They also tend to blame themselves whenever something bad happens in the family, whether they had anything to do with it or not. Seeing the two of you as tired as you look now will only slow her recovery. Go to a hotel or motel and get some sleep. Take a good hot shower or soak in the tub. Get the tension out of your faces, so that when she sees you in the morning she knows you’re both all right.”

“But then how’ll she know how worried I am?”

“She knows. How could she not know. But she also needs to know you’re all right. That you’re not sick too. As tired as you both look now, she’d very likely think she’s made you both sick.”

“Well, thank you again, Doctor. Come on, Mother, let’s go find us a bed,” Harold said, grabbing his wife’s hand and dragging her off.

“But Harold...”

“Enough, Alma. You heard the doctor. She’s going to be fine. We’ve got to get some rest and look refreshed when we see her.”

“But he didn’t say that. He said...”

Zack and Peggy watched them disappear around the corner. Conflicting protests trailed like smoke behind them till they were out of earshot.

“I take it you had no trouble giving her the antidote.”

“None at all, though I don’t think it will be of any help. She’s definitely not one of our cases. The nurse left me alone as soon as you left the unit. I gave robin the stuff, counted to thirty slowly and went out to review the chart.”

Chapter 50

No News

The night was surprisingly mild. He hadn't really needed the jacket. By the time he was half-way back to the house with the mail and the newspaper he'd removed it because he was starting to sweat. He shucked the boots, hung the jacket and went into the kitchen in his socks.

Thirsty work. He dumped his load of papers on the table and rummaged through the fridge for a soft drink. Gracie didn't like them, thought they were bad for you, but John never could get used to just plain water. Fruit juices were okay, but nothing could beat the taste and feel of something cold, sweet, and carbonated. Back in the corner, behind a jug of grapefruit juice, he found an Orange Slice. Perfect.

Popping it, he sat and sorted through the mail. Bills, ads for things he didn't need and didn't want, a seed catalog, Sears sale catalog, and a magazine sweepstakes. Did anyone every really win those things? Nothing urgent.

He reached for the paper, looked briefly at the headline (some fool politician was trying to raise a new tax to help the people thrown out of work by some other fool politician), and fished in the folds for the sports section. Extracting that, he pushed the front section away and read about the Mariners.

He yawned, opened the section to follow the story of their miracle win against the Twins, and wondered in the back of his mind for the eighty millionth time why the sports and business sections were always combined. The cocoa was beginning to catch up with him. That and the walk.

Finishing the story, he laid the paper down, took a final pull on the soda, and went up to bed. He'd finish the paper when he got up.

Maybe. Politicians floating a new scheme to rip-off the public wasn't news. That was routine. Business as usual. The public ripping off the politicians, *that* would be news. Fat chance of that ever happening.

Chapter 51

Two Out of Three

The adrenaline rush of their triumph of deception propelled them through the labyrinth of Portland's never-ending freeway renovation project safely. The inevitable letdown of their assumed failure to help Robin hit as they passed a sign announcing a truck stop at the next off-ramp. Peggy pulled in.

"I've got to get some coffee or we're going to wind up sleeping in the trees. Permanently."

"I could drive for a while."

"Thanks, Zack, I might just take you up on that."

Inside, they found a booth and gratefully accepted the ready coffee and menus. Then Peggy excused herself.

"Can you watch my purse? Need to drain my tank."

Zack nodded and looked at the menu. It had been a long time since dinner, but nothing sounded that good. He didn't want to eat too much anyway because he knew it would make him even more sleepy. He settled for an English muffin.

Peggy came back just as the waitress had taken his order.

"Make that two. And do you have marmalade? Great. Thanks." She flopped into the booth and said, "Thanks for watching my purse."

"It was quite a job, too. Had to fight off two truckers and a biker in leathers with studs."

"My hero. And so quickly. What are you? A closet Chuck Norris?"

Zack just smiled and sipped his coffee.

"Careful Zacky Boy, you're developing a sense of humor."

He shook his head slowly. "You couldn't stand it. Wouldn't have a straight man for your zingers."

"I'm glad you realize that."

The waitress delivered their muffins, and they sat in companionable silence spreading jam and munching.

Finishing her first half, Peggy said, "You know, I'm going to miss you."

"You are?"

"Yeah. Nancy's not near as good a straight man as you are. Or were. Maybe I won't miss you that much. I hate competition."

"No competition here. But it's nice to know that I might be missed, even a little."

They finished their muffins and Zack signaled for a refill on the coffees. After they were poured, Zack asked, "Do you want me to drive?"

"The coffee helped, but I think maybe you'd better. I'll curl up on the back seat and see if I can't get a little nap. And listen, if you get too sleepy, pull into a rest stop or something. There's no hurry to get back now."

"I know, but I still want to get back as soon as we can. I want to know how Nancy and Ed did."

They drained their cups. Zack put his wallet on the table and said, "Pay the bill and watch my purse. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

On his return he met her at the cashier, just as she was putting the change back in her purse. She handed him his wallet and said, "You got the tip. I needed to break a twenty. Come on, let's get going or I might suggest something I know I'll regret, like getting a room at that motel over there."

Following her out the door, he said, "I think we'd both regret it. Give me the keys and get in the back. I'll get us home."

"I just love it when you take charge, Dr. Keller. It just makes me feel so safe and secure," Peggy said in flagrant Scarlet, swooning onto the back seat.

Zack shut the door against her feet, walked around to the driver's door and got in. Driving out of the parking lot, he said, "Thank you for the homage to my adopted home, but that kind of southern woman is a faded memory. Now they're all Rosalyn's and Hillary's."

"You don't sound pleased about our emancipation."

“No, I’m glad you’re not barefoot, pregnant, and chained to the stove. I’m just not sure that what you traded for is all that much better.”

“Spoken like a true male chauvinist.”

“Don’t misunderstand me, I think women should have the same opportunities as men. I think, though, that you may have traded slavery in the home for slavery to the business world. The same slavery we men have had for most of this century. And look what it’s gotten us. Ulcers and heart disease.”

“And a better standard of living.”

“Materially maybe, but nothing of any real lasting value. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I just wish that homemaking, especially child-rearing, was accorded the same respect and status as corporate ladder climbing. Maybe we wouldn’t have as many screwed up kids. Maybe we’d be a little more competitive in the world’s markets, instead of sliding backwards all the time.”

“It’s still possible to have a career and raise a crop of decent kids. It’s not easy, but it’s possible.”

“Not if both parents feel they have to constantly prove themselves. Not if they never stop competing. Not if everything they do is seen as a life-and-death struggle for dominance. They might win the corporate battles, the big bucks, and all the glory, but they pay a terrible price for it. And their kids pay an even higher price.”

“Why do I think I’m listening to the voice of experience here?”

“I never had any children.”

“But you were one. And you described your childhood as austere. I took that to mean that you were poor. Not necessarily poverty stricken, but not much better than subsistence. Now I think you were referring to the emotional aspects, not the material. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Did you know that Japanese women are accorded a great deal of freedom in the home? Some western observers say that they are the true centers of power in their culture. It is very subtle, as are so many things in Japanese culture, but it is true. They exert a very potent and powerful influence, but it’s all behind the scenes.”

“You’re not going to answer me are you?”

“They have that influence,” Zack went on as though she hadn’t spoken, “because they have invested themselves in the succeeding generations. Their highest calling is rearing children who will bring great honor to their families. They let the men go out and do the battling, supporting them, training them, seeing to it they are equipped to triumph, and then quietly reap the rewards of those victories. The biggest difference, I think, is that they are willing to let their men take the acclaim. Whereas here, recognition is all important.”

“You are telling me about your childhood, aren’t you?”

“Whether your contribution is really valuable to the overall success of a venture is less important than the recognition you’re accorded. We spend more resources on ego-stroking and perks than we do on actual production.”

“Your parents were pretty successful by American standards, weren’t they? I’ll bet you had lots of money. Lots of toys. And lots of nanny’s. But no Mommy and no Daddy. And no brothers or sisters because there wasn’t time. Did you go to public school or were you shipped off to a boarding school?”

“No, I wasn’t a poor-little-rich kid. I was a middle-class kid with middle-class parents and went to a middle-class public school. And I had a younger sister. But both my parents did work. They were driven to succeed in their separate enterprises, ostensibly so they could make our life better than theirs had been. And materially it probably was. They worked very hard. They put in lots of hours at lots of meetings. They always seemed to be competing, not only with themselves, but with each other, even though their businesses had nothing to do with each other. What they both forgot was it takes more than a nice house and a new bike to make a child feel secure and loved.”

“So you were left alone a lot?”

“Not physically. They always tried to work it out so one of them stayed with us, but that was because they had to more often than not. They couldn’t afford baby-sitters as often as they would have

liked, and they resented having to stay home. They traded the chore off by taking turns. Who had to change their schedule to accommodate watching us was often the second loudest argument we heard.”

“The loudest was about money, or the lack of I’ll bet.”

“It’s funny, the thing I remember most was that no matter how hard they worked, how many hours they spent at the office, or how much work they brought home, they never seemed to really get that much further ahead. We were always on the edge of financial disaster. Or at least that’s the way it seemed. They tried to keep it from us, but kids know when things are tight. Like I said, they forgot that a bigger house, with a bigger back yard and a bigger pool didn’t make you feel secure, especially if you always overheard them talking about how much everything cost and how they couldn’t afford this or that. But they had to get whatever it was to maintain their position.”

“Yeah, that kind of thing can leave a family emotionally drained, rich or poor.”

“Neither Mom nor Dad was especially demonstrative, but when things were tight, which seemed to be most of the time, then they were a lot less so. They kind of wrapped themselves up in their careers, like a blanket, to ward off the cold reality that they were always overextended.”

“Sounds dreary. Nancy said she never met your folks. Well, it was too late to meet your father, but your mother never visited, and she said you rarely went home. Now I know why. And I think I know why you two had so much trouble. She said you two took off like a rocket and then fizzled out. Was she your first love?”

“Serious one. Yes.”

“Any since?”

“I thought so. Once.”

“But it fizzled too?”

He nodded.

“What went wrong?”

“She was one of those clinging types. Very touchy-feely. Always wanted to know what you were thinking and feeling. Wouldn’t give you a moment to yourself. Had to know everything about you.”

“I’m surprised. Nothing like Nancy,” Peggy said with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

“More like her than you know,” Zack replied, apparently having missed it. “At least the way she was then. She’s certainly changed since then.”

“I can’t picture Nancy as ever being like that. She’s always maintained a certain reserve.”

“She did that, but she was always trying to get inside me. She kept insisting that we had to share ourselves, be open with each other, and bare our souls, if we were going to make it.”

“And you couldn’t do that. What’s the matter? You looked in there and found the cupboard bare?”

Lost in thought, Zack drove on for awhile. Peggy let him think. “No, I didn’t think it was bare,” he said finally. “I just couldn’t risk opening it.”

“And how about now?”

“With the right person, maybe. I don’t know.”

“You know,” Peggy said as she sat up and leaned her arms on the back of the passenger seat, “it occurs to me that there’s a lock on your cupboard with a lot of crud and corrosion on it, and the only way it’s ever going to get opened is to clean and oil it. Nancy’s got a lot of crud too. Not on her lock. She’s never had one. But she’s got a shelf that needs cleaning off. Maybe you can help each other.”

“You’re talking about the letter, aren’t you? She told you about it.”

“More like I dragged it out of her. I can be persistent occasionally.”

“I hadn’t noticed, he said, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. “Ed said essentially the same thing. Not as poetically, but the same thing nonetheless. I was about to tell him I didn’t think it would be such a good idea when William and Nick showed up. Am I the only one who thinks sleeping dogs should be left to lie undisturbed?”

“But this dog’s having nightmares, nightmares that are waking it up. I’ve known Nancy for a long time. She’s my best friend, but I’m not hers. I’m her second best friend. Her best friend is Ed. And if her two best friends say she needs to get rid of this hurt, this crud she’s carried in a secret corner of her soul, then she by God needs to. And so do you.”

“But Nancy’s made her peace with it. Look at her life. She’s married to her best friend. She has a beautiful daughter, and as near an idyllic life as I can imagine. Why does she need to open this old wound?”

“That’s just the point. It’s already open. You did that when you showed up.”

“But I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I know that. Blame’s not the issue here. Healing is. The point is the wound is open. You have the ability to make it heal without abscessing like it did in you. No, no, let me finish. You’ve been carrying around a lot of baggage yourself. You need to sit down with Nancy for your own sake more than for hers. You need to make peace not only with her, but with yourself. Maybe then you’ll be a fit person to go the distance with someone.”

“I thought the reason I couldn’t keep a relationship alive was because my parents never gave me enough emotional security to risk opening myself to someone.”

“Great self-analysis. Might even be true. But you’ve grown up quite a bit. If you hadn’t we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You need to dump the guilt. To make reparations. I think you’ve always been afraid you’d wind up doing the same thing, so you cut it off before it ever gets the chance to. Tell me, have you always gone with Nancy’s?”

Zack said nothing. He just stared at the road ahead.

“I thought so. Ed once told me about an interesting concept that he learned when he became a Bahá’í.”

“He’s a Bahá’í? Is Nancy?”

“Yes, they both are. Have been for several years. You know about it?”

“I live in Atlanta. You can’t live there and not know about them. They’re at the heart of the city’s efforts to eliminate racism. That explains a lot.”

“Anyway this concept is about the things that happen to us. He says that we should think of them as tests, like we get in school. And the teacher is always fair and never tests us beyond our capacity to pass the test. But another point is that the test is the way we grow. The way we learn. So the tests can be painful. The key point for our discussion, though, is that we will continue to be given the same test over and over until we pass it. The teacher never lets us slide.”

“In other words, we keep making the same mistakes until we learn how not to. So what you’re saying is that I’ve been picking Nancy’s when I should have been picking Jane’s or Dorothy’s or Esmerelda’s.”

“Esmerelda. Interesting you should mention her. She’s this great girl, about your age, who’s had a really rough time of it...”

“I am not her savior.”

“What? Right. Sorry. Where was I?”

“Making a mistake.”

“Clever. You really are developing a sense of humor. I could almost consider you myself, but you’re not nearly old enough. Or rich enough.”

Zack looked at her in the rear view mirror and shook his head. “Go on. This is painful, but it is keeping me awake.”

“Okay. The second half of the equation is a book Ed and Nancy gave me about marriage. I was complaining about never being able to find the right man. And she suggested I take a look at it to see if maybe I could pick up some pointers.”

“What’s it called?”

“*Marriage, A Fortress for Well-Being*. Amazing book. Oughta be given to every kid on their twelfth birthday. Anyway it has this kind of checklist thing for picking a mate. Unfortunately, I haven’t been lucky enough to work it out myself yet, but Nancy obviously has. It’s the reason I’m so jealous of her sometimes. What this book says is that a marriage is made up of three basic elements: physical,

intellectual, and spiritual. Now, don't go getting that look. We're not talking religion here. The spiritual refers to values, attitudes, and those things we hold most precious which are *not* material things. The physical is sex, basically, and he included emotions with that because emotions are at least as much physiology as anything else. The intellectual refers to our reasoning. How we apply logic, and how we go about solving problems and use our minds. Anyway the whole idea was that a successful marriage can be built on any two of those elements."

"You mean if they are compatible in any two of those three areas, they can make it work."

"It takes more than mere compatibility. That's the starting place, but it's more like a sense of harmony or wholeness between the two people in those areas. Sort of like they click on intellectual issues or spiritual values or they have this really strong physical attraction. I still don't understand it all that well, which is probably why I haven't had all that much success with it, but the point is that most of us base our decision to marry on only one element, and that is not enough to sustain the relationship."

"And that element is usually the physical one, I suppose."

"I suspect you're right. Now, the reason I envy Nancy so much is that she and Ed click on all three elements. Big time. In megadoses. I would give almost anything to have what they have."

"So what you are saying is that I not only need to stop looking for another Nancy, because that was just a physical relationship and had no other harmonious elements; but that I also need to look for someone with whom I can click in at least two of those ways."

"You get an A."

"What did you say this Esmerelda's phone number was?"

"Oh, she'd be all wrong for you. Probably wouldn't even make it on one element. The point I'm trying to make is, you need to free yourself of Nancy before you can even begin looking at someone else. She's like this two hundred pound rock on your shoulder you lug into every relationship. And I don't think you'll ever be able to free yourself of Nancy until you've made your own peace with her."

“You mean she’s forgiven me, but I haven’t.”

“I think she’s tried to. Probably did a damn-fine job of it till you showed up again and tore everything all up; but, yeah, that about sums it up. All I can say is this: talking about it with me tonight hurt her, but not as much as it’s been hurting you all these years.”

Chapter 52

Opening Up and Closing Down

Sara came into the room and stood beside Janet's bed. She looked at the overhead monitor which provided digital readouts of her patient's pulse, oxygen saturation, and blood pressure. She didn't need to physically take Janet's pulse, yet she took her patient's wrist in her hand and felt for the pulse. She'd learned about the fallibility of machines in the school of hard knocks. More importantly, Sara believed her patients needed the touch of another human being, even if it was something as simple and routine as the taking of a pulse. It was an essential part of nursing therapy.

Janet of course knew all this from her long exposure to Sara. She knew Sara better than Sara might even know herself because Sara's thoughts and feelings came to her unfiltered. As raw data, a computer geek might say. And she had the advantage, if you wanted to call it that, of being objective, of being outside looking in.

Janet steeled herself for Sara's touch. She felt her fingers search for and find the pulse; felt Sara's thumb press on the back of her wrist; felt the throb of blood pass under her fingers; and felt Sara's concern, her essential optimism being challenged, but holding.

But there were no words, no images, and no thoughts.

It took Janet almost half a minute to realize that she was not getting the flood of information that filled her mind with every contact. Just as she did, Sara put her wrist back down and broke the contact.

"Open your eyes for me, Janet, please. Time for the four o'clock eye check."

Janet opened her eyes, and Sara shined her light in each of them in turn.

"Okay. Good. Now follow the light."

Janet obediently followed the light with her eyes. Up. Down. Right. Left. Center, crossing her eyes slightly.

“Good. No change. Very good, Janet. You’re doing just fine,” Sara said and squeezed her hand.

No images and no words filled her head. No thoughts at all except her own. It was true. Sara was as blank to her as one person should be to another.

I’m free! I’m free of them!

Sara let go of her hand, and Janet felt a break of something almost indefinable—a bond, a closeness that seemed so natural that she didn’t even realize it was there until it was gone.

It was Sara’s feelings. But even they weren’t as strong and as overpowering as they once had been.

Does this mean I’m getting well? Did it work? What about Toby?

A hundred questions ran through Janet’s head. It was almost as confusing as the mind reading. Taking a deep breath, mentally as well as physically, she took control of her runaway mind.

The first thing I’ve got to do is concentrate on getting control of my body back. Then I can take care of all this other stuff.

Sara heard the sharp intake of breath and its sighing release as she started through the door. She turned around and asked Janet if she was all right. She received a single blink in reply and left to check her next patient.

Breath control had been one of the interesting aspects of these cases, Sara mused on her way to Toby Miller’s room. In most VPS type cases, the patients had to be supported on respirators, at least initially. Some patients needed it for the rest of their lives, years in some cases, though that was quite rare. Usually they died of lung complications very quickly. All these people here had been extraordinarily lucky.

In Toby’s room, Sara ran through the ritual recording of monitor readouts and the almost unconscious, habitual taking of his pulse. Then she leaned over the bed and put his eyes through their paces. Up. Down. Right. Left. Center.

“Right again, please, Toby.”

Was there a slight deviation to the right, or was that my imagination?

“Left, please.”

Same thing here. Or am I just being hopeful. It's so slight.

“Toby, blink for me when you can't see my finger anymore.”

About twenty inches away from Toby's face, Sara moved her finger in a slow arc to the right till it disappeared over the edge of the bed. He blinked when it went below the bed.

His eyes definitely deviated to the right.

“Tanya!” Sara ran out the door and waved her partner over frantically. Tanya dropped her pen and chart and hurried to Toby's room.

“What's the matter? He stop breathing?”

“No. Check me. I think he's getting his eye control back.”

“No. You sure?”

“Check it with me. Toby, please follow my finger again for Tanya.”

Tanya placed herself so she looked straight down on Toby's face, right over his nose. Sara slowly moved her finger between their two faces from center to right then back all the way left.

“I think you're right. Toby, honey, can you look as far left as possible for me?”

Toby strained to look in the direction Tanya wanted enough to create a little nystagmus.

“Yes! Did you see that? Lateral nystagmus. Not much. Just a millimeter or two, but he definitely deviated and his eyes definitely wavered. Toby! I think you're going to make it. C'mon, Sara. Let's check the others.”

Tanya sprinted to the next room. Sara took Toby's hand and held it with both of hers. “It'll take some time, Toby, but I really do think this is the turning point. Hang in there. I'll be back in an hour to check your eyes again.” Then, very uncharacteristically, she kissed the back of his hand and laid it back on the bed. “Oh, I'm so pleased,” she said, as she brushed a tear from her eye and hurried out to join an imploring Tanya.

Toby, left in the vacuum of their exhilarated exit, struggled to understand what had just happened. Not the eye movement thing. That was interesting, good even, if he understood things properly. But he hadn't gotten a single thought from either of them, not even when Sara had held his hand and kissed it. All he'd gotten had been an overwhelming sense of relief and hope and joy. And that had stopped as soon as she'd let go of his hand.

Actually, the feelings weren't that overwhelming either, not like they'd been before. He sensed that they were from Sara, but he didn't feel them with the same intensity that he'd felt other feelings from her before.

Did it really mean he was going to get well? Was the first step the losing of this lousy telepathy thing? Was he going to be stuck with other people's feelings, though?

He tried to move his mouth. Nothing.

He tried twitching his nose as he'd done when he'd first found himself in this mess. Nothing.

I wonder how Janet's doing? Is she the same? Getting better? If this means that we're getting better, Janet, it means I can't talk to you like we did any more.

And that would be the only thing he would miss. He'd hated the intimacy of everyone's thoughts and feelings invading his head, but he'd cherished the intimacy he'd shared with Janet. He wondered briefly if she felt the same way and then remembered her last words to him. She loved him. Of course she felt the same way he did.

In her room, Janet shared the same thoughts as if in confirmation of Toby's assumption, though not through the benefit of telepathy. She simply felt the same way as Toby. Something very special, indescribable really, had gone out of her life. Yet something equally indescribable remained.

She and Toby had not only been able to share their thoughts, their words in conversation through their unique messenger system, but their innermost feelings as well. Rather than the flood of raw emotions which threatened to drown them under succeeding waves of love, hate, anger, and intimacies no one should have to

endure, their emotional exchange had been marked by a gentle, almost subliminal ebb and flow.

Neither had recognized this unspoken interchange at first. They'd had so much trouble sorting out the courier's emotional and intellectual content, that just getting the message had been a considerable achievement. Then as they gained more control and became more practiced, they could sense the differences in emotional content. In the same inexplicable way that they had been able to recognize the signature of a person's thoughts that unequivocally differentiated it from someone else's, they'd become able to recognize the signature of each other's feelings. And that had tied them together more closely than either of them could ever have expected.

Janet thought of the bond as similar to the one shared by her parents. Dad and Mom were so close that one frequently correctly ended the sentence of the other. They could both be thinking about the same thing without ever having shared a word or even having been in sight of each other for hours. It was spooky, but nice, except that she could never play one off against the other.

But this thing with Toby was even closer than that. It was like sharing the same body almost. Like having the same mind, but being two completely different people as well. She couldn't explain it, but she liked it as she'd never liked anything else. But would they be able to go on from here? Or would their intimacy be too much for them to handle when they were face to face? She hoped it wouldn't, but couldn't quite bring herself to believe it. Such things happened in romantic fantasies. This was the real world. Such things never happened in the real world. Well, almost never. It had happened for Mom and Dad.

A tear welled in her eye, broke over the edge, and ran down the side of her face to her ear. Another followed on the other side. Then another. And another. And still another. They formed a silent, continuous flow.

Are you crying too, Toby?

Chapter 53

Uh, Oh

John stared up at the ceiling and debated whether to get up or not. He felt rested, tired maybe, but not sleepy. He'd already looked at the clock and discovered it was half past four. Normally he wouldn't get up for another hour. Lately, since Gracie'd been in the hospital, it had been even later.

He knew he'd been neglecting the ranch. There were chores that he'd put off every day. The big things, the really necessary things got done. It was just the little things he didn't get to, but they would mount up quickly and be nearly impossible to catch up on if he didn't get to them pretty soon.

He stretched his arms over his head and continued to stare at the ceiling. The plaster along the edge was cracking. Another little job to do. At least he didn't need to paint. They'd done the whole house, inside and out, last year.

May as well get goin'. Gotta go see her today.

He swung his leg over the side of the bed, sat up, rubbed his face, and then stretched his arms. His stomach growled and he decided breakfast first, and then a shower.

Padding around the kitchen in slippers and flannel robe, he chopped some ham and onion and stirred them in a hot skillet with a little margarine. He'd only lately come to accept margarine because Gracie had insisted. She wouldn't keep butter in the house anymore. He missed it. No matter what they did to it, oleo didn't taste like butter. At least she hadn't outlawed eggs in her campaign to lower their cholesterol. She'd just cut them down a bit. No more than half a dozen a week.

He beat half his week's ration, added some shredded cheddar to it, poured it over the sizzling ham and onions, and folded the mix

into itself repeatedly. He'd never been able to do an omelette right. Gracie could, but his always came out looking scrambled so he just scrambled his eggs from the start. It always tasted the same anyway.

The toast popped up just as he forked the eggs onto his plate. He set out wild blackberry jam, made from the berries Gracie gathered from their fields every summer. After he freshened his coffee, he sat down to enjoy his meal and read the rest of the paper.

Usually he read the paper after dinner. Mornings were normally devoted to Gracie. But she wasn't here. So the paper, poor substitute that it was, would have to do. It was a good thing he'd left the front section alone last night or there'd be nothing to occupy his mind but Gracie's predicament, and he'd thought about that enough, at least for right now.

Buttering toast and spreading jam, he started at the top and he read about the two politicians. Side by side pictures showed one holding what looked like a stuffed bird, and the other a grubby, emaciated child. Their story ran down the side of the page. He followed it and unfolded the paper while he forked a mouthful of eggs into his mouth.

The story continued on the inside, page three, but he'd read enough of it to know that his original assessment of last night was correct. They were both fools.

He switched over to a story about a missing boy at the top of the page opposite the politicians. Strange. The parents weren't looking for him; the Health Department was.

John read on with interest down the page and turned the paper over. The story ended above a police artist's sketch of the boy. He looked ahead at the picture. The kid did look kind of familiar. John went back to the story. It mentioned a dog. A cute little mutt, tan and white, kind of like a terrier mix. Suddenly it clicked. He looked back at the sketch and then at the dog's description.

That's got to be him! That's got to be the little dog that almost spilled me. No wonder the kid looked familiar.

He read back through the article quickly to find who to call. 911. Okay.

John told the dispatcher he'd seen the kid and his dog.

"Please described the boy you saw for me."

"He was just like the one in the paper. About ten or eleven years old, kinda goldenish tan, brown hair."

"What was he wearing?"

"Uh, ah, Tan pants and a plaid shirt I think. And a jacket. A light tan jacket. And tennis shoes. You know the kind, look big enough to be float boats for the river."

The dispatcher giggled and said, "Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Did you see a dog with him?"

"Yes. The dog almost knocked me off my horse."

"It was a big dog then." She couldn't keep the disappointment entirely out of her voice.

"No! A little dog. He ran right in front of my horse and made her rear up. Aren't you going to send a search team out? I think he's been living out here in my woods."

"And you say the dog looked just like the description given in the paper?"

"Yes. Tan and white. About fifteen pounds or so. The boy called to it, and it ran to him and they disappeared into the trees."

"What did the boy call the dog?"

"Mike or Mick? No! Nick. That's it. Nick."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes. Is that important?"

"I'm going to connect you to Sgt. Donaldson."

"What? What about..."

"Sgt. Donaldson."

"Yes, I think I've seen that kid you've been looking for."

"Could you give me a description of the boy, please."

Chapter 54

Strange Bedfellows

As John Searles repeated his description of the boy he'd seen for a fleeting few seconds, a bone weary Zack and Peggy climbed out of her car in the Brandauer's yard. They stumbled up the steps into the kitchen and went straight through to the living room.

The dogs watched them from their place on the hearth rug, but neither moved to greet them or even woofed. William looked up over the back of the sofa at them, eyes bleary with too little sleep.

"Go back to sleep," Peggy whispered. "We'll just find a place to flop and die."

He nodded, surprised at himself that he had picked up Peggy's idiom so well that he knew that neither had a desire for, nor an anticipation of death. He watched Zack follow her down the hall towards the guest bedroom. He raised an eyebrow, but made no comment.

Zack pulled the door shut behind them and followed Peggy to the bed. She kicked off her shoes, and he followed suit. They both fell onto their sides, facing away from each other, and immediately began breathing deeply and sonorously.

Nancy knocked softly on the door to the guest room but received no response. She tapped a little harder and called Peggy's name.

A snuffling snort, muffled by the door, answered.

She tapped once again. "Peggy," she said with more insistence.

Another snort. Sharper this time, but no other response.

Drawing a deep breath, Nancy gripped the doorknob and opened the door a crack. Zack and Peggy lay just as they had fallen on the bed, back to back, in their rumpled clothes, each snoring softly.

Stifling a giggle, she considered closing the door and letting them sleep, but she couldn't do that. She needed their help. Now.

She pushed the door open and went to Peggy's side.

"Peggy?"

"Mrff, whff."

"Peggy? Wake up."

"Whaa?"

Nancy put her hand on Peggy's shoulder and gently rocked it back and forth. "Peggy, I'm sorry, but you have to wake up. We've got a problem."

"What problem?" Zack said into the bedspread. He raised his head and looked over his shoulder at Nancy. "What time is it?"

"About half past seven. William and Nick can't get home."

"What? Why not? Peggy?" Zack said, sitting up and poking his bed mate in the hip.

"Don't do that, Zack," Nancy cut in. "I always hated that when you did it to me."

"Sorry. Force of habit."

"No wonder you never stayed married," Peggy said, raising her head off the bedspread.

"How would you know?" Nancy asked.

"Nevermind. Listen, can you two children take your bickering somewhere else? I'm trying to get some sleep here."

"Sorry, Peggy," Nancy said.

"Sorry, Peg," Zack added.

"It's Peggy, not Peg, Zack. I'm not short a leg."

"Sorry, Peggy. Nancy says William can't get home."

"Why the hell not? He got here, didn't he? Can't he find his way back?"

"There are cops all over the area," Nancy explained.

"What?" they said in unison, sitting up.

"There are cops all over the place," Nancy went on, "including a search and rescue team with dogs."

Their sleep banished, though fondly remembered somewhere back there in the recesses of their minds, they swung their feet off the bed and began stuffing them into their shoes.

“Dogs?” Zack said.

“Cops?” Peggy said.

“William and Nick left about a hour ago to go back to their ‘Mission Capsule,’ as he called it. But he came back almost immediately because the woods were crawling with sheriff’s deputies and a team of dogs.”

“How’d they find him? Somebody squeal?”

“No one squealed, Peggy. Our neighbor, John Searles, called this morning because he recognized the picture in the paper as being the same kid who almost caused his horse to throw him.”

“Well, how’re William and the dog?” Zack asked.

“They’re both fine. They’ll both be safe as long as they stay here. Ed’s already talked to the sheriff’s people and assured them that we’ve had no strangers visiting.”

“Strange visitors, maybe, but no strangers,” Peggy said as she reversed her shoes so they would go on the correct feet. “So what’s the game plan? Just wait’em out?”

“If that was all there was to it, I wouldn’t have awakened you.”

“Uh, oh,” Peggy said, “Why do I know that I’m not going to like what you’re going to say next?”

“Because she’s your best friend, and you know her very well. Just give it to us in a nutshell, Nancy. I don’t think either of us is in any shape to comprehend a lot of explanations.”

“Okay. In the simplest terms, William’s mission capsule will self-destruct at ten if he doesn’t get back to it.”

“You mean boom?” Peggy asked

“And no capsule? No return home?” Zack asked.

“No boom,” Nancy said. “It will disintegrate, but not with an explosion. He described it as sort of dissolving. And yes, without the capsule, he has no way to return home.”

“So why can’t he just stay with us till they send another ship for him?” Peggy asked.

"I don't know exactly. He just said that it would be a very long time before they could attempt it."

"Nice people," Zack said. "Send a kid out on a mission and if it goes sour, tough luck kid. You're on your own."

"No, it's not like that at all. It has something to do with the physics of his mode of travel. I don't understand it, I just know that it's not that they are abandoning him, it's that they can't get back to him right away."

"I think it would be better if we all talked to him. Where is he?" Zack said.

"In the kitchen."

They stumbled into the kitchen, while rubbing sleep from their eyes. Peggy went immediately to the coffee pot. Zack started for the table where the boy and Ed sat, but veered towards Peggy when he identified her objective. He detoured around the two dogs who sat expectantly between Ed and William.

"Morning," said Ed, munching a piece of toast.

"Glad to see you're taking this so well," Peggy said.

"Could be a very long day. Need to fuel up. I suggest you do the same. There's bread by the toaster. Eggs in the fridge. I think there's some bacon too. And oatmeal and cold cereal in that cabinet above you."

Zack nodded, as though acknowledging Ed's practical sense, and went to the toaster after filling his cup. "How many slices, Peggy?"

"Two I guess. You got any marmalade left, Ed?"

"In the fridge," Nancy said, taking a seat next to Ed. "Before we go any further, I've got to know, did you get them all?"

"Yes," Zack said.

"Even the one who was sent to Portland?"

"Even her, though we don't think she's one of our cases. She was on a respirator. And her parents were freaked. *Doctor* Zack had to do her himself. I thought he was gonna choke when Mother insisted that only a doctor was gonna see her little girl."

"Well, you weren't so bad yourself with your line of bureaucratic double-talk. You had me confused and I knew what was happening."

“This is all very interesting,” Ed said quietly, “and we definitely want to hear about it, but we’re working under the gun here. William, where exactly is your capsule?”

“Sorry, Ed, you’re right,” Peggy said. “Say, how big a risk is there that these deputies and their dogs will stumble onto it?”

“Very little. It is very well camouflaged. They could walk right up to it and not realize it. Identifying its location precisely will be difficult without a map.”

“Just a second. I’ll get the Gazetteer from the Jeep,” Ed said.

He went outside and returned in a couple of minutes. The others concentrated on their food. When he returned they cleared a space on the table for him.

“What kind of map is that?” Peggy asked. “There’re no street names. I don’t even see any roads. What are all those squiggly little red lines?”

“Elevations,” answered William. “This is an excellent choice. Let’s see, your ranch is here, I believe.”

“That’s right,” Ed said.

“And that means Mr. Searles’ house would be up here, correct?”

“Yes, that’s probably about right.”

“Well then, if you go east just a little to this stream and follow it up to where it has cut a deep trench between these two hills, you see this ninety-degree angle turn here?”

“Yes, I know that area. There’s a waterfall there when the stream’s running. It dries up in the summer. Is that where you are?”

“Just around that corner, at the base of the waterfall. The mission capsule looks like a rather large boulder.”

“That’s brilliant. That waterfall is made up of huge boulders all piled up on top of each other. And it really looks like one of those rocks?”

“Yes. We researched it very carefully. It has exactly the same look and feel as the surrounding material. We tried to leave very little to chance. Even though it is a remote location—you’ll notice that there are no roads anywhere near it—if it should be seen by someone, they would not consider it as anything but another rock.”

“What about the entrance?” Zack asked. “Won’t that give it away?”

“No. The door conforms to a series of what appear to be natural cracks in the rock. There is no handle. It can only be opened by pressure on a specific area that matches my right hand.”

“Kinda like a fingerprint reader?” Peggy said.

“Yes. It matches my hand print to the one in memory.”

“This is all very interesting,” Nancy said, “but it doesn’t get us any closer really to getting you there.”

“Is there any way we could just call the sheriff’s men off?” Peggy asked.

“Not that I can see,” Nancy answered. “We called them in on our search under the pretext of possibly having discovered a lost boy. Now that it looks as if he might have been seen, it would look very strange to ask them to call it off.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It would definitely raise a blip on their cop radar.”

“So what is needed then,” said Zack, “is some sort of diversion so William and Nick can get into the capsule by ten o’clock.”

“But how?” Peggy asked. “They’ve got dogs out there. They won’t chase a bone thrown the wrong way.”

“But they don’t have a scent to follow either,” Ed said.

Nancy said, “Of course. They don’t have anything to give them William’s scent.”

“Right. When they use dogs for tracking,” Ed explained to Peggy and Zack, “they give them a scent to track. They don’t have anything like that because no one’s got anything of William’s for them to sniff. Bringing the dogs was actually a waste of time, which is just what Irv told their captain.”

“Captain?” Peggy asked. “They sent a captain to run this hunt? Where’s Sam? He’s usually in charge of the searches.”

“He’s there, but this captain put himself in charge. Very self-important man. Personally, I think he’s looking for publicity. He kept making noises like he was going to be the next sheriff.”

“Oh, well that explains it,” Peggy said. “It’s Gregory.”

“Yeah, that’s the name he gave. Captain Gregory.”

“You mean you people even use your first names with your titles. Like, ‘Hi. I’m Sheriff John?’”

“No, Zack,” Peggy said. “His last name is Gregory. I don’t think he has a first name. At least not one he ever used with me.”

“What? You know this guy?” Nancy asked.

Zack mimed putting on handcuffs while looking quizzically at Peggy.

“No,” she said to him, “but he thought about it. Yes, Nancy, I know him. He’s a jerk. A lieutenant from Cleveland who retired after putting in his twenty and got hired here as a captain to run the patrol division. Sheriff Cambridge thought the department needed some professionalizing, which is true, but he picked the wrong guy for it. Listen, William and Nick are safe. This guy couldn’t find his own mother in the lady’s toilet if he was locked in there with her.”

“Unfortunately, he’s not the one doing the looking,” Ed said.

“Yeah. I forgot about that.”

“But,” Ed added, “he certainly sounds like the kind who would drag poor old Irv out of bed for something like this. Sam sure wouldn’t. He knows better.”

“Who’s Irv?” Zack asked. “And who’s Sam?”

“Irv’s the owner and trainer of the search team’s bloodhounds,” Ed explained. “And Sam is the sergeant who’s in charge of the search and rescue team.”

“And they’re friends of yours?” Zack asked.

“Well, Irv trained Baxter,” Ed said. “and I know Sam from back in high school. We don’t socialize much now. Kinda went in different directions, but we sure saw eye to eye about using the dogs. Irv was trying to explain to the captain about needing a scent when I walked up. After Irv told him that my dog had met the kid, he tried to commandeer Baxter for the hunt. Sam told him it wouldn’t do any good because Baxter wouldn’t know what he was looking for, but he wasn’t hearing any of it. I just kinda slipped away while they argued and came back here.”

“Perfect.” Zack said.

“Huh?” they all said.

“It’s perfect. If this captain is as big a fool as you all say he is, Ed, then I think you should definitely agree to Baxter joining the search. Only you get him to go off in the wrong direction.”

“And just how am I supposed to do that?”

“We can take care of that,” William said. “We’ll tell Baxter what you want him to do.”

“What?” Everyone said in unison.

“Nick can give Baxter his instructions. He has established a rapport with him. It shouldn’t be very difficult. Now, what area do you recommend that Baxter lead them to explore?”

Ed leaned over the map and studied it for a moment. “I think the best and most plausible place would be over towards this area here to the north. The terrain’s not too difficult for a boy your age, and it’ll take them over a small hill very quickly so they won’t be able to see you when you go in.”

“We are in your hands.”

Half an hour later, Ed arrived at the Searles house with Baxter on a lead. It had been decided that it would be too suspicious for all of them to show up for this hunt. Today was a working day. Zack, Nancy, and Peggy had other duties, and the finding of this boy was not a Health Department priority. They had merely been the ones to call him to the attention of the authorities.

But they were all still exhausted, especially Peggy and Zack. So Nancy called Tom and told him that none of them would be in until noon or one o’clock. She explained their midnight rides, which he might well hear about later, as being necessary after considering the change in the condition of the patients. Nancy wasn’t sure he bought it all until she mentioned Dr. Keller’s intense interest and his earlier characterization of their efforts as lackluster at best. Miming a disdainful diatribe, Zack nodded as he heard her say this.

After she returned to the kitchen table, Zack said, “I guess I get to be the heavy in this drama.”

“Type casting,” Peggy said.

“Well, he already thinks I’m some kind of workaholic, Type A fed, so it shouldn’t be too hard to convince him that I abused his staff.”

“No question. It’s a natural. Now, dear Nancy, can you find another room, say in the barn, for this abuser of poor county employees to sleep in. I hardly got any sleep at all for all his snoring.”

“My snoring? You were the one who went to sleep sawing three-foot-thick logs before I could get my shoes off.”

“You two sound like an old married couple. Peggy go up to Janet’s room. You know where it is. Zack you take the guest room. I’ll get you both up at noon.”

“Can’t I just be sick for the day, Boss,” Peggy whined.

“Sure you can, but I thought you’d like to know if your efforts bore any fruit, and noon will be the soonest that we can expect anything of a definite nature.”

They trooped off to their separate quarters and Nancy sat staring into her cup as if trying to read the grounds like tea leaves.

“They will be fine,” William said. “All of them.”

She looked across the table at him. His face radiated a serene confidence. Risking everything, he had come to them to right a wrong for which he felt responsible. And he had not asked for a single thing in return, not even assistance with his escape. That had all been her idea. When they’d come back this morning, he’d told her that they hadn’t even been able to get across the north pasture before spotting the deputies at the edge of John’s woods. They had returned with the intention of staying in the barn until the danger passed, only because there was nowhere else to hide.

What an amazing young man, she thought. I only hope that we can grow to be as mature as his people obviously are.

“It is time,” William said. “We must go now.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“No. There is no need, and you would only place yourself at risk. We will be fine. Thank you for all you have done for us.”

“No, it is we who should thank you. You gave me my daughter back. And all the others too. We owe you so much more than we can ever repay.”

“On the contrary, it is we who owe you for your understanding. After all, if we had not come, your people would not have been made ill. You are a generous and kind person.”

He stood up, Nick coming to his side; and Nancy followed them to the door. She reached down and scratched Nick behind his ears. William covered her fingers with his hand, while touching the dog’s head.

Nancy’s mind filled with images of a sunlit world with beautiful cities, of gorgeous scenic wonders, and of golden people, serene and happy, as they went about their daily business.

All this can and shall be yours someday. You have the capacity. Now, go and rest.

The contact broke, and they were gone. She didn’t even hear the door close behind them. Desperately trying to hold onto the peace that the vision and his message had given her, she turned back into the kitchen and walked through the house up to her bedroom where she set the alarm for noon and lay down to dream of his world.

Chapter 55

Stalked

In the shade of a huge oak, William and Nick paused at the edge of the north pasture. There was still no sign of the searchers they had seen earlier. The ruse seemed to have worked.

They climbed the low wire fence and hurried across the twenty yards of open space into the trees. Nick took the lead, his sense of direction being much keener than William's. They proceeded as quickly and quietly as possible around the roll of land that formed the southern bank of the stream. William had decided that it would be best to approach the capsule from the east by walking up the stream to where it dropped off to form the waterfall. He reasoned that by staying on the stones of the stream's dry bed, they would make less noise. He also thought that the top of the fall would give them a better view of the area around the capsule.

All went well. Startling only an occasional lizard and a couple of squirrels, they reached the fall in just under thirty-five minutes. In the distance, William heard the dogs' baying. It grew more faint and increased his confidence that the searchers were indeed being led away. As they approached the edge of the pile of rock that formed the sixteen-foot waterfall, Nick froze.

William dropped to the ground and flattened himself out beside his dog a couple of feet from the edge. A sharp, metallic click, followed shortly by a drifting cloud of acrid smoke, told them they were not alone.

Stretching himself out, William peered over the edge of the rock slab that formed the waterfall's lip. A large man in a chocolate-brown uniform and matching baseball cap sat on a rock beside the capsule. His cigarette disappeared under the cap's bill, and another cloud of smoke rose. A moist cough bent the deputy over briefly and

was followed by the sound of him scraping his throat clean and spitting.

William eased back and looked at Nick. In less than an hour the capsule, against which the deputy was now leaning, would disappear. He figured they needed about ten minutes to climb down the waterfall and get inside the capsule safely. They might be able to do it in less, but the flat minimum, without risking severe bodily injury, was still probably five. Thank God they'd stowed everything away before they'd left last night. That would have required even more time.

But how could they get this man away from here? Far enough away that he would not only not see William and Nick but not see the capsule when it left.

Throwing a rock into the trees or down the stream would not move the man far enough out of sight for long enough to accomplish anything but their capture.

Nick might be able to lead him on a chase, but would he be able to lose the man and return in time?

A soft scrape behind them cast his half-formed plans to the wind. They'd been found. And by someone so stealthy that not even Nick had detected him.

Rolling over with the faint hope that they might be allowed to stay with Ed and Nancy, he turned to face his captor. He put a steadying hand on Nick, not wanting him to run off, and received two simultaneous shocks.

Nick had not given any warning because he knew who the stalker was. And the stalker was the last person on this earth that William would have expected.

Chapter 56

Recovery

Mark Miller had been awakened from his uneasy slumber by Dr. Baron's rush through the ICU waiting area. His attempt to follow him had been firmly rebuffed at the door by Sara. She told him that it looked like not only Toby, but all the patients were beginning to show signs of recovery, and that he needed to wait until the doctor had examined them all.

That had been at six-thirty. It was now after nine and he'd finally been allowed in to see his son. Baron had insisted on a full series of lab studies and new x-rays and CAT scans. Toby had just returned from the grueling process.

As soon as Toby had been transferred from the gurney back to his bed, Mark had fallen on his knees and knelt over the bed, hands clasped in prayer.

Toby looked around the room, his eye movement now fully restored, and hoped no one was here to witness this embarrassing display. He longed to tell his father to shut up and to act like a man, not a wimp, but he hadn't yet regained the use of his voice. About all he had gotten back was the ability to raise his eyebrows a little and twitch his nose. At last. Though, of course, it didn't itch now and nothing tickled it. Still, in his mind, it was much better late than never.

Tears streamed down Mark Miller's face as he repeated over and over his thanks and praise to the Lord for the deliverance of his son. He kept thanking Him for the miracle and promising such righteousness that Toby cringed. He had no intention of becoming some kind of Baptist monk. If only he could shut his father up. This was getting out of hand.

A sharp barking sound interrupted Mark's supplications.

The sound surprised Toby as much as it did his father. The only reason he knew that he'd been the cause of it was that it had hurt his throat. He tried it again. Tried to say, "Stop it!" All that came out was the same bark.

His father howled, "He's healed. Praise the Lord. He's healed. Thank you, Jesus!"

Minnie rushed into the room. "What's the matter, Mark? What's the matter with Toby?"

"Nothing! He's healed! Jesus has seen fit to grant my prayer. It's a miracle!"

"Well, He must have decided to do it on a wholesale scale, 'cause everyone else is getting better too."

"Praise God! He is generous!"

"Yeah, real generous. He's even fixing up the ones in Eugene."

A bark that sounded like "Dad!" interrupted another joyful noise.

"Hear that? He speaks! Jesus has returned my son to me!"

"Dad!"

"Well, he's also returned the others as well."

"Praise the Lord!"

"Yes. Well, listen, I've got to ask you to keep it down in here a little. Pray all you want. Thank God all you want. Just make it a little quieter celebration. Thanks."

Shaking her head, Minnie walked out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her firmly.

Chapter 57

Distractions

Zack gestured frantically for William to come to him. As carefully and quietly as possible, the boy crawled back a few steps, and then stood up. He walked towards this strange human. Nick padded silently alongside.

“What are you doing here?” William whispered once he thought they had moved far enough away from the deputy.

“I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about what it would be like for you to be stuck here. About how I would feel if I were in your shoes. So I followed you. I have to know you’re safely on your way home. Then maybe I can get some sleep. How many are down there?”

“Just one.”

“Probably got lost.”

“Or tired. He seems to have some breathing difficulties.”

“And he’s right down there in front of your capsule, right?”

The boy nodded.

“Thought of any way to get rid of him?”

“We were considering having Nick lead him away when you startled us.”

“And just how did you expect Nick to get back or keep the guy from raising an alarm?”

“Those are the ramifications we were just beginning to consider.”

“Well forget it. Giving yourself away will only get you caught. Give me a few minutes and I’ll get rid of him. How much time do you need to get safely inside?”

“Ten minutes. Five, if we accelerate our risk.”

“We’re this close, and we have the time,” Zack said, checking his watch. “Let’s try it without the extra risk. Just wait here till we’re out

of sight and you can't hear us anymore, and then you can scramble down there."

Before William could say anything, Zack had stepped past them, and started making a lot of noise breaking branches and kicking stones.

"Who's up there?"

"Zack. Who're you?" he said as he looked over the lip of the waterfall into the florid face of an obese deputy.

"Dave. You with the search party?"

"I think I kinda got lost."

"Easy to do up here."

"Tell me. I heard them shout that they'd picked up a scent over to the north somewhere and I was trying to find my way back."

Zack started climbing down the rocks, which fortunately were something like a giant staircase. Unfortunately, they had also accumulated some rather slick moss at different points. Now he understood why the boy had said it would take that much time to climb down and get inside his capsule.

He stepped out and around a protruding granite slab and felt his foot slide away. He pulled it back and hugged the rock.

"Careful there. That moss is kinda slippery. Gotta watch where ya put yer feet."

"Thanks." *I thought was doing that.*

Zack looked around for a different path. Other than a ten or twelve foot leap to a jumble of broken stone below, there was none. He put his foot around the outcropping again and scraped the surface till he had a surer purchase.

"That's it. Good job."

He reached around the protrusion, found a grip, and pulled himself past it. Standing for a moment to catch his breath, he surveyed the rest of the descent. It didn't look too bad. Some big steps, but no more outcroppings. He just had to watch his footing.

At the bottom Zack stuck out his hand. "Nasty stuff that moss. It looked a lot more simple from up there.

"Yeah, it always does."

“Well, I’m glad I found you. I’ve been all over these woods. You know the way back to the house? I think my searching days are over.”

“Yeah. I can getcha back. Was just taking a breather. Gettin’ too old for this sort of thing.” He coughed, spat a huge wad of phlegm, and held up his cigarette. “And these things don’t help much either.”

He ground the offending butt under the toe of his boot.

“Don’t imagine they do.”

“You got that right. But I just can’t give ‘em up. Tried ever way I know, I don’t know how many times.”

“Nicotine’s worse than booze or heroin to kick they say. So how come you’re up here and not with the others.”

“Well, dogs’re good and all that, but they gotta have something to track. A scent, you know?”

“They got one. Brandauer’s dog met the kid.”

“Yeah, but that was days ago. How do they expect the dog to remember that scent and then follow it?”

“I don’t know. It sounded like a good idea to me.”

“You must be a city boy.”

Zack smiled kind of sheepishly. “Yes. But I’m really getting to like this country living.”

“Well, the only reason that I can think of that they’d be willing to try it is desperation. They got nothing else.”

“If you say so. I don’t know anything except I’m sore and tired and thirsty and hungry.”

“Well then, let’s get you home. We ain’t doin’ any good here,” he said starting off down the stream bed. “I came up here because I remembered that there was a little cave formed by the rocks at the base of that waterfall. Perfect place for a kid to hide out, but it looks like one a them rocks fell in front of it.”

“So you’ve lived around here a long time, then.”

“Yeah. Used to be old John’s neighbor. Played all around...”

The words became indistinguishable to William, but he could still hear the sound of their voices. They waited until they could only hear the rustle of the leaves and the low whistle of the firs.

Creeping forward, William peeked over the edge at the empty space below. The dog came up beside him and the boy put his hand on his back. Nick told him that he sensed nothing around them that didn't belong there. No humans, known to them or otherwise.

Taking great care, they descended the rock stairwell. Once on the floor of the stream, they went around to the capsule's entrance. William placed his palm against a depression that looked as if a flake had chipped off eons ago, and the rock split and opened along the cracks in its surface.

He stood back to let the door swing fully open, and then the two of them hurried inside. He touched a panel next to the jamb, and the door began to swing shut.

"Billy! William!"

He hit the panel again, reversing the door's direction.

"William!" Zack yelled as he ran up the stream bed. "He collapsed. I think it's a heart attack."

William grabbed a metal case from its fitted recess. "Stay here Nick. Where is he?"

Zack led him down the stream about a hundred and fifty yards to the prostrate deputy. Pale and sweating profusely, he lay clutching his left shoulder, and gasping for breath.

"We were just walking along and all of a sudden he groaned and grabbed his chest and fell down."

"It certainly does look like a myocardial infarction."

"That's him," the deputy gasped. "That's the kid. You know—"

"He's stopped breathing," Zack said, while putting his hand on the deputy's throat. "I don't feel a pulse."

William snapped open the case he'd brought and grabbed a narrow box about six inches long. "Open his shirt."

Zack tore the shirt open to find an undershirt beneath.

"That's okay. Just pull the top down a little. This has to go over the heart."

Zack did as instructed and William pushed the device down onto the still chest. He tapped a couple of buttons and a series of colored

lights began blinking while a steady electronic tone sounded. “He’s fibrillating. Stand clear. Don’t touch him.”

Zack sat back on his heels, hands in the air like a stick-up victim. William scooted back an inch or two and carefully pressed a green button.

The man jerked once. The tone remained steady. William tapped a yellow button next to the green one. A couple of the lights changed color, and he tapped the green button again. The man jerked again, more violently this time.

The lights kept flashing their colors. Zack was beginning to see a pattern, but still had no idea what it meant. The steady, flat tone continued unchanged. The boy touched the green button once more. Another jerk. No change in the tone.

By this time Zack had figured out that this device was some kind of defibrillator like the paramedics used, but a lot more compact and sophisticated. He also knew that William wasn’t any kind of doctor, but he wasn’t about to stop him. He obviously knew a lot more about what he was doing than Zack did.

William touched two buttons at the base of the box, one pink, one blue. He paused a second, and then touched the green one again. Another jerk and the tone changed to a repeating pattern, something like an arpeggio. The pattern picked up speed and then settled into a steady rhythm.

The deputy drew a deep, rattling breath, choked off by a wet, gurgling cough.

“He’s choking on his secretions. Turn his head to the side, please, Zack.”

Zack complied and William extracted another device with a long flexible tube attached from his kit. He stuck it in the man’s mouth and pressed a button. The familiar sound of someone sucking on a straw in an empty glass explained William’s action. He removed the tube.

The deputy drew another breath, still moist, but without a choking cough. The arpeggio continued steadily.

“You don’t have much time. You’d better get back or you’ll miss your take-off.”

“He hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“Good. Then he won’t see you.”

“He already has.”

“Just as he passed out. I’m sure I can convince him he was delusional, if he remembers it at all. I’ll call for help on his radio here. Now go. You’ve only got a couple of minutes. And Nick’s in the capsule. You’ll be stranded without him.”

“You’re certain you can take care of him?”

“Yes. Now go.”

William stood up slowly and Zack reached for the instrument on the deputy’s chest.

“Leave it. It will tell you if his heart starts to fail again. Listen to the pattern, if it changes, press this button. If it becomes steady, like it was before, press the green button. Be careful not to be touching him when you do that. When help arrives, you can remove it. After you do, please destroy it. You have nothing like this, and you will have no way of explaining its presence.”

“Don’t I know it. Okay. I’ve got it covered. Now get out of here.”

“If he chokes again, use this. This button here activates it.”

“What do I have to do with you? Throw you out of here. I’ve got it. Go!”

The boy closed his kit and began to walk back towards his capsule as Zack lifted the deputy’s radio to his lips.

“Hurry! It’s three till now.”

William picked up his pace, and broke into a run when he came in sight of the capsule. He dashed through the door, and slapped the door control panel as he went. Rather than try to stow the medical kit, he placed it on his lap and strapped himself in. He looked over his shoulder at Nick curled up in his seat, a kind of egg-shaped, padded cocoon. Then he looked at the MTR chronometer.

Ninety-six. Ninety-seven. Ninety-eight.

They'd done it. And they'd gotten more data than even he had hoped to obtain. But best of all, he'd proven his theory, though not quite in the way he'd thought he would.

A whoosh of air sounded outside the capsule, like a vacuum-sealed container being opened. William felt light for a moment, as though gravity had been suspended. Then he felt a bump and sank back into his chair as the capsule rocked gently and settled. The communication monitor, which had been silent and blank since the mission began, lit up with the face of a gray-haired woman with golden skin.

“Welcome back, William Nichols.”

Chapter 58

Friends

Her alarm screeched at noon. She rolled over and hit it off, none too gently.

That was a short night.

Too bright out. Too warm. Not night. Noon.

Work. Work. Got to go to work.

Squinting against the bright sunlight coming through the window, Nancy opened her eyes.

Peggy. Zack. Got to get them up.

Shielding her eyes from the glare, Nancy rolled to a sitting position. She kept her head down, and slowly let her eyes become accustomed to the brightness. She almost wished she hadn't bothered to take this nap. She felt worse than when she'd gone to bed. No help for it though. She'd promised Tom that they would be in this afternoon.

Slipping her feet into her slippers and wrapping herself in her robe, she went down the hall to Janet's room and roused Peggy. As expected, she responded less than charitably.

After assuring herself that Peggy was awake and moving, she went downstairs to the guest room and knocked on the door.

"Zack?"

No answer.

She tapped a little louder and called his name again.

No answer.

She put her hand on the knob, twisted it, and pushed the door into the room quietly.

"If you're going in there to wake me, why be so quiet about it?"

Nancy jumped and spun around. Zack stood behind her, a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Damn, you are a sneaky man.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Didn’t you sleep?”

He shook his head, “Couldn’t. Too much excitement. Couldn’t stop worrying if William would make it okay.”

Nancy noticed his clothes for the first time. They were dirty. His arms had little scratches on them. His trousers had a small tear where they’d obviously been snagged by something, and the knees were muddy.

“You went after them.”

Zack offered no response, verbal or non-verbal.

“You went after them to make sure they got off safely, didn’t you?”

He lowered his eyes and nodded once.

“Well? did they?”

“Yes.”

“Were there any problems?”

“None worth mentioning.”

“Uh, huh. Why do I have trouble believing that?”

Zack shrugged and said, “Tom called.”

“When?”

“About half an hour ago. He said not to bother coming into the office. Things could wait there. But he did say that you should get down to the hospital because everything has changed there.”

“Oh, really?”

“That’s what I said, in essence, though I tried to keep any expectations for the better out of my voice.”

“I take it then that they are recovering.”

“They’re talking, and one of them’s moving her arms and legs. The place was in pandemonium when I called.”

“I can imagine.”

“Imagine what?” Peggy said through a yawn, while coming around the corner from the living room.

“The hospital is in pandemonium,” Zack said. “They’ve all started to come out of it. They’re even talking and one of them’s become mobile.”

“Janet?”

He nodded. “Chattering like a chipmunk. She might have taken her first step already.”

“Any reports on the Eugene group and the kid in Portland?”

“Tom didn’t say, so I called. Same story. The little girl’s condition at Children’s hasn’t changed though. She’s still on a respirator.”

“So we did it,” Peggy said.

“I guess so. All but that one,” Zack said.

“But she wasn’t really part of it. I mean we established that when we were there, right?”

“Right. But I still hoped that the antitoxin would help her too.”

“What did she have? Guillain-Barre syndrome?,” Nancy asked.

“As far as we could tell.” Peggy said. “That was the original diagnosis. They only changed it because she seemed to fit our pattern. At least at first. What about William and Nick? Did they get away safely?”

“Yes,” Nancy said.

“You sure?”

“We have an eyewitness.”

“Well, not exactly. I wasn’t there at the actual moment of lift off or whatever it was. I was busy with a deputy. But I did go back and the capsule, which really did look just like a big boulder, was gone.”

“But you didn’t see it go.”

“No, Peggy, I didn’t actually see it go.”

“Did you hear anything.”

“You mean like a rocket blast?”

“Or a high pitched whine.”

“Nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter, Peggy,” Nancy said. “They’re gone.”

“And the people are getting well. Let us not forget that,” Zack said.

“Yes, let us not forget that,” Nancy said.

“Which means I’ll be leaving you. I’ve booked my return flight for tomorrow morning.”

“Can’t you stay a little longer?” Nancy asked.

“No, I need to get back. And I see no purpose in my staying. You can get back to your lives and I can get back to mine.”

“What about Ed? Has he returned yet?”

“Just got back. He and Baxter led them a merry chase, but to no avail. Baxter lost the scent. Ed’s out in the barn now, consoling him,” Zack said.

“Poor boy. I bet they both feel just terrible,” Nancy rejoined.

“Yeah, the poor old guy,” Peggy said. “He did great. We did great. I’m hungry. How’s about some lunch?”

After spending the afternoon at the hospital with Janet and the other patients, the four of them adjourned to the Carriage House for a victory celebration. Tom joined them and congratulated them for a job well done. He also made a point of having the meal charged to the Department. He told Zack that he would be sending a formal letter of commendation to the CDC. Similar letters would be placed in Nancy’s and Peggy’s files as well. Then he downed the last of his drink and told them that they were needed in the office in the morning and left.

“Ever the administrator,” Peggy said.

“But he’s right. We do have a lot of catching up to do.”

“And I’ve got to leave early to drive back to Eugene.”

“So this is good-bye,” Peggy said, leaning over and planting a kiss on her new friend’s cheek. “Take care of yourself, Zack. And remember what we talked about.”

“I’ll remember. Good-bye. If you ever decide to visit Atlanta, let me know.”

“I will. See you in the morning, Nancy. ‘Night, Ed.”

“Bright and early,” Nancy said.

“What a terrible thing to say to your second best friend,” Peggy said.

They all laughed and followed her out.

In the parking lot, while he watched her drive off, Zack said, "She's quite a lady. Very wise beneath that brash exterior. Very insightful."

"To riot," Ed said with a grin.

"Yes, sometimes. Listen, there is something that I need to talk to Nancy about. Do you mind if we take a walk through the park here?"

"No, not at all. In fact I'd be disappointed if you didn't. I'll just wait in the car."

Nancy tucked her hand in Zack's arm and followed him into the park and the setting sun. The last rays lit the maples and oaks and turned their leaves a green-cast gold, a preview of the color they would attain in a few months.

They came to a bench, and Zack asked her to sit. He sat facing her, with head bent, and looked at his hands. In a voice so still the river's quiet passage twenty feet away threatened to drown it out, he asked her forgiveness.

"You have it."

"Peggy said you would say that, but I'm not sure I can believe it. She said seeing you tore the wound open."

"She prefers melodrama to real life. It hurt a little when I first saw you."

"More than a little. Remember, I saw your face, too."

"That was just the shock."

"You're sure of that. It looked like a lot more than just the shock of seeing someone you'd forgotten even existed."

"All right. It hurt. Are you happy now?" she said gently.

He looked up and saw her smile and the kindness in her eyes and said, "No, I wish it hadn't hurt at all, but I don't want you to make the same mistake I did."

Nancy took a deep breath and sat silently for a long minute. "What we did to each other was mean and in some ways very childish, in the worst sense, the way children can say and do things that are the most hurtful. They have a talent for knowing exactly the right thing to do or say to cause the maximum pain."

Zack nodded silently.

“I hated you for quite a while. It ate at me. Not just because of what you’d written in that letter, but for what I thought you’d made me become. It poisoned my relationships with men. With everyone. Until I met Ed. Even then it took a long while before I could trust him enough to open myself up to him. He was—is—so different.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“He’s the one who helped me begin to heal. Finding the Bahá’í Faith helped me complete that process. Or at least I’d thought so. Till you showed up. I’d thought I’d been over it for a long time. All healed up.”

“You were. More so than me certainly. But I didn’t have the advantage of having someone like Ed.”

“Funny how we all need someone like that. Someone who can soothe us, take away our pain, make us whole again. We can’t do that on our own.”

“No, we can’t. But I think a part of that is being able to say, I’m sorry. And I am.”

“And so am I. I was arrogant and cruel when I told you what kind of woman you should look for. And the kind of woman I picked, made you out to be little better than a pedophile.”

“Now who’s being melodramatic? In any case, no apology is necessary. You were right. I just never realized it until this week. Last night actually.”

“Oh? What happened last night?”

“I found someone with a healing touch.”

“And, perhaps a bit of brass?”

Zack smiled and nodded. “A friend. Not a lover. Funny. I never really considered that I could have one.”

“A friend?”

“A female one. They’ve always been either people I worked with or possible mates. Sometimes both. But never friends.”

“They are kind of nice, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Actually she was the one who put me straight. Told me to take another look at what you’d said all those years ago.”

“So you have decided that little girls are more appropriate for you? Should I warn the Atlanta elementary schools?” Nancy said with a sly smile.

“No,” he laughed, “I do like them over the age of consent. Quite a bit over, as a matter of fact. What I meant was that you were right about your being the wrong kind of person for me. If we’d ever have gotten married, we would have made each other miserable. I feel I owe you a huge debt of thanks for that. I just wish I’d paid attention to it a lot sooner. Would have saved me a lot of heartache. And denied a lawyer a payment or two on his Porsche.”

“How about we just call it even?”

“Okay. Friends?”

“Definitely.”

Epilogue

Nancy joined Ed on the steps of the back porch. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she snuggled in close. The afternoon chill deepened as the sun's shadow crept across the yard. It got dark so much sooner since the clocks had been set back. The old-timers were predicting that this would be one of the coldest years on record.

"So how did Peggy say she is?" Ed asked.

"Progressing quite well. Just as she has for the last couple of months.

"Robin certainly has been her special project, hasn't she?"

"One of them."

Ed smiled and nodded. "Did she mention how that one's going?"

"Not specifically, but she has put in for time off to go to a conference in Kansas City where a certain CDC biologist is presenting a paper."

"Kansas City?"

"That's was Tom's reaction. She's never gone to a conference unless it was in someplace 'fun,' as she puts it, like San Francisco or New Orleans or Las Vegas. Although she did go to one in New York once. Said she'd never go back."

Ed just shook his head slowly from side to side. "Well, I hope it works out for them. They both deserve some happiness."

"Yes, they do."

She turned her attention to her daughter, who was playing in the yard with Baxter and their nearly inseparable companion, Toby. The wind stirred the dry, yellow maple leaves and swirled them around the yard as the sun slid below the hill.

Toby threw the stick and Baxter bounded after it. He returned and gave it to Janet. She tossed it, and he returned it to Toby. The

game continued for several more tosses, and then stopped by mutual agreement of all three participants.

Janet hugged Baxter around the neck and allowed him to slurp her face. Toby put his hand on the dog's head and scratched him behind the ears. While they held him, the two children looked at each other and smiled in deep contentment, almost as if they could read each other's minds.

Nancy put her arm around Ed and said, "Do you think William has any idea what he and Nick started?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't put it past him. I wouldn't even put it past him to know what's going to happen next."

Mission Journal
Specialist William Nichols recording
(Translated from the original)

Sovereignty of Knowledge, 1028 B.E. (November 1, 3021 A.D.)

Final report: Summary and conclusions.

There can be little doubt now about the genesis of the Bonded, though the mechanism surprised us as much as anyone. The mission proved the theory and, on that basis, can be considered a success. However we would be remiss if we did not also express our concern about future missions.

The fact that we became an active participant in our own history raises the question of whether we should engage in any further missions. While it might be argued that our participation was required, in this instance, we must carefully evaluate whether we should engage in any such similar activity again.

It must be remembered that the original purpose of the mission was solely to observe and record. No participation in history was desired or anticipated. Yet, despite precautions, it still occurred.

Our concern is that the temptation to act in a direct way may become overwhelming. Knowing that we changed, or at least confirmed history, can be a potent intoxicant, leading us, in our frail human way, to assume that we can right ancient wrongs or alleviate suffering. In short, that we can act as God.

If history has taught us one thing, it is that we make very poor gods. Yes, we can decide that we will only use this technology to gain a better understanding of our past and to resolve those questions historians have wrangled over for centuries by observing history as it takes place. But can we trust ourselves not to try to right those events which we perceive as wrongs when we have the ability to do so?

We think not. The risk associated with satisfying our historical curiosity, no matter how important we tell ourselves the questions may be, is simply too great. Noble causes, regardless of their merit, have historically been undermined in their prosecution by the ignoble desire of mankind to achieve parity with God. Even in this enlightened era, there are still those who would find that desire, and the temptation this technology offers for its fulfillment, impossible to resist. Though we have come a great distance as a species, we have not progressed so far as to have attained the all-encompassing vision of God.

It is therefore, with regret, that we recommend that this entire project be dismantled, and that the material which would allow its redevelopment be destroyed.

Perhaps, at some time in the future, mankind will have attained a greater measure of that all-encompassing vision and be able to use this technology with restraint and respect. Perhaps, too, mankind will have learned by that time that it has no need to alter its past in order to improve its present. Perhaps it will finally have learned that what it does in the present bears the greatest, and most proper, burden for what will happen in the future.