Only The Darkness

Mike Crowson

Only the Darkness

"Only the darkness hides the shape
Of future terrors to escape … "
Rudyard Kipling
The Storm Cone – 1932

Mike Crowson

Lulu.com

First Published 1998
Revised Edition © Mike Crowson 2007
Published by Lulu.com
ISBN 978-1-4092-1017-7

By the same author:

The Rings of Poseidon
Heat Stroke
The Flag and the Flower
The Riddle and the Key
Parallel Loop (Occult and Bizarre Short Stories)

Psychic Lifeline
(Non-Fiction : Help to those in Psychic or Occult Difficulty)

Witchmoor Edge Detective Fiction:
Witchmoor Edge
On Edge
Outside Edge
Over The Edge
Leading Edge
Female of the Species (Short Stories)
Deadlier Than the Male (Short Stories)

ONLY THE DARKNESS

CHAPTER 1

Another jagged streak of lightning forked down the side of one of the nearer peaks, which loomed for an instant from the rain and the falling darkness as another, more distant, flash lit up the sky behind it. The lightning was almost continuous now, illuminating the whole of the Sierra Nevada in an eerie firework display, to the accompaniment of an equally continuous, though not immediately near, crackle and crash and rumble.

The flash was followed by a sound halfway between a vicious tearing noise and a great pile of bricks falling but, though the flash had been vivid and the noise loud, the seat of the storm was not particularly near. The thunderstorm was possibly the more interesting to watch as the worst of it was clearly passing them by, the centre of the storm unleashing a spectacular fury as the air rose to cross the mountains.

Gill stood at the open door of the balcony, rather than on the balcony itself, watching the awesome display, as the storm continued to take out its anger on the mountains.

"Looks like the worst of it will miss us," said her husband Steve, joining her at the door and watching with her.

"It's as if the clouds are tearing themselves apart on the tops of the mountains and we're just watching them breaking up," said Gill, not really answering him. "Like a ship running aground or the coracle in your storm," she added.

"Probably nearly as wet," he remarked. "The street outside is like a river."

Lights were beginning to come on in the town, though it had been dark with lowering black clouds for some time. Malaga had been sunny and quite hot for late February, and they had driven fifty kilometres up the coast before seeing any sign of the storm. Even when they reached Salobreña it had still been dry, though very threatening.

It was certainly raining hard now. Precipitation hung from the clouds like strips of fine, grey muslin and lashed like something solid. Salobreña clings to a rocky outcrop: the rain soaked into the earth where there was any and bounced off the rock where there wasn't. Water gathered in the alleyways like little streams and tumbled down flights of steps like miniature waterfalls, on its way to join the growing rivers flooding the steep streets and tiny squares.

Behind the first two watchers, Dave and Concha quietly came into the room and also watched, not interrupting. "Is this as fierce as that storm two thousand years ago?" Gill asked Steve.

"Completely different," said Steve. "That was the wind. A gale or worse, but, not a thunderstorm, though there was rain."

"One doesn't rule out the other. You can get thunder and lightning with a hurricane."

"I don't recall thunder. Anyway, it was the wind I remember. And the windblown spray." There was humour in Steve's voice as he added, "I'll say this though. I don't recall a more violent storm in this life."

Concha was trying to make sense of the conversation. Her English was good. Very good, in fact. However the problem lay not in understanding the words, rather in making sense of the conversation.

"How can you remember something from two thousand years ago?" she asked.

"Actually it wasn't two thousand years ago," corrected Gill, "I should have said 'two thousand BC'. That's four thousand years ago."

Another particularly sharp and violent flash lit up the mountains some twelve or fifteen kilometres away.

"I still don't understand. Do you mean Steve has lived before and remembers?" Concha asked.

"Reincarnation. Yes," agreed Gill.

"Interesting," said Dave. Concha was thoughtfully silent, either wrestling with the concept itself, or struggling with the words to discuss it.

"If you're really interested, there is a relatively reliable way you can find out about other lives you might have lived," said Gill. "It

doesn't involve hypnotism or trances or drugs or anything like that. The subject stays in control."

"I don't think I believe in reincarnation," said Concha.

"You don't have to believe in it to have an interesting experience. Belief only affects your understanding of that experience."

"Maybe," said Concha, sounding unconvinced. "Perhaps I'll try it sometime."

Thunderstorms, however spectacular, pall as a source of entertainment after a while - and this one was no exception. Gill shut the doors to the balcony and let the blind drop. "We can't go out in this rain," she said, "But I'm thirsty. I could use a drink."

"There's a cafe-bar attached the hotel. I'll show you," said Concha and she led the way downstairs. "It was a separate building," she explained as they went. "My parents bought it a few years ago and they had a door knocked through from the hotel the first year I was away at university. Now we seem to have spread into next door on every floor. It's all one building really."

She led them through reception and into a smallish bar with a door leading into a tiny restaurant, at present in darkness. There were only two people in the bar, watching a football match on TV.

"*Hola, Raul. Quiénes jugan?*" Concha said to the young man behind the bar.

"*Real Madrid y Atletico Bilbao*," he answered without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Raul is my brother," she explained to the others. She introduced them. "*Le presento a mis amigos, Gill y Steve Benderman y mi novio, David Graham.*"

Raul shook hands with them but, though quite friendly, turned straight back to his football match.

"What would you like?" asked Concha. "Coffee or something stronger. Beer?" Steve and Dave thought they'd have a beer and Gill thought she'd stick with coffee.

"Milk?" asked Concha and Gill nodded.

Raul tore his attention away from the game long enough to draw them three beers and to use the machine to make a coffee that was not an Italian style 'frothy' one but was at the same time both stronger and more milky than an English one. They took their drinks and a plate of assorted tapas to a table by the wall.

"What's your 'relatively reliable' way of discovering past lives, Gill?" asked Dave.

Steve was watching the football match on TV from the corner of his eye. Possibly he was miles away, thinking of other

matches in times past and the fighting on the terraces that had landed in trouble with the law. He sighed softly and shook his head before turning his attention back to his friend's question about past lives.

Gill was answering: "The concept is explained in an Australian book from the sixties," she said. It works on the same principle as that old game of trying to rub your stomach with a round and round motion and pat your head at the same time."

"Pat your head and rub your stomach," Concha repeated.

"Yes," agreed Gill pausing to demonstrate. "It's actually very hard to do, because you have to concentrate on two very different actions at once. That's what makes the Christos Experiment work. That and visualisation. You need the subject and at least two other people, preferably three. The brain can't cope with two conflicting stimuli at the same time as visualising. It moves out of gear and one of the helpers talks you through it all. Most people find it an interesting experience, whatever they believe it is."

"What exactly do you experience?" asked Dave.

Gill took a sip of the coffee. "That varies enormously," she said. "You come down to earth in a new place, I won't go into how, and start by looking at your feet, what you're wearing and so on. Then you study what you look like, your age, who you are and so on. After that you turn your attention to your surroundings."

"Does it work with everybody?" Dave asked.

This time Gill paused longer before replying. She gazed at her coffee glass and took another sip. Then she answered carefully. "From what I've read and what I've seen and heard, it seems that virtually everybody experiences something. Just what they experience varies wildly. Most have a sort of vivid waking dream and most of them appear to recall a previous existence as somebody else, somewhere else. A few clearly remember events that seem to be from their own childhood. A very few recorded instances are of what you might call 'future dreams', but those who have them never seem learn anything that couldn't be guessed. I think such people could probably be lumped together with the one or two others who experience dreams which don't appear to make any sense at all." She paused again. "Even they seem to find it a pleasant and interesting experience, though," she added.

"You might not have a very pleasant death in a past life," observed Steve, now fully attentive to the conversation..

"People have an inbuilt unwillingness to remember the unpleasant," said Gill. "Whether we're talking about events in this life or previous ones. One of the directions for a guide is not to persist in

asking questions the subject doesn't want to answer. I'll talk you through if you're really interested," she told Dave.

"I'll try it if you talk me through it," said Concha.

"Okay," said Gill. "After we finish our drinks. We can't go out in this storm."

"It is still raining but not quite so hard," observed Steve, who had been staring out. "I think the storm's died out."

"It was raining too hard to keep it up for long," Concha answered and, turning to Gill, said, "It's not much after seven now. We can't go out yet and supper isn't for nearly three hours. How about trying this..." she struggled for a word. "... experience, now?"

"Okay," said Gill. "I'll need you two as well," she told Steve and Dave.

"I think one of the bedrooms would be best," said Concha. "There won't be anyone in the visitor's lounge, because the hotel's closed as a hotel at this time of year, but we could still be interrupted there."

"Shame to leave this," remarked Steve, taking the last titbit from the plate and washing it down with the last of his beer. Concha, too, drained her glass and stood up.

Real Madrid and Atletico Bilbao were still battling it out on TV as they left, and Raul and the customer were still absorbed in the outcome.

"*Hasta Pronto, Raul*," said Concha as they left and was answered only by a hand movement as he watched the game.

The floors of all the rooms were tiled, as they are in most Spanish houses, so Concha lay on a rug, and Dave took a pillow from the bed for her head. "You'll probably be more comfortable if you take your shoes off," said Gill. "Steve," she told her husband, "you get a notebook and pen. You'll find one in my case. Dave, you kneel down at Concha's feet and I'll kneel by her head."

"Now, Dave, you start massaging her ankles. Use an up and down motion. Very gently. Concha, relax completely and close your eyes." Gill began to rub the edge of her clenched fist, in a circular motion, in the centre of the Spanish girl's forehead, in the area where the 'third eye' is traditionally sited.

"Now," said Gill softly, "listen carefully and try to follow what I say ... Try to imagine that you are growing three feet. Your legs are simply growing longer ...You are over eight feet tall, but it's your legs that have grown ... Now, you're shrinking back to normal. See yourself as your usual size. Try to see yourself and try to follow my instructions. Now you are growing three feet longer through your head. Your body is simply growing taller or longer ... Again you are

over eight feet tall. Now you're shrinking back to normal. See yourself as the normal size"

Gill pushed her hair back with her left hand without pausing the circular movement of her right hand, then continued. "Okay, we'll do the same thing again, except this time we'll make it six feet. Try and see yourself growing six feet longer, through your feet ... really tall. Or really long, as you're lying down ... a full six feet taller. That's over eleven feet tall ... now shrink back to normal. Try to grow from the top, from your head ... Grow six feet taller ... See yourself as really tall ... Now shrink back to normal. Be your ordinary height."

"Right. Now visualise your front door. Imagine you're outside either this hotel or your flat in York. It doesn't matter which, but choose one and stick to it."

"This hotel," murmured Concha, only just audibly.

"Okay. See the sign outside. See every detail of the closed door. Imagine the blue sign. Really see the white 'H' on the sign, with two stars underneath it. Now gradually float upwards. See the bedroom windows as you float past. The roof. See the view over the area as you float upwards." Concha smiled, though she didn't speak or open her eyes. "Now," continued Gill, "float upwards and into the clouds and into blue space. You see nothing at all except a blueness ... Start to slowly descend ... Come gently down. Can you see land. Hard ground beneath you?"

"Yes."

"Come gently down." Gill stopped massaging Concha's forehead and signalled to Dave to stop massaging her feet. Dave got up and sat on the bed. Steve sat ready to take notes, though he wasn't sure what he was supposed to write.

"Now," said Gill, "Look at your feet. What are you wearing?"

"Shoes," answered Concha. "They're rather like my own but a bit brighter colours."

For want of anything better write, Steve wrote that down.

"Okay. What else are you wearing?"

"Shorts and a rather silky top."

"Sports things?"

"Oh no. Quite formal and dressy. There's a matching jacket lying over my case." Steve scribbled more notes.

"Where is the case?"

Concha sounded a little surprised. "Standing beside me. I'm just standing."

"What is your hair like?" asked Gill.

"Fairly long and wavy and held back in a big clip."

"I should have asked you before. Are you male or female?"

"Female," she answered without hesitation.

"Look around," Gill told her. "Have you any idea where you are?"

"A railway station. Chamartin station in Madrid. I recognise it."

Gill was taken by surprise by the sureness of Concha's answers, but this was clearly not a past experience. At least, not long past. "Do you know how old you are?" she asked.

"Forty ... something - two or three, I think."

Gill wondered if this was some sort of dream inspired speculation about the future. There were a few recorded instances in the Christos Experiment of subjects seeing their own future, though nothing was recorded in such experiences that couldn't have been guessed.

"Do you know your name?" she asked.

"Adela."

"You are certain about that?"

"Absolutely."

That seemed to rule out a future dream. Gill tried another tack. "What are you doing in the station?" she asked.

"Waiting. I have to travel to Paris to meet someone and then travel on to ... somewhere else, alone. After I get my instructions."

"Waiting for who?"

"I don't think I know."

"Where are you going after Paris. Do you know?"

"I think so. The brief is in my briefcase."

Gill pounced on the little clue. "Brief?" she said. "Are you a lawyer of some kind?"

"I think so."

Concha's degree was in languages. In fact, she and Gill had met at University, while the latter was completing a Masters in Archaeology and Concha was there on exchange to improve her English. She certainly wasn't studying law, which made it unlikely that she was a lawyer. Gill was stuck for what to ask next.

A thought occurred to Steve. "Are you carrying or holding anything?" he asked, looking up from the notes.

"I have a bag over my shoulder and a newspaper under my arm."

"Look at the paper. What paper is it?" continued Steve, while Gill watched in silence, still kneeling at Concha's head.

"El Europeo," she answered.

"And can you see the date on the paper?"

"El veintitrés de febrero de dos mil cincuente y dos."

Gill struggled with the Spanish. "The twenty third of February two thousand and fifty two."

There was a silence as the three watchers took in the date, then Gill said, "You'd better come back to the present, while we decide what to do next. Imagine yourself floating upwards again. Floating away from the station and into blueness. You can't see anything but blue ... Now imagine yourself floating gently down until you can see the surroundings of Salobreña. Down until you can see your own front door again. Right, open your eyes."

Concha lay there blinking for a moment, then said, "A young man was just approaching me. I think he was probably the one I was waiting for."

"Pity we didn't wait another minute or two," remarked Dave.

"Do you remember the details of your dream or whatever it was?" asked Steve.

"Oh yes," she answered. "I seem to know quite a lot of other things about the person in my dream as well. And I think I've remembered where she was going to."

"Where?" asked Gill.

"Zurich," said Concha. "She - I - was going there as a lawyer but that wasn't the whole reason. I don't know the other reason, but I'd like to try again and see if I can find out."

"We can try it again if you like, but not now," said Gill. "None of us could concentrate enough for a second attempt straight away."

"I suppose it can wait. If the rain stops we could go for a walk."

"It stopped half an hour ago," said Steve.

"Half an hour? I had no idea we had been so long," said a very surprised Concha. "Perhaps it had better wait a bit."

"We were over an hour altogether. We all need a break," said Gill, yawning.

"All right. But I'm definitely going to try it again," Concha insisted.

"Why are you so interested?" asked Dave.

"I remembered the whole name of the woman in the station."

"Who was she?" asked Gill.

"Adela Graham Ponce."

The significance didn't strike Gill immediately. The Spanish custom of using two surnames - your father's first then your mother's - meant a foreigner has to stop and think about relationships.

Concha was Concepciona Ponce Aguila. If the woman in the story was Adela Graham Ponce, she must be Concha's daughter. But as yet Concha didn't have a daughter. She wasn't even married. On the other hand, her fiance's family name was Graham.

CHAPTER 2

The rock to which Salobreña clings is topped by an Arab Fortress and Gill had just finished her Master's degree in Archaeology: to her anything ancient was interesting. She had seen the castle when they arrived the previous day and promised herself a visit.

The next morning was clear and sunny with a cloudless blue sky - it seemed a good day for walking around ruins and Gill's enthusiasm was infectious. Steve was mildly interested - they had met, after all, on an archaeological dig' where he had been looking after the vehicles and the mechanical things like generators. Even if he hadn't been actively interested himself, he would have indulged his wife's passion for such places. Concha just wanted to share her hometown with her friends and Dave didn't mind.

On the seaward side the rock is too steep for building. It rears up almost sheer amidst an ocean of sugar cane, about a mile or so from the Mediterranean. The landward side is not as steep - but that is by comparison with the seaward side: the town still hugs the hillside, as if afraid it might fall off. The rocky outcrop is too steep for streets to run directly up the hill and, to avoid lengthy detours, it is necessary to climb tumbling alleyways and long flights of steps, past streets of glistening, whitewashed houses, built into the rocky hillside and much higher at one side than the other.

Nearer the top the road was less steep, but they hot and panting nevertheless when they reached the only gate to the castle by means of a lengthy flight of wide, shallow steps.

Gill studied the way the gate twisted through the walls. "This castle doesn't seem Arab style, at least not this part of it," she said.

"Long before the Arabs or the Romans came this was a Phoenician stronghold," said Concha. "I don't know whether the Romans used it but the Arabs rebuilt it. Some of the rulers of Granada used it as a prison, it was so ... ?"

"Impregnable?" suggested Gill.

"Does that mean 'very hard to capture'?" asked Concha.

"Yes."

"Impregnable." repeated Concha. "As I said, rulers of Granada used it because it was so ... impregnable. The Christians used it against pirates, before it was partly destroyed by an earthquake and fell into disrepair."

They wandered through pleasant shady gardens, in bloom even at this time of year, along battlemented walkways, through another gatehouse and into the inner fortress.

Although the castle was not very big, it took them most of a morning to explore, and Gill could certainly see why such a position cried out for a fortress. Eventually, however, the four of them had seen everything there was to see and even Gill agreed it was time for a drink.

The cafe-bar El Peñon had a terrace with tables, just below the castle and offered dramatic sea views at the same time as a drink.

"What's 'El Peñon' mean?" asked Gill, as the four settled down with cold beers, welcome even in February.

"The rock," Concha answered.

"At least it's an appropriate name," Dave remarked.

Once they had settled themselves round a table, Concha raised the subject of the previous night's experiment and her rather startling experience.

"It was very vivid, last night," she said. "I could see every detail in the station," she said. The comment sounded sudden to the others, but she had been mulling it over for a while.

"Do you know that particular station well?" asked Dave, obviously wondering how her far imagination was involved.

"I've been there a couple of times,"

"Could you just have remembered the details?" he asked.

"I didn't see it quite as I remembered it," said Concha, and paused before elaborating. Then she went on.

"It was Chamartin, no doubt about it in my mind at all. I knew it was Chamartin and, what's more, the general layout was as I recall it. The detail was different, though. The floors were tiled differently I think. There were more shops and the trains were not exactly the same."

"How were they different?" asked Dave.

"The odd thing is, I'm not sure," she answered. "I know they were different, but I'm not sure how. The paintwork was different but it wasn't just that. I think I'd like to try the experiment again and see if I can get some answers to questions I have from last night. Will you talk me through it, Gill?"

"You're not bound to go back to the same place, you know," she said. "Only about a third or fewer of those who try it a second time continue the first experience. Most have different experience. One that seems to be from a different life."

"I still want to try," insisted Concha.

"I don't mind doing it again," said Gill.

Dave was looking at his fiancée cautiously. "Why are you so keen to do it again?" He asked. "What haven't you told us."

Concha hesitated even longer before answering. "I know a lot of unimportant things about that woman which I haven't mentioned. Those things are not the reason." she hesitated again. "At the very edge of my mind is the reason for my trip to Zürich," she said. "I can't remember it and I think it's very important and it's bothering me."

"Well, we can certainly try and settle your curiosity this evening," said Gill. "I'm not making any promises though," she added.

By this time it was time to head back to the Hotel. It didn't normally provide meals, but this was February and very much the 'off-season', and the four of them were guests of Concha's parents. Well, if the truth be told, it was their first chance to meet Concha's fiancé, and the main meal of the day was an important time to get to know somebody.

So far, things had seemed to go reasonably well between Concha's parents and Dave. Gill had wondered if Dave's Afro-Caribbean ancestry would make any difference. Concha had been certain that it wouldn't.

Dave and Steve worked at the same garage and Concha had first met him when visiting Gill. There was an easy comradeship between the two men and Gill liked Dave too. However, it wouldn't do to be late for the meal, so they walked down the steps and alleyways, back to Calle Christo and the hotel. It was not so hot and tiring as going up, of course, but not a great deal quicker, because those uneven alleys and steep flights of steps do not make for speed.

On the way back Gill and Steve fell behind Conchas and Dave and Gill was able to voice what was worrying her.

"You know," she said, "I hope Concha's all right. She seems to be very keen to try the 'Christos Experiment' a second time."

"Not surprising," replied Steve. "After all, she dreamed she was her own daughter and that the daughter's name implied that she had married Dave. Cast your mind back to when we first met and tell me you weren't interested in how things would turn out for us."

"Yes, you're probably right." said Gill. "But I feel responsible, because I told her about it in the first place, and I talked her through it as well."

There was an air of faint worry about her, which she tried to shake off. "Anyway," she added "I don't think I can avoid trying it again tonight."

"Tell you what," said Steve, "I think we should use a tape recorder to record the story instead of me taking notes."

"Good idea," agreed Gill.

In the evening, after dark but before the last meal of the day, Concha borrowed a radio-cassette player from Raul and then lay down on the rug with shoes off and head resting on a pillow. Dave again knelt and massaged her feet and Gill again knelt at her head and massaged the centre of her forehead with the edge of her clenched fist. Again Gill talked Concha through growing and shrinking and visualising her own front door.

"Imagine that you are rising up into the blueness of the sky. You can see nothing but blue. Now you are sinking very gently down to earth. Can you see land below you? ... Very gently down ... Now look around you. Where are you?"

"On a train. A train from Madrid to Paris," Concha said, and launched into Adela's story.

CHAPTER 3

ADELA'S STORY

Back in the days when there were separate nationalities, my mother was Spanish and my father English. I was born in Spain but, of course, we're all Europeans now. Because of my parentage, I am completely bilingual in English and Spanish, and my German isn't bad either, because I worked in Germany for a while. I trained as a lawyer and worked for Amnesty International for a few years, mainly in South America. I've settled down as I've got older, and I work in a well-known Madrid firm now. Underneath my respectability I'm still a bit of a rebel, but most clients tend to have forgotten that these last five or six years. This latest brief, however, suggests to me that somebody, somewhere still remembers.

I've read the brief right through, and I don't see why the young man in question, or his organisation, asked for me. During my time with Amnesty I did, of course, defend quite a lot of people accused of crimes which carry a death penalty, including murder, but I do not have even national reputation as a major criminal lawyer, much less an international one. So why had a young man in Zürich asked me to defend him on a murder charge?

From my reading of the notes, it seems he had been the last person in the offices of an environmental group to see a senior scientist alive. By his own admission he had left long after the rest of the staff and had no firm alibi to cover the time this scientist was shot. The gun was found with the body in the offices he had locked up. There were no fingerprints on the gun, but the circumstantial evidence was there. Still, I thought that no judge was likely to convict him on this evidence. I wondered if there was more.

The train was one the usual hover trains with linear drive. It was very fast, smooth and quiet. Just before it left Madrid I met a young man from the environmental group. He gave me a note with my 'instructions'. The instructions were somewhat mysterious. I didn't

know whether to be intrigued by them or to conclude merely that someone was being melodramatic.

Something - the English side of me, I suppose - does not like a lot of drama if it isn't strictly necessary. No romanticism, the English.

The 'instructions' were to go to a particular hotel in Paris, where a room had been booked for me overnight. A member of the environmental group Planetenwache (Planetwatch, or something like it, in English) would contact me there and give me a full briefing before I traveled on to Zürich. Since I already had papers in my briefcase which detailed the case, I was not sure what else there was to brief me about.

The hotel was small but very comfortable and had a full dining service. My grandparents on my mother's side kept a hotel in Salobreña, on Spain's Mediterranean coast. My uncle Raul kept it at that time, helped by my younger sister Eva and her husband. That had seemed like luxury living compared to some of the places I frequented in South America, but I would guess this place merited about one star more. It was, as I said, small but comfortable.

I had just settled down to my evening meal - rather late, Madrid style - when a woman in her thirties came up to me.

"Adela Graham?" she asked, and I nodded. "My name is Corrine Coty. I'm from Planetwatch. May I join you?"

"Be my guest."

"I haven't eaten yet," she said, "so I'll order something now, on your account. Planetwatch are picking up the bill, so I won't be a liability to you."

I could have afforded to buy her dinner anyway, but she ordered and Planetwatch paid.

"Rüdi Bäckmann is charged with murder," said Miss Coty. "The evidence against him is not very strong, but the objective is not so much to convict him as to buy 'them' a certain amount of time. To keep him out of circulation while 'they' find something he has hidden. No one with a history of association with Planetwatch can get anywhere near him. That's why we want to use a lawyer unknown to them."

"Who are 'they'?" I asked.

"We are not sure," Miss Coty answered.

She was speaking English to me and her English was near perfect. However, I didn't think she was English. Perhaps, like me, she was half English. There are a growing number of bilingual people around. A result of increasing European intermarriage, I suppose. Incidentally, I mean 'English' culturally speaking, of course, for there is no longer any such nationality.

"The security arm of Europol are involved," she continued, "but we don't think they initiated the action. It seems as if some multi-national companies in what used to be Switzerland are the ones who are really trying for whatever it is they think Rüdi Bäckmann has hidden. What we would like to know is what they think he has and where it is. That's where you come in. If you're willing," she added.

"How am I supposed to help?" I asked.

"Rüdi is in prison, of course," she said. "When any of us visit him there's a glass screen between him and the visitor. You speak into a microphone on your side and he hears on a speaker his side. There is a microphone and a speaker on each side. Everything is relayed and, I don't doubt, recorded. Lawyers have direct contact, but that is monitored by a TV camera and, quite probably, recorded as well. We needed somebody completely unknown to put them off their guard. Your firm has a branch in Zürich. We asked them to bring you in because of your Amnesty International background."

"I thought everyone had forgotten that? How did you remember?" I asked.

"I didn't remember. I work for the Paris branch and I'm only repeating instructions, but I suppose someone on the International Committee must have known,"

Corrine's explanation didn't answer the question. "Let me get this straight," I said, "You want me to go into the prison as a lawyer, persuade this young man to tell me what everyone is busy going to great lengths to try and find out and recover whatever it is everybody is desperately looking for?"

"Yes."

"There may not be any secret to uncover."

"We know that," said Corrine. "But somebody is trying very hard to recover it. Our headquarters in Zürich and every one of our branches in each major cultural centre of the European Confederation - Paris, London, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Sarajevo, Athens and so on - have been thoroughly and professionally searched. Everyone on their side seems to be trying. Will you try on our side?"

If Planetwatch or Planetenwache or whatever they called themselves knew they had been searched, it couldn't have been all that professional a job, but I'd come across this kind of harassment in South America and I had come across people hauled in on trumped up charges just to keep them out of circulation before. Usually, though, it was the government of whatever country doing it. Still, the concept was not new. "Okay," I said. "Do you want me to defend this Rüdi Bäckmann as well?"

"Oh yes," she said. "That's the main job. We need a good defence to make sure he gets off. I am appointed by the International

Committee of Planetwatch to ask you to do this as well. Only a few people in the organisation know anything about it. Here's a 'phone number to report to if you do discover anything. Don't contact this number unnecessarily and don't report anything other than to this number."

She passed me a card. It appeared to be an ordinary business card, giving the address of a monastery and retreat centre near Madrid and the phone number of a Father José Perera Arancha. "If anyone should happen to search your bag this will look innocent enough." she said.

I thought that it probably would, though I didn't think anyone would be searching my bag. That was something from twentieth century South America, not late twenty first century Europe, but I didn't say anything to that effect.

"Have you no idea what I'm looking for?" I asked.

Miss Coty hesitated a shade too long, and I thought she probably had a very good idea.

"Not really," she said. "I can only say for sure that a couple of multi-nationals involved in genetic engineering seem to be going frantic to find something. It has to be some form of information about them or, possibly, about something they are doing. It's safe to assume the information is in some sort of hard copy form - a paper of some kind or a computer disk - or they wouldn't be looking. They would just have had Rüdi Bäckmann run over or shot or something if it was all in his head."

I thought about it and couldn't see where the murder came in, so I asked Miss Coty.

"We don't know," she confessed. "We think maybe the scientist was researching something damning when he was shot, but we don't know what."

Again I felt that Miss Coty did have a very good idea. Maybe she wasn't telling me because it was just a suspicion and she didn't want to influence me. On the other hand, she didn't seem unduly worried that a lot of her story was just unsupported assertion. Well, there didn't seem to be much risk involved with looking. The brief was genuine. I had a legitimate reason to see Rüdi Bäckmann and I would have to talk to him as a matter of professional interest. It couldn't harm to bear the other matter in mind, just in case the Planetwatch concerns turned out better founded than they seemed to be at present.

When Miss Coty had finished her meal and left, I had another coffee in the lounge and then went to bed. I make myself rest reasonable hours, but I do not actually sleep very long. I sat up in bed to re-read the brief, then I read for relaxation for a while before I slept.

Zürich is, of course, the capital of the European Confederation now that it includes some countries from further east. The train next morning was busy but, like the one from Madrid, it was one of the newer, faster type.

When I reached the European Capital, I took a taxi straight to the office of our firm. Our head office is in Madrid, but the Zürich office always feels itself to be the more important. A kind of arrogance born of being at the heart of things, I suppose.

The receptionist was very efficient and very welcoming. "We have an office available for you with all the usual videophone, computer and electro-mail facilities," he said. "An assistant has been assigned full time and Herr Weißartz, the Senior Partner, would like to speak to you as soon as it is convenient."

As I was a Junior Partner in the Madrid Office, that was an order, though he had phrased it very nicely. He handed me a small bunch of cards. "That one," he said, taking each card in turn, "fits the side door, should you wish to have access to the building after hours, but please inform the security guard first. This one operates the door of your office. This one switches on your electro-mail unit and boots your computers. And this last operates a secure cabinet in the office. If there's anything else you need please let me know. Oh yes, here's a wallet for the cards." He handed me a small plastic folder with a professional smile and turned to answer the videophone with the same, smooth, welcoming professionality.

I slotted the card into the reader and went into the office they had provided. There was plenty of space, with two comfortable desks, several chairs and all the equipment, including an answervid. I called reception to have them tell Herr Weißartz I was going to see him, switched on the answervid, took my briefcase with me in case I needed to discuss the case and went out.

Herr Weißartz must have been close to retiring age. He was a greying, balding sixty-odd. I thought at first he was annoyed that the Madrid office had been called in, but I decided that it was merely that he felt a need to prove something to head office and was a bit aggressive about it. It wouldn't do to criticise the Zürich office though, not that I had seen anything to be in the least critical about.

"Welcome to Zürich, Miss Graham," he said. He was speaking in pedantically precise English. "I must say I cannot understand why our clients asked you to come all this way," he went on, "Not that I mind, of course. It is a pleasure to welcome you." His manner was as correct and polite as his English,

"I rather agree with you," I told him. I didn't intend to give anything away. "I can see no reason why Mr Bäckmann should ask for a junior partner from Madrid to defend him, especially as I have no

great reputation as a criminal lawyer. Although I speak German, there are several native speakers of German in the firm. The case looks very straightforward and the evidence verges on the flimsy. We might even ask for the case to be dropped. I can only think it has something to do with my work for Amnesty International years ago, but I thought everyone had forgotten that."

"You worked for Amnesty International? I did not know," said Herr Weißartz.

"No reason why you should. It's a matter long forgotten," I told him. "It was largely in South America and it's not relevant to this case."

"Perhaps not," he said. He looked thoughtful for a moment, before he went on: "Now. I have assigned Fräulein Trudi Fricke as your assistant during your stay and I have booked you in at the Hotel Schöne Aussicht."

Hotel 'Beautiful View': that sounded promising. To Herr Weißartz I said, "I will sort out the office and meet my assistant. Then I think I'll check in at the hotel and do one or two bits of shopping I need to do. I will try and arrange a preliminary visit to our client for tomorrow morning."

"No hurry," said the Senior Partner, which struck me as an odd thing to say - quite Spanish but not in the least German. "I expected you yesterday," he added, partly contradicting the sentiment implied by his previous remark. He used a tone indicating that he hoped for a response.

"I stayed overnight in Paris. I had one or two personal things to see to," I told him.

"No hurry," he said again, "You should have taken your time about it."

I couldn't decide whether he was being polite or sarcastic or really meant it. And, if the latter, why? Did he not care about our client languishing in jail longer than necessary? There was just the faint possibility that Herr Weißartz didn't want Rüdi Bäckmann out of jail too quickly either, though I couldn't see why, but I resolved to be careful what I said to him. Perhaps I ought to be careful what I said to Trudi Fricke as well.

I returned to my office and summoned that young lady. She was in her mid-twenties - I'm a bad judge of ages, but I would guess about twenty-four or twenty-five. Trudi was pleasant enough and her English wasn't too bad. She had a law degree from Heidelberg University. She seemed fairly competent, though somewhat slow. But she was a revolutionary. I decided in half an hour or less that she was probably an agent provocateur for Weißartz. She was an obvious environmental enthusiast and either had been chosen for that interest,

or was putting it on to try and egg me on to say or do something indiscreet.

Within half an hour she had asked my opinion of the CO_2 laws, ventured her own opinions against some of the more extreme forms of genetic engineering - the experiments into slowing human ageing, for instance - said it was a shame Rüdi Bäckmann was being persecuted and given me a dozen opportunities to be indiscreet about Planetwatch, had I been less cautious. I decided that there was perhaps something in Corrine Coty's melodrama, though it wasn't obvious what. I also decided that, if her fears were real, whatever long arm of the multinationals was at work, it probably stretched into my own firm.

It was obviously better to treat the whole business as strictly a professional defence against murder. I enthused about the new CO_2 laws, even though they're inadequate still, in my opinion. I rather non-committally said I didn't know much about genetic engineering, even though I know enough to have considerable reservations, treated Rüdi Bäckmann as a matter of business and ignored the opportunities to be indiscreet. I left her to make an appointment for us to see our client next morning, and went to check in at the hotel.

I left my briefcase in the office with the built in recorder switched on. If Herr Weißartz or Fräulein Fricke tampered with it during my absence - and by now I felt they might - I had nothing incriminating in it, but a little device from the last century would tell me whether there had been a visitor. It had done wonders for me in South America!

The hotel did have quite a nice view, though not from my room. It was a little larger and a little more luxurious than the one in Paris, pleasant though that one had been. I bought a couple of those cards you put into an electro-mail sender to transmit a hologram, and sent one to my sister and the other to her son Pepe. There are times when I wish I had children of my own, but there always seemed to be too much to do first, and it will soon be too late for that now.

There are other times I wish I had more family too. There's just Uncle Raul and he's quite old. My parents are dead and I have one sister who's married with one child. I still keep in touch with my English friends I call cousins, Gill and Tony. Their parents were good friends of my parents, but they're not real cousins. In a bout of nostalgia I went back to reception and bought two more holocards.

After I had sent my electro-mail from the hotel sender I went out to do some shopping and try to walk off this bout of feeling sorry for myself

CHAPTER 4

I thought Trudi Fricke's enthusiasm for things environmental was a bit overdone on the first day, and I proved it to myself on the second day. When I said we would go to the prison by tram, she offered to drive us. Almost half the total population of Europe does still have a car, though it varies from area to area and is a rather lower level of ownership in Switzerland. However, many people reserve their private cars for essential purposes and don't put them to everyday uses, especially when there's fully adequate public transport. No strong environmentalist would drive, especially not the fanatic this particular young lady seemed to be or, at least, purported to be.

The public transport system in the heart of Europe is perfectly adequate, but had I insisted we use it **she** would have thought **me** a fanatic, so I let her drive us and we arrived British style - held up in traffic, nowhere to park and quite unable to have a sensible conversation en route.

Rüdi Bäckmann was being held just outside Zürich. The prison was spotlessly clean and appeared reasonably comfortable. I have paid large sums of money in times past to stay in less congenial surroundings. Prison Guards were not obtrusively present, but security was tight. I had to leave my handbag in a locker room, though I was permitted to leave anything else I felt like, lock them up and take they key with me.

I wondered who they thought was likely to steal my belongings in a prison this secure. Certainly there would be no hiding anything from the staff. I assumed that they would have a duplicate key and would inspect my bag as a matter of course. My briefcase was carefully checked before I took that into an interview room.

My client was in his early thirties: a dark eyed, reasonably good looking man who was seated at a table playing patience with old fashioned cardboard cards when I entered. He gathered up the playing

cards as I walked in, and handed them to a Guard who took them and walked out, leaving the three of us.

"Good Morning," I said, "I am Adela Graham from the Madrid office of Fernandez, Holz & Co. I believe you asked for me specifically."

We shook hands. "This is Trudi Fricke, who was assigned as my assistant when I arrived in Zürich, by Herr Weißartz, one of the senior partners. She is local and will provide any background information I lack."

I wanted him to know that I didn't fully trust her, without the woman herself realising it and I had wondered how to tell him. I said: "Miss Fricke drove us here today. I wanted to use the tram, but she insisted on putting her own car at my disposal and driving us herself."

"I see," he said, nodding. I hoped he'd got the message.

"Would you prefer to conduct the interview in German?" I asked him. We had been using German so far and he nodded again.

"Are the police still investigating the crime?" I asked and he nodded again. If he did it much more he'd start to look good in the back window of Trudi Fricke's car.

"What sort of questions are they asking?" I said. "What are they asking about?"

"They think that Karl Hagan was working on something and I took it, or know where it is," he said.

"And did you? Or do you?" I asked him.

"The police won't say what it is they're looking for. Perhaps they want to try and trick me into some kind of indiscretion or something, I don't know for sure. Anyway, I don't know what they're looking for. I shouldn't think I know anything about it, whatever it is, but I can't tell them where to find it, if I don't know what it is."

That seemed to be a fair enough stand.

"Has anything new emerged since this brief was drawn up a week ago," I asked.

"No."

"Tell me the story of what happened."

"About eight o'clock in the evening I locked up the Zürich offices of Planetwatch. Karl Hagan was still in his office working on something or other. He said he would let himself out with his own keys when he had finished. I locked up and left. Next morning, when I opened up, I discovered his body. He'd been shot between eight thirty and nine thirty the previous night. The gun was there but whatever he'd been working on was gone."

The door was locked when you arrived?"

"Oh, yes."

"Were any windows open?"

"I didn't look myself, but you may be sure that the police checked. To the best of my knowledge, all the windows were closed and secured. Our office is not on the ground floor and some of the windows have bars."

"Your fingerprints were not on the gun?"

"There were no fingerprints on it," he said.

That was significant, but it did not help my client particularly. "Where were you between eight and nine thirty?" I asked.

"I went straight home and stayed there."

"Any witnesses?"

"I rang a man called Andrew Swift. He's an Englishman working for the Zürich office. I talked to him shortly before nine. The videophone company records show the call. Unfortunately I could still have driven back to the offices or taken a taxi and just about had time to murder Karl."

"Do you have a car?" I asked.

"Of course not," he answered.

"Have the police found a taxi driver?" I wanted to know. If they hadn't there didn't seem to be much of a case.

"No. There isn't one to find," he answered.

It would be a bit naughty of them not to tell the defence if they had found one - keeping information like that from the defence is serious, but they might not have got around to it yet. Of course, in some parts of the world there not being a taxi driver would not prevent the police from finding one. I thought it over and concluded that, although this looked like a case of mistaken identity, I didn't think my client was being framed. The mistake might be deliberate though.

"Okay," I said, "I'll talk to the Prosecutor's Office this afternoon. If they haven't got any more evidence than they've revealed to us I'll try and get them to drop the case without a charge. There isn't, as the English say, enough evidence to hang a cat."

Rüdi Bäckmann rubbed his ear pensively for several seconds. "Thank you," he said and shook hands long and hard. Much longer than was necessary. Then he said, "Thank you Miss Fricke," and shook hands with her too.

As he had shaken hands with me he had pushed something beneath the dress ring on my middle finger. I picked up my briefcase, looked at him gravely and said, "I will do what I can and report back to you, possibly tomorrow. Goodbye." and we left the room.

I did not attempt to recover whatever it was he had pushed beneath the ring, nor even look at it. In the locker room I went to the loo, but I did not even look at it there, just in case they monitored the toilets, though I thought that unlikely. On the way back to the office, while Trudi Fricke was taken up with driving, I took my ring off to polish

it and discovered a tiny rolled-up sliver of paper. That must have been behind his ear and palmed as he rubbed his ear. I transferred it to the inside of my bra and made a great show of polishing my ring. Trudi never noticed.

We discussed the case and agreed that the evidence seemed flimsy. I left her to try and arrange a meeting with the Prosecutor that afternoon and went out for a walk, a think and a bite to eat.

I ordered a snack in a small restaurant and then went into the toilet to recover the bit of paper from my bra. It was as well I didn't try to dig it out in a more public place. I thought I'd lost the thing at first and had to halfway undress to recover it. Back at my table I unrolled the scrap of paper and studied it. There was just the name Muller and a telephone number and the words '*später als sechs'* - later than six. That seemed clear enough: phone the number after six and ask for the person 'Müller', whoever he or she was. What I'd find was another matter.

The woman in the Prosecutor's Office was a female version of Herr Weißartz: German speaking (with no Spanish and very little English), close to retiring age, very polite and very formal. All the same, she did seem to be very fair. I said 'seem', because, as they used to say in England 'Handsome is as handsome does'. That's a very useful expression in modern European terms. The European Parliament still has less actual power and the unelected bureaucrats more actual power than it would appear on the surface, and many polite people in the system do not actually deliver.

The English language, or perhaps the British people, I'm not sure which, have a lot of saying or proverbs, unfortunately now dead or dying. My English grandparents used to use the expression 'the proof of the pudding's in the eating'. The meaning is about the same as 'handsome is as handsome does'- the bureaucrat in the Prosecutor's Office seemed very fair and very pleasant, but I would suspend judgement until she actually proved it by her actions.

Anyway, the lady agreed with me that she too felt that the police didn't have much of a case and told me that the examining magistrate agreed and had given them until the end of the week to provide further evidence or release my client. That seemed fair enough. Again I point out that I say 'seemed': I reserved judgement on the reality.

Trudi Fricke appeared to think that I'd performed miracles when I hadn't actually done much at all. Herr Weißartz appeared to agree that I was really making things happen. Perhaps the Spanish reputation for 'mañana' and taking one's time had led them to expect me to take much longer, though I didn't feel to be rushing. Anyway, I

told them I wanted to leave early and do some sight seeing. Actually I wanted to check the digital recorder in my briefcase to see whether anyone had inspected it the previous night, but I wanted to do that in the privacy of my hotel room.

Fortunately the tape in my briefcase is at least modern enough to be sound activated, while recording gives start times of sound sequences, so I didn't have to plough through hours of silence. The briefcase picked up a visit from the cleaning company robot and then ran on to about nine pm. Somebody entered, picked up the case and opened it and went through the various papers. The papers were put back and the case closed.

And then I had my piece of luck. The visitor used my videophone and I recognised the voice. Trudi Fricke. All she said was that she had checked me out and I looked OK. There were no names, she got an outside line, but I couldn't tell what number she had dialled, there was no clue as to who she was speaking to and the call contained nothing of importance. Except that it proved that the young lady was looking me over for somebody or other.

I wasn't sure what to do about that phone number given me so surreptitiously by my client. Clearly I couldn't use the vid. in my hotel room. The line might be tapped and I didn't like the idea of giving the opposition a clear picture of me. What to do? I decided to call from a restaurant. I put my bag so as to partly obscure the camera and stood at an angle myself, so I only gave an angled shot of part of my hairstyle, then I dialled the number. I put on a Hamburg accent: it sounds truly ghastly, but it doesn't sound foreign, and I asked to speak to Herr Müller when a young woman answered. She looked pleasant but ordinary with straggly dark blonde hair and little make-up

I was told that this was a wrong number. Fraulein Müller had stayed there but had moved and, after some searching, she gave me a number she said he had left her. I wrote it down and rang off to try the number she had given me.

There was no answer at first, but eventually a man answered with a lot of noise and people passing. He explained that it was a bar. A moment later he was interrupted by the same young woman who had answered before. She claimed to be expecting a call.

`She explained that she thought her own videophone was tapped and that the bar was just across the road. Her German accent was good, but I detected an English accent underlying it. She explained that she had something that Rüdi wanted to pass on to Planetwatch, but 'they' were everywhere.

"Where are you staying?" she asked. I told her. "I will go there and leave a small package for you in reception," she said. "Ask there after ten, to give me time to deliver it."

"Okay, I'll do that," I told her, and rang off.

I wondered again who 'they' were and whether she, like Corrine Coty, was being unnecessarily careful. Considering Rüdi's arrest on rather flimsy evidence and my own nocturnal visitor, I decided that perhaps they weren't, and went back to order my meal. It was a little early to eat, but I was curious to see the package.

As luck would have it the man at reception handed me a large padded envelope without being asked, when I went for my key. I took the package up to my room with me.

Inside the large envelope there were two written reports, each about forty pages long, some hand-written notes, four computer CD ROM's and a piece of plastic about five by twelve centimetres by one and a half or two centimetres thick. It had a multi hole terminal down one of the longer sides - about thirty or so holes - and looked as if it was meant to plug into a computer There was also a small plastic bag of what looked like quite ordinary rice, about a half-kilo. I put the disks, the rice and the plastic-whatever-it-was-under my pillow, had the room-robot make me a drink and sat down to read the notes.

The handwriting was easy enough to read, though the notes were in German. The typed sheets were a computer print-out in English. It appeared that there were two separate items, because the sheets were stapled into two groups. One group was British, the other American and both referred to genetically engineered subjects. In both cases the patents had been acquired by the same Swiss based multi-national corporation and both looked like good ideas.

I presume you are acquainted with the principle of genetic engineering - you isolate a gene in one thing, carrying a feature you want to replicate in something else, and transfer it across. In the case of the British research, someone had taken a salt marsh grass, isolated the salt resistant gene and transferred it to rice. Bingo - rice you can grow in salt water. That ought to work wonders for the world's food crises.

In the other case a gene that didn't mind ultra-violet radiation had been isolated in a tropical lizard and transferred to higher latitude mammals. In a world of decreasing ozone that too was a very welcome development, because increasing ultra-violet means lowering the resistance system in mammals, including humans. So why were Planetwatch worried? I read on and found out.

The two different multi-nationals had been co-operating. Having bought the patents thirty or forty years ago they had kept them secret and opposed any legislation to reduce pollution from gases which would slow down global warming or ozone depletion. Instead of investing millions of Euros in research they had invested millions of

Euros in political manipulation, sabotaging conferences, lobbying governments and so on. More pollution would mean higher profits.

Suddenly I realised how many millions of Euros were at stake, the vast potential for profit and how real the dangers were. As I realised just what I was holding my blood ran cold.

CHAPTER 5

Sleep, as you can well imagine, did not come easily. First I went over every step of my involvement in this affair, to examine the likelihood of my part in it being exposed. The chances that I was followed in Madrid or Paris were not great. The booking of the hotel in Paris had been done in cash by Corrine Coty, using my name, not that of Planetwatch.. Unless we were actually followed there, there was nothing to link me to Planetwatch before my arrival in Zurich, except, of course, that they had asked for me.

So far, so good. On arrival I had shown interest in human rights rather than anything environmental and I had deliberately left my briefcase where it could be surreptitiously checked for anything incriminating. Probably my room at the hotel had been searched too, but there was nothing incriminating in my room either. Well, not until tonight anyway.

I had suggested Trudi Fricke coming with me to see my client and I was ninety nine per cent sure she had seen nothing of the bit of paper transferred to me by Rüdi's sleight of hand. That was very well done. I wondered whether he had been a professional or semi-professional conjurer. I didn't think she had seen me transfer it to my bra, because she was too busy driving at the time, but I wished I had been even more patient and left it hidden until I was on my own.

I had called the number given me by Rüdi from a restaurant, and the girl herself had taken precautions. If they were monitoring her calls, the woman with a Hamburg accent asking for a female who used to live at that address shouldn't have triggered the interest of even the most sophisticated of monitor robots. The only significant risk was that the girl herself had been followed or that an investigation would show that a package had been delivered for me.

What I had to do was invent a perfectly natural reason for the envelope, In case that was checked. The girl I could do nothing about, but she had been very careful on the vid.

I looked at the envelope again. There was no name, only a room number. That might be a help. I would sleep on that one. I also had to dispose of the real contents of the packet - they were far too 'hot to handle'. I thought I knew how I could do that, but it depended on accounting for the packet itself and, as I said, I was going to sleep on that one. So I did, though rather fitfully.

Next morning I slipped out of the Hotel and up Hauptbahnhof Straße. In one of the side streets I had seen a second-hand bookshop with something I thought might do very nicely. There was, as I thought I remembered, an Italian language course, consisting of a book, some DVDs and a couple of CD-ROMs. Together they were about the same size as the package left for me. Next I went to a stationers for a padded envelope about the same size as the one left for me.

I took my various purchases to the Post Office, addressed the new envelope to my uncle Raul in Salobreña, transferred the various items from the old envelope to the new one and posted it by good old fashioned hand mail. Then I stuffed the language course into the envelope delivered to reception and went back to the Hotel. I slipped in and went to reception as if I had just come down from my room rather late.

I said that I didn't think the package was meant for me and asked if it could have the wrong room number on the envelope or whether, perhaps, it could have been intended for a previous occupant. I left it with a puzzled receptionist and went in, considerably late, for breakfast.

After I had eaten I went to the office and told Herr Weißartz that I didn't think there was much I could do that day and that I intended to spend it sightseeing.

"Do you mind if I borrow Fräulein Fricke for the day," I asked. "I haven't mentioned it to her yet, but I think it would be nice to have a companion who knows the area well."

Actually it could be hugely tedious, but the alacrity with which he agreed to the request suggested that I had done the right thing in asking.

"One thing," he said, "Our client is expecting a further contact from us."

"I didn't promise it would be today," I answered, "and there's nothing to report, but you could have a junior call him on the vid. and tell him the present rather hopeful position. We can say we'll report more fully tomorrow."

He brightened, "I will see to that," he assured me in his formal manner.

"If we haven't heard anything by lunch time tomorrow, I'll contact the Prosecutor's Office again, but we'll only rub them up the wrong way if we overdo it."

I don't give a damn about rubbing up Prosecutor's Offices the wrong way, I never have done. It was Herr Weißartz I didn't want to rub up the wrong way, now that I had what Planetwatch wanted me to lay my hands on.

"No, indeed," he said. "If they intend to release our client anyway, there is no point in annoying them. I think you are right to leave the matter for today. I hope you enjoy a pleasant day."

I wasn't at all sure I would, but I took my leave and went to find Trudi.

The day actually turned out to be very pleasant. We took a trip on Lake Zurich and had lunch at the far end. After we came back, Trudi drove us out of the city to a couple of quite spectacular viewing points and a rather early dinner halfway up a mountain somewhere.

It may have been that I had nothing to hide and was therefore more relaxed or possibly Trudi was in control and felt that there was no way I could get up to anything she was supposed to prevent. Either way it was a much more pleasant day than I expected, and Trudi was good company as a companion.

All the same, I made sure that I did not say or do anything to arouse suspicion. I kept off environmental subjects (other than appropriate remarks about the scenery) and would not discuss the case, other than to say I didn't want to talk or think about business for the day. I told her some guff about not getting emotionally involved in your cases.

It's actually good sound legal common sense not 'guff'' at all, but I've never been able to do it, which is why I was so successful when I worked for Amnesty. I did mention that I thought I would be going home Saturday, if the Prosecutor's Office kept their word and released our client. I told her that they would hardly need me and I was quite satisfied that she could handle anything left over. I said I couldn't see why Planetwatch had insisted on me and that she should make sure that every last Euro of extra costs was claimed.

I did more bending than my host, but then, I had a good deal more at stake. Apart from that it was an enjoyable day.

I slept better that night and arrived at the office next morning in a much better frame of mind. About eleven o'clock the Prosecutor's Office rang to say they were releasing Rüdi Bäckmann. I sent Trudi to pick him up

and bring him back to our office, and made sure that I was talking to Herr Weißartz when they arrived. Our client came with Trudi into his office and there was much hand shaking all round.

"Thank you for everything," said Rüdi, speaking in German. "It is a relief to be out."

"I'm sure it is," said Herr Weißartz genially. "You have Fräulein Graham to thank for all the work she put in. This young lady really stirred things up very quickly."

"I had the right assistance," I said referring to Trudi Fricke. In a veiled reference to his sleight of hand with the bit of paper, I added "I am pleased to say that all the matters you raised were dealt with equally well. I am sure that you will hear nothing more from the police other than written confirmation that the case against you is dropped."

"We will, of course, try and get some compensation for you under section 47 of the detention regulations. Fräulein Fricke will be dealing with that matter, though I have to say that the chances of success are only about fifty-fifty at best. The police will claim 'reasonable suspicion' and stand a good chance of getting away with it."

I wanted to try and give Rüdi some idea of what was happening to the information package.

"I shall be returning to Madrid tomorrow." I continued, "I don't think there is anything further to keep me in Zurich."

All was smiles. Herr Weißartz produced a bottle of wine and we ended indulging in a small celebration of our client's release.

Trudi called reception and told them to ring for a taxi to take Rüdi home. As it arrived he shook hands with each of us again. As he said goodbye to me, he also said, "Thank you again for helping me out. I cannot repay your help so, as they say in English, beware of Greeks bearing gifts and one eyed Englishmen."

We were all speaking German. We had been ever since Rüdi arrived, because his English is not brilliant, but I was absolutely sure about the words, odd as they were.

"What did he mean?" I asked Weißartz.

"I am not sure," he answered, "but I believe the reference to Greeks bearing gifts is a reference to the Trojan horse. I do not think it originally an English expression at all. As to one eyed Englishmen, I have no idea."

"The expression is new to me," I said. "Oh well," I continued, appearing to dismiss the matter, "I really don't think there is any reason for me to stay any longer. I shall clear up the office you provided and return to Madrid tomorrow."

"As you wish," he said.

"Thank you for all your help. I shall make sure that Fräulein Fricke is quite certain what else to do. And I shall have dinner with her this evening if she is free. Otherwise, goodbye and thank you."

"It is us who should say thank you," he responded politely. "Have pleasant journey back," he said, and we shook hands.

I went through the file with Trudi, packed my things, found her free and had dinner with her that night, slept well (though I dreamt of a one eyed Englishman) packed up at the hotel and caught my train via Paris to Madrid.

On the train I had plenty of time to think about Rüdi's words. He had spoken in German and said what any fluent English speaker would have thought was odd - and any native speaker would have put down to a foreigner's misunderstanding of the language. The English do not speak of 'one eyed Englishmen'. I thought that, in the peculiar circumstances that I now found myself, it could be a warning.

In Madrid I did not go back to my flat. I did not even leave the station. I went straight to the ticket office and bought a ticket to Granada, travelling overnight, as it was already late.

I'm not sure why I acted as I did. Certainly I wanted to get to Salobreña to pick up the package. I also needed a break and I was feeling a nostalgic need to be with what little family had. None of these factors amounts to a reason for such haste.

Premonition or a combination of the other reasons or whatever, I travelled all night and, in the early morning I caught a bus from Granada to Salobreña. I arrived about noon at uncle Raul's hotel, tired and more than ready for a sleep.

They were all really glad to see me, of course, and there was no way to slope off to bed immediately. The TV was on in the cafe-bar as usual, and, as we sat having a before dinner drink, the news came on. A major item was about an explosion in Madrid in the early hours of that morning. The cameras were outside the bombed building and the damage was extensive. The building contained largely apartments, it said, and police were unable to find a motive.

"Shouldn't think there were many survivors there," said uncle Raul, nodding towards the screen. Looking at the rubble it didn't seem likely.

A longer shot from a different angle showed more of the street. The view looked familiar. Chillingly familiar. My home was among that rubble. My neighbours were among the dead and injured and, if I'd gone home last night I would probably have been among the casualties. My apartment was in that block.

It looked as if some one wanted me dead. My blood ran cold again.

CHAPTER 6

I slept because I was too tired to do anything else, but I did not sleep well. I dreamed running away from a dark, shadowy shape that followed me everywhere. It was trying to get hold of something I had and the chase was endless: through city streets, across fields more like Britain than Spain, over mountains and so on, ad infinitum.

It's obvious, of course, where the dream came from and what it meant, but it wasn't exactly a nightmare. In the dream I absolutely had to escape with whatever it was I had, but I didn't feel personally threatened. I woke very early Monday morning - five o'clock or thereabouts - with a vicious headache, and lay awake thinking that the dream was wrong in one respect. I **was** personally threatened: my life was very definitely in danger.

The unexplained explosion could have been a coincidence, but the odds against it were enormous and I just did not believe it in the face of odds like that. There would be a time lag before 'they' knew I wasn't in the building at the time and another while 'they' figured out where I was. Whoever was responsible was probably just 'making sure': I didn't think that anyone knew for certain that I even knew there was any evidence against them, much less that I had handled it.

Part of the problem I faced was the question of 'evidence' of what? Some individual or group within the senior management of a multi-national called GENAG (some sort of acronym I imagined) had certainly indulged in a course of action that amounted morally to a crime against humanity. I didn't doubt that they had broken more than a few laws along the way - murder, bribery, causing explosions and so on, but I didn't have any evidence of that. What I had evidence of was a great moral outrage. A really big crime that was not really a crime at all.

There is no law against patenting an idea and then sitting on it for thirty years or more. Possibly there ought to be a law against it, when millions have died as a result of your inaction, but that's an

entirely different matter and I'm not talking about that. Basically, I wondered what Planetwatch intended to do with the information once they had it.

The package would arrive at uncle Raul's Post Office Box today or tomorrow. What I could do this morning was call Father Perera at that monastery near Madrid and try and arrange a hand over. Then I'd take a trip somewhere and make sure I didn't cause any danger to uncle Raul or the rest of the family. I thought that, just to be on the safe side, I'd use a public vid. rather than call from the hotel. I lay awake considering the question from various different angles without coming to any firm conclusions until it was time to stir myself.

After breakfast I wandered in the sunshine down to the square by the Town Hall, where there is a public videophone centre, still found in small Spanish towns. From there I dialled the number given me by Corrine Coty. An elderly monk answered the vid. and I asked for Father Perera.

"I'm sorry," he said, "Father Perera died last week in a road accident."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," I said, more than a little shaken, "What happened? Was anyone else hurt?"

"He drove off the road at a bend. No other vehicle was involved. I'm afraid I have no other details. Were you a friend?"

"Well no, not exactly," I answered vaguely. "I am a lawyer and I needed to speak to him regarding a matter with which I am dealing. I would have valued his advice and I am very sorry to hear of his death."

"He will be missed by his many contacts in the field of humanitarian aid and agricultural development," agreed the elderly monk.

"May I express my personal regrets," I said, somewhat stiffly and now rather anxious to cut short the call.

"You may indeed," he replied, "this is a very sad matter."

I said my goodbyes and rang off as quickly as I decently could. I could see why Planetwatch had wanted me to give my evidence to Father Perera, but it was quite possible that others could see it too.

My situation was now serious. I had a short breathing space until somebody realised that I was alive and tracked me down, but I didn't think that would take long. I didn't believe for a moment that Father Perera's accident was accidental. I didn't know how to contact Corrine Coty. Rüdi Bäckmann would be watched the whole time and, according to Corrine, Planetwatch was riddled with informers. I had to do something with the information I had which would change the

situation. The sunshine was pleasant and calming, but it didn't actually help much.

There was a card in the Post Office Box to indicate that the package had arrived and was available at the counter, as it was too big for the box. I collected it rather absent mindedly, making small talk with the counter clerk while thinking through the beginnings of a plan.

A friend I went to school with had a computer consultancy and services firm in Motril, the nearest town of any size to Salobreña. He had done a few jobs for me in the past and had some machines for hire by the hour as well. For a start I might as well get the hand-written notes on CD and have a look at what was on the other CDs DVDs at the same time. I could also see if he knew what the other plastic thing was. I didn't know for sure that it came from a computer, but he would probably recognise it if it did.

I left the post office with the package, caught the bus to Motril and walked round to Juan's offices. He was busy with a client when I arrived, so I hired a computer and CD-writer and began typing in the notes.

When I saw the client leave and figured that Juan was free, I took time out to consult him about the plastic thing.

"Adela!" he exclaimed. "It's been ages since I saw you." There was an expression in his eyes not unlike the feeling of nostalgia I had in Zurich. "It's been too long," he added, smiling. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Desperation," I said wickedly. "I need help and advice and there isn't anyone else."

"I can't believe that," he said, adding, equally wickedly, "You can pay for all the help and advice you need."

"Not from somebody I really trust," said, meaning it honestly and showed him the bit of plastic.

He looked at it and said, "I think it's from a static robot. It's the programme to enable it to carry out some function or other. It's properly called an EPROM - that's an acronym for Erasable Programmable Read Only Memory."

"Is it possible to tell what the programme is for?" I asked.

"Y-e-e-s," he said slowly. "You could use a compatible model. If you fit the EPROM in, the robot starts by confirming what it's supposed to do."

"Can you find out for me what this one does, without anyone discovering that you've checked?" He looked at me curiously for a moment. "It's very important," I said.

I thought about the forever I seemed to have known him, swallowed hard and took the plunge.

"Look. You know that explosion in Madrid yesterday - it was on TV?" He nodded. "I had a flat in that block. Somebody thought I might have heard that this thing existed. They planted a bomb and tried to blow me up, just in case. That's nothing to what they'd do if they knew I'd got it, and I want to know what it is somebody wants to kill me for."

He looked at me harder and longer this time. "Who are 'they'?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not certain, but I think it's somebody - an individual or more likely a small cabal - in the higher management of a highly respectable multi-national company," I said. "I don't know who or how many and I can't prove it either." I became a bit desperate and added, "On the other hand 'they' arranged an arrest on false charges that I was defending and 'they' probably killed a monk in Madrid last week."

"Either you're exaggerating or you appear to have got yourself in deep," he observed at last.

"You don't know how deep," I told him, "and what's more I didn't realise how deep myself until yesterday."

"Okay," he said, still cautiously, "I think I know what this comes from and I think I know where there's a model I can get at. I'll have to leave it until tonight, though, if you want it done without anyone knowing about it. In the meantime, what about lunch?"

"I've hired one of your machines by the hour," I said, "so we'll have to hurry."

He laughed, "I won't charge you for the time we're at lunch."

It was good to be around someone I'd known so long. We started first grade at school together, and I was turning forty now. We'd gone right through school together and I'd even been at the same university as him, though we'd done entirely different things. At one time before HIV really made you careful about your partners, we'd even been lovers, before I started my travels. If I hadn't gone to South America .... For the second time in under a week I had a bout of nostalgia and feeling sorry for myself - must be my age or something. Like the last time, I put the thought behind me and settled for a meal.

Over lunch I confided more of the story to Juan. He suggested that I ought to do something with the material myself, rather than risk losing it and getting killed as well, if I tried to make contact with Planetwatch. I asked him what he thought I ought to do. It was not so much that I didn't know what to do, though I didn't know how to go about that either, but I thought a second opinion might widen the possibilities.

"If you want to embarrass the multi-nationals you need to tell the whole story to the world's media - all the leading papers, news

agencies, radio and TV networks and so on. The story might get suppressed in a few, but if you told them all it would break. If you want to bring political pressure to bear you need to tell world leaders and leading opposition figures in a wide range of countries. If you want to see the rice grown, try giving the secret to political leaders in those countries desperate enough to ignore the patent."

"God," I said, "I'd like to do all three."

He was silent for a while, then he said, "It is possible - probable, even - that this EPROM of yours has something to do with the salt resistant rice, since it came out of the same packet. If it has, you may be able to do all three."

"I don't imagine I'd be given the chance, "I muttered, depressed.

"Well," he answered, "You'd have to have your disappearance for a few years arranged properly. It would be essential to disappear completely in the space of about three hours, and you'd need access to a lot of electro-mail senders, but you could do it."

"How?" I was sceptical.

"Get the DVDs all ready and a sender programme with all the electro-mail numbers on it. There'd be a lot, so you'd need to use a lot of senders," he said. "Start with Middle and Far Eastern leaders and newspapers, about eight in the evening our time, then go onto European ones and finally the Americas. Get everything to arrive too late to be seen in time for the next day's deadline or broadcast the same night, so you can finish the job before anyone realises you've started. Start the whole process rolling and make your getaway. You'd need copies of your EPROM ready with courier services to be delivered first thing on whatever day you broke the story."

"Wow," I said, "That would really set the cat among the birds, as the English say." The English actually say 'pigeons', but we were speaking Spanish and you don't get many pigeons in Andalucia.

"It's up to you to decide," he said, "but you really have to disappear completely for a while, because you're going to be a target for a time."

"How long will it take to organise the computer part?" I wondered out loud.

"If I can find out about the EPROM tonight, it won't take more than three or four days to get the copying done. You need to have a couple of days more to allow for the courier delivery firms to have delivery ready." He pause a moment before continuing, "The programming will take no time at all, but you're going to need time to research and collect the receiver numbers you need.

"It might be best to disguise it all as a massive advertising campaign for something. Book all the senders in the name of a

fictitious advertising agency. I think everything could be in place in eight or ten days, provided you can do all the research parts of it in a week or less." He actually sounded quite enthusiastic.

I think when it came down to it, Juan was in a bit of rut. Here he was, in his forties like me and doing reasonably well careerwise, also like me, but not doing very much with his life. Also like me, come to that. I think that's why I had taken on the task without too much reluctance. The fact is, we were both enjoying ourselves!

"I can arrange my flights, move my money and so on in a few days. I haven't got a fortune, but maybe I could write or something."

"Under an assumed name, I hope," Juan said. He was only partly joking. "Look, you'd better move in with me for the week or ten days it takes."

I nodded. "I think you're right," I said, "I'll go back and get my things this afternoon."

"No," he replied, urgently. "It may be painful, but you're going to need an immediate break from your family for their safety. Ring up your uncle Raul and say you're staying with Juan. He'll know who you mean but, even if they've tapped his vid. already, they won't know who Juan is or where I live."

"That's true," I said, "I don't even know where you live. But I don't think they'll have got around to tapping uncle Raul's vid. yet."

"You never know. They may have started last week in case you contacted him. Anyway, use a public vid., don't call from here.."

"All right," I said, shaken. It was certainly possible that there was a tap on his phone pretty well as soon as I got involved with the case. It was only luck that I hadn't called him. I was too late into Madrid and too early into Granada to call, otherwise they might have known yesterday that I wasn't in my flat at the time of the explosion. It could be that I had had a narrow escape.

"Where do you live now?" I asked Juan.

"I have a flat on the outskirts of town, but don't even say that to your uncle. Don't even say which town. Let him think it's Almería or Malaga or something."

"Okay," I acknowledged, though they'd know which town soon enough if uncle Raul's vid was tapped. "Now, I'd better make a start on that research. It could take a while to get those vid. numbers. You can get into the commercial computerised list of international numbers by the hour. I can get the numbers, but I'll have to make a list of the names I want the numbers for. I'll make a start in the library when it opens again." I glanced at my watch. "Three thirty," I said. "They won't be open again for another hour. I'll also go to a travel agent and check flight times etc. Are Viajes Gomez still on Calle Lorca?" I asked.

"Still near where they were," he said. "They've moved round the corner onto Calle Alvero Nuñez."

"In the meantime I'll go back to your office and start on that list of names. I'll start getting the numbers after I get back from the library and the travel agents."

"Yes. Well, while you're doing that I'll make preliminary enquiries about renting senders. I'll use the name of a fictitious advertising company. Any suggestions for a name?"

"I'll think about it," I said.

The rest of the afternoon flew by, but somewhere along the line I decided on Bolivia. At the travel agent's I decided that I would book a flight from Madrid to Caracas via somewhere unlikely, and from there to Mexico City. It would have to be a return flight from Caracas, of course. Now that Mexico is part of the United States of North America, along with Canada, you can only visit on holiday, but I planned to buy a ticket in Mexico City to Lima and cross into Bolivia from Peru by land. I ought to be fairly safe and anonymous there until things quietened down. Actually, I didn't think I'd have to lie low for long. Once the dust had settled and the multi-national pair had faced the wrath of the world, they would be in no shape to go hunting me. The danger was going to be before the event - now - and during the first few hours and weeks after it. A year or two and I might even be able to contact my family again.

In the library I found a diskectory of European MPs and Departments from which I printed out the relevant pages and also came across a diskectory of 'World Political Leaders by Country'. I didn't need all of it straight away, so I only printed out the parts I needed immediately and headed back to Juan's offices.

"I checked with Eurovid.," he said as soon as he saw me. "I arranged for you to hook into their directory with the machine in the side office, starting at seven. I hope I did the right thing."

I nodded and went to my list I had been writing. I took the list with my pages printed from the directories in the library to the computer Juan had indicated.

"I'm going out for a while to see a robot about a bit of plastic," he said. "I'll see you in a couple of hours." and he left me to the videophone, the computer and my list of European Newspaper and TV company newsdesk receiver numbers.

By the time Juan returned, at gone eleven, I had already compiled a very formidable list and was ready to break for the evening. "It's getting late," said Juan, "Let's walk home by way of a cafe-bar and I'll fill you in about my evening's activities as we go." I was only too glad

to gather up all my stuff, push it into the now bulging envelope, and let him switch off and lock up.

The night was warm and the walk only about one a half kilometres. "Your 'bit of plastic' is a standard EPROM for a static robot," Juan told me. "Don't ask me whose robot I used, but I would have needed very little specialist equipment, given the right location, to engineer a salt resistant strain of rice. I can get copies of the programme made in Barcelona. We could even have them done while we wait, if we took it there." He changed the subject slightly. "Have you decided where to hide?" he asked.

"I'm going to lie low in Bolivia," I answered.

"After Nepal, Bolivia must be the highest country in the world. It's not possible to lie low there."

I was about to argue when I realised he was joking. "Well, keep a low profile, then," I said, grinning.

"A larger company has been trying to buy me out for a month or two," he said. "If I accepted their latest offer and sold up, I could come with you." As a statement of fact that was undeniably true. In addition I was not looking forward to going into self-imposed exile entirely alone, but I didn't want to make things dangerous for an old friend. I told him so. "Running away and hiding would be a lot less dangerous than what I'm doing now," he pointed out. That was also true.

"Sleep on it," I said.

He was silent for a while. Then he said, "Is that meant to be an invitation?"

I turned the possibilities over in my mind. I didn't like the old image of man the protector, but we had been lovers once and he had been good to be with. He had skills I needed just now, but he was an old friend who was taking risks for me and for my cause. With HIV much more common you didn't take casual risks any more, but he wasn't a casual friend. On the contrary, I knew him pretty well and, anyway, there was probably more chance of being murdered in the next few weeks than of contracting AIDS. Most of all, Juan was a very good friend at a time when I needed friends.

"If you like to take it as one." I said at length.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning I had to go shopping in Motril to buy a few clothes, since mine were either in a suitcase at Uncle Raul's or blown up in my flat. I didn't buy a lot, because it would be cheaper to do most of my buying in South America and, anyway, I wanted to travel like a tourist.

I went to the local branch of my bank and left them some instructions to pass on to their Madrid branch, which would no doubt raise eyebrows when they arrived. I also used an anonymous public sender to electro-mail Fernandez, Holz & Co., telling them that I was resigning my position and leaving them a power of attorney with regard to the claim on the insurance of my flat and contents. The firm could pay off the mortgage, sell the apartment and keep any balance in trust for me. When I would be able to get at the money was another matter entirely.

I booked my flight from Lisbon to Rio, even though the flight started in Madrid. I hoped that using an airport in the former Portugal and the Air Argentina flight from Madrid to Buenos Aires via Lisbon, Madeira and Rio, I would contrive to fool any pursuers. From Rio I had a return flight via Caracas to Mexico City, where I planned, as I mentioned before, to buy a single to Lima. Juan booked his flight direct to Caracas from Madrid where he would meet me and we would travel on to Mexico City together.

I could not see any way that those hunting us could find us. They could identify my name if they checked the passenger list of every person boarding at Lisbon, but I didn't think there was much risk of that. I had never been to Rio and I didn't speak Portuguese, so Lisbon to Rio must be a very unlikely choice.

We hired a car and drove up the coast road to Barcelona by way of Almería, did our business there under assumed names within a couple

of days and drove back. Before we left Juan had an attack of what you might call 'spy mania' and indulged in a complicated deception.

At his urging, I booked a flight to London and gave the ticket away to a stranded traveller. You can get rid of a ticket easily at any airport on the Mediterranean: it's been like that for a hundred years or more. All you do is produce your I. D. to get a boarding card and then give it to the person actually travelling.

After that I picked up a holocard of Barcelona, which I sent to uncle Raul, telling him I was flying to Copenhagen for a few days and would be in touch later. If 'they' monitored Uncle Raul's electro-mail, a search of Copenhagen flights would draw a blank, so they'd check all the flights from Barcelona and discover that I'd flown to London. I didn't think 'they' would go to all that trouble, but I'd been wrong before and the ruse might buy us a little time, just when we needed it.

Back in Motril I finished the necessary research quite quickly - another three days was enough - and the eight copies of the EPROM went out to courier companies. We chose countries partly on the basis of need, partly in areas of the world where rice would grow, and partly on how likely they were to ignore the patent.

We chose Bangladesh: it's an extremely low lying country; the Philippines: a series of islands with a lot of coastal swamps and a big population; Egypt: they've had a long war with Ethiopia and the Sudan about control of the Nile waters. The underlying problem is salt intrusion into the Nile delta and a growing population; China: they don't give a damn about western patents and they eat a lot of rice; Indonesia, for the same reason as the Philippines; India; Venezuela, because all the agricultural land is crowded into a coastal plain with a lot of swampy land and Vietnam, because salt water intrusion into the Mekong delta is becoming a very serious problem. We sent an outline of documentation and a warning that this strain of rice was patented, along with an explanation of how GENAG had been sitting on the secret for thirty years while starvation made it an ever more valuable asset.

Arrangements for the 'publicity campaign', as Juan called it, had gone so well that we were actually ready to roll two days early. We were using senders in Cádiz and Seville, booked in the name of Black Cat Advertising. Juan wanted to call it Agencia Rayo (Thunderbolt Advertising) because they wouldn't know what had hit them. I favoured Agencia del Gato Negro because it would set the cat among the pigeons but we'd need luck to get away with it. The first pun is English but the second is the same in both languages, so Juan understood it well enough. Nothing depended on the name and he simply went along with it.

Juan was going to Cádiz by road to set the disks running in the senders there, then he would drive back to Motril, tidy up one or two loose ends and catch a bus to Barcelona next day. I was going by bus to Granada and then by train to Seville, where I would visit the computer services firm that was hiring out its electro-mail senders, start things rolling there, and travel on by train immediately to Lisbon. The plan was as watertight as we could make it.

I sat back and tried to enjoy the bus ride to Granada. It's always spectacular, but I was too taken up with events to pay proper attention. Anyway, I didn't think it mattered very much as I was going to see the Andes again and they're even more spectacular than the Sierra Nevada. I was preoccupied as I changed to the train and so anxious to get everything sorted out that I took a taxi from the station in Seville to the computer services outfit. I had five copies of everything for the five machines and I set them up ready to roll at eight pm and waited. ...

On the stroke of eight the little warning lights came on as each machine began transmitting the story to the media and political leaders. I left the building, took a taxi back to the station and caught a train to Huelva and the first leg of my journey to Lisbon.

I reached Lisbon by late morning the next day, in plenty of time to check in for a late afternoon flight. There was nothing that I could see in the papers, but the story had been designed to miss the papers to give us maximum time. There was a TV in the departure lounge, but the news was all in Portuguese and I don't speak any. Well, 'none' would be a slight exaggeration, but after I've ordered a coffee and said 'Thank you' I would have used up about a third of my vocabulary and, as far as listening to the news is concerned, that pretty well is 'none'.

I read a book and slept on the plane. I changed planes in Rio without leaving the airport and flew on to Caracas. By that time the story had well and truly broken. I picked up several papers at the airport and took a taxi to the hotel to meet Juan.

I checked in and went up to my room with a bundle of newspapers. I had bought copies of El Pais and El Europeo as well as Die Welt and several English Papers, and I propped myself up with the pillows, and sat on the bed to read them.

The press seemed united in the opinion that what GENAG had done was an outrage against humanity. World leaders voiced a range of opinions, the most friendly of which could only be viewed as hostile. The voices ranged as far as nationalisation of the assets of the two companies by a couple of more maverick third world countries. I don't suppose this threatened the companies very much, but no world leader seemed anxious to rush to their defence. On the whole, higher

latitude countries were more worried about Ozone depletion and ultra-violet: Chile and Argentina were as outraged as Norway, Sweden and New Zealand. Lower lying tropical and sub-tropical countries, on the other hand, were angry about the rice that could have fed their hungry millions. It was quite a spread and already the United Nations Assembly was gathering for a special session to discuss the issue. The whole thing sounded better than I hoped. I wondered whether Planetwatch were pleased with what Juan and I had achieved on their behalf.

I glanced at my watch. Juan was already a bit late and I wondered if he had seen the papers yet. To pass the time I started on the inside pages of El Pais. I picked out one little item. I don't know why I was drawn to it. The headline read simply 'Second Mystery Explosion in Two Weeks'. The story referred back to the explosion in Madrid and described a bomb that had blasted a building in Motril, destroying the offices of a computer services firm and killing the proprietor.

Bloody, bloody GENAG. Someone must have traced me to Juan. 'They' were trying to the end to save themselves, their hides and their fortunes - whoever 'they' were - and it had almost succeeded. Juan had obviously already been to Cádiz before it happened, because my efforts alone would not have caused such an uproar. The explosion must have occurred soon after he got back, so they had failed by just a few hours. There was nothing to link them with this latest, pointless death ... but at least they were being pilloried for the millions of other deaths they had caused.

Looking at it objectively, GENAG had killed millions negligently. They had murdered Father Perera, Karl Hagan and some of my neighbours, as well as Juan. His death was just one crime among many. I didn't feel objective, though. I didn't know Karl Hagan or Father Perera or all those millions. I didn't even know some of my neighbours beyond saying "Hello." But I did know Juan. He was an old, old friend and a lover. I loved him. I had planned to meet him and go into a self-imposed exile with him.

Tears trickled down my face. At least 'they' couldn't take away the last couple of weeks, but the years of exile seemed to stretch away endlessly ahead of me, as cold, empty and lonely as the Andes I was running to. I swore to myself that I would hound GENAG, thwart the company at every turn and finally destroy them.

I threw the papers aside. This was just the beginning. I was going to look into the company and try to find those responsible. They might have destroyed my future and killed Juan, but I was going to get even.

CHAPTER 8

A few tears trickled down Concha's cheeks and she blinked. She lay still for a minute or so and then rubbed her eyes before she sat up.

"Hombre!" she said inadequately. Her voice sounded level and Gill thought that, though the story had broken off at a low point, Concha didn't seem too upset by the experience.

"I got most of the story on tape," said Steve. I lost a little bit when I turned the tape over and it ran out just before the story finished. I couldn't get the very end, I'm afraid."

"I can remember the end clearly enough." replied Concha. "But did it really take over an hour?"

"More than an hour and a half," corrected Gill. "It was a 90 minute tape."

"Hombre!" said Concha again, as inadequately as before.

"I think," said Gill, "it would be best to let it lie for a little while. If we let it rest while we do something completely different, we're less likely to make judgement based on the emotions of the moment."

"Let's go and eat before we say anything," Dave remarked.

"I don't know that anyone has anything to say right now," said Steve. "I know I want to think about it all before I say anything."

Concha got up and sat on the bed to put her shoes on. "I have hunger and I am not sure what to think," she said, sounding far more Spanish than usual. "I think supper first, talk later seems a good idea." She continued more fluently again, "There's a place up by the terraces below the castle that does great food. Simple but good. I'll show you."

The cafe-bar she took them to was smaller than the one attached to the hotel and it was packed. There were only four tables in the restaurant part, but one was free and they were able to sit down straight away. As Concha had said, food was simple and cheap but very good. Over very good mushroom omelettes with mixed salad and chips 'Adela's' story seemed to make more sense.

"Right," said Dave. "Has enough dust settled for you to react to Adela's story?"

Steve was deep in thought and hadn't said much since they left the hotel. "I've never been involved in the Christos Experiment before," he remarked, which was a little odd, because Gill clearly had. "But, the one time I had any experience of anything similar, several people shared a story. It seemed real to them all. This was just Concha speaking into a tape."

"Was it real for you?" Gill asked Concha.

"Oh absolutely," said the Spanish girl. "I was really sick and angry and totally devastated that they'd blown up Juan like that. One day earlier and we wouldn't have got the story out like that. I'd like to have seen their faces when the story broke."

"GENAG?" asked the Dave.

"Yes," said Concha. "I know I'm not Adela, but I identified with her enough to share her feelings and I'm glad she won."

"The almost fanatical behaviour of the companies suggests to me that they must have had a lot to hide," Steve mused, but none of the others seemed inclined to take that up.

"I'm curious to know what happened next," remarked Dave.

"Oh no you don't," retorted Gill. "Any other brush with the future can wait until we've enjoyed this holiday. I don't want to spend it all dabbling with the Christos Experiment."

"Don't get me wrong," Dave answered. I said I was curious, but I'm not sure we ought to try it again, just to satisfy my curiosity."

"It wouldn't do any harm to consider the implications of the story, though," said Steve thoughtfully. "I'm intrigued by the warning about the one eyed Englishman."

"That was more than 50 years into the future," said Gill, "and that's if you believe the story in the first place."

"Oh, it was real, right enough," said Concha. "I'm absolutely convinced that I glimpsed a bit from Adela's future."

"And do you think that Adela was, or will be, your daughter?" asked Dave.

Concha hesitated for a moment. "Yes," she said, "Yes, I think so."

Gill changed the subject, "Anyone fancy a dessert?" she asked. "I think I'll have one of those flan things. They're cream caramels or something in English."

"I think I'll just have a coffee," said Dave.

"And me," added Steve. "Are we going to visit Granada tomorrow?" he asked.

"I think so," answered Concha. "We'll need to stay overnight there or we simply won't have enough time. The Alhambra alone will

take us all day." She ordered two flans and four coffees and four brandies.

The road from the coast to Granada has to cut through the Sierra Nevada. It follows the river Guadalfeo for some way and then spirals spectacularly over high passes and through tunnels. Steve found the driving a strain and remarked on the number of tunnels.

"I shouldn't think you'd meet more in Switzerland," he said as they drove through yet another.

"There's five or six more if you drive up the coast to Almeria," said Concha, "but I've no idea how that compares to Switzerland because I've never been there. I should think with a country full of mountains they'd have more."

At Concha's urging they found a cheap hotel in Granada and left the car there.

"It's better to walk up to the Alhambra," she said. "It's a steep walk up, but you appreciate it more."

It was quite a walk up the steep and wooded hill. The sound, though not often the sight, of fast rushing stream flowing down somewhere near them. "That's the water from the gardens," she said. "What the Moors did with that water you can still see today." She was rather mysterious and obviously enjoying the thought of showing her friends.

Eventually they reached the walls and the wide, shallow steps leading up to the huge gate. As Concha had said when they visited the castle at Salobreña, the massive structure led them right and then right through the outer walls, followed by left and then left again, until they were inside the inner walls. The sheer size was staggering. There was a Moorish Palace and its gardens, a later Christian palace, a former monastery now a state hotel, rows of shops and other buildings, the ruins of the military fort, the ruins of towers destroyed by earthquakes and Napoleon's invading troops, along with gardens, remaining towers and walls.

They wandered round the partially ruined stronghold and looked at the way an attacking army breaking in would have to choose which of two exits to take from the gate house: one leading to a dead end and the other to another gate-house, both below the inner walls.

"When Granada fell," said Concha, "It was surrendered not captured. When the Moors left, Boabadil, the king looked back on Granada and sighed. His mother, according to tradition, said 'Cry like a woman, my son, for what you would not defend like a man'. Come to the palace and see what he left."

Gill was completely awe-struck by the beautiful plaster-work on the ceilings and the elaborate tiling. "These look like Arabic words," she said, tracing the intricate patterns of tiles.

"They are words from the Koran," replied Concha. "Islam forbids the representation in art of things created by Allah, so you have these elaborate abstract patterns and sayings from the Koran. This one was Boabdil's battle cry, something about 'to Allah the victory'.

"All the windows have this fine tracery instead of glass," said Gill. "Surely that isn't plaster too?"

"I think so," said Concha.

They wandered through the Court of Myrtles and the Court of Lions admiring, as every tourist since Washington Irving has done, the carefully preserved splendour of Muslim Spain.

"The water you saw earlier," said Concha, "running down the hill, is the water from these fountains. What they did was force the water from the Spring through pipes of ever decreasing width so that it fountained out, then caught it in ponds and ran through the whole process again at a lower level. This is the bottom level."

They wandered through the palace gardens, explored the rooms of the palace, and looked more closely at the walls.

Steve was very taken with the construction. "Look," he said "There's a gap between the inner wall and the outer wall. It's not very wide but the inner wall is higher. You could easily jump down from the inner to the outer, but there's no chance of a soldier with weapons jumping the other way."

Concha's mother had packed a picnic lunch, because a picnic in the Alhambra is somewhat of an experience. They put off the Generalife Gardens and the summer palace until after they had eaten and settled down to a lunch outside the Moorish palace. Dozens of cats surrounded them.

"Where on earth have they all come from," Dave wondered out loud.

"They're semi-wild and they live in the Alhambra," said Concha.

"I see," said Steve, "In Trafalgar Square you feed the pigeons, in the Alhambra you feed the cats."

"Exactly," said Concha. "To change the subject completely, I feel as if I want to do something about Adela's story."

"Like what?" asked Dave.

"I feel as if I've had a look at the future," replied Concha. "I want to do something about those two companies."

"They haven't done anything yet," objected Dave. "In fact, they probably don't even exist yet."

"They may never exist," said Gill. "Let me explain. As far as the Christos Experiment has touched on the future, it seems that you see things that might be, rather than things that will be."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Concha. "I want to change things so that events in the story don't be. No that's wrong. So that events in the story can't be. Is that right?" she asked Gill.

"I'm not certain of the grammar or tense, but I understand you," Gill answered.

"I have a friend called Gene," said Dave, "He's doing an M.Sc. in genetics and wants to go on and do a Ph.D. in plant genes and genetics..."

"I thought 'Jean' was a girl's name," said Concha.

"J-E-A-N is a girl's name, sometimes called 'Jeanie' as affectionate version," explained Steve, with a wicked grin, which prompted Gill to wonder what was coming. "But J-E-A-N-S are trousers made from denim and the word doesn't have a singular. On the other hand, G-E-N-E is either a boys name, short for Eugene and usually American, which can't have a plural, or G-E-N-E can also refer to a DNA code carrying some feature of a plant or animal and that can have a plural. There is also a word G-E-N-I-E, but that is a magical spirit with supernatural powers and has nothing to do Gene or a gene or Jeanie with a J. Do I make myself clear?"

Concha stared at him in bewildered horror. "Just when I think I'm getting the hang of your stupid language," she said. "The real trouble for a foreigner is the way words sound the same but have quite different spelling and meanings."

"Homophone," said Gill.

"Eh?"

"Words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. They're called homophones. Don't you have them in Spanish?"

"No," replied Concha. "In Spanish every letter has just one sound and, apart from 'B' and 'V' which sound the same everywhere and a soft 'c' and a 'z' in Latin American Spanish, no letter sounds the same as another."

"There must be some homophones," said Gill.

"One or two in Latin American Spanish, otherwise no," insisted Concha.

"How boring," teased Steve.

"How sensible," snapped Concha and they laughed.

"Anyway," said Dave, throwing some cheese to the cats, "I could suggest to Gene that he take salt resistant rice as his Ph.D. project. That might start things rolling in another direction."

"I don't know," said Gill, "Tampering with the future could have very unforeseen consequences." She stood up and dusted the crumbs off for the cats. "There might be other things that Concha was aware of but didn't mention. You'd have to take those into consideration too."

"There loads of little things I knew," admitted Concha, "but I've thought long and hard, and I don't see they have any bearing on the main point."

"What sort of things?" asked Gill.

"When Juan was blown up, Adela was already pregnant by him," said Concha. "All that going down a route which made salt resistant rice a public property might mean that Juan wouldn't be killed so she could marry him."

"Or that he died in some other way," said Gill. "Anyway, it's a thought while we look at Generalife Gardens. Is that part of the Alhambra, Concha?"

"They're fabulous gardens and a summer palace built by the Moors. They were trying to build 'paradise' as the Koran describes it, with water gardens, flowers, pavilions and so on. It's outside the inner walls but inside the outer walls, if you see what I mean."

By the time they wandered back down the hill to the town all four of them were tired and conversation dried up. However, two of the four were giving considerable thought as to whether the future could be changed by persuading Gene to try and develop salt resistant rice.
Concha was thinking that, if Dave could pull it off they might bring changes to her daughter's life. Gill was thinking that dabbling with the future was better not done at all.

CHAPTER 9

The plane roared down the runway and began a steep climb over the mountains circling Malaga, barely three minutes behind schedule. At the very beginning of March the pressure of flights to the southern Mediterranean is at its lowest, and delays are uncommon.

Concha's feeling that she 'wanted to do something' about Adela's story had grown over the holiday, but there had been other things on her mind too. She and Dave had sent Steve and Gill off to visit the caves of Nerja, while the two of them spent a whole day talking to Concha's parents and plucking up the courage to discuss marriage with them. Dave had feared that they might have reservations about his Afro-Caribbean background, but the Spanish don't seem as bothered by such things as the British or other northern European races sometimes are: they were more interested in what he did for a living, where they intended to live, how good his Spanish was, what his political views were and so on.

Each of the four had thoughts and impressions: some to be shared with the world at large; others more intimate and to be shared only with a partner and still others so personal as to be unshared.

Gill reflected to Steve that this visit had confirmed her first, fleeting impression gained two years earlier, that Spain was to be explored, absorbed, experienced.

"There's so much history and in places the remains are hardly touched," she said. "I'd like to visit time and again until I really know it. Just to come here for the sun is such a waste."

Steve agreed. "It's hard to accept that most English tourists spend their time on beer, fish and chips, discos and a suntan," he said. "On the other hand," he continued, "You have to bear in mind that we aren't typical English people anyway. At one time I was interested in beer and football myself, so I might have been beer, beach and disco tourist myself."

"True, but I find it hard to believe," said Gill.

"So do I - now," agreed Steve. "Anyway, we could maybe come to Spain for a longer holiday, if you like. You finish your master's degree this June, after all. I could take time off work and we could come for several weeks this Autumn."

"Months," said Gill and Steve laughed.

"Well," he admitted, "I do have some money left from the legacy, but it won't last long if I throw up work altogether and starting acting the playboy."

In the row behind, Dave and Concha were thinking of more personal matters. Concha was glad that her parents had liked Dave and that first meetings had gone well. It even looked as if Dave would try for a job in Spain, though she was quite prepared to live with him in England. Still, though York was a pleasant city, she preferred the warmer climate of southern Spain.

Concha was also determined to 'do something' about Adela's story and had won Dave round to a position where he was almost as anxious as she was to speak to his friend Gene. They hadn't quarrelled with Steve and Gill about it. They had sensed Gill's reservations about tampering with future events and had thought it better not to push her too hard.

Gill had seemed quite willing in principle to give the whole thing another try some time. Dave fancied 'having a go' as well. Of course, they knew well that the odds were against anything to do with the future. Concha wanted to try the Christos Experiment a third time, but after she and Dave had tried to modify the course of events. All the same, they knew that Gill might not co-operate if she was aware of any concerted effort to modify the flow of things to come.

Concha didn't fully explain her intentions even to Dave, but she wanted to see whether she could influence events, whether she could influence the 'future' if, of course, that was what she had experienced. She didn't know what Steve would have thought, but she had a pretty shrewd idea that Gill would not be very happy, so she said nothing.

In fact Gill was not exactly opposed to an attempt to change the future. She had observed at the time that the Christos Experiment, on the rare occasions when it reflected events to come, seemed to deal with what 'might be', rather than what definitely 'would be'. It was rather a matter that she was cautious about the results of tampering. It could always be that you saw glimpses of what might be if you dabbled. If you left the future alone, what you saw might not happen at all.

Concha was not aware that, as the aircraft flew silently above an obscuring layer of clouds, her friend was pondering the implications of her experiences as well, but neither shared her thoughts with the other.

Dinners were served and then the hostesses turned sales people and went round with duty frees and souvenirs. Steve and Gill were uninterested and Dave wasn't tempted either, but Concha, rather surprisingly, bought a teddy bear with a scarf in the Airline's colours and a pilot's hat.

She told Dave it was 'a souvenir of his visit to meet her parents' and so it was. She did not also say that she had no doubt that they would marry and have a daughter. She was keeping it as a toy for Adela, whenever she was born.

The flight was uneventful, the bus into Leeds ran according to the timetable and so did their train to York. By teatime the same day Dave was already phoning Eugene, urged on by Concha.

"Why don't you come round for a meal," said Dave, "We want to tap your brain about genetic engineering. How about next Sunday?" He covered the mouthpiece and added to Concha, "You'd better cook him something special."

"A break from work would be great," answered Eugene. "This bloody course has been taking up most of my time, and the question of a Ph. D. thesis has occupied the rest. A break will be great and I can spare a couple of hours on Sunday. “But," he added a little suspiciously, "why the sudden interest in genetics?"

"It's a long story, Gene," Dave told him, "I don't want to go into it right now but, because of something we've heard, both Concha and I want to know some basics, if you don't mind talking shop and giving your opinions to a couple of people who are totally new to even the most basic concepts."

"I don't mind talking or sharing opinions," said Eugene. "It seems a pretty easy way of earning a free meal!"

"I wondered why you were so willing." Dave laughed. "Seriously though, I have several questions about the subject."

"What's triggered this sudden interest?" Eugene wanted to know.

"Tell you all about it on Sunday," said Dave. "As a matter of interest, have you settled on anything for your thesis yet?"

"No. Why?"

"No reason. See you Sunday, about two-ish."

"Okay. See you Sunday about two," agreed Eugene.

CHAPTER 10

Gene arrived more-or-less on time, curious to know what had prompted Dave and Concha's newly discovered interest in genetics. Dave had avoided answering the question directly. He only wanted to get a general picture of the subject and Gene's opinions, before they were coloured by anything he said himself, but he was making his friend very curious by creating this somewhat unnecessary air of mystery.

He fetched cans of beer to ease the conversation and asked, "Have we got as far as patenting anything that's been genetically engineered?" in an attempt to get things started, as all three sat down with glasses and the cans.

"Good grief, yes," Eugene answered. "There are so many patents given, and so many more applied for, that it's just impossible to keep up with trends."

"Such as?" asked Concha.

"Well, for a start, you can buy genetically engineered products in the shops already. So far it's mostly foods - tomatoes with increased shelf life and things like that Most products are labelled, but some US companies try to get out of it by mixing engineered and non-engineered produce."

David tried to look wise and nodded. Eugene continued: "Then there's Pharming with a 'PH', for example. We've reached the stage where some pharmaceutical companies are 'pharming' cows and sheep which have been genetically engineered to produce medicines in their milk."

"Good grief!" said Dave. "I'd no idea."

"The first 'pharmed' products will come onto the market before the end of millennium," said Gene, "And there's a cow genetically engineered to give plastics instead of milk. Then take the 'Oncomouse'." He topped up his glass from the can and took a pull.

"The what?" asked Concha.

"The 'Oncomouse'. Du Pont has patented a mouse genetically engineered to develop tumours."

"How awful," said Concha, shocked..

"The cancer researchers don't think so. It's saving them time and money, though the makers - if that's what you call them - patent holders would be more accurate I suppose. Anyway, they're not happy about the degree of success the idea has generated."

"I should think not," said Concha, not saying exactly what she meant.

"I would have thought," said Dave reflectively, "that engineering something not to grow cancers would be more useful."

"Not as much fun for the researchers though, or as profitable for the companies which supply them either," said Gene dryly. "If you engineer cancer out of existence in a generation and if you engineer away all the world's other problems as well, there'll be a lot of out-of-work geneticists."

"That might be a good thing for the world," Concha observed.

"Not so good for geneticists, though," said Eugene, "and they're the people doing the research. Not so good either for genetics companies, and they're the ones paying for the research."

"I'd no idea there were so many developments going on," reflected Dave. "I wonder there isn't more made of it in the media."

"While we're on mice, there's a lovely one designed by the AIDS researchers. It's called S'CID-hu' and they've engineered it not to have an immune system, then they implant human tissue and inject it with HIV. That one may be a bit dodgy actually."

"In what way?" asked Dave.

"There's a sort of mutation of the HIV virus and the new one becomes active in humans a lot quicker. And it can theoretically be transmitted in the air."

"Theoretically?" queried Dave.

"Nobody's been infected that way yet, as far as I know but, if one of the researchers slips up, some one could be. I should think AIDS would become unstoppable."

"That sounds extremely dangerous," said Dave. "It's a wonder there isn't a lot of loud opposition to some of this."

"Well," said Gene, "There is some opposition from Green groups, especially in the European Parliament, but that's nothing to the possible philosophical or theological opposition or the trouble there could be with women's groups."

"Women's groups?" asked Concha. "Why would women be concerned?"

Gene hesitated a moment and then said, "All right. I don't personally approve mind, but there is a patent application - not

decided yet, you understand. Not refused and not granted, but an application - for a transgenic 'pharmed' female human mammal. In other words, a genetically engineered woman. She would have various unspecified modifications to her breast milk and would be able to pass on the features to her offspring." Gene paused. "You do see the implications?" he asked.

Dave was a little uncertain. This opens up a lot of questions," he said, rather lamely.

"You bet it does," responded Gene. "First, a patent is a matter of ownership. Can a company, or an individual, 'own' a human being? The usual word for that is slavery. That's one for the philosophers and the theologians to fight over. If you get round the ownership of a human by saying it isn't a person any more, just a new genetically engineered species, that should keep the theologians busy for a while, deciding whether or not it's human. On the other hand, you could get round the ownership question by saying that only the process is owned, not the person. That might pacify the theologians, though you then have a serious problem with women's groups and liberals. Small 'L' liberals, I mean."

"I still don't understand why women would be more concerned than men," said Dave.

"I can," said Concha, shocked again at what she was hearing. "Freedom to control your own body, I think."

"Absolutely," agreed Gene.

Dave was still puzzled. "I don't think I understand," he insisted.

"Look," said Gene, "If the scientists engineer changes which can be passed on to children, what do you think will happen to the genetically engineered girls? As soon as they're old enough to have children, what will happen to the age of consent, to education, to freedom to marry when they want and plan their families, to careers or to a vocation to the religious life? Do you really think a scientist will wait 'till a woman is thirty or thirty five or forty and chooses to have children, when, physically speaking, she could have a child at twelve or earlier? And what will happen to the right not to have children. Phrases like, 'in the national interest' or 'in the interests of science' will flood out!"

"I think that, if women's groups knew what was going on," said Concha, "they'd be very angry."

"I agree," said Eugene, "but apart from the Friends of the Earth petition 'No Patents on Life' there is no opposition."

"But what about genetic engineering to solve problems of fertility or to cure illnesses?" protested Dave.

"You do realise that there's a ninety percent failure rate with in vitrio fertilisation. All the media attention to the successes tends to overlook the failure rate." said Gene. "It's a very expensive procedure and it tends to treat both women and babies like a commodity. That in turn has some undesirable spin-offs."

"Such as?" asked Concha still in a state of shock at all this new information.

"For a start there is a shortage of foetal material for experiments so scientists are seriously suggesting keeping dead women alive on life support machines as surrogate mothers. Foetal material machines."

"How awful," said Concha, shuddering. "How do you know all this information? It doesn't seem to be public knowledge."

"There's no particular secret about it," Gene answered her thoughtfully, "It's just that nobody has been interested enough to pick up the story, though some of the researchers might be happier for ideas to slip through unnoticed, I suppose."

He paused to take another drink, then continued, "The proposal for a transgenic woman came to light accidentally," he said. "There was a patent issued by the European Patents Office on a hormone called 'relaxin'. Relaxin is normally only produced in the ovaries of a pregnant woman. Among other things it softens the cervix to help implantation of an egg, so it's very useful in cases of in vitrio fertilisation. In preparing their brief against the patent, the European Parliament Green Group discovered the application for the patent on the transgenic woman."

"Who asked for the patent?" asked Concha.

"For relaxin? A medical college in Australia, who sold it to the pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-La Roche. They're Swiss based, I think."

"Why did the Greens object to the relaxin patent?" asked Dave.

"They said that the hormone wasn't patentable because any expert in the field could see for him or herself what it did. You can't patent something if any reasonably expert person in the field could see it, and there's some truth in the objection."

"You sound as if you disapprove of genetics entirely," observed Concha.

"No," answered Eugene, "There's a lot that I disapprove of, but there are some useful things that geneticists are doing too. I just want to see society take some really thoughtful moral decisions on the more extreme proposals."

"Aren't you more concerned with plant genetics?" asked Dave, knowing the answer to his question but wanting to steer the subject round to his real concern.

Eugene nodded. "That's a lot safer field, though there a few questionable trends there too. We're not above moral considerations there as well."

"Explain," said Dave.

Eugene was enjoying himself. He was holding forth as an expert among lay people in a little known field - it was unusual to have an interested audience, though he didn't yet know why they were interested.

"The scientists want to do things because they can, rather than considering the human implications. That's always been the case, but now the funding comes from companies whose only motive is making money from the new ideas. Let me give you an example. Pyrethrum is a very useful plant-based pesticide and it's been grown in the past by tropical third world farmers as a cash crop for export. It comes from a tropical member of the chrysanthemum family. Now a US agricultural company is genetically altering temperate members of the chrysanthemum family to enable it to be grown outside the tropics - in the US. They'll make the money presently made by the third world farmers and US imports will be cut."

"But that's not illegal," protested Dave.

"Of course it's not," said Gene. "There's no patent on pyrethrum itself, so the company are not breaking any rules or agreements, the US will cut back its imports and the only drawback is that a couple of hundred thousand more third world farmers will starve. That's quite in order, in terms of developed world morality."

Eugene sipped his beer again, then added: "Of course they'll probably switch to producing heroin, marijuana or cocaine. They’re cheaper, more profitable and it gets back at the US."

Dave could see what he meant, but decided to draw the conversation round to rice.

"Would it be possible to develop a salt resistant strain of rice through genetic engineering?" he asked.

Eugene hardly even thought about it. "I should think it would be very straightforward," he answered. "Rice is a grass. There are several salt resistant grasses in salt marshes. If you found a suitable one and isolated the salt resistant gene, transferring it to rice would be straightforward. You notice I didn't say 'easy', but straightforward. I think so. Why?"

There was a silence for a moment, then Concha said carefully, "I'm not sure I want to get into the how and why yet, but I have good reason to believe that a multi-national company might try to

manipulate things in the future to make more money from salt resistant rice."

"I don't find that in the least hard to believe as a concept," said Gene, "but why would salt resistant rice be so important?"

"Okay," said Dave, "I've been doing some homework myself in the last few days. There is salt-water intrusion into the deltas of the Mississippi, the Nile, the Ganges, the Mekong, because they all have falling ground levels for various reasons like dredging of the Aswan Dam. Egypt has a growing population and falling food production, the US grows rice under irrigation in California and has a water shortage. And so on. And, of course, with global warming, sea levels will rise, so more land now used for other crops will be subject to flooding from salt water. Salt resistant rice could play a huge part in providing cheap food for poorer countries."

"Not if it was patented in the developed world," said Eugene, who noted his friend's reference to 'homework' and was even more interested in his motives.

"A multi-national that owned the patent would control the seed," he went on. "The real reason that the US didn't want the bio-diversity treaty as proposed by the Earth Summit was that too many US companies want to own plants and seeds."

Eugene had given Dave and Concha just the opening they had been looking for.

"Couldn't you do a Ph.D. project on the salt resistant rice and then circulate the seeds and the ideas so widely that no one could patent it?" Concha demanded.

Gene thought the idea over at length. "Yes," he said doubtfully. "The real problem is that research in universities is often funded by companies on the agreement that they have first refusal on any patentable ideas. Then universities often patent saleable ideas themselves, and sell the patents to get funds for further research. There is very little funding without strings attached any more. If I did attempt the project I'd have to make sure that I wasn't funded by some company which grabbed the idea."

Dave was a bit disappointed. "Then you don't think you can do it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Gene replied. "The bloke who would be my supervisor is worried about trends as well. Perhaps I could persuade him to find some funding to which there are no strings. I could try."

"Will you take the project on?" asked Concha, thinking it was time she got round to the meal.

"Possibly," said Eugene cautiously. "If you tell me what your interest is. I like the possibilities of the project, but you'll have to convince me."

"I think that ought to wait until the meal is ready," said Concha, getting up. "I've got a Spanish Omelette for first course, followed by a cheese pasta with a mushroom sauce, followed by gateaux. And we brought some wine back from holiday with us."

"Sounds great," said Gene, "I'd forgotten you'd just got back from holiday. Did you go anywhere exciting?"

"We stayed with Concha's parents," responded Dave. "They have a small hotel in southern Spain. We decided we're getting married this year, probably October."

"Congratulations," said Eugene, as Concha carried in the Spanish Omelette.

"Come to the table," she said, and began to serve. "Dave, how about you pour the wine?"

"This is great," said Eugene a second time, "but I still have the feeling that you haven't told me everything by a long way."

"We're celebrating," grinned Dave, screwing a corkscrew into the cork.

"Yes?" said Gene, in a tone that implied he thought there was more to it than that. Concha sat down.

"I'll tell you the whole story," she said, "Though you may scoff at some of it."

CHAPTER 11

Eugene reflected as he waited to see his thesis supervisor. Or, more correctly, reflected while he waited for his thesis supervisor to see him. He was wearing a jacket and tie, instead of his more usual open necked shirt and a lab coat. Probably the only time he had been smarter was at his degree presentation or possibly the selection interview when he first came to university.

In spite of the revolutionary views he had expressed to Dave and Concha, he was an idealist rather than a rebel. His part Afro background might have had something to do with his attitude, but he really was more interested in doing something important for the human race than in making a lot of money personally.

As result of his long conversation over Sunday dinner, he was pretty well sold on the idea of salt resistant rice. He had done some background homework of his own since that Sunday, and begun to see for himself how such a piece of genetic engineering could either make somebody a huge amount of money or be of enormous benefit to the human race, but probably not both.

As it now is, he knew, there are stockpiled reserves of food in some countries while in other countries, people starve. However, the world population is rising and the available area of land for agriculture is shrinking as over-cropping and clearing forests impoverishes the soil and spreads deserts. As Dave had said, there was no doubt that his project could provide food for millions, if it only succeeded.

He turned over again the arguments set out in the research proposal he was taking to his supervisor and hoped he could convince that elderly man. While he waited his mind slipped onto other, but associated, matters.

The scientist in him was sceptically interested in Concha's 'experience', whatever it was. He had no doubt that it had seemed real to her and had made a deep impression. From what she had said, it

must have been some sort of waking dream, possibly a variety of self-induced hallucination. The idea of massaging round and round on the forehead, while massaging up and down on the feet, he conceded, might throw the conscious mind out of gear.

He considered that the whole thing sounded interesting and that he'd like to observe it. On the other hand, he didn't believe it to be a genuine observation of the future. He couldn't accept the possibility of experiences of that kind.

'Still,' he thought, 'modern physics is saying that, theoretically speaking, time travel is not entirely unthinkable. Just almost.'

The office of his supervisor had one door leading directly into the corridor where Eugene waited, and another that opened into a general office with several members of the department's secretarial staff were working. Professor Badger's office doors were closed, but both opened almost simultaneously. The door into the corridor opened to let out a young woman. "Probably a second or third year undergrad." Gene thought, inconsequentially and largely unconsciously as she closed the door behind her. At almost the same moment the connecting door opened as well, and a rather small, rather elderly man 'popped' into view.

'Popped' seemed an appropriate word somehow, because his appearance was sudden and the whole movement a sort of jerk. He leaned over one of the secretaries, said two or three words, and bounced towards the corridor as the secretary got up and started to look for something in a filing cabinet. At the outer office door Professor Badger stopped, peered around a little short sightedly and identified Eugene.

"Ah. Come in, come in," he said, smiling benignly, and led the way back through the departmental office and through the connecting door to his own room.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "Now, you wanted to see me." What the Professor actually said was a statement, but it was fairly obvious that he intended it as a question - 'Why do you want to see me?'

"I've got a Ph.D. research proposal together. I'd like to discuss it with you," Eugene said, by way of reply to the unasked question.

"Well, let me see it, let me see it," said the Professor with enthusiasm.

Eugene handed him the folder and he began to read in silence. Gene sat down again and looked around. This was not, of course, the first time he had been in this study. It was probably quite large, though it didn't look it with all the furniture. There was a large and rather untidy desk at which Professor Badger was sitting, half a

dozen chairs and a coffee table that spoke of comfortable discussions, two filing cabinets and the bookcase. The bookcase or, perhaps more correctly, bookshelves ran along most of one of the walls. It started with very old and well-used books, included binders full of professional journals and books of less determinate age, to end with new paperbacks. These were, to judge from their newness and titles, the latest thoughts and developments in genetics.

The floor was carpeted, the view from the fourth floor window an interesting townscape of York, with the minster just visible over the rooftops, but it was rather less than dramatic, as views went. The whole room was the study of a thoughtful academic who had kept abreast of developments in his field, but was now nearing retiring age. Eugene wondered whether Sherlock Holmes could have deduced all this from the room. Some of his own observations were not just of the room but of the man himself. He concluded that he was not really a detective after all.

"Interesting, interesting," observed the Professor, looking up. "Salt resistant rice, eh? From what you say here, I wonder that everyone in plant genetics isn't working on it already."

"A lot of people may be," said Eugene. "I referred to Steven Schneider there." He nodded towards his research proposal. "Schneider is just about the top US. climate specialist. He's the Head of Climate Studies at the National Center of Atmospheric Research at Boulder, Colorado, he's written hundreds of scientific papers, published a string of books, appeared before US. Senate Committees - you name it. Now Schneider believes we're in the era of Global Warming already and developing salt resistant rice is one of the ways the human race can adapt to changing conditions. That's a widely read book, so other geneticists may well have the same idea. You notice, incidentally, that I also argue that, even if we aren't yet in a period of climate change, salt intrusion into agriculture is already happening for other reasons."

"Yes, yes," acknowledged the Professor, "I think the project is worthwhile and funding will be no problem. I've rarely seen a more convincing research proposal."

"Thank you. But I think funding may actually be a problem."

`"Why?" asked Professor Badger. "Seed producers will be falling over themselves to sponsor a project like this."

"That's exactly it," answered Eugene. "I'd like to find funding without strings attached, if I can. I'd like salt resistant rice to be universally available, and that wouldn't be possible if some multi-national company owned a patent on it."

There was a long silence in which you could almost hear the old man thinking out the implications of various options. "Yes," he said slowly, "yes."

Eugene observed irrelevantly that the Professor's habit of repeating key words appeared not to be just a matter of enthusiasm. "I can see that a company patenting the idea might restrict access to the seed to maintain prices and that, in turn, might limit the usefulness of the project to third world food production."

He was again silent, tapping a finger absently n the plastic file cover. "I will have to think about the financial implications carefully, but there may be enough money in the departmental budget for the university to fund this project. Leave this with me." He brightened.

"Leave this with me," he said again, rather as if Eugene had argued. "I think we may be able to help. This seems a very worthwhile project. A very worthwhile project."

Professor Badger opened the door and let Eugene out into the corridor like a respected guest. "I'll be in touch in a day or two," he said, "Leave it with me, leave it with me." and he closed the door.

Eugene was elated as he walked back along the corridor towards the lifts. He stood uncertainly for a moment, unsure whether to phone Dave or go for a drink. It was actually too early in the day to catch Dave in, he decided, which meant it was probably too early for a drink as well. At that moment he was joined by two other postgraduate students from his Department. "We're just going up to the Union bar," one of them said, "You joining us Eu?" and Eugene thought he might just as well.

It was actually three days before Eugene received an urgent recall to Professor Badger's office. With the Professor was his number two in the Department, introduced as Doctor Conrad Fischer. Although Eugene hadn't taken any classes with the man, he knew the doctor slightly and didn't like him particularly. It was nothing clear and nothing you could pin down. Eugene couldn't say, "I don't like him because..." there are some of the human race you like and some you don't care for, even when they've done you no harm. At the moment Dr. Fisher was polishing his glasses and Eugene noticed that there was something not quite right about his right eye. A cast or something.

"Sit, down, sit down," said the Professor, "Doctor Fischer just happened to be here. We were discussing another matter entirely and I thought he'd be interested in your project."

"Yes," said the Doctor, "I just skimmed through your thesis proposal and it looks most interesting."

"Thank you," acknowledged Eugene.

"The seed companies will be falling over themselves to fund this little project," he continued, pointing to Eugene's proposal.

"Actually, the university is funding the idea directly," corrected Badger mildly, answering Eugene's unspoken question. "I have decided to put departmental funding into it."

"Thank you," said Eugene a second time.

A rather sly look came over Fischer. "If the scheme is successful and you can get in first with a patent, it will be worth a fortune to the university," he said. "There are companies that would pay millions for this patent. Why, we would be able to fund our own research entirely on the proceeds. It would make us world renowned."

"I was rather hoping," said Eugene, "that we could simply make the salt resistant rice freely available to third world countries. That way the university would really be world renowned."

"I meant world renowned for our research, not world renowned for being broke," snapped Fischer.

"Money isn't everything," objected Eugene.

"It is if you haven't got it," answered Fischer. "Without funds all research would grind to a halt."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said the Professor soothingly. "We can discuss that problem if the project proves a success. For the moment all I will say is that the finance for the project is departmental and has no formal strings attached. As to obtaining a patent, we will need to patent the rice ourselves or somebody else will patent it and squeeze us out. A decision as to what to do with a patent comes later."

Eugene sensed that the older man was on his side. Fischer sensed it too and didn't like it. Eugene thought that there might well be some very heated battles to be fought at the university senate level sometime in the future, should his project prove a success. All the same, this was better than he had hoped when he had decided to submit a thesis proposal on the subject. Better too than he had suggested to Dave and Concha. He decided to call them as soon as he got out.

"Well," said Professor Badger, "You may as well start right away. Of course, if the funding came from outside, the matter would take time and you'd have to start in September or February, like most research students. In this case you've finished your MSc. courses, so I will organise your funding from next month.

"You can start the research at the end of the month. Two years to your doctorate initially, then we'll review the position." the Professor held out his hand. "Congratulations on your research studentship," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Eugene answered, shaking it. This was a better outcome than he had dared to hope.

"I'll stretch funds to cover a full time Research Assistant for you," continued the Professor. "and some part time secretarial help, though it will be a very small part time, I'm afraid. In return I'll need you to teach a first year class for me from September."

"Very fair. I'll be glad to do it," replied Eugene. He wouldn't exactly be rolling in money but, as a Research Student, would have enough to live on.

"We'll leave it at that then. Leave it at that. I'll have Margaret set it all out in a formal letter in the next day or two."

Dr. Fischer obviously did not share the enthusiasm of the Professor or Eugene's elation: the latter felt sure that trouble had been postponed and was still to come. He noted that there was no effort from that quarter to shake his hand and the good wishes had been very lukewarm, if it's possible to be intensely indifferent.

Eugene was elated but it was a bit early to phone Dave. Instead he took the lift down, left the building and set out to walk into the city centre.

York is not all that large a city. It has grown over the years, but tourism is still the major industry and it has preserved its long history for visitors: Roman and Norman walls to be walked around, medieval streets and historic buildings.

This is not entirely irrelevant. As he walked through this atmosphere of history, Eugene was thinking that it was hardly surprising that this kind of atmosphere should produce experiences which could be regarded by those who had them as ' past lives', if the conscious mind was 'disconnected'.

Concha's experience was not, however, a past life. On the other hand, he gathered that she had tried it somewhere else. With thoughts of this general kind whirling round his head, Eugene turned past Bootham Bar, out along the main road a little way and turned left into a side street.

Concha was, predictably, pleased in the extreme to hear Eugene's news. Dave was pleased, but Concha was almost ecstatic. She had to hear every word of his thesis proposal and how the Professor took it. She was even more interested than Eugene's mother would have been.

Eugene was thinking to himself that her experience, whatever it was, had certainly made an impression on her, and when he questioned her about it, she volunteered Dave as a subject. She wanted Eugene to get the project started before she had another try herself but without explaining her own reluctance, agreed to call Gill and see if she was free that same evening.

"Dave can get in some drinks and we'll make a night of it for you," Concha promised. "Assuming Gill's free, of course."

Gill was, and readily agreed to come round later with Steve.

CHAPTER 12

Gill seemed not to mind the 'sceptical observer' attitude of Eugene, which slightly surprised him. He had not had much to do with anything psychic or religious, but he had expected a caution about the presence of non-believers and sceptics Gill did not seem to have.

"Oh no," she said, "the experience, whatever it actually is, doesn't seem to be affected by belief. The presence of one sceptic, or even all sceptics doesn't seem to make much difference."

Eugene was interested in her continued explanation. "The subject needs to be ... well, able to visualise fairly well, or you don't get much to work on, and has to be more-or-less willing, but what he or she actually reckons the experience to be doesn't seem to make any difference. You get a range of types of experience anyway, and the subject being sceptical doesn't seem to matter."

Eugene wanted to know if Dave would be a good subject.

"No way of knowing," Gill answered him. "He's never tried it before so I can't tell. There's one more thing. The person who acts as guide doesn't need to believe either. On the other hand, he or she needs to follow the steps of the experiment exactly and needs to be reasonably competent sounding or any nervousness can get through to the subject and lessen the chances of anything worthwhile. Belief or scepticism doesn't come into it though."

"Can I tape the attempt?" asked Eugene, rather expecting Gill to have doubts.

"Good idea," she responded. "We usually just take notes but, if Dave and Concha have a tape recorder and a spare C90 tape, you'll be able to study exactly what happened at your leisure." Gill grinned. "Let's hope it's something worth studying," she added.

"You think it might not be?" asked Eugene.

"The odds are in favour," answered Gill. "In about sixty-five to seventy-five per cent of cases there is something which could be a past life. In twenty per cent or so there is a less definable experience

consisting probably of events remembered from childhood and in about five to ten per cent of cases there is either nothing tangible or, very rarely, something like Concha's extraordinary story the second time she tried it."

"With Dave, I just don't know what will happen, but the odds are that you'll get something interesting," she continued. "It depends partly on his ability to visualise. Or perhaps on his suggestibility, and I don't necessarily mean that in any derogatory sense."

Eugene nodded. "Have you got a tape recorder, Dave?" he asked.

"Yes," he answered, "But we don't have a microphone and I'm not sure about a blank tape."

"There's a microphone built in it, I think," said Concha "And you could record over the tape you made of the radio one assorted tracks. The back is blank and you can always make ... record ... side one again."

"Okay," said Dave and began searching through the wall unit drawer, which was full of tapes.

"Here," he said to Eugene. "Take this tape. I'll just go and get the recorder from the bedroom.

Eugene was feeling that he was dealing with rational people and that Gill was not trying to pull some sort of fast one over him, not that he could see from Concha's explanation of her story how it could be done anyway. Moreover, Gill didn't seem to prejudge what the experience was. Steve could have told him that she simply kept her views to herself so as not to influence other people - she had her own, very personal, reasons for believing, very certainly, in reincarnation.

"If Dave lies on the floor with a pillow for his head, I'll kneel at his head and Concha can kneel at his feet," said Gill. "Take off your shoes, Dave. You'll relax more and Concha can get at your feet to massage them."

"Wouldn't he be more comfortable on a bed?" asked Eugene.

"Too comfortable!" said Gill, laughing. "He might easily go to sleep and nobody would have anything to investigate."

Eugene grinned too. He could see Gill's point. Concha fetched a pillow from the bedroom and Dave lay down on the floor, resting his head on it. "Have you got a cushion?" asked Gill. "Correction. I can see you have - can you pass me one." Concha passed over one of the two cushions on the settee and Gill knelt on it. "The last time we did this," said Gill, "Concha took ages and it nearly killed my knees."

Eugene set up the tape recorder while Concha knelt down at Dave's feet and Steve just sat back in a chair and watched.

"Okay," said Gill, "Dave is the subject and he's lying down. I'm acting as guide and my name's Gill. I'm kneeling at Dave's head and

Concha is kneeling at his feet. Also present are Eugene and Steve. I'm now going to begin massaging the centre of Dave's forehead with the edge of my fist, using a circular motion, while Concha massages his feet and ankles with an up-and-down motion."

They both massaged in silence for a few seconds and then she continued, "I'm going to give you a series of simple exercises in visualisation. I want you to do your best to follow the instructions I give. I think it would be all right to report your impressions after the exercises and before the experiment proper." Dave nodded. "Dave nodded," said Gill, for the benefit of the tape recorder. "Close your eyes and relax," she told Dave.

Gill went through the same preliminary exercises as she had done with Concha. Dave imagined himself growing three feet taller through his feet, then three feet taller through his head. Next he imagined six feet taller and then twelve feet taller. Finally he imagined himself back to his normal size.

"Great," said Gill. "Now, without moving or opening your eyes, give Eugene a quick impression of what you imagined."

"Taller wasn't quite the right word because I was lying down," he said, "but I did manage to visualise the impossible all right. A sort of Orwellian double think, where two contradictory facts are both true at the same time."

"Right," said Gill, "Try and visualise your own front door now. See every detail of the paintwork, the bell push, the street number and so on. In colour if you can manage it."

Eugene watched as Dave went through the usual procedure of seeing every detail of his own front door and then imagining himself gradually rising up, until he could see first the city and afterwards only blueness all around. As Eugene watched in silence, only Gill's voice was taped, giving soft, clear instructions to float down to the ground and look at his feet to see what he was wearing.

"I can't see them properly," said Dave. "Old, scuffed boots, I guess."

"What are they made of?" Gill asked.

There was surprise in Dave's tone as he replied, "Leather, of course."

"What sort of boots?" asked Gill. "Describe them."

"About halfway to my knees. Big heels. Kind of fancy stitching hidden by my trousers."

"Big heels?" queried Gill.

"Big enough that they don't slip through the stirrups."

"Stirrups? You usually ride a horse then?"

"Most always. Now. Yesterday. Tomorrow. Most always."

Eugene noted that, although Dave's accent had not changed so as to notice, he was using a slightly odd turn of phrase, but he didn't say anything. It was clear that the latter was experiencing another reality and he saved his questions for later.

"What else are you wearing?" continued Gill.

"Shirt, trousers, hat, bandana."

"Shirt only. Is it hot then?"

"Sure is. This time of year is mostly hot. Hot and dusty."

Gill's soft voice kept up a steady stream of questions. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Riding," answered Dave. "Riding with this damn herd. Been doing it weeks and I'll be doing it weeks more."

"Is it your herd?"

"Nope. Be worth a dime or two if it was. Thirty a month and my board, that's what I get."

"This is the American west, then?" asked Gill.

"Yup."

Dave was not being very helpful. He was not volunteering any information for which Gill didn't ask, and her knowledge of the American west was very limited. "Are you a gunfighter?" she asked.

"I got a gun," Dave said a little cautiously. "Most everybody has a gun. I can shoot too. I fought in the war between the States, but I'm no gunfighter. I don't hardly ever use a gun these days."

Gill didn't really know what else to ask. She looked at Steve. "You say you're riding the herd right now?" he said to Dave.

"Yup."

"What job are you doing?"

"It's my turn to ride drag," Dave answered. "Hate it. The dust gets everywhere. I got my bandana over my nose and mouth and it helps some. Horse hates it too."

"What brand do you ride for?"

"O bar S. Ollie Selby. I guess he's a good enough guy to ride for. Leastways, I been part of the crew ever since I got out of the army."

"How old are you?" asked Gill.

"Rising forty."

"Apart from the time in the army, have you always been cowboy?" she asked.

"Hell, no. I was a sailor for a while. Then I had a clerking job in New York. I worked as clerk for a stagecoach company. Went into the army for a spell and then rode for a ranch in the panhandle until war broke out. Then I went back into the army again. I done other things too, but I forget."

"Where will you sleep tonight?"

"Come dark we'll bunch up the herd and cook will rustle up some food before we bed down on the prairie."

"Any danger of an Indian attack?" asked Steve.

"Don't think so," Dave answered. "I heard the Sioux were off the reservation to the north but everything's hunky dorey round here. Anyway there's always a couple of boys on duty with the herd at night. Haven't seen anyone for more than a week. Then it was just a couple of guys rode in while we were eating. They lit them a shuck."

"Pardon?" said Gill.

"Lit them a shuck. You take a corn shuck on a stick and use it like a torch. Texas expression. Only these guys just rode off into the dark. Me, I like to see where I'm going."

Gill paused and looked at Steve again. "Okay. We'll bring the experiment to an end. Imagine that you're drifting up into the blue again ... blueness all around you. Now, gradually drift downwards, until you float to earth by your own front door. Right. Open your eyes."

Dave opened his eyes as instructed, and looked around. After a moment or two he sat up. "Interesting," he said and got to his feet. "I've no idea what the images were, but it was certainly interesting." He sat down in a chair to put his shoes on.

"How clear a picture did you see?" asked Eugene.

"Pretty clear, though it didn't amount to much visually. The really interesting thing was that I knew the answer to everything Gill asked and a lot more besides."

"You didn't help at all," objected Gill. "I know damn all about the Wild West and you never gave us a bloody thing you weren't asked."

"I don't think he - or that version of me - was a very talkative person."

Steve grinned. "I don't suppose he had much to talk to most of the time," he said, "Just a horse and the hind end of a lot of cows."

Dave's mind had already moved on. "Tell you what," he said to Eugene, "I reported things I didn't know or, at least, didn't know I knew, about cowboys. Not one of my driving passions."

"I don't think there was anything you couldn't have known though," observed Eugene.

"I think pretty well everything I mentioned could be gleaned from books or films," Dave agreed.

"What was that about a corn shuck?" asked Gill "What's a corn shuck?"

"A corn shuck is a corn cob. You know, it's what you get after you eat corn on the cob. I think it's maize really."

Eugene nodded. "Everywhere but North America," he said.

"I think I'd heard the expression 'light a shuck' for 'leave' before, but I'd no idea where it came from," said Dave.

"The thing is," objected Eugene, "that you could have known. It isn't proof. Except, of course, subjective proof to you personally."

Gill interrupted, "I don't think the experience is provable at all. It is subjective and personal. I don't even attempt to identify what it is and I question whether, initially, you should. In the longer term it might be interesting to try and come to some conclusions." She paused. "For now, you have to make your own mind up what you experienced."

Concha was thinking that she might have some objective proof. If setting Eugene onto the development of salt resistant rice she was trying to change the course of future events. If she succeeded in changing the future and tried the Christos experiment again, she ought to change her experience.

It might be as well not to mention this to Gill just yet, so she only said, "Right. Who wants coffee and who wants tea and who wants something stronger?"

CHAPTER 13

It was more than two months later that Concha mentioned to Gill the question of having another try at the Christos experiment. The two women were rather half-heartedly doing some Saturday shopping in the little market behind the Shambles. They dodged the tourists and side stepped the ones taking photographs, as they tried to get about more prosaic business.

The day was one of those warm, sunny, late spring days, that bring people out after the greyness of winter, and York was swarming with trippers. It is a fact of life that those who live in such a place must accept those who visit, as the price of living in very attractive setting.

"The crowds are just too much," said an exhausted Gill, "Let's go for a coffee somewhere."

"We go onto working every Saturday and Sunday from next week," remarked Concha, who worked for the tourist information office. "I'd like to make the most of my last free weekend, so let's go somewhere expensive."

"When do you go to Spain for the wedding?" Gill asked.

"The wedding's the last weekend in October and I'm going over two or three weeks before. Dave has a trip over to Malaga for a job interview next month, but he'll have to go alone. The City Council won't release me."

"If Dave gets the job, when does he have to start?" asked Gill.

"He'll have to give notice where he is. I suppose he'll start by the end of July at the latest. If he gets the job I might give my own notice a bit earlier. You'll still come over for the wedding, though?" said Concha anxiously.

"Try and stop me," answered Gill. "Where will Dave live until you get there?" she added.

"Salobreña is a little far away, otherwise he could stay with my parents. There are plenty of places in Malaga that just rent a room and bed, though. Some of them are not exactly luxury but most are OK."

"Have you any thoughts on where you'll live after you get married?"

"Well, as I said, Salobreña is too far away to travel every day into Malaga and, if Dave gets this job with a U.K. transport company that has a depot there, I will probably go for bilingual secretarial work or as a travel guide there or somewhere near. There are millions of tourists go through Malaga airport."

Gill noticed she hadn't actually answered the question. Concha had a habit of sometimes answering the wrong question and she didn't think it was altogether a matter of misunderstanding.

Just then she was distracted. "Oh, look," she said, pointing, "They've actually got two seats free at the same table," and she dived into small but suitably expensive looking tea rooms.

Gill was exaggerating slightly - there were actually several tables free and, as it was waitress service, they sat down immediately. Concha put down her several shopping bags.

"What time are you supposed to be meeting Dave?" asked Gill.

Concha glanced at her watch. "Not for nearly an hour," she answered. "He's taking even more Spanish lessons now."

"Why not just learn from you?"

"Same reason as a lot of people don't learn to drive from their husband or wife," said Concha, laughing. "He can practice with me, but it would be a quick route to a divorce before we even got married if I tried to teach him. Apart from the personal thing, I don't teach Spanish, I just speak it."

"You're probably right," said Gill as the waitress arrived, and broke off to order.

"Gill," said Concha, when the waitress had gone, "Can I ask you a favour?"

"Probably. Ask away."

"I want to do the Christos experiment again, before we get so involved with arrangements for the wedding that I haven't time."

"Okay," said Gill. "I thought you'd forgotten all about it."

"No," said Concha, "I've been putting it off..." There was something about her tone which told Gill there was more to come."

"Yes?"

"It was my idea to set Eugene off on his project to try a develop salt resistant rice."

Gill played with a teaspoon. "I thought it might've been," she said, and waited for Concha to continue.

"I was so struck by what that multi national company was doing in Adela's story that I tried to change that version of the future. Eugene's funding is from the university and he wants to make the

knowledge freely available to third world countries. That would make sitting on the knowledge just to make more profit a totally impossible idea."

Gill was still playing absently with the spoon. "Somebody else might get in first, ahead of Eugene." she said at length.

"I know that, but I felt I had to try something. Now I want to see if I've changed the course of events."

Gill said thoughtfully, "I've no idea of what happens when we deliberately try to influence events to take a different course. I don't even know if it's possible. There are all sorts of theories about time and the future. One theory is that time is circular and anyone could cut across from one moment to any other moment. "

"Fred Hoyle sees time as being like a lot of pigeon holes, lit up in turn by a spotlight we call 'now'. The boxes that have been lighted he regards as fixed, but he claims you can change the ones that are yet to be lit. The interesting thing about this theory is that, since they are lit up one at a time, it doesn't matter what order you light them in."

Concha frowned. Gill wasn't sure whether it was the language or the ideas causing the problem. Concha's English was very good, but there were limits. Eventually she said, "That sounds a very strange idea. Is it your idea too?"

“No,” Gill answered. She thought about her answer before she went on. “We know from Quantum Physics as well as from the Western Mystery Tradition that what we see is an illusion. In the reality behind the illusion there is neither time nor space.”

Concha considered this. “Illusion?” she queried.

“We know that an atom is mostly space,” Gill explained. “If an atom was the size of an airport, the nucleus, the biggest part of it, would be the size of a nut on the landing wheel of jumbo jet. It just vibrates so fast it creates the illusion of being solid.”

"Oh," said Concha, nodding, though Gill was uncertain the extent to which she had understood the conversation. "Steve doesn't seem to think time travel is possible," she said, the slight change of subject leaving Gill uncertain her friend had understood.

"No," she agreed, "though I think it's doubt rather than direct belief. It's to do with the theory that time moves only in one direction, because change moves only in one direction. He thinks you can experience your own past, because it's part of you, but not the past in general. That's why he believes you saw what might be, not what will be."

She paused a moment as the tea and the coffee plus some extremely fattening cakes arrived.

"Come to that," she continued, "I don't even know that your experience was a genuine future. I don't know what it was."

"Oh, it was the future all right," insisted Concha. "What I want to know is, can I change it? Are there a range of possibilities?"

"I've no idea," admitted Gill, "but I'll take you through the Christos experiment again. I just take no responsibility for explaining any experience you have."

"That's okay," said Concha. "How about you and Steve come round this evening and we'll make a night of it."

"Steve finishes work about four, but you'll need to do it after dark," Gill told her. "Visualising is theoretically quite possible in daylight but it gets pretty difficult in practice when you are distracted by daylight and lots going on."

"This evening?" insisted Concha.

"I don't see why not," said Gill, looking at the cakes. "Now, which of the wicked things do you fancy?"

Gill and Steve walked round to Dave and Concha's flat again, arriving about seven thirty. Gill had brought a bottle of wine with them and for a while they just drank, chatted and listened to music. Later, when it was getting darker, Concha closed the curtains and the talk turned to the real purpose of the evening.

"Seems a shame to shut out the tail end of a nice day," said Dave.

"Time flies," said Concha.

"Did you know that Spanish uses exactly the same expression," said Dave, "In Spanish, of course."

"Stop showing off the results of your lessons," said Concha, and went on to explain again her attempt to change the course of future events. Dave knew anyway and Gill had heard most of it that morning, but she repeated it all for Steve's benefit. She ended with more-or-less the same pleas she had made before, "So I've got to try again and see if there are changes in what I experience," she said.

"I've been thinking about that," commented Gill. "What happens when you try it this time may have nothing to do with last time."

"What do you mean?" asked Concha.

"You might have something more like Dave. Something which could be a past life experience. It might have nothing to do with Adela or what you experienced last time."

"That's always possible, but I've got to try, for my own peace of mind," Concha persisted.

"Another thing," added Gill, "is that I'm not sure to what extent such an overwhelming interest would influence the experiment."

"You mean, it might control the experience, because it's a subjective experience anyway," said Dave.

"Sort of," agreed Gill. "I've done the Christos lots of times with dozens of different people, but it's always been past lives or muddled nonsense. We're on totally uncharted territory here. I don't even know how much the conscious mind can influence a subconscious event. Very considerably I should think."

"But you promised to try it," protested Concha.

"I did and we will," said Gill. "I'm just trying to warn you not to expect too much or to make too many unwarranted assumptions about what happens this time, or even what happened last time."

"All right," said Concha, "I'll take full responsibility for my visions, if that's the right word, and for how I interpret them."

"On that understanding," Gill told her, "I'm ready when you are."

Everything was organised as on previous occasions: Concha lay barefoot on the floor, her head on a pillow; Dave knelt ready to massage her feet and Gill knelt ready to massage her forehead, while Steve sat ready with the tape recorder. Gill nodded and he switched it on.

"Right," she said. "Close your eyes, Concha." She and Dave began massaging. "Imagine yourself growing three feet taller through your feet...."

Gill went through the preparatory exercises, as was now usual and went onto visualising Concha's own front door.

"I wonder if visualising this house instead of the hotel in Salobreña will make a difference," muttered Dave.

"Shouldn't think so," Gill muttered back, and shushed him up. She continued with the instructions to float up into the blue, then float gently down to earth again.

"Look at your feet," she told Concha. "What are you wearing?"

"Shoes ... Sandals really," answered Concha.

"Socks? Stockings? Tights? Trousers?" asked Gill.

"No," said Concha, "Sandals, bare legs and a skirt."

"You are female then?"

"Yes."

"Hair?"

"Shoulder length, sort of. A bit shorter. Wavy."

"How old are you?"

"Early or mid twenties I think."

Gill paused and then said, "Do you know who you are? Your name?"

"Ana," said Concha, "Ana Graham Martinez."

"Are you related to Adela Graham..." Gill looked rather desperately at Dave.

"Ponce," said Dave, supplying the missing name.

"Adela Graham Ponce," said Gill.

"She is my grandmother. She is back in Bolivia."

"Where are you?" Gill asked.

"I'm not sure. Spain. I think it's Salobreña, but it doesn't look like the Salobreña I know. I'm just visiting."

"How is it different?"

"This is almost an island. There is just a causeway linking it to the land at one end."

"What are you doing in Salobreña"

"Visiting. I am part of my father's official staff, but we are taking a couple of days from public duties to visit some of the family in Spain."

"You're not Spanish then?"

"Bolivian. My father is vice-president of the country. I am a very junior member on his staff. An interpreter."

"What are you doing in Spain, then? In Europe?"

And Concha launched into Ana's story.

ANA'S STORY

CHAPTER 14

My name is Ana Graham Martinez. I'd like to think that skill as a linguist alone landed me this prestigious job with the government team. I speak fluent English, French and German, in addition to Spanish, of course. As well, my Japanese and Chinese, though less than perfect, are quite adequate. At twenty-eight I have just finished my university studies and practical exchange work.

My father is the vice-president, but I think my job is due to my skill. One might argue, of course, that my skill is the result of education and training and that, in turn, is the result of his job and his money. That probably is at least partly true, though it owes something to the fame and the determination of my grandmother as well. And I like to think it owes something to my own determination and ambition as well

My grandfather was killed in a bomb blast before my father was born. His killers were caught and tried in Spain. They never named anyone, though it is certain that they were the paid agents of some company or other, long since wound up. Even though there was no real proof, my grandmother hounded several companies and their directors at every turn for years. She made sure that they lost a fortune from patents in genetic engineering she kept leaking to governments that would ignore their rights.

I'm not sorry for these companies and nor were most people. At least one of the companies had bribed and persuaded and bullied governments to ignore the dangers of global warming and do as little as possible about the emissions that cause it. Now the world is reaping the results of ignoring the problem for the best part of two centuries.

For her ceaseless efforts in opposing breaches of international law on the emissions causing climate change, my grandmother earned the Nobel Peace Prize when she was already in her late seventies. Now she is almost a hundred and we all know that her efforts came too late to save the human race from itself. Of course, Bolivia is high in the Andes mountains. Well, most of it is, anyway. We're not threatened at all by sea levels, which is why we are taking an impartial part in the negotiations to try and drastically limit any future climate change.

Actually, not all of Bolivia is mountainous or high plateau, but the term 'low lying' is relative, so we're in no danger from the sea

My older sister is a climate scientist and she claims that, while we may be safe from rising seas, climate change is now unstoppable and threatens all life on the planet with ever-rising temperatures. The western Antarctic ice shelf is collapsing, and nobody can predict how much sea levels will rise as a result. My sister seems to think about four or four and a half metres. She reckons that higher temperatures are melting the permafrost, which thaws out into marshes, which release methane - a greenhouse gas. She says that there are billions of cubic feet of methane to be released. Warmer waters kill off phyto-plankton, which like cold water and don't like ultra violet light; they, in turn, use up carbon dioxide, so killing them off adds to global warming. Warmer air holds more water vapour, which is a greenhouse gas. Melting polar ice and snow cuts down sunlight reflected back into space, which means more warming ... she's very gloomy about the future of life on planet earth.

Anyway, I've strayed a long way from what I was saying so, to get back, I got an important job with the government, just before the vice-president and his party began the official series of negotiations on environmental security and limiting climate change. I was just the right person for the staff of such a trip, but I was still really pleased to be assigned to the party, though the exercise itself is too late by a hundred years to be much use.

I didn't see much of my father, of course, because I was assigned to a senior civil servant called Emilio Garcia de Lomar. He is a really gentle and patient man, a diplomat who never gets annoyed whatever anyone says. I can't imagine a better person to conduct negotiations about anything. He is a tall but rather slight man, with hair greying just a bit and a moustache. I'm not a good judge of ages, but I should think he is just turned forty.

He briefed us at length about the problems, the possible scientific solutions, and the potential and actual sources of environmental tension. I carefully prepared the technical jargon in the various languages and read widely on the subject as well. For several

weeks we were extremely busy preparing ourselves and there was plenty of work to be done.

In the first round of talks, the Bolivian team and another from Nepal were to gather opinions, details of problems and so on, from various governments. Then there would be a meeting of the two teams to try and thrash out a possible course of action, along with some bilateral negotiations. At the end of the second phase would be a huge multi-national conference, like the ones at Rio de Janeiro last century or, Djakarta or Durban earlier this century. I don't think that Senor Garcia is hopeful of a more successful conference this time than before, though it was not in his nature to actually give voice to such an opinion.

This wasn't the first time I had been out of Bolivia. I had visited several of the neighbouring countries and I had spent a year on exchange in Japan and another in United States of North America as well. At one time Canada and Mexico had been separate countries and English had been the official language of two of the three countries. Even the United States before the merger had been heading for a majority of people speaking Spanish, merging had simply speeded up the process. Anyway, even though there was a big English speaking minority for me to practice on, Spanish was the first language of the majority and, jointly with English, the official language of the United States of North America, and our first call was on the U.S.N.A. government of President Fernadez.

Anyway, time came for us to depart. Because of the lie of the land, you can't actually see La Paz from the airport, but I was emotional about setting out. I felt proud of my country, even though it is really no more to our credit that our country is high above sea level than it is possible to blame the Dutch because Holland is low lying or the Maldive Islanders for their Islands having disappeared completely beneath the waters of the Indian Ocean. I suppose that the Dutch deserve a great deal of credit that they have made much of a low lying land and The Maldives a great deal of sympathy for the loss of their islands; I cannot say we have done much with the height of our country. Our contribution to the sad world we live in, is to mediate as fairly as may be, with humility and without smugness. Be that as it may, I felt proud of our country as we flew from La Paz, by way of Mexico City, to Washington.

The USNA was once the richest country on earth, possibly the most powerful and certainly the greediest. It's people still use an unfairly large share of the world's resources, but their growing population, increasing problems with climate change and a vast balance of payments problem have taken their toll. Now it is just rather coarse and rather greedy as a country although, individually, most

ordinary North Americans I've met seem all right as individuals. In general they are welcoming and friendly. Over the past 200 years, the North Americans have done a huge amount to contribute to global warming - now they're facing the consequences.

I'm actually getting a bit ahead of myself. We landed in Washington and most of the team was lodged in a reasonable hotel. Just the Vice-President (that's my father, you know) and a few top advisers, including Senor Garcia de Lomar, stayed at our embassy. The next morning, though, we began talks, and I sat in as part of Senor Garcia's team to act as interpreter to the meeting on agriculture. This didn't seem a very exciting assignment compared with, say, sea level rise, but there we are. The idea of the first round talks was to find out what each country felt were the main problems threatening their security. After that we'd try and come up with some solutions in the second round.

The first session was just preparations for a major round of talks with the Agriculture Secretary. I translated hours of big talk. God, these North Americans have a high opinion of themselves still. Senor Garcia just listened without comment. The real problems facing the USNA were not of security with other countries, because they were pretty well self-contained. On the contrary, it was the relative security of the various parts that they talked about so endlessly.

For example, higher temperatures meant that the bulk of the grain crop was grown further north, and a drier interior to the continent and higher ultra-violet levels from ozone depletion meant a fall in the overall harvest which, in turn, meant higher prices. Consequently they had a lot of unrest and a growing underclass. With a rising population and a declining harvest it was all they could do to feed themselves and, with less to export, there was less money around for imports, Still they were reluctant to use their cars less.

Fuel prices had risen a lot and they have had to exploit tar sands and things, but they still went on dumping carbon dioxide into everybody's air. They seemed to me to be either a totally selfish, totally mindless lot about pollution, or incredibly stupid not to see the connection. At least our grandparents were only dimly aware of what they were really doing. This lot could see the results of their actions and still didn't change their ways. At times I almost forgot to translate what was said, as they repeated their own propaganda like a bunch of lemmings. I felt like leaving them to foul their own nest or keep on running towards the cliff and mass extinction - except that it was my world too!

After the first day's talks Señor Garcia took a drink and an early evening break with his team. He asked me what sort of

impression I had gained during the day. I told him what I thought of their big talk.

"I think it's probably just as well that you're the linguist and I'm the diplomat," he said laughing slightly. "Your job is to translate fairly and accurately what they say, however annoying it might be."

"I did," I answered, "but you did ask me what I thought."

"Oh yes," he admitted. "You are quite entitled to your opinions, and I am entitled to mine. In truth, our opinions are not so very different. How can they be when I was responsible for so much of your briefing. On the other hand, it is important that we should keep those opinions to ourselves, if we are to have the remotest chance of success." He smiled in way intended to make me more confident, and I resolved to try and be as gentle and restrained as he was.

The very next day that resolution was sorely tried when I met the Secretary of State for Agriculture. He a large man from the English speaking community called Cy Wagnowski. With a name like that he must have had some eastern European antecedents, I should think and, to judge from his general appearance, there must have been a touch of Afro blood in him somewhere. On the other hand, when it came to manner, he was all pig. The man was a wealthy, rude, domineering, ambitious, self-important pig. At least, he seemed like that to me. Senor Garcia was pleasant and affable towards him: I don't know whether I succeeded too, but it didn't matter much because he ignored me anyway.

"The farmers have to make a living," he said at one point, "and we have to grow enough food to feed our people. With crop yields falling we have to use all the chemicals and modern equipment we can."

Senor Garcia made one of his few excursions into policy that I heard him make. He said quietly, "An ancient Sumarian with a wooden plough, a stone axe and his own efforts could grow enough food for six people - in other words, he grew food at a six hundred per cent energy profit. When you add together the energy used in making tractors, their fuel costs, spreading herbicides, insecticides and fertilisers, transporting and processing food and so on, we do not farm at an energy profit. It is the use of energy that is destroying the planet and you are inefficient in energy terms, compared to an ancient Sumarian."

"We haven't any choice," Wagnowski said, without really having listened. "We have to use every means we can to push up food production."

"You simply have to cut back on carbon dioxide emissions," insisted Senor Garcia. "You have to cut back on greenhouse emissions from agriculture and use private transport less."

"Can't be done," said Wagnowski. "People need food and people have the right to choose how to travel. Sure they could use public transport if they wanted, but most don't want."

"What proportion of the population drive a car?" Senor Garcia asked.

"I don't know," answered Wagnowski irritably.

"Not much more than half," said Garcia, "I looked up the percentage for myself prior to the talks."

"Well?" demanded Wagnowski aggressively.

"Those who have no licence - the young, the old, the blind, the poor - they have no choice," pointed out Senor Garcia.

"We're here to discuss agriculture," snapped Wagnowski, "Leave transport to the transport group."

I'm afraid it was all like that. Every time he started losing an argument, Wagnowski became rude and hostile. The rest of the time was like talking to a brick wall - he just didn't listen. Senor Garcia de Lomar was unfailingly polite and patient. But patience is wasted on a brick wall.

That night I watched the news channel on television for a while. The trouble with news in the USNA, whether it's on TV or on a daily newsdisk, is that there is very little international news and, when there is any, it's all from the USNA point of view. I'd noticed during the year I lived there that there's plenty of news coverage and it's available in both English and Spanish, but the problem is the same: if it doesn't affect the USNA in some way, it's hardly worth a mention.

It comes in part, I think, from the fact that the US developed an empire on one continent, instead of several continents, like the ones which came before it. That and a certain inward looking self-concern that I mentioned earlier. Another thing which rather bothers me about news in the developed world is that you have to turn to a news channel if you want anything more than the most superficial coverage of a few selected events that the media think would make good copy. Real problems in poorer countries tend to get far less coverage.

Anyway, as I said, I watched the news on television that night and neither the big section devoted to USNA news nor the little section devoted to world news was very good. There were reports of trouble on the border between India and Bangladesh and the Australians had turned back some of Indonesian boat people. As both Indonesia and Bangladesh are very low lying, I could guess what the 'trouble' was, though news coverage didn't go into the causes. How on earth could ordinary citizens make sensible choices when they lacked the information? This is the area of the world covered by the team from

Nepal in the first round talks, but I wondered if Senor Garcia might have more details through the embassy. I thought I would ask him at the morning briefing session. I hadn't any great hope of finding out from a North American newsdisk.

The home news was just as depressing but given in much more detail. Yet another hurricane had swept ashore near Baton Rouge, doing enormous amounts of damage. There was talk of having to abandon Baton Rouge, like New Orleans was abandoned twenty years ago and Miami ten years ago. It appeared that the state of Louisiana would need a new capital, though, if they did that. Somewhere further inland and not so low lying, I suppose. However, the people don't like it and the government hardly dare do it, but sea levels rise and, if the North Americans wanted to stop it, I suppose they should have acted a hundred years ago.

It seems from the report that, with more and more hurricanes and violent tropical storms, the value of property all along the low lying Golfo de Mexico coast is falling. That should solve the problem of coastal property being so valuable that the government has to defend it.

Another news item, treated by the news channels a massive success story, was the new water supply for Philadelphia. Salt-water intrusion into supplies had made a new system necessary. I wasn't sure that the building of a new system could actually be billed as a success. Surely preventing salt intrusion into the old one in the first place would have been more of a success. On the other hand, I still can't see much sign of the policy changes needed to stop further sea level rise.

When I tired of the endless bad news about storms and sea levels, I tried other channels. Mostly there were just inane games or old films, though I did eventually find an opera channel. It wasn't anything I especially liked, so I switched off the TV and plugged in a book and read for a while, until it was time to settle down for the night.

Next morning Senor Garcia came into the hotel just as we were finishing breakfast, so I asked him about the news stories of the night before. He looked grave and said he was going to mention it in the briefing session, but he explained that India had closed its borders with Bangladesh, constructed a barbed wire fence with watch towers right along the border and begun shooting any Bangladeshi who tried to enter India. The story had reached the international news media because a train load of refugees fleeing the rising seas had attempted to force their way across the border and Indian soldiers had machine gunned them, killing over two hundred. I could understand both sides of the problem. Bangladesh is a low lying country. My sister says that four fifths of it is less than six metres above the twentieth century sea

level, and the sea has risen four meters above that level already, flooding much of the land and making much more of it unsafe and prone to floods whenever there were heavy rains or a cyclone.

On the other hand, India is a poor country with a rising population and a declining land area. It was understandable, if not forgivable, that it should take action to prevent refugees from flooding in. The truth is that neither country was responsible for the problems: they were largely caused by the developed world.

After the briefing session we began talks on a larger scale, and I could see pretty quickly that not all North Americans were as arrogant and rude as Cy Wagnowski. President Fernandez, who spoke in totally unaccented English, was a frail looking man with a rather careworn expression, but he was really vital and alive, as was his Secretary of State, a pleasant woman of eastern, possibly Japanese or Korean, ancestry. I think the President may have realised it was too late for North America and too late for the human race. Clearly men like Wagnowski held an awful lot of sway and, if he tried to go further than the population at large were ready to go, no doubt Wagnowski and the forces he represented would step in and make life difficult for him.

We had another briefing session next day and were then free to look around Washington while the senior officials of the team met to agree what exactly the North Americans had said. The day after that we flew to Zurich.

CHAPTER 15

Zurich is the capital of what's left of the European Federation and has a big airport. Either the airport must have been very busy once, or the planners thought it was going to be, because we seemed to 'rattle around' in a corner of it, even though we were a sizeable group. The terminal building seemed far too large for the numbers passing through it.

The customs and immigration officials were very polite and respectfully welcoming to the party, but they were all very dour and serious and I had a feeling all the while that the reception might be very different if we were refugees from some poorer country seeking asylum.

The European Federation, like the USNA, is not what it once was. At one time it had included most of the formerly sovereign states in Europe, from Russia to the Atlantic, until the northern European group broke off to form 'Scandinavia' and one or two of the other peripheral states drifted away. Zurich itself seems a very clean city and the area around it very scenic and attractive - I always feel more at home among mountains - though we only had the merest glance as a fleet of cars whisked us to a hotel.

The cars all had tinted windows, the hotel had a canopy outside the front door and tinted bedroom windows. There was air conditioning and the tinted bedroom windows did not open. The man at the reception desk told me that the windows were designed to keep out ultra violet light and didn't open to prevent visitors from circumventing the precautions. As the ultra-violet level was almost as high in Washington and nobody seemed to take much notice of it there, it was obvious that the risks were taken much more seriously by the Europeans. I wondered whether that would make them more willing to adapt politically. On the other hand, air conditioning uses unnecessary energy so, unless it was solar powered or in some way 'survival friendly', the Europeans may not have grasped the full

implications of the situation. However, it showed an awareness I hadn't seen in the USNA.

We had another briefing session from Senor Garcia and other negotiators, but they didn't really say much that we hadn't covered in the sessions back in La Paz. The British had been the first to leave the European Federation, twenty odd years ago. Nobody seemed to know much about the political scene there, but it was hard to believe that they once had a vast, world-wide empire and exported the English language around the world. All anyone knew about Britain since it left the European Federation was that, after a period of direct military rule, democracy had been restored five years ago and the government of Jennifer Hammond was facing an election about now.

Senor Garcia told us that there reports of law and order tending to break down in the country and nobody seemed certain what the position of its constituent parts actually were - was Britain even a single country any more? Anyway, much industry and all the ports had been lost and London abandoned as the capital. It was not even established whether the team would - or even could - visit Britain, but it seemed scarcely relevant whether the British were included in the itinerary or not.

Germany had been the next to go after Britain. Basically they had quit rather than take their share of the Dutch as Holland shrank and the people were pushed back by rising sea levels. Germany had its own problems as the areas around Hamburg, Bremen and Bremerhaven were lost to the seas. So many of the major ports of the world have gone in the last ten to fifteen years that trade has been seriously disrupted but, of course, you know that.

Senor Garcia said that rising German nationalism and xenophobia was something of a problem again: there were two very vicious wars in Europe in the early part of last century, and German nationalism had contributed to both those wars.

The strains on the other states of the European Federation were much worse than the strains on the USNA, not because the problems were actually worse, but because the states had all been separate countries once - within the living memory of the oldest citizens - and had their own languages, cultures, histories and traditions. Each felt a loyalty to itself and its own priorities. Break up of the union under environmental pressures could not be ruled out, even in the USNA: in the European Federation it was really quite likely, as the peoples became much more territorial and territory shrank. I thought this was a very silly and selfish attitude to take, but Senor Garcia seemed to think it an understandable response to the pressures of rising sea levels.

Zurich had somehow the air of a capital well past its best, though the whole city was clinically clean and the buildings immaculately maintained. I soon observed the politicians as similar - they seemed to affect much more power and influence than they really had. I am struggling for a word or phrase: I can't say 'faded glory' because nothing was 'faded'. I suppose it was rather like keeping the palace spotless when the king has gone and you have a republic, just in case you ever have a monarchy again. At least some of the people we met were going through the motions of maintaining an empty front.

In their talks the politicians of Europe were much more willing to accept the changes to society that environmental pressures demanded than were most of the North American politicians I translated. I detected, though, that they seemed much more willing to agree in principle than to accept any specific proposal. There was, for example, a certain bureaucratic lethargy on the part of Pierre Delois, the Environment Commissioner of the Federation, that was nearly as irritating as the rudeness of Cy Wagnowski. As I told you earlier, it's a good thing that I am not one of the diplomats. I think I keep my feelings to myself all right, but I sometimes don't feel very diplomatic.

Anyway, there were two more days of talks, after which the party was splitting up. One team was going to Berlin to talk to the Germans, the other to Gothenburg to talk to the Scandinavians. Senor Garcia dropped the surprise bombshell that I was having three days off.

"You have family in Spain, I understand," he said. "You are spending a very short time, you and your father, visiting those relatives."

You could have knocked me down with a feather, as English speaking North Americans say. I knew nothing about such a plan, but it would be rather nice, since I had few relatives in Bolivia. Anyway he told me to be ready to go to the station about quarter of an hour before the rest of the team were to go to the airport. He said I would rejoin his team in Cairo.

He had, he told me, one of the most difficult sessions - the Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia round. There had already been two major wars over the waters of the River Nile and a third was always looming.

Next day we - my father and I and two security staff - went by high-speed electrolink via Paris and Madrid to Granada. Madrid was not unlike La Paz without the high Andes in the background, but Granada was really nice. My father and I wore wide brimmed hats and sunglasses. Being lower lying and further south, Granada was much hotter, though Zurich, like Washington, was warm enough. I must say it still feels funny to be warmer as you go south, even though I've been

in the northern hemisphere several times before, Altogether it must add up to almost three years.

The hired car took us over the hills to the coast, and I saw where my Grandmother had been born and where my father's family came from - a smallish place called Salobreña. It was just a rocky outcrop, almost an island, topped by an Arab castle. I imagine it must once have stood a little way from the sea, but now it was linked to the mainland only by a causeway at one end, over which the hired car drove. I thought it might be quite tricky in bad weather and asked if this was high tide. The driver told me that the Mediterranean doesn't have much in the way of tides, but I still think it would a risky drive in bad weather.

Anyway, the hired car dropped us outside the small hotel that my father's family kept, and we went in to greet them. Of course my father had vided to say that we were coming, so it wasn't a surprise, but they seemed really pleased to see us. My father had a cousin Ramon about the same age as him. Ramon was the second son of my Grandma's younger brother and no more than a year or so younger. There was an older brother, I think, but he died in a motorbike crash or something.

Anyway, he - Ramon - had two children, Maria and Concha, about the same age as me. Ramon was a dumpy, jolly man whose wife had died a few years ago. He and Maria ran the small hotel with Concha's husband looking after the little cafe-bar attached to it. I think, like Salobreña itself, the Hostal El Peñon had probably seen better days, but it was a pleasant, welcoming little place. Well, they both were, the hotel and the village.

My father's cousin Ramon mentioned over the evening meal that there was another cousin called Eva. Well, not his and my father's cousin - a cousin of the two daughters, Concha and Maria perhaps? Or would that have made her his daughter? His cousin's daughter perhaps? I think that's it.

Anyway, Eva had married into an English family that had for two or three generations been friends of theirs. Ramon said that he was worried. There had been a lot of trouble in Britain when land had been flooded, with those owning property on higher ground trying to keep out those on lower ground. Fortunately the whole family had moved from lower ground to a hilly part of the country before the trouble really started.

It seems that, at one time, they had visited Spain. Then the exchange rate became too bad and they couldn't afford it. Ramon had visited Britain once but now there are no longer any regular ports, not many flights and postal services had become hopeless. For one thing the British Government during the period of military rule had been

monitoring all electronic mail and the European Federation had broken off all electronic links in protest and for another the reliability of all surface mail was hopeless since so many ports were submerged by rising sea levels. He asked if we were going to Britain as part of our mission. My father said that it was possible a small team might go.

"Can you find out about them?" he asked.

"I could ask the chief negotiator to try," answered my father.

"Any chance of bringing them out?" He sounded a little hopeful. "They would be allowed into the European Confederation, I checked."

My father looked doubtful. "If they wanted to come I suppose it might be possible," he said after a pause. "They might not want to come though," he added.

"I don't think they have much in Britain." Ramon said. "It's a very poor country indeed now. They allowed themselves to depend too much on imports and they've very little to sell any more. Anyway there isn't much trade, with the world's major ports all flooded." He grinned, although this was nothing to smile about.

"Tell you what. In the morning Miguel - that's Maria's husband - can take you to our little place in the mountains and show you how we've been preparing to manage. We've a solar powered desalination plant that irrigates a piece of land where we could grow enough to support the family if the hotel failed. Our cousin and her family would be better off here."

My father nodded slowly. "I will see what can be done," he said. "May I use your vid. to call our consulate?" and without waiting for an answer he got up and went to dial the Bolivian Consulate in Madrid - the embassy itself is in Zurich.

Next morning Miguel took us by mule cart up into the hills. The foothills of the Sierra Nevada, I suppose. The mountains in the background were not as high as I was used to, of course, but they high enough, and they appeared parched and rocky, with deep chasms and steep soaring peaks, just like those I knew. We left the road and followed a track up to a valley between two low hills. The ground was almost level and there were trees - olives, locusts, oranges, chirremoyas and some vines and vegetables. There was a small house - what I think the rural Spanish refer to as a 'Finca'. A rather primitive house cum farm with storage buildings. There were some chickens scratching around and a flat roofed shed with flat panels on top.

Miguel explained that they were solar cells and, when the sun rose, they generated enough power to pump up salt water. The water ran through a sort of radiator like thing and some was turned to steam by the sun's heat. While the salt water ran back to the sea, the steam

ran through to an underground storage tank, where it condensed and was stored to supply the house and irrigate the land. When the tank was full, the solar cells charged batteries providing power for the house lights, instead of pumping water - it was rather ingenious really, though I gather from what he said that the technology has been around for a century or more. The stupidity and short sightedness of our grandparents' generation continues to take my breath away.

We had a pleasant day up in the hills, only going back to Salobreña that evening because father wanted to call the consulate in Madrid again.

I don't know the details of what father arranged, but the consulate, or possibly the embassy in Zurich, chartered a small plane, though it was at his personal expense, I think. We would fly to Britain and go with our embassy staff there to meet their government and prime minister for some talks. In the meantime, our embassy there would try to track down Eva and her family for us. What we would do about making contact was left until later.

Our excuse was the talks with the government but we had no idea what we would find. It occurred to me that it might be quite useful to environmental security to know what the British were thinking and doing, but I didn't say anything, because I was an interpreter, not a negotiator.

As we weren't setting off until the next day, I had the afternoon free. I understood that the place where my grandfather had been killed was not far from Salobreña, and I thought I would like to see it, if there was time. I asked Uncle Ramon about it, but he shook his head sadly. "It was a place called Motril," he said. "All this is..." and he pointed across the bay, with a pause which implied nostalgia or something, "...was a flat river estuary where they used to grow sugar cane. The main coast road went straight on. Motril was in the middle of the small plain." There were tears in his eyes. "You can still see some of the town in about twelve feet of water. Why don't you visit the castle instead?"

There didn't seem much point in doing anything else, so I wandered up the steep streets to the castle. First built by the Phoenecians, used by the Romans, rebuilt by the Moors, used by medieval Spain, restored last century ... it had probably seen some sights over the centuries. I looked over the walls at the sea and the Sierra Nevada and it occurred to me that it had probably witnessed no sights sadder than the sights of this century, though.

Next morning we went by hired car back to Granada and began our journey to Britain and the government of Prime Minister

Jennifer Hammond. For the first time on our trip I was a little nervous. We would still have diplomatic status, but what would we find?

CHAPTER 16

There was no official welcoming party: we were met at the airport only by the ambassador and two of his staff. And what a change the place was from anything I had seen before on this trip. Coastal airports were flooded long since, of course, so we landed at an airport near a place called Birmingham, well away from the coast, though we didn't see the town itself.

At the airport, the terminal building was quite extensive, but it was empty. There were, it seemed, just half a dozen flights a week, yet the terminal building was big enough to have coped with more than ten times that number each day. There were the shells of shops galore, all boarded up and with graffiti scrawled across the shutters - political slogans mostly; a huge customs hall, most of it un-staffed and roped off, with old and dusty ropes; half a dozen baggage conveyors, none of which were working. That is, they were not switched on for our benefit. Whether they actually worked or not I've no idea, but they were covered in dust and, anyway, nothing else I saw in Britain seemed to work, so I don't suppose the baggage conveyors did either.

The immigration and customs staff turned out to meet us in quantity. Considering there were no flights to or from the airport until the next day, all fifteen or so must have come in specially, but they were not a welcoming party. The immigration staff had automatic rifles and I distinctly did not like the look one of the women gave me. The customs officials only had pistols and those were in holsters, but they were surly and suspicious characters. I was extremely glad to get through and walk out of the building, past more armed guards at the door, and reach the waiting cars brought by the ambassador.

There were two cars from the embassy, an armoured car with soldiers in front and a jeep to bring up the rear.

"We're going through a pretty well government controlled area," said the ambassador, holding the door of one car for my father, "so I think the army is as much to keep tabs on us as to protect us."

I got into the second car with one of the secretarial staff and one of our two security people. The other was in the first car with the ambassador and my father.

As we drove from the airport we passed a vast building with a chain link perimeter fence, through which some children with wide brimmed hats and sunglasses were peering. I asked what the building was.

"It's a refugee camp for those forced off low lying land," the secretary told me. "I ought to introduce myself," he added, "I'm Ricardo Jiménez."

In British fashion he used only one family name though he was, I assume, Bolivian. At any rate, his Spanish was faultless.

"I am Ana Graham Martinez. I'm an interpreter with the group that's talking with various governments at present," I said in answer. "But, if it's only a refugee camp, why the fence?" I asked.

"I don't think the fence has much to do with it being a refugee camp," he replied. "I rather think the whole place used to be some sort of exhibition centre back in the days when this country had something to exhibit. Still," he continued, "The fence is probably useful. Refugees from low lying areas aren't popular with people on higher ground, you know." There was a pause, and when he spoke again he changed the subject. "What's this about Eva Benderman? I take it she isn't part of your round of talks."

"The Vice President has a cousin Eva. Well, some relative anyway. I've never heard her last name," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"His Excellency set me on trying to track her down."

"Any luck?"

"Oh yes, I located her all right. Considering the mess this country's in, it was a considerable achievement." He gave a rather self-satisfied smile. "She lives with her partner and two children in a place called Harrogate, in the north of the country."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about the geography of Britain," I told him. I wondered whether we'd have to visit the north of this country. The car drove over a particularly rough patch of road and I wondered how we'd get there, as the car bottom clunked against something, presumably the tarmac.

"Britain is three countries: England, Scotland and Wales. Scotland is almost completely independent and Wales is not far off. Most of the central and southern area of England is strictly government controlled, but the north and the west is rather beyond the government at times and some of the inner cities are no go areas from time to time as well. You could probably get to Harrogate all right, though it would be risky some of the time."

I didn't like the sound of that and wondered whether Eva Benderman could get to us. It might be safer. We turned past a building with a tall chimney belching smoke.

"What the hell's that?" I asked, surprised.

"Coal fired power station," said Ricardo. "This country has plenty of coal but precious little else. They support a chemical industry of sorts on coal, distil the stuff to make petrol and generate electricity with it too."

"And cause pollution with it, I see."

"Oh yes," he said, "The level of pollution this country causes is out of all proportion to the size of its population."

We were now driving along a wide road with almost no traffic and a surface just barely tolerable. I imagine the ride in the armoured car must have been really uncomfortable. It was a divided highway with two lanes on each side of a crash barrier but, apart from the occasional antiquated truck belching black exhaust fumes, we saw no other vehicles using it.

The little convoy could only travel as fast as the armoured car, so the journey seemed to take ages, but we overtook only one old van. I commented on this to Ricardo.

"There's a speed limit of forty-five miles an hour," he told me. "It applies to everything except police cars, as a fuel saving measure, I think. Not that many vehicles could do more than fifty miles an hour anyway," he added.

"Fifty miles an hour. What are miles?" I asked

He laughed. "Sorry," he said, "Fifty miles an hour is about eighty kilometres an hour. A mile is a rather antiquated measure of distance."

"Oh," I said sagely. I had heard the term used once in the USNA, now I came to think of it. The countryside was quite pleasant, though I like mountains. It was rolling low hills mostly, covered with smallish fields of various vegetables and larger fields of grains and what appeared to be soya. It looked very intensively cultivated, without an inch to spare between crops. I was thinking that they could do with less space for traffic and more space for food.

When I said as much to Ricardo, he agreed. "The planners last century thought there would be an unending pressure for more roads, so they built more and more," he said.

"The planners must have been out of their minds," I said. "Didn't they realise that oil was going to run out?"

"Well they behaved as if they thought it would last forever," answered Ricardo. "They built roads and imported food."

I said that it seemed hard to believe they had either a traffic problem or a health service. Rather to my surprise, Ricardo disagreed.

"There isn't much left of the country that once was," he said, "but, if you read anybody's history - any country you like - this country comes into it. The reason half the world speaks English is that England once ruled half the world and they influenced most of the other half too. They've gone downhill because the world changed while they stayed the same."

I just said "Hmm," and thought about it. Possibly he was right: history, like geography and diplomacy is not a strong point in my background.

Eventually we arrived in Oxford. As capital cities go it was small and unprepossessing, though some of the buildings had grace and character. Of course, the capital had been switched from London about ten years before, because rising sea levels had flooded the place.

Actually, London had been flooding for a century or more. Someone, my sister I think, told me that they put a barrier across the river to keep the sea out way back in the last century. Anyway, perhaps London had been larger and more imposing as a capital.

Oxford had been a university town. It still was somewhat and the colleges seemed to have most of the older and more interesting buildings. In fact, I think that the better government buildings had probably been taken from some college or other. I rather think too that most of the government offices had once been shops or the offices of private companies. I must say, though, that I don't know this for certain, and I didn't have the time to ask. Perhaps it would not have been very diplomatic to ask the British anyway.

We stayed at the embassy. The ambassador said that, although we would be a little cramped, most British hotels were pretty awful and we'd be both better off and more secure in the embassy. We were a bit cramped for space, but it was just for a couple of nights. My father had a briefing session with the ambassador that evening and next day we had talks with Jennifer Hammond, the Prime Minister.

I was a bit surprised when we met Jennifer Hammond - I was there as interpreter, of course. I don't know how old I expected her to be, or what I expected her to be like, but she was only in her late thirties or early forties and would have been pretty, if she wasn't so tired looking and rather haggard. I suppose she must have had plenty on her mind, and so it turned out.

"Welcome to Britain," she said, shaking my father's hand. "Poor and pointless enough a welcome though you'll find it, I suspect."

She invited us to sit around a table. My father, the vice-president; the Ambassador; Ricardo; me as interpreter; The Prime Minister; her Private Secretary and a senior army officer, whose status there I could not quite grasp. We all sat solemnly round a polished wooden table in a comfortable room overlooking a small garden. It was almost possible to forget that you were in an impoverished, depressed, rebellious country and imagine yourself in one that ruled half the world and influenced the other half. Then Jennifer Hammond brought us back to earth.

"There is an election scheduled for five day's time," she said. "You might wonder why I'm not out trying to win votes instead of holding talks with a world leader." I suddenly realised how powerful my country and my father actually were. I had not thought about it before. "My government would probably lose their overall majority to a rat bag of nationalists and fascists whatever I did," she continued.

Spanish has both a conditional and a subjunctive tense: there was no difficulty at all in translating the uncertainty she was conveying. The question was, to what did the word 'would' refer. Either there was to be an election or there wasn't.

The Prime Minister continued, "If an election were held we would probably lose our overall majority and you would have a coalition of even more right wing, short sighted, nationalistic and violent forces to deal with. In practice I don't think it will happen. John," and she gestured towards the army officer, "Who is my eyes and ears towards the military, tells me that a second coup is likely within the next day or two."

She turned to this 'John' and he explained, "The army realises that we haven't the resources in Britain to take on Europe or the USNA: there are forces within the grouping likely to win the election which are too stupid to accept that. The little Englanders could easily get us into international trouble."

"Even more international trouble," corrected Ms. Hammond, and 'John' nodded.

I translated this but, as I did, I thought that Ms. Hammond certainly had a shrewd understanding of both her own problems and her country's problems too.

My father explained that he wanted to obtain the views of as many governments as possible, so as to try and bring a substantive set of proposals to the world summit. Jennifer Hammond listened as I translated and nodded wearily.

"I can give you my own views;" she said, "I can give you the government's views, for what that is worth, but I can't tell you the views of the military government we will almost certainly have in a week's time. They may go along with as much as possible of anything agreed

internationally, in order not to provoke unnecessary retaliation, but I can predict that they won't have any views about anything you suggest."

The Prime Minister seemed to accept what was coming as inevitable. I wondered whether she was in any personal danger. Rather to my surprise, my father asked her.

"I don't know," she replied frankly, "I don't think I'm in for anything worse than house arrest, but you never know."

'John' - I learned later that he was Major John Durham, but I didn't know that yet, so I'm getting a bit ahead of myself if I call him more than 'John' - looked a bit uncomfortable.

"I think there is a very real threat to your personal safety," he said to the Prime Minister. Then he turned to me and said, "Explain to the vice-president that Ms. Hammond is the daughter-in-law of the last Prime Minister before the last military coup. There are those who see the name itself as a threat. I would strongly urge her to leave the country."

I was a bit shocked and I also wondered what, precisely, a 'daughter-in-law was, but I translated what was said. My father nodded slowly. "There is a second and considerably secondary reason for my visit," he said.

"I thought there might be," answered to the Prime Minister with just a touch of humour in her voice and eyes, though her face was impassive. "This country hardly merits a high level visit."

"The visit might have been from one of the negotiating team, rather than me personally," he began, "but I have a cousin who is partner to a British citizen and is living here. The ambassador tracked her down for me. Now I want to make contact and see if she'd like to fly back to Spain with us."

"She is married to a British citizen. Where does she live?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Harrogate."

Jennifer Hammond thought about it for a moment, and then asked 'John', "Is it possible to videophone Harrogate?" He shook his head.

"I think they broke the links last year," he said.

"What about getting there? Is Harrogate off limits, or is it possible to get there?"

"You can get to Leeds by train," he answered. "Harrogate - well, you'd have to use a car from Leeds. The local police are a bit prickly because they've had a lot of trouble with refugees from York and along the Ouse and the Humber, but it's mostly okay."

"Why don't you leave the country with us?" my father asked the Prime Minister gently.

There was a long pause. An antique clock on the decorated mantelpiece ticked softly. Ricardo rustled some papers. Jennifer Hammond looked more strained and tired than ever, but I thought to myself that she had certainly been a beauty once. Eventually she drew a deep breath and sighed.

"I won't pretend the idea isn't tempting," she said at length. "If and when the coup comes I will offer to leave the country and ask for asylum somewhere. Until then ... My duty is to stay until the election. I shall try and do that."

"I guarantee you asylum in Bolivia," said my father. He turned to the ambassador. "Use the normal diplomatic channels to notify our government that the promise has been officially given." The ambassador nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "I would like to think that such an offer would be unnecessary. I rather doubt it. I would like to think that I will be allowed to take up the offer if an emergency arises. I shall try, of course, but from what Major Durhan says, I rather doubt that too."

She took another deep breath, and said, "Major Durham can go with you to Harrogate as an escort. He will be able to handle any problems with the army. I will have first class travel by train to Leeds and back to Birmingham arranged for you. I will also arrange for a car - no two cars, you may need them both - to be made available in Leeds. What will happen in Harrogate, of course, I can't say."

The Major looked as if he was about to argue, but he didn't. "It's too late to set off today," he said. "There are only two trains a day as far as Leeds. If you leave early tomorrow you might make it back to Birmingham by the day after." He turned to the ambassador. "Have the plane standing by. There won't be much time between then and the coup."

CHAPTER 17

I suppose Britain's rail network was built to serve their old capital not the new one, and that must have made for stress on the system, but there's no excuse for the trains themselves. The trains are not actually dirty - I suppose they're really very clean when it comes to things like sweeping floors, clearing rubbish and so on - but they're old. Old and unreliable.

There is supposed to be a direct link between Oxford and Leeds. Our first train broke down at Birmingham, while the replacement had to wait for another, connecting train, somewhere between there and Leeds. I gathered from the guard or ticket collector or whatever they call them, that other train was delayed because the overhead power lines broke down. Then, to cap it all, there was a signal failure or something just outside Leeds station and our train just stood there for more than half an hour.

The seats of the train were worn and some were mended. They could have been less lumpy and more comfortable too. There was a loudspeaker system built into the roof of our coach, but the guard didn't use it. Probably broken. All the stations we went through looked run down and depressing. On the other hand, the guard was polite to everybody within earshot, though the gun in his holster was a bit unnerving.

The refreshment service surprised me. There was a man with a trolley serving very decent coffee accompanied by quite reasonable sandwiches with a choice of fillings, rather crummy biscuits and some imported chocolate coated ones. I commented on the quality of food to the Major and he said that the quality was good but the prices totally beyond most people. "This is real coffee and real chocolate coating," he explained, "but there are very few imports. Most people have to use coffee substitutes. They can't afford this. A meal almost costs more than the train fare, and that costs enough!" I did notice that several of the other passengers had packed food for their journey.

The journey was decidedly slow, as I explained, and I would have been in a very questionable humour by the time we arrived in Leeds, except that Major Durham, John, was an interesting travelling companion. He took the hold-ups and problems in his stride, I noticed. Perhaps he was used to them. At any rate he didn't make things worse by offering lame excuses. We talked about Britain and the possible coup.

"This was a great country once," he said, "but our empire dissolved in the middle of the last century. Some politicians tried to act as if that hadn't happened, and we wasted our wealth and resources on trying to be the military power we once had been."

"Do you think there will be another coup?" I asked him.

"It's very likely indeed," he replied. "I will probably go down with the Prime Minister," he added.

"Why? Do you mean you're her current partner?"

"Married to her?" he laughed slightly, "No, no. I'm not married at all. Too many army marriages break up too quickly." I struggled with the thought, not certain I was translating him correctly. I didn't know any western country still had marriages instead of partnership agreements. I know about marriage from history books, of course, but this was the first time I'd come across them. How quaint! I wondered whether the British had their AIDS tests before marriage, like most other countries had them before partnership agreements. I also wondered why he felt likely to be blamed for the government.

"Why are you threatened, then, if you're not her partner?" I asked. "Do you hold some post in her Government?"

"Her Government is entirely made up of elected politicians," he said. "But, as an advisor, I've identified too closely with the government." He thought for a moment, and added, "I don't believe the army should step into government, and I've made my views too well known for the generals to ignore me."

"How many officers feel like you?" I asked him.

"Not enough," he answered gloomily, "Not nearly enough."

The station at Leeds was like the airport at Birmingham. It was big enough to have coped with hundreds of trains, it had a huge precinct full of boarded up shops and had a general air of neglect. There were eight or so ticket windows in the booking hall, but there was only one open. Like the trains, nothing was dirty - just old and dilapidated.

Outside the station, waiting patiently, were the two cars John had laid on for us, along with an army jeep with four armed soldiers, looking slightly bored with their long wait. I gathered John had arranged for them to be there as escort of a sorts. They were two substantial cars, and one held my father, the major and me, with one

of the security men we had brought with us sitting in the front with the driver. The other security man had the second car to himself, though he sat with the driver too, not that his English was very brilliant. I don't suppose he had much of a conversation. Of course he had the small pocket radio to speak to our man.

Leeds was a much bigger place than Oxford but much poorer looking. At least the government had made some attempt to keep up appearances in their capital, but here everything needed repair or paint. The Major said that there were a lot of refugees here from coastal areas further east and I did see a lot of what looked like factories, shops and offices, all converted to ramshackle dwellings. I will say the gardens looked nice though, when we got out of the city centre. Most of the houses seemed to have gardens and they all seemed to have some flowers as well as the vegetables.

Except where it crossed a river the road was not too bad. It led through hilly country, down a long steep hill to a partially flooded village, where it ran on an embankment to a river, crossed by a rather rickety looking bridge and continued on the embankment until the land rose up again and became hillier. I assume that the area must be prone to flooding, though, apart from a small area of the village, it looked all right when we passed.

We drove through more farmland which looked very much like that I first saw when we drove from Birmingham to Oxford, and which we saw endlessly from the train to Leeds. I wondered whether the whole country was intensively farmed like this. Then we began to slow as we climbed a steep hill. Two thirds of the way up there was a barrier. Most of the road was closed completely by a series of big concrete blocks ranged across it. The remaining bit was closed by a steel barrier, which could clearly be opened by the people manning it. These were a rough looking collection of individuals with a uniform of sorts. They had blue combat jackets, flat caps and automatic rifles. A sign on one of the concrete blocks read 'HARROGATE - ACCESS CONTROLLED BY THE LOCAL POLICE'.

Access appeared at first sight to be more 'closed' than 'controlled'. Nobody opened the barrier, but one of the 'police' came over. He was wearing sunglasses, like most people did and had a scabby patch on his cheek which looked like skin cancer. He probably spent most of his time outdoors and should have worn a barrier cream. You can't warn some people. John got out of the car to meet him.

"Good afternoon," he said, "The Bolivian delegation would like to speak to Mrs Eva Benderman. I believe she lives in Harrogate at..." He consulted a paper. "30 Ripon Place."

"We can't take any more residents whatever their nationality," said the man.

"We will not even be staying over night. It is possible Mrs Benderman and her family may choose to leave with us," the major answered.

"Why would anyone want to leave Harrogate?" the man asked, in a tone implying that Harrogate was the best place on earth and the idea of leaving completely unthinkable.

"She may decide not to come, of course," explained Major Durham placatingly, "but she has relatives in both Spain and Bolivia. She may opt to leave the country and join her relatives."

"Go abroad!" he said in a tone of total incredulity.

"Possibly. Now can you get authorization for the delegation to approach Mrs Benderman?" I thought that must mean that she was married to a British man. I wondered about her last name when Ricardo mentioned it: I didn't think then it sounded very Spanish.

"I don't think so," said the man, "but I'll telephone police headquarters and see what they say." Obviously he thought of himself as a genuine policeman and was at least behaving in accordance with a slightly warped version of the law.

The Major got back into the car and we explained the conversation to my father. The security guard in our car spoke on his radio to the second car and, in the jeep, the soldiers fingered their weapons nervously, though I personally didn't think we were in any danger.

We waited a few minutes while - presumably - the policeman rang his superiors, then he walked back over with two more of the 'policemen', automatic rifles at the ready. John got out of the car to meet him again.

Park one of the cars and the jeep over there," he said. "We'll keep an eye on the soldiers and bodyguards. One person can go on to see Mrs Benderman with the other car. The other two can wait in the control post until the car gets back."

They certainly didn't run high on trust and I didn't think they so much wanted to keep ‘an eye' on the guards as several guns. Still, I didn't think we were in any immediate danger.

"Which of you is going in?" asked the policeman.

My father said that he didn't speak very good English. John said it wasn't his place and he was right. I said I thought somebody older would carry more weight and that, anyway, she was more my father's relation than mine.

"This Eva Benderman is Spanish," I pointed out. "You speak some English anyway, but I bet her Spanish is okay."

Eventually my father agreed and John and I got out of the car. So did the security man. The second car and the jeep were duly parked and the heavy steel barrier was dragged aside for the first car

to pass through. It was already being dragged back when we left the four soldiers and two bodyguards standing around, guns ready, being watched from behind the barricade by several 'police', armed with a machine gun and automatic rifles.

Major Durham and I walked through a gap just big enough for one at a time, conscious that we were unarmed but that several guns were nevertheless pointed our way. We walked up to the control post and went in.

We sat in the post for what seemed like an age. It was not much more than a large portable cabin with three rooms. The first had a sort of counter, for what purpose was not clear: looking through the papers of visiting truck drivers perhaps. One of the two back rooms was some sort of storeroom. Through the open door I could see more rifles and ammunition, as well as various cardboard and wooden boxes.

The other room was nearer to being a kitchen and it was there we were taken. We were sat down on upright chairs and given mugs of what I presume was either coffee substitute or tea substitute. It definitely wasn't tea or coffee, but it was actually quite drinkable, though I wouldn't want to drink it to the exclusion of the real thing.

We sat there, with a formally polite and heavily armed guard watching over us for what seemed like an age, during which time very little was actually said. I would guess it was about an hour and a half, though it seemed like days.

"Harrogate has a separate police force, then?" I asked, by way of trying to make small talk.

"Yes," answered our guard, not helping conversation at all, but in no way indicating that he didn't want us to talk. He simply seemed to have nothing to say himself.

"It's a big place then?" I asked.

"Not big," he said. "It has money and influence. It can afford a proper police force." I wondered what he considered to be less than a 'proper' police force, but I tried to be diplomatic and didn't ask him that.

We continued in the same manner - me spasmodically trying to make conversation and him not helping - for ages. Eventually the first 'policeman' came back in to the shack, spoke to a couple of men in the front office and walked into the kitchen to speak to us. "Follow me," he instructed and, still under guard, we followed him back through the barrier to the second car. I couldn't see the first car.

"Get in," he said and we did.

With several guns pointing at us there wasn't any room for debate about it. Presumably we were being released because the first car had returned and presumably we were getting into the second car because the first car was full. That seemed hopeful. Once we were

packed in with both the bodyguards, the barrier was opened and the first car came round the end of the building.

It was indeed full, though I couldn't make out the occupants. Our car backed up and fell in behind the first one, which had pulled up and was waiting. When the jeep had also backed up we set off. Glancing back, I saw that the barrier was already returned to position. The 'police' were taking no chances, but I had to admit that it was order of a sort and they had at least been both fair and polite.

The drive back to Leeds was much the same as the drive out, though John seemed anxious to get back to the city before dark. I'm not sure why and didn't ask, but I could only speculate that this part of Britain was not entirely safe after dark. I can't say I'd found it all that safe in daylight.

Back in Leeds, John took us to the 'Northern Star' Hotel where he had apparently booked rooms. The Benderman family - a man and woman about forty and two children in their early teens - got out of the car with my father.

"I booked two double and three single rooms," said Major Durham, "I think we'd better have two more doubles and keep these soldiers with us for the moment. I think I'll have them keep watch in twos." He disappeared into the Hotel.

"Ana, I present my cousin Eva and her partner Steve," my father said. We shook hands British style and kissed on the cheek, Spanish style. "And these are their two daughters, Eva and Julia."

The younger girl was a bit younger than I'd thought at first glance - about ten or so - and the older in her early teens. They both looked a bit shy, but the younger smiled in a rather sweet way. The bodyguards glanced uneasily around. You could almost hear them wishing we'd move inside and make less obvious targets. Nothing was said, but we went inside and they followed cautiously.

Over an acceptable meal I learned that my father hadn't had much trouble persuading Eva and her family to leave Britain. A small island, reliant on trade but with most of its ports lost to rising sea levels is going to be in serious trouble - and Britain was. Eva had been wondering how they could get out of the country, but there seemed no way. Being an island is very useful in war but a distinct disadvantage to trade in the new world circumstances, and the range and quality of food available was dropping while prices were rising. Pressure of people from low lying areas was leading to overcrowding, violence and local 'police forces' that were no more than vigilantes were springing up to protect higher ground. Eva was almost desperate to leave!

Harrogate actually sounded reasonable as towns go. My father said it was clean and orderly with elegant buildings and a rather open feel. Steve said that the town's huge open space, the 'Stray' had

been planted with vegetables, as had some of the town's gardens. My father remarked that there were still a few flower gardens left.

After the meal or, rather, when it was a matter of sitting around drinking cups of coffee substitute, Major Durham disappeared for a time to talk on the vid. to one or two of his army contacts and to see about getting back to Birmingham. He was gone about half an hour and returned looking extremely worried. I asked him what was wrong.

"The coup is coming earlier than I thought," he said. "My contacts were not very specific. Probably because they don't dare be, but my guess is about eight o'clock tomorrow morning, from what everybody is saying."

"As soon as that!" I said.

"As soon as that."

"The same offer applies to you as applies to the Prime Minister," said my father. "You can fly out tomorrow."

"Thanks," John answered him, "but I don't think you understand. They're closing the airport and stopping all flights." We looked at each other in alarm. There is no way to get to Birmingham tonight and by eight o'clock tomorrow morning it will be too late."

CHAPTER 18

The hotel was not very flexible - it was not able to manage breakfast next morning before the appointed hour. Major Durham said that most things in Britain seem to improve when oiled with money and the hotel manager was no exception. With the application of sums of money from my father they did manage to provide us with coffee substitute and toast, though the latter was smeared with a rather poor quality margarine and insipid, runny jam. In English terms my father had to pay extra for that but the exchange rate, as I mentioned earlier, makes things cheap for foreigners there. With this rather poor breakfast we were at least not quite starving as we trooped through the early morning gloom into the station.

Major Durham and my father had decided to travel by train via London to Oxford and try and take refuge for a time in the Bolivian Embassy. I thought all of London was flooded and, anyway, I was not sure why they settled on this route. John apparently thought it would be better than going via Birmingham and told my father he had ideas for getting out of the country by way of London, if we didn't make it as far as Oxford. I don't think he explained himself to my father and I certainly had no idea what he intended. He sounded confident without being specific.

We, my father and I and the security men, would have been safe enough whatever happened, I think. The military might have given us a rough time while they checked out our story, but I don't think they would have harmed us. I think Eva would have been OK., though I'm not certain about Mr. Benderman and the children as they're British citizens. Possibly the new government would have been glad to get rid of them too, though they might well have spent a while coming to a decision. The major and soldiers were a different story.

Anyway, the Major thought it would be sensible to buy the tickets in little groups, so as not to attract too much attention and that seemed like a good idea. Steven Benderman bought tickets for four

adults and the two children, which covered our security guards. I bought tickets for another three adults and two children, then put the children's tickets into a waste bin, which took care of us and the Major. The four soldiers were still with us and looking a bit hopeful, like pet dogs beside the table when you're eating, or by the door when you go out - they didn't want to be left behind if they could help it. My father sent the bodyguards, separately to buy three tickets each, which covered the whole party. We wandered to the platform without any check being made at all. Not even a ticket collector was on duty at the gate and by 7.30 we were on the train.

The major had acquired a small portable radio from somewhere and listened for news of the coup: it came on the 8.00 bulletin, as an announcement of something that had already happened. It mentioned that Major Durham and the Prime Minister were both under arrest, so the army would probably be looking for the Major very thoroughly indeed, when they found they hadn't arrested him after all.

The train to London made better time than the one from Oxford the day before. After a little way there was a straight and level track that suggested how the British had once connected everything to their old capital. For much of the way there was actually a double track and beside the lines there was old level gravelling, hinting at other tracks, presumably torn up for recycling. There must have been a lot of travel once, and frequent trains to need more lines: I must say we only passed three others all the way. Two rambling freight trains and a passenger train like ours.

My father supplied our fellow passengers with money - he seemed to have a considerable source, having changed some before we came to Britain and more at the hotel. Foreign currency seems to go a long way when you swap it for British money - they've gone back to pounds, but you get a lot of them for a Euro or a Boliviano. Anyway, armed with money, everybody dribbled down to the buffet car and made a late but expensive breakfast of hot 'something' - it was probably best not enquire too closely what - and tomato rolls and real coffee.

The route to London was flat and all the way we passed by fields and farms where the land was more intensively cultivated than anything I'd seen before I came to this country. I wasn't much called upon as interpreter. So as not to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves, the Bendermans travelled as a family, taking up four seats as a group. The soldiers travelled together as another group and the bodyguards sat across the aisle from us, a semi detached pair. My father, the Major and I travelled together as a three, but the Major slept

a lot of the time - I suspect he had been busy the night before - and spent the rest of his time fiddling with the radio.

The older main line stations in London were, so John told us, beneath the rising flood waters, and the train now stopped at one of the old North London stations, Finsbury Park.

"The underground still runs," he said, "Well, some of it does, though all the low lying stations are blocked off because of the flooding."

He told us we could take this metro from Finsbury Park to Hanger Lane, where the trains from the west terminated. Apparently we'd have to change metro lines deep under the flooded part of the city, which sounded a bit dodgy to me, considering how unreliable everything in this country seemed to be. John said we could get a train to Oxford from Hanger Lane - if we ever got there.

Near to London the guard came round to check the tickets. "You'll need permits to move around now, because of the coup," he said. "You're all right as far as London, because the train left Leeds before the coup was announced. They'll tell you when you arrive where you can get permits to complete your journey," He looked again at the tickets. "Why are you going to Oxford the long way round?" he asked suspiciously.

"We are the Bolivian delegation to talks on climate change," my father explained in his not so fluent English. The guard waited, because that didn't answer his question.

I had a flash of inspiration. "We're being taken to see for ourselves the effects of sea level rise," I said.

"Oh well, that's all right, sir," said the guard, in a much friendlier tone. "You'll have no trouble at all getting the permits. A quick word between the police station and your embassy will be all it takes." He looked closely at the Major. "You're not part of the Bolivian delegation," he suggested cautiously.

"No," I said, "He's advisor appointed by the military."

"Not the last government?" He sounded suspicious.

"No," answered the major and the guard hesitated.

"He is escorting us to see the effect of the flooding and to make sure we don't do anything too risky," I explained, inventive again on the spur of the moment.

"The police will check with your unit and issue a permit if the orders are unchanged," he said at last. He went on and I heard him giving the same warning to the others in their little groups. He was polite about it all and not exactly unfriendly but, like the guard the day before, he carried the silent menace of a gun to back it up.

The train pulled into Finsbury Park and I noticed the guard watching us as we went down the subway. I imagine he was making sure we didn't try to slip away down the embankment, which might have been possible. The track runs on a high embankment at that point and the platforms are above street level too. I suppose that's why they chose it. At any rate, you go down steps from the platforms to the subway and then down more steps to the exit. The Major turned in the opposite direction to the exit, and we followed him down a linking staircase that led to the metro. "We've have tickets to Oxford," he said. "That includes crossing London."

He hurried us down the steps to the metro platform. There was a signboard indicating the next train as due in only three minutes.

"If that sign is correct, we've not long to wait," I said to my father and he nodded.

The two girls, Eva and Julia, looked as if this was quite an adventure they were enjoying. Steven Benderman looked a bit apprehensive and Eva rather excited. The rest of the faces in the party gave no clue as to the emotions behind them.

There was a sort of singing from the rails and then a rumble as the metro approached. The train was old but clean. It was dead on time and the doors slid open. As we got in and the doors closed I thought that I saw the guard and a railway official came onto the platform. He had watched us into the subway and had seemed rather suspicious of the Major, but I only caught a fleeting glance of the two men and I wasn't certain, so I didn't mention it to the others. I wondered, though, if they'd be waiting at Hanger Lane.

The Bendermans sat as a family in four seats facing each other and the soldiers sat as another foursome. Father, John and I sat in seats facing inwards and, across the aisle, there was a cheerful looking metro employee. I should think he was going to or from work: I must say I wouldn't like to work below the ground and the floodwater all the time. The coach was otherwise empty, which turned out to be useful.

The train rumbled through the darkness at a speed hard to guess with nothing to relate to, the tunnel giving way once or twice to darkened stations, presumably abandoned because of the floods. I hope they are good and watertight!

At one point the train came to a complete halt in the tunnel. The silence was deafening but the metro employee opposite us didn't look at all put out. "Don't worry," he said, "Often stops like this. Hope you're not claustrophobic."

I smiled and shook my head. I didn't think I was claustrophobic, but I began to feel decidedly uncomfortable about the delay. Then, without explanation for the stoppage, we rumbled on

slowly, only to stop again after a few seconds. This time I could see we were in a darkened, disused station.

A door at one end of the carriage opened and the driver came back. "Sorry about the delay," he said, "There's going to be a power cut and blackout." and strode through the door at the end of the coach to tell passengers on the next one.

The off-duty metro-man looked puzzled. "They don't give you advance warning of a power cut," he remarked.

I asked him what he meant. "Well," he explained, "There's no advance warning of a power failure, it just fails."

"Why do you think there's warning this time?" I asked him.

"When we had a military government before, they used this trick to hold up people they wanted to get their hands on. Have you got travel permits?" he added, not really intending it as a question.

"Actually we set off from Leeds before the coup, so we don't have permits," I said. "We're part of the Bolivian delegation to the climate change talks, so we'd be all right" I explained, "but the soldiers escorting us were appointed by the civilian government. I suppose they might want them, though I can't see why."

"It wouldn't do any harm to steer clear of the military police," he said. "They're a nasty lot." and the lights went out. There was just a small emergency lamp glowing dimly in the otherwise total darkness that pressed in around us.

"There doesn't seem to be anywhere to go, even if we wanted," I said.

"Ah well, this used to be a major interchange on the old underground system before the floods," he said. "We're in the old Kings Cross station and there's a maze of passageways between different lines, including some no longer used."

The Major was listening with a growing interest. "The old Northern Line City Branch?" he asked.

"Right enough. There's no trains run that way and they took up the rails for scrap, but the tunnel is still there."

"Where does it come out?" John asked.

"It's a three and a half mile hike to Kennington," he said, "Then you have to go a couple more stations after that, because Kennington's closed. Tidal. Quite a walk but safe."

"How much do you want to show us the way?"

"I'd do it for nothing if I wasn't so hard up. I'll take you for five thousand."

John reached for his wallet and in the near darkness counted out four one thousand pound notes and a two. It didn't seem much money for the risk, but perhaps the risk was not great.

"I won't ask your name," he said, "but what do we call you?"

"Al," he answered.

Al led everybody - the Bendermans, the soldiers, the security guards and so on, quietly to the back of the coach.

"Okay," he whispered, opening the door at the end of the coach. "Step onto the buffers between the carriages and step from them onto the platform." He addressed the Major. "You'd better come last and help them, especially the children."

"Right," he whispered back, and Al disappeared from sight.
I don't know how the others fared, but it was tricky. Eventually we were all safely on the disused platform. "I've got a torch," said Al, "but I won't use it yet to avoid drawing attention. Link hands and follow me.

On the platform, now that our eyes had grown accustomed to the near dark, there was just a little glow from the emergency lights in the train. Off the platform and in the connecting passageway the darkness was total. After a minute of so Al switched on a torch. I've heard the expression 'a beam of light cutting through the darkness', but I've never see an example of it before - the darkness was thick and heavy, like something solid, and torch beam knifed through it as if it was sharp.

Anyway, by the light of his one torch we hurried along passages, down a long flight of steps and stumbled onto another platform of the disused station.

"Old Northern line, south bound," said Al. "There's about three and a half miles of tunnel before we connect with the part we still use. We pass seven old stations but the air's all right and the way is level. He jumped off the platform to where the track had been. "Right," he said, "I'll help you down. Who's first?"

That hike ... march ... walk ... whatever you call it, was dreadful. We stumbled along in the darkness and dead atmosphere of that deserted tunnel as if it would never end. The first disused station came up fairly quickly but, long before the last, I was praying for the enterprise to end. For most of the way the tunnel was dry, though there was a stretch where we splashed through and inch or two of water and there was the sound of trickling and dripping.

"Don't worry," Al said. "They still pump out the water from the unused sections, to keep the used sections dry. It's safe enough." I wondered why they didn't just seal off the unused sections. Perhaps they had never got around to it or maybe there was some other reason. Either way, it was lucky for us that they hadn't done it yet.

At one point, where the disused tunnel merged with the route they use, there was an abandoned station. The next half mile would have been awkward without someone really knowledgeable, like Al. "Through trains are every forty minutes on this stretch," He said. We rest up here until we hear one go through and then the way's clear.

You'll need to be careful not to touch the extra rail on the outside. That's live, though they switch it off until there's a train due."

We waited until a train rumbled past and then hiked on to the next station but one. Eventually the darkness grew less complete and I could see the beginnings of a glow in the distant blackness, which grew into the station.

We had to approach carefully, Al looking out for watching eyes. We came up the tunnel to a platform that seemed brilliantly lit after the complete darkness, though the lights were actually not very good. He led us through to the emergency stairs and upwards to street level. I don't know whether the lift worked, but it wouldn't have been a good idea to use it. The stairs were an endless spiral, and my thighs ached from the hundreds of steps.

At the top of the stairs Al peered cautiously out. From where I was standing I couldn't see anybody, but there must have been a ticket collector. Al signed to us to stay put and he walked out. I heard him chatting to someone. After a moment the two of them went off together.

The Major peered round the corner and said "Coast's clear," and he led us out into the sunlight.

"Right," he said, "If we go far on foot the police will stop us sooner or later. Let's get something to eat, then I think we'll steal a bus.

CHAPTER 19

I can hardly claim much experience at stealing buses, but it appears so easy that I am surprised it doesn't occur all the time. Perhaps it does in Britain. Or, considering that nobody seemed to be looking for us, perhaps it doesn't.

Whichever the case, this one was powered by electricity from overhead wires, restricting travel to those streets where there were wires, so I suppose it would be just a short time before discovery and arrest. A bus in front of you would have been an obstacle too, but we didn't encounter that.

There was a bus in a side street and, while we watched, another drew up behind it. The driver of the second got out and walked round to talk to the driver of the first, then they both went round to a small cafe in the main road 'for a cuppa', as I heard one of them say.

As soon as they were out of sight, two of the soldiers handed over their weapons to the other two to hold and got into the first bus by simply using the emergency door switch. While one pulled the wires off the ignition switch and joined them together, the other turned the indicator board to 'Sorry - Not In Service'. By the time the second one had finished with the indicator, the first was sitting in the driver's seat. He opened the door for the rest of us and we climbed in.

"Keep down for the moment," said the Major, "We don't want anyone asking themselves why there are passengers on an out-of-service bus." Then he turned to the soldier who was driving and said, "Right into the main road, straight through the first set of lights and take the left fork when you come to Clapham Common."

He turned to father and me. "I think I can remember the way, more or less, to where I want to go. Once we turn left towards Tulse Hill it's one long road to the main route out of London, though we can't get to Kent on a trolley bus," he added for our benefit. Where this 'Kent' was or why he wanted to go there, he didn't explain.

The bus didn't make much noise. The Benderman children went upstairs and Eva and her husband went with them to keep an eye on them. Father went too. It was the first real chance there had been to talk to his cousin. I stayed downstairs with the major and the soldiers. I thought that, between my father's less than perfect English and Eva's rusty Spanish they could probably manage the conversation OK.

South London was not very prepossessing - the buildings were dowdy and needed paint and every open space and spare bit of land was under cultivation. As we rose higher I caught glimpses from time to time of buildings rising from floodwater, like some great natural disaster, which I suppose it was. What I mean is, that this looked like it would soon end. But it wouldn't: those buildings would eventually collapse into the rising waters. The city was drowning and nothing could save it - that should have been done a hundred years ago. I felt a great sadness for the stupidity of the human race and recalled how stupid Cy Wagnowski had been and wished to see the high mountains of the Alto Plano or the sheer cliffs of the Valle De La Luna again. I found sea level oppressive for the first time on this trip.

The feeling of homesickness passed a little and the bus climbed steadily onto higher ground to the south east of the city. We kept on trundling quietly along in more or less the same direction when a police car passed. Its occupants didn't show any interest in the bus, but John thought we'd better get rid of it anyway, before we were picked up.

We passed a bus depot of one of the rural services and rounded a bend. "Stop here," John instructed the driver. "Okay," he called, "Everybody off and wait by that bus stop." When everybody but the driver was off the bus he told him, "That side road runs down hill. Drive the bus to the corner, then let it run down the hill a few yards on its own momentum. Then turn first left, out of sight of the main road."

I think the bus company will be a while looking for their bus, which will give us a good start. They'll also need something to tow it back to the overhead wires. The driver joined us.

"Now," said the Major, "We'll need one not so limited as to where it can go." He said to the two soldiers who had broken into the first bus, "You two come with me." For the benefit of the rest of us he added, "Wait here a few minutes."

We stood at the bus stop like a miscellany of people waiting for a bus. I wondered what would happen if one came, but we didn't have long to wait for the Major. A bus appeared in just a few minutes. A small, elderly bus came grinding into sight, on a clapped out diesel engine making clouds of sooty exhaust. There was an indicator board

saying 'Private Hire' and it also carried a hand written sign 'Requisitioned for Army Use'.

It ground to a halt alongside us, the doors opened and John called out, "Climb on and let's get moving."

We climbed aboard and John explained that he had not 'stolen' this bus: he had 'requisitioned' it for army purposes, though he didn't give us any more details of his story than that. One of his soldiers had cut the telephone cable, so checking his story would take a while, by which time we'd be long gone. He seemed very pleased with himself. As the bus was hijacked rather than stolen he thought we could sit on the seats properly, which was an improvement.

The bus coughed and wheezed its way out of London and into countryside. John said he thought there would be less risk if we kept off the motorways, so the roads we travelled were even worse and the journey took even longer.

All this countryside, John said, was part of the county of Kent. Presumably a county was some kind of administrative area. As the day wore on and the light began to fade, we still trundled steadily on through darkening fields of endless crops, along a road marked as A20. through somewhere called Maidstone towards another place the signs referred to as Ashford.

John thought we should find a place to eat, but there was no sign of anywhere. We turned off onto some country roads after dark had fallen completely and a fine drizzle had begun.

At a village inn - I'm not sure of the name of the village - the Major saw a sign offering food. The Major sent the Benderman family in to eat. He went in himself with us and the two security men and told the landlord that we were an official visiting team from Bolivia on our way to the barracks at Maidstone and could he have a meal for us and something for the escort. We got it and it was eatable.

John is very plausible when he puts on his military act and I think the man was just glad to be paid. It was turning nine thirty when we set off again, rumbling along the same country road.

"There's a tunnel under the channel," said John. He said it to my father and me, quite without any preamble. "It hasn't been used regularly for passengers for twenty years or more, but freight trains still use it. What's more to the point, there's a service tunnel you can drive through. There's a gate and it's guarded, but it's usable." It seems that the reason John knew so much about it was that he'd once had overall responsibility for the security there, as a part of some posting or other.

"The guard changes at eleven pm and doesn't change again until seven in the morning." he said. I wondered whether he hadn't thought this all out years ago. That set me wondering what had

become of Jennifer Hammond. The Major continued: "If we take out the night guard just after it's changed, our escape won't be discovered until seven tomorrow morning, by which time we'll be in France."

That sounded okay as plans went, though the thought of another long tunnel wasn't all that inviting. Still, we'd be driving through this one.

The bus was reversed off the road, onto a little track. There we were largely hidden from view by several trees and some higher, rather untidy hedges. The headlights were doused, the interior light turned off and we waited in the darkness, the rain and the silence. The Benderman girls were asleep. After about fifteen minutes or so there were headlights on the trees and a jeep roared past.

"Just four men," reported the driver and the Major nodded.

"Wait for the ones coming off duty," he said. We waited.

About fifteen more minutes passed and, just when I was wondering if there was another road up to the tunnel, the headlights again shone on the trees, coming the other way this time, and two jeeps drove past this time.

"More on the day shifts than the night one," said John to nobody in particular. At his instruction the bus was started up and Headlights but not interior lights were switched on. We coughed and wheezed our way back onto the road. I wondered how well armed the guards would be. The four soldiers with our party had machine rifles of some sort and I knew the two Bolivian bodyguards were carrying concealed guns. I wondered whether that would be enough if shooting started.

The Major sent two of his men to the emergency door at the back of the bus, where they crouched with their guns. What their instructions were I wasn't sure. The Major positioned the spare soldier opposite the front entrance and the two bodyguards checked their guns.

As we rounded a bend I glimpsed a chain link fence and a steel barrier. In the light of the headlights I saw two armed guards coming out to see us. The bus stopped and the two men at the back dropped silently out of the emergency door, While the Major straightened his cap, waited until the driver opened the front door, and stepped down.

"Good evening," I heard the Major say, throwing the guards off balance with uniform, his rank, his lack of weapons and his friendliness. The guards both approached, coming out of the light. "Is this the customs control unit? I'm damned if I can see any signs."

I couldn't hear the reply, but the two men from the emergency exit came up behind the guards in the dark and disarmed them without a struggle.

While the two guards climbed up into the bus, watched by the soldier with a gun, the Major, with his two soldiers walked, quite openly, towards the guardhouse. In the poor light the two men looked like the two guards. They went into the guardhouse and came out a minute or two later with another two men under their guns.

When they too were led up into the bus the Major said, "Right. You four won't be harmed in any way as long as you behave. Simmonds. Collect their weapons, put them in the jeep and follow behind the bus. Close the barrier once we've gone through."

"Sir." He snapped to attention and saluted, then left."

The Major turned his attention to the guards. "We intend to drive through the service tunnel to France," he said. "The military police want some of us already, so don't try anything stupid. On the other hand you'll be free to come back if you want to when we've made our getaway. Now, am I going to have any trouble?"

The guards said not and I think they meant it. These men were like the soldiers with our party, rather than the customs and immigration people who had met us when we arrived. I thought it over. The police in Harrogate had been careful and suspicious, like customs immigration staff. I concluded that those who had direct contact with outsiders - customs, immigration, local vigilante type police and perhaps, from what I'd heard, the military police, were potentially very unpleasant. I thought these soldiers might easily opt to fall in with us completely. Oh well.

With the barrier closed behind us we drove a little way round the corner, past some darkened buildings and stopped, the jeep just behind us. "Need some more diesel," said the major. "Won't be long."

The engine stopped and with it the windscreen wiper. It was raining a fine rain again and there was a chilly wind - I could see bushes moving in the breeze and I could feel it when the bus door opened - making it a miserable night. The Benderman girls were still asleep, the two security men had their weapons out. Nobody talked. I heard liquid splashing into the bus's fuel tank.

I suppose the stop was only for about ten minutes altogether, though it felt longer. Eventually everyone climbed back in, the bus started and the major guided the little convoy round the end of one of the buildings and down a slope, a sort of ramp cutting deeper into the earth. We halted just in front of some gates (or doors, I don't really know which you'd call them) the jeep just behind,

John got down from the bus and went to a panel in the wall of the cutting. He opened it, pulled a lever and the gates slid open, rather like the doors on the metro had done. It was a good thing he knew where the controls were: it would have taken ages to find them in the dark if you didn't know to start with.

The bus and the jeep drove through and stopped again. Suddenly there was an explosion. I suppose it wasn't that loud - it didn't wake the Benderman girls - but it was loud enough to startle me and I looked around, peering to see what it was. As I watched I could just see the gates closing again. A moment later the Major got back on the bus and we set off again.

"Sorry about the bang," he said. "I thought a grenade in the control panel would slow them down a bit if there was any pursuit."

"It startled me," I said, and one of the guards grinned. He actually looked almost friendly.

"It won't stop anyone. There's a hand operated device for winding open the doors, but it will slow them down."

There isn't much you can say about driving through a tunnel. Every so often there were connecting doorways on the right and left leading, I presume, into the rail tunnels. They must have had a lot of traffic once to need two tunnels for trains.

The guard who had grinned at me earlier went to the major and said, "I'd better tell you, because we might all be killed, that there's a customs and immigration post in the tunnel itself. It's right at the half way point."

The Major looked at him sharply. "How many men?"

"Not many," said the man. "Three customs, two immigration and half a dozen military police."

The Major thought it over. Eventually he said, "That's new. In my day they just stopped everything at this end." He thought it over some more. "Is there a guard house?" he asked.

"I've never been inside," the guard said, "but I've heard the customs blokes complaining that they'd been promised a proper post but it hadn't been built yet. I think there's just an area of tunnel set out as a guard room with oil drums filled with concrete to block the tunnel."

I didn't like the sound of it. The whole escape plan had gone too easily. The bus stopped and the major got up. "Can one of your men drive?" he asked.

I asked them and one volunteered. As he got into the driver's seat the Major went, with his three soldiers and the co-operative guard, to the jeep. The service tunnel was wide enough for the jeep to crawl past us. The second security man checked his gun again and we set off slowly, the jeep leading this time, the major and five reasonably well armed men in it.

We drove on through the blackness and I think I must have fallen asleep for a while. At least, the next thing I remember is the bus stopped and the security man whispering. "Sorry to wake you, but the Major wants to give me some instructions."

I shook my head sleepily, trying to concentrate. "Yes?" I said.

"I'm going on ahead," the Major said softly. "The jeep has a laser rifle so two are sticking with me in the jeep while the other three go down the rail tunnel. I wanted these two," and he indicated the security men, "to help keep an eye on the prisoners and drive the bus."

I translated for the security men. There was a whispering and soft scuffling, as we changed drivers and the soldier who had been driving joined the others in the jeep.

My father heard me, and Eva translated for her husband. The Major left silently and the jeep set off a moment later. In the distance there was a glow of light and I could just make out the jeep going towards it. The bus headlights were off and we sat in near darkness. I heard at least one of the Benderman kids moving around and heard Eva quietening her.

Suddenly there was a quick scuffle and one of the guards lunged at the security man, trying to wrench away his pistol. The lights of the bus came on and, while we were all blinking at the sudden brightness, the other security guard, who was still in the driving seat remember, shot once from the driver's area. As the rebellious tunnel guard was falling, the lights went off again and we were plunged into blinding darkness again. It was so sudden that it was over before it happened and patterns were dancing in front of my eyes.

"Gracias," said the security man, pushing the body aside.

"De nada," answered the voice of the driver. Those two could certainly move fast when the situation demanded it!

Then our attention was pulled back to the distant scene as there were several very bright flashes, a few gunshots and an explosion. And I thought I could hear a train rumbling in the distance.

CHAPTER 20

The bus stayed well back and I wasn't around the fighting to see what happened, but the Major told my father what happened and I translated, so I can describe it to you. I was not all that interested in the details but I can tell you in general what took place.

It seems that the jeep with the laser, which made all those bright flashes I mentioned, kept advancing slowly, while three men dropped off and went through one of the connecting arches into the train tunnel and sneaked up quietly. The men in the jeep claimed that they were chasing intruders but the military police didn't believe them. I think that was mostly because they hadn't telephoned first, so the police and immigration staff started shooting and the jeep opened up with the laser.

All this distracted attention long enough to enable the others to use a couple of grenades and their weapons from the side entrance. Anyway, the fight was over in short order. It was moving those cement filled oil drums that took the time and, of course, a freight train arrived from the French side while it was being done. The driver and guard were supposed to pick up a British train at the mid-point and take it back. There wasn't one yet, so they chose to come with us, rather than wait in the dark and the debris. I don't blame them.

The Major had one man cut the telephone wires and 'disable' the lights. I'm not sure how you 'disable' a light. The word implies more than just switching them off, so I suppose they cut the cables or something. Anyway, they did whatever it was, and then we left, taking the weapons with us. I don't think the whole business had taken more than about an hour. I don't suppose the real time would be more than two or three o'clock in the morning, though I couldn't see my watch and there was, of course, nothing outside the bus to see by. I think I slept.

I woke again when the engine of the bus began to labour a bit. It was not really much louder, but it seemed to be working harder and I

could tell we were going steadily uphill. We seemed to climb for ages and I suppose we did. The tunnel must go pretty deep to get under the Dover Channel or whatever they call this stretch of sea, so its not surprising that the tunnel climbs a long way.

There are no doors on French side of the service tunnel, though there were a couple of guards who were rather surprised to see us. My French was the best of the party - it's very good, as I told you earlier - and, though the Major spoke a little French, I did most of the interpreting.

I explained who we were and that everyone was either Bolivian or had been offered asylum in Bolivia (except the French train driver and guard, of course). One of the Frenchmen phoned his HQ. He said afterwards that there was transport coming for the train crew and an escort for us and would we mind waiting. It was still dark, though there were the first signs of dawn breaking. We were now safely in France, but I for one would have felt safer a bit further from the tunnel - there were only a couple of French guards and the British Military Police might yet turn up.

The French seemed efficient and neither we, nor the train crew, had long to wait. We followed a battery powered electric car to some buildings not far away. A junior officer asked us politely to leave the weapons, except hand-guns, and follow him inside. We were given coffee (the real thing) with an apology that there wasn't anything to eat at that time of the morning, and invited to sit down.

It was a large room - more a small hall. Possibly it had been some sort of terminal lounge in the days when there were passengers to use the trains. Perhaps I should say, when there were trains for them to use. The chairs were comfortable compared to those on the bus and the faces as we sat around drinking coffee looked a lot more hopeful.

Eventually, more than an hour and a half later, several people arrived. One looked like a reasonably senior military officer, the second wore a uniform that wasn't quite armed forces: she turned out to be an immigration officer. The third was in civilian dress and introduced himself as an examining magistrate. They were polite and rather formal at first, but 'thawed out' a little - I like that phrase, 'thawed out', though it's not regarded as very polite in some circles, now that the world is 'thawing out' - as the session progressed.

"We will have to check with the Bolivian embassy in Zürich, you realise," said Mademoiselle Lapin, the immigration officer. "I am already convinced your story is true, but checking it is a matter of duty."

"Once your story has been checked," added the magistrate, "you will, of course be free to continue your journey. I shall authorize

temporary entry visas, restricting you to movement through the European Federation. It is a duty to ask each one individually and in turn whether he or she wishes to return to Britain."

While he went through the process with me translating, the immigration officer went to call Zürich. I wasn't surprised that everybody wanted asylum in Bolivia, having seen Britain for myself.

"Now there is the question of The Benderman family," the magistrate continued. "Madame Benderman is an European Federation citizen so, therefore, are her two daughters. Messieur Benderman has for more than ten years been partner to an EF citizen so, on production of the partnership agreements I can issue a citizenship document to him."

Mr Benderman looked relieved and Eva looked really happy. The two girls were playing in a corner.

Mademoiselle Lapin returned smiling. She said to my father, "You have been causing your embassy considerable alarm since yesterday morning's coup and your complete disappearance, Senor Graham de Martinez."

She sat down with the other two and continued, "The embassy confirms those parts of your story that it can and, more importantly, confirms the asylum status of those who aided your escape from Britain. They have agreed to pay for suitable accommodation, since you have had a rather busy night, and to charter a coach to take you all to Madrid."

I translated for the benefit of the soldiers and explained that they could fly to La Paz from Madrid and, for the first time, there were expressions of real relief, even jubilation, and wide smiles all round.

A junior officer went up to the military member of the panel and whispered something. He nodded. Then he turned to me and said: "A British military police detachment has arrived here through the tunnel and is demanding the return of British citizens. I have asked a couple of representatives to come in."

The Military Police duly arrived and immediately put up French backs by speaking virtually no French. I was not feeling kindly disposed towards them and didn't offer to help. Mademoiselle Lapin spoke reasonably good English and translated more or less what was said. That didn't help them either, because they were rude and demanding.

Eventually the magistrate said, "There are no British citizens here. Just the Bolivian delegation with diplomatic immunity and some EF citizens."

When this was translated the British 'hit the roof' as they say in English, and pointed out the Major and the other soldiers. Mademoiselle Lapin was dismissive. "All these men have been given

political asylum in Bolivia and temporary entry visas to the EF to pass through en route for Bolivia. You have not been granted entry visas, so you will have to be deported immediately."

To say the British were not pleased with this ruling is an understatement, but that's too bad. I had the impression that none of those on the investigating panel liked the British Military Police any more than we did.

I hadn't realised how hungry I was until we reached the hotel dining room. I hadn't realised how tired I was until I reached my hotel bedroom.

When I woke up and came down it was already afternoon. The weather was better and my mood was better too, though a spell at a higher altitude would have been welcome. Three of the soldiers sat with Steven Benderman trying to learn Spanish from Eva. The two girls were playing on the lawn with the two bodyguards and the Major was sitting with my father.

"John thinks he will spend two or three days with us in Salobreña," said father. "Then he'll go with the rest of the soldiers to Bolivia. It is possible that there will be a place for them in the Bolivian army."

I nodded. They seemed to be communicating all right without me, so I went in search of a snack.

The next morning early a coach arrived to take us on to Madrid as promised and, though coach takes much longer than plane, you see the countryside better. We wound along the Atlantic coast of France, diverting inland wherever the road went through low-lying country, to Spain.

Away from the coast, Spain is high. We went through the high, dry tableland of the meseta. It was the first time any of us apart from Eva had seen this part of Spain, but the mountains made me homesick for Bolivia again. I must say, though, that the air at higher levels felt better.

We left the soldiers at a hotel in Madrid to study Spanish, see the sights and wait for the Major a few days, while we went on by train to Granada and bus to Salobreña.

Suddenly and without any warning, Concha sat up. There was no floating in the wide blue yonder, no drifting gently down. She startled the other three completely and said, "It's too terrible."

"What is?" Dave was obviously concerned.

"Do you mean that what happens next is too horrible?" asked Gill.

"No," said Concha. "Nothing like that. Everyone ends up safe in Bolivia. No I meant what was happening to Salobreña."

"What?" asked Dave.

"In that story it was becoming just a rock in the sea with a few houses and a castle. It's too terrible an end for such a lovely place."

She got up and put her shoes on, apparently none the worse for the sudden change to the present.

"I want some other kind of future," she went on. "Why isn't Eugene's project changing the future?"

Gill was thoughtful and a little uncertain.

"I know what I believe about the past," she said. "I'm not so sure about the future. Perhaps there is only one past but many futures. Perhaps only one out a many possibilities will actually come to be."

"But you can travel both back and forward," objected Dave.

"You don't 'travel'," Gill pointed out. "Your body and even your consciousness stay here, in the present moment. All you do is experience something. Perhaps you just examine your own subconscious, or maybe past present and future are all there at a higher level."

After a pause she added, “Some quantum physicists think that the universe is a hologram. Perhaps this is just a way of reaching the hologram.”

"Steve doesn't seem to think you can see future time," said Concha. "Gill tried to explain it to me but I didn't understand. Not properly, anyway."

"You not only don't go anywhere during the Christos Experiment," said Gill. "You can't. I just said, you experience what has been or what may be, but you, yourself, remain in the present. And what about the idea that time doesn't necessarily happen in sequence, so you may have already lived future lives? One famous scientist suggests a random view of time very much like that, though I don’t agree, as I said."

There was a silence as the other three thought Gill’s words.

CHAPTER 21

Gill grabbed her suitcase from amongst the others on the moving belt and deliberately held it so as to block her husband from reaching his.

"Now you'll have to wait until it comes round again," she said between fits of laughter as she put it on their trolley. "Oh look," she said, waving, "There's Eugene. I knew he was coming to the wedding but I didn't know it was on the same flight. How on earth did we miss him?"

Steve was watching for his case. "No idea," he said.

"Who's that with him?"

"No idea," said Steve again, concentrating on the approaching suitcase.

"I wonder if it's his wife."

"He's not married,"

"Well who is it then? His girlfriend?"

"Go and ask him," said Steve taking hold of two cases, one of which held the wedding present, and putting them on the trolley with Gill's case and their hand baggage. Eugene was collecting his case at the end of the belt, where it turned back to circle again, so they had to pass him on the way to passport control anyway.

"Hello," he said. "I didn't think there were enough people on a flight like this to miss anyone. Can I introduce my sister Claire?"

She was two or three years younger than Eugene and strikingly pretty, especially when she smiled. She had a really friendly smile that seemed to light up her whole face. She didn't say much: perhaps she was a little shy or possibly she was overwhelmed by the occasion.

The terminal building at Malaga is designed to have spare capacity even at the height the summer season. In late September it was barely half full, cool and unhurried. They wandered through the arrivals procedure and out into the vast, marble tiled concourse. Dave and Concha were waiting for them.

"Hi," said Dave. "We borrowed a minibus for a few days from one of Concha's uncles, so we have plenty of room." Dave looked tanned. Concha looked ... happy? More than that.

"You wheel the trolleys out onto the pick up area and I'll bring the minibus round," he continued, and disappeared.

Gill and Concha behaved as if they hadn't seen each other for years, when actually it had only been a few months, but the Spanish girl also made what looked like a genuine attempt to make Eugene and his sister welcome as well. Gill was a little puzzled: they were not really close friends. Was Concha still obsessed with the salt resistant rice project?

They pushed the two luggage trolleys through the tinted glass automatic doors and into brilliant sunlight. It was actually quite hot.

"If it's this hot at the end of October it must be really hot in July," Gill remarked.

Concha smiled. The observation didn't really merit a reply.

"We're having a heat wave," she said "It was twenty one degrees centigrade about an hour ago," she said as a rather dusty white minibus drew up beside them and Dave stepped down.

"Put your cases in the back," he said, going round to open the rear door. A couple of taxi drivers had been watching the two trolleys hopefully. Now they turned away disappointed.

Steve passed the cases from both trolleys up to Dave, while the others climbed in from the front. After Steve had returned the trolleys they too clambered in, Dave driving.

The minibus headed away from the airport and merged with traffic on the road into Malaga from Torremolinas and Marbella, to filter off it again shortly after, onto the Malaga ring road.

"Confusing language sometimes, Spanish," said Dave. "We're on the 'Ronda de Málaga, but Ronda the town is the other way.

"English has at least as many confusing moments," said Steve, relaxing in the Sun and 'Spanishness', "Maybe more. A boxing ring is square, for instance."

"A bullring is the other way round," said Dave "It's circular, but they call it 'Plaza del Torros' - square of the bulls." Dave put on a pained expression and Steve laughed.

"Ah," interrupted Concha, "that's partly because the English word 'square', like Berkley Square, implies a shape. The Spanish word 'plaza' doesn't imply any particular shape. It often means the same thing as 'Square' when you use it in addresses, but it's not the same." There was no answer to that, really.

The ring road curved gently back towards the coast and gave way to the coast road east. "We're going up to our house at Frigiliana on the way to Salobreña," said Concha in a moment of silence.

"Everybody has to look at the house you're going to live in after the wedding," said Dave, "It's a Spanish custom. You have to look at everybody's presents and inspect the house."

Gill was interested. One way of making sure you have somewhere to live," she said. "We can get out our presents and give you them there. Save carrying them all the way to Salobreña and back to Frigiliana,"

"You've got to give us them there," said Dave.

"There's no 'got to'", said Concha, though she did agree it was the custom.

Eugene asked why they had chosen Frigiliana.

"Well," said Dave, "Concha has a bilingual secretarial job with a travel agent in Nerja. It includes some courier work - meeting parties at the airport, going on excursions as a guide and so on. Living close to Nerja will make life easier when it comes to early starts and late finishes. My job is in Málaga, There's a good bus service and it's only about 40 minutes by car."

Eugene nodded. "Sounds ideal," he agreed.

"The other reason is that Frigiliana is a beautiful village but very quiet, and I like it," said Concha.

That's enough reason in itself," said Gill. "You may as well live in a place you like, if you can." She was thinking about her own luck, living in York.

Frigiliana was attractive. They turned inland off the coast road as they approached Nerja and, almost immediately, began to climb. The road was a series of tight bends as it climbed steeply up the mountainside, the country falling away. Suddenly they crested a hill and rounded a bend at the same time, to find themselves in the village.

"If we were to leave the car here and walk up there to the right," said Dave to Steve, "there are streets and streets of shallow steps, made up pebbles cemented into decorative patterns copied from Moorish designs. They're all too steep and too narrow for vehicles. There's a reasonable cafe up there too, run by an English couple."

They didn't stop, however. Dave kept to the main road and turned off by the town square, to pull up at the end of a short street that ended in more of the steps climbing upwards.

"We're just up here," said Dave.

"OK.," said Concha, taking over, "Everybody out. From here on we walk, but it isn't far."

Dave parked so close to the nearest wall that they all had to get out on the off side. There was just about enough room for another vehicle to squeeze past. Gill looked at the gap doubtfully.

"Bags of room," said Dave cheerfully. "Come on." and they all followed him up the hill.

It was a very pretty house, though nothing at all to look at from the front. The door opened straight onto a narrow street winding along the contour of the hill. It was barely a dozen steps up from the minibus and two doors along from the steps, which continued their breathless climb upwards.

The door opened almost directly into a living room and kitchen, cool and tiled. There were steps up and at first floor level, there was a bedroom over the downstairs rooms, with a balcony over the doorway. There was also a door out onto a little patio, from which led the bathroom and another bedroom. There was even a tiny garden. There was a blank wall on one side of the patio - presumably the back of rooms like those in their house - and, though there windows in the house above, it was so far above because of the hill, that it didn't really overlook them. The whole thing seemed quiet and private. All of the rooms were painted white and all the floors were tiled. The outside was whitewashed and everywhere, for decoration and security, there were wrought iron grills, banisters and railings, painted black. The house, like the village was breathtaking.

"Now," said Concha. "These curtains are a present from Aunt Maite and this washing machine is a present from my brother Raul. My parents paid for restoration of the house and fitting the bathroom. My Uncle Antonio came and decorated it all and tiled the upstairs and the pots and pans in the kitchen came from my grandparents. Come into the living room and see the lovely table my Auntie Pilar bought me."

Concha started back downstairs followed by Gill and Claire. Steve, Dave and Eugene followed, but neither as quickly nor as enthusiastically. "When the ritual is finished, we'll walk up to that cafe-bar and have a drink," said Dave. "I'm gagging with thirst, but this sort of tour is part of the traditions of a Spanish wedding."

"I presume your sister Alycia is coming over for the wedding, Dave," said Steve.

"She's already here," he answered. "The family came yesterday, but we left them in Salobreña to meet you lot."

"It'll be nice to see her again. I haven't seen her since the end of that archeological dig two years ago. Apart from when Gill and I got married, that is."

When the tour of the house and examination of the presents was over, Dave suggested the cafe-bar at the top of the village. "There a lots of others, of course," he said, "but El Jardin has splendid views from the terrace."

"It's also at the top of the village and a hell of a walk," said Concha, somewhat less than enthusiastically. "We won't have much time to stop but I suppose you will see the village." and she fell in with her husband. Gill walked with Claire and Steve walked with Eugene.

By the time they reached El Jardin they were puffed and sweating. They flopped into chairs around a table on the terrace - there were plenty free at this time of year - and sat, gazing and sweating, over long cold drinks.

"So, how's the project going, Eugene?" Concha asked, with such an air of casual interest that Gill and Steve could both tell that it was contrived.

"Extremely well," he answered. "I didn't expect to make this kind of rapid progress. I've already isolated a single gene responsible for tolerance to salt - the same one in several grasses that I've looked at. I haven't taken it out or transferred it or anything, of course. All I've done is identify it. It will be a very straightforward process to take it and transfer it to rice. It'll be time consuming, of course, but identifying the gene in the first place was the stroke of luck I needed."

"I'd have thought it was a matter of skill, not luck," Steve observed.

Eugene paused to take a swallow of beer and said, "It's like any detailed search. You have to know what you're looking for, but the luck is whether you start looking in the right place. Well, up to a point it is."

"Anyway," he continued, "Professor Badger tells me that there is an international conference in Switzerland some time early next year, and he's put us forward as speakers. He's hoping I'll be far enough advanced by then to present a paper at it." He was obviously proud of his progress and Claire looked proud of her brother too.

"So nothing can stop you now," said Concha.

Gill frowned. She didn't voice her doubts out loud, but she muttered to herself "There's many a slip ..."

She was thinking that Concha was putting too much store by Eugene's project. Ana's story had implied that, for some reason, Eugene would not succeed and she wondered why. Still, all seemed to be going well, so perhaps her misgivings were unfounded.

"We'd better be moving," said Dave suddenly, "It's getting towards the time we should be on our way."

"I suppose so," agreed Gill. "It's your big day tomorrow," she said to Concha, and they got to their feet reluctantly to walk back to the minibus and the drive on to Salobreña.

CHAPTER 22

The wind was not strong but it had a chilly edge to it and there were low clouds and an intermittent drizzle to make the London streets miserable. Leafless trees stood with bare branches in the square, windscreen wipers clicked endlessly on the cars that passed and, down a side street, rain dripped off some scaffolding. Doctor Fischer turned into the restaurant gratefully, handed his padded jacket to the cloakroom attendant and asked the doorman for his table, taking the briefcase with him. Two other men sat at the table already.

"Conrad Fischer," he said, holding out his hand. Both men stood to shake it.

He shook the hand of the older man first, assuming him to be senior as well as older. "Don Baxter," said the other and, indicating the younger man added, "And this is Walter Tumin."

The speaker pronounced 'Don' as homophonous with 'Dawn' - pinning his accent as Mid-West American with his first word.

The younger man bowed ever so slightly and said, "Pleased to meet you."

He was in his middle to late thirties with black, wire-rimmed glasses, a hard face and spoke with a somewhat 'transatlantic' accent, much harder to identify

There were no such doubts about Baxter's accent as he continued, "Business can wait. The waiter is on his way over, so we'll order first."

All three sat down and Dr. Fischer placed the briefcase by his side against the chair as a waiter padded silently across the plush carpet, pencil poised to take their order.

"I'll have the cream of tomato soup and a medium rare T-bone to follow," said the older man. "I'll have green beans, corn and fries with the steak and make sure it's not too well done."

The younger man and Dr. Fischer both also ordered. Fischer observed a pedantry in all of Tumin's requirements and demands -

cucumber must be included in the shrimp salad or he would take the melon, but without a glacé cherry on top. Fischer wondered why he couldn't simply leave a cherry if he didn't want it. Baxter was exact about his likes and dislikes.

Like me, Fischer thought, but Tumin is hyper-fastidious. He would have settled for any good wine to accompany the meal and Baxter said he didn't care what they had, so long as it was drinkable. Tumin, on the other hand, not only wanted wine from the right estate, he required the right year as well. Fischer felt sorry for the wine waiter and hoped Tumin tipped well, though he somehow doubted it.

Fischer noticed again the younger man's accent and the way he spoke perfect English but a shade too precisely. Was he simply pedantic about language, as he was about food, or was English a second language?

Baxter ate enthusiastically and Tumin ate as if it was a duty he could only perform if the conditions were exactly right, but no business could be discussed until the 'happy eater' had worked his way through the sweet trolley and the cheese board to the coffee. Only then was business permitted.

"I read your project outline. It looks like there could be an lot of money in it," said Baxter, pulling a briefcase from beside his chair and taking a plastic bound, A4 sized booklet from it. He put the briefcase down and placed the booklet on the table.

"I presumed you'd read it," said Fischer. "The discussions today implied it."

Tumin inclined his head slightly - almost nodded.

"What do you think of the prospects of a deal?" Dr Fischer asked.

Tumin smiled slightly. "There can, of course, be no question of a deal unless you have a patent application to sell us. The company has its own research facilities and the information provided would enable us to perform the transfer. We would without question be able to prepare our own application. However, somebody else might apply first." He paused, a hint of a smile still hovering.

"You, for instance," said Baxter. "What's to stop you selling the information to us and then applying for a patent yourself?"

"I would hardly..."

"Look," continued Baxter, "I'm not saying you would double-cross us, but you're coming to us on the quiet aren't you?"

"And we do not know you," Tumin added. "If your application for a patent," he continued, "were to be accepted, it would be possible to sell the application to us for a considerable sum. A very considerable sum. I take it you will apply for a patent."

"Of course," Fischer replied, "The snags are minor ones. The university holds all the rights to the discoveries of all those working on the project." Fischer studied his handkerchief carefully, then used it to wipe his good eye. "I could do with your assistance over one little matter."

"Yes?" said Tumin.

"The principle researcher is due to speak at an international conference in a week or so. I feel that publicity would have an adverse effect on progress and attract other researchers into the same field."

"We are ready to apply for a patent," Fischer continued, "but we haven't yet. My researcher is very good as a scientist, but inexperienced as a conference speaker - he might easily commit some indiscretion. Can he be stopped?"

Tumin looked thoughtful. "How important is he to the future of the project?"

"Very important in having got us where we are, but the work is done."

"I see. And this is the conference in Geneva, I take it?"

Fischer nodded.

"How's your researcher getting to Switzerland?" asked Baxter.

"By air," said Fischer. "He's flying from Manchester."

"No problem," said Baxter. "I'll need flight details, of course. I'll give you a number to call with the details. It won't be me on the line, but the information will be passed on to me."

He fished a piece of blank paper from a pocket book and wrote down 'Keith' and a number. "Just ask for Keith and give him just the flight number, date and time. Nothing more. Don't even mention what it's about."

He turned his attention to other matters. "I can see from this," and he waved the project outline, "that waiting is going to make the patent all the more valuable in the long run. I think you should apply for the patent, sell the rights to us and then forget about it for a year or two. Or three."

Fischer nodded again. "If the price is right," he said.

"It will be," said Baxter then he turned to Tumin. "I can fix up for this guy not to speak at the conference." Fischer polished the lens of his glasses and dusted the blacked out other lens. Baxter watched him replace them but made no comment.

Tumin was still considering the earlier matter. "There will be advance copies of the speech in the conference papers, remember," he said to Baxter. "I could possibly speak to the conference organisers."

Baxter waved his hand dismissively. "There'd be too many questions. Can't you arrange for that particular speech to go missing

before the advance papers go out? When this guy complains to the organisers they'll just get another run off for handing out on the day. You can have his first paper edited and a harmless one substituted."

"It would be possible," Tumin agreed.

"Okay," Baxter said, turning back to Fischer. "I'll arrange for a piece of luggage - a fancy case - to be dropped off. You just give it to this guy as a present and see that he uses it, so my people will know who they're looking for." He glanced at his watch. "Say, we'd better be moving. Tumin and me have another matter to deal with today. You be sure and apply for that patent."

"How much are you offering?" Fischer asked.

"The deal's negotiable but we can start haggling at five million."

Fischer nodded again. “That, I take it would be pounds, not dollars or Euros,” he said

“Sure,” Baxter said. “Pounds sterling.” He picked up what was largely Eugene's project outline with a lot of new information added. "I want this," he said, brandishing it a second time, and returned it to his briefcase.

"I too think there is a lot of potential in the idea,” Tumin said. "I concur with Mr. Baxter that it would be a highly desirable acquisition," He likewise rose to his feet.

The doorman called the two men a taxi while Fischer recovered his coat from the cloakroom and went into the gents.

In the taxi, Baxter was thinking out loud. "We've invested time and money into our own research on salt resistant rice. This guy's way ahead of us. Fischer is sitting on something a whole lot more important than he realises."

"He sees the financial potential of the scheme," Tumin objected.

"He can see a gold mine in it for him, right enough," agreed Baxter, "and he wants to stake a claim. I can see a gold mine for the company, but I want the whole damn mine for us. And we get nothing, in spite of all we've spent in research, if we don't get hold of his notes."

Tumin looked a little unhappy. "There is certainly a good deal at stake," he admitted.

"However, he might take his wares elsewhere."

"If we do him a couple of favours and offer him what looks like a load of cash we'll have him hooked and he won't go hawking the patent around and find out how valuable it really is."

"I think he desires fame as well as money."

"I reckon he'll settle for the cash, if it's enough."

"It may still be an expensive transaction for us," Tumin remarked. "Though letting him go elsewhere would be even costlier. Can we be certain that Fischer won't hold out for greater reward?"

"If he's involved in what happens to this researcher guy," said Baxter, “he'll go along with us. The cash will smooth his conscience some. I don't reckon the price of his conscience will be all that high."

Tumin looked even gloomier but he nodded. "We can probably acquire the patent, as you say, but the academic cloud may be to the detriment of the company."

Baxter lowered his voice, though the window into the front of the taxi was closed anyway. "The company's future is on the line. There's too much at stake to moralise a whole lot. We have to have the patent and we have this guy Fischer's interest. I'll arrange for his researcher to be taken right out of the picture, then we buy the patent, because he'll be too scared to sell it to anyone else."

Tumin was stony faced. "Right out of the picture," he repeated.

"Man, this is one hell of an omelette and we can't quibble about breaking a few eggs."

When Tumin spoke again it was on practicalities, but his tone hinted at other misgivings. "There is much risk," he said, "and it will increase the risk still further to have an additional person involved."

"He won't be," said Baxter cryptically. "I'll ease him out when the time comes."

CHAPTER 23

Gill stooped to pick up the post as she went through the front door. There were a couple of window envelopes with typed name and address - probably bills, as Gill herself thought, and a larger, thicker envelope with Spanish stamps and handwriting she recognised as Concha's. She turned over the envelope to look at the return address: the letter was indeed from Concha. There was also a much bigger envelope with a typed label. "The newsletter," she muttered, recognising it but deciding to leave it until later.

She was about to close the door when Steve turned in at the gate. "You're a bit early," she said, holding the door and then closing it behind him.

"I'm dead on time," he answered, "but you're a bit late."

"Watch must be slow." She glanced at it.

"Put the kettle on and I'll make the coffee," he said. "I've got to make a quick call." and he went into the bathroom.

"Get that dirty grease off your hands while you're at it, It's your turn to do tea," called Gill absently, and took both the letters and her bag into the kitchen, put them on the work top and filled the electric kettle. She plugged it in, turned it on and then turned her attention back to Concha's letter.

With a lengthy, newsy letter there was a collection of photos, some of which were of the wedding the previous year. Gill put them on the work-top and read the letter first. She was still reading when Steve walked in and began looking at the photos while he waited for Gill to finish the letter.

"Makes me wish I was back in Spain. Especially this weather," he said as Gill finished the letter and came over to look at the photos. Nice we're going there on holiday before too long."

"Not soon enough," she said, taking the pictures from him. "It does almost make you wish you lived there."

Gill put down the photos to make a cup of tea. "Still," she went on, "I like it here in York."

She gave Steve the letter and reached for the mugs. With studied casualness she said, "I'd rather like to try running an occult supplies and off-beat curios shop," she said.

"There might be a market for it in a place like York," said Steve noncommittally. He picked up the letter Gill had put down. It was addressed to both of them.

"It wouldn't hurt to do some preliminary market research," he said, and started reading the letter.

"If it paid its way you could run it and I could spend a bit of time writing," she said. "That way you'd be less oily." Steve gave a little grunt that might have meant almost anything.

At that moment the telephone rang in the living room. Gill put down her coffee on the table and went to answer it.

Steve finished the letter from Concha and then looked at the other post. He too recognised the envelope containing the newsletter from the occult group to which both he and Gill belonged. He had torn open the envelope when Gill came back into the kitchen, visibly shaken by the phone call. He put it down and asked, "What on earth's the matter?"

Gill was more shaken than he had seen her. "Now I understand why nothing changed in Concha's story," she said and took another drink of her coffee.

Steve looked puzzled. "Explain," he said.

"Maybe it's my fault for letting Concha try to change the future."

Steve still looked puzzled, but he was beginning to feel frustrated, since Gill wasn't making much sense.

"I said you'd get his things for them," she said.

"Who's things for whom and where from?"

"Eugene's. From the university."

By now Steve was beginning to sound frustrated as well as feel it. "Why can't he get his own things?" he asked, still fairly patiently.

"Because he's dead," said Gill and burst into tears. She leaned against Steve. "Do you think it's my fault?"

Steve had always realised that there was a somewhat irrational streak somewhere deep down in his wife's make up: she had, after all, tried to kill herself once, before they had met. It was true that she usually kept herself well under control. Outwardly she was a woman who seemed very well balanced and very normal, but for a profoundly psychic streak. She was intelligent as well, but possibly too sensitive for her own good.

On the present matter, he didn't think she was in any way responsible for Eugene's death, but he was smart enough to realise she had to think that out for herself. He was also shocked at the fact of Eugene's death.

"Dead?" he said. He too was rather shaken, though unable for the moment to accept the reality of it. "How?" he asked.

She thought the whole thing through and brought herself under control quite quickly, externally anyway. After a few seconds she seemed to have pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. My part was very indirect. It's just that I was shaken by the news, because it does explain why the future was unchanged and ..."

"And?" said Steve, sensing what else was coming, though he neither felt particularly psychic nor needed to be on this occasion.

"And ... Well ..." Gill hesitated. Steve remained silent. "I did wonder," went on Gill uncertainly, "if something was going to happen to prevent Eugene from finishing the project. I couldn't see why else nothing changed between Adela's story and Ana's story."

"The thought did cross my mind too, at the time," said Steve. "But you're the psychic one. Who was that on the phone?"

"Claire. The family wants you to go up to the university for Eugene's things. I think they don't like facing what they see as an intellectual organisation at a time like this."

"Why ever not?" said Steve.

"You haven't been around academia so much that you've forgotten that a lot of Afro-Caribbeans find the whole hierarchy and establishment as a bit suspect. Not all of them, of course. You're an exception yourself, but many just don't trust authority or anything that looks like it." Gill answered.

"Well, I don't really mind," he said eventually. "Anyway, it will give me a good excuse to go through his papers and things." A thought occurred to him. "You didn't tell me how he died."

"A plane crash. The plane he and Professor - what's he called,"

"Badger,"

"Yes, Badger. The plane he and Professor Badger were going to that conference on crashed into the channel.

Steve thought about it. "I'll go for Eugene's things tomorrow," he said. "A plane crash? Either Eugene and the Professor were very unlucky or something smells fishy. Well, we'd better phone Dave and Concha tonight. Do you want to call them before or after dinner?"

"I'm not hungry at the moment. Let's leave dinner till later and I'll call now. We can't speak to them, though. I'll have to leave a

message with Bar Manolo. I'd better make it simple. That man's English is nearly as primitive as my Spanish."

She finished her tea and switched the kettle on again. "I think I'll have another cup. Coffee this time. Do you want one?"

Gill made the coffee and then flipped through her address book to find Bar Manolo's number. As Dave and Concha weren't on the phone at their house in Frigiliana yet there was no choice but to leave a message.

Bar Manolo was in the main square of Frigiliana, just below Dave and Concha's. Gill carefully wrote down the message in Spanish, just in case the proprietor was busy and a non-English speaker answered, then she dialled the number, realising that she couldn't be certain when Dave and Concha would get the message.

"*Hola*," she said, "*Habla Gill Benderman. Esta Luis?*"

Fortunately Luis was there and, also fortunately, his English was a lot better than Gill had suggested. It was actually not bad as he had worked in London as a waiter for a year or two.

I feel better now," said Gill when she rang off. "Shall we have some dinner?"

Next day Steve drove to work. He arranged to take a longer lunch break than normal and used it to drive to the university.

In the entrance hall of the main building was an enquiry desk. He started there but was sent to the security desk in a neighbouring building. There was one security guard in uniform on duty. He took an age to look up a number from a small booklet of departmental numbers, interrupted by frequent enquirers wanting trivial information and given it in great detail. When the guard finally found a number to his satisfaction it was, apparently, the wrong one. Finally he got through to someone who seemed to know what he was talking about and, as he talked to this anonymous person in the genetics department, Steve found himself studying the area behind the guard.

He noticed there was a closed circuit TV system with four monitors, showing the outside of the main entrance and the outside of the rear entrance - presumably so night callers could be identified - the car park and the area in front of the lifts in the main corridor. There was also a panel showing fire and burglar alarms, so an observer could identify which had been set off. The effect was rather spoiled by the presence of an ordinary TV set but, by the time the security guard had dealt with him, Steve had been able to get a good idea of security arrangements.

Steve was given directions to the fourth floor and, to his surprise, offered the post trolley. "Save you making two or three trips," said the security guard.

In fact Eugene's belongings did not amount to very much, since most of his personal things were at the house he shared with several other students and where he had two rooms of his own. Apart from a number of books and folders and some stationary there were only a couple of lab coats, some instruments, sports gear for use, Steve assumed, in the university Sports hall, and Eugene's battered briefcase and an empty suitcase, which had likewise seen better days.

Steve recognised the suitcase as the one Eugene had used when he went to Dave and Concha's wedding and, without really thinking about the significance, stuffed it with Eugene's loose possessions, loaded the already boxed books onto the trolley and wheeled it to the lift.

By the time Eugene's belonging's were crammed hastily onto the back seat of the car and the trolley returned, Steve was already running a bit late, and gave the matter no more thought until he got home from work that evening.

It was not until nearly nine that Steve started sorting through the boxes and cases he had collected. Gill came through into the living room and found him kneeling on the floor, surrounded by books and papers. "I hope you're going to pack all that stuff away again," she remarked, looking at the mess surrounding him.

"I'm just checking through his stuff and re-packing it," he said.

"Do you mind if I put the TV news on?" asked Gill.

She didn't wait for an answer before switching on the set. She noticed that Steve was, in point of fact, re-packing the boxes more carefully than they had been packed in the first place and turned her attention to the TV.

While Gill watched the TV news, Steve was becoming increasingly puzzled. He thumbed through several files from one of the boxes, packed them away and checked the briefcase. The plane crash was still faintly news and Gill drew his attention to the item.

".... have located the Slovak European Airways plane which crashed into the English Channel yesterday, killing all seventy four passengers and six crew," said the anchor woman, and the voice of a reporter was heard over a rather pointless shot of the English Channel from a plane.

"An attempt will be made by accident investigators to recover the black box flight recorder but first reports do not rule out the possibility of an explosion and investigators are studying the possibility of an explosive device. The anti-terrorist police are making routine enquiries at Manchester Airport." With that the anchor woman reappeared to go on with some other story. Gill switched off the TV.

"I thought you were watching that," said Steve.

"Well that was a pretty shattering bit of news."

"That investigators haven't ruled out the possibility of an explosive device? Some reporter has gone up to the investigators and said 'Was there a bomb?' and the investigator said, 'Don't know enough yet to say what caused the crash.' They're just inventing news." He stuffed the bundle of papers back into the briefcase. "I'll tell you something much more puzzling."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I can't find any papers relating to either the project or the conference," said Steve, sounding both puzzled and frustrated.

"He'd have them with him," she said. "In his briefcase."

"He'd have copies, surely and anyway I checked ... the ... And that's his suitcase as well," he said, indicating the case of oddments. "Did he have the money to buy new ones?"

Gill had one of her psychic flashes. The hair stood out on the back of her neck and a chill ran up her spine. She knew, with an absolute certainty the general outline of what had happened, though not yet who the villain was.

She said, in a voice little more than a whisper: "Who lent him a nice, new, expensive looking replacement suitcase and matching briefcase with a small bomb in the lining?" Although phrased as a question it was a statement.

The phone rang, interrupting their thoughts. "Concha," said Gill and picked up the receiver. "Hello ... speaking, Hello Concha. Good to hear from you ... Yes, they're very good photos ... How are you enjoying married life? ... I bet you are. ... Yes we did leave a message for you to phone us. Sorry. Look, we've heard some rather shattering news ... "

Steve's first thought was that Gill might need another drink after this conversation, so he went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. His second thought as he did so was that it might have been better if he had could have made the call to Dave. He thought Gill was probably back in control of herself now, but Concha had been very obsessed with Eugene's project and there was no certainty as to how she would take it. He made two coffees and took them back into the living room.

"... All right, I'll do that. I'm sure I can get time off work for that ... About the same time tomorrow then ... Bye." and she rang off. Steve held out a mug of coffee and looked expectantly.

"They want me to go and talk to the university and see what they have to say about the project and what's going to happen to it."

Steve didn't think that sounded too unreasonable. Gill had finished her postgraduate degree only the previous year. She still had lots of contacts in the university and could find her way around.

He felt in the pockets of both lab coats before he folded them up and put them in the suitcase. In one pocket he found a bunch of keys. He put the lab coats away in the case and tossed the keys thoughtfully up and down in his hand. The two deadlock keys were probably the keys to Eugene's office and the lab and the smaller keys the ones to his filing cabinet and desk. He ought to give the keys back to the University Genetics Department. He probably would do - eventually.

In the meantime, if all else failed and Gill drew a complete blank, well, he did know a lot about security arrangements and he did know which was Eugene's office ... If he hung on to the keys he would be able to have a little look at Eugene's office himself.

CHAPTER 24

Gill knew her way round the university, of course, but she checked Dr. Fischer's room number with same security guard who had the previous day slowly and inexorably, even though inadvertently, wound Steve up when he came in search of Eugene's belongings. She took the lift up to the fourth floor and turned in the opposite direction to Eugene's former office.

Gill was not to know, but Dr. Fischer was acting Head of Department following the death of Professor Badger, and was using his office, which was the room number she had been given. When she went into the departmental office a secretary rang through to announce her. "Dr. Fischer will see you in a minute," she said. "If you take a seat out there in the corridor, he won't be long."

Gill glanced at her watch. She was already two or three minutes late arriving. "Right," she said and went out into the corridor. She didn't sit down. There was a notice board covered in advertisements for courses at other universities, offers of project grants for various carefully specified pieces of research, names of one or two grant making trusts the destitute student could apply to for help. Most students were destitute and existing on miniscule student loans, parental help and part time work: what this apparently referred to was a kind of academic famine relief or intellectual soup kitchen.

Gill glanced at her watch again after ten minutes and yet again after another five or so. She had read all the notices and was tired of waiting when the secretary popped out.

"Dr. Fischer will see you now," she said.

"About bloody time too," Gill muttered, in a voice too soft to be heard and followed her to the connecting door.

The secretary knocked and waited until Fischer said, "Come!" before opening the door for Gill.

"Yes?" Fisher said. "I don't think I know you. What department are you?" Obviously the secretary had not made a note of who she was when she made the appointment.

"I am not at the university any more," said Gill. "I finished my post gradaute work last June."

"Then what do you want?" Apparently the secretary had not made a note of that either. Either that or he hadn't read the note.

"I've called in connection with Eugene Parker," said Gill. "My husband collected his personal effects yesterday on behalf of the family."

The Doctor's face didn't actually change - he was almost poker faced anyway, but something in the atmosphere changed. Gill felt that he was suddenly very wary and very cautious.

"Yes?"

"I wondered what was going to happen to the project. There's nothing about it in his personal papers."

"There wouldn't be," Fischer replied. "All his research belonged to the university anyway. As to the project, it's not university policy to discuss university research matters with outsiders. On the other hand, I can say he wasn't making much progress. We'll probably scrap the whole project."

"But he was full of it a couple of months back. He was on his way to give a paper on his progress at a conference when he was killed," protested Gill.

"He was keeping Professor Badger company on some trip or other, I think," agreed Fischer, "But it was no more than that. I've seen nothing among his research notes about giving a paper and Professor Badger never said anything to me about it either."

He stood up abruptly and walked to the filing cabinets, unlocked one and opened the second drawer down. He took out a file and walked over to Gill, flipping through it as he did so.

"Thought so," he said and offered the file to Gill. "As I said, it's not university policy to discuss departmental matters outside the staff of the department but, in view of the unusual circumstances, I will make an exception."

Gill took the proffered file but this was not her subject and she didn't know quite what she was looking for. There was nothing that looked like a conference paper and nothing to indicate, to the lay person at least, that the project was nearing completion. She handed the file back to Dr. Fischer, wondering whether he believed what he was saying.

She felt defeated or, at least, outmaneuvered. This was not what she had understood to be the facts as Eugene had told them, but she had no proof. She didn't think Eugene was lying about progress,

but there was a lack of direct evidence either way. She decided there was no point in prolonging the interview.

"You're really going to drop the project then?" she said, wondering, as she handed back the file, just who had murdered Eugene and where his papers now were.

The Doctor put the file back into the drawer without answering and shut and locked the cabinet again. Then he returned to his desk and sat on the edge of it while he polished his glasses.

"I think so," he said at last. The Doctor gave an impression of reflection and consideration, before continuing, "There is nothing in the file to suggest that he was making any progress. We might try getting one of the big seed companies to finance another attempt using several researchers, I suppose." He put on his glasses.

Gill got up to go, noticing that there was something wrong with one of his eyes but not really taking it in at a conscious level. Certainly she gave no thought to Adela's story and Rüdi Bäckman's warning. "Well, thank you for your time, Doctor Fischer," she said.

"Not at all," he answered. "I'm very busy but these ... er ... unfortunate ... matters must be dealt with." and he shook her hand.

As their hands met Gill had another of her psychic touches. Again the hair on the back of her neck stood on end - horripulation is the proper term for what is a real phenomenon - and chills ran up her spine. She knew with absolute certainty where Eugene had got the expensive luggage. She remembered the warning now. This was Rüdi's 'one eyed Englishman' from Concha's first story.

Over dinner that night Steve listened to Gill's account of the interview more or less in silence.

"So you think he's Concha's one eyed Englishman?" he commented eventually. "I wonder if there's a Greek bearing gifts somewhere."

"If that remark was meant to be funny it was misplaced," Gill said.

"Off hand I'm not sure whether it was a joke or not. Probably not, now I think about it"

"So what do we do now?"

Steve thought it over for a moment or two. He got up and fetched the bunch of keys from inside a neat little ceramic jug which Gill had brought back from Spain. He sat down at the table again.

"What are those?" asked Gill.

"Keys."

"I can see that. I meant, keys to what?" she said, a little irritated that he seemed not be helping.

"I think they're the keys to what was Eugene's office, laboratory and filing cabinet," he said. "And I know which they are."

"Where did you get them?"

"A pocket in Eugene's lab coat. I think I'll go and have a look around. Although," he added, "I think it's rather likely that anything like evidence will have been removed. Probably to Fischer's office." he was still thoughtful and tossed the keys absently from one hand to the other and back. "Which was Fisher's office?" he asked.

"4 East 55," She said "Fourth floor, right from the lift or left from the stairs and about the fourth or fifth along. There's a connecting door from the departmental office next door in 4 East 53."

"Eugene was in room 4 West 32," remarked Steve and added with an apparent irrelevance, "When do the cleaners come in, do you know? Is it a different time for each building?"

If Gill was surprised she showed no sign. "All the buildings are cleaned early in the morning. Cleaners go in about five o'clock in the morning. Why?"

Steve continued to play with the keys. "So there's nobody there but the security staff in the evening?" he said.

"Well, the caretaking people come round between six and eight to do any repairs. There are plenty of people about until eightish. They lock the buildings then, but they allow people already in to stay until ten. Those are the rules in three of the buildings, so imagine it's the same for the rest."

"Hmm," said Steve, "So if I were to go in sometime before eight and let myself into Eugene's office and take a look around. I could stay there until after ten and take a look round Dr. Fischer's office."

Gill was not sure that she liked what she was hearing, though the risk did not seem very great

"I think," said Steve, pocketing the keys and glancing at his watch, "that I will go and have a look around both Eugene's office and the office of this Doctor Fischer too." He stood up. "In return, you can do my turn at washing up for me. If I do it before I go to the university I'll be too late."

Gill nodded and then stood up herself. "I'll drive the getaway car," she said. "If you think I'm going to stay at home and worry, you're mistaken."

She grabbed her coat from the back of the chair and, as she put it on, she added, "You can do the washing up when you get back!"

Steve parked in a dark back street about thirty yards or so from the rear of the genetics building. They both got out and Steve locked up,

remarking, "I thought you said you were going to drive the getaway car."

"I said I'd drive it," answered Gill. "I didn't say anything about staying in it. Why don't we just 'act natural' and park in the car park?"

"In the first place it's a staff car park," Steve answered, "and in the second place there's a video camera over it and I'm camera shy. Come on" and he led the way out into the main street and towards the front entrance.

It was about ten to eight when they entered the building and there was no sign of the guard. "So much for security," remarked Gill as they walked up to lifts and pressed the 'call lift' button.

The lift arrived and the doors slid open. "I think we'll walk one floor," said Steve, pressing the third floor button. "It's no use advertising the fact that there's someone on the fourth floor." They got out of the lift and headed for the stairs to the next floor. Already the lift was on its way up to the eight floor.

"Good," said Steve, "I don't want to draw unnecessary attention to our arrival."

On the fourth floor they turned towards Eugene's office and Steve fished out the keys he had been playing with earlier. The corridor was in near darkness, with light seeping down from the stairwell from which they had come. In the low light they would have seen light under the door of Eugene's office if any had been on. There was no sign of occupancy, so Steve tried the keys. One fitted, the door unlocked easily, and the door opened silently at a touch. They went in and closed the door behind them.

"Okay," said Steve, holding out the keys, "I don't suppose there's anything there to find," He indicated the filing cabinet. "But you may as well try."

"I couldn't see anything if it was there to see. But I see the room has blinds, so close them and I can put on the desk lamp."

"Your wish is my command, oh master," said Steve and rolled down the blind at which Gill turned on the lamp and tried the keys in the filing cabinet. It opened.

"Empty," she said, trying each drawer in turn.

"Try the desk," suggested Steve, but that was empty too. What is more it was not only unlocked - it didn't have a lock.

"This office is about ready for someone else," said Gill.

"There's a key spare," Steve remarked. "I wonder what it fitted."

"Something in the lab?"

"Maybe," said Steve, "He might have kept some files there, though I think he'd have kept anything important under lock and key in his office."

"We could always look in the lab," suggested Gill.

"We could, I suppose," Steve said, still doubtful, and he placed the bunch on the centre of the desk. "Now, we'd better open the blind and turn out the light..."

"Ssh!" whispered Gill, and they both heard footsteps coming down the corridor. The person, presumably the security guard passed by on his way to the end of the corridor.

"Keep quiet a bit longer," whispered Steve. "There's nothing that way but the fire escape."

"The light will show under the door," said Gill, "take your coat off." and she shrugged off her padded jacket and hung it over the back of a chair.

Puzzled, Steve took his off as well and slung it on the desk. "Now what?" he whispered and Gill grabbed hold of him in an intimate clinch and began kissing.

They were married, of course, but they hadn't been married so long that Steve had forgotten how attractive his wife was. She was not a raving beauty - her looks were striking rather than stunning, but she had the same longish blonde hair as when he first fell for her. She was just a trifle tall for a woman but she cut a very desirable figure, even in a sweater and jeans. He had no problem at all the idea of kissing her and he guessed what her scheme was.

He unbuckled her belt and undid the front of her jeans so that he could reach his hand down inside her knickers to caress her. Then they kissed some more.

They heard the footsteps coming back. Both of them kept absolutely still, hardly daring to breathe as the footsteps sounded the return of the person. Then the door opened. Steve had his back to the door but Gill saw the surprised but unembarrassed face of a security guard looking round it to investigate.

"Lock up behind you when you leave," he said, and closed the door. They heard his footsteps as he walked away on his rounds.

Steve withdrew his hand. "I was enjoying that," Gill objected. "We can't go wandering off just yet, so I might as well enjoy it a bit longer."

Steve resumed caressing her as the footsteps receded and the sounds of life died away.

When all had been silent outside for a while, they separated again and Steve opened the office door very slightly to look out. After a moment he shut it again.

` "Hmm," he said. "Whoever it was has gone and he's turned out most of the lights on the stairwell. There's just one light left on."

"This floor must be completely empty but for us," said Gill.

"Well," said Steve. "The guard will be expecting us to leave before ten, which gives us nearly an hour to pay the Doctor a visit."

CHAPTER 25

The fourth floor certainly seemed empty as Gill and Steve left what had been Eugene's office and walked quietly down the hall, past the stairwell and down the corridor on the other side to Dr. Fischer's office. Gill tried both the door to his office and the door to the general office and found them locked.

"Offices in a block like this often have the same lock," said Steve, taking out Eugene's bunch of keys again. He tried both keys in the door to Dr. Fischer's room but neither would turn in the lock. "But not in this block," he added.

"Try the door of the departmental office. There's a connecting door to the other office," said Gill.

Steve tried both keys in turn. The second one turned. "Aha!" he muttered and pushed open the door. The room was in darkness, of course, but Gill silently felt her way to the window and closed the blind so that Steve could turn on the light.

"Now," he said, closing the door to the corridor and crossing to the connecting door, "Do the keys fit this door too or do I have to force it?"

Steve again tried both keys but, as on the outside, neither worked. "I'll have to force it," he said.

"Is it actually locked?" asked Gill.

He turned the handle. "No," he said a little sheepishly, opening it and pocketing the keys.

Gill turned out the light in general office while Steve closed the blind in Dr. Fischer's room and turned on the light. Except that the roof top view of York Minster was not visible at night and with the blind closed, the room was little changed from when it had been Professor Badger's office. Another filing cabinet had been added and to the three cabinets Steve went to first.

He tried each of them but they were locked. He tugged at the drawers hopefully a second time and then studied them in search of

clues as to the most likely and to examine the best and quietest method of breaking in.

Two were matching in colour and style. The third was different. This would not, in itself, have indicated anything other than that it had been bought at a different time. However, as far as he could recall, the odd one was the twin of the one in Eugene's office. Had there been a mark on the floor there, to indicate a departed cabinet? He wasn't sure and he wasn't going back to look, but there had been space enough. Gill stood watching him in silence.

He took out Eugene's keys again and looked at them. As he had observed to Gill in the other office, there was one key that hadn't fitted anything. He tried it in the third filing cabinet - it fitted the lock and turned.

"No wonder the filing cabinet in Eugene's office was empty," he said. "Fischer took the important cabinet. He took the whole bloody cabinet."

The third drawer down was marked 'SRR'.

"Salt Resistant Rice," said Gill, pointing and pulled it open. She knelt on the floor to avoid prolonged bending and flipped through the folders. One was marked 'Conference'. She took it out and put it on the floor. Another was marked 'Project Outline'. She took that out and passed it to Steve. "See if that's the one Eugene showed us," she said.

"I can't really remember," he said, flipping through it. "All I can say is it might be. It looks pretty much as I recall it, though perhaps thicker."

He still had it his hand when Gill said, "Wow, will you look at this." in a tone that drew Steve's attention completely. She was holding a filed marked 'Patent Application'. The label was in a different hand. They both studied the file: there was a lengthy form headed 'European Patents Office' accompanied by an outline running to twenty sheets or more.

"Look," said Gill in disbelief, "The application is in Dr. Fischer's name. Not on behalf of the university or in Eugene's name or anything. Just him. We need to copy this,"

"There's a copier in the main office. I saw it on the way in."

"You'd better copy the whole file if you can get the machine working," she said, and picked up the file marked 'Conference'. "Copy this as well. It's proof that Dr. Fischer was lying to me - Eugene was going to speak at the conference and he knew it.

Gill remained kneeling at the filing cabinet working her way through the folders, while Steve went back into the departmental office. He turned on the copier and, while he waited for it to warm up, he checked the paper and thought over what they had found. There

was nothing to link Fischer with the deaths of Eugene or Professor Badger and there was nothing here to link this patent application with Eugene, other than the conference paper. Keeping that was Fischer's only mistake, as far as he could see.

The copier completed its warm up and Steve worked his way through the application and then started on the conference paper.

He was interrupted by an excited Gill. "There are a couple of CDs in there that could be for a computer. Is there any way of copying them?" she asked. "What about that computer in the secretarial office?"

Steve looked at the CDs. "They look like ordinary CD-Write disks ," he observed. "You could copy them on that computer if you can find some blank CDs."

While Steve finished the photocopying, Gill first looked at the CDs in the rack on the desk. They were the right type but they weren't blank.

"Now, blank CDs ..." she muttered and began searching through desk drawers without luck.

"Cupboard?" she muttered and opened the doors. There, on the top shelf, was an unopened packet of ten blank CDs. "Damn," she said out loud and Steve asked what the problem was. "The cellophane wrapper is still on the packet," she said.

"Take the wrapper with you," said Steve, "Everyone will think that someone else opened the packet." and he switched off the copier.

He gathered up the copies and looked around for something to put them in, finally taking a pocket file from the cupboard. He also helped himself to a large, padded envelope to put it in. Gill had extracted two blank CDs from the packet and sat down in front of the computer. Steve took the packet and returned it to the cupboard. Then he shut the cupboard doors and took the files back to the cabinet.

Gill had left two folders at an angle. "Leave the one marked 'Research Notes' and put your two behind that one," she called softly.

While Steve put the files away, Gill switched on the computer and it booted itself from the hard disk. "Windows Vista," she said to herself as it loaded seamlessly. "If there’s a programme to burn CDs it ought to work the same way I’m used to. If I remember rightly ... She wiggled the mouse experimentally and then clicked what she hoped was the right sequence. The message came up 'Insert CD to be copied'. Gill gave a sigh of relief, stuck in the first of the CDs as she was instructed and clicked 'OK'.

The computer seemed happy enough to copy the data without having to understand or interpret it. It wheezed gently like someone clearing their throat, spat out the CD and the up came the message ‘Insert a blank CD. She did so and the wheezing continued until the

machine ejected the new copy. As Gill started on the second CD, she remarked, "At least we know there's something on the disks to copy."

“Chances were pretty good,” Steve agreed as he came back into the secretary's office. "Did you doubt it?" he added.

"N-o-o," she said slowly. "I suppose there was an outside chance he would have wiped the disks, but I didn't really think he would have."

By the time Gill had switched off the computer and returned the disks to the file it was one minute to ten.

"We'd better get a move on, said Steve, "That guard will be back to check on us."

"You could always love me again," said Gill with a wicked grin."

"We got away with it once in an empty office. I rather doubt it would work a second time in Dr. Fischer's office."

"Oh I don't know," said Gill, still grinning, "I think it would work for me pretty well anywhere."

Steve gave her a quick kiss, closed the filing cabinet, locked it, turned out the light and re-opened the blind.

They went into the general office shutting the door behind them. Gill checked that everything was switched off and then turned the light off while Steve opened the blind and gathered up the envelope with the photocopies and the copy disks. Gill peered cautiously into the corridor and, when they were sure the coast was clear, they went out and locked the door behind them.

As they walked towards the lift Steve whispered, "It's just after ten. The doors may be locked. If we go down to the first floor and go out through the fire escape it will set the alarm off, but we'll only have one flight of steps to go down to make our getaway."

"Why can't we walk right down and go out of the fire door on the ground floor?" Gill whispered back.

"There's a security camera covering the lift area on the ground floor, so there's a good chance the guard would see us."

They started down the stairs, moving as quietly as they could. At the second floor they stopped, hearts in mouths, as the lift went past and stopped at the fourth floor.

"That will be the guard checking that we've gone," whispered Gill. "We just got away in time."

"We aren't exactly away yet," Steve whispered back. "Come on." and they hurried as silently as possible to the first floor and along the first floor corridor to the fire escape.

"Ready?" he said "This will raise all hell." and he pushed it open.

A bell started ringing as they rushed down the fire escape. There wasn't actually much light for rushing, just the reflected glow of a street lamp round the corner. They reached the bottom and hurried out of the alley, into the street and turned into the side street where the car was parked.

Steve unlocked the car and Gill jumped into the driver's seat. "I'm driving the getaway car and you're washing up, remember?" she said,

She started the car and drove off, slipping the vehicle in gear and starting to move before he'd even closed the passenger door behind him.

The phone began ringing just as Gill was unlocking the flat door and she hurried to answer it. She picked up the receiver and said, "Hello."

"Hello Gill," said Concha at the other end. "I called you earlier and you were out."

"We were doing a bit of burglary."

"I don't understand." Concha said. "Did you speak to the university about what happens now to the project?"

"I went to the acting head of the genetics department, Dr. Fischer but I drew a complete blank. Steve and I broke into his office tonight and we have proof he was lying."

"What about?" asked Concha.

"He said that Eugene was making no progress and it was Professor Badger who was going to the conference. He claimed Eugene was just keeping him company. He said they would drop the whole project through lack of progress."

"But that's not true," Concha protested. "Eugene said he was almost there."

"And he was," agreed Gill. Fischer has applied for a patent in his own name. And we found a copy of Eugene's paper to the conference."

"What did you do with them?"

"Steve photocopied them and we put them back," Gill said. "Eugene's research was all on computer disk. I made copies of that too."

"So there is a bundle of papers and a couple of CDs."

"That's right."

"Just like in Adela's story?"

Gill thought about it. The folder was in a large padded envelope as well. Surely not the same one. "Well, yes," she agreed at length."

"And what will you do with it now?" asked Concha. "Go to police or what?"

Gill was a bit stumped. Well," she said, "we hadn't even thought or talked about what comes next. We just concentrated on getting hold of some evidence. Probably you and Dave ought to think about it and Steve and I will certainly look at it. Then we could talk again on Sunday."

"I will call you Sunday then," said Concha. "What time?"

"I don't think we're going anywhere. Ring late afternoon, say, between five and six, and we'll call you back. It's cheap rate from England on Sundays."

"OK. We will call you Sunday between between five and six, your time." Concha agreed. "Goodbye."

"'Bye Concha. Speak to you Sunday." The phone went dead and Gill put it down. "Let's go straight to bed," she said to Steve. I still feel randy."

The next morning Steve got drinks while Gill sat up in bed and studied again the copies they had made the previous night. Steve brought the coffee to the bedroom and joined her in bed.

"You know," said Gill, "This stuff is rather like what Concha described when she was Adela. What should we do with it?"

"I don't think there would be a lot of point going to the police," Steve said. "There doesn't seem anything to link this stuff to Eugene."

"You mean Dr. Fischer would just claim it all as his?" Gill felt offended by Fischer's effrontery, but she could see what her husband was getting at.

"It would be his word against ours and I doubt we'd make it stick. Mind you," he added, "If the police established a bomb on the plane which Eugene was travelling on, they might be interested in this little lot as evidence of a motive."

"Is there any point in confronting Fischer?"

"I don't think so," said Steve. "He would just laugh at us and then we could end up like Eugene and Professor Badger."

"What can we do then?"

"We could give it all to Planetwatch," suggested Steve.

Gill looked at him sharply to see whether it was an ironic remark intended as a joke or a serious suggestion. He looked serious.

It was unusual for Dr. Fischer to be in his office on a Saturday, but the immediate prospect of several million pounds is a pretty powerful incentive to overtime. So it was that he overheard the night security guard telling his relief of the disturbance the night before.

"They were getting ready to have it away in that empty office on the fourth floor," he said, and Dr. Fischer pricked up his ears. "Then they went out through the first floor fire escape. Well, somebody did

and every door was locked and when I checked every room, nothing looked to be touched."

"What were these two like?" asked Fischer, breaking in on the conversation.

"I didn't stay around to study them," said the guard. "I'm not a Peeping Tom. But the girl was quite tall, I think, with blonde hair. Longish."

This wasn't enough to identify anyone, but it did cross Fischer's mind to wonder whether this could be the same woman who had inquired about Eugene's project. He decided that it was probably just a couple of over-sexed students and coincidence. Not certainly, just probably.

He hurried towards the lift, glancing at his watch. There was just time to check the files and make sure there was nothing compromising or missing, before driving down to a hotel in Gerrards Cross, just outside London, to meet up with Baxter and Tumin again. He was looking forward to a weekend at what sounded like a good hotel. He was looking forward even more to being rich and famous.

CHAPTER 26

Baxter or Tumin, whichever was actually the boss, had taken a private board room at a hotel which lived up to Fischer's expectations, as well as booking large and luxurious rooms for each of them.

It was to the boardroom that they retired with Dr. Fischer for the negotiations. It was a thick-carpeted room with a long table and ten comfortable and well padded chairs at it. The decor was pleasantly unobtrusive and the lighting concealed. Though the windows of the room overlooked the front of the hotel with its genuine Tudor timbering, the car park and the main road, double-glazing kept the room tranquil, while air conditioning kept it pleasant.

Besides Baxter and Tumin there were two other men. Baxter introduced them briefly as Henry Collins - Baxter said vaguely that he was a lawyer without specifying his speciality - and George Popedopilis, an accountant. While coffee and biscuits were served by the hotel staff, both Collins and Popedopilis set up 'laptop' computers and a printer at the far end of the table, then joined the other three round the top. Baxter took the end place and the chair of the discussions, but Fischer again had the feeling that Tumin was the real authority.

`"Okay," said Baxter. "Have you got the patent application?"

Fischer nodded and opened his briefcase. "Here it is," he said and passed it to Baxter. He only glanced at it and passed it to Tumin.

Tumin looked through the application to make certain that it was signed and in order. Next he studied carefully the European Patent Office's letter of reply and acknowledgement of the application. He checked that it was dated and signed. Then he passed the forms and correspondence to Collins and began reading the detailed supporting statement himself, nodding understanding and agreement from time to time.

"While he's reading and Collins is checking the legal aspects," said Baxter, "we" - and he gestured vaguely towards himself,

Popedopilis and Fischer - "may as well try and agree the nuts and bolts."

Fischer nodded his acquiescence and Baxter continued, "Now there are two possible ways of dealing with this. We can buy the application from you and that's an end of the matter or, alternatively, we can buy the application from you and agree to set aside a fixed sum of money for funding other research to be undertaken by your department. The same conditions as usual would apply, but the department would decide on the projects instead of referring the proposal to us."

"There would be advantages in that," said Fischer.

"Sure," agreed Baxter, "For a start it would make you a whole lot more influential, because you'd be holding the purse string. Money is power."

"Of course I am only acting Head of the Department so far. Badger met with ... an ... er ... unfortunate accident and the matter of a permanent successor has not been resolved."

"Sure," Baxter was expansive, "Sorry to hear about Badger, by the way. A permanent resolution to the problem won't be any problem when the university hears about the deal, though."

Popedopilis, rather diffidently, contributed to the debate. "The company will be able to offer a little less cash to you personally if it sets funds aside for you to administer research," he said.

"Heck, yes," agreed Baxter. "But you'll have career security as well. Say, three million to you and twelve million in research funds to the university or five million flat for an outright purchase and no further strings."

"Three million would make me rich," said Fisher.

"Sure would."

"And twelve million pounds in research funds would be quite a career boost," Fischer said. Baxter just nodded. "And the justifiable prestige coming to me as the scientist who developed salt resistant rice would amount to fame."

Baxter frowned. "The company might not want too much publicity right off," he said. At that point Tumin finished his reading and put the paper down.

"You can't expect me to forgo my justified fame," protested Fischer with a self-important seriousness which had Baxter looking for signs of irony.

I don't think that your role in the affair wants looking at too closely," the other remarked.

Fortunately for the situation Tumin changed the subject, saying. "This statement accompanying the patent application appears

to be complete and in order, but we would have to have the research notes as well," he said.

"The notes are on two CD-Roms," said Fischer. "I have them with me."

"Are there copies?" Tumin asked.

"I have a print out in my filing cabinet but no copies of the disks," said Fischer. "Why?"

Tumin just shrugged and glanced at Baxter.

"We agreed on three million direct to Dr. Fisher and twelve million in research support to be administered by the university on the usual terms," said the latter. It was not actually true, because, although there were no counter suggestions, Fischer had not agreed. On the other hand, it was a large sum of money and he felt reasonably happy with it.

"For you the accident to Professor Badger was rather lucky," Tumin remarked. "It would appear very opportune for you, though it was very unfortunate for him, of course."

Fischer was a little uneasy at this reminder and at the way it was worded, though Tumin gave no impression that this was anything other than an innocent remark. Baxter's comment had been even more ambiguous. In his heart of hearts, though, Fischer knew that the plane crash was suspicious to say the least. And to 'say the least' was probably the wisest course, so he just nodded and said, "Quite so." very noncommittally.

"Seems Okay," said Collins, looking up from the application papers. "From a legal point of view we can go ahead whenever you're ready." His accent, like Baxter's, clearly marked him as American.

"Then," said Tumin, "You may prepare the contract." To Popedopilis he said, "You may write a cheque for three million pounds and authorize the setting aside of funds for research." To Fischer he said, "I shall require the research disks and, of course, I shall want to check them."

Fischer opened his briefcase and took out a small padded envelope containing the two disks – the same ones Gill had copied two nights before.

"Here you are," he said.

Tumin produced a mobile phone from his briefcase and used it to instruct someone to come up, while Collins retired to his computer and began making adjustments to a document already entered.

There was a knock at the door and a motor-cycle courier entered. "Take these disks to the office and have them checked," said Tumin holding out the envelope. "Hand them direct to Mrs Coty. I will have called her direct with details of the programme and so on. She

will know exactly what to do, but you are to hand them to no other person."

The motor-cyclist left and Fischer got up to go to the toilet. "Excuse me a minute," he said.

"A moment," said Tumin. "The programme used for the research notes?"

"The usual university one," said Fisher. "Datastore in Cobol." Tumin nodded and dialled another number on the mobile phone.

While Fischer was out of the room Baxter remarked to Tumin, "He seems very set on the public acclamation he thinks he's going to get."

"Don't disagree with him before everything is signed," said Tumin and then, speaking into the phone said, "Mrs Coty? ... You will receive two disks by courier. They will be in Datastore Cobol. Check through the disks thoroughly and telephone me at once with details of what is on them ... Yes, as soon as you possibly can ... no, just let me know what is on them and make back up copies, that is all ... Yes ... Goodbye."

While Tumin was talking on the phone, Baxter got up and went round the table to Fischer's things. He looked through the briefcase and picked up a bunch of keys, which he put down on the table. From his own briefcase he took out a stack of little boxes, which he opened. Each of the boxes was filled with a waxy substance, in which he made an impression of each key in turn. He worked quickly, watched by a slightly amused Tumin. He was ignored completely by both Collins and Popedopilis, who concentrated entirely on their own work. Baxter put Fischer's keys back where he found them, snapped the boxes shut, put them back into his briefcase and sat down again.

"Just a little insurance," Baxter said to Tumin.

The latter nodded. "You think of everything," he said.

Baxter grinned and said, "I like to stay ahead." He added more seriously, "And this time we've got to. We can't afford to waste three million, after all we've put into the research.

Before Tumin had chance to comment, Fischer re-entered the room. "I've thought it through while I've been on my feet," he said, "and I accept the terms." As he was speaking, Collins handed some documents to Baxter.

"That's great," said Baxter. "I have the agreement here. All you have to do is sign both copies. Dr. Tumin will do the same on behalf of the company and you get one copy, along with your cheque. You'll notice that the agreement to fund the research in your university department is a separate document. Mr. Popedopilis will sign that one for the company.

Popedopilis handed a cheque, printed on the computer, to Tumin for a signature, then signed it himself and finally handed it to Fischer with a copy of the deed assigning the patent application to Tumin and Baxter and their company. Fischer felt wealthy, potentially famous and entirely safe, though he thought he'd better go through that filing cabinet with a fine-toothed comb, and make certain that nothing incriminating remained.

"You'll have to excuse us all," said Baxter. "We have to be getting a move on. These guys are okay, but I have to be in the States tomorrow."

"I understand," said Fischer and they all shook hands before Collins and Popedopilis packed up their computers and Fischer took his cheque to his room.

"Okay," said Baxter, when Fischer was safely out of earshot. "He's going to shoot his mouth off about the patent. This salt resistant rice will be worth more if we keep quiet about it for a while."

"I think we must say nothing and let our own researchers complete their own lines of enquiry," said Tumin, by way of agreement.

"Sure," said Baxter nodding, "We complete our own project and apply for a patent on that when this patent runs out." He indicated the assignment made by Fischer. "After that we can set our researchers onto looking at robotic computer programmes and patent that."

Tumin meditated a moment or two on Baxter's words. "It is very probable that delaying sale of the rice will increase its value," he agreed at length. "At all costs we must protect our investment."

"We can make shorter term profits from the crossed wheat and maize we're about to patent. We can hold back a bit on the rice. That way all the dust will settle and Fischer will be forgotten."

"There is some risk that he will attract attention to the question of whether the project was his," observed Tumin.

"Hell, that's no great problem," said Baxter. "We own the patent application, bought in good faith and there doesn't seem to be any question over ownership. No, what worries me is his big mouth. I think we'll have to shut it for him."

He picked up Tumin's mobile phone, ignoring the other's frown of disapproval, and dialled. It rang. "Oh, hi," he said, "Baxter here. I want you to keep an eye in Fischer's car. When he's ready to leave let me know straight away and, when he goes, follow him." He rang off and handed Tumin his phone back. "You make the decisions and leave the details to me," he said, somewhat cryptically.

Since this was a winter day with a cutting wind and intermittent drizzle, the city walls at York were almost empty of people. Gill and Steve were

wrapped up against the weather and walked along the medieval flagstones without really noticing the antiquity around them, troubled and seeking to come to a decision.

"I think we ought to confront Fischer with the evidence," said Gill.

"And I think that if we did that we'd end up like Eugene and Professor Badger or Juan or Father Perera."

"Father Perera?"

"Died in a road accident," said Steve. "In Adela's story."

"Then what can we do with the information? It's red hot and steaming."

"Give it to Planetwatch. Talk to the Director and hand it all over to them." They walked on silence for a time, the wind cutting around and over the battlements.

"I'll tell you what," said Gill at length. "I'll try and get to see the Air Accident Investigators at the Civil Aviation Authority. I'll see if they are in the least bit receptive to ideas about of who benefits from the death of a couple of passengers. If I don't get anywhere with them, I will contact Planetwatch." Steve nodded. "But I don't like Fischer getting away with it."

"It's getting dark," said Steve, "and it's bloody cold to boot. Let's have a warm drink somewhere, then we'd better get home before Dave and Concha phone."

"Okay. There's a cafe by those gardens just over the river. That's usually open on a Sunday." They hurried along the last stretch of wall and headed for the bridge and the cafe Gill mentioned.

The security guard came to with a stinking headache and straight away went to the washroom for a drink to take with the two aspirins he had in his jacket pocket. He seemed to have been out to the world for just over ten minutes, but there was no sign of what, if anything, had hit him. Indeed, there was no bruise, except the one on his knee where he had banged it falling and a slight pinprick from the tranquilliser dart he didn't even notice. He was puzzled as to what had happened. Although, technically, the building was open, there didn't seem to be anyone around. When he felt recovered, he searched the building from top floor to basement and found nothing out of its place. On balance he thought it better not to report the incident, but resolved to see the doctor next day and set about making a cup of tea.

During his brief unconsciousness two men in overalls, looking like caretaking staff on overtime, had been up to Dr. Fischer's office with a little trolley. They had let themselves in with a key, loaded one of the filing cabinets onto the trolley and wheeled it towards the lift. The security guard was stirring as they wheeled the filing cabinet out,

loaded it into a van and drove off. He came to just as they were departing into the night.

"I'm not surprised it was fatal," said the fireman to the policeman. "How the hell did he hit the right hand parapet of the bridge like that?"

"No witnesses," answered the patrol car driver. "We think he was probably overtaking something big and didn't make it, but the car was on fire before anyone found it."

"Before anyone reported it," said the fireman.

"Same thing."

"Not always, it isn't," said the fireman, setting up the cutting equipment.

"Unless we find whatever it was he was overtaking, it's unlikely we'll ever know," said the policeman.

CHAPTER 27

Gill picked up the post as she went out the front door. "Early," she thought, "I'll look through it at work." and stuffed it into her already bulging handbag.

Her job at the museum was only part time - a little less than three quarters of full time - and it was only temporary. If this cataloguing work lasted until the spring she could probably get full time work through the summer as a guide in the museum, answering queries from visitors, and that would almost certainly lead to permanent work because another staff member was leaving in less than a year. On the other hand, she wasn't sure that she wanted that.

As she walked briskly down the street she considered the possible choices open to her. There had been one letter in the post that was in the printed envelope of 'her' agent - the one who had agreed to look at a detailed treatment and a couple of sample chapters from her book. The agent hadn't sent the stuff back, so that augured well. She would read the letter as soon as she got to the museum.

She wanted to write for a living, though probably not fiction, at least not principally. She was more interested in time, past lives and things occult. That had caused her to join the occult group to which she and Steve belonged. That had also prompted her to consider the occult supplies shop. She would need some money to get that launched properly. Certainly Steve had some, left by his mother when she died, and there was no doubt that he would help her, but she did not want to use his legacy unless she was certain of a profitable going concern.

She was still turning over the various options in her mind when she arrived at the museum. She went straight to the basement where the new acquisitions to be assessed and catalogued were awaiting her attention.

In winter the building was very quiet for, though it was open, there were few visitors. Upstairs was clean and fresh and smelled of

polish but the basement, though warm and dry, smelled of dust and a sort of 'oldness' that one associated with a museum. Gill hung up her coat in the locker, took the post from her bag and left that in her locker too. She sat down at the desk to read her letters, starting with the one from her agent. She read, eyes shining with disbelief:

> Dear Gill Benderman,
>
> Re: Shadows of the Past
>
> Thank you for the treatment and sample chapters of the above proposal you sent me.
>
> I am pleased to tell you that I have been successful in interesting a publisher in your proposal. Subject to the satisfactory completion of the book within agreed deadlines, an offer has been tentatively made.
>
> The terms of the offer are set out in the accompanying sheet and our terms of business provide for a commision of 10% on UK contracts, 15% on overseas contracts.
>
> You will appreciate that, as a new writer, no money will be forthcoming until the work is completed, but the terms offered seem otherwise very reasonable to us.
>
> Would you be good enough to let me have your acceptance of these terms by return, so that a contract can be drawn up by the publisher.
>
> Yours sincerely,

Gill was so excited that she wanted to tell somebody straight away, though there wasn't anybody handy. Eventually she looked at the other post. There was a bill from Yorkshire Electricity that wasn't very important as they paid monthly anyway and a letter from the occult order to which she and Steve both belonged. It was just a summons to the next meeting of the temple, but she noted that she would be initiated into the next grade up - Adeptus Minor. She supposed her rapid progress was a reflection on former lifetimes of progress along the path.

Gill had been at the museum for nearly twenty minutes and hadn't done a stroke of work, so she put the post away and buckled down to it, dusting off a piece of ceramic and studying it carefully.

"I'll ask the curator's permission to make a couple of phone calls in my lunch break," she thought, looking with growing puzzlement at the artifact before her.

'Hmm,' she thought, 'Not at all obvious what it is ... No manufacturer's or artist's mark ... Old, but in no way primitive, and it does seem complete.' She shut off thoughts of personal affairs or ringing the Civil Aviation Authority or Planetwatch and concentrated on the matter in hand.

The Civil Aviation Authority were a big organisation to find one's way around and Gill was frightened to think what the cost of the call was going to be, the time it was taking. Eventually she was put through to the Air Accident branch.

"Can I speak to someone from the team investigating the airline crash in the channel last week," she asked and initiated a quick conversation at the other end.

"Eventually the receptionist said, "Mr. Simpson will speak to you."

What role, if any, Mr. Simpson had in the investigation was not made clear to Gill, but Mr. Simpson asked, "How can I help you?" He didn't sound the kind of person you would turn to for help.

"I have some information about two of the passengers on the airliner which crashed into the channel last week," Gill began.

"Are you a relative of one of the passengers or crew?"

"No. Just a friend of one of the passengers, but my information might have a bearing on the enquiries, especially as to motive if it turned out to be sabotage of some kind." She didn't say 'bomb' outright, because that sounded too sensational.

"We're only taking evidence from those involved with control and maintenance at the moment," said Simpson. "We might well turn our attention later to what relatives of the passengers and crew have to say...."

"But the information I have could have an important bearing on the question of motive if it was sabotage," Gill protested.

"We don't have any cause to suspect sabotage." Simpson sounded a bit curt. "There seems to have been some problem not involving a major explosion in the luggage hold or with the controls between the luggage hold and the passenger area. I suggest you ask someone who is a relative to write outlining the information you say you have. We'll get in touch then if we need to."

Clearly Mr. Simpson thought the conversation was over. "All right, said Gill, "I'll get his sister to write."

"You do that," said Simpson, said 'Good Afternoon' not 'Good Bye' and rang off.

"Don't call us, we'll call you," Gill observed rather sourly to the receiver and put it down.

She picked up her diary again - a small desk diary far too large for her overweight handbag - and looked up the note she had made of the Planetwatch phone number.

Planetwatch sounded much friendlier. A male voice answered, "Planetwatch. Can I help you?" The actual words were not greatly different from Mr. Simpson's opening, but the tone could not have been more different.

"I wanted to speak to your director, if I could," said Gill.

"You're in luck. Ms. Hackett came back from lunch seconds ago. Can you give me some idea what it's about?"

"I have some information regarding the content of a patent on genetically engineered rice." Gill didn't know how to be more explicit with sounding sensationalist.

"Right. If she's gone straight to her office she should be there by now. Hang on a minute."

The line went dead for a moment and then a warm, somehow rather mellow voice answered, "Hello. Liz Hackett here, Who am I speaking to?"

"Gill Benderman from York. Look, I don't know how to explain myself without sounding melodramatic."

"Okay, so be melodramatic. I'll make my own mind up about what you say," replied the same unruffled voice."

"Right," said Gill, "We have the research notes, the original project outline and so on, for a genetically engineered salt resistant strain of rice. The researcher was going to make the knowledge freely available to third world farmers and governments but he's dead. There's circumstantial evidence that he was murdered and we have a patent application in the name of another individual who was close to him. I'd like to talk to you face to face and give you the stuff I have."

"That isn't all that melodramatic," said Ms. Hackett. "It depends on the material you have, of course, but somebody stands to make an awful lot of money from the project. Salt resistant rice eh? I could see enough money sloshing around that little enterprise to be a motive for murder. More than enough. Millions."

"Can I come and see you then?"

"Where did you say you were speaking from?"

"York."

"And when were you thinking of coming to London?"

Gill thought for a moment. "I don't work Thursday mornings or at all on Wednesdays. I could come and see you the day after tomorrow," she said.

"Hang on while I check my diary..." There was the sound of the phone being laid on a desk and pages turning. "Sorry about that,"

said Ms. Hackett. "Yes. Wednesday would be okay. Can you get down by eleven or eleven thirty?"

"Let's say eleven thirty. That gives me time to find the place. I don't really know London that well."

"Eleven thirty Wednesday, then. Now don't expect Planetwatch to have grand offices. We don't spend much on our headquarters. We use a converted warehouse in a side street - There's a big enough sign outside the place but I'd advise you to use an A-Z to find it. Take the tube to Angel station or any bus that runs along Upper Street. Just come into reception and tell them you have an appointment with me."

"I'll get an A-Z then. I'll find it somehow. See you on Wednesday at eleven thirty. Goodbye."

"Look forward to it. Bye." and she uttered the word 'Bye' rather breathily, like a media performer or a Radio 2 DJ, though not in any way insincerely.

Gill glanced at her watch. The Planetwatch call hadn't taken long at all but she'd used up a large chunk of her lunch break, not that anyone kept very strict tabs on her timekeeping. She put on her coat and picked up her bag to go out and grab a sandwich. Just as she was leaving she passed the Assistant Curator coming back from lunch. She had the first edition of the York evening daily paper.

Gill noticed the headline 'SECOND TRAGEDY IN A WEEK STRIKES UNIVERSITY'. Curious, she said, "Can I borrow this a sec?" and took the paper to glance through the news item.
She read:

SECOND TRAGEDY IN A WEEK STRIKES UNIVERSITY

The Genetics Department at the city's university was hit by a second tragedy when Dr. Fischer, the Acting Head of the Department, was killed in a car crash. He stepped in to fill the gap left by the death of the Head of the Genetics Department, Professor Badger, in a plane crash last week.

Dr. Fischer was killed when his car crashed into the side of a bridge in Buckinghamshire early on Sunday evening. There were no other vehicles involved and there was no other occupant in the car, which caught fire afterwards ...

Gill didn't read any further, but hurried out for sandwich, shaken. She felt much as Adela must have done, seeing the news item about her flat being blown up - the sooner she got rid of the papers she was holding, the sooner she would feel safe.

"Have you read tonight's Evening Press?" she called to Steve, almost before he walked through the door.

"Bought a copy in case you missed it," he said and joined her in the kitchen. "What do you make of it?"

She thought carefully before answering and then said, "It's too much of a coincidence just to be a coincidence." She flipped off the switch and poured the water from the kettle into the two mugs.

"I think he must have sold the patent application and then somehow fallen foul of whoever bought it." She stirred the coffee and passed one of the mugs to Steve.

"There must be a record of who now owns the patent application," he said, thinking out loud. "It won't prove murder but at least it would tell us who we were up against."

"I'm seeing the Director of Planetwatch, a woman called Liz Hackett on Wednesday," said Gill. "I'm going to London for the day. I suppose you can't come too."

"You suppose right," said Steve. "But how about I get rid of these work clothes and take you out to eat?"

"As it's my turn to get dinner, I don't mind at all," she answered with a grin. "What's this in aid of?"

"Nothing in particular, except it's been a trying few days. And it's still your turn to make dinner tomorrow." he added, going into the bathroom to wash.

"Take a look at this letter first," said Gill, and he turned off the tap again and came back.

She took the morning's post from her handbag. "I almost forgot with talking about Fischer's accident," she said as he took the letter.

He read in silence, then said, "That's great. Absolutely great. Hang on, I've got something for this occasion." and he disappeared into the bedroom. Gill heard him opening the cupboard door and scrabbling around for something. He returned a moment later with a black shoulder bag, a paper bag and a couple of books.

"Right," he said, I saw this advertised cheap second hand and I bought it for you. But only for when you started writing seriously. Go on. Have a look."

Gill unzipped the bag and saw a white laptop computer. The paper bag contained a box of CDs two cellophane wrapped boxes

containing a word processing programme and a Macintosh operating system, both new and unopened.

"It's not a brand new one with a huge memory," he said. "You can upgrade yourself when you make some money from writing and you've had chance to really find out what you need."

Gill was speechless.

"This is clever though," he continued. "If you did your book chapter by chapter, I could ttransfer the files to a USB stick and it to work. I bought you the same programme they use in the garage office." He indicated the unopened box. "Sandy in the office said she would print off copies for you on the laser printer for just the cost of the paper."

While Gill was looking at the programme box, "What's even cleverer," he remarked, "it's got wireless internet connection, so until we get a connection ourselves you can get on anywhere there's a hotspot and research the internet that way until you have a service provider yourself. "

Gill took the manual from him, rather too overwhelmed to listen properly. He continued, more to himself anyway, "I could send those research notes on the disks you copied over the phone ... " He paused, thinking about possible destinations. "I think I'll try sending them to our office computer and see it works, before I try anything fancy."

Gill was still not listening. "Wow," she said inadequately. She had been wondering about a word processor or a computer and whether they could afford one. Steve had caught her by surprise before with his thoughtfulness. He must have seen that computer weeks ago, gone into it carefully, like he always did with things, talked to the woman in the office to find out about the printer and the programme ...

She felt a little overwhelmed and reached up to kiss him, hugging him wordlessly afterwards. At length, when she had kissed him again, long and slow, she said, "We'll make it a celebration meal out tonight and, as a thank you I'll get dinner for a week."

Steve grinned and said, "You'll be out on Wednesday. Are you including that in your week?" and went back into the bathroom while Gill looked again at her computer and the handbooks and thought what a considerate husband Steve could be and how much she loved him.

Then she went to change her own clothes and fix her hair.

CHAPTER 28

The exterior of the Planetwatch office was, as Liz Hackett had indicated on the phone, not very prepossessing, though it hadn't been at all hard to find with a street map.

Although Gill liked London to visit, she felt certain that she wouldn't want to live there. It appeared so vast, and there seemed so much of every activity you could think of. It was not just big, it was too big. It was the first city in the world bigger than ancient Rome and, at one time, bigger than any other in the world. No, she wouldn't want to live there, but visiting was an exciting thing to do.

The train had been a fast, quiet, comfortable electric one which had brought her to Kings Cross in only a little more than two hours. That station is a major interchange on the underground, linking seven lines, one of which took Gill to 'The Angel', from where it was only a short walk through the chilly streets to the Planetwatch office.

She studied the outside of the converted warehouse, shivering a little in a cutting wind. Apart from a large modern sign indicating that this was the right place, not much had been done to the exterior. Though the architecture wouldn't have been that bad if it was cleaned up, everything Victorian was either too functional or too fussy for Gill's taste.

She didn't object so much to the architecture, but her mind rebelled against the thinking of the era and the exploitation of other humans, particularly women. She thought of Eugene's murder and of that of the Professor and Dr. Fischer. They represented greed and murder for money - the profit motive. That was a very Victorian motive. She pushed open the door and went inside.

The interior of the building was warm and friendly and appeared to have been extensively, though not expensively remodelled. There was a carpeted reception area with a counter bearing the legend 'General Enquiries' over it. An arrow pointed through a doorway to 'Membership Enquiries and Shop' while another

door was marked 'Campaigns and Administration'. Gill walked up to the 'General Enquiries' counter, behind which sat a young man.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"I have an appointment with Ms. Hackett at eleven thirty," said Gill.

The young man smiled. "Ah, yes," he said. "Ms. Hackett is expecting you. Go through the door marked 'Administration' and straight ahead of you are both the lift and the stairs. Take whichever you please to the second floor, turn right and it's the second door on the left."

"Thank you," Gill said and started through the door. As she went she could hear him answering the phone with the same helpful friendliness. She took the lift to the second floor, turned right as instructed and knocked on the second door on the left.

"Come in," said the same mellow sounding voice she had heard on the phone. "You must be Gill Bendermann. I'm Liz Hackett the Action Director of Planetwatch and this is Monica Watson, the Scientific Director."

Liz Hackett was in her mid thirties, a rather sharp-featured woman with lightly permed hair and laughter lines round her eyes. There was an indefinable air of 'one-who-has-seen-much' that, like her voice, did not quite match her age. Monica Watson was younger - only a little older than Gill herself and with an air of youth and energy about her. She looked very intense and serious. Perhaps she was.

"Right," said Liz after they had shaken hands. "Come and sit down. Tell us your story and be as melodramatic as you like. But your material had better be good," she added, sitting down herself.

Gill opened her briefcase and took out the various papers and computer disks. "It might be as well if you each had a look at these photocopies. I made a spare copy just in case, so you don't have to share." She passed over the patent application and supporting documents.

"Red hot," said Liz to Monica. "Not three weeks old yet." and they began reading through them. Liz skimmed through the supplementary statement and concentrated on the application form and acknowledgement, while Monica showed exactly the reverse interest.

"Okay," said Liz. "Now what's the story behind this?"

"The original researcher was Eugene Parker. Some friends of ours persuaded him that salt resistant rice was a good project. He got it funded by the university direct, with no strings attached and intended to make the seed freely available to anyone at all. He was killed in an air crash on the way to give a paper at a conference."

"Not the plane that crashed into the channel two or three weeks ago?" asked Liz.

"That's the one," agreed Gill. "You can see that the patent was applied for in the name of Dr. Fischer?"

Liz nodded. "Uh hu," she said. "I don't remember the date of the plane crash exactly, but this application must have been filed within a couple of days."

"Doctor Fischer was the Second in the Genetics Department at York Uiniversity to Doctor Badger who died in the same plane crash. Dr Fischer was acting Head of Department."

"He can't have wasted much time before filing the application," Liz Hacket remarked, looking at the date again.

"No," Gill agreed. "And at the weekend he died in a car crash. It's a better than even bet that some multi-national has already bought the patent application from him."

"We could find that out, no problem," said Liz. "We have a small unit in Munich, monitoring patent applications. The question is what to do with what we've got."

"I have all the research notes on disk," said Gill, producing the copies she made. "Surely we could do something to make this knowledge available, the way Eugene Parker wanted."

Monica Watson looked up from what she was reading. "This application is so new that, if applications were made for patents in the far east we'd probably get in first. If Planetwatch had the patent, we could release the seed ourselves."

Liz looked interested. She picked up the phone. "Hello," she said into it, "Can you find Terry and ask him to drop whatever he's doing and come to my office immediately ... Thanks."

She put down the phone and turned back to Monica, "It would be really something if we could do it," she agreed. "The alternative is to send copies of the application and research notes to governments likely to need the rice enough to ignore the patent."

"One doesn't rule out the other," said Gill. "You could apply for a patent at the same time as approaching various governments."

"That's certainly possible," Liz agreed. She thought out loud. "We'd need plenty of copies of the material. We've got our own copier of course. Terry is our computer whizz. I'll ask him about copying the disks."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," she called.

A man about thirty entered. Gill didn't like him, but she didn't know why she didn't. He was clean-shaven and wearing a suit and tie. He looked pleasant enough and had an air of efficiency about him. There was nothing obvious to justify her instant reaction, and she shelved her feelings for the moment.

"Terry," said Liz, "This is Gill. She's given us some very interesting research stuff, part of which is on disk. Can we make copies for circulation?" Liz had not introduced them properly and, for some reason she couldn't explain, Gill preferred to remain anonymous.

"No problem," he answered. "What's the data programme?"

Liz looked questioningly at Gill, who shook her head. "I haven't looked at what's actually on the disks. I don't know anything about the programme, except that I presume it's whatever the science faculty of the university uses," she said. "Something in Cobol, I'd guess. Possibly Datastore?" she added tentatively.

"Not to worry," said Terry, taking the disks from Liz. "I'll get my wife to work through various programmes and I'll copy the programme as well, if we don't have already have it. I'll ask her this evening. She'll probably be able to do it by dinner time tomorrow."

"That's great," said Liz. To Terry she said. "We need the copies, about twenty of them. If you can do that by tomorrow it will be great."

To Monica she said, "I'll try phoning branches in India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Australia and so on. I'll have them get hold of patent applications and fax them to us. You can prepare two documents. One for presenting applications for patents, the other for bypassing the patent system altogether." She turned to Gill. "This could be great. How about lunch to celebrate?"

Without waiting for an answer, she stood up, saying to Monica and Terry, "Right, let's get on with it. Terry, take the disks. Monica, take all the written stuff. Let's get this whole thing started and hit them before they know we've picked up anything to hit them with."

She ushered out Terry and Monica, grabbed her coat and bag and linked arms with Gill. "I feel great about this," she said.

"You seem to have a good team," said Gill, as she was propelled out of the office by Liz Hackett's enthusiasm. "Can Terry's wife be counted on?"

"She's done things for us before with no problem."

Gill was still uneasy, though there was no obvious reason. "Who does she work for?" she asked.

"I don't really know," said Liz, "But it's some research company or other. She's done things for us before and she seems to have access to a lot of resources, particularly when it comes to applications programmes and programming languages.

She paused as they waited briefly for the lift, then continued: "As a matter of fact I've never actually met her, but I think she's French, with a name like Adrienne or something."

She held the lift doors open for Gill. "Come on," she said

She was still enthusing about the idea and the possibilities as they passed through reception.

"I'll be back before two, Paul," she said to the young man at reception. He looked up from answering a call and nodded.

As they walked towards the main road Gill decided she liked Liz Hackett. She seemed an efficient administrator who got on reasonably well with her staff. All the same she couldn't get away from the seemingly unjustified feeling about Terry Coty. Where had she come across that name before?

It sounded as if Planetwatch would solve the problem of getting universal access to Eugene's discovery. On the other hand, she wasn't sure that it was possible to change the future. The matter was now out her hands completely and, though she had photocopies of the written files, there were no copies of the disks.

She was unaware of Steve's experiment's with her computer's wireless internet facilities and the fact that there were copies of the research notes at the garage. Or that he had made additional copies of the CDs.

Next morning was Thursday, and Gill did not start work until lunch-time. About nine thirty the phone rang.

"Disaster, Gill," said Liz Hackett's voice unsteadily when she answered it.

"Disaster?"

"First, according to Terry's wife, when she found the right programme there was something wrong with the data on both disks. Corrupt copies, Terry said."

Gill was stunned. "One I could believe," she said, "you do get the occasional faulty CD, but both? Have you got enough from the photocopies to go ahead with registering the patents."

"That's the other part of the disaster," said Liz and paused. "We had a major fire at Planetwatch offices last night. Upper floors only, but the photocopies and our notes were in my office."

"And that was affected, I suppose."

"Got it in one," said Liz. Though her words were still 'flip' she sounded near to tears.

"I've got copies of all the photocopy material," said Gill. "I can send it to you."

"Planetwatch UK will be limping along for weeks," Liz answered. "We were insured, of course, but we won't be able to get it together enough to even re-write the material to support patent applications for several days. By that time, it's my bet, it will be too late."

"What d'you mean?" asked Gill.

"Surely you don't think all this was a coincidence? I don't. By the time we could get the patent applications in, someone would have got there first." Her voice was bleak. "Somehow or other, whoever owns the patent learned about our plans, I'm sure of it. I've been outmaneuvered."

Gill conceded that as very likely, but couldn't see how the plan could have been uncovered so quickly. Or uncovered at all, come to that. It could only mean that somebody within the Planetwatch organisation was planted to pass on information. "Well, what shall I do with the information," she asked.

"Send it all on to our Munich office. They have a small group monitoring all patent applications. I'll call them now and fill them in on what's happened. Post it express, or whatever the Post Office call their urgent service nowadays."

"All right. Have you got the address?"

"Fortunately I have all the important addresses in my diary and I keep it with me. Hang on. Yes, here we are.... Königen Louisa Straße 27, MUNICH 94450. Phone number is 01049-254-6697."

"Got it." She said

Gill put the phone down feeling much as she had when she had read of Dr. Fisher's 'accidental' death. She glanced at her watch and wondered whether she could ring Steve at work. She sighed and picked up the phone again.

Steve listened without comment as Gill relayed what she had been told by Liz Hackett. She seemed to be in better control of herself than when she had learned of Eugene's death, and made no mention of the fire at Planetwatch being 'her fault'. He thought that this was probably a good sign, since she could have blamed herself with a little more reason, not that it would have been justified.

He decided that it would be better to say nothing of his copy of the study notes at the garage. The data had been transferred between Gill's computer and the office machine. What was more, the office computer carried out a data verification so, although he didn't know what programme Eugene had used, he knew that either Terry Coty or his wife were lying. Perhaps they both were.

"Give me the Munich phone number," he said, and Gill repeated it.

"Right," he said. "Why don't you send everything straight to the Munich office, lock, stock and barrel. There's a big envelope down the side of the bureau. Use that and send it express, on your way to work this lunch time."

"I might as well, I suppose," she agreed.

"I'll phone these people and tell them it's on the way."

"Okay," she said more brightly. "We can't really do more than send it to them."

"That's right." He didn't mention that he would also ask them for their email address.

CHAPTER 29

"When is it due?" asked Gill.

Concha didn't reply immediately. She leaned back in the warm autumn sunshine and gazed out to sea. The 'Balcony of Europe' at Nerja might be a little presumptuously named, but it is certainly both dramatic and attractive.

There is a promenade, perhaps a little less than half a mile long, jutting straight out to sea, at right angles to the town. It occupies the whole width and entire length of an outcrop of rock some twenty-five or so metres above the sea. There is a double line of palm trees providing shade for the benches and the whole is beautifully tiled. An iron fence guards the edges and a couple of ancient cannon glare outwards at the seaward end.

Concha didn't look very pregnant, though you could tell at once if you knew. "Beginning of March," she answered, just as Gill was forgetting she had asked.

"Funny language, English," she added. "You can ask me 'when is it due?', referring to the baby and that's all right. But I have to say 'when is it due out?', referring to the book."

"Be a bit ... well, blunt and indelicate, if I said 'when's it due out?' referring to the baby," said Gill. "As if it, well, pops out on its own with no effort from anyone else. How do say it Spanish."

"In everyday talk you 'give light to' either a baby or a book. It's more or less the same thing. When do you give light to your book?"

"More or less the same time actually," said Gill. "It will be in the shops by mid-March but there's an official launch at the very end of the month, in time for Easter."

Gill was enjoying both the holiday in general and the scene from the Balcón de Europe in particular. Behind them was the town, to one side there was a little cove with fishing boats drawn up and a wider beach further along, to the other several hotels with

commanding views. The sun was not too hot this late in the year. "What are you going to call it - him or her?" she asked.

"'Raul', after my brother if it's a boy,"

"And if it's a girl?"

"'Concepciona', like me."

"Not 'Adela'?" asked Gill, wondering whether the obsession was over and done.

"Dave won't have 'Adela' as the first name. He will agree to her having two names - we'll call her 'Concepciona Adela'. As a sort of souvenir of a story he thinks is over and gone."

"Over and gone?" repeated Gill, mildly curious. She was distracted by the approach of Dave and Steve and they got lazily to their feet to meet them.

"Remember how you know much more than you ever mention in your story?" Concha asked. For a moment Gill was puzzled. "When you try the Christos Experiment," she elaborated and Gill nodded.

"Well, I know something that I never actually said in the story."

"What's that?" asked Gill.

"Adela's name was Concepciona Adela Graham Ponce. She just called herself Adela."

They met up with the men and walked back towards the town.

"Do you remember the name 'Coty'," Gill asked, thinking of her unreasonable dislike of Terry Coty and the way everything seemed to have awry at Planetwatch, after he took charge of the disks of Eugene's research notes. "The name rings a bell with me and I can't think where I heard it before."

"It was Corrine Coty who briefed Adela in Paris," said Concha.

"Ah," Gill commented. "I knew I knew the name. It was Corrine Coty."

"You mean, it 'will be' Corrine Coty some time in the future." said Steve.

"Why do you ask?" said Concha.

"No reason that matters," Gill answered, thinking that it would be better not to try and mess around with the future again. "I just wondered. Let's have a drink."

`"Why did you 'just wonder'?" Steve asked as they sat down at the table of a pavement cafe.

"Well," Gill said reluctantly, wishing she hadn't reopened the subject. "It was a Mrs. Coty who said the data on the disks was corrupt and you must admit that the fire at Planetwatch happened at a very convenient point for somebody."

"We haven't heard any more about the patent, I take it?" asked Dave.

"Not that I'm aware," Gill answered him. "Perhaps the information we photocopied wasn't enough for their Munich office to act on."

"They had the data on disk as well," said Steve. The remark fell like a bombshell and they all looked at him.

"How?" asked Gill.

"You recall I told you that your computer had a wireless internet card?"

"Vaguely."

"I had it talk to the computer in the garage, the night before you went to Planetwatch."

Gill was taken aback by Steve's revelation, but not altogether surprised. It was the sort of thing he would think of.

"You never told me," she said, and there was a pause as they enjoyed the sun.

"I don't know whether Concha saw the only possible future - which brings up the old questions of predestination and free will - or just one of many possible versions," Steve remarked lazily, "But I'll tell you something about the immediate future."

"Yes?" Dave asked.

"If one of us doesn't go inside to order we're going to have a long wait, because there's no sign of a waiter."

"I'll go," said Dave laughing. "What will you have?"

"Surprise us," said Steve lazily as Dave got up. "Beers. Coffees, anything will do."

"Right," he said, and roused himself.

"And I must go to the toilet," Concha added. She rose also and they went into the cafe together.

"I think," Steve remarked, glancing to make sure that Dave and Concha were both out of earshot, "that there are a range of futures and that Concha made this particular one happen."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think predestination makes sense philosophically."

"I think I could argue about that from Near Death Experiences ," Gill said, "but I didn't mean philosphically. What I was getting at was, why do you think Concha made this future happen?"

"The woman who answered the phone when I rang the Munich office of Planetwatch was a Dagmar Bäckman," Steve answered obscurely, glancing again to make sure neither Dave nor Concha was returning yet.

"Bäckman? That rings bells."

"Like Coty did?"

"Coty ... Bäckman. Got it. Rüdi Bäckman from Adela's story."

"I'd guess that Rüdi is ... or will be ... Dagmar's son or grandson," Steve said.

"Terry Coty was quite young and his wife sounds to be a career woman. I'd bet that she has a daughter called Corrine late in life." She paused, thoughtful for a moment. "I don't know what this all says about time or the Christos Experiment, but you'd better not say anything to Concha."

"I don't intend to," Steve answered her. "I don't like the idea of the crimes at the door of GENAG or what they're going to do to the planet, but I want to leave the future severely alone, to happen as Concha saw it or not."

Gill reflected on the deaths of Eugene, Professor Badger and Dr. Fischer. They were all now past. Established fact like the fire at Planetwatch and the patent. She thought of the future deaths, of Father Perera, Juan and all the nameless others. Would they too become 'established fact' eventually?

'Perhaps,' she thought, 'It is better to do what seems right today and know nothing of the future.'

She sat silent in the warmth and watched Dave returning with four beers. An an unspoken afterthought occurred to her.

'I can't help being psychic, though.'