

**KILOWATT**

## PROLOGUE

*On July 3, 1989, an article appeared on page nine of the Soviet military newspaper Red Star reporting that the Soviet Navy had deployed a Poseidon-class submersible to the Barents Sea as part of a marine environmental research project. Two days later Pravda reported the tragic loss of seventy-three sailors in an airplane crash in a remote region of the Ural Mountains. According to the article, the sailors were being transferred from the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk to the Pacific Ocean Fleet at Vladivostok. When questioned by a reporter from Reuters, V.I. Volkov, Chief of the Soviet Navy Political Directorate, denied that any relationship existed between these two incidents. He was lying.*

THE DAWN MIST drifted in ghost-like columns across the still surface of the lake. In the shallows near the shore a heron stood motionless beside a fallen tree; farther out the dark head of a beaver glided by trailing a strand of water lilies. For Admiral Dmitri Nikolaevich Rastakov, these moments of beauty and unhurried solitude were rare and cherished—especially now with his nation in crisis and Gorbachëv leading them all to perdition.

He made another cast and watched the lure arc and drop with a soft splash. With a flick of the wrist he set the spinner and began reeling it in. Perhaps it was time to retire, he thought. Get out before the pressures of the job killed him. He could just make out the bright flash of the spinner as it ran in toward the boat. He had two perch caught already and would use them for his famous *ukhá*, the fish soup his grandmother had taught him how to make. Pulling his line from the water, he reached into the tackle box for another lure and was startled by the sudden trilling of the mobile telephone. A large, cumbersome device encased in military steel and powered by nickel-cadmium batteries, it connected him to the Ministry of Defense and went with him everywhere, like a personal demon.

For a brief moment he was tempted to pitch the accursed thing overboard. Instead he lifted the black receiver.

“Yes?”

“Comrade Admiral, I have been trying to reach you for many hours.”

“The reception is seldom good here, Comrade Captain. What do you want?”

“We have a situation, very serious. I am on my way to you now and will arrive shortly.”

Rastakov returned the receiver to its cradle. The caller was Vasili Pushkin, a descendent of the noted Russian poet and his chief of staff. Mobile phones were not secure so Pushkin could say nothing more. The serious situation must have something to do with the sea trials for the *Tigron*, the new BARS-class attack submarine, taking place in the Barents Sea four hundred miles to the north. Why else had Pushkin dared disturb him during his jealously guarded once-a-year fishing trip? A foreboding like dark winter clouds gathered in his mind as he retrieved his fish and laid them in the bottom of the boat. He cursed as he yanked the oil-stained rope and the outboard motor surged to life. He pushed the throttle arm and the boat swept around, the bow lifting, as it headed toward the shore, the waves fanning out in velvet undulations behind him

So, he thought to himself, it *was* too good to be true. Despite the long years of suffering and sacrifice, Russia was quickly falling into irrelevance—a second-class world power. Everything broken. But *if* the new technology had succeeded, what then? The Russian Bear would play its tune and the rest of the world would dance—the United States, Western Europe, China.

The rising sun was beginning to illuminate the upper branches of the white birches along the western shore of the lake as he cut the motor and allowed the wake to push him up to the dock. In the silence, he heard the KA-29 Helix helicopter approaching from the northeast, the urgent thumping of its six long blades cutting through the morning air, growing steadily louder and more commanding. An eagle resting on a tree limb near the bank took wing in protest, swooping low over the water.

Rastakov tied up to the dock and, forgetting the perch, hurried up the long narrow steps to the *dacha*. He called to his wife. He only had a few minutes to tell her he was leaving and to gather his things. Their vacation was over; she would have to close up on her own.

ON THE FLIGHT back to the Northern Fleet Naval Command Center, Pushkin briefed him. What he said confirmed Rastakov’s worst fears.

“The *Tigron* performed flawlessly for the first twelve hours of her

underwater high-speed trial,” Pushkin shouted over the high-pitched whine of the helicopter’s two turboshaft engines. “Then we received a broken up transmission; the signal was unintelligible. After that, only silence.”

“What steps have you taken to locate her?” Rastakov asked.

“The destroyer *Druzhni* and sub-tender *Pechora* were on station monitoring the tests. They have located the emergency buoy. The *Tigron* is on the sea bed at a depth of four hundred feet.”

“Any surface debris?”

“None, Comrade Admiral.”

So it was possible the *Tigron’s* hull remained intact. Perhaps it was only a power failure, serious but not necessarily fatal. Rastakov forced himself to concentrate. Why had the sailors made no attempt to escape? The submarine’s conning tower was equipped with a VKS pod. It was designed to accommodate most of the crew, and once detached, would float to the surface and serve as a lifeboat until rescuers arrived. But there was no VKS.

He looked out the side window. The sun was nearing its zenith and a whitish haze obscured much of the earth below. He rubbed his face and reminded himself to shave when they landed. He leaned back against the headrest, closed his eyes, and tried to imagine what the sailors inside the *Tigron* were going through. He had served sixteen years aboard submarines and knew the constant unspoken dread that lurked in the back of each submariner’s mind—the dread of being trapped inside a stricken vessel deep beneath the surface of the ocean. It took a special kind of courage to overcome this fear and he often wondered what led young men to volunteer for such hazardous service. For some, no doubt, it was the desire to protect their beloved Mother Russia from her enemies; for others, little more than a restless young man’s need to escape the crushing boredom and alcoholism of some village out on the steppe, doomed to discover in time that he has merely traded one kind of claustrophobia for another.

“Comrade Admiral?” Captain Pushkin was awaiting orders. To save the men inside the *Tigron*, Rastakov knew he must refuse to think of them. Instead he must focus on basics: currents and weather conditions, battery life and fuel requirements.

He felt confined and unbuckled his safety harness. “Do we have a rescue submersible ready for service?”

“Yes, at the base in Severodvinsk. It is being loaded onto a freighter now.”

“When will it be ready to sail?”

“Within two hours.”

Seventy-three men and the most important ship in the Soviet Navy lost at sea. A catastrophe.

“Do you have the weather forecast?”

Pushkin handed him a printout that called for clear skies through the next day, then clouds and scattered showers for the remainder of the week.

“Do the Americans suspect a problem?”

Pushkin gave a shrug. “We have detected no increase in their signal activity.”

“Good, we must proceed with great caution.”

A cover story was needed to explain away the use of the mini-sub; nothing went unnoticed by the American satellites. An article in *Red Star* about a marine research project should suffice. He would ask Pushkin to write it. He came from a literary family. They might yet fool the Americans.

TWENTY-TWO HOURS later, radio communication from the search and rescue team in the mini-sub was patched through to the Command Center. Because everything about the *Tigron* and its prototype technology was ultra-top secret, the signal was not broadcast over the public address system. Instead it was routed to only two sets of headphones, those of Admiral Rastakov and his chief of staff.

The submarine was lying on the sea floor, and the captain of the mini-sub reported no visible damage to the hull. He moved the sub into position over the forward emergency escape hatch.

“We are docking now.”

There was a long pause broken by intermittent static.

“Docking is complete,” the voice returned. “We are opening the escape hatch into the fourth compartment.”

More static. Rastakov glanced over at Pushkin. The man’s face was impenetrable as stone, but the dark circles under his eyes testified to his lack of sleep.

“The hatch is open,” the captain’s voice was efficient, brisk. “Lieutenants Voronin and Biryukov are entering the vessel.”

For the next hour, disembodied voices of the rescue team came from the dark void of the sea into the Admiral’s headphones. They spoke of grotesque scenes of death and destruction. Several times the men vomited, fouling their breathing masks. Twice they requested permission

to turn back but were ordered to continue, documenting what they found with underwater cameras. They paid a high price for completing the work—within a month Lieutenant Voronin would resign his commission, while Lieutenant Biryukov would spend the next two years in and out of a psychiatric hospital. They would be the only ones ever to go inside the ill-fated *Tigron*.

SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, Naval High Command sent Rastakov orders to attach magnetic charges to the hull of the submarine and blow her up. There was to be no formal investigation. No final report. No evidence whatsoever that a submarine called the *Tigron* had ever existed—except for the bones of seventy-three sailors scattered across the sea floor awaiting the end of time.

Then came the decision by the Kremlin to terminate the Svarog Project, the name given to the prototype technology being tested aboard the *Tigron*. Rastakov couldn't understand. What had happened was most unfortunate, yes, but the new technology could be Russia's salvation. All that was needed was time to work through the problems.

"Time and lots of rubles, Nikolaevich, which we do not have," said Commissar Volkov, chief of the Soviet Navy Political Directorate. He had at last agreed to see Rastakov after repeated requests from the admiral. Spread out on the desktop between the two men were the photographs taken inside the *Tigron*. Volkov, a notorious chain smoker, lit a fresh cigarette.

"And there is something more I must tell you, Comrade Admiral. Anatoly Kryuchkov is dead."

The news stunned Rastakov. Kryuchkov was the scientist responsible for the Svarog Project; the man and the project were one and the same.

"Dead? How?" Rastakov said, trying to gather his wits.

Volkov tilted back in his chair exhaling blue smoke into the air. "The KGB screwed up big time, that is how. They had Kryuchkov under surveillance, but a week after the *Tigron* accident, he slipped away. They found his clothes folded neatly on the bank of the Moscow River. Two days later the body washed up down river. Most of his flesh had been eaten away.

"Do they know for certain it was Kryuchkov?"

"He was wearing a medical necklace."

Rastakov waited as the Volkov took another puff on his cigarette.

"They checked his dental records. A positive match."

"It could have been an accident, not suicide."

“There was a note.”

“What did it say?”

“That he was responsible for the accident and the death of so many men, could not live with the burden of guilt, that sort of thing. Kryuchkov was most upset that his discovery was being used by the military. He objected vigorously.” Here Volkov waved his hand as ashes fell on the carpet. “But none of us has the luxury to please only himself. Is that not so, Comrade Admiral? We serve for the good of the state.”

Rastakov had spoken with Kryuchkov in person only twice, but he had heard through the rumor mill that the scientist was unhappy working for the military.

“Certainly we can continue without him,” he said.

“I am afraid not.” The knell of fatalism in his superior’s voice was unmistakable.

“Why not?”

“Because our little inventor destroyed critical project data. Again the KGB cannot say how he gained access to the computer files and drawings, but he did, and they are gone.”

What incompetence! What waste! He pleaded with Volkov to resurrect the Svarog Project but was reminded that the project, like its inventor, was dead. End of story.

As for the Communists, Rastakov knew it would not be long until they were finished as well. In time the organized criminal gangs would take control of Mother Russia, aided and abetted by corrupt officials like Volkov. Well, as far as he was concerned, they could have her. He would go back to his fishing.

# 1

REB DID HIS BEST to ignore the ticking of the wall clock as Dr. Yoon studied the readout from the tonometer, a marvel of twenty-first century medical technology that shot puffs of air against the eyeball to measure the intraocular pressure. Like most Americans, Reb hated waiting, especially this doctor kind of waiting. For him it was a club people joined as they got older, whether they wanted to or not; a sort of bargain-basement Club Med where, instead of lolling away pleasant hours under the Caribbean sun drinking Pink Flamingos, its members sat glumly in examination rooms under the indifferent glare of florescent lights, or paced nervously back and forth at home waiting for the telephone to ring with test results that would foretell their fate. Good news and life went on pretty much as it had; bad news—and judging by the ophthalmologist’s somber expression the news was bad—then what? Keep his chin up and play the dutiful patient? Get a second opinion? And what about the cost? Would Blue Shield live up to its commitments, or would the ravenous appetite of the medical industrial complex devour his life savings, as it had so many others? Reb tried to think of a joke to drive these depressing thoughts from his mind. There was the one about the Irishman who was dying of cancer but told his friends it was AIDS, because he didn’t want any of them sleeping with his wife after he was dead. Or the patient who had both his feet amputated and—

He was interrupted by the sound of Dr. Yoon’s voice.

“Your pressures are increasing,” the doctor said, holding out the strip of paper in the way a detective at a murder scene might offer a spent shell casing to his partner. Reb made no effort to take it.

“What about the eye drops?” he asked.

Dr. Yoon shook his head. “They no longer seem to be effective. Your

right eye is forty; your left eye is thirty-eight. And there appears to be damage to the optical nerve.”

“Permanent damage?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Reb thought about his grandmother Libby who went blind from glaucoma in her eighties and had to be put in a nursing home. He would bring her audio books from the library and sometimes he read to her. Now here *he* was, only fifty-three, and already doing the glaucoma shuffle.

“What’s the next step?” he asked.

“Laser surgery.”

“What will that do?”

“Open up the small filtering area in the eyeball. That will allow the fluid to drain, which should reduce the pressure.”

“Will it keep me from going blind?”

Concern softened the ophthalmologist’s features.

“We’ve made great strides in treating glaucoma in recent years, Mr. Morgan, but your condition is unusually aggressive. The medicated drops should have helped, but they haven’t. Surgery is the next step.” A slight pause as he searched for words. “Unfortunately, we will have no way of knowing for sure whether it will lower the pressures until after the procedure. You should prepare yourself.”

Right, Reb thought. Prepare myself.

THE SKY WAS dark with waiting rain as he made his way out to the parking lot—dark and brooding like his mood. A woman pulling a crying child by the arm hurried past as he unlocked the door to his car and felt the first sprinkles on the back of his hand. Five minutes later he was on Business I-80 heading west toward Sacramento, the rain so heavy it was like driving through a car wash at fifty-miles-an-hour. He strained to see ahead, the wipers of his 1967 Volvo 800S unable to keep up with the deluge. He considered pulling over and sitting out the downpour, but he wanted to get home. He had a lot to think about. The last three years had been a disaster. First there was the break up of his marriage. He and Kate had been married a long time and raised a child together. Brendan was now in graduate school in Virginia and would receive his doctorate soon. Once a week they talked on the telephone and discussed basketball or the latest article in the *New Yorker*; the divorce was never mentioned.

Then the early morning phone call from Mrs. Throckton in New Jersey. His father was in the hospital, she told him. He’d had a massive stroke and the doctors didn’t expect him to last long. This was followed

by a hurried flight to Newark and a cab ride to the hospital where they said their good-byes with Reb doing all the talking, and his father, unable to speak, clutching his son's hand and peering over the edge of oblivion with moist, tired eyes.

And now, if Dr. Yoon was to be believed, his glaucoma was out of control confirming the old adage that troubles came in threes. Reb turned the defroster fan knob up to full but still had to wipe the inside of the windshield repeatedly with an old undershirt he kept under the seat. The taillights in front glittered through the rain like fairy jewels, flashing now and again as someone touched a brake pedal. He took several long breaths to center himself and calm his emotions. Trouble was a mountain canyon, dark and steep, and time was the river that ran through it, bumping and churning among the boulders. But eventually time would find its way out again into open country and sunshine. The trick was to keep the heart in the center of the current, otherwise it could circle back into eddies of anger and regret. He'd known his share of hearts trapped in those eddies, or worse, sucked into everlasting holes of despair. That wasn't for him; he would trust time to carry him safely through.

The traffic eased as the rain let up, and he found himself stuck behind a UPS semi-trailer. He checked the lane to his left and pulled out to pass. A car horn blasted in his ear and he had to jerk the car back behind the truck again, his heart pounding, as a silver BMW swept past, the driver shaking his head with disgust.

Suddenly the full impact of recent events came crashing down on him. He hadn't seen the car. Was it the rain or was his peripheral vision going to hell? If the latter, then he was a menace to others as well as himself. He would have to give up driving. What would he do then? Take public transportation? Get a Seeing-Eye dog? A white-tipped cane?

He felt the challenges piling up in front of him, the first of which was how he would make a living. Photography had been his passion and career since leaving college. Not only did it nurture his creative imagination, it allowed him to work for himself. Given his problematic relationship with authority over the years, this was probably a good thing. But photography was also a cobbled-together livelihood. There were art shows and galleries for his fine art photographs and weddings and portraits when money was tight, with the occasional assignment for the local newspaper thrown in if the regular photographer was on vacation or out sick. That would all end, of course, if his eyes went south on him. Beethoven had managed to continue composing even after he lost his hearing, but a blind photographer? Reb didn't think he had the genius to pull it off.

“You need cheering up, son,” he said out loud and switched on KVMR-FM in Nevada City. KVMR was a non-commercial, community radio station located in the Sierra foothills and the only one he listened to anymore. They featured a wide range of music including reggae, folk, rhythm and blues, jazz, and women’s music. They also broadcast left-of-center call-in talk shows, astrology readings, political debates, lectures by leading progressives, live reports from environmental conferences, and a community swap-shop. Program directors at mainstream public radio stations called it “patchwork programming,” a pejorative term because, to their way of thinking, such eclectic programming hurt station “branding.” Reb enjoyed the variety. He also appreciated the fact that the DJs were all unpaid volunteers. They would come in at two in the morning just so they could share their favorite Ani DiFranco CD or bootleg recording of the Grateful Dead.

He caught the end of Amy Goodman’s *Democracy Now* as he took the Midtown-J Street exit. He had moved into a one- bedroom apartment on the top floor of an older home soon after the divorce. He liked the neighborhood’s mix of ethnic restaurants and shops. He was particularly fond of the art-house movie theater and late-night cafe over on Broadway.

The local news had an extended piece about the upcoming election in Nevada County and how outside Republican operatives were once again pouring buckets of campaign money into the county to gain control of the Board of Supervisors.

What is it with these Republicans? Reb thought to himself as he pulled into his driveway. They drape themselves in the mantle of small town American virtues, and then they play the pimp for every developer and multinational corporation that comes along looking for a good time. Whatever happened to the party of Lincoln and La Follette? He was about to switch off the engine when the station’s program manager interrupted his thoughts.

“Have you ever dreamed about working in radio as a news reporter? Well, here’s your chance. KVMR is hiring three interns for our news department. These are full-time paid positions where you will learn how to cover local and regional news as part of a great team of dedicated news hounds. For job description and application call 530-555-KVMR, or visit our web site at KVMR.org. KVMR is an equal opportunity employer.”

Reb switched off the car but didn’t get out. Radio. He let the word ramble about awhile inside his head until it began to kick up the dust of memory. Soon after arriving at college he had joined the radio club. There were only a dozen or so members and he was given his own Thurs-

day evening music show. He played a lot of Jefferson Airplane and Joni Mitchell. Dylan and the Band too.

The memory was bittersweet because being part of the radio club meant a great deal to him. But then sometime during his sophomore year, his thoughts shifted away from college to the streets where the anti-war movement was coming into its own and the hippies were stirring up their own kind of trouble. College suddenly felt like a prison, and so he left and never looked back.

He got out of the car and climbed the stairs to his apartment. He grabbed a yogurt and a package of smoked salmon from the refrigerator. He thought about calling Brendan with the news about his eyes but decided to wait. Instead, he dialed the number for KVMR.

# 2

MARTY HAMILTON BACKED his rented Jaguar into a one-hour parking space on 12th Street. He expected his meeting to take more than an hour but he was running late and didn't have time to drive around looking for a longer-term space or a lot that wasn't full.

"Stop worrying," he told himself as he switched off the engine. "With your salary, you can afford a hundred parking tickets."

He tucked his Oakley sunglasses with titanium frames into their case and tossed the case onto the passenger seat. His colleagues in the marketing department at EnerTex liked to put on airs. They called themselves "deal originators." Not Marty. He knew who he was. A salesman, plain and simple. And what made being a salesman special was the happy fact that he was selling the one thing everyone wanted. Not sex. Better than sex. Energy. Electricity. Kilowatts. The power to run coffee makers and air conditioners, to run everything that made modern living modern. He liked the sound of that last part; it had a ring to it. "Everything that makes modern living modern." He pulled out his palm pilot and jotted down a reminder to work the phrase into a presentation someday.

Two blocks away he entered a recently renovated office building on K Street and rode the elevator to the tenth floor. The velvety notes of orchestral music wafting out of hidden speakers helped settle his youthful nerves and focus his attention on the meeting ahead. He straightened his tie and examined his fingernails. He considered a short line of coke to bolster his confidence but convinced himself he could do without. "They need you more than you need them," he told himself.

Stepping out of the elevator, he followed the hallway to the offices of Margaret Greer, Special Assistant to the Governor. He opened the door and went in. On the wall behind the receptionist's desk hung the Great

Seal of the State of California. I *do* love this job, he thought as approached the attractive young brunette.

“Hi, I’m Martin Hamilton,” he said as he handed her his card. He was tempted to add, “but you can call me the ‘Tin Man.’” It was a nickname he’d picked up in college from a character in a movie about two aluminum siding salesmen in Baltimore during the 1960s. Instead he glanced at his Cartier TANK watch.

“I have a two o’clock appointment to see Ms. Greer.”

“Please go right in, Mr. Hamilton. They’re expecting you,” the young woman said and he thought he detected a dash of come-hither warmth in her smile. Trimmed out in his dark blue \$2,900 Domenico Vacca suit, Marty Hamilton was an eye-ful and he knew it.

The office was spacious and elegant, with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the Sacramento River glittering in the afternoon sunlight. To the right of the polished mahogany desk, four chairs were arranged around a low table upon which rested a crystal vase of fresh-cut flowers, their soft fragrance permeating the air. Marty recognized the vase. It was Waterford. His mother collected Irish crystal and he had developed a keen eye for it over the years. The carpet under the table and chairs was hand-knotted Persian with a preponderance of deep reds.

There’s real money to be made in this room, Marty said to himself. And the Tin Man is just the clever boy to make it.

A woman and two men sat around the table and they stood as their visitor entered. The woman took charge of the introductions.

“I’m Maggie Greer, Mr. Hamilton. This is Tony Seriafi and Bob Hunt. Tony is with the California Energy Commission and Bob works with the legislature.” The men shook hands like fellow Rotarians, everyone smiling. It put Marty in mind of his grandfather, the owner of the Oldsmobile dealership in Kalamazoo, Michigan, during the Second World War. For more than four years no one could buy a new car. None were being made. It was all tanks, trucks, and airplanes for the war effort. Then in ’46, automobiles started coming back on the market again and people lined up to buy them. In fact, they were so hot to get their hands on a new Olds that his grandfather liked to brag that he didn’t need salesmen on the floor anymore—just “order writers.” It was that way now for Marty thanks to EnerTex. No real, honest-to-God selling, just writing down orders.

“Would you like some coffee or tea?” Maggie asked after they were seated.

“Yeah, coffee would be great.”

She picked up the telephone on the table.

“Susan, please bring coffee in for everyone.”

Polite with the hired help. He liked that.

“Well, Mr. Hamilton, we’re eager to hear what you have to say,” Maggie said.

Marty opened his briefcase and drew out three glossy, full color booklets that he distributed.

“I don’t need to remind you of the fix California found itself in during the energy crisis of 2001,” he began. “Rolling blackouts. Utilities going broke. The state pressuring its neighbors for additional supply. It cost the governor his job.” He paused a moment as if the memory was painful for him; the others waited.

“It’s true electricity prices have come down since then,” he went on, “but what about the future? It is estimated that by the year 2030, California’s population will grow to well over *fifty* million. That’s an increase of *fourteen* million from what it is today. This means the state will need a minimum of 92 gigawatts of electricity to meet its needs. Currently, the state has 66 gigawatts of supply on hand, but 32.1 gigawatts of that supply is generated by older fossil fuel plants that will be retired before 2030. Add to that loss another 5.4 gigawatts from retired nuclear plants and the state will have to come up with 55 gigawatts of new supply at the very least. Quite a challenge no matter how you look at it.”

Too many numbers perhaps, but he wanted them to appreciate the fact that he’d done his homework. He could also tell by the way Hunt and Seriafi shifted uneasily in their chairs that the recitation was having the desired effect. California was facing some hard choices. Electricity was essential to nearly every aspect of life in the Golden State. Hospitals, agricultural irrigation, manufacturing, telephones, waste treatment plants—even the fabled cable cars of San Francisco—would all grind to a halt if the electricity ran out. So where was the state going to get the additional juice? One scheme involved shipping dirty coal-generated electricity over the border from Mexico. But that would require building new high-load transmission lines. Who would build them and how long would it take? Fossil fuel power plants could be thrown up relatively quickly, but it took a minimum of ten years to site and build a transmission line.

Tony Seriafi was the first to respond. “We’ve initiated a program to install solar panels on a million homes by the year 2018, Mr. Hamilton.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” Marty said, “but the most that will get you is 3,000 megawatts, if you’re lucky. Solar is an immature technology at best.”

He wanted to say more but checked himself. No good would come from playing the scold. All the same, the energy outlook was bleak for California, as it was for the rest of the country, and the sooner they faced the truth the better. So many factors played a part. Even small technological developments could affect future energy needs in surprising ways. The growing popularity of wide-screen televisions and plasma computer monitors was a case in point. A typical plasma screen consumed roughly 1,000 kilowatt-hours a year, compared with the older cathode ray tube that used 233 kilowatt-hours. Thus, if half the 12.7 million households in California replaced their CRTs with plasma displays, the state's annual electrical usage would grow by 4.9 billion kilowatt-hours. And this from just one electrical appliance. What would happen if there were a sudden spike in the price of natural gas, or a couple of years of below average rainfall? Or what would happen if there was a terrorist attack on a major power plant? The state would be forced to ration energy again, leading to economic and political instability.

Hunt looked at his watch and then at Maggie Greer, his impatience ill masked, and Marty realized it was time to buck up the natives.

"But I didn't come here to peddle doom and gloom," he said with a smile. "Quite the opposite. Like your governor,"—he turned and looked at the life-size framed photograph of the charismatic governor that hung on the wall. The chisled jawline, the flinty blue eyes, the slightly goofy grin, it was a face he'd known and loved since childhood. The only thing missing was the signature machine gun. He turned back and discovered that everyone was watching him. He felt a stab of embarrassment.

"Like your governor," he repeated himself, "I believe California has a bright and promising future. Granted, energy deregulation has created difficulties. It wasn't thought out properly; it should have been done in stages. Still, it's a proven fact that government-regulated markets do not work. Only free, competitive markets lead to the innovations that solve real world problems."

"Look Mr. Hamilton—" Hunt tried to interrupt.

"What you're about to say, Mr. Hunt, is that the energy market is different from other markets. It's a market of scarcity because the natural resources we use to generate electricity are finite. Furthermore, most come with negative environmental consequences. Well, that might have been true in the past. But today there's an exciting new technology on the horizon, a technology that will revolutionize how electrical energy is generated and consumed in this country and eventually around the world."

He leaned forward and put his hands on his knees. "The alchemists of the Middle Ages searched in vain for a way to turn lead into gold." This was a riff he'd picked during a lecture on European history while at Vanderbilt. "The Philosopher's Stone" was the name they gave the mysterious and elusive substance they believed could bring about this magical transformation. Well, I can say now with complete confidence that the EnerTex Corporation of Texas has discovered the Philosopher's Stone for our modern age, an entirely new generation technology that will provide Americans with an unlimited supply of affordable, non-polluting electrical energy. If you would now please turn to page three of the prospectus . . ."

He sat back and waited as they turned their attention to the booklets they held in their hands.

"On page three you will find a photograph of our Ranger 1 power plant. It's located in west Texas near a town called Birdstar. The plant went into service a year and a half ago and has a maximum output of 850 megawatts. It's the first of its kind to use ATG technology."

"What does ATG stand for?" Seriafi asked.

"Active Transdimensional Generation. If you turn now to page ten, there is a table with price-per-kilowatt comparisons."

Again he paused.

"As you can see, when compared with coal, natural gas, and nuclear, our new ATG generation process provides electricity at substantially lower cost. And the best part is that EnerTex is able to lock in these low prices over the long term. That means guaranteed, rock steady pricing for the next ten to twenty years. You'll be able to plan your economy knowing in advance precisely what your energy costs will be."

Like a skilled magician waving his wand, young Marty Hamilton had swept away their impatience and anxiety and replaced it with a glorious vision of hope and happy tomorrows. He hadn't learned that trick going to Wharton. No, when it came to selling, the Tin Man was a natural.

There was silence for several minutes as the state officials pored over the prospectus.

"Okay, I give up," Hunt said, "what's the fuel source?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say, Mr. Hunt. The information has been classified top-secret."

"Classified? Who classified it?"

"The feds," Tony Seriafi said. "I sent you an email about it, Bob. The technology's so new the government doesn't want it falling into the wrong hands."

“Well, I’ve heard some crazy schemes in my time but this one takes the cake,” Bob said shaking his head and frowning. “You can’t go around building power plants without letting people know how they work, what fuel they use, or if they’re safe or not!”

It was Maggie’s turn to join the conversation. “Two years ago a special six member board was set up to oversee these new power plants and to make sure they pose no threat to public health or the environment. The board is part of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and has sole regulatory oversight.”

“The legislation establishing the board was passed by Congress,” Seriafi added, “and signed into law by the president.”

“So the federal government can come into California and do whatever it wants when it comes to regulating electrical generation,” Hunt said, his face coloring. It was a huge sore point the way more and more state laws were being superseded by federal laws. This included regulations protecting the environment and food safety and labeling standards. Even the voter-approved use of medical marijuana had been trumped by Washington.

“Look, Bob, there’s more to this than just reducing the cost of electricity,” Maggie said. “It’s about reducing global warming. Isn’t that right, Mr. Hamilton?”

“The ATG process produces zero emissions of carbon dioxide which is why EnerTex plans to build—”

“If your power plants are as good as you say they are and can help solve the problem of global warming,” Hunt said, “then why keep the technology secret? Why not give it away. Post it on the Internet. Encourage nations big and small to replace their older polluting plants with these new ATG power plants because global warming is the most serious problem to ever confront mankind and we better do something about it, and do it damn quick.”

Marty was speechless; it was the first time anyone had made such a suggestion. What officials usually wanted to know was how EnerTex came up with the technology in the first place, and whether the federal government had helped in its development. It required some fancy footwork to field that particular question since he didn’t really know the answer. He assumed some genius at EnerTex had invented the ATG process but the higher-ups would never confirm or deny. Not surprisingly, this gave rise to a variety of rumors; one making the rounds even mentioned the CIA. None of this, of course, had anything to do with him. He was just a salesman, a lowly cog in the machinery of capitalism. But one thing he

was sure of: capitalists don't *give away* valuable technology. Not even the mighty Bill Gates, who gave his money away but never the operating system.

Fortunately Marty was spared having to respond to Hunt by the arrival of the secretary who entered the room carrying a tray of cups and saucers. She moved around opposite Marty so that she could catch his eye as she set the tray down. This excited him and made him feel important, just what he needed to hold his own with a bunch of California politicians. She left the room before anyone spoke again.

"You must understand our concerns, Mr. Hamilton," Seriafi said in an obvious effort to steer the conversation back to the land of the possible. "What you are saying, if I understand you, is that EnerTex is willing to build its new power plants here in California, but for national security reasons, the citizens of our state will play no part in inspecting or regulating these facilities?"

"That's correct. The federal government would assume full responsibility, not the state."

Marty reached down and picked up his coffee. "Furthermore, before we begin the siting process, we will require that you pass legislation exempting EnerTex from state regulatory oversight."

"That's impossible." Bob Hunt said. "The legislature won't stand for it."

Marty sat back cradling his cup and shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I guess EnerTex will have no choice but to build its power plants elsewhere."

The first rule Marty had learned in a seminar on negotiating was to care, but not too much. If California wasn't interested in getting its energy house in order, then so be it. It was no skin off his nose.

"The state governments of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Maine are willing to meet this legislative requirement," he said. "I'm sure more states will follow when they see how significantly our new plants will cut their electrical energy costs."

"But the political landscape in California is different than it is in those other states," Seriafi said.

"I realize this," Marty said, "but it is precisely the way you run your politics that's caused the mess you're in." Time to call a spade a spade. It gave him a kick to lecture people who were at the top of their game and more than twice his age.

"Not without the help of some pretty damn dishonest Texas corporations," Hunt was quick to add.

"Bob, please," This from Maggie Greer who long ago had accepted

the fact that ninety percent of her job was smoothing feathers. She turned to Marty. "Mr. Hamilton, isn't there *some* way we can deal with this problem short of passing special legislation?" She already knew the answer because she had been on the phone earlier that morning with Marty's boss, the CEO and president of EnerTex, Avery Axton.

"There may be a way," Marty said, pausing to sip his coffee. Give a little to get a lot, he told himself. "I believe the people in Nevada might be willing to help."

"Nevada? How's that?" Hunt asked.

"The governor and several key officials have indicated a willingness to allow EnerTex to build two or three power plants in their state and then send the electricity generated by the plants to California. That way the regulatory responsibilities will fall upon their shoulders, not yours, and they are only too happy to pass those responsibilities along to the appropriate officials in Washington."

"Would that result in higher electricity prices for California consumers?" Seriafi asked.

"Of course," Marty said, "but the savings over what Californians currently pay for electricity would still be substantial."

"But two or three plants in Nevada can't hope to meet California's electrical energy needs." Hunt was trying to work out the math, balancing megawatts and votes.

"You're right," Marty said. "In time, we will need to build plants inside California, but by then perhaps the citizens of your state will have learned to trust our company and agree with our position on regulatory oversight."

Marty looked at his watch as if to say, "Well, now that we've dealt with the bigger issues, can we wind this up? How many megawatts did you have in mind this afternoon, Madame? A thousand? Five thousand? Perhaps you'd be interested in a vacuum cleaner or a set of encyclopedias while we're at it."

Writing orders, not selling, that's what he was doing. And he might get it all done before his parking meter ran out. Anything was possible for the Tin Man these days.

# 3

THE DRIVE FROM Sacramento to Nevada City took Reb an hour and ten minutes since the rain had stopped. The week before he'd had the Volvo's engine tuned and it navigated the winding roads of the Sierra Foothills with hydrocarbon-intoxicated enthusiasm. His own enthusiasm was in high gear as well although he was slightly embarrassed by the Walter Mitty-like fantasies coursing through his head. He was going to be another Edward R. Murrow—cigarette in one hand, microphone in the other—reporting from the rooftops of London. Or Charles Collingwood sending his radio dispatches back from the bloodstained beaches of Normandy. These men were before his time, but he was old enough to know who they were and how their work shaped the early days of electronic journalism. Perhaps an opportunity would come his way to make a contribution, to report on a story of real importance. Stranger things had happened.

Taking the downtown exit off Highway 49, he turned onto Broad Street. Isolated patches of blue in the sky overhead brought with them the promise of better weather and he rolled down the window to let in the invigorating scent of ponderosa pine. He enjoyed visiting Nevada City with its quaint Victorian architecture and small town feel. Christened “Queen of the Northern Mines” during the Gold Rush, it was one of the oldest towns in the Golden State and a favorite with tourists from the Bay Area. It was also a magnet for New Agers, a catch-all phrase that included psychic channelers, aroma therapists, astrologers, and other seekers of spiritual understanding, both frivolous and sincere.

He crossed Deer Creek and parked in front of the stately, if frayed-at-the-cuffs, National Hotel where the upper crust of Nevada County congregated in the 1800s and made their deals for gold mines and water

rights. It was rumored the hotel was haunted and that guests were regularly awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of doors opening and closing and disembodied footsteps in the hallway. For Reb that notion only added to the hotel's charm, and he once suggested to Kate that they celebrate their anniversary there. Kate, however, wasn't big on ghosts and they wound up renting a bungalow for the weekend in Half Moon Bay.

The offices for KVMR were on Spring Street across the street from the Miner's Foundry Cultural Center. As he entered, Reb was met by a middle-aged woman sitting behind a desk. She had white wavy hair and she wore a large turquoise and silver necklace.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm here to see Phil Cook," Reb said. "We talked on the phone this morning. It's about a job with the news department."

"Phil just stepped out; he'll be back in a minute. You can wait for him here if you want."

She pointed to a chair that was hemmed in by boxes of music CDs, discarded computers, and bins full of mail.

"My name is Mattie," she said with a friendly smile.

"I'm Reb, Reb Morgan."

"Where are you from?"

"Sacramento."

She shook her head. "The valley's too hot for me."

"Have you worked here long?" Reb asked.

"I volunteer twice a week answering the telephone. I'm a midwife the rest of the time."

"My son Brendan was delivered by a midwife. Well, that was the plan, but after eighteen hours of labor, the midwife told us to go to the hospital. That's where he was born, by C-section."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the program manager, a large man with sandy hair and a slightly disheveled appearance, who was carrying a paper bag and large container of coffee.

"Lunch," he said holding up the items by way of an apology for not shaking hands as Mattie made the introductions.

"Why don't I give you a quick tour of the station before we talk," he said.

They walked through the outer office past a cluster of desks into another room that was filled from floor to ceiling with shelves full of CDs.

"This is the music library," Phil said. "The CDs are sorted with

colored tape on the spine by genre—red is for rock, green for folk, black and orange is for international.”

The CD shelves ran down the middle of the room and along two walls. The older vinyl albums, the kind Reb grew up with, were stacked endwise on shelves that spanned the remaining two walls. Reb noticed a *Traffic* album he had once owned and pulled it out. The ink on the jacket cover was faded, much like his memories of those times.

From the library Phil led him down a short hallway with two doors on the left and a wall of mail cubbyholes at the end. The first door had a glass window and a glowing red “ON-AIR” sign above it. Inside Reb could see two people. One was a stocky man wearing a flowered Hawaiian shirt. He had salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a long ponytail and was sitting behind the control board. The other man was shorter, with close-cut, tight curly hair. He was perched on a high stool with a microphone on an extension arm in front of him. Both were wearing headphones.

“This is our on-air studio,” Phil said. “Broadcasters are required to take a class and get certified before they can apply for their own shows.”

“Is it hard to get a show?” Reb asked.

“That all depends.”

“On what?”

“On the time of day, mostly. There’s stiff competition for the morning and early evening shows.”

“Who decides who gets a show?”

“The program committee. It’s made up of broadcasters and community members.”

They walked to the next door that Phil opened so Reb could look inside.

“This is the main production studio. The news department has its own studio upstairs. It’s quite a bit smaller but the equipment is state-of-the-art.”

Five minutes later they were seated in Phil’s office. Reb had thought the front office cluttered, but it ran a poor second to the profusion of padded envelopes, broadcast trade journals, newspapers, empty jewel cases, cassette tapes, and assorted correspondence that were heaped upon the program director’s desk. Creativity and chaos were often bedfellows.

“Ever worked in radio before?” Phil asked, leaning back in a cracked vinyl swivel chair that looked as if it had been with the station since it got its license in 1978.

Was this part of the interview? Reb wondered. He wanted to make a good impression; he’d never been formally interviewed before.

“The college I went to in New Hampshire had its own radio station. I hosted a weekly music show my first two semesters. It was a lot of fun.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I left college.”

Phil popped the lid off his coffee and the dark aroma filled the room.

“Ever go back? To college, I mean?”

“I went to photography school in San Francisco for two years. I’ve been doing photography ever since.”

“Well let me tell you about what’s going on here.” Phil said and then sipped his coffee. “A board member has given the station a sizable donation to build a first-rate news department. His name is Brent Abrams. He believes the establishment sources of news in this country are seriously screwed up.”

“Where did Abrams get his money?”

“Made it in Silicon Valley. Cashed out just before the high-tech bubble went bust and moved up here to retire. He came on the board a year ago because he said he enjoyed listening to the station. We could use the money for more important things than a news department, such as buying our own building so we don’t have to rent anymore, but it’s a restrictive gift, so news it is.”

He took another sip of his coffee but left the bag with his lunch unopened

“Until now,” he said, “all we’ve had is a part-time news director. That’s Alice Carpenter. The other reporters are volunteers. Last February we added a daily five-minute local news segment to follow the BBC World News feed. Now, thanks to the gift, we can make her job full time and train three new reporters.”

“How many people do you think will apply?” It was the question foremost in Reb’s mind. He wanted to gauge the competition.

“Hard to say,” Phil shrugged. The telephone on his desk began ringing but he ignored it. “Intern might not be the right word, but we didn’t know what else to call it. It’s a learning position, but it comes with a salary. Do you want to know what it pays?”

Reb nodded.

“Twenty-six thousand dollars a year with benefits. For community radio, it’s all we can offer but you’ll get on-the-job training too.”

Twenty-six thousand was at the bottom of the pay scale given the cost of living in California. Still, money matters seldom made it to the top of Reb’s priority list. Why that was, he couldn’t say. He liked money, got

a rush whenever he sold a large framed photograph at an art show, but he didn't think about it very much. Doing the books and paying the bills had been Kate's bailiwick, and the fact that she earned a good salary as a hospital administrator had meant that he could continue with his photography. Then his father died and he inherited a legacy that he invested in bonds and bank CDs so that he now could almost get by on the interest. Besides, he *wanted* the job. One benefit of the glaucoma was that it had added a sense of urgency to his life. No more playing it safe, he didn't have the time.

"So how do I apply?" he asked.

"You want the job?"

"I do."

"Can I ask you why?"

Reb took a moment to consider his answer. If he told Phil that he might be going blind, the program director would understandably be reluctant to give him the job. Age was already a factor working against him; a *blind* old guy would be too much.

But would it be *lying* to conceal the fact? Dr. Yoon said the laser surgery might fix everything and then he would have thrown away a great opportunity for nothing.

"I guess I'm looking for a change." Reb said. The truth about his glaucoma would have to wait. "And I'm something of a news junkie." Which was true. He made a point of reading the San Francisco *Chronicle* and Sacramento *Bee* from cover to cover every day, and he had subscriptions to the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Economist*. His biggest addiction was C-Span, which he often preferred to watching a movie or reading a book.

Phil was looking at him so that he felt compelled to go on.

"I guess the real reason," he said, "is that the world is pretty messed up right now. There's global warming, which is no joke, and more and more countries are getting nuclear weapons. The Middle East is a wreck, so is much of Africa. Like most people I don't feel like there's anything I can do to make things better, but I want to try. I'm not good looking or thick-skinned enough to go into politics or do I have the necessary degrees to work for the government or an NGO. I'm not rich or a celebrity, so what can I do?"

"Work for community radio?" Phil said.

Reb shrugged. "Sacramento is the capitol of the seventh largest economy in the world. There's got to be a lot to report on here."

He could have said more about how being a photographer was lonely

work and that he missed being around other people. Besides he was beginning to lose his interest in photography—perhaps in life itself, like the lyrics of the Grateful Dead song, his tears turning to stone. It had been different before the divorce and his father's death. An old woman in a worn coat on a park bench watching lovers walk past hand in hand. Reb once saw the meaning of existence in that single image. Or a child on a tricycle, and a policeman polishing his buttons before the Saint Patrick's Day parade. Now he didn't care all that much if he ever shot another photograph. It *was* time for a change. Either that or go the medication route, Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro, the whole *mélange* of corporately manufactured molecules whose corollary function was to keep a drugged-out populace from the realization that the self-same corporations were a major source of the problem.

"I should warn you that community radio stations like KVMR are not the most functional organizations to work for," Phil said putting down his coffee and rummaging around inside his desk for an application form.

"What do you mean?"

"Bloated egos, petty rivalries, feuds over money, marital infidelities, you name it, you'll likely find it here. The station would make a fine setting for a soap opera."

Reb didn't know if Phil was exaggerating or not.

"Why do *you* do it then?" he asked the program director.

"For the money, why else?"

They both laughed as Phil withdrew a piece of paper from a drawer with the triumphant smile of someone who had caught a hare in a thicket with his bare hands. Taking a pen from his shirt pocket, he handed the paper and pen to Reb who took them over to a nearby table. He made room by shoving aside a half-filled box of stale donuts and began filling out the form. Whatever else was going wrong in his life, this, at least, felt right.

# 4

WHERE DID THE TIME go? Sandra Valdez wondered as she glanced over at the display on the microwave. She had been up since six; it was now eight-forty and the children had missed their bus. She would have to drive them to school before making the fifty-mile commute to work. Sandra was executive director of the Family Resource Center in Lubbock, which was fortunate because that made her the boss and not likely to get fired for arriving late. It would be the fourth time this month.

“Luis, Maria, hurry up and get in the car. We don’t have all day.”

“I can’t find my homework, Mama.”

“Never mind your homework; tell your teacher you will bring it in tomorrow. And put the milk back in the refrigerator.”

She knew they were making a racket and hoped it wouldn’t wake her husband. Ernesto worked the graveyard shift as a security guard at the new power plant west of town and he needed his sleep. They had been trying for months to get him on the day shift without success. She hated this arrangement because they seldom got to spend time with each other. He was asleep when she left in the morning, and by the time she got home, he was getting ready to go to work at the plant. Dinner was the only meal the family shared together during the week, and even that failed to happen on the evenings when she had to remain in Lubbock for meetings.

She grabbed her purse and briefcase and hustled the kids out the back door and down the steps toward the car, nearly tripping over the cat as she did so.

“Mary in heaven help us,” she muttered under her breath.

Five minutes later she dropped the kids off at St. Theresa’s Elementary School and from there she drove through Birdstar past the courthouse, turning east on Waller Road. As she swung onto the northbound

ramp of Interstate 23, she switched on the radio and Lyle Workman's folksy voice filled the car.

"Earlier this week Senator Jim Starling of Pennsylvania announced a proposal to charge a two-percent "user's fee" on all political donations. The money would go into a special fund so local election officials could purchase additional voting machines and not keep people waiting for hours out in the rain and cold to cast their vote. The money could also be used to make sure that results from computer voting machines are verifiable by requiring that the computers print paper receipts. Airline passengers pay a user fee to make sure airports and the air traffic control system work efficiently. Well, those who donate to political candidates should want the same thing too—a system that's both efficient and fair. A good idea, right? Wrong, according to NAFE, the National Association for Free Enterprise. They claim the user fee is just another tax and they're against taxes. Well, I did some research and this is what I found out. NAFE is funded almost exclusively by one of the largest broadcasters in this country. And is that any surprise? Where do most political donations go now? I tell you where: right into the pockets of the big broadcasters to pay for expensive campaign commercials. Is it really too much then to ask them to give up a small percentage of their large profits so the citizens of this country can maintain a healthy democracy? After all, the airwaves belong to the people; the broadcasters are just borrowing 'em, and for free too.

And while we're talking about elections, Congress . . ."

She listened to the five-minute commentary that came on every weekday morning at 9:10 following the national and local news. Then, as was her custom, she switched off the radio so she could mentally organize her day. But she never missed Workman if she could help it. They had met and become friends while he was Texas Commissioner of Agriculture under a former Democratic governor back in what she regarded as the "good old days." A colorful and uniquely Texan sort of character, Workman was opinionated, witty, and a natural-born storyteller. He billed himself as "a friend of America's working man and woman," a citizen-activist with the guts and determination to speak up for the little guy, and if he stomped on some right-wing Republican toes now and then while doing it, that was okay with Sandra. Somebody sure needed to straighten those birds out.

But mostly what Workman did was lift her spirits by making her laugh. She needed that now more than ever. Everyday it seemed there were new budget cuts that meant laying off Center staff and reducing

services. Her agency had once been the darling of the system. Agencies from all over Texas had looked to them for inspiration and guidance on how best to deliver effective community-based social services to children and families. Articles about the Lubbock Family Resource Center showed up regularly in national magazines and she had once been invited to testify before Congress. Now she could barely keep the doors open and the lights on. It made Sandra angry when she wasn't busy being depressed.

Pulling into her reserved space behind the Center, she opened the door and stepped out. The temperature was already eighty-five degrees and the forecast called for another scorcher, the tenth in a row. She felt sorry for the low-income families her agency served since many of them lived without air conditioning, some without refrigerators. People went a little crazy when it got so hot; they did stupid things like beat their children or stab a neighbor.

"Ms. Valdez, there's a man waiting to see you. He's in your office." Rita was the Center's receptionist. She had come to the agency through AmeriCorps—a bright girl with a flair for organization.

"I don't have any appointments this morning," Sandra said, momentarily confused. "Who is he?"

Rita shrugged. "A government official I think. I've never seen him before."

"What's he doing in my office?"

Rita looked unhappy. "I couldn't stop him."

Sandra didn't have the heart to give her a lecture; the poor girl was overworked as it was.

Entering her office, Sandra found a man in a dark suit seated in the chair opposite her desk. He was typing on a laptop that he had open on his knees and he stopped and looked at her without getting up.

"Sandra Valdez?" he said.

Cop energy, Sandra decided. She could tell by the way the question used the voice, as if it owned it—a dead giveaway.

She dumped her purse and briefcase on her desk but remained standing.

The detective, or agent, or whoever he was, snapped his computer closed, leaned over, and slid it into its case next to the chair. He straightened up unsmiling.

"I'm Special Agent Brewer," he said pulling out a leather wallet and flipping it open to reveal a badge and identification card. "I'm with Homeland Security."

The name of the agency had always sounded to Sandra like the name

of a bank and she was tempted to say, "Can I have the toaster if I open a new checking account?" but thought better of it. These people needed to be taken seriously; they were gaining power and could hurt people in more ways than Sandra wanted to think about.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm here about your husband, Ernesto," he said putting away the wallet.

She was surprised. She had assumed he was checking up on an immigrant client. They had a number on their service roster, but her husband? What had he done? He was back home in bed as far as she knew.

"It's just a routine inquiry, Ms. Valdez," he said. "No need to worry. I just want to ask you a few questions." On their own these words were pleasant and reassuring, but to Sandra they lacked any relationship to the hard, perfunctory tone of voice uttering them. That voice was all police business.

She began to fume. Who did he think he was barging his way into her office without an appointment and setting up shop with his little computer and then prying into her personal life? It called to mind the stories her father used to tell her. As a young man in Arizona during the Second World War, he helped build one of the camps used to intern Japanese-Americans. He talked about watching the trucks arrive day after day filled with men and women, young and old, and how they would clamber down awkwardly from the tailgates clutching their flimsy cardboard suitcases and stand in the glare of the desert sunlight looking dazed and lost. He felt sorry for them.

For Sandra, a healthy dose of caution was in order whenever the government got paranoid and started snooping into people's lives.

"How long has your husband worked at the Ranger 1 power plant?" Agent Brewer asked. Through some sleight of hand he had produced a small tape recorder and placed it on the desktop between them.

"Since they built it."

"Why did he apply for work there?"

Sandra shifted her weight from one leg to the other.

"This is west Texas if you haven't noticed, and there aren't many good jobs, especially for Latinos."

"Why did you husband pick security?"

"He served as an MP in the army. Can I ask where this is going?"

Brewer ignored the question. "Has your husband been complaining about health problems lately?"

"Health problems? No," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"He has a bad back that acts up sometimes, but he disclosed that on his application."

"Yes, I know. We have a copy of the application."

"Then why are you asking me when he went to work at the plant? Apparently you already have that information."

"Yes, but we like to cross check the answers we receive."

"To see if one of us is lying, you mean?"

"No, we're just trying to be accurate. I only have a few more questions."

He looked down at his tape recorder as Sandra struggled to contain her rising irritation. She sat down. "Continue," she told him.

"Has your husband complained about not feeling well? I don't mean his back, but other things?"

"Such as?" Her mind was in a turmoil trying to make sense of what was going on.

"Aching joints, muscles?"

"Sometimes."

"Trouble with his eyes?"

"No."

"His hearing?"

"No."

"Chest pains, shortness of breath?"

"No." She picked up a pen and began tapping the edge of the desk; she had other, more important things to do.

"Difficulty controlling his bladder?"

"Look, what is this about? I need to—"

"What about chronic fatigue? Temporary forgetfulness?" He paused and then added, "Diminished sexual desire or function?"

If there was a line, Brewer had just crossed it. She wanted him out of her office, pronto.

"None of these things," she said, her voice flat and business like. "You can leave now."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure that I want you to leave? Yes, I'm quite sure."

He remained seated, studying her, and she was determined to give him nothing more. A tense silence hung heavy in the room. The telephone in the outer office rang once and Rita answered it. The aquarium bubbled softly next to the filing cabinet.

“Are we done?” Sandra said.

“For now.” He stood up.

“Perhaps you can tell me something.” Despite herself, emotion was crowding its way back into her voice. “What has the Department of Homeland Security to do with my husband’s job at the power plant? It’s not a government facility.”

“Power plants are prime targets for terrorists and fall under the authority of Homeland Security.”

“But what’s my husband’s health got to do with terrorists?”

“It’s relevant.”

“How?”

“I can only say it’s relevant.”

“Then why talk to me? He’s the one you should talk to.”

Brewer switched off the tape recorder and dropped it into the side pocket of his jacket.

“Do you know what I think?” she said. Her temper blazed, the flames obscuring her better judgment.

“I don’t think this has anything to do with terrorists. This is about the EnerTex Corporation and their fat-cat buddies in Washington and they’ve got you out dealing with some nickel and dime lawsuit over health insurance—or is it workmen’s compensation?”

The agent said nothing but reached out and took a piece of candy from a bowl that Sandra kept on her desk. She watched him in a state of dumb bewilderment. Rather than put the candy in his mouth, he dropped it into his shirt pocket and smiled at her. It was creepy. He was telling her that he had the power to do or take anything he wanted. She wanted to slap him. They faced each other a second or two longer; then he turned and walked out of the office. She took a deep breath. It saddened her to realize how much she had grown to mistrust her own government in recent years.

# 5

THE NEWS PRODUCTION STUDIO at KVMR was little more than a walk-in closet and crammed with so many pieces of high-end audio gear, their green and orange power lights glowing in the semi-darkness, that scant space remained for carbon-based organisms like Reb Morgan and Alice Carpenter. Today, the sixth day of Reb's training, they were working their way through the plug-ins for the station's audio editing and mixing software. Alice enjoyed teaching news production and she was impressed with Reb's progress. Relieved too. Twenty-eight people had applied for the intern positions, and it had been her job as head of the news department to select the final three. She had found the process daunting, especially since she knew many of the people who applied; Nevada City was a small town and opportunities of the sort KVMR was offering were rare—one woman in her yoga class was now giving her the cold shoulder because she hadn't been picked. Despite this, Dan and Vicki had been relatively easy choices to make. They were both in their twenties, and for the station to survive, Alice believed, they had to involve more young people. The fact that Vicki was both Asian American and a woman accorded with the KVMR's goal to increase diversity.

Then why had she gone with Reb Morgan? He was intelligent and enthusiastic, but so was everyone else who applied, and most were younger. One contributing factor was his skill as photographer; the station was exploring ways of providing additional content over the Internet, which included visual content. But perhaps the real reason was that she wanted to work with someone her own age, someone who politically and culturally shared similar points of reference. If she happened to mention the name Senator Sam Irvin, for instance, or Agent 86, he would know whom she was talking about. And he wasn't full of himself; he didn't try too hard to impress. Above all, she liked his laugh.

“Let’s go over how to use the de-esser plug-in,” she said as Vicki and Dan came crowding into the studio.

“How long are you two going to be?” Vicki asked. “We’re putting together a story about the raw sewage that spilled into Lake Wildwood yesterday. We have some interviews to edit and want to get it on tonight’s news.”

Alice looked at Reb who shrugged. “I’m in no hurry,” he said.

“How long do you need?” Alice asked looking at her watch. It was quarter to six.

“An hour, maybe two,” Dan said.

“Do you want to get something to eat?” she asked Reb.

They walked over to Scanno’s Restaurant on Broad Street and were seated at a table near the back by the hostess who took their drink orders.

“Have you eaten here before?” Alice asked.

“No,” Reb said, “it’s my first time.”

“Look over there,” she said pointing to the ornately carved black walnut bar. “It was brought by sailing ship around the Horn to San Francisco during the Gold Rush. They then loaded it onto a wagon and hauled it up here to Nevada City.

The bartender, a sturdy man with thick arms and a full red beard, was leaning over the bar talking to a female patron. Reb could easily imagine him arriving with the bar in the 1850s.

“Can I ask you something?” Reb said. “Why news? I mean, why not host a music program like most of the other DJs?”

“I used to have my own Saturday morning music show, but then Redwood Summer came along and I started doing news.”

“You were part of Redwood Summer?” Reb asked.

“We were trying to stop the Maxxam Corporation from cutting down one of the last stands of old-growth redwoods on the planet.”

“Isn’t Maxxam Charles Hurwitz’s company?”

“He used junk bonds to buy Pacific Lumber and then had to triple the timber cut just to service the debt. It was a disaster for the redwoods.”

“Yeah, I know. Hurwitz is part of that wrecking crew coming out of Texas these days.”

Alice nodded in agreement. The trouble began with the savings and loan fiasco back in the eighties when the American taxpayers bailed out Hurwitz to the tune of 1.6 billion dollars. Dozens of other high-flyers got bailed out as well, most of them from Texas. But was it fair to blame a place for the bad things people did? People were people and greed was

greed pretty much anywhere you went. Still, so many powerful corporations and politicians called Texas “home,” it did make a body wonder.

The waitress showed up with a bottle of Cabernet and Reb poured them both a glass.

“I went just to protest at first,” she picked up the story, “but then Phil asked if I’d file some news stories for KVMR. He gave me a tape recorder and a microphone and I started interviewing the organizers, protesters, and families of the loggers. I’ve been doing news ever since.”

“Do you like it?”

“Most of the time, but I miss my music show.”

“Why keep doing it then?”

“Why do we do anything in life?” she said. “A job needs to be done, someone asks you to do it, and so you do it.”

“There’s got to be more to it than that,” Reb said.

She laughed. “Of course there is. For one thing I’m good at managing people even though it’s not always easy at a place like KVMR where everybody’s got an independent streak. And I need the income.”

Reb took a sip of wine.

“And there’s the big picture to consider,” she said.

“Which is?”

“The community radio movement is under a lot of pressure these days from commercial and religious broadcasters who have more money and political clout. There’s even competition from the big NPR stations.”

“And doing news can help?”

“If it’s done right; if you can provide your listeners with information that they value and can’t get anywhere else.”

Their meals arrived, and while they ate, Alice talked about growing up in south Florida where her father had been a pilot who flew B-52s armed with nuclear bombs during the Cold War.

“Is he a conservative?”

“You bet.”

“What’s he think of your liberal views?”

“We don’t discuss politics.”

“And your mom?”

“She’s always voted Republican but she doesn’t buy all of it. She thinks going to war in Iraq was a colossal mistake and she’s also for a woman’s right to choose.”

“Why does she hang with a Republican then?”

“Habit. Loyalty. She says she doesn’t trust the Democrats.”

“Do your parents still live in Florida?”

“Too many hurricanes; they moved to San Diego four years ago. What about your parents? Are they still alive?”

“No, my dad passed away last year. He was an insurance investigator. He ran his own shop until the day he died.”

“Was he a good investigator?”

“Very good.”

“What about your mom?”

“She died when I was fifteen. She was hit by a car while she was crossing the street to get the mail.”

“Were you close to your mom?”

“Yeah, we were close.”

She wanted to know more but she didn't feel it was her place to ask—it was hard to imagine losing a parent at such a young age.

“Phil tells me you're separated from your husband,” Reb said, wanting to change the subject. “How long has that been going on?”

“About six months.”

“Do you think you'll get back together again?”

“We'll wait and see,” she said.

“My wife and I were divorced two years ago,” he said. “She now lives in Lake Tahoe with an investment consultant.”

“What's her name?”

“Katherine. Kate. We met at a commune in upstate New York. We later moved to San Francisco where I went to photography school. That's where our son Brendan was born.”

“Any other children?”

“No.”

“Where is Brendan now?”

“In grad school at the University of Virginia.”

Alice talked about her own children. Jason was the oldest and worked for an environmental engineering firm in Hawaii, while Beth was finishing her last year at UCLA.

“For a couple of ex-hippies, our kids have done okay in the world,” Reb said, and she smiled.

They finished their meal and split the check. Walking up Broad Street, they didn't speak and Alice's mind kept returning to the question of her marriage. The trial separation gave every sign of becoming permanent. Alice held the Sacramento law firm of Hitchens, Dunn and Mackleroy to blame. Wayne had jumped at the chance when they offered him the job. After eleven years with the Public Defender's Office in Nevada County, he felt “used up.” Now he earned four times his previous salary and would

make partner in a few years—not bad for an attorney going into private practice so late in the game. She fully supported his decision to switch jobs at the time; the extra money was a big help with college expenses. But Wayne changed after he started working in Sacramento and that eventually drove them apart. He seemed to care more about impressing big clients and hobnobbing with the power brokers in state government and their corporate lobbyists than he did about helping some single mom on welfare. And then he had an affair with another attorney in the firm, a young redhead just three years out of law school. It lasted six months. When Alice found out, Wayne broke it off.

They reached the station and Alice found herself depressed. “Do you mind if we call it quits for today?” she said.

Reb drove down to Sacramento listening to Marie Dooley’s Celtic music show on the radio. He sensed sadness in Alice that matched the sadness in his own heart. She understood.

# 6

PROPPED UP IN BED inside room 117 of the Airporter Motel, the drone of traffic only partially drowned out by the wheeze and rattle of the exhausted air conditioner, Dr. Walter Easler raised his glass and took another swallow. On the nightstand shone a lamp with a soiled shade and next to it was a near empty bottle of Kutskova vodka.

“It is time to leave,” he said aloud in slurred English to the solitary image in the mirror that stared back at him from across the room. “If I stay, I shall be as guilty as they are.”

He frowned at his crumpled clothes and considered undressing. Instead he took another swallow of vodka.

“But where can I go?” he said addressing the image again. “I have no home to return to. No family. No friends. I am cursed. I have become the Flying Dutchman.” He smiled without pleasure at the aptness of the allusion. “Yes, the Flying Dutchman.”

The clock radio read 12:42 in the morning. He must act. The memory of the last six months oppressed him so that he could barely breathe. The trouble started soon after the power plant came on-line. He had been confident up until then that he had solved the problem with the containment force field. But slowly he realized that it was still there. He thought about the *Tigron* and the government cover-up. They lied to the families of the sailors, telling them that their loved ones had died in an airplane crash in the mountains instead of at the bottom of the sea. The lying had angered him and he called Pauli, the American engineer who had become his friend. He told Pauli everything, and Pauli said he knew people who could help. Three days passed and they arrived in Moscow and got him away from his KGB handlers. They provided the corpse for the staged suicide and the truck that smuggled him out of

the country, first to West Berlin and the house near Planckstrasse, then by private airplane to Lisbon and the hotel by the sea. That is where he met Samantha—lovely, capable Samantha. She gave him a new identity, a new life—passport, driver's license, even Mastercard and Visa. He was no longer Anatoly Kryuchkov; he was now Dr. Walter Easler. And he had a new job as director of research for an energy company in Texas called EnerTex.

Another swallow as he recalled the seven long years of research followed by the building of the Ranger 1 power plant. They were hot, windy days, living in a trailer as he supervised the construction of the ATG reactor.

The next swallow drained the glass that he dropped onto the bed as he licked the edge of his shirt-sleeve, an old Russian custom. Vodka was meant to be drunk with food, but when there was no food, you licked the sleeve.

A car alarm sounded in the parking lot and Walter, his eyes heavy-lidded from the alcohol, waited for someone to turn it off. He remembered brimming with enthusiasm the day the EnerTex plant went operational. Unlimited electrical energy without pollution or greenhouse gases. No toxic waste. It was the solution to one of mankind's most perplexing problems. It all seemed possible until he read the results from the tests he had run and saw that the acceleration effect was still there—much less than with the submarine, but irrefutably there.

The alarm was silenced, the murmur of a man's voice, a woman laughing.

Walter seldom drank for he had seen what it had done to his father. But he was sick at heart; the failure of the force field meant that the EnerTex workers were in danger. And even those who lived in the town nearby.

He swung his legs clumsily over the side of the bed and reached for his cane that was wedged between the mattress and the nightstand. He stood up and waited until he was sure of his balance. Stress made the effects of his polio worse and the vodka compounded the problem. He moved slowly, using the cane to steady himself. The bathroom reeked of cheap air freshener and the cold fluorescent light hurt his eyes. The ventilation fan rattled even more than the air conditioner. He relieved himself and returned to sit on the edge of the bed, then rubbed his forehead and picked up the telephone. He took a slip of paper from his shirt pocket and dialed a number. He pressed more numbers on the keypad as he cycled through the automated options. At last a real human voice came on the line.

"This is Karen. How can I help you?"

"I want to book a flight."

"What is your destination and date of travel?"

"Chicago. I wish to go to Chicago. Tomorrow."

"From what city will you be departing?"

"Houston."

"What time of day do you wish to travel?"

"It does not matter. Middle of the day."

"What class of service do you require?"

"Economy." Traveling first-class or staying in a luxury hotel was too risky; he might run into someone from EnerTex. He must be cautious now, very cautious and clever.

"Can I have your name, please?"

"Dr. Walter Easler."

"Can you please spell your last name for me?"

"E-A-S-L-E-R. Dr. Walter Easler."

He finished making the reservation and set the clock radio for 7 a.m. He reclined on the bed again, pillows pushed up against the wall, his legs stretched out toward the image in the mirror.

"You are a handsome fellow and you do not interrupt," he said with courteous nod. "I like that."

He retrieved his glass and reached for the bottle but accidentally knocked it off the nightstand with the side of his hand. It dropped down next to the bed with a thump, the vodka spilling out and soaking the carpet. He left it there.

"I have drunk too much," he said. Somewhere the flushing of a toilet made water rush through a pipe in the wall near his head. He was growing sleepy and could barely keep his eyes open.

Walter had gone to his boss Avery Axton and begged him to shut down the power plant. They quarreled. EnerTex had already spent too much on Ranger 1, Axton said. Fix the problem, tell us what you want and we will get it for you. Walter knew it would be the *Tigron* all over again, only now it would happen more slowly and only a few would know the truth. He had to get away. He would play no part in the deception, the tragedy . . .

He at last trailed off to sleep, with the light burning yellow next to the bed and the slumped figure in the mirror quiet and still.

THE NEXT MORNING Walter arrived at Bush International Airport and made his way to the gate. He was struck by the curious notion that the

busy terminal was a grand stage upon which three simultaneous plays were being performed; what distinguished each from the others was the element of *time*.

In play number one, the actors had too little time. They had overslept or gotten stuck in traffic. Perhaps their originating flight arrived late and they hurried down the concourse, roller cases bouncing crazily from side to side behind them as they ran, stricken with fear that their airplanes would fly away without them.

The actors of play number two inhabited ordinary time. They were the passengers who could afford a moment to read a section of the newspaper or get a bite to eat before boarding their flight. These were also the shop and service employees who straightened the magazine racks and cleaned the bathrooms—and the gate attendants who assigned emergency-row aisle seats to the fortunate few. These non-passengers worked their eight-hour shifts and went home to their families, each day more or less the same as the next.

Then there was play number three, the time-drags-on-forever play. The performers in this peculiar farce slumped uncomfortably in chairs designed to deny them comfort. They gazed dejectedly at departure screens, wandered the concourses aimlessly, and depleted cell phone minutes talking to spouses or giving endless instructions to corporate underlings. They got drunk in the airport bars and flirted with indifferent, foot-weary waitresses. All the while their sorrowful frustration rose and swirled through the great building like a noxious contaminating miasma that could inspire the pen of a Dante.

A man with a protruding stomach and his front shirttail sticking out plopped down next to Walter. He was perspiring, his inflated balloon of a face flushed with exertion and annoyance.

“It took me more than twenty minutes to get through security,” he said between breaths. “They pulled me aside and had me take off my shoes and my belt. Why hassle me? I don’t look like no A-rab, do I?”

The man gave no indication of expecting a verbal response so Walter just nodded. Americans could be so childlike, he thought—so narrow-minded and self-absorbed, even after 9/11. They wanted oil for their SUVs and lawn mowers and electricity to power their consumer electronic goods. But they also expected to be left alone.

And yet Walter had grown to love America. He loved their silly movies full of car chases and beautiful women. He loved country western music. He ate at truck stops and bought stuffed armadillos. He feared he was going crazy, loving America the way he did, and began to doubt his

resolve to leave her behind. Where would he go? Chicago was only the first stop in his flight from EnerTex and the life he had known in Texas. From Chicago he would fly to Canada, and then to Malaysia. Where he would go after that, he could not say. Money was not a worry. He was sixty-three and had enough to last the years that were left to him. But a man without important work to do in the world, alas, was a man whose life had no meaning. He hadn't always believed this. America had taught him that it was not enough to be kind and cultured, a lover of beauty, an intellectual. All that truly mattered in this place called America was that a man's talents be valued and wanted by society. It was no longer God, but the corporate CEO, who handed out the coveted titles—director of research, vice president for product development, sales manager for North America. EnerTex had given him a new identity, and he now felt an emptiness inside as he prepared to turn his back on it. Would he always be the Flying Dutchman, a man alone in the world with never a safe harbor in sight? Life isn't perfect, he told himself. If a few must suffer for the benefit of the many, who was he to shake his fist at the heavens? Was he honestly to blame for what had happened to those inside the *Tigron*, or for what was happening now to those who worked at the power plant? Someone had to pay the price for new technologies, even if they did so unwittingly.

“This is a pre-boarding announcement for United Airlines Flight 1182 to Chicago-O’Hare.” A woman’s voice came through the ceiling speakers drowning out CNN on the overhead television monitor two rows of seats away. “Passengers traveling first-class and those needing extra assistance, or who are traveling with small children under the age of five, are invited to board at this time. Please have your boarding pass ready. Thank you.”

Walter watched a mother with two children move toward the gate, a half-dozen well-dressed businessmen following her. Each in turn handed the attendant a boarding pass and disappeared down the jetway. Walter stood. He leaned on his cane with his right hand and pulled the handle out of his rolling suitcase with the other. More people crowded toward the gate in preparation for the general boarding announcement, including the unhappy man who sat next to him. Walter stood motionless for several seconds watching them, and then he turned and began walking down the busy concourse away from his flight and a life of uncertainty and idleness. He would show up for work at EnerTex tomorrow. He would make up an excuse about being sick. Mr. Axton said they still needed him and perhaps, in the end, that was enough.

# 7

“HOW ARE YOU feeling today, Ernesto?”

The Valdez family had just finished dinner and the children were in their rooms doing homework. Sandra was running water for the dishes while her husband cleared the table.

“I feel okay,” Ernesto said coming into the kitchen. Sandra turned off the water but did not turn to face him for fear her eyes would betray her.

“How are your hands? Are they still hurting you?”

Sandra had not mentioned her meeting with Agent Brewer. The man had upset her and she wanted to understand his game first. Amarillo was the nearest city with a Homeland Security office. Why would he make the one hundred and twenty mile trip from Amarillo to Lubbock if it weren't important? Did he have other business in the area? No one drove around West Texas for the sake of the scenery. The agent asked if her husband was having trouble with aching muscles or joints. Ernesto *had* been complaining about aches and pains, especially in his hands. He was afraid it might be arthritis, even though he was only thirty-four. And there were lines and dark patches under his eyes. Maybe they had been there all along and she hadn't noticed them. You live with someone for years, go to work every day, raise children, you can't be expected to notice all the subtle changes that take place over time. Was she only observing these changes now because Agent Brewer had planted the idea in her mind with his ridiculous questions? It was making her *loca*.

“My hands feel better today,” he said as he scraped the leftovers into the compost bucket on the counter, “but I'm tired. It must be this night shift they've got me on. Maybe I should try some vitamins.”

Yes, that must be it, Sandra tried to convince herself as she slid the

plates into the hot, soapy water. It's hard to sleep during the day. Still, the worry lingered on for the rest of the evening after Ernesto had gone to work.

THE NEXT DAY was Saturday and Sandra drove over to see her friend Hazel Pendergast. Hazel worked at the Cut and Curl Beauty Salon three days a week; the rest of her time she spent looking after her three kids. Her husband Mike was part of the maintenance crew at the EnerTex power plant. Sandra was very fond of Hazel but envied her also because her husband worked days.

"Have you and Mike been having any trouble in your sex life?" Sandra asked as she spooned Coffeemate into her cup. The question took Hazel by surprise but not because she found talking about sex awkward. Quite the opposite. An important part of her job at the Cut and Curl as she saw it was dispensing sexual advice to her clients. It was cheaper than going to a therapist and they loved her for it. Besides, there weren't any therapists in Birdstar.

"Why do you ask?"

"Ernesto and I are very lucky," Sandra said. "We both enjoy sex."

"Congratulations. You'd be surprised how many couples don't."

"You and Mike?"

"We like sex just fine. I'm talking about some of the women who come into the salon. When they start complaining about how their husbands ignore them, I tell them to give their husbands more vitamin F."

Sandra laughed but Hazel could tell something was bothering her friend.

"What's this all about?" she asked. "Has Ernesto become uninterested? Have you become uninterested?"

"No, it's not like that. He's . . . he's just not as enthusiastic as he used to be," she said and took a sip of her coffee. "He used to be the one to start things off, but lately it's me. I don't mind so much but it's different. And he takes longer to, you know . . ."

Hazel was tempted to offer her friend a sample of her famous advice. "Rent a dirty movie and see if that helps." Or, "they have these Internet sites where you can buy things to spice things up." But some intuition held her back, a shadow of doubt stealing over her own heart.

"Do you suspect he's having an affair?" she asked.

"No," Sandra shook her head. "You know Ernesto; he's not like that."

Sometimes women friends saw something in a husband that a wife

couldn't, or wouldn't. But when it came to Ernesto, she couldn't imagine him making the midnight creep to cheat on his wife. It just wasn't in his makeup.

"So you want to know if I'm having the same kind of trouble with Mike?" Hazel said. "Is that it?"

Sandra nodded.

"Well the truth is, we *are* having some problems in that department, though I haven't told anyone about it. Mike says it's not because he's falling out of love with me. He says he just feels different. Physically, I mean. The desire is there, but he can't do it as much as he used to. I think it's making him depressed, and of course once you start down that road things only get worse. So much of sex is what goes on inside your head. We've even talked about going to a doctor."

"You have?" Sandra said. "What can a doctor do?"

"There are drugs. And they can do things to a man's anatomy."

Sandra then told her friend about Brewer's visit to her office and about the questions he asked.

"He wanted to know if we were having trouble with our sexual relationship, if Ernesto had changed in that way."

"He did?"

"What's bugging me is how did he know? How would someone from Homeland Security have that kind of information?"

"I just remembered," Hazel said touching her forehead. "A guy came by the salon on Tuesday. He said he was conducting a health survey for the EnerTex Corporation and he wanted to ask me some questions about Mike. Well, you know how it is on Tuesdays; I was busier than a hummingbird on diet pills. So I told him I couldn't possibly answer any questions."

"What did he do?"

"He said he'd come back later, but I could tell he was pissed. I was afraid I might have made things difficult for Mike at work."

"Did he come back?"

"No, it was only a couple of days ago."

Sandra felt a surge of relief; she wasn't just being paranoid. Something must be wrong at the power plant, otherwise why would they have sent someone to talk to Hazel too? And why was Homeland Security mixed up in it? Was it even Homeland Security? She had read newspaper accounts about people using fake police IDs. She could see his face so clearly in her mind. Agent Brewer. Maybe that wasn't his real name. She was going to get to the bottom of what was going on. Of that much she was sure.

# 8

THE FIRST NINE MONTHS at KVMR so monopolized Reb's time and energy that little was left over for worry. The laser surgery had gone off without hitch but the results were discouraging. True, the pressures had stopped charging upward, no small blessing there, but neither had they retreated, which meant that every six weeks he had to return to Dr. Yoon's office to stare at a red dot in the center of what looked like a huge white salad bowl set on its side. The nurse would darken the room and then tiny pinpricks of light would flash on and off randomly inside the bowl. Reb's job was to press a button on a hand-held device every time he saw a flash. Click. Click . . . Click. Click. He knew the pauses meant he had failed to detect one of the little lights at the far edge of the bowl and the experience invariably cast him into a melancholic, end-of-the-world kind of mood, as if the stars in the heavens were slowly winking out, one after another.

And the burden of his illness was made greater still because he was facing it alone. If he were a church-going kind of person, he might talk to his pastor. But Reb's spiritual faith was not of the organized variety. When pressed, he described himself as a cross between a Dorothy Day Catholic Worker type of Christian and a Taoist of the Chuang-Tzu persuasion. He knew what this meant even if few others did.

Once or twice he considered engaging the services of a therapist but never made the call. Cost was partly to blame; given his modest community radio salary, eighty dollars a session was nothing to sneeze at. But perhaps the real reason was that no one in his family had ever gone to a shrink. Irrational or not, he didn't want to be the first. So that left sharing his troubles with a woman. Increasingly he wished the woman were Alice. They had spent so much time together during the early days of his radio

training, alone walking the streets of Nevada City talking over story ideas, interviewing people, and staying late in the news studio editing and mixing audio. Afterward, driving back to Sacramento he would recall the scent of her auburn hair, stirring up a turmoil of suppressed desire.

But as the months passed, they saw less and less of each other—news team meetings twice a week and occasionally hosting the bar together at some KVMR event. He thought about asking her out, but then reminded himself that Alice was married and she'd probably go back to Wayne in the end. There were plenty of other women in the world, he told himself; he just needed to make more of an effort to find one who was available.

In Sacramento, he often stopped by the Riverland Brewery on Capitol Boulevard on his way home from the station. Every Thursday a group of women came in, grabbed a large table in the back, and ordered pitchers of beer. They would talk and laugh and he tried to imagine himself taking one of them out. Maybe they would go to a movie, take salsa dance lessons together, or do whatever it was that dating couples did these days. Then he'd think, Christ, I'm too old for this, and would turn his attention to the Kings' game on the television above the bar.

The news stories he produced during this period ran the gamut from a three-part series on the dilapidated system of levees along the Sacramento River—another New Orleans waiting to happen according to the scientists he interviewed—to a profile of the founders of the *Teddy Bear Convention*, an annual event that drew thousands of people to Nevada City from all over the world. The assignment, however, that most excited his interest was a white-water raft trip he took down the South Fork of the American River. Each year a rafting company called Alpha Adventures donated a trip to a charity in San Francisco that ran a residential treatment and vocational training center for hard-core drug addicts. Marshall House's policies were strict but its success rate was impressive. To be admitted into the program, addicts had to agree to sever all connections with family members for the first eighteen months. After that, they were permitted to see their spouse or child only once each month, provided they had made adequate progress in their treatment program. That's where the raft trip came in. It took place on Father's Day and two-dozen Marshall House residents got to see their children again for the first time.

Reb showed up at the river put-in near the town of Coloma two hours east of Sacramento. It was early morning. The sky was clear and blue with temperatures expected to reach the mid-eighties, ideal weather for June. He was placed in a raft guided by a young, no-nonsense woman named

Carrie who stowed his microphone, headphones, and digital recorder in the raft's dry bag. Besides himself and the guide, there were three men in the raft with their children. Soon the canyon walls closed in around them as their brave company of rafts swept downriver. Boulders jutted up out of the water and deer could be seen along the banks. As they approached the first rapid, the passengers, young and old alike, grew pensive and quiet. It was the first white-water rafting experience, and for most, the first time they truly had been out in nature. Reb realized it was as alien an environment for them as it would be for him to race camels on the plains of Mongolia. This emotion of unfamiliarity seemed to thicken the air about them. Then they hit their first white-water, a class-two rapid called "Barking Dog." The men screamed, the kids screamed, and from that moment on they couldn't get enough of it. Their enthusiasm was so intoxicating, in fact, that Reb chanced damaging his equipment by pulling it out of the dry bag and recording the whoops and hollers as they shot through the next two rapids. He positioned himself in the center of the raft just before they dropped into the seething, raging water, pulled the headphones down tightly over his ears, and hung on with one hand while holding the microphone aloft with the other. It was a comical sight that only added to everyone's enjoyment.

At the lunch take-out, Reb interviewed the fathers and kids individually. He found the fathers remarkably eloquent about their struggles and hopes. But it was the children who knocked him out. Each began by talking about the water, how cold it was and how scary it was going through the rapids. But then the intensity of their eyes changed and deepened, and their smiles moved from enthusiasm to joy as they talked about how much they had missed their dads and how happy they were to be with them again. To Reb, they got at the very heart of what it meant to love someone.

Which also made it radio of the first order; he couldn't imagine anyone listening to the sounds of laughter and splashing water, the words of the children as they talked about their fathers, or the cry of the lone red tail hawk soaring above the river canyon and not sensing the magic of what had taken place that day.

Reb also began to regard river guides in a different light. His first impression, mixed with a tinge of envy, was that they were just hedonistic, sun-tanned young people blowing off the summer having a bit of fun. There was that, of course, but there was something holy in the way they went about their work too. In fact, this sense of holiness so lingered with him for days afterwards that he went back several times to interview

guides at their base camp on the river. The theory he came up with and managed to weave into the story was that river guides constituted a kind of religious order all their own. They lived simply, often communally, and were free of the greed and hunger for fame that goaded and tormented so many of their contemporaries. Many came from the upper ranks of society and had enjoyed every advantage that money and position could provide. And yet, like Franciscans of old, they had turned their backs on the world and its vanities. In much the same way that monks and nuns in other parts of the world served as keepers of sacred temples, raft guides kept the living rivers upon which they spent their days, temples whose names were the American, the Keweah, and the Salmon. Each raft was a sort of floating chapel in which differences in social rank and privilege quickly and naturally fell away. The banker and corporate CEO paddled along with the school custodian and taxi driver in a common purpose which was to stay alive and find a measure of spiritual renewal by absorbing the beauty, pulse, and non-humanness of the ancient river canyons. Reb observed first-hand how the experience transformed people. He watched the way they slowed down and became protective of others who only hours before had been complete strangers. For some, just escaping the tyranny of the clock was enough.

It took Reb a number of sessions in the studio to mold the piece into what he wanted. He worked mostly at night and at one point seriously considered taking the training to become a raft guide himself. That way he could guide on weekends. Radio work was intellectually and creatively challenging but sitting in front of computer screen for hours on end was also a kind of slow murder—not to mention the strain it put on his eyes. Oh yes, the glaucoma. He'd become so absorbed in the editing, he almost forgot about it. Best to give raft guiding a pass. Many of the guides had nicknames. What would his be? Charon, the blind boatman of Greek mythology who ferried dead souls across the River Styx? That should go down well with the raft company's marketing department. No, better to invest in a gym membership, or maybe take up jogging.

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER the rafting story aired, Reb received an e-mail from the station manager. The message read: "Come see me as soon as you get in." So he went upstairs and knocked on Kevin's door.

"Come in."

Reb entered the office and had to step over Kevin's black Labrador to reach a chair.

"I have some pretty exciting news," Kevin said, all smiles. "You know

that piece you did on the Father's Day white-water raft trip? What was the name of the organization?"

"Marshall House."

"Well, Phil sent a copy of it to the NFCB and they called me this morning. Your piece has been nominated for a Golden Reel Award for best local public affairs documentary. If you win, KVMR gets a Golden Reel too because the documentary was produced here at the station."

Kevin's grin was infectious even though Reb felt slightly embarrassed by his ignorance. "What's a Golden Reel?" he asked.

"Only the top honor from the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. It's like the Oscars of public radio, up there with the Peabody. We won a Golden Reel a couple of years ago for a piece a high school student did on the Public Defender's office here in Nevada County. The award normally goes to the big stations in New York or LA. It'd be a real coup to win another one."

"What happens next?"

"We'll send you to the NFCB conference to get your award."

"If I win, you mean?"

"You get to go either way. They announce the winners at the banquet on the last night of the conference."

"Where's the conference held?"

"This year it's at the Hilton in New York City."

"Can the station afford it, sending me to New York, I mean?" He didn't want to sound negative but he knew the station was far from flush, and from what he'd heard the prices for hotel rooms in New York were out-of-sight.

"Not to worry. Brent Abrams is picking up the tab. He's paying for Alice to go too since she's head of the news department."

This last bit of information cheered Reb even more than being nominated for an award. He had just learned from Phil that Alice had filed for divorce. They were now both free, white, and twenty-one. And if the old movies were right, the Big Apple was a great town for falling in love. Bad eyes or not, life was looking up for Reb Morgan.

# 9

THREE TOURS OF DUTY in Afghanistan as an intelligence officer with Special Forces convinced Colonel Viktor Degtyar it was time to quit. His unit's job was to hunt down and interrogate suspected Mujahidin. Torture was an everyday duty and the stench of blood, urine, and fear still clung to him and kept him awake at night. So he resigned his commission and returned home to a country that was starkly different from the one he had left, a Russia reordering herself along criminal lines under the euphemism of privatization. The emerging strong men pursued power ruthlessly. Valentin Gromonov was one such man.

Viktor met Gromonov at a party in Moscow for the kick-off of the world concert tour of the mega rock band Aquarium. Gromonov's huge, meaty head moved in quick jerks atop a compact, muscular body held aloft by short, sturdy legs—a wrestler's body.

"You were with the Spetsnaz in Afghanistan," he said to Viktor, his mouth full of Osetra caviar, as the two men moved side by side along the buffet line. "You are a specialist?"

"We are all specialists," Viktor said.

"Yes, this is true. But you are very good at finding people from what I hear. Very skilled. Very thorough. These are admirable traits. I think the leaders of the Mujahidin were smart to be frightened of you."

Gromonov. Viktor had seen his name and face many times in the newspapers and on television. He was the head of a syndicate, one of a handful of super-wealthy oligarchs who sprang up after the collapse of the Communist regime. A man to watch. A man with protected interests. Was this how Gromonov knew so much concerning the career of a retired army officer?

"I hear they tried to send you to Chechnya," Gromonov said, "but you refused."

"I am no longer interested in the army."

"An ugly business, Chechnya. You were wise not to go."

Viktor shrugged; the conversation bored him.

"I hear also you consult on security issues for a Swiss company," Gromonov said, "but that they pay you little."

From compliment to insult, Viktor thought, and he turned to walk away.

"No please, hear me out," Gromonov said in an apologetic tone. "Your business is your own, Colonel, but I am looking for a man such as you. A man whose talents are, what should I say, under appreciated? You should call me."

Placing his plate down next to the *rassstegai*, Gromonov produced a business card from his vest pocket that he handed to Viktor, leaving a spot of grease on it with his thumb.

"You can reach me at this number. You will not be sorry."

A government official, sotted with drink, came up behind Gromonov and began slapping the large-headed man on the back repeatedly in an exaggerated demonstration of affection.

"Valentin, my excellent friend. How good it is to see you!"

Gromonov struggled to swallow without choking as he spun about, his eyes hard and dark, to see who was touching him. Then he smiled, flashing several gold teeth and his voice boomed out, "Yegor, my good friend. You are looking well."

His eyes, however, were unchanged. Viktor, who had noted the same predatory look often enough among fellow officers in basement interrogation rooms in Kabul, instinctively stepped back. Gromonov was not a man to know pity or doubt and any attempt to dupe him would be to play a very dangerous game; Viktor suspected the Moscow River had swallowed its share of weighted corpses of those who had tried and failed.

He set his plate down and moved away from the buffet line while Gromonov continued his chat with the government official. He was no longer hungry. Crossing the ballroom in the direction of the exit, he wondered if he could work for a man like Gromonov. He told himself he would go home and sleep on it. What else did he have to occupy his time? Gromonov was correct about his Swiss employers. They were misers and dull as ditch water. With what little they paid him and his military pension, he had barely enough to purchase vodka and the occasional services of a prostitute. Perhaps he *would* give Gromonov a call.

A noisy rush of people came surging toward him. In the center were the guests of honor, the band members of Aquarium. They were surrounded

by a jostling animated entourage of adoring fans; the air crackled with excitement as the pheromones of hungry young bodies swirled around him. A girl with raven black hair, older than the rest, in matching purple velvet jacket and slacks brushed up against him. She glanced at him and laughed. Her eyes were thick with mascara; a tattoo of twisting briars wound itself around her white neck. Viktor put aside his plans to leave the party and instead followed the girl and the band back into the ballroom. He wanted vodka. He wanted the girl. He wanted to forget.

“WE ARE A STRANGE country these days, don’t you think?” Gromonov tossed a rust-covered bayonet and several green tarnished brass belt buckles onto the desk for Viktor to inspect. It was mid-morning and they were in an office at the far end of an aging warehouse next to the rail yards. A kerosene stove vented through the wall heated the space. It was Gromonov’s working office, not his show office.

“They were dug up near Voronezh,” Gromonov said. “They are Italian and are worth money. People in the West are crazy for such things.”

Viktor was aware that one of the newer scams in Russia was a very old one. Grave robbing. Five million Germans and their allies had met their end on the Eastern Front and had been tossed and bulldozed into mass graves along with their Iron crosses, battalion pins, and SS belt buckles. A few of the bigger gangs were equipping teams of “black trackers” to scour the countryside for these desirable trinkets.

“We use computer-enhanced battle charts and metal detectors to find the graves, but it can be dangerous work. There is much unexploded ordinance.”

Viktor suddenly feared he was being recruited to find war souvenirs, but Gromonov read his expression and laughed.

“No my friend, I need you for the living, not for old bones and lost glories. Have you heard of a scientist named Anatoly Kryuchkov?”

“No,” Viktor said.

“I am not surprised. Kryuchkov’s father was a brilliant physicist who worked on the hydrogen bomb after the war, but he went insane and died in a nut house. Anatoly was his only son and smart, like his father. He made something that was kept very secret—a new way of making electricity. The process does not require hydrocarbon or nuclear fuel. Nor does it rely on the sun, the wind, or geothermal heat. The Kremlin believed this technology would transform the world and they put Kryuchkov in charge of developing it. It was called the Svarog Project in honor of the ancient Slavic God of fire.”

“So what happened?”

“In 1989 an attack submarine called the *Tigron* was outfitted with an experimental power plant using the new technology. But there was an accident, a terrible accident, and the submarine was lost at sea with all hands.”

“I heard of no accident involving a submarine.” Retired or not, Viktor paid close attention to the military news.

“Perhaps you remember a Navy transport airplane that crashed in the Ural Mountains during a storm?” Gromonov said. “Seventy-three sailors were killed. The government said they were being transferred to the Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok. It was reported in the newspapers and on the television.”

“The wreckage was never found,” Viktor said. “The bodies of the men were not recovered.”

“A fabrication,” Gromonov said, slapping the desk with the palm of his hand. “Those men lost their lives onboard the *Tigron*. It was a huge disaster and the government covered it up. Kryuchkov blamed himself for the death of so many sailors and committed suicide. That is what they say, anyway. The government, the KGB, everybody. One night, they say, Kryuchkov went to a place high above the river. He took off his clothes and jumped in. He left a note. Very sad, don’t you think?”

Gromonov paused as he lifted a pot from an electric burner and poured two cups of black tea.

“Would you like to know what I think?” he said after handing one of the cups to Viktor.

“I think our Anatoly, maybe he never drowns in the Moscow River. Instead, I think he is smuggled out of the country and sent to America to work for an energy company. It takes him eight, ten years, but he solves the problem that destroyed the *Tigron*. Do you see? And this American company will soon become rich selling Russian electricity to the entire world.”

Gromonov sipped his tea.

“Did the authorities find Kryuchkov’s body?” Viktor asked.

“Some days later. It was badly decomposed. Unrecognizable. They used dental records for official identification.”

“And?”

“I have learned in life, Colonel, that anything is possible if you have enough money. And the Americans have money. So I think, what if the dental records were falsified? It is not so difficult, with a bribe, to have one set of x-rays replaced with another.”

“Who else believes Kryuchkov might still be alive?” Viktor asked. He had little doubt that Gromonov knew all about falsifying death records.

“An associate of mine who works in one of the ministries. He is a clever man. He believes the CIA was involved, and that Kryuchkov is now living in the United States. He thinks Kryuchkov works for a company called EnerTex. This company is in Houston. Have you heard of it?”

Viktor shook his head.

“It is run by a man named Avery Axton who is a close personal friend of a former president of the United States. Now do you understand?”

“Your associate believes that the CIA, acting under orders from the president, handed Kryuchkov over to this company in Texas, is that what you are saying?”

“He is guessing; he does not know this for certain.”

Viktor leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea.

“EnerTex is a small company,” Gromonov said, “but it will soon become a very large company because they have stolen our technology for making electricity. My associate says they have already built one power plant and will build more. The United States government has special arrangements with Mr. Axton and EnerTex—very secret and unusual arrangements, from what he hears.”

“And he believes there is a connection between this new technology and the Svarog Project?” Viktor said.

Gromonov nodded. “As I said, he is clever when it comes to these things. Not like me.” Gromonov gave a shrug and smile of innocence that Viktor found annoying.

“So how does Kryuchkov fit into all this?” Viktor asked.

“Without Kryuchkov, there is no new process, no Svarog Project. My associate wants to investigate but the Kremlin will not allow him to. They are very definite. Kryuchkov is dead, they say. But Valentin Gromonov does not work for the Kremlin. He works for himself. So I think I will investigate. Perhaps I am wasting my time and money. Perhaps Kryuchkov is as dead as the owner of this old bayonet.” He picked up the weapon, looked at it briefly, and then put it down again. “But I have what the Americans call a *hunch*.”

There was loud thump on the door and Gromonov got up to open it with a look of impatience. A heavy-set man wearing boots, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, began to enter the room holding a large cardboard carton that Viktor guessed held more war relics.

“Not now,” Gromonov snapped, shoving the box and the man backwards out of the room and slamming the door. He returned to the desk and sat down.

“I have all the strong men I need, Comrade Colonel. Accountants too. What I need is a man like you, a man who can find someone who doesn’t want to be found. I have read your file and know much about you. You have courage. You speak very good English. I will pay you to go to America and find out if Anatoly Kryuchkov is alive or dead. I have people in Texas to help you.

“The Americans will have given him a new identity.”

“Of course.”

“And if I do not find him?”

“Then I will know he is dead and the Americans have invented this technology on their own. But if he is alive, then I want you to bring him back to Russia. He should give this wonderful invention to his own people, not the Americans.”

And make you rich, Viktor thought. Gromonov was unlike his fellow oligarchs. Most had been managers of Soviet factories and made their fortunes by buying up stock in their own companies when industry was privatized. Gromonov, however, had worked his way up from the streets running prostitutes and selling drugs. His real break came in the late 1980s when Gorbachëv regulated the sale of vodka. There was too much alcoholism, the president said. It was like America in the 1920s; underground syndicates, one run by Gromonov, began siphoning off vodka from state-owned plants and selling it on the black market for rubles, which they then converted into dollars. The dollars Gromonov invested in other profitable ventures, some legal, some not. While Viktor was in Afghanistan risking his life hunting down and killing terrorists, Gromonov, safely back in Moscow, was importing opium by the kilo from the same country and processing it into heroin, which he then smuggled into Europe and the United States. Viktor did not hold it against him. People did what they had to do.

Still, Viktor had “associates” of his own with access to information, and from them he learned that Gromonov had invested heavily in oil wells near the Caspian Sea. Pipelines had to be built so the precious oil from this remote region could reach customers in the West, customers who would pay in dollars and euros, not worthless rubles. And these pipelines had to be protected because there were bad people who wished to blow them up—ethnic separatists, religious extremists, competing gangs. So Gromonov invested more money. He purchased security, costly but necessary. Should a new energy technology now replace oil, Gromonov faced ruin.

That was why he needed to get his hands on Anatoly Kryuchkov, if the physicist still existed. He could then either exploit the new technology

or get rid of the inventor and keep the world hooked on oil. It was how Gromonov had grown rich and powerful. He understood the mechanics of addiction.

“America is a very big place,” Viktor said. “It will be difficult to find this man, if he is still alive.”

“Begin in Texas,” Gromonov said standing. He went over to a safe in the corner of the room. He leaned over and worked the dial. Pushing down the handle, there was a satisfying click and the door swung open. He reached inside and withdrew a large envelope and handed it to Viktor.

“Here is what little information exists about Anatoly Kryuchkov. It cost me more than you can imagine.”

Viktor withdrew several pieces of paper and a black and white photograph. It showed a man of small stature in profile crossing a city street. He had a cane in his right hand and appeared to be supporting his weight with it. Viktor looked up at Gromonov.

“Kryuchkov was stricken with polio as a child,” Gromonov said. “It was a mild case and he recovered, but it came back when he was forty. To walk, he must use a cane.

“It is difficult to make out his face, he is too far away. Where was this taken?”

“In St. Petersburg. Twenty years ago. He was attending a conference.”

“There are no other photographs of him?”

“The government has more, I am sure, but this is the only one I was able to get.”

“I am surprised.”

Gromonov lifted his eyebrows but said nothing.

Viktor then scanned the sheets of paper. They pertained to the energy company in Houston, Texas, called EnerTex, including a short bio and a picture of the company’s president, Avery Axton.

“EnerTex built its first power plant near a village called Birdstar in western Texas,” Gromonov said. “It went on-line eighteen months ago and produces eight-hundred and fifty megawatts of power. The company will not reveal how the electricity is generated or what fuel is used. The United States government is shielding them. It is quite extraordinary.”

Viktor waited for more information but received none.

“And if I find Kryuchkov and he refuses to come back with me, what then?” he asked.

“You will kill him.”

Neither man spoke for the span of a half a minute. The colonel looked at the photograph while Gromonov sipped his tea.

“My friend,” Gromonov said, “some men need a reason to kill. Others need only an excuse. Some cannot be kept from killing; they enjoy it too much. You are of the first sort, I think. So here is your reason. The United States has grown conceited and stupid. They break treaties at will and invade poor defenseless country whenever they want. They are like a spoiled child whose toys can destroy us all if we are not careful.”

With his palms on the desk, Gromonov leaned forward. “Now it is possible that a Russian scientist has turned over to them the means of dominating the world’s economy far into the future. Energy, Colonel, the wars of our age have all been fought over energy. So I ask you, should Russia, like the rest of the world, become America’s lap dog because one of our own has betrayed us?” He shook his head slowly. “If Kryuchkov will not help us, then we must prevent him from helping our enemies.”

For the next half-hour the two men discussed money and logistics. Gromonov would pay Viktor thirty thousand dollars and his expenses; he would give Viktor an additional forty thousand should he find Kryuchkov and bring him back to Russia.

“And if I must kill him?” Viktor asked.

Gromonov’s dark pig-like eyes shone with mischief. “Kill him only if you must; he would be useful to me.”

“But if I must kill him?”

“There will be a bonus, of course.”

“I want the money in euros, not dollars,” Viktor said. Gromonov considered the request, his expression saturnine. Euros would cost him more but he wasn’t surprised. Many involved in illicit trade around the globe were moving from dollars to euros, one more sign of America’s decline.

“Euros, yes, agreed, in euros,” Gromonov said standing up. Viktor stood also and they shook hands.

Viktor had known from the moment he entered the office that he would take the job; he just wanted to be sure everything was spelled out beforehand. Misunderstandings with a man like Valentin Gromonov could be fatal.

And should this gangster who violated the graves of soldiers underestimate a former colonel of the Spetsnaz and attempt a double-cross, it would cost him dearly.

# 10

SANDRA SLID THE FILM through the after hours slot at the Movies To Go store before crossing the street to the Family Resource Center. With Ernesto working nights, they seldom went out to the movies, nor did they watch them at home except on rare occasions. But she was determined more than ever to figure out what was going on at the power plant and Hazel recommended she watch *Erin Brockovich* starring Julia Roberts.

“It’s about an ordinary woman who goes up against a big corporation and wins,” Hazel told her. “And it’s a true story.”

So Sandra watched it and then had a long talk with Ernesto. She told him about Agent Brewer, and on the drive to work that morning she formulated a plan that included talking to as many of the wives of power plant employees as possible. She spent practically every second of her spare time over the next five days on the telephone and the stories she heard sounded eerily familiar—husbands suffering from aching joints and muscles and chronic fatigue. Others complained about blurry vision or forgetfulness. She could recite the litany of symptoms in her sleep. One woman told her that her husband had lost two teeth in the last six months.

“First time it happened,” the woman said, “Ed was eating his supper. He bit down on something hard and spat his tooth onto the plate. Three weeks later another fell out while he was brushing his teeth.”

“What did the dentist say?” Sandra asked.

“He didn’t know what to say, and that worries me. Ed’s been using snuff since he was a teenager competing in rodeos. It could be cancer.”

Sandra couldn’t escape the nagging fear that Ernesto and his fellow workers were being poisoned by some kind of radiation. Her friend Betty Mae, however, who worked for the Dalton County sheriff’s office

in Birdstar, assured her that there were no radioactive materials at the plant.

“Look hon, if they had anything hot out there, we’d know it. State and federal emergency planning requires we be informed.”

SANDRA ENTERED THE Resource Center and found Laura Andrews waiting for her. Laura, a tall, slender woman in her late forties with wheat colored hair, was a family physician who donated her services one day a week to the Center.

“You said you wanted to see me, so here I am,” Laura said smiling. She was always upbeat, a trait Sandra appreciated.

“Rita, please hold my calls,” Sandra told her secretary and then turned to Laura. “Let’s go in my office.”

Once behind closed doors Sandra told Laura about Ernesto and the others.

“We could test for Lyme disease,” the doctor said. “That would match some of these symptoms.”

“Lyme Disease? I didn’t know we had that in Texas.”

“It’s found wherever there are deer ticks. It’s a nasty bacteria, similar to syphilis.”

The mention of syphilis in connection with someone in her own family threatened to stampede Sandra’s emotions and it showed.

“It’s a spirochete that effects the brain and nervous system like syphilis,” Laura hastened to clarify. “But Lyme has nothing to do with sex.”

“You can’t get it by having sex?” Sandra asked.

“Not as far as we can tell. Look, Sandra, I don’t know much about Lyme Disease. Most general practitioners don’t.”

“I don’t remember Ernesto getting a tick bite,” Sandra said. “Besides, why would a bunch of people who all work at the same place suddenly come down with Lyme disease? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Are there many deer inside the power plant property?” Laura asked.

Sandra shrugged. “I don’t know. Ernesto says the area around the plant is restricted.”

“Then they probably don’t allow hunting and the deer might be congregating there. Animals are smart about figuring out where they’re safe. Do you know of anyone else in Birdstar who’s having these kinds of health problems, someone who doesn’t work at the power plant?”

Sandra shook her head.

“You could check with the schools; they’ll know if any of the children

are presenting symptoms. Meanwhile, I'll do some research. I'll want to draw blood from Ernesto and the others. Can you arrange for them to come up to my office?"

"How long will this take?"

"That's hard to say. It's a process of elimination."

"But the workers at the plant are in danger now."

"I'll do what I can to speed things up, Sandra, but it will take time. I'll need those blood samples first."

Sandra could feel impatience pulling her apart inside like a malevolent spirit. Laura's words, "it will take time" stung her ears and she wanted to yell at her friend, "tell me *now*, not later." What was happening to her? Why was she so anxious and keyed up all the time? She wasn't her normal self; she knew that. Her temperament had been much like her mother's, a child of Mexican immigrants who survived the worst of the Great Depression and the Second World War—she lost a brother on Iwo Jima—and yet never lost her emotional equilibrium and infectious optimism. Sandra tried to pinpoint when the change began taking place inside her. It was before Agent Brewer's visit, she knew that. A year ago? Maybe two, not longer. Perhaps she was suffering the onset of premature menopause.

"Is there something else that's bothering you?" Laura said softly, breaking the silence.

"No, I'm sorry. I *do* appreciate your help."

"What will you do if we find out what's making Ernesto and others sick?"

"Complain to the county; get them to investigate."

"And if they won't listen? You know EnerTex slings a lot of weight around this part of the state."

"Then I'll go to the press, or organize protests. I'll think of something."

"Well then, all I can say is, go for it, girl!"

The two women smiled and felt slightly dangerous.

TEN DAYS LATER Laura called back with the test results.

"I wish I could give you a definitive answer, Sandra, but I can't. Whatever it is, it's not Lyme disease, West Nile virus, Legionnaire's, or any of the usual suspects. It could be a chemical toxin we don't know how to test for. That's my guess. I'm going to a conference next month where I can talk to some folks from the CDC. Maybe they'll have some ideas. I'm sorry I can't be more help than that."

"You *do* believe me, Laura, that something is wrong at the power plant?"

A slight pause and then, "I believe that *you* believe it."

Hearing these guarded words, Sandra felt an enormous frustration dragging her down. If a woman she'd known and worked with for years didn't believe her, then who would? The word "hysteria" had not been mentioned but it was certainly in the air. A suggestion or two by a government agent and Sandra Valdez was letting her fears run away with her. The pressure at work over the last six months had been brutal. Maybe she was losing perspective.

She hung up the phone and went over and sprinkled food into the fish tank.

No, she told herself, something bad is going on. Call it woman's intuition. It was the same feeling she got when one of her kids was about to come down with a fever, or was being bullied at school—a knowing deep down in her bones. She would try to convince Ernesto to quit his job. It would be tight financially with the children and the mortgage and everything but health was more important than money. She returned to her desk and looked at his photograph. He was good man, but she knew he would not quit his job no matter what she said, and this only added to the preponderance of her frustration. She would have to produce concrete evidence, but how?

Sandra stepped into the outer office.

"Rita," she said, "I'll be taking a few days off. I might stop in to check my e-mail, but as far as anyone is concerned, I'm not here. Can you handle things for awhile?"

"I'll do my best, Mrs. Valdez," Rita said, forcing a smile through her worry. She could sense that something was wrong with her boss. For weeks Mrs. Valdez hadn't been acting herself. Then there was the closed door meeting with Dr. Andrews. Did Sandra have breast cancer? A bad heart? Maybe she was suffering from excessive stress, social work burnout. Rita reached under her desk for her purse and cigarettes. What would happen to the agency? For many in the city it was the last strand in a social safety net that was being ripped to pieces by the political sharks of the conservative right. She stood up to go outside, but the phone rang and she picked it up.

"Family Resource Center."

An official sounding voice, a man's, said, "Let me speak to Sandra Valdez."

"I'm sorry, she's out of the office for several days. Can I take a message?"

A click and then silence.

"Asshole," she muttered as she hung up the phone and went outside for a smoke.