Blind Guides

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To my wife, Gena.

CHAPTER 1

There are two priorities that hold a man in place. Without them, he is like a feather drifting in the whimsical winds of the universe. They're not extravagant priorities by any means, but reasons to live. They are in essence, work and a good woman. A man can live with either one or the other at any given time, but to have both is to be one step beyond the gates of heaven.

At the moment, Stace Manning had neither.

He caught his sweating bottle of beer just as it tipped towards the grass. Kissing the coppery edge, he sucked the warm dregs of the brew over his tongue then spit it out. Disgust rattled his face as he swiped the dribble from his whiskers. The balmy sun of September had cooked its contents into a revolting concoction.

Sitting on his blanket at the Freibad public swimming pool, he leaned back and tipped his face towards the sky, enjoying the sensation of white-noon heat burning through his eyelids. Across his chest, beads of salt-ripened perspiration beaded into drops and ran through the dark curls towards his navel. He rolled his head back and forth, massaging his shoulders with the tips of his long black hair, listening to the orchestration of noises reaching his ears. He heard the tinkle of a breeze passing through the leaves above, the rumble of a car passing by the

outside fence, and a father calling to his toddler. Down by the pool, children were jostling for position behind the diving boards. The metal springs of the boards croaked like frogs as children bounced on them. Nearby, people were laughing by the concession stand eating pomfrits and drinking beer. Closer to him, two young women were gossiping. Stace couldn't tell what they were talking about. He had learned little German in the past year he'd spent in Frankfurt.

What was her name? He held his breath and listened for her movements. He'd not heard her leave since he'd finished his confession and had closed his eyes. Never in his life had he dared to reveal so much to anyone, especially a woman. He felt self-conscious, as if he'd taken a knife and sliced open his mind, exposing his most ghastly secrets. Was she still seated on the corner of his blanket facing him, her feet folded to the side, sandy hair falling down the left side of her face? "She's probably bored stiff! I've been the pitiful American and played on her sympathies," or so he thought.

"Hallo," she said, in a way characteristic of Germans calling people out of a daydream.

He dropped his head and opened his eyes. "I hope I haven't bored you," he said.

She looked at him amusingly, with a slight smile twitching underneath her erect nose. It wasn't her habit to walk up to complete strangers, especially the men whom she knew were just scrutinizing her. Those men who looked over their books and newspapers, or lay with their heads propped over their folded arms stealing glances at the sunbathing women. She'd rather they just look once and get their fill, instead of concealing their lust within disinterested gazes. Stace had looked as well, but she noticed in his glances a look of curiosity. As if he was looking not only at her, but into her, with an unquenchable thirst to know. She sensed him to be foreign. His long curly hair clean and combed, a well-trimmed beard, and the unmistakable lack of custom set him apart as a foreigner. At twenty-seven, she'd seen her beer stein full of the predictability of German men and the thick presence

they wore about them like cologne. Almost unknowingly, she had found herself walking towards this stranger as though wrapped in the expectation of an unfolding romance.

"No," she said, "you don't bore me. I'm sorry to hear about your art exhibit."

"Well, it really wasn't my exhibit," he said, hoping she wouldn't see his disappointment. But it was to be his exhibit. It would have given him the edge he needed to jump-start his dreams. He'd spent the last four years living through the reality of being rejected from the exhibit and he was surprised the pain of its memory played out today, just as much as it did when it happened.

A moment of anticipation passed between them.

"Would you like to go for a swim?" he asked.

"Ja."

As she stood, she reached behind her and unfastened the bow of her bikini top. He caught her movements out of the corner of his eye, turning his head just as the long strings from the bow fell to her side. Her breast leaped from the cup and settled into a noble curve upwards. Timidly, he looked the other way.

Stace walked ahead of her on to the first step leading into the center of the pool. Icy water, cold as the mountain streams of New Mexico, lapped across his ankles. His skin turned to goose flesh. Eva quickly caught up and stepped in, impervious to the chill. She descended the steps and dove in, moments later reappearing. He stood there for a moment admiring her tenacity. Her head was bobbing along the top of the water as the rest of her body was contorted by the hallucinogenic effect of the waving water.

"Come in!" she yelled at him.

"Too kalt!" he protested.

"It's nice once you get used to it."

"I bet." Not wanting to appear like a total coward, he dove in.

The underwater world exhilarated his spirit. Somewhere the pains of the world lay…somewhere above the surface the memories stung, but

here was a world without walls and without the need to conform. Instinctively, he turned towards Eva and found her swimming along the surface directly above him. Her eyes were wide open and her hair was glowing in backlit sunshine, extending like an aura around her head. Diamond shaped ripples of light danced across her skin and her breasts greeted him with hazel-colored nipples. He joined her at the surface and she followed him back down into the depths.

After their swim, they strolled up to where Eva had spread her blanket. She grabbed a towel and began to dry off while he searched for words.

"That was fun," she said, turning her head and squeezing the water out of her hair. "Are you doing anything tonight?" she asked without looking at him.

"No. Would you like to get together?" he asked quickly.

She smiled.

He wondered if she was joking.

She finished drying her hair and left it wild. From a plastic bag, she brought out a pair of denim shorts and pulled them up her unshaven legs. After snapping the button, she looked over to him as if expecting something.

He was still searching for words. She pulled out a pink tank top from the bag and as she reached towards the sky, it fell over her breasts. Having dressed, she put her hands playfully on her hips as if to say, "Well?" then asked, "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?"

"Sure."

She fumbled for her wallet and took out a business card. "Here's my number. I live nearby. Call me around 6:00 p.m. and I'll give you directions."

He was ecstatic, but managed to conceal it. His response was formal, as if he was used to this sort of thing. "I look forward to it." He glanced at the card, which read, "Eva Burtman, Investigative Reporter."

She finished packing her things and walked towards the main gate.

CHAPTER 2

Reverend Jeremiah Eisner walked across the plush magenta carpet of his office in Munich, Germany towards the mirror hanging over a cherry wood dresser. He had done this six days a week for the past thirteen years. He worked his fingers up the last two buttons of his creased dress shirt that was in all practicality, white. After adjusting his collar, he pulled the knot to his red silk tie with its splash of gold flakes up to his neck and with effort secured the points of his collar with the two pea-sized buttons. More than once he'd thought about taking the scissors to the buttons, for his arthritic fingers had long since lost their dexterity. Running his thumbs along his waistline, he tugged at his suit pants and pulled them up over his belly button. Extending each, he plugged the holes of his sleeves with modestly sized, fourteen-karat gold cuff links. Nearby, resting over the back of the burnt amber leather chair lay the vest to his three-piece suit. He slid it on and picked up a lint brush, stroking it down the length of his slacks as far as he could bend over.

On his way into his private bath, he paused at the painting of the man that endowed him with his daily dose of legitimacy. The portrait was of the socialist, Kurt Eisner, an ancestor of the reverend, who was assassinated over seventy years ago. The reverend gloried in the illusion of his own potential for greatness. He liked to think that his life would

have a similar impact on humanity and specifically, that he was chosen to preach his version of the end of time for the salvation of the masses. He was a man on a mission.

Walking into his private bath, he stood before the frameless mirror instinctively feeling for his bath comb. Reaching towards the ceiling like an off-balance ballerina, he suddenly stopped, for upon further examination he found that his receding clump of titanium-white hair looked quite satisfactory. He stretched for the hair spray and swirled the can over his head, then backed out of the perfumed fog. When the air cleared, he checked his teeth, nose, and ears for distractions, then peered into the deep canyons of his face extending from the corner of his lashes down through his cheekbones, all the way down into the edge of his frosty beard. He wasn't overly distracted by his signs of age, but the routine had become habit, giving him something to do while he waited for show time. Content with his appearance, he walked out of the bathroom and took a seat at his desk.

His library, gathered in enormous shelves built into two walls of his office, consisted of no less than 1,316 books, and hundreds of documentary films and subscriptions to over twenty-three magazines and newspapers. He'd devoured nearly all of the contents of the library. He was well versed in history, theology, social and economic theories, political movements, and philosophy. Coupled with this knowledge, he had the ability to analyze these various avenues of thought into a cohesive whole, merging all this information into his own version of eschatology. This gift gave him the uncanny ability to predict the outcome of almost any situation with prophetic intuition.

As if these abilities were not enough, he was a supreme orator. Tall and imposing, handsome, and sincere in his beliefs, the reverend's messages seemed to carry with them the will of God. Yet despite his vocabulary and intellect, he wasn't one to flaunt his abilities on his congregation, but formulated his speeches into simple phraseology, so that the common man could understand his theological discussions. As such, his influence could be felt throughout the Anglo-Saxon world.

Indeed, his audio and video productions of his daily two-hour show were broadcast in nearly every modern country of the globe. His book, *Our Global Community*, had been published in thirty-seven languages and dialects. Assisting him with the disbursement of his vision was a staff of over one hundred individuals, most of them working directly out of the International Christian Coalition's Munich offices. In addition, he had an army of representatives working in many countries negotiating the furtherance of his work.

But the reverend had his enemies and his share of vices. Leaders within many political arenas sought him for enlightenment. Such meetings were often secretive, for while these leaders valued his input, they weren't prepared to stake their reputations by association with him. Nor were these leaders isolated to the geography of Europe alone, but influential people in many other countries around the world valued his insight to such a degree that in some cases he influenced religious and political policy. In his younger years, the reverend was oblivious to the obsequious manner in which others sought his wisdom, but now coveted their idolization of him like a good pat on the back.

What had occurred recently within his mind was nothing short of a paradigm shift, a complete realignment of his understanding of the Christian faith. Central to this shift was the realization that the Christian faith was not to be the passive display of ethical and moral virtues, which draw men and women into its fold by those who lead by example. Rather, Christianity should be the vehicle that dictates political and sociological change. He was overwhelmed with the notion he'd reached a new plateau in his faith and that God was calling him on to bigger and better things. In fact, just hours ago, he'd learned of another reason to substantiate his self-glorification.

The letter was full of possibilities. Neatly presented and signed by Frederick C. Watson, the CEO of Trojan Security, Inc., it now lay flat on his polished mahogany desk and read:

To Reverend Jeremiah Eisner:

Several years ago, I was approached by a colleague of mine with your book, and several video sermons you had preached. The result of that fateful event has been nothing short of a complete transformation of my faith.

I'm particularly interested in your concept of the role Christians have in these final days of earth's history. You're justified in confronting the evils of our time and in insisting that the political and social leaders of our governments adhere to the basic tenants of the Christian faith. I support you in the judgment that leaders who are not able to verify their faith should be relieved of their responsibilities and be replaced by individuals who are morally grounded. I believe, like you, that God can't bless a nation, whether it is Germany or America, when its leadership continues to support the humanistic agenda.

I'm the CEO of Trojan Security, the world's largest computer security corporation. We're located in Austin, Texas, but have corporate distributing offices in fifteen other cities around the globe including Heidelberg. Our main emphasis is in designing and implementing computer security systems for major corporations. My purpose for writing to you is not grounded towards financial gain. Our corporation has considerable resources and as for myself, God has provided me with more than an adequate standard of living.

Trojan Security has from time to time supported both churches and charities, but I would like to take our support to a new level. I think my ideas and suggestions would be worth your time. I will be in Heidelberg between July 5th and the 12th. If it is at all possible, I would like to set up a time that we may visit. I will have my secretary call your organization next week to arrange a convenient time.

The reverend stepped out from behind his desk and walked to the center of his office. There was a short knock on his door and in walked Joseph Stautzen, the reverend's right-hand man. With a discerning eye, Stautzen ascertained the color of the reverend's suit and walked into the wardrobe closet, where he pulled the matching jacket to the rever-

end's suit off its hanger. Stautzen spread the jacket open and slipped it through the reverend's outstretched arms.

"Any problems I need to know about?" the reverend asked.

"No sir. Everything's ready as usual."

Stautzen escorted him to the elevator and down to the bottom floor. When the elevator opened, Neli, the production director, met them and briefed them on the final details of the show. The three of them then proceeded across the grounds of the ICC's complex and into the production studio. The reverend quickly positioned his body behind the crystal podium and placed his Bible next to his sermon. From somewhere behind the TV cameras, Neli called out the last ten seconds before airtime. The reverend collected his thoughts, adjusted his notes, and took a deep breath.

He began by comparing the current political and religious setting of the European continent with that of the United States. It was his opinion that beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the next three decades, the United States underwent dynamic policy changes that occurred through the influence of evangelical Christians. These evangelicals had been able to successfully influence many politicians to support their ideologies and most notably, they had obtained enough influence to vote their own candidates into office.

After the turn of the millennium, the extent of the evangelicals became more pervasive and the reverend cited examples. Producers and leaders of the media and television industries were forced to generate wholesome, family orientated material free of sex and violence, and objectionable cable programming was sliced in half. Laws against pornography become more severe, and coupled with successful boycotting campaigns, had put most of the companies in the sex industry out of business. Schools, colleges, and universities, under fear of losing federal financial aid, were obliged to promote creationism and downplay evolutionist ideologies. Archeological research projects, which did not seek to verify biblical interpretations of creation, lost their funding. A crackdown on the illegal use of drugs and criminal activity became para-

mount. Harsh penalties were imposed and prison inmates were required to attend religious services on condition of parole. Even the artistic world fell under scrutiny. Libraries were cleansed of objectionable books and musical bands rated by content; even art galleries and museums were presented with strict guidelines dictating the type of material they could present, or their business permits and grants were yanked. "All of these changes and many more," the reverend assured his audience, "were a result of the collective repentance of the masses. God had given America success and prosperity as a nation because in the face of a humanistic agenda, they had chosen to unite under the Christian flag."

Bubbles of perspiration had collected on the reverend's forehead and were trickling down his cheek. He took out a white handkerchief from his back pocket, but before he could wipe himself dry, a makeup artist came running up to the podium to assist him. "That was outstanding," she said, "now lift your chin." She patted his face with a dry towel then powdered his forehead to eliminate the shine. The reverend then returned to his office to consider the ramifications of the letter still on his desk.

CHAPTER 3

Thousands of miles away in Austin, Texas, Julie Forstein peered into the bedroom as twilight slips of blue filtered through the Venetian blinds. The strips of light lapped over Rick's sleeping body like plowed rows in a field. She set the breakfast tray on the dresser and sat at the edge of the bed, then ushered in a new day by turning on the table lamp. Rebecca, their daughter, who'd followed her upstairs, ran towards her sleeping father like a prancing fawn.

"*Shhhhh!*" Julie whispered, zipping her lips.

Rebecca hopped on the bed, sat near her father's warm face, and giggled.

"Daddy, time to wake up," she squealed, tugging at the blanket covering his shoulders. "Daddy, time to eat!"

Rick stirred and growled at her like a monster. She leaped from the pillow and landed on his chest. "*Ugh!*" he grunted, wrapping his arms around her tiny form like a grizzly. She screamed with delight and leaned towards him chomping on her bottom lip. He buried the back of his head in the pillow and tried to focus on her plump round face. "What do you want munchkin?"

"Me and mommy made breakfast," she beamed. "You gonna love it!"

"Is that right?" He shook her wildly and she giggled more. "Then I better get up."

"No! You eat in bed," she demanded.

"I can't eat in bed. The ants will come and get me."

She looked under the covers searching for the little critters.

"Just kidding," he said.

Little Rebecca was twenty-one months old. She was conceived in love and fell into the future plans of the Forstein's expectation of marital bliss at just the appropriate time. She was in all respects flawless, a creation formed in the bosom of angels. She first walked at eleven months, knew her primary colors by thirteen months and had developed a blossoming vocabulary. Her skin was silky white and vibrant, as plump as a porcelain doll, yet still concealed the mysteries of just what features she'd inherited from her parents. Happy, innocent, and curious, she'd enjoyed a life up to this point void of trauma or neglect, having been the object of Julie's undivided admiration by day and the prize that awaited Rick at the end of his busy day.

"Today it's breakfast in bed," Julie interrupted. She reached over and picked up the neatly dressed tray of morning delights, along with Rebecca's offering of burnt toast saturated in butter, and slipped it over Rick's legs as he sat up. Then she walked towards the bathroom. Rick watched her cotton robe slip off her shoulders and down to the floor.

"What have you got planned today?" he asked, suspiciously eyeing the piece of burnt toast that Rebecca was pushing towards his mouth.

Julie turned on the bathroom light and stood before the mirror. "Susan's coming over at about 11:00 a.m. and the three of us are going shopping at the mall."

"Ready to spend my hard earned money?"

"I've earned it too don't you think?"

He glanced at Rebecca, who was trying to put on her mother's robe. She'd finally found the sleeve holes and rammed her hands inside, but the sleeves were far too long and they flopped on the floor. She raised

her hands into the air to keep them up and ran around the side of the bed. The hem of the robe dragged across the carpet behind her.

"Yeah, you've earned it," he said to Julie, but she'd already started the shower and didn't hear him.

"You look very pretty munchkin."

"Like, Mama?" she asked, wiggling her fingers.

"Just like her," he said. "Are you going shopping today?"

"Yes!" she yelled, the final "s" long and slurred.

"Mommy says she's gonna buy me a new dress."

"Isn't that great!"

Rick thoroughly enjoyed the husbandry of his family life. He was particularly proud that his wife didn't need to work and his daughter didn't have to spend all day at daycare. As far as he was concerned, everything was as it should be. Within an hour he'd eaten, showered, and was headed off to work, fully intoxicated by the simple pleasures of his life.

At 10:30 a.m., Julie's older sister Susan arrived a half hour earlier than expected. As Julie finished putting the morning dishes into the dishwasher, Susan dressed Rebecca for the mall. After sliding yellow panties over Rebecca's rump, she propped her up on the edge of the couch. "You're so precious," Julie said, holding her chubby little hands. "Now lift your arms up high and touch the moon." Susan took her dress, gathered it around the collar, and slid it over Rebecca's head. "Now stick out your feet." Rebecca locked her knees and Susan capped her toes in ruffled socks and baby tennis shoes. "There. Now you're all ready to go." She leapt off the couch and Susan patted her on the butt as she ran towards the kitchen.

"She's absolutely beautiful, Julie. I'm so proud of you and the life you've made for yourself."

"It's kind of scary don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"Things are going almost too well. Even I understand the laws of probability. Sooner or later something is bound to upset the balance in my life."

Susan watched Julie scrub away at a completely clean plate in the sink. "I've never known you to worry about things."

"Not worried, just expectant," she replied.

"Just because things didn't work out between Greg and I, doesn't mean it's going to happen to you. Is there anything that would lead you to believe otherwise?"

She thought long and hard about Rebecca, about her and Rick, and about the fact that she didn't have clue what Rick did at Trojan Security.

"No. Not really," she finally replied.

"Then let's go spend some money."

CHAPTER 4

The sun was still poised over the trees as Stace walked towards his apartment from the pool later that afternoon. He enjoyed the scene as he walked along the aqueduct, which to him was fresh and charming. But perhaps it was the way Stace looked at life—his artistic sixth sense engaging itself. For things that might appear normal to others were not normal to him.

Children who passed by on their bikes laughed just like other American children, but their speech was different and to him, intriguing. The old man walking towards him was like any old man who walked for his health. Yet, he thought the man's olive green knickers, pinned just below the knee and held up by suspenders, rather silly. In the field, he saw two young lovers in their teens embracing under the shade of a tree. Here, young love seemed more pure, rather like the love of Romeo and Juliet. It was different from the love expressed by teenagers in America, which he often witnessed in teens kissing on the side of a convenience store. Whether he realized it or not, this is why he loved Germany. It was surreal, magical, and romantic.

He lived about ten minutes from the pool on the top floor of a quaint German home on Wiesenfeldstrasse. He rented the upstairs apartment from the owners, the Summersheims, who lived in the home on the ground floor. Like most of the homes nearby, it was a

square, two-story home graced with a red tile roof. The sides were constructed in stucco and painted white. The window frames were dressed in planter boxes bursting with bright red geraniums.

Around 5:30 p.m. that afternoon, Stace took out Eva's card from his wallet and gave her a call. On the third ring she answered. He wrote down the directions to her apartment in nearby Hochst, and when he turned onto Loreleistrasse forty minutes later it was nearly dark. He stood for a moment under the glow of a rusty lamppost on the corner, its light faintly illuminating the building in which she lived. The building was nondescript. It sat on the corner of a small lot a few feet above street level. Surrounding the lot was a short cement wall. On top of the wall was a two-foot, cast-iron fence. Eva's dull orange Opel was parked near the corner were she said it would be.

As he knocked on Eva's door, her German shepherd sent barks of alarm echoing down the hallway.

"Come on in," Eva said, opening the door.

He entered cautiously as Sheeba sniffed him over. Her back grizzled with specks of gray and brown fur.

"I'm just finishing up," Eva said, walking towards the kitchen.

The round table in the dining room had been modestly set for two. In the center of the table was a wicker basket steaming with the aroma of fresh bread.

"Can you open the wine?" she asked, handing him a bottle of red and the corkscrew.

"I don't often get a chance to cook," she said, hovering over a frying pan on the stove.

"What are you making?"

"Gyros. I'm just finishing frying up the lamb."

"Sounds good. Don't think I've ever had homemade gyros."

She smiled and flipped the strips of lamb over. He sat down at the table where he could watch her and opened the wine. Now was as good a time as any to ask her. "Your business card…what kind of work do you do, Eva?"

She hesitated for a moment, pita bread in one hand, strips of lamb dangling off the end of a fork in the other. In actuality, she had expected the question to come sooner or later. It always did. The problem was, she could never be entirely honest about what she did. Not just to potential boyfriends, but to many of her other friends as well. She always had to be careful she didn't reveal too much and yet, do it in a manner that didn't raise suspicion.

"I'm a reporter," she said simply.

"Yeah, your card gave that away, but not with the Frankfurt paper, right?"

"No." Had it been any other person she would have changed the subject, but somehow she felt the need to say more. "I work for the Schwarz Monatlich."

"I've never heard of them."

"You probably haven't."

"What's it about?"

"My boss started the paper decades ago. He named it after himself. Schwarz, is Deutsch for black. Monatlich, means monthly."

"The Black Monthly, sounds ominous."

"It fits."

She laid the strips of lamb into the pita pockets and stuffed them full of veggies, then dressed them with the cucumber sauce. Stace wasn't sure if she was ever going to elaborate.

"Primarily, we investigate people and organizations—sometimes even companies—which you might say, work underground."

"Underground?"

"Not in the true sense of the word. They are organizations which have a political or ideological agenda."

"You mean hate groups?"

"In a sense."

"Are they still allowed to operate here in Europe?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

"Good?" she asked, walking towards the table with a perturbed look on her face.

"Not that I agree with most of them, but it's good they are still allowed to have a voice. You know they changed all that a few years ago in America."

"I know. Dig in."

He grabbed a gyro and set it on his plate. "So why them? Do you monitor them or something?"

"You might say the paper's a bit of a contradiction. We watch a few organizations very closely, but every now and then one of them steps over the line and we see to it that the public knows about them."

"Steps over the line?"

"Sure. Every once and a while some organization or company goes too far. Could be anything, like someone paying off a politician for favors…a big company lobbying for certain laws that favor another group's ideological slant—those kind of things."

"And you try and catch these people?"

"Sometimes we uncover enough evidence to shut them up for a while. Sometimes we just publicly expose their activities. We do what we can."

She changed the subject and they finished dinner.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked, rising.

"Sounds good."

"Have a seat on the couch and I'll bring it to you."

He went into the living room. Since his conversation had been cut short at the table, he looked for additional clues to Eva's personality in her surroundings.

Directly across from him were windows dressed in white lace curtains. A soft breeze was blowing through the open window panel on the left. It slowly filled the curtain, raising it up towards the ceiling like a sail. He watched it fill and collapse under its own weight, only to refill again. A granite ledge ran across the length of the windows over a coiled heater and held a few potted plants. Under a hanging lamp in

the far right corner was a gigantic wicker chair with floral patterned cushions tied to its bamboo braces. Near the chair was an end table resting on a welded iron frame. On the table was a stack of magazines. The one on the top of the stack was *Paris Match*.

"You speak French?" he asked, raising his voice.

"A little."

Against the wall to his right was a thick oak cabinet. It was lined with doors of various sizes with brass handles. A shelf in the middle held a dozen or so ceramic plates propped up on stands. At first he thought they were a collection of dishes, but none of them matched. Each plate was unique, having either a picture or a painting on its face and German words written across it. His eyes dropped to the floor where Sheeba lay curled with her head poised on her front limbs. Her tired dark eyes peered at him indifferently. Down the short hall he could see photographs of friends or relatives hanging on the walls. In the left hand corner of the room a desk sat rammed into a corner with a computer monitor on top of it and a mountain of newspapers and correspondence. Stacked on the light brown carpet in front of the desk were several cardboard boxes sealed with packing tape. Resting on top of one of the boxes was a slim file. The label was clearly visible and read, "Christian Reform Movement."

Eva quickly blocked his view. She handed him a mug and walked over to the wicker chair. She took a moment to compose herself, tucking her feet up under her and balancing her mug in the fabric of her dress between her thighs.

"I was looking at your plates." He glanced towards the glass shelf. "What are they for?"

"I've earned them," she said proudly and immediately jumped up. "Have you never been to a volksmarch?"

"Can't say that I have."

"A volksmarch is a hike. Some are short, five kilometers, others are longer, like ten or more. When you finish the walk you get a souvenir, usually a plate."

"They're like trophies?"

"Ja. They have the name of the march and the date. The first one here is from the Buga 99 volksmarch. They hold it every year here in the city in late April when the flowers start to bloom. This one is from a march I went to in Feldberg."

"Sounds like fun."

"Lots of fun. Fact there's one coming up in Treiburg in a few months. Would you like to go?"

"I'd love to."

She was suddenly struck by her frivolity and jumped back in her chair reeling in thought. "Schieza! Meet a stranger at the pool, invite the stranger to dinner, and three hours later I'm asking him to spend the weekend with me!" Like all the other men in her life, she fully expected that within a few days he'd be gone too, never to return her calls.

While Eva scolded her thoughts, Stace admired her independent attitude and confident demeanor.

After a few minutes of silence, she looked at him with a serious gaze. He felt comfortable with her facial embrace. "I enjoyed listening to you this afternoon," she said finally.

"I unloaded on you," he said, embarrassed. "I haven't been in this country long. I still don't have many friends and if I'd expected we might become friends I probably would have kept my mouth shut."

She watched him cope with his embarrassment by brushing off imaginary dust flecks from his shirt. "So you didn't expect to become friends?" she asked, teasing him.

"No. And well…yes! I'm just not in the habit of sharing those kinds of things with anyone. Sometimes it's easier to tell things to a stranger than to a friend—don't you think?"

"That's true, but consider me a friend now. I would really like to know more about you."

"Why?"

"Because I think you're interesting, and well, I like you." But now she was being dishonest with herself and her insincerity troubled her. Actually, she liked him a lot, but she was just getting over feeling like an idiot and didn't want to relive the moment. "I just think we might be able to become good friends."

He smiled. She saw her honesty was received. She was quiet again for a moment, then picked up their conversation where it had stopped earlier in the day at the pool. "What happened to you after the exhibit?"

"You don't give up easily."

"I'm a reporter remember?" She smiled and rocked in her chair. Even Sheeba, who'd been resting peacefully, looked up at the unusual tone coming from her master.

"Right. So what's the Christian Reform Movement all about?"

"I'm asking the questions here," she said playfully, but his snooping into her affairs troubled her.

"If I tell you, you promise not to hold it against me?" he asked.

"I promise."

He sipped his coffee and forced his mind to go back to the experiences surrounding the art exhibit. This wasn't easy. The mental act of rethinking through the event distressed him. The incident had significantly changed his life and most of those changes had not been for the better. For the last four years he'd been living in the vacuum of his own thoughts. He didn't like emotional pain, refrained from social contact, hated commitment, and otherwise considered himself a loner. Consequently, he viewed everything philosophically, because it allowed him to approach his relationship to the world with detachment. This line of thinking had suited him well, but he was now sensing it had robbed him of the thing he wanted most, contact with other people, and more specifically, contact with the opposite sex.

"To be honest with you, I've never experienced anything more painful in my life…and I've never been able to forgive Rick Forstein for allowing it to happen." Indignation filled his eyes.

"You said this afternoon it was the nature of the photographs that caused the university to disqualify your entries."

"So they said, but I never believed it."

"Do you think it was personal?"

"I do. I've always thought art to be above the jurisdiction and limitations of—," he paused for a moment, recognizing he was reverting back to a theoretical analysis of art, which he didn't want to do. "What I'm trying to say is that they had no right to expel my work from the exhibit! None whatsoever!"

Eva was astonished by his anger, but since she was emotionally removed from the event, she had to wonder if the university had legitimate grounds for rejecting his work. "Did they say your material was pornographic?"

"No." He was adamant. "No one at the university ever said my photographs were pornographic. My photographs contained simple representations of the human form. I intentionally withheld portraying the erogenous zones because it suited my purpose. I very much like—" he stopped short, realizing he was about to lapse into abstractions, and when it came to speaking about his creative passion—his reason for existence—he must choose his words more carefully. "I like creating the element of desire. When somebody looks at my photographs, I want their mind to travel to a place where the source of their pleasure is."

The wind picked up, sending the curtain sailing into the living room. She was impervious to it.

He knew he had her attention and continued. "There's something entirely primal about the naked body don't you think? I portray the human form because it brings out our most basic instincts. Not just our animalistic tendencies, but also our deeper emotions. What the human mind seeks is that transcendental state where it can escape the suffering and pain of life. We have found that state in the expression of love. I'm not talking about sex here. I'm talking about the bond that

exists between lovers. It's a magical place where a person forgets about the cares of the world by considering the needs of their lover."

Eva no longer debated his motives. She understood his photographs were rejected not because of their content, but through the refusal of the university to accept the vision behind their creation. She could also sense why Stace would project his negative feelings towards Rick Forstein, the person most responsible for his rejection.

In an attempt to empathize with him, she searched for an experience in her own life that had violated her person as much as the rejection of Stace's work violated him. She could think of no specific experiences. She did discover, however, that her work as a reporter presented a wide range of injustices that were often left unsettled. She tried to count the dozens of individuals and organizations she'd tracked, which continually got away with crimes through their political and financial power. In her own way, she fought tenaciously against those injustices.

At the present time, her energies were directed towards an organization known as the Christian Reform Movement. It was an investigation she had started only a few weeks ago when her boss handed it to her. What she did not know yet was that the CRM was once an underground terrorist organization based in Berlin. Its primary objective during the 1980s was to nullify the efforts of the East German Communist Regime. After the two countries reached agreements in the early 1990s, the East German Communist Regime effectively merging with the Federal Republic of Germany, the CRM's political criteria had been met, but they wanted more. An offshoot of the organization had established itself in Frankfurt. What alarmed her boss Mr. Schwarz most about the organization was that it promoted an extreme version of the Christian faith, which often manifests itself in destructive ideologies based in bigotry and intolerance.

"Hallo," Stace said, yanking her out of her thoughts.

"Sorry. I was thinking about what you were saying," she replied. "I can only imagine how you must have felt to have been rejected like that."

"I should have the right to create and express what I damn well please and damn those who disagree," he blurted out.

Those whom he felt had trampled on that principle were many. At the top of the list was Rick Forstein, followed by the committee members and finally, the university's administration. Born with some deficit in character that rendered him incapable of confronting conflict, Stace had been living with the regret of not having fought the university's decision ever since. He'd been a staunch advocate of passivity all his life, believing that the injustices of life had a way of working themselves out to those who possess an honest heart. Trouble was, the problem had never worked itself out. This presented him with a moral dilemma. In the absence of justification he found that his heart contained emotions he'd rather not claim as his own. How he now wished he could go back in time and discredit the pious reputation of the university! How he had fantasized that the most horrific circumstances would befall the charmed life of Rick Forstein! After four years, the unresolved conflict still tormented his mind like the stench of a dead armadillo flattened on the road somewhere in West Texas.

"I don't like to think about it," he said.

He looked a bit frazzled. "Would you like to go for a walk?" she asked.

"That's probably a good idea."

Along Loreliestrasse, two rows of sleek European cars edged the street like lumpy caterpillars hugging the curb. The apartments and homes sitting beyond them had square-cut windows that appeared to be crying for the history they'd seen. From the corners of their windows the rust, soil, and paint of yesteryear wept like tears streaking the weather torn plaster.

They took a left onto Gebenschusstrasse and headed for McNare Kaserne. Left over from the Second World War, the Kaserne was now a US Army installation housing the 32nd Signal Battalion. As they approached the installation, one of its four-story buildings came into view, painted in the color and texture of an old orange peel. Surround-

ing the installation was an eight-foot high, chain-link fence. The top of it curved inwards and several strands of barbed wire ran along its course. Stace wondered if it was designed to keep people in or out.

"I wish they'd all go home," she said, as they walked along the fence towards the front of the Kaserne. "Not you of course"

"Ah, you don't like the capitalists," he joked.

"Of course I like Americans, but because they're always in uniform I feel like I'm in a war zone."

He understood. Americans were all over Frankfurt. He admired their misplaced loyalties, wondering how sane rational human beings could be moved under the guise of patriotic idealism to sell their souls to a higher power. The truth be told, it wasn't the American soldiers he disliked, it was the idealism to which they surrendered. Granted, the America to which he was indigenous to marketed well an individual's right to succeed, but it had failed to disclose the fine print. Capitalistic success was for a select group.

They continued towards the front of the installation, stopping briefly at the entrance on Konrad Glatt Strasse. It was marked by a circle drive paved in black cobblestone. The night had turned misty and the cobblestone looked like polished flint. The drive led up into an archway cut out of the Kaserne's administrative building. It was guarded by a virtually impenetrable iron gate and a pimple faced soldier dressed in full war gear brandishing an empty M-16.

"You still haven't told me that much about yourself," he said.

"There's not much to tell. "I've lived in Frankfurt all of my life. My father owns a backerei in downtown Hochst."

"Backerei?"

"Bakery."

"He and my mother, along with my brother, live above the backerei in a little apartment. I used to work for him in the mornings greasing pans for bread and pastries before going to school."

"Have they always owned the backerei?"

"My parents started it from scratch many years ago. My father used to work as a city representative."

"A politician?"

"You could say that, but you'd never hear him claim the title."

"And your brother?"

"Alfred's his name. He works for the phone company. I don't see him too often." Which was true, he and Eva kept their contacts to a minimum, meeting on occasions in busy cafés over coffee. What she left unsaid was that he also worked for the Schwarz Monatlich, setting up audio and video surveillance devices for the paper to assist with investigations.

"Your mother?"

"My mother works with my father at the backerei. She takes care of the books and works behind the counter with the customers."

He tried to picture her father leaning over a counter pounding dough into bread, while his wife, wearing a white cotton apron around her waist, served customers. He saw them waking long before the sun rose, working throughout the day and into the evenings, then collapsing late at night on a couch to spend a few minutes alone with each other. He envied the heritage of the woman who walked beside him, having lost his mother to breast cancer when he was young and growing up with his father whose gestures of love came sporadically after the long hours he worked as a house framer.

They said little on the way back to Eva's home after rounding the Kaserne, choosing rather to meditate on their attraction to each other. Eva's wholesomeness and warmth radiated from her presence, even though she was only willing to share a few words with him. They brushed up against each other several times during their walk and he felt the urge to take hold of her hand. Despite the urge, he resisted. To him, the hours of the afternoon and evening had passed like months. He'd disclosed more to her about himself in that short time then he'd ever spoken to another woman. He walked her back up the sidewalk to the outside door of her apartment and stopped.

"I had a great time," he said, not wanting to overstay his welcome.
"Me too," she said.
"Can I call you again?" he asked.
"I'd like that."

CHAPTER 5

By means of correspondence, the reverend agreed to meet with Fred Watson at a cafe around the corner from the University of Heidelberg. Late Sunday afternoon, the reverend steered his licorice black Mercedes out of Munich and headed north on the autobahn at a comfortable speed of 145 kilometers per hour. By 9:00 p.m., he'd checked into a local bed and breakfast. He preferred this quaint method of lodging, because he'd become such a public figure that finding privacy at the larger hotels had become impossible. Once in his room, the reverend settled into a comfortable chair and read himself to sleep.

The following morning, he took an outside table at a cafe fifteen minutes prior to his guest's arrival. On the sidewalk in front of him, young men and women who attended the university walked proudly towards an uncertain future full of naiveté and expectation. He envied their zeal, but not their intellectual deficit. He had once been a professor of theology at the university, until he was excused from the position for what he would later justify as, "differences in beliefs." The administration claimed, however, it wasn't his theology that was in question, but rather, his methodology.

"Reverend Eisner?"

Pulled out of his thoughts, the reverend stood and faced the sharply dressed gentleman.

"Yes."

"I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not long. Please, take a seat, Mr. Watson."

"Thank you and call me, Fred." Watson removed his sports coat before sitting down.

A gold emblem stamped with the initials F.W. cinched a paisley tie to Watson's shirt. The reverend never judged a man by the clothes he was wearing, so he searched the man's face for any telltale signs. What he saw was a smoothly shaven man with an early forties complexion. His black hair had only just begun to gray in frosted highlights over his temples. His eyebrows were tailored to meet a nose, which ran a straight line to a sharp point over his upper lip. His lips were of equal proportion, so they neither smiled nor frowned until the situation dictated so. Whether he was handsome or not, the reverend didn't care, for he'd determined long ago that a man's character was not revealed by such minor details.

"Have you eaten, Mr. Watson?"

"Please, it's Fred, and yes I have.

"I'll order us more coffee—Herr Ober!" the reverend cried out to a young waiter standing by. The waiter, wearing a pressed white shirt and a black bow tie, dashed over to them.

"Sir?" the waiter questioned.

"Bitte. Zwei tasse kaffee."

"Zer gut," said the waiter.

"So, you've been to Germany before?" the reverend asked.

"About once a year. Trojan Security has several locations around the world and I visit them once a year. I never miss the opportunity to come to Heidelberg."

"It is a beautiful city!" the reverend proclaimed. "There's quite a history to this place.

"Afraid I've never stayed long enough to discover it."

"That's too bad. During the Reformation, this university was the hub of Calvinistic theology. In 1563, the theologians here drew up

what's called the Heidelberg confession. The confession laid the foundation for many Christian denominations existing today."

"I didn't know that," Watson replied. What he understood about the reformation was a vague understanding that Luther, the father of the Lutheran church and many others like him, broke away from the Catholic Church. "I can only imagine what this city must have been like during those times," he replied.

"It's all a question of what one perceives, don't you think?" asked the reverend. Watson didn't respond. "Take these students for instance…," the reverend gestured to the hordes of students passing by their table. "I venture to say, 95 percent of them are totally unaware of the more important dynamics of life."

"If you're referring to their lack of interest in religion, I understand where you're coming from."

The reverend's eyebrow twitched towards the pastel blue sky. He was struck by the young businessman's intuition.

"I'm under the impression we are truly living in the last days," Watson continued, looking mystically at the reverend.

"That too, is a question of perception," the reverend replied, pleased with the direction of the conversation. "In America that's the consensus, but here in Germany—indeed, all of Europe!—our people still live in ignorance. We've failed in our responsibility to walk in our faith and have allowed ourselves to be lead by leaders who don't serve God."

Watson listened intently. He'd traveled many miles to meet this man. He thought the reverend to be even more dynamic in person, speaking with a charisma that had to be witnessed.

The waiter returned with two tiny porcelain cups of coffee centered on a silver tray.

"Danke," the reverend said, looking out into the street.

What was he thinking of now? The future or the past? Perhaps his mind was walking the ancient streets of Heidelberg much like the reformer, Calvin. If that was the case, his countenance didn't reflect the triumph of that time. Rather, it appeared defeated and sorrowful,

much like a man who'd suddenly realized he was fighting a losing battle. The reverend shook his head slightly, breaking free from the grip of his thoughts. "So, what can I do for you, or as your letter suggested, what can you do for me?"

Watson took a packet of sugar and swirled it into his coffee. "As I mentioned in my letter, I've watched your ministry for several years." He took a sip of coffee and continued. "During that time my faith has grown tremendously. Thus far, I've had a good life and the Lord has provided me with everything I needed and wanted. But lately, I've become aware that I've not done enough to thank God for all of His blessings. I believe He's leading me to change that situation."

Looking over to Watson with pastoral concern the reverend asked, "And what might that be?"

"As I mentioned in my letter, I support your work and have come to feel akin to it. I'm especially impressed with your coalition's success within the political arena. Are you familiar with the American Christian Broadcasting Network?"

"Yes, and also with Pastor Tim Raymond. I've spoken to him many times."

"Their organization has been instrumental in changing much of the American political agenda for the past decade."

"I admire the work they've done."

Watson sipped away at his coffee and glanced into the street. He was hesitant to continue for one simple reason. He'd met with Pastor Raymond last year and had proposed to him the same idea he now wished to share with Reverend Eisner. When Pastor Raymond refused him, he'd felt personally rejected. Although he still supported the ACBN in spirit, he'd withdrawn his financial support from their ministry. Despite that rejection, he was still thoroughly convinced the Lord had not only given him the idea, but that the idea would work. He just needed a man in the right position to carry the plan through.

"Pastor Raymond is a good man," Watson at last proclaimed, "but that's not why I'm here. I should begin by saying first of all, if for some

reason you find no merit in my idea, then this conversation between us never happened."

He waited for the reverend to respond to his terms.

Doubts crowded the reverend's mind, muddling his usual clarity of thought.

"Are we talking about something illegal?"

"That would depend on your perception," he replied, offering a smile. "The Lord has used mysterious ways of accomplishing His work. The furtherance of His work has never been dependent upon the laws of the land. He does what He does because He is God and the world has always adapted itself to His actions. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I couldn't disagree with such a statement." The reverend replied.

"How you receive what I have to say will depend on your estimation of whether or not you believe God has given you a work to perform. It also depends on whether you feel an obligation to follow man's laws. I know you well enough to say that your heart is in the Lord's work, and if presented with an idea to further that work the laws of man wouldn't stop you from proceeding."

The reverend was wise enough to recognize when someone was patronizing him. Having confronted the distasteful gesture many times during his ministry, he'd learned to excuse it as a simple error in human judgment. He prided himself that he had the ability to look beyond a person's choice of syntax and to listen to what people were actually saying. There was in this businessman from America sincerity to his logic. The fact remained, the reverend did believe his ministry to have the providence of God and he never once considered his work to be impeded by man-made laws. "Are you sure you wouldn't have made a good preacher?" he asked, whimsically.

Watson smiled. He was beginning to win the confidence of his new friend. "My expertise is in running a business. I'm a born salesman."

"I'm not all that familiar with your line of work and computers. I still do things the old fashioned way."

"Are you familiar with the Internet?" Watson asked.

"I'm aware of it, but don't use it. The ICC has a website, but other people on my staff handle it. It's my understanding the site has significantly increased our material sales."

"Are you aware that approximately two billion people now use the Internet. Those who don't use it are affected by it in one way or another. For instance, you don't use it, but your secretaries do. The information they receive benefits your ministry."

"Sure, but again—"

"Understood, but follow along with me."

"I'll try."

"When you preach, what has to happen in order for you to get your message across?"

The reverend lifted his head back raising his eyebrows. Spinning his empty coffee cup on the napkin, he seemed hard pressed to answer a question so obvious. "Well, I suppose someone has to read my book, or listen to a tape, or view one of my videos."

"How do they get that information?" Watson pressed.

"They either buy the information or get it from a friend."

"That's only half correct, but you recognize the other half deals with marketing, or in getting your materials into the hands of people who will distribute it to your membership."

"True."

"What if I told you there was a way to by-pass that system? Think of it as a way to cut your advertising expenses, or a way to get your message to more people."

"Suppose I'd have to look into it," he said with a chuckle. "But money isn't the issue with me. Like you, I'm quite satisfied with what God has blessed me with. But in answer to your question, I'd be interested in getting my message to as many people as possible."

"The Internet is utilized by many people and has an impact on everyone. People use it in their homes, as well as organizations like businesses, governments, ministries, universities, schools, and even underground elements of society such as crime and drug rings. What's

on the Internet is public information. Anyone can tap into it and get the information they need. From a security standpoint, the Internet is like an enormous telephone party-line with hundreds of millions of people on it at any given time."

The waiter returned with a silver pot full of coffee and filled their cups, then disappeared.

"It's worked for the ICC. We move a lot of material through our website."

"But people still have to get to your web site, correct?" Watson asked.

"Sure, we list our materials on our site."

"But they still have to know where to find your site?"

The reverend was getting tired of the circular conversation. "Correct," he said, with a slight tone of frustration.

Watson sped things up. "How people get to your site is done in a variety of different ways. To make a long story short, with all the spam and garbage on the Internet, it's a miracle that people actually find your site."

"So we are missing sales?"

"You're probably missing a significant amount of sales, but that's not what I want to discuss with you."

"What exactly is it you're trying to explain to me?"

"To put it bluntly, we've discovered a way of reaching people with information without them even asking for it."

"I'm not sure I understand. Are you talking about controlling computers?"

"In a sense, yes. The program we're working on will be able to insert bits of written and photographic information onto the screen of anyone using the Internet without them knowing about it." Watson looked hard into the reverend's eyes to see if he'd understood the possibilities of such a tool. He looked lost.

"Explain."

"Take your book for instance, even if someone reads it they still have the ability to reject its contents don't they?"

"I suppose so," the reverend replied, although the idea that someone could reject his book seemed preposterous.

"The reason for this is that their minds are distracted from receiving the message. The minute they read a passage, they're thinking about the bills they haven't paid, or that the dog needs a walk. We have found a way to by-pass those distractions."

"Are you talking about imprinting ideas into people's minds?"

"Exactly. The subconscious is like a pool holding the memories and impressions of the soul. From that pool of information the mind makes everyday decisions. If that pool is full of the things of this world—full of evil you might say—then a person will automatically make bad decisions. But if that pool has the necessary information to make good choices, than it can change the way a person acts. It gives them the necessary tools to make good decisions."

"And you're saying the Internet possesses this technology?"

"Not the Internet. That's the medium, but the technology exists to build a program that could do it."

"You've done this. You have this in place?"

"Not yet, but I'm putting a team together that will make it happen."

"Then it's just a theory."

"Not a theory, but when it's time for wheels to turn then wheels will turn," he replied.

There were few things that escaped the reverend. That turn of logic did.

"When it was time for the wheel to be made then someone invented the wheel. That's all I meant. Let me put it another way. If the ideas of the reformation hadn't come from Calvin in Heidelberg, they would have come from another person in another city. I take it Calvin wasn't the only one thinking about breaking from the Catholic Church during the 1500s." The reverend nodded and Watson continued. "Present technology has reached the point where building such a program is

possible. This program will be built by someone, better Trojan Security than someone else. And this program will be used by someone, better Reverend Eisner and the ICC than someone else, because I can tell you for a fact, if such a program were to be used by the wrong group then it could have catastrophic results."

The reverend parted his lips, but Watson didn't let him reply. "I know what you're thinking. I've thought it through a thousand times. It's not a question of *if* this technology exists—it does. It's not a question of *if* someone will use this technology to their advantage—they will. As far as I'm concerned there are only two arguments that need to be considered." Watson shifted in his seat and leaned over to the reverend like he was about to close a multi-million dollar deal. "First, is the idea unethical or illegal? Second, if you're not willing to use this technology for God, are you willing to risk that this technology be used by the agents of Satan?"

"I don't see how that's possible," the reverend replied.

"Understandable. I've had much more time to consider the ill effects of such a program. The reason it will affect so many people is because of the influence of the Internet. You know that people are followers. They will follow anyone with vision who gives them something better to hope for. History is full of madmen who have used their influence to lead millions of people astray. Imagine a person, a person such as a modern day Hitler. Imagine if he could get his hands on a program that could alter the way people think. Imagine if such a person could instantly influence the leaders in government, businesses, and institutions of higher learning with their agenda. Just imagine, millions of people suddenly and unexplainably acting in ways you could only describe as demonic. There would be utter chaos. It could postpone the second coming of Christ for hundreds of years." Watson leaned back into his chair, but never took his eyes off the reverend. "Now, if you can imagine all that, then you can imagine the possibility of having such a program utilized by the Church. In the right hands, it could

help convert millions of people to Christianity who might never have a chance."

Watson extended a shaking hand towards his cup of coffee. He'd worked himself up into a frenzy. What irritated him most was that he was incapable of carrying out the idea himself. He could have the program designed, but he needed a charismatic religious figure such as Reverend Eisner, who had the religious network established to make it happen.

Watson's words screamed like asteroids bouncing through the reverend's mind. As though negotiating the next move of a chess piece, the reverend analyzed each word, and combined them with his own assessment of the political and religious state of the world, taking into account what he understood to be the overall present state of the human predicament. He considered his ministry and the International Christian Coalition he'd established and how the Lord had led him in the past and blessed the work of his hands. Through it all, he'd been able to lead thousands of individuals to the Christian faith. He understood the implications of each argument presented by Watson. He believed him. If such a program could be built then it would be built. And if the program had the power Watson suggested it did, then the Christian Church should use it. Who was he to question that such an idea had not germinated in the mind of God? After all, this was the age of communication and technology. The more he thought about it, the more he entertained the idea he had been chosen to help in the implementation of such a program. And if the furtherance of the Gospel set him against the laws of the land, then so be it!

"If you need time to think, we can talk in a few—"

"I don't need any time," the reverend responded. "It's rather fitting, that in a city as this, where the reformation forged the present state of our world, that the plans of God for the final events of earth's history should also be initiated."

The implication of the reverend's statement rattled in Watson's mind like his first big sale, the one he thought he'd totally blown, until

he himself was blown away when the client agreed to buy. The reverend had bought the idea. Their union was forged. He leaned over the table and speaking in a low tone said, "You do realize any future communication we have will have to be done with extreme discretion. The likelihood that some will misunderstand our motives is certain."

The reverend's mind flashed back to the many situations in the gospels where Jesus was extremely secretive about some of his activities. "I understand," the reverend said.

CHAPTER 6

Eva sat at her wooden desk watching shadowy forms pass in front of the windows to the basement office of the Schwarz Monatlich. The dinky windows, set in aged, charcoal colored brick, and protected by corroded iron bars, were covered with a crying layer of greenish paint. The forms passing beyond them were ghostly, lapping the windows in a rhythmic flow and lulling her to sleep.

Her weekend with Stace had been uneventful, which was monumental in its simplicity. She'd learned more about the American in one day than she'd learned about her previous boyfriend in months. When she awoke that morning, she recognized her attraction to him had been one of pity. She recounted his story of the art exhibit, and his distaste for Rick Forstein. She envied his ability to simply pick up and move to another country far away from the pressures of his past. But having given all this some thought, she'd decided he was on the run, and when someone is on the run it's nearly impossible for that person to come to a sudden and decisive stop. More than likely, he'd be passing on. She'd probably never hear from him again.

"Guten morgen, Eva," came the raspy voice of her boss, Mr. Schwarz. "It's too early for you to be thinking so heavily," he said from the door of his office, which was really not an office, but a cutout in the corner of the basement with a window peering into the main room.

She turned to face him. Mr. Schwarz was the type of man to which clothes served no purpose, other than to cover the body. It was possible what he now wore had been a hand-me-down from his own father: unpolished black leather shoes, the same gray cotton slacks he always wore, and a wrinkled white shirt. Forget the tie. He never met anyone important enough to impress. What he lacked in dress he made up for in the zealous pursuit towards the monthly publication of his paper. He'd lost two wives through the pursuit of his vision and didn't seek a third. What he had to show for his life was a rented basement, a handful of eager young visionaries and the diminishing circulation of a newspaper with the outdated ideals of reform. Now aged to sixty-seven, the signs of hardship were chiseled into his face like cracks in granite.

She called him by his first name, "Dexter, how long have you been here?"

"You mean, when did I ever leave?" he replied. Which one might assume, given that his skin was as white as flour for want of sunlight.

A jiggle at the door signaled the arrival of Shelly LeBlanc with a bag of pastries followed by Ruben Thanasouk. "And where's de coffee?" Ruben asked, in his thick Liberian accent, rising in pitch and ending with an overemphasized "*eee"* sound. He sniffed the air like a hound. "We brought de breakfast and you haven't made de coffee yet?"

"Es tut mir leid," Eva apologized. She walked to the coffee maker and started a pot.

"That's a cute top," Eva said to Shelly. "A one-piece?"

"No, two." Shelly backed away from the table and took hold of the seam of the peach colored outer sweater and pulled it up so Eva could get a good look at the matching top underneath. The blouse barely covered the bottom of her ribs.

"Aren't you cold?" Eva asked, looking at her pierced belly button.

"Ja, but fashionable don't you think?" she replied, with a whimsical grin flashing over her freckled face.

Eva never asked Shelly about her genealogical background. She suspected Shelly to be French, but she may have been English. Her complexion was fair and sprinkled with freckles, which were not visible from a distance, but at close range spotted her otherwise pretty face. Her hair had a slight brown pigment and always looked frazzled. This morning Shelly had it pulled tightly around her bony head and secured in the back with a juvenile looking barrette. The bangs of her hair were not long enough to reach the barrette and they buzzed around her face like teased wires.

At twenty-two, Shelly was the youngest member of the paper. Eva disliked most of her choice in apparel, which she considered to be childish. She also thought Shelly's flippant disposition unbecoming of the seriousness of their work. Quite frankly, there were times when they didn't need a child buzzing around the office like a loose bee in a flower shop. But despite her demeanor, Shelly's administrative and secretarial skills were impeccable. She'd saved Eva's neck more times than Eva could count.

Ruben Thanasouk had immigrated to Germany from Liberia when he was twenty-six in 1995. His parents had been killed during the military dictatorship in Liberia that same year. He was as black as pitch. His thin long features popped out of his face like a Braille photograph highlighted in sterling. The only part of him darker than his skin was the tightly packed crop of hair on his head. He also sported a matching goatee, which leaped out from his chin like a toothbrush. Like Eva, he was an investigative reporter for the paper.

"Ruben, Eva, I need to have a word with you in my office," Mr. Schwarz said, poking his head out of his door.

Ruben finished making his cup of coffee and they walked into his office.

Eva took a seat on the couch backed up against the flimsy wall opposite Mr. Schwarz's desk and crossed her legs. Ruben stood by the door.

"How's the story coming on the Christian Reform Movement?"

She knew the look. Mr. Schwarz had his moments of light-heartedness, but he also had a war face.

"Not much to offer. As near as I can tell they work out of an apartment near the Ginnheim tower. They've got a number of churches and a following throughout Germany. I haven't checked with Alfred yet, so I don't know the extent of their incoming and outgoing calls. Mechtild with the Bundespost says they run a lot of packages through the post office."

"Maybe dey've got a tape ministry going or someding," Ruben said.

"How many of them are there?"

"I figure about three people, two men and a woman. There's one other thing though," Eva surmised.

"What?" Mr. Schwarz questioned.

"I doubt there's anything to it, but they all come and go at different times."

"Like dey have jobs?" Ruben asked.

"I think they do. And the woman walks her dog in the park near the apartment," Eva said.

"The one between the American housing area near Paquetstrasse?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"Ja. It just makes me wonder how threatening the group really is. They don't seem to be hiding their activities or their identities," Eva said.

Mr. Schwarz reached over and picked up a pamphlet on his desk. "I found this on my windshield last night. There may be only three of them, but it seems they've got quite a following." He handed the pamphlet to Eva. "Take a look at page two."

"*New Objectives Of The International Christian Coalition*," was the article's heading.

"Familiar with them?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"Who isn't?" asked Ruben, reading what he could over Eva's shoulder. "Non-threatening, like de American Christian Broadcasting Network—"

"Is that what you think?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"I claim ignorance!" Ruben replied. "I was dealing with my own revolution at dat time."

"Well, let me refresh your memory. To recap, the ACBN, along with other formidable Christian organizations in America at the time, became so powerful they were able to place their own candidate in the White House in 2012. Then they cleaned house. They started with the government, then moved to private industry, then checked in the closets of every American household. They stuck their puritan hands into everybody's business."

"But—"

"Save it. I know what you're going to say. Violent crime dropped 46 percent. They won the drug war. Militarily, they're still the most powerful nation. All fluff!" Mr. Schwarz fell back in his chair with a long sigh. "Listen you two, you know me. I call it like I see it."

"No need to explain anything to us, Dexter," Eva said. "We understand that no country, no matter how good the motives or intentions, has any right to assume the rest of the world should bow down to its ideologies."

Mr. Schwarz smiled approvingly at his apprentice. She reminded him of himself, only younger. "My concern is that Germany, like so many other nations blinded by the false sense of prosperity in America, will soon follow America's lead. I've followed the International Christian Coalition ever since I heard of them twelve years ago. They've become extremely influential and frankly…what is it, Eva?" Mr. Schwarz noticed she'd flipped to the back of the pamphlet and was fixated on the last page.

"Perhaps nothing, but this name's familiar, Joseph Stautzen. He's listed as the Executive Secretary of the ICC under Reverend Eisner. I've seen his name floating around in the material I've collected on the CRM."

"Are you sure?"

She tweaked her head to the side as if rattling a memory loose. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Then that's a problem. If the International Christian Coalition and the Christian Reform Movement are connected, then we need to find out the extent of their involvement with each other."

Ruben looked at Eva discretely with an expression of bewilderment. He failed to see the point.

"Eva, I want you to drop whatever you're working on and focus strictly on the ICC and the CRM. Ruben—"

"Ja."

"Assist Eva with this one."

"Sure. Whateva you want. But what about de next month's publication?"

"We'll have to rely on the older stories we've tabled, at least until we know what's going on with these two organizations. Eva, get Alfred into the CRM's apartment. We need something substantial to go on."

"I'll get him right on it," she replied. "Anything else?"

"That's it for now."

They walked out of his office. "I don't know about you, but I fail to see de importance of dis story," Ruben whispered under his breath.

Eva didn't reply, but her expression mirrored his thoughts. She opened her top desk drawer and flipped through a file consisting of previous notes she'd taken about the three members of the CRM. The information amounted to little more than brief notes of the CRM members that were given to her by Frau Becker, the apartment landlady who owned the apartment they were living in.

"Shelly!"

"Ja." She hopped over to Eva's desk.

"I need you find out everything you can about these people. Find out if they work and where they work, their family backgrounds and nationalities, everything."

She snatched the file out of Eva's hands.

"I don't see much here," Ruben said, after browsing through the pamphlet. "Typical young radicals bent on saving de world. Any intelligent person can read trough dis. Noting rational or organized, just disjointed extremism."

"Just the kind of people stupid enough to be dangerous," Shelly said from her desk.

Ruben and Eva looked at each other simultaneously, realizing she could be right.

"Ruben, you ready for a little old fashioned surveillance?"

"Will it do any good?" he asked, thinking of more productive things he could be doing.

"We'll take two cars. I want to show you where the apartment is and have you watch it. Then I'm going to do a little research at the library and find out what I can about the International Christian Coalition."

CHAPTER 7

Rick glided up the stairs to the second floor of Building *D* in the Trojan Security Building where he worked. Having spent the weekend with his family in the canyons of Big Bend National Park in Southwestern Texas, he was anxious to return to work. Walking down the long corridor, he took out his pass-card and slid it into the sleeve of the security system on the wall outside the computer lab. Behind the door, he could hear the familiar sounds of the mainframe humming its mechanical mantra. The security system processed his request for entrance and sounded with a buzz of rejection. He tried again and had the same result.

"Hi there!" Trish said from a doorway down the hall. "How was your trip?"

"Trish. What the hell's going on?"

"You've been promoted," she replied frankly.

"You're kidding?"

"Would I kid you about something like that? The maintenance crew boxed your stuff up and took it to your new office in Building *A*."

"And what about you?" he asked.

"Sorry, can't go with you. It's my understanding you won't need a secretary."

Trish escorted him out of Building *D*, down a long sidewalk past a glassy pond with waddling ducks, then through the doors of Trojan Security headquarters. The front lobby opened into a waiting area with a chest-high counter wrapped in strips of walnut wood and capped with pink and white marble. Behind the counter sat the receptionist.

"Rick Forstein," he said to the receptionist.

"Hold please," she said to the caller on the line, then addressed Rick directly. "Mr. Forstein, we've been expecting you." Pressing a button somewhere on the control panel to her switchboard, she spoke to a phantom voice on the other end. "Mrs. Tallon, Betsy. Mr. Forstein's here…yes, we'll be up shortly."

The receptionist took Rick up to the second floor and passed him on to Mrs. Tallon, who then walked him down a hallway to his new office.

He discovered his new office to be much larger than the cubicle he'd come from. The desk was on the right. The name Rick Forstein, etched in white on a simulated wood plaque sitting on his desk, faced two formal visitor chairs. Behind the desk along the right wall was a series of empty bookshelves. In the left hand corner were two sets of filing cabinets. The window on the far wall overlooked a patch of scrub oak trees. Underneath the window sat a plush couch and a coffee table. On the table were three boxes full of his personal belongings. He found an envelope on his desk and as he fumbled to open it there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he yelled. In stepped Mitch Pruitt.

"How ya doing, Rick?" Pruitt asked in his jovial manner.

"Great," he said, still in shock.

"What do you think?"

"You kidding? This is heaven, but I'm more concerned with whether I'll like the new job."

"It's a position. You're moving up. There will be a lot more expected of you."

"Why me?"

"You're the most qualified. I've been watching you and so have the others. You have energy and drive."

Rick was intrigued. "Why now?"

"We're forming a new team for a special project and I want you to be a part of it. But if you don't want the position I can still get over to finance and have them reduce your next payroll check—"

"Wait a minute. How much are we talking about?"

"Finance has authorized $189,000, plus perks."

"Perks?"

"Sure. Travel expenses, better stock options, access to the health club, this nice office—"

"Who will I be working with?"

"You'll get filled in at the briefing. Did you have a chance to look over the material?" Pruitt asked, pointing to the envelope.

"No. I was just—"

"Minor stuff," Pruitt said. "You know how to get in and out of the building right?"

"Yeah."

"Look, I've got to run. I'll let you get settled in. We've got a meeting scheduled for 10:00 a.m. in the conference room. That's in the other hallway."

Rick waited a few minutes until Pruitt had cleared the hallway then reached for the phone to call home. The phone rang at the other end once, twice, and on the fifth ring the answering machine clicked on. "Crap!" he complained.

At 9:55 a.m., he left his office and headed towards the conference room. The door was unlocked and the room full of strangers. They eyed him with expressions of acknowledgment as he took a seat and said, "Good morning." The two women on the other side of the table returned his gesture. The brunette smiled back at him, pushing a strand of curls away from her face that had fallen over her eye. The woman with the light complexion cracked a shy smile. To her left sat a younger looking man in his thirties. He carried a foreign manner and

said nothing. Next to Rick was an older gentleman in his late forties. A thick mane of dusty white hair curled over his ears. His skin was sun-ripened and rough. He reached over and shook Rick's hand. At that moment, another door to the room opened and in walked Pruitt followed by Mr. Frederick Watson.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," Watson said authoritatively.

Rick had never met the man personally and was impressed with his commanding disposition. Pruitt took a seat next to Rick as Watson moved to the head of the table and took off his coat, taking a moment to roll his shirt sleeves up as though he were ready to get down to work. When he'd finished, he looked at the group respectfully

"My father began this company over twenty years ago and through his leadership has made Trojan Security the leading producer of security system software. I've been with the company since graduating from Texas A&M. I started as a programmer, later working my way up through the executive side of the house. When my father retired seven years ago, I was given the unique opportunity to keep his dream alive. Since that time, we've experienced a remarkable margin of growth even by industry standards. Yet, in all we've accomplished, in all the projects we've taken on, none of them are as important as the project we begin today."

He moved to the edge of the table, placed his palms flat on the surface and leaned over. "The implications of this project have the potential to cause literally, global panic. If the technology we are going to create were to fall into the wrong hands, it could threaten the political stability of our world. Each one of you has signed on with this company with the understanding that the work you perform here is highly classified. Due to the sensitive nature of this project let me forewarn you, any information regarding the creation and implementation of this project shall not be passed onto anyone outside of this room. You will not discuss it with any other Trojan Security employee, with any friend or relative, not even with your spouse. This is for their own safety and yours." He looked around the room at each participant,

studying their faces for any signs of misunderstandings. "Ladies and gentlemen, are we clear on this issue?" To that everyone nodded.

"Folks," his tone was now endearing. "What we're going to do is first of all, create a computer virus. I realize this runs contrary to normal protocol, but it is essential that we create this virus to know that it can be built. Once we know that it can be built, then this will allow us to create a security program with the ability to stop the virus." He paused for a moment. "Does anyone have any questions at this point?" None were solicited. "Good, because once you get into the meat of this project, some of you will have doubts. Should you have doubts about the virus, remember that the ultimate goal is to build the security program to stop the virus."

Pruitt stepped out of his chair as Watson took a seat.

"Each one of you is a specialist in your particular field and is important to the dynamics of this group. So, let me take a few moments to introduce you to one another."

"To my right, is Rick Forstein. Rick has been with us for a little over three years. He's extremely knowledgeable in the area of programming. If there's a new product on the market or a new piece of equipment or software, he's not only heard of it, but he can tell you everything about it. In my estimation he's got a complete grasp of what is or isn't possible. If it's not possible, then he'll find a way to make it possible. Isn't that right Rick?"

"I do my best," Rick replied.

"The gentleman to the right of Rick is Dr. Peter Loran. Dr. Loran previously worked as a neurosurgeon for many years. He's now actively involved in research and the writing of various books all centered on the complexities and capabilities of the human mind. More recently he has done extensive studies in an attempt to discover the human mind's relationship to this technology we call the Internet. I know absolutely nothing about it, but it's my understanding Dr. Loran has opened up an entirely new area of research that has to do with the relationship

between neuro-space and cyberspace. I'll leave it up to him to fill you in on all of the details."

"Next to Mr. Watson is Joseph Stautzen. Mr. Stautzen is on loan to us from the International Christian Coalition based in Munich, Germany. As you may or may not know, or whether you would like to believe it or not, the power of belief has a profound effect on the receptivity of the mind to accept information. Mr. Stautzen will be working with us to help us integrate this human dynamic into the program."

"We thought it appropriate to involve the expertise of the female gender into this scenario, so we hired the first two women we could find." Pruitt chucked at his own humor.

The two ladies smiled nervously. "Actually, that's not entirely true. Davia Reese," he motioned to the woman to his right, "is a linguist. She holds a Ph.D. in linguistics and has spent the majority of her life working freelance for businesses and governments translating material into various languages. Any program we create will also need to be translated into some of the world's most influential languages. It will be Davia's job to take our completed project and translate it into those various languages. Next to Davia, is Jeanette Thompson. Call her Jean. She's a graduate of the National Defense University in Washington. The NDU is the military's answer to training and equipping individuals to help America win the information war. She's our one stop source when it comes to understanding the intricate details of how the Internet works. You don't need to salute her, even though she's a retired Air Force Colonel."

Rick glanced over the table at Jean. If she was a retired Colonel, then she must be near forty. She didn't look a day over thirty-five. "She must be pretty damn smart to be here," he thought. "Definitely beautiful."

"As for myself, my name is Mitch Pruitt, I've been with the company eleven years. I will be keeping Mr. Watson abreast of your progress. If I'm not around, then Rick's the lead man." As Pruitt concluded, Mr. Watson rose to add a few words.

Pruitt concluded the meeting. “I think we should all get to know each other before we begin. I’ve arranged for us to have lunch at the Pavilion in the Arboretum. Shall we,” Pruitt said, gesturing towards the door.

CHAPTER 8

Eva didn't have a clue what to look for when she walked through the doors of the library. She didn't expect to find any information on the CRM, so she made a mental note to contact her source at the polizei office about them later. The main thrust of the pamphlet Mr. Schwarz had given her appeared to be a promotion for the International Christian Coalition. It offered some generalities along with two names, Reverend Jeremiah Eisner and Joseph Stautzen. After only a few minutes of looking, she found more than she'd expected.

Looking up the name of the ICC and its founder Jeremiah Eisner, she discovered four book references and a host of newspaper and magazine articles concerning their activities. In the *Guide To Germany's Religions* book, the ICC was listed as a nondenominational evangelical church with a countrywide membership of 1.5 million and an international membership of 4.6 million. *The Financial Synopsis Reference Of Commercial and Private Institutions,* listed the ICC's annual budget to be approximately sixty-seven million *euros*. The *Media Manual*, which lists television and cable production studios, listed the ICC as the fourth largest Christian broadcasting network in the world, and also, that its shows were viewed by approximately thirty-two million viewers a week. Her most productive find was Reverend Eisner's book entitled, *Our Global Community*. She checked it out and slipped it into her bag.

To save time she discretely made photocopies of nine magazine articles on the ICC to read later.

On her way back to the CRM's apartment, she stopped at a corner deli and picked up a turkey sandwich, a Coke and a half-liter tub of Maya peach yogurt. Since the day had nearly ended, Hugelstrasse was lined with cars and she had to park along a side street. She walked up the sidewalk and spotted Ruben's white Fiat where she'd left him earlier in the day. "Guten abend!" she yelled, sticking her head in his window.

"Scheisse, Eva!" he fired back.

She went around to the passenger door and hopped in.

"Brought you something." She tossed the bag in his lap.

"What de hell did you do dat for?" he asked, irritated.

"What? Bring you dinner."

"No. Scare the shit out of me."

"Thought you could use some excitement."

"I told you dis was a waste of time."

"Got any pictures?"

"Sure, I got pictures, but of what? I've seen four people come and go all day. One was of a moder taking her little girl on a walk. The other person was an old lady picking roses from de bush out front." He cocked his head towards her. "And what'd you find out?"

"Found out I got a lot of research to do. Seems Reverend Eisner of the ICC is a busy man. He's a preacher, philanthropist, directs a number of different ministries, friend to all kinds of important people. He's also written a bestseller."

"Well just don't get fanatical on me," he said, eyes fixed on the front door of the apartment and juggling an old Pentax in his lap.

"You know me better than that. Besides, I wouldn't let anything near me that might cause me to lose my head."

"Like de men in your life?" he teased.

She went silent and looked up towards the apartment on the third floor.

"I suppose dis means I'm going to be here for a while," he said, pointing to the bag of food.

"I know this seems like a waste of time, but it's all we can do at the moment. Stay here until 7:00 p.m. tonight. It'll be too dark to shoot after that."

"You know we really could use more help. I could sit here for weeks and not catch anyting. Did you get a hold of Alfred?"

"Not yet. I'll talk with him tonight."

"Even if I do manage to get some pictures of de occupants, we still won't know what deir up to until we get inside."

"I know."

Ruben poised the camera on his thigh and reached for the bag. "Tanks for de food."

"I'm going to head back to the office and see what Shelly's found out. By the way, I need you here in the morning by 5:30 a.m."

"Why so early?"

"Because I know you can't stay here around the clock. Morning and evening are the best times."

"Now you tell me. I've been sitting here in de sun all day."

"And I do appreciate it." She stepped out of the door and was nearly hit by a passing car. It's horn faded in the distance. She poked her head back in the window.

"You should be more careful," he said grinning.

"I'll bring you breakfast in the morning."

"Sure you will. Now get de hell out of here before you give me away."

Back at the office, Eva laid her briefcase on her desk and flopped down. "Shell," she began, but Shelly was already on the way to her desk with a file in hand.

"This is all I could come up with so far."

Eva glanced down and read the first name. Tasha Matyastick. "Czechoslovakian?" she asked.

"Ja."

"Curious, don't you think?" Shelly asked.

Eva glimpsed at the other two names, Neil Usher and Derrick Sachs.

"German," Eva surmised. Below each name were a few additional notes.

"You're amazing, Shelly." She shoved the file into her briefcase. "If anyone wants me I'll be at home. I've got some reading to do and Alfred is supposed to drop by my place later this evening."

CHAPTER 9

The sun was licking the tips of the hills of Bad Soden as Eva headed out of Sachsenhausen and into the heart of Frankfurt. She crossed over the Rhine at the Main-Neckar Brucke and connected with the autobahn near the main train station, the Hauptbanhof. After merging into the far left lane, she picked up speed. Seven minutes later, she exited at Main Taunus, took a left at the light, dove under the autobahn and headed southeast into Hochst.

Once home, she flipped the switch on the wall and the hanging lamp in the corner above her favorite chair bathed the room in a warm yellow glow. Sheeba whimpered and followed her to the dining room table where she set her briefcase down. At her desk, the buzz of the phone rang like a sick bell.

"Hallo."

"Hi, Eva."

"Alfred. Can you drop by this evening?"

"Sure. Any special reason?"

"We'll talk when you get here."

He knew better then to press her.

Forty-five minutes later, he arrived slightly winded from his brisk walk. "I had to park way over on Wausgaustrasse."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Good to see you again."

Eva and Alfred Burtman were separated by only two years in age. She was the elder of the two. They both shared their mother's nose, which turned outwards at the tip, and hung over puffy, round lips. They had their father's eyes and his eyebrows as well. On Alfred, they gave him a trace of intelligence. On Eva, they came off as earthy.

"How's mom and dad?" she asked.

"They're fine. They keep asking me to take over the backerei for them and I keep telling them they should sell it and retire. Dad keeps talking about the government. Says they're all a bunch of radicals with their head so far in the clouds they couldn't smell a coming inquisition if it reached over and yanked the Bible out of their hands."

"What about Mama?"

"She keeps asking when you're going to stop by."

Eva scooted to the edge of her chair and leaned towards her brother.

"Wie gehts, sister?"

"I don't think it's anything serious, but Mr. Schwarz—"

"If Mr. Schwarz thinks it's serious than it probably is."

"We've been doing a story on an organization called the Christian Reform Movement."

"Never heard of them."

"We discovered they might be tied in with another organization called the International Christian Coalition. You familiar with them?"

"Sure. You're not?"

"When have you ever known me to be religious?"

"You do watch television don't you?"

"I don't have time to watch television," she replied.

"If you watched TV, then you'd know what they're about."

"Why's that?"

"Because there's nothing more insidious than a religious organization with political motives, or a political power steeped in religious ideologies. The ICC's either one or the other."

"You sound like dad."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Why the sudden interest in the ICC?" he asked.

She walked to her briefcase, pulled out the pamphlet and tossed it to him. He took a quick look and handed it back. "It's not unusual that the CRM would support the ICC. I can think of at least a half-dozen organizations that support them. I guess my only concern would be if they were hostile. You know…radical."

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"You need some help?"

"Ja."

"What do you need?"

"Everything. The movement works out of an apartment on Hugelstrasse." She glanced at her watch. "Ruben's been there all day watching the place."

"And at that rate you'll know something in late November 2015, right?"

"We need a few bugs and a couple of video cameras inside the apartment." She made the request slowly with obvious hesitancy.

"Eva, how long have we been doing this together?" he asked, sensing her fear.

"About six years."

"Then you know I'm with you don't you? You know I'd do anything for you don't you?"

"Ja."

"Then you know not to worry."

"I guess so," she said, the words drifting.

"What's the address and do you have any photos of the occupants?"

She reached for the file in her briefcase and copied the address of the apartment on a slip of paper. "I don't have any photos yet. All I know is there are three people living in the apartment and I don't even know when they come or go."

"I'll need some photos and a few specifics."

"Give me a few days."

The doorbell rang and Sheeba came running out from a room down the hall barking and setting them on edge.

"Expecting anyone?" Alfred asked.

"No," she replied and opened the door.

"Hello, Eva!"

"Stace!"

"I was going to call, but thought I'd just pop on over."

She stood in the doorway—startled and surprised—blocking his way.

"I hope you don't mind." Stace said, reading her expression.

"No, come on in."

Stace noticed the young man lounging on the couch. "I didn't realize you had company. I should come back another time." He started towards the door.

She grabbed his wrist. "No! Please stay. This is my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Alfred's my name."

"You didn't tell me you had a new friend, Eva." Alfred said, glancing at her.

"We just met. This weekend, at the Freibad pool."

"It was nice to meet you," said Alfred. "I was just leaving." He glanced at Eva to reaffirm they had an understanding.

"Tell mom and dad I'll stop by as soon as I can."

"Sure. By the way, dad's got something he wants to show you."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise."

"This is unexpected," she said, closing the door.

"Are you sure I wasn't interrupting?"

"Not at all. Alfred was on his way out. I'm glad you two had the chance to meet."

"You could be twins you know, except for a few subtle differences."

"I'm glad you noticed. Have you eaten?"

He followed her towards the kitchen, but stopped short at the table. "No, but if you're going to make something, I'll eat."

"Great," she said, her head in a cabinet.

His eyes flowed over the names of the three members of the CRM and the few notes written about them on the sheet of paper. Another note followed the names. "Investigate connection between CRM and ICC."

"Heavy assignment?" he asked, holding up Reverend Eisner's book.

Stace's words pinned anxiety in her eyes as she looked towards him. "Not really," she said, backing towards the refrigerator eyeing him suspiciously, noticing he'd cracked the book open. "What was he doing reaching in my briefcase?" She'd have to do something about it. She walked to the table and playfully took the book out of his hand. She tossed it into her briefcase along with the file and closed the lid.

"You know, Stace, you never told me where you work," she said, diverting his attention.

"I guess I didn't. Told you everything else though didn't I?"

She smiled.

Stace told her all about his job developing film and his efforts to break into the freelance market. Took him all of three minutes. "I really am a photo nut. I take at least one of my cameras with me everywhere I go."

"Even to the pool?"

"Afraid you got me. That would be a little too obvious wouldn't it?"

She had her head stuck in the refrigerator and didn't see him pull his Nikon from his backpack. He focused on her belt. When she turned and stood, the auto-winder advance two frames.

"Hey! That's not fair." She stuck her bottom lip out in a mock display of annoyance. "Everywhere, huh? You didn't take it to the pool, and I bet you don't take it into the shower with you."

"That depends on who's in the shower with me."

His bullet hit its target. The response he was anticipating crossed her face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that," he said innocently.

"Ah, but you did."

They snacked on a plateful of sliced ham and potato salad and moved into the living room for coffee.

"You say you take a lot of pictures. Are you any good?"

He laughed full-heartedly, which caught her by surprise. "I got my first good camera, a real 35 mm, when I was twelve. That was fifteen years ago. I own three Nikons and about nine lenses. I also have a large format camera. I'll shoot anything that moves." He thought he'd stop there.

She thought that anybody with that much equipment had to be at least serious. "Can you develop film as well?"

"Anything you want. Why, anything you need done?"

"Maybe."

"I really could use you. Every day and all day," she thought to herself. Most of what they did was legal, but some of it, positively insidious. She really had no idea who Stace was anyway. She didn't know whether she could trust him and if she could, would she want to put him at risk?

"I don't know, Stace, but here are times we could use someone with your skills."

"Shooting or developing?"

"Both."

"I could use the extra work," he replied.

"Tell you what, if something comes up we'll see."

"Fair enough."

She resolved to drop the subject, but was enticed by the possibility of using him for at least some minor projects. And now that he'd come to see her again, she reconsidered how she thought wrongly that he was just drifting through life.

"I'm curious, Stace, do you consider yourself to be religious?"

He was astonished by the question and calculated a response. "If I say I am and she's not, then she'll probably think I'm a fanatic. If I say, I'm not and she is, then she'll think I'm an atheist."

"I consider myself to be a spiritual man," he replied, nice and neutral.

"Is there a difference?"

"Sure there's a difference, to those who know there's a difference."

"Stace! Do I look stupid to you?" she asked with agitation.

"Okay, straight-up."

"Straight-up?"

"Means, no bullshit. But first you tell me. Why the deep question?"

"I've got my reasons."

"Something to do with that book and those organizations you're investigating?"

"Something like that."

"And you promise not to hold it against me?"

"Why would I hold it against you?"

"Because I can't promise you what I think is exactly on center."

"I won't hold it against you. Now spit it out."

"I know one thing…I'll have nothing to do with organized religion."

"Why's that?"

"Because religion has never encouraged people to find God or the meaning of life on their own. Religions are just systems of belief which people are required to follow if they want to belong to the religion."

"But people can choose what religion they want to follow," she said.

"For most people, there is no choice."

"I'm not sure I follow you," she said.

"Just that many people feel obligated to follow the religion that they were raised on. And some are simply afraid to leave their religions because they have been taught that if they leave God will punish them. Either way, they have not made a choice."

"But people do follow religions to know the truth don't you think? she asked.

"Religion and truth is an oxymoron. Besides, you missed my point."

She was miffed by his insinuation.

"Look. People have a natural tendency to want to find a purpose to life. They look to religion to provide them with these answers. But there are thousands of religions. I don't see how anyone can arrive at the conclusion that their religion is the truth. The assumption defies common sense. To arrive at this conclusion a person has to assume that every religion other than their own is false."

"The way you put it, a person can never find what they are looking for by following a religion," she said.

"No, they can't. The numbers don't add up. If there was only one religion to follow…perhaps. But since there are so many religions the only sensible conclusion is that no religion provides all the answers."

"But if people don't follow religions, what are they going to follow?" Eva wondered.

"Why do people need to follow any religion?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just that people are intelligent enough to find the answers they are looking for on their own. The problem is, most people have been led to believe that they can't survive without religion."

Eva's mind was beginning to turn.

"There are a lot of things being said and done today by so-called, 'men of God.' Most of these individuals have no interest in helping people to discover the mysteries of life. Their only interest is to get people to follow their system of beliefs."

"Makes you wonder what their motives are." Eva said.

"I can only assume their motive is based on a personal desire to lead people to live the kind of life that they approve. Usually, their actions amount to nothing more than controlling the way people think and act. They're blind guides," he concluded.

"Surely you don't think that all the religions of the world and their leaders can be wrong do you?"

"Your question answers itself. Not every religion and its leaders can be right. The fact that there are so many religions illustrates just how confused the world of religion is. Better to find out the truth to life on your own."

"So, what do you think it means to be spiritual?" she asked with genuine interest.

Stace thought about the question for a few moments before answering.

"Being spiritual is living life with a certain frame of mind. It differs from following a religious system, because a spiritual person should not be interested in following any system. To be spiritual, a person has to first of all cherish their freedom to think independently. They must guard against any ideologies that would force them to think or act in a particular way. But it's more than this. A spiritual person is interested in exploring the mysteries and wonders of life, even questions about God and the supernatural. They are interested in discovering the truth."

The slightest smile was beginning to cross Eva's face.

"Are you laughing at me?" Stace asked candidly, but also, lightheartedly. "Guess I got a bit carried away."

"Not really. We'd all like to find out what the truth to life is. I was smiling because you surprised me with the idea. That's all."

"I've interrupted your evening, so I'm going to take off," he said rising.

"You don't have to—"

"I should, but I'd like to see you again. How does your weekend look?"

"The paper shuts down on the weekend and I try to give work a rest. Give me a call later in the week and we'll make plans."

"I'll do that."

She opened the door for him and he stood in the doorway for a few moments with a blank look on his face. He wanted to kiss her, but instead, just reached out and touched her hand before leaving.

CHAPTER 10

Throughout the night, Eva twisted on her bed dreaming indecipherable dreams that produced within her a pleasant state of euphoria. She'd slept in, she was sure of that, for her room was bright with daylight and the sounds of midmorning. As she opened her eyes, Sheeba licked her face and spun circles wagging her tail.

"Get away girl!" Eva objected, wiping her face with the sleeve of her pajamas.

Eva rolled onto her back and studied the swirls in the plaster above her head, looking for the familiar faces and animals she'd marked. The last image of Stace before he left the previous evening was all she could see. She pulled the comforter around her breasts and folded her hands on her stomach. For as long as she could think back, she couldn't picture another man who left her feeling as powerless as he did. His memory numbed her.

She thought about Shelly in the office making the coffee she should be making. She could almost hear her pager going off in her bag. It would be the office trying to contact her. But these were mere whispers of annoyance, barely audible in her careless frame of mind. Her lack of initiative amused her. She couldn't help but smile with the realization something powerful had seized her, something more gripping than the

passion she found in her work. She smiled again, a healthy smile, blooming with the possibilities of romance.

Sheeba came back in the room, but Eva dodged her wet tongue. Methodically she rose, dressed in sweats and took Sheeba downstairs for a walk. When she got back, she placed a call to the office and told Shelly she had research to do. She brewed a pot of coffee, took a long hot bath, dressed and reluctantly opened her briefcase. She took out the reverend's book and read the back cover. "A must read for Christians in these last days," stated a quote from one of his contemporaries. She suspected its contents to be a heavy theological treatise and set it aside to wrestle with later. Then she opened the file Shelly had prepared on the three known individuals of the CRM.

Tasha Sibrina Matyastick:

Female. Age 25. Born in Klatovy, Southwest Czechoslovakia. Immigrated to Stuttgart, Germany in 2005. Studied engineering at the university for one year and dropped out during the summer following her freshman year. Arrested March 2006 in Stuttgart for organizing a student protest of the United Nations International Army's invasion of Albania. Served a three-month sentence at the Woman's Correctional Institution in Gaggennau, near the border of France. After release from prison drifted to Frankfurt. Currently resides at 1342 Hugelstrasse, apartment 3-B.

Present status: employed as a clerk by the Schnell Department and Pharmacy near the corner of Miquellallee and Hansaellee in Frankfurt.

Derrick Burford Sachs:

Male. Born in Dessau, East Germany. Age 48. Immigrated to Frankfurt, West Germany on October 6, 1993.

Present status: employed with Salter Imports, an import/export firm located in the Niederrand district.

Currently resides at 1342 Hugelstrasse apartment 3-B.

Neil Thomas Usher:

Male. Age 47. Born in Beescow East Germany, near the eastern border of Poland. Immigrated to Frankfurt, West Germany on October 6, 1993.

Present status: employed with the Gunter Group since 1997, a privately owned accounting firm.

Currently resides at 1342 Hugelstrasse apartment 3-B.

Eva noticed the possible connection between Derrick Sachs and Neil Usher. Both had immigrated to Germany on the same day and their original citizenship was from East Germany. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, there was a mass migration of East Germans into West Germany. Thousands had crossed the borders during that time, many traveling as friends to begin a new life. Tasha Matyastick appeared to be the only one of the three with a different background. Evidently, she'd traveled to Germany to escape the political climate in Czechoslovakia with the intention to embark on a new life. Her arrest undoubtedly, cut short that goal.

Eva tossed the file into her briefcase, disenchanted with the mediocrity of its contents. What she had thus far was a list of three people who left the political horrors of their own countries for the freedom of the west. Individuals, who probably wanted nothing more than to live without the hassle of their government breathing down their necks.

She took a sip of coffee and fingered the corner of the reverend's book. What bothered her now, was that in all the years she'd worked for the Schwarz Monatlich, she'd never been involved with an investigation that focused on a religious organization. Most of her investigations targeted the misuse of political and governmental power. At times, she covered stories about corporate organizations and white-collar crimes. Her role in those investigations was clear-cut, the laws were stated in black and white and it was just a matter of uncovering enough evidence to break a story and get a conviction. There was always a certain satisfaction in bringing down those of wealth and power, those

who'd trampled on the common citizen to get to the top. So she never questioned the purpose of her work. Her investigation of the ICC and the CRM would require an alteration of protocol. The more she thought over her new role, the more she suspected she was crossing over an undefined line. Who's to say she wasn't in danger of encroaching on the very principles she stood for, that people had a right to believe what they wanted to believe? Taking a deep breath, she determined any further investigation of the two groups must be done with the utmost objectivity.

The first chapter of the reverend's book established his principle for motivation: fear. He began by highlighting the evils and horrors of the modern world and concluded it was the Christian's responsibility to resist such evils in a united front-line offensive. With words backed by historical and biblical significance, his portrayal of the evils sizzled in Eva's consciousness with relevance. The reverend was a man of generalities and abstractions, not targeting his verbal arrows at any particular world leader or regime; rather, he focused on themes and sociological influences. It was a tactical maneuver, designed to introduce the reader to recognize the prevalence of evil, which ran through the world and bound it together in darkness. He assumed political and governmental institutions were in general, lead by individuals who sought office for the sake of power alone. He cited the trend of global leaders who had embraced the idealism of capitalism. Such materialistic goals signaled the end of culture and initiated a race for financial superiority that wouldn't end until all the natural resources of the world were used up.

This led him to his next point and the next few chapters, an assault on the rampant spread of violence and crime. His overall objective in these chapters was to show that the ideals of capitalism had supplanted the necessity for spiritual morality. In the middle of the book, he spoke about the movement of the global masses towards a humanistic agenda and the unnatural reliance on technology to solve humanity's need for immortality. He cited recent advances in DNA cloning and the proliferation of scientific measures to prolong life. He called to point the

United Nations recent move towards space exploration and its attempt to find other inhabitable planets. To the reverend, this revealed a pathetic epitaph to the existence of mankind. It proved mankind had lost its ability to conscientiously curb its assault on the natural resources of the world, that mankind was no longer able to control its greed even when confronted with global catastrophes and the possible extinction of the human race. He even covered at length the results of global warming. Scientists had predicted as early as the nineties that the oceans of the world could rise as much as eight feet should there be a massive meltdown of ice in the Polar Regions. He claimed recent scientific studies had shown the oceans had indeed, risen an unprecedented three feet and the shorelines of the world were already rippling with disaster.

His conclusion and solution to all of these crises was the institution of faith in Christianity around the world, for it alone could purge the human spirit of its incessant greed and at the same time force a universal healing of the nations. He called for the spiritual awakening of mankind to repent of their evil deeds. Nothing short of a complete global repentance would bring about the favor of God. Nothing short of a spiritual awakening of every soul on earth could awaken God's favor of the human race and allow God to work His miracle working power. In the reverend's interpretation of theology, the final days of earth's history would be marked by such a revival of the Christian faith. In his summation of the book, he appealed to all, for the time of revival was now knocking on the door of humanity.

It was 2:35 p.m. in the afternoon when Eva finally laid the book down. She searched desperately for an excuse that would allow her to disbelieve the words she'd read. She walked into the living room and looked out the window. Across the street, a woman was pulling in a comforter from a window, which she'd laid on the window ledge earlier that morning to air out. Beyond the corner, on raised tracks running above the side street, a U-Bahn whizzed by on its way to Niedernhausen. The sky was a rich blue. A gentle wind pushed swirl-

ing clouds through the sky. Everything was normal and yet, extraordinarily different. Hidden in the normalcy of life was a disquieting calmness, not unlike the hours before an approaching storm. True to their intent, the words of Reverend Eisner had reached their target.

CHAPTER 11

"Three bear claws, Mrs. Seiler? Here you go. A loaf of weizenkeimbrot, Mrs. Kantrel and a half dozen glazed? Just a second. Let me ring up George on the register and I'll get right back with you." And so it went six days a week. The traditional rush for morning pastries, leaving the Burtman's Backerei in downtown Hochst in crumbs and their owners frazzled.

By 6:00 a.m. every morning except Sundays, Leda and her husband Kermit would lay out the treasures of their craft behind the glass display counters in the front room of the bakery. Nothing was left undone, not even the tray of pretzels placed on a table outside the door for children to help themselves to on their way to school. By 9:00 a.m. the pretzels, along with most of the other pastries and bread would have disappeared. It was a labor of love they both shared: Kermit mixing, pounding, rolling, baking, and Leda dressing each donut and roll with pastel colored creams and icings, and bagging the seven different types of bread they made. While Leda cleaned up in the aftermath, Kermit would begin preparing the late afternoon selections of brot. Through the years he'd mastered the art, producing masterful sculptures of flour and water, which would earn a place in the heart of any food critic.

It was late afternoon when Eva came walking up the cobblestone sidewalk. Kermit was in the kitchen baking the next day's supplies of cakes and pies and Leda was busy sweeping the crumbs out the front door towards a cluster of pigeons.

"Eva!" Leda cried out.

"Hallo, Mama."

Leda clung to her as though she were making up for lost time. "Its been too long, Eva. Too long!"

"I know, Mama."

"Kermit! It's Eva!" she yelled to her husband in the kitchen.

"Was?" he yelled back, over the drone of the mixer.

"Eva!"

"Augenblick mal!" He said excitedly, wiping his hands over his stained apron.

Eva couldn't wait. She stuck her head through the crack in the door separating the kitchen from the bakery, "Hi!"

His hug was as warm as the ovens and sweet as frosting. "I've missed you," she said.

"How long can you stay?" he asked, backing away to shut the mixer off.

"About thirty minutes."

"Good. I'll be right out."

"Let's sit down and talk," Leda said, taking hold of her daughter's arm and escorting her to a table in the corner behind the counter. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Ja bitta."

She returned with two cups of coffee and lemon crème donuts. "They used to be your favorite."

"They still are," Eva said.

"You know, if it wasn't for Alfred we'd never even know you were alive."

"You know that's not true Mama," she said, knowing full well it was.

"Alfred says you have another boyfriend."

"Word gets around fast. What else did he tell you?"

"Just that the man was an American."

"You disapprove?"

"Disapprove! Come on, Eva, when were you ever concerned with whether I approved of what you were doing?" She spoke as to a friend and not to a daughter. "I'm much too old and you're an intelligent young woman now. All I want is for you to be happy."

"Thanks, Mama—"

"But do tell."

"Well, his name's Stace Manning. He came to Germany last year."

"Where does he work?"

"He's a photographer. Right now he's working for a film developing company in Hattersheim, but he does some freelance work."

"Is he stable?"

"I just met him last weekend, Mama."

"Sorry, just curious."

Eva had few friends while growing up and fewer girlfriends that were her age, because she said, "They just like to play make-believe-family with their dolls all day." She took that autonomy with her into high school and completely by-passed the stages of young love and sexual discovery. As time progressed, her impressions of the world took on a more serious nature, and the questions she raised about life were those that might be better discussed in collegiate philosophical classes. Still, she'd been and would always be a daddy's girl. Kermit recognized in his little girl the disturbing pulse of his own nature. Eva had an above average dose of insight combined with an acute sense of justice, which had rattled in his own mind for as long as he could remember. He knew those who possessed such insight could take only one of two paths through life. Either they learned to capture and use that insight in a constructive way, or they would wind up frustrated at the injustices of the world that surrounded them. And it

scared the hell out of him to see this characteristic forming in his young daughter.

"What's he like?" Leda asked.

"He's a passionate man…artistic."

"Have you slept with—"

"No! Of course not, Mama."

Kermit appeared in the doorway behind Eva. Leda looked at her husband intuitively. "Eva's got a boyfriend, an American—and passionate!"

"Mama!" Eva said, raising her voice and slapping her mother on the shoulder.

"Gut. Very Gut!" he said, taking it as a sign of normalcy in her life. "How's work? Alfred said you were investigating the ICC."

"Ja. Familiar with them?"

"A little," he said with disinterest. His impressions of the ministry were mixed and he didn't want to influence her one way or the other.

The bell above the door to the backerei chimed and Leda jumped up.

"Guten tag, Frau Necklen!" she said. "What can I get you today?"

"I need a loaf of vollkornbrot and roggenbrot."

Leda reached for a sheet of transparent wax paper and removed the loaf of whole-grain bread first.

Seeing that his wife might be busy for a few minutes, Kermit said to Eva, "Come upstairs, I want to show you something."

She followed her father into the kitchen and up a stairwell into the apartment. Being in the stairwell reminded her of the many times she and Alfred would sneak downstairs into the backerei and eat leftover pastries while their parents were sleeping.

"I remember when you and Alfred would sneak downstairs at night and steal pastries," he said suddenly.

"You knew?"

"You'd be surprised what I know about you two," he said, turning towards her at the top of the stairs with a twinkle in his eyes.

He entered his study beyond the living room and sat down behind his desk, the same desk he inherited after his father who had passed away four years earlier. He pulled open the top drawer and carefully brought out an envelope bearing the name of the Deutsch Geschaftlich Bank of Frankfurt.

"What's that?"

"It was the mortgage on the backerei. Your mother and I made the last payment in August, two years and seven months early!"

He opened the envelope and brought out the document. Holding the bottom of it, he ran his right hand across its length to flatten it and hold it in place. At the top was a red stamp mark reading, "Paid in Full," followed by the date "August 28, 2013." She looked at her father, who was fixated at the stamp as though he still couldn't believe it. It was a late-blooming victory in his life, which he'd worked sixteen years to win.

"I don't know what to say," Eva said.

"I know. I almost didn't believe I'd live to see the day. Now it's time to file it away. I just wanted you to see it."

She came around behind him and wrapped her arms around his stout shoulders. "I'm proud of you."

"Come now, it's just a mortgage note—paid off mind you—but a note just the same." He stood up and looked into her eyes. Something wasn't right. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"I know you better than that. Let's go into the living room and have a talk."

She sat on the living room couch and ran her hands along the new fabric she'd never seen before.

"Looks nice don't you think? Gives the room new color and life. Now, what's wrong, Eva?" he asked, perched on the edge of his favorite chair across from her.

"Nothing really." Then she thought about all of the events that had transpired in the last week and looked at each one in turn. She had met

a man, had a new assignment and was worried about Alfred. Most importantly, she was confused about the contents of Reverend Eisner's book.

"I just have a lot of things on my mind lately."

He looked at his daughter sympathetically, thinking of the many times she used to tug on his pant legs as he worked in the kitchen. She was still the same little girl, but now she clung to him for encouragement in different ways. "You have a new friend?" he asked, hoping to isolate her problem.

"A friend, but I think we could be more than friends."

"That's good news. Any trouble at work?"

"No. Just the usual workload."

"What are you working on now, something about the ICC? Alfred wasn't specific."

"Mr. Schwarz thinks there's a connection between the International Christian Coalition and a smaller group called the Christian Reform Movement."

"That's a little different than what you're used to investigating, isn't it?"

"It is."

"You say that like it's a problem."

"Could be."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm used to chasing down the bad guys."

"You've always enjoyed that haven't you?" he asked, admiring what his daughter had made of herself.

"Ja."

"And there are no bad guys here?"

"None that I can see."

"From what I know, the ICC's just another Christian ministry, but I've never sat through one of their shows. Wouldn't have the interest for that, but I know they provide the funding for a few sizable charities."

"That's just what I mean, I don't see a story in it."

"What about the other group? The Christian…what did you call them?"

"The Christian Reform Movement. CRM. It's an underground Christian ministry. They've got a following."

"A real fizzler right?"

"Exactly." She thought of her brother Alfred. She couldn't help thinking her instructions to bug the group's apartment had been premature. It could be an unnecessary risk. Problem was, it wasn't her call.

"Dad. I've been wanting to ask you something…"

"Ask."

"How come we never went to church together as a family?"

Kermit turned his head and looked out the window into a cloudless sky. A long moment passed before he answered.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer not to discuss it."

"Was it something you have against rel—"

"When your mother and I first met, our parents were of a different religious persuasion. It prevented us from…"

"That's okay dad, it's not important."

"You could say it was because conflicting religious beliefs that your mother and I came to meet. A meeting that was both bitter and sweet. Our love for one another has been our religion. Your mother and I made a joint decision years ago that you and Alfred would be raised in the principles of that love."

She'd never heard the story of how her parents had met and fell in love, and she would not hear that story today. Eva sat on the couch considering her own emptiness and needs. She felt she was at the threshold of something much more meaningful than anything she'd ever experienced. But it was coming too fast for her. She'd spent a lifetime encircling herself in a cocoon of systematic actions which had kept her warm and secure. This shell was now threatened with the onslaught of emotions brought on by her attraction to Stace, and was being chiseled away by the awareness of her own spiritual needs.

Around the corner and down the hall the door to the kitchen opened and Leda's voice bounced upstairs.

"Kermit! The bread!" she yelled.

Her father jumped out of his seat and stopped in the foyer looking at Eva.

"That's alright, Papa. I've got to get back to work now anyway."

She followed him downstairs and out into the front room where her mother was serving another customer. "I have to go now," Eva said.

"So soon?"

She looked into her mother's eyes with a renewed appreciation for her and kissed her on the cheek.

CHAPTER 12

From his vantage point, Ruben picked at his goatee and watched as a young woman approached the walkway leading up to the apartment. She had straight black hair cut in an oriental style cap, curling just below the ears and tapering to points beside her cheeks. Her features were sharp and defined like the crease of mountain peaks, and her eyes were as sleek as an Egyptian's with mascara. Her denim skirt buffed her black boots as she walked, and she carried an ivory cloth bag stuffed with groceries. Before she made the turn up the walkway, Ruben lifted the Pentax to his right eye and held the 300 mm lens as steady as he could. The auto lens focused on her face giving credibility to his assumptions. She was indeed beautiful.

"Abend," Derrick said to Tasha as she came in the front door. He was busy dubbing audiotapes of the sermon Neil preached the weekend before. His inflection was lifeless, a mere courtesy. He didn't even look up as she set the bag of groceries on the kitchen counter.

"Hello, Derrick."

"Is he still out there?" Derrick asked her.

"Ja. What do you suppose he's after?" she asked, removing a loaf of bread out of the bag.

"What they always want."

"Who do you suppose he's with?"

"Definitely not the polizei—too obvious," he replied.

"Detective?"

"Probably a reporter. Nothing to worry about, Tasha."

She walked into the living room and stood at the corner of the window, pulling aside the edge of the curtain and peering outside. Ruben hadn't moved, his black form was clearly visible through the reflection of the windshield.

"He's a nigger," Derrick said, like he'd been sucking on an ice-cube.

Tasha paid no attention to him. She went into the kitchen and finished putting away the groceries then went to her room. When she'd disappeared behind her door, Derrick got up and went to the window to have another look. Same beat up white Fiat parked eighty meters down the street. Same nigger. He watched the man raise a camera to his face then lower the camera towards the seat beside him. A minute later, the lock on the front door popped and in walked Neil Usher.

"The son of a bitch is still there," Derrick said from the window.

"I know." Neil set his briefcase on the table and walked over to Derrick. While they watched, the Fiat pulled out from around the silver car in front of it and drove past the apartment.

"Where's Tasha?" Neil asked.

"In her room." But as he spoke she came out. They waited. The door to the bathroom closed and the sound of water from the shower chugged through the pipes in the wall.

"What does she know about him?" Neil asked.

"Nothing. Other than he's watching the place. I've been playing it off."

They sat down at the dining room table. "What can you tell me about him?" Neil asked.

"Not much more than you already know. He showed up yesterday morning sometime and stayed to early evening. He got here early this morning.

"He's been here all day?"

"Near as I can tell. You want me to follow him?" Derrick asked.

"Not yet. If he's still around next week then we know we've got a problem. We don't need this crap in the equation right now, and not a word of this to Tasha."

Neil Usher and Derrick Sachs were two men who existed in the opposite spectrums of the prism of life, but shared the same ambitions. Neil was clean-cut, educated, cautious, and calculating. Derrick was wild, simple-minded and ruthless. They operated together as one, similar to the mind of a schizophrenic, with more potential in two men than could ever be possible in one. But like one character in the mind of a schizophrenic is bound to emerge as the dominant voice, Neil had taken on the commanding role. This suited Derrick just fine, because he was a man who liked to be led and he could be led to perform the dark deeds with an unnatural disassociation to law and order.

They'd met while serving in the Berlin underground where they, along with two-dozen other radicals, began the Christian Reform Movement. After nearly a decade of nourishing themselves on the milk of dissension and revolutionary aspirations, Neil and Derrick looked to the West and the opportunities that presented themselves there. In 1993 they immigrated to Frankfurt.

If their Christian perspective in East Germany had been fanatical, they took it to an even more extremist level in the West. For where there's a proliferation of social freedom, there's also the proliferation of ideological, philosophical, and theological thought. In the East, those who exercised the Christian faith worshipped in secret places and in the cramped cavities of their minds. There, religion was more primal in nature, feeding on oppression, which had a way of breathing relevance into the faith. In the West things were different. There, freedom encouraged the expression of spiritual thought beyond its primal level. It had given rise to the merging of thousands of ideas and teachings from a variety of differing religions and philosophies. Neil and Derrick believed those ideas had eroded the pure teachings of the Christian faith, and they felt it was up to them to set things straight.

In Frankfurt, the inclusion of others into their ecumenical fold proved difficult at first. The people of the cosmopolitan city, having laid hold of the freedoms associated with free thought, were uninterested in pursuing any belief seeking to drag them back into the dark ages. The time was one of prosperity and there was no room for self-sacrificing when times were good. In fact, the general consensus of most Christians in Germany and Europe at that time was that God was in the process of blessing his children with material and financial success.

At first, Neil and Derrick didn't buy into the concept that God rewards the faithful with success and position in the present life, but as time progressed they began to drink from the cup of that idealism. They became more intoxicated by its potential. Eventually, they would come to see in the ministry of Reverend Eisner a spokesman who could usher in the times of prosperity they believed to be prophesied in the Bible. The reverend taught that the reward of the faithful came in the form of prosperity. A Christian was not to seek materialism, but rather, receive its blessings as a testimony of their personal connection to God. It was an old idea wrapped in modern day terminology. An idea born on the assumption that God rewards the faithful, so He can tease the heathen into submission. Neil and Derrick had felt such a passage into God's favor when their revolutionary efforts helped to bring down the Berlin wall. As a reward, God had led them to the West and had introduced them to the greater work of the International Christian Coalition. There was not a doubt in their mind that the joining of the ICC and the CRM was providential.

Tasha Matyastick was another story.

She was two years old when she and her mother immigrated to Germany. The year was 1988. Tasha's father, Nikoli, was a commercial pilot. Through his connections, he was able to send his wife and daughter to Germany, but it would be a year later before he could manage to escape from Czechoslovakia himself. Through the next few years, the family began a new life in Germany. About once a month,

Nikoli would rent a single engine plane for half a day to maintain his piloting skills, and he would often take his wife along with him. On one fateful day, however, there was an accident, and he and his wife were killed when the plane they were flying crashed just after takeoff. The authorities concluded the accident had been caused by a problem with the electrical system. Those who had helped Nikoli and his family escape into Germany knew better. Evidently, the Czechoslovakian secret police had caught up with him.

After the accident, a friend of the family raised Tasha in a loving and stable environment, but she would thereafter remain adrift. Embedded in her mind were the fragmented stories of the oppression in Czechoslovakia and how her parents had devoted the better part of their lives in seeking freedom from it. What she heard, she didn't want to believe. What she remembered, she didn't want to forget. Her father's sacrifice in getting Tasha to Germany had cost him his life. For this, Tasha could never forgive herself. She left the comforts of her adopted home a week after her seventeenth birthday.

As she grew into a young woman, her absence of roots would become more profound. She'd been unable to successfully merge into the mainstream of German society, choosing rather to live within her profound sense of imagination. If asked who she was, she would fall silent. If asked what she believed, her expression would melt into a pathetic blank as she wandered through the empty rooms of her mind where those beliefs had failed to take up residence. Her world was a river, bordered on one side with disbelief and on the other side with impossibilities. The world had robbed her of justice at an early age and as a consequence, she didn't know how to channel her anger or how to find what she was looking for—but at least she was looking. Many years later, the flow of her river carried her downstream where a sheet of paper blew across her path announcing a revival meeting of the Christian Reform Movement. She'd been walking home in the early evening from her job as a waitress at a local pub in Stuttgart, when the bright yellow announcement brushed her ankle and blew into a puddle

on the cobblestone street where it floated face up. She reached down and picked it up by the corner. While it dripped drops of oil and dirt-stained water she read it. The announcement told of a Christian gathering to be held that evening on a nearby street. It would begin at 6:30 p.m.

She entered the dinky theater on Guerickestrasse fifteen minutes later with all the mental caution of a dehydrated sponge. The ancient theater's wooden seats were nearly filled to capacity. The taped organ music blasted out of the PA system and rippled the crimson curtains along the walls. In the cathedral ceilings above, the liturgical music fell towards the congregation like a gentle rain. When the song ended in a high-pitched sustain, goose bumps spread up and down her body. She watched as a handsome young man approached the podium. The lights were dimmed and the features of Neil's face were highlighted from a light positioned somewhere below the microphone.

Neil spoke words that touched every heart in the place that was either absent of purpose or cast in the despair of loneliness. To Tasha, Neil seemed magical, possessing a sense of purpose she'd never before seen in a person. She couldn't remember the exact theme of Neil's message, but the warmth of his presence had extended their long tentacles out over the audience and penetrated her soul.

She had to meet him, had to be with him. It was a strange infatuation; one rather like flame is to oxygen and how the two need each other in order to exist. In this case, Neil was the flame; a burning life-sucking force, feeding off the adoration of his converts. Tasha was the oxygen, feeding his fire through her desperate need for direction.

CHAPTER 13

For the fifth day, Ruben parked his Fiat down the street from the CRM's apartment. This morning was cool and the steam from his breath fogged the windows in the tiny compartment. After the sun rose, the mist in the windows condensed into beads of moisture. In his boredom, he watched the life of one bead grow to the size of a tear and begin a mad dash down the driver's window. Zigzagging along, it sought out other beads of condensation, absorbed them, picked up additional speed, and finally disappeared into the rubber slit at the top of the door. The process amused him. As he watched others fall he failed to notice the faded blue Mercedes van with the stone crack in the windshield park thirty meters behind him.

Throughout the week, Eva's brother Alfred had been doing his own reconnaissance, and his actions had gone completely unnoticed, even to Ruben. For several days he parked his utility van at various locations around the apartment to plot and plan. Yesterday, he did a little footwork by entering the building though the back door with this tool belt hanging around his waist and a roll of cable encircling his shoulder. He counted steps, made note of the exits, and examined the lock on the door of the CRM's apartment. By his own estimation, he had the place thoroughly cased, but the details of the occupants of the apartment were still a mystery. He couldn't make his move until he knew the

faces of the occupants who lived there. He was relying on Eva and Ruben to provide him with that information.

Although it was still morning, Ruben decided to call it quits at five minutes to nine and headed down Eschersheimer towards Frankfurt. He pulled into a fifteen minute parking slot in front of Strickland Photography at ten after. He set the dial on his parking placard to read 9:15 a.m. and tossed it on the dash, giving him twenty minutes before the parking polizei could give him a ticket. In the photo store they downloaded his photos, converted them to disk, and printed up some quick copies. Derrick followed him from the apartment in his own van, and waited for him down the street. Twenty-five minutes later, Ruben jumped in his car with a package in hand.

Derrick followed Rueben through Frankfurt and over the river and into Sachsenhausen. He watched him park in front of a three-story, two hundred-year-old brick building marked with the name, Ansel Insurance Company. "Where the hell's he going now?" Derrick mumbled to himself and wrote the name of the insurance company in a notepad he kept in the top pocket of his flannel shirt. He watched as Ruben ducked under the low arch of what appeared to be an entrance to the basement and noticed a sign that said, Schwarz Monatlich. "Well, I'll be dammed," he whispered and pulled his van into an open parking slot.

Ruben descended the stairs and entered the dank hallway. The brick along its walls had once been a rich charcoal color, but time had given it a sooty appearance with patches of lime-green algae forming in the corners near the cement foundation. He fumbled for his keys to the steel door, and Eva glanced in his direction as he entered the office.

"What?" he asked her.

"Nothing, I just didn't expect you back so soon."

"I'm just getting back from Strickland's—here's the prints." He tossed the package on Eva's desk. For the moment, she was disinterested in looking at them.

Five minutes later, as Derrick waited, a utility van bearing the name of the Frankfurt telephone company parked directly in front of him. A lean young man in his thirties got out of the van and walked directly towards him. Derrick sat up nervously and prepared himself for the encounter, but the young man turned between the two vans and opened one of the cargo doors. The man grabbed his utility belt and snapped it around his waist, then took out two orange cones. After closing the door, he set one cone on the street near the rear bumper and looked up. The two exchanged glances and nodded a casual greeting. Alfred set the other cone near the front bumper of his van and walked towards the Schwarz Monatlich. He rapped on the door three times and waited for it to open. Shelly was near the door filing paperwork and let him in.

"Alfred! Good to see you again," Shelly said. She'd been attracted to Alfred since the first time they'd met, but he never responded to her flirtations.

"Guten tag."

Shelly understood by the tone in his voice he wasn't going to respond today.

He walked to his sister's desk. "Are you aware one of the men from the apartment is parked outside?"

"You're kidding," she replied in a sudden state of panic.

"He's in the blue van." Alfred said.

She jumped out of her chair and wove her way around the desks to the windows along the wall. Ruben and Shelly were right behind her. In the middle window overlooking the street was a clear spot where Eva had once scraped off the paint so she could look outside. She put her eye to the hole and looked across the street. People were scurrying about on the sidewalk and cars were whizzing by obscuring her view. But there he was…wind blown hair, wrap-around sunglasses, flannel shirt rolled to the elbow and hanging over the doorframe of the van.

"Let me take a look," Ruben said. He nudged her away, "Dat's one of de guys I've seen."

"He's either Neil or Derrick," Eva said.

"We know that Neil is employed with the Gunter Group. He's probably clean-cut and has a day job. Derrick works an all night shift at the import/export business, so it doesn't really matter what he looks like. If you ask me, I'd say this man is Derrick Sachs," Shelly said.

"Why is he here?" Alfred asked.

Ruben had the only possible explanation. "He could have followed me back from de apartment."

Mr. Schwarz came out of his office and looked at the group huddled around the window. "What's going on?" he asked with his hands on his hips.

"Derrick Sachs is parked out front watching the place," Eva said.

"Who is Derrick Sachs?"

"A member of de CRM."

They cleared a path for Mr. Schwarz as he walked towards the window. "Where?"

"In the blue van." Alfred answered.

Mr. Schwarz took a long hard look at the man in the van and shook his head from side to side. "Listen, I want all of you to take these people seriously." He checked to see if they understood him.

Eva was the only one that answered. The rest of them nodded. He walked back into his office and shut the door behind him.

"I take it you haven't been able to get inside their apartment yet?" Eva questioned Alfred.

"Too risky. Haven't you got some photos you can show me?

"On my desk. We were just getting to them." She opened the package and lined the pictures up side by side. Within moments they had isolated the pictures of the CRM members through the process of elimination.

"I tink I'll park myself outside de Gunter Group and keep an I out on dis Neil Usher," Ruben said. He stood up and grabbed his windbreaker.

"Wait!" Alfred said. "We don't know what Derrick is after yet. What if he follows you?"

"Den I loose him."

"Let me go ahead of you. I've been spending as much time around that apartment as you have. It's possible he may know who I am as well. I want to check his reaction as I leave."

"When are you going to be able to get inside the apartment, Alfred?" Eva asked as he headed for the door."

"I'll have to wait until next week. Probably Tuesday. I'll let you know."

As he slipped out the door, Eva went to the window to watch. Alfred crossed the street and headed for his utility van. She focused on Derrick's reaction. Derrick glanced casually at Alfred then back towards the building. She watched Alfred pack his cones and drive away. Derrick never gave him a second thought.

"What do you think?" asked Shelly.

"I think Alfred's in the clear."

Alright," she said, turning towards Ruben. "Now you."

Eva heard him ascending the stairs and watched him move towards his Fiat parked a few slots down the road. Ruben kept his eyes in front of him, giving no indication he was aware Derrick was watching him. Derrick glanced towards Ruben several times as he got into his car and backed out of the space into the street. After Ruben drove off he got out of the van.

"Shit!" Eva yelled, as he jogged towards the building. "He's coming."

She pulled away from the window and raced to Ruben's desk, snatching up the photos and shoving them into her briefcase. She stood at her desk waiting, her head swelling with thoughts of what she would say or do when he came to the door. Shelly waited behind her computer as quiet as a rat that had just been spotted by a cat. Except for the hum of Shelly's computer and the clop of pedestrian's shoes passing the basement windows, the office was unbearably silent. A

minute passed, then another. Shelly looked over to Eva and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "Well, where is he?" As she did, they both heard the slamming of the paper machine dispenser on the sidewalk. Eva ran over to the window and peeked through the hole. Derrick was nowhere in sight. She shifted to the right to get a better view of the entrance and saw him.

"He's buying a paper, Shelly. One of our papers!" Shelly jumped up to have a look. By the time she reached the window, he'd gotten back in his van.

"We forgot about the papers," Eva said. Of course, she was right, but there was nothing she could do about it now. She was a reporter and reporters work for papers and papers get distributed and people can find out all kinds of information in papers. Eva shuddered when she thought of the editorial page, where every member of the paper's staff would be listed along with their titles and responsibilities. Derrick didn't need to barge into the office. All he had to do was look at the editorial page. From the list of names it would be no problem for him to find addresses and any other type of information he wanted. It could be only a matter of days before he'd know practically everything about her.

CHAPTER 14

Meanwhile in Austin, the Trojan Security team had been tossing around a handful of ways in which it would be possible to send hidden messages though the Internet. The term they used for the program was that of a virus, which insinuated that the implementation of such a program would be a potentially deadly element. In its biological form, a virus attacks a living organism with the intent of disrupting the healthy flow of life. In the computer world, the same destructive properties of a virus exist, although in mechanical form. Every member of the Trojan Security team was comfortable with the idea of creating a virus that affected the mechanical components of a computer. What they were expected to create, however, was something far more insidious. It would be a virus that would not only affect the cold, metallic components of a computer, but a virus that could forever alter the psychological temperament in the minds of those who used their computers.

To pacify the probability that the team would be intelligent enough to understand the impact of the virus, Watson had decided to appeal to the team member's sense of responsibility and avarice. Each member of the team had been chosen because of their expertise, but Watson went a step further and offered them a healthy compensation package as a motivational incentive. Apart from being the son of the creator of Tro-

jan Security, Watson was particularly adept in the art of motivation. The dynamics of his art centered around his ability to recognize and take advantage of the talents of his workers, and to treat them with dignity and respect. The later, usually falling into the realm of financial compensation.

Watson was correct in assuming that a misguided group of individuals would be willing to use a virus similar to what they wanted to create, and it was possible such a program already existed. Appealing to the team's good nature, he took the incentive much further in implying that the team had a moral responsibility to create the virus. Still, for some of the team's members, especially Rick, his participation in the project took him through a circular pattern of ethical arguments, which played in his mind like the cranking of a jack-in-the-box. There was certainly good reason to build the program and good reason not to. If the program already existed, it would be morally right to create a security program that could destroy it. If the program didn't exist, they were using their skills to create something that was better left in the graveyard of ideas, along with all the other inventions of human destruction.

In his mind, Rick thought of a time decades ago when a team of scientists created and developed the mechanics of nuclear fusion, which led to the hydrogen bomb. Who could argue its creation caused both massive destruction and ironically, a certain degree of security—at least for those who possessed the technology. Had the technology been created by radicals and not by a civilized world, it was quite possible America might not be the super power it was today. That same technology had kept many uncivilized and radical governments from imposing their ideological slavery upon others. How was this different?

In his attempts to reconcile these questions, Rick downplayed his role and lost himself for the time being in a quiet place in his mind. "Hell, I'm just one man working for a computer company in a city. One man in seven billion who goes to work and gets a pay check in order to feed his family. I'm not special. In fact, there are probably a

thousand other individuals in the world who have my skills and could build this program. In fact, I wouldn't doubt it if a few of them are engaged in building something just like it. Yeah, that's it. Somewhere in China or Switzerland there's a team just like us building this same damn software—so who cares? We build the program and we design the software that will destroy any chance of it getting into the wrong hands! Sounds good to me! And the day after we do, I'll drive to work and take on another project. Maybe I'll get another raise and buy a better ride." So it was, through some asinine self-talk, that Rick was able to jam the gears to the jack-in-the-box and get down to work.

But the fact remained, talent and technology had reached such a level that it was impossible to keep such a beast of a virus from being born. That's to be expected from the race we know as human beings. For man is a creation fastened with enormous drive for change and stimulation, as well as an erroneous sense of his own mortality and potential to err. It's not unlike the blind, who despite their blindness, fail to consider the future catastrophes of their day and still roll out of bed, grab their walking stick and proceed beyond the door into life.

The team had divided the program up into two essential components. The primary component was what they referred to as the, "psychological stimulus element." This part of the program dealt with the elements of the power of suggestion. Above all, this element would have to target those areas of the human intellect that effect a person's ability to think and reason, beyond their established moral framework. In other words, it must be able to take an otherwise normal individual, one who possesses the ability to reason at a cognitive level, and completely alter their belief structure, so that they might act in a way that was previously impossible for them to act

The other component of the program was what they referred to as the, "technical element." It would apply the psychological stimulus element into a working environment by utilizing the properties of computer hardware and the Internet. Where Rick and Jean Thompson were concerned, the technical aspect of the program was a given. It was

not a matter of *if* the program could be built; the problem would be how to nail a possible handful of scenarios down to one working solution. When the psychological stimulus element could be worked out, it could then be merged into the technical medium.

Once the team had been able to obtain a reasonable assessment of what would be required to build the program, they spent the rest of the week brainstorming. To this end, all five members of the team solicited a treasure of input based upon their own beliefs and how their beliefs prompted them to act in certain given situations.

From the outset, Stautzen resented the fact that the primary element of the program had been labeled as the "psychological stimulus element." To him, there was nothing psychological about it. There was only one aspect to life that prompted people to believe what they believe and to act the way they act. That aspect centered on religious beliefs. All good and evil stemmed from a person's religious background. If what a person believed was in error, then what a person did was in error.

Dr. Loran then proceeded to give a detailed account of how beliefs really stem from a person's sociological and geographical upbringing. He agreed with Stautzen that religious beliefs did influence behavior, but that was only because religion was an existing sociological dynamic. He argued that a person is religious simply because their parents and grandparents were religious and those beliefs were passed on from generation to generation. Stautzen of course, disagreed. He refused to believe he was a Christian simply because his parents were Christian and that his most treasured beliefs were nothing more than hand-me-down habits.

Davia had been one of the most silent participants in the group, but thought her input might be helpful to the discussion. She spoke shyly, but with clarity, in a high pitched voice that added to the tension in the air. First of all, she claimed she was neither Christian nor a believer of any organized religion and that as an atheist, she still possessed an able set of values and beliefs.

Stautzen was quick to attack her logic much to the embarrassment of the others. He could not believe she was really an atheist, nor did he believe there was such a thing.

Dr. Loran prepared to speak again by leaning forward and raising his hand. He carried an air of authority, which captivated everyone's attention. He considered himself to be a man of great intellect and thought Davia's frail way of explaining her point needed to be strengthened. He stated Davia had simply given up the religion she'd been raised on due to a sequence of unfortunate circumstances. After losing her religion, she latched on to another set of beliefs, which emphasized the non-existence of God and had brought comfort into her life. None would argue his point, except Davia, who didn't feel the least bit vindicated, yet she was too shy to press her point. Dr. Loran seemed pleased, twisting the ends of his mustache between his fingers as he leaned back in his chair.

Stautzen fumed with indignation.

Jean spoke up, "And what of your beliefs, Dr. Loran?"

"What about them?"

"I guess all religious beliefs are to you like a vapor, neither here nor there. It all comes down to whether we sat on daddy's knee and were told stories of God, Mohammed, or Darwin."

He stroked the chin of his beard formulating a response. He didn't even look bothered—just challenged. He thrived on debate and arguments that challenged his wit, and there would be no need for emotions in arguments of a scientific nature.

Jean grew frustrated by his silence. "If we are to believe what you say, then what even you believe is a learned response to stimuli. Even if you could verify your assumptions with scientific evidence, you're simply repeating what others have said before you. Belief is either real or not. Correct?"

Dr. Loran was quite comfortable with the fact that his own beliefs were beliefs he simply learned from others. He didn't claim to be original, but he did feel that if people know why they believe what they do,

it is far better than believing something because somebody told them to believe it. "You're right Jean, what I believe I have learned. I suppose that makes my beliefs just as valid as anyone else's beliefs. However, people should know why they believe what they do, rather than mimicking what others tell them to believe. He looked around the group to ascertain if he was getting his point across and saw he wasn't. "In most cases involving religion, people arrive at the most whimsical and erroneous conclusions about anything!"

"Wait just a minute Dr.—"

"Please, let me finish. My point is this. Most religious beliefs are based on stories and superstitions. That doesn't make believing in something less important, it just means you should have confidence in what you believe. And you can only get that through scientific evidence or by personal experience."

"And what of death, Dr. Loran. To what purpose does science give us concerning life after death?" Stautzen asked.

"There's no life after death," he replied calmly, though his response seemed uncertain.

"Then your scientific argument is impotent. In those areas that concern the human soul, it comes up short. Sure, science can tell me the color of an apple is red because it absorbs every other color than red. It can tell me how the flavor of an apple rests on the tongue and is absorbed by taste, which depending on certain variables will tell me whether I like the flavor or not. But on the other hand, I don't have to give you a reason for why I like the apple. Furthermore, I have the pleasure of knowing that a Supreme Being created that apple for me to enjoy, which is a pleasure in and of itself," replied Stautzen.

"You don't know that for sure," Dr. Loran insisted.

"And you, Dr. Loran, can't tell us how the apple descended from that chunk of microscopic matter that existed shortly before the big bang," Stautzen blurted back.

Throughout this debate, Rick had failed to comprehend the passion to which Stautzen and Dr. Loran espoused their views. Rick had

searched desperately to find any situation in his own life where he could find the origins of his own convictions, but came up empty. This puzzled him greatly. Not being able to identify any particular event that would give substance to his beliefs, made him wonder if he actually believed in the Christian traditions in which he was raised. He'd never really questioned his beliefs because he never really had to. For him, the Christian traditions he was raised on had worked. They'd provided him with a working set of values to conduct his life, and the proof of their relevance could be found in the measure of his success. Having thought through this dilemma, he knew it was time to put an end to this argument and turn the group towards more pertinent issues.

"We need to recognize that the nature of belief is not as important as knowing that belief works. By this I mean, that regardless of what one believes, whether that be Christianity," he said addressing Stautzen, "or scientific analysis," he said, looking towards Dr. Loran, "belief is what gives people a purpose. It provides them with answers to their questions about life."

Dr. Loran silently agreed with him. He thought Rick had understood him well and he cracked a slight smile.

Stautzen on the other hand, had a vested interest that the project target individuals who were seeking God and some form of religion. The program would be worthless to the ICC without this particular dynamic and he realized he would have to adjust his line of reasoning. "Mitch Pruitt brought up the suggestion that we look into building the program around what we have been discussing. I'm willing to consent to Dr. Loran, the world revolves around religious beliefs, erroneous beliefs, and perhaps even…superstitions."

Dr. Loran looked up from the table towards Stautzen, completing the smile he'd begun a few moments earlier.

Stautzen kept the momentum going. "We should play up this part of the program. The people who will be most affected by this program will be those who rely on religion with all its mystical and mind con-

trolling influences. The more scientific a person is, the less likely they will be to recognize the subliminal affects of the program. Anything we tell them to do might be simply reasoned away. Lord knows," he said jokingly, "there are definitely more superstitious people than there are practical people in this world."

Everyone agreed with him, but none more than Dr. Loran.

"Good, we're finally headed in the right direction," Rick said.

The team then focused their attention on isolating the specific components of the psychological stimuli element. Their purpose was to find those dynamics of belief that have the greatest impact on the intellectual and emotional mechanisms of the human mind. Dr. Loran and Stautzen shot off various suggestions. Davia played the part of secretary and was thorough in summarizing their findings into a readable format. She listed their points into a series of "rules," which would provide them with a working model.

Rule 1. *Belief is central to action.* People act in harmony with their beliefs, regardless of whether those beliefs can be proved to be right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable.

Rule 2. *Messianic complex.* This rule states that the more a believer conceptualizes his or her own beliefs as superior to the beliefs of others, the more likely that person will not tolerate or accept the beliefs of others.

Rule 3. *Fear.* Fear is the greatest motivational factor. For the believer, the loss of salvation and immortality will keep the believer focused on their beliefs. They will not deviate from traditional teachings, for even questioning them might mean the loss of eternal life.

Rule 4. *Safety in numbers.* This rule states that people are more likely to succumb to and follow a particular set of doctrinal beliefs as the number of believers who share their beliefs increases.

Though simplistic in its design, the team was pleased with the list they'd created. Their four rules encapsulated the most important

dynamics of belief and read like a resume of the psychological background of all believers, regardless of their cultural and sociological upbringing.

Originally, each member had been hired and given few specifics as to what the program was all about, except Stautzen. Watson had hired him through the recommendation of Reverend Eisner. Watson and the reverend had been adamant that the creation of the program be used to further the religious and political goals of the ICC. They were counting on Stautzen's powers of persuasion to get the job done, but cautioned him that in leading the group to accept the ICC's agenda as a working model, he should not give them the impression this aspect of the program had been fixed. Which is precisely why Stautzen was completely surprised that Pruitt, while at lunch on Monday, had immediately informed the team that the program was to be built around the ICC as a model. He could now see Pruitt's logic in tossing Reverend Eisner's book on the table. It streamlined the brainstorming and allowed the group to swallow the idea early on. Stautzen could tell, however, there were doubts still lingering in some of the members.

"Some of you are concerned that the virus will be built around the ideologies of the ICC. Perhaps I can ease your fears and help you see the logic in proceeding that way. We really have only two possible options anyway. One option would be to make up our own religion. The other option would be to use one already in existence; hence, the ICC. The virus must be precisely targeted. We don't have the time to develop a new idea or philosophy that people might follow. This could take decades. We are going to have to rely on short informational bleeps to try and get people to swallow something much bigger, which is why our focus should be on getting people to follow a religion that already exists. This means, they are going to have to be somewhat familiar with the concept we're trying to get across to them."

"Like the ideologies of the ICC?" Dr. Loran jokingly asked.

"Exactly," replied Stautzen.

"I don't get it Stautzen. You work for this organization. Why would you want to have a program built around their ideologies, that would later be destroyed by the security program? It seems in your best interest to—"

Dr. Loran cut Rick off. Stautzen was grateful he did. "Then our best course of action would be to develop a program that would destroy the ICC's influence upon people." With one statement Dr. Loran had taken the creation of the program from idea to reality.

"We can't do that. That's not our job," Rick said, disagreeing with the direction that the discussion had turned.

"Why not? We're not playing around here. This is a real opportunity to invoke positive change." Dr. Loran said appealing to the entire team.

"Because it's not our place," Rick countered.

"Sure it is." Dr. Loran continued. "I can't think of anything more threatening and potentially dangerous than the infringement of individual liberty. It's a universal dilemma and should be considered as one of the essential ingredients to the program. The worst-case scenario is for this technology to get in the hands of either a political or religious power and then used to influence unsuspecting people to subscribe to their way of thinking. If there is a villain to this whole scenario, it would seem to me to be that of the Christian fundamentalists. Historically, their purpose has always been to control. It's not the humanists we need to worry about, because they could really care less about what people think. The most decadent forms of human rights abuses have always occurred when religious institutions have been in power. Targeting the ICC is a perfect starting point. If we can build a program to stop the influence that the ICC has on people, then we'll be building a program that has a chance of stopping similar organizations."

"Dr. Loran's point is a good one," Jean startled the team by saying. "Target the ICC. I'm sure Stautzen can tell us all about them and specifically, how they approach and win new converts to their cause. We design our program with the assumption they're building a program

themselves. We ask the same questions they would ask and we implement the same methods and tactics they would use. It may not be exact in every detail, but if and when the time comes when an organization of their magnitude were to use such a program, then our security measures should be able to stop them."

There was little more Stautzen needed to say. He listened to their silence as an indication of their acceptance.

Rick, however, was skeptical. He wasn't entirely opposed to the plan. Focusing on the fundamentalists provided the team with a working model. Given the fact that the ICC was a working organization also added a new dimension to the program. It gave the program a sense of realism that took it beyond the experimental stage. Even so, something didn't seem right to him. He thought it might have something to do with his own belief that the fundamentalist influence on America as a good thing. He didn't find it to be a personal threat and could think of more than a half-dozen examples where their agenda had made positive changes. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the idea was introduced by Stautzen. Perhaps Rick was simply suspicious of the German, whose presence in the group seemed suspect. Or maybe it had something to do with the psychological stimuli element itself. Frankly, it just plain bored him. His real interest was in the technical creation of the program. After he'd given it some thought, he determined he was happy the week was drawing to a close and that this portion of the program had been settled. He didn't like committees and certainly didn't like discussions centering on theology, abstract theories, and psychological fluff.

Next week the team would be splitting up. Jean and Rick would begin working on the technical aspects program. Dr. Loran, Stautzen, and Davia would begin their research and synopsis of the ICC. Rick was confident they would succeed despite the nature and intensity of the team members. He was anxious to work with Jean, whom he found stimulating from more than an intellectual standpoint. He'd suspected

for sometime there might be others who knew more than he did about the world of computers, but he'd never met one as attractive as Jean.

CHAPTER 15

"Is he still out there?" Shelly asked.

"Ja, but I've got things to do and I can't stay cooped up in here all day."

"Where are you headed?"

"Out! Call me if you need me."

She reached for her briefcase and nervously walked up the stairs leading to the street. Without even glancing at Derrick she hopped into her Opel and headed toward the Untermain-brucke towards Frankfurt. She thought she'd lost him for a moment, but as she cleared the bridge on the other side of the river she saw the top of his van cresting the curve of the bridge about a half-kilometer behind her. After crossing the bridge, she started wandering aimlessly through the tight city streets. Right at the Theaterplatz, past the Romer, left on Haseng, a short zigzag past the corners of Holzgraben and Schaferg. He was still behind her. Just up the road was a five-point intersection centering on the congestion of Eschenheimer Tor. One street banked off to the right and a choice of three streets darted off to the left. She veered left and opted for Hochstrasse at the last possible moment. When she came upon the Alte Opera a minute later, he was still in her rearview mirror.

Indignantly amused, she chuckled. She'd always been able to justify her own methods of surveillance, but found it ironic that her methods

were now being used to track her. She was used to being the hunter, not the hunted. She knew of course, that since Derrick was following her, the CRM was fully aware of her investigation, but this was beside the point. It still gave him no right to follow her around. Her attitude originated from the fact that up to this point all of the investigations she'd done were clear-cut and without any personal threat to her life. Once she began an investigation, she wouldn't stop until she thought there was enough evidence to convict. By the time her enemies knew what was happening, they were under the merciless hands of the media or the law. Now, for the first time, her investigation had been compromised. The vision of the man in her rearview mirror shook her confidence, rattling loose another emotion she rarely experienced—fear.

She was not accustomed to the depths in which this fear now plunged her. She quickly found the A-66 and drove towards Hochst. She thought about going back to the backerei to see her parents where she would feel safe. Fortunately, she had the presence of mind not to lead Derrick there. Going home was not an option either. So, without even realizing it, she'd driven beyond Hochst into Hattersheim and parked in front of Stroof's Photo where Stace worked. Fumbling for her bag on the seat, she leaped out of her car, hurrying up the short flight of stairs leading into the front office. She stepped inside the glass door then turned around and looked up and down the street.

"Can I help you?" a woman behind a counter asked in German, thinking she needed directions.

"I need to talk with Stace Manning."

The woman behind the counter picked up the intercom microphone. Eva heard her voice blast into a warehouse beyond a closed door. "Stace Manning, please come to the front lobby," the woman said. Her second request was more of a directive.

In the warehouse Stace was busy cutting five by seven pictures of blurred shots of the old train station in Frankfurt. It was the first time he'd ever heard his name called and he wondered why. Mr. Paterson's office was up that way. He stalled for a moment and finished cropping

the poorly taken photos as best he could. He shoved them into a package along with the original negatives. Placing his hands flat on the workbench before him he hung his head, and couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong. For months he'd worked this same table, fine-tuning his monotonous sequences of movements, which he could now do with his eyes closed.

Slowly, the van crept down the street towards Stroof's photo like a metallic blue cat stalking, wheels turning like flipping paws searching for a flash of orange; a sign of Eva's car. Eva caught sight of the van and backed away from the door, falling into one of the chairs along the wall. Her heart throbbed like a water balloon bouncing along the pavement.

"Eva! What are you doing here?" Stace asked, popping his head through the door of the warehouse.

She jumped out of her seat. "I thought you might need a ride home."

"I'd rather take the S-Bahn," he said bluntly.

Her face turned pale.

"Only kidding."

She raised her eyes and smiled tensely.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"Not yet." He pulled back his shirtsleeve and checked his Swatch. "Can you wait about twenty minutes?"

"Ja."

She sat down folding her hands around her knees, glancing around the lobby nervously, trying to ease her anxiety. No doubt Derrick had spotted her car in the parking lot and was waiting for her to resurface. Time passed sluggishly on the huge clock on the wall, a Fuji promotional giveaway. Its face was a blown up photo of a giant box of film. Out of the dot in the *i* of the name Fuji, the long black hour and second hand converged. The minute hand lurched forward every sixty seconds. The woman behind the counter shuffled through orders and cracked a smile of indifference towards her.

When Stace got off work they jumped into her Opel and headed up the street out of Hattersheim. Neither one of them spoke until they approached the Main Taunus exit on the autobahn. Eva was busy looking in her rearview mirror and Stace was watching her movements with suspicion.

"You busy tonight?" she asked.

"Not really. There was that show I wanted to catch but—"

She slapped him on the shoulder. At the Main Taunus exit she traveled north towards Bad Soden into the Taunus Mountains. About a kilometer up the road she swerved at the last moment into the far right lane then onto the access road. Stace seized the handle of the door, but said nothing. At the light she took a hard left, went over the autobahn and entered the parking lot of a shopping center.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"No," he said, distracted by her actions.

She veered into the back parking lot and Stace expected her to park, but she kept circling and circling, up one aisle, down the next, up another, all the while keeping her eyes in the rearview mirror. It finally occurred to him she wasn't looking for a place to park. Suddenly, she dashed around the side of the building into the front parking lot. She found a spot at the end of one of the rows and double parked. She still wasn't offering any information and he wasn't about to ask. They sat there a full three minutes before she shoved the Opel into drive and just barely missed a car coming down one of the rows. She headed towards the exit, went back over the autobahn and continued north towards the Taunus Mountains.

"Well, since you weren't hungry, I thought we'd go for a little ride."

"A ride?"

Meanwhile in the parking lot, Derrick drove towards the front of the mall and slammed the van into park. He surveyed the front parking area, but couldn't spot her Opel. Shifting the van into drive, he circled the mall and ran through the back parking lot. Seeing no trace of the car, he slapped the steering wheel and headed out of the parking lot.

Driving as slow as a snail over the overpass, he looked in both directions over the autobahn passing under him. They were nowhere in sight. "Crap!" he grumbled.

"So where are we headed?" Stace shouted above the roar of the wind whipping through the windows. A sharp ninety-degree turn loomed ahead.

Eva took her foot off the gas and stomped on the brake pedal. Tires screeched and Stace held on as the Opel nearly flipped over into the ditch on the right side of the road. Eva quickly regained control and they came to a sudden stop at the first traffic light in Bad Sodden.

"Sorry, Stace. We had a lot happen at the office today and I can't get it out of my mind."

Stace loosened his grip on the door handle.

They drove through the quaint town and she turned right onto a thinner road that began winding up through the Taunus forest. After five kilometers, she took a left and pulled into an unpaved lot. She parked next to a silver Audi, the only car in sight. They got out and stood for a moment in the silence. Above them loomed a canopy of enormous pine and fir trees draped in moss. These rose like spears thrust into a forest floor of field grass speckled with sprigs of wood ferns.

"Beautiful isn't it?" she asked, but again, she was just saying words. Her mind was elsewhere. Stace followed her as she headed up a hiking trail speckled with loose stones.

"Beautiful," he thought to himself, for a moment dropping his suspicion of her behavior. He hiked for a few minutes, and stopped, taking in a breath of fresh air. The atmosphere within the forest carried with it no particular aroma, or at least one in which he could identify, but it was sharp and cool, invigorating his senses. He took in another deep breath then ran up the trail joining Eva.

"It'll be dark here in another forty-five minutes," she said.

He looked up through the trees. Their tips were sprinkled with flecks of sunset. As they continued, the forest floor darkened with each step.

"Have you ever felt like giving it all up and running away," she asked without turning towards him.

"Giving what up?"

"The rat race," she replied.

"Sometimes."

"I forgot. You're a bit on the run yourself aren't you?"

"I don't think you can ever run away. You can leave one place for another, but all you really end up doing is trading one set of circumstances for another. You still wake up as yourself in the morning no matter where you lay you head."

She slipped on a loose stone and he caught her by the elbow.

"Sure, I may have swapped countries for a while, but I still have to earn a living. Still have the same troubles on my mind." He stopped rambling for a moment and glanced at her. She'd not looked at him since they started up the trail and he wondered if she was even listening to him. "And I'm still looking for that one person to share my dreams with."

She kept hiking and they said nothing until they crested the top of the ridge. The trees along the edge were coated in the diffused orange light from the setting sun. Just over the ridge was an open meadow stretching downwards into a shallow valley. Clumps of wild grass and sprigs of violet flowers dressed it. Adolescent pines encircled its border. Beyond the meadow was a series of overlapping ridges and valleys, gradually descending in the distance towards Wiesbaden. At the edge of the world the sun appeared like a cotton ball dyed in burnt orange, nesting in an ocean of cream on the horizon.

"Let's sit here," she said.

He sat down next to her and looked behind him towards the parking area. He could still make out the silver Audi, now dulled to the color of old nickel. "Besides, it's not really running away. I prefer to see

it as maturing. Sometimes you have to let go of the things in life you can't change and move on."

"What's America like," she asked, for the first time looking at him.

"It was wonderful—still is wonderful. There are places in America where you can get lost. Places like here in the mountains where you can be who you are and the world can be the way it is. Places where you discover what you thought was important was really not important."

"What do you mean?

"That there are other things in life to think about rather than making a living, and sometimes you have to be willing to walk away in order to notice them."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound."

"It's as easy as you want it to be. Remember when you were a child? Didn't you and your brother fight?

"Not often."

"What'd you fight about?"

"Alfred used to take my hair brush and hide it from me."

"A real crisis!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "It was at the time. He'd bug the crap out of me!"

"It's not so important anymore is it?"

"Of course not, we grew up."

"And now you have bigger problems?"

"Yeah. I do. Problems either I or the world won't grow out of."

"Does that mean you have to fight them all your life?"

She leaned back on her arms. The sun had set, but her face was still lit in a soft glow. How he wished he could creep inside her mind to listen to what she was thinking.

"As hard as I try the problems just keep coming. I finish one investigation and another one gets dropped on my desk." She sighed in frustration.

"That's because there are more criminals then you could ever hope to stop."

"Is that why you left, Stace? Did you not have the will to fight the university's decision, or because you didn't want to even try?"

He looked towards Wiesbaden. The edge of the horizon was no longer visible, obscured by an impenetrable haze of darkness. Only a hint of pink remained in the sky above. "I think there's more to life than fighting, even fighting for what you believe in. I don't think it has anything to do with being a coward."

"I didn't say you were a coward."

"Not in those words, but call it the way you see it. There's a point where you need to settle in and enjoy life. Even old soldiers have to retire at some point and leave the battle for the younger ones. It doesn't mean you quit fighting altogether, it means you…well, you just have to let it go!"

He stood and Eva was startled by his outburst. She reached for his hand. He was looking away from her, fixed on some point in the darkness, fidgeting. She touched his hand delicately at first, but he didn't respond. She gripped it with conviction, then tugged on it. "I didn't mean to upset you. Sit down."

"You didn't upset me. I upset myself. Everything is as serious as you make it to be, or as comical as you want it to be. I would like to believe life is wonderful. There are too many things to enjoy and experience without having to focus on the injustices twenty-four hours a day. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. But even though I'm in Germany, I can't seem to let go of my past. It's as if I'm dragging behind me this huge steel ball on a chain and until I reconcile the past I'll never be able to move forward." He was calm now, his words softer, blending into the swirl of the breeze flowing through the trees.

"Was it the university's decision or something that Rick—"

"Tell you the truth it's all running together now. As an artist I understand my work might be rejected. But I don't just shoot pictures to try and make a living. I shoot as an expression of who I am. I'm always conscious of the impression I would like to leave on the world. When I was young, I was much more egotistical about my work. I

don't know if I can explain this accurately without you misunderstanding me, but I thought I had some special gift, that my work would have some profound impact in the world…"

"But it—"

"I was wrong. Just because you think you're something special doesn't mean others think so."

She knew that he was thinking about the individuals responsible for excluding him from the exhibit. They not only succeeded in banishing him from the exhibit, but they had altered the course of his life. What they had done may have seemed incidental to them, but for Stace, the significance of their actions replayed themselves over and over in his mind, undermining his confidence and rendering him creatively impotent.

"I know who I am as an artist. That's much more important than what a few people may think of my work. Any real artist creates from an unspoken need to create and not through a need to be accepted," he said.

Now she knew, he was lying to himself. In an effort to forget his pain, he was reasoning away the injustice done to him and he was looking for a reason to continue his work. He was stuck in a theoretical nowhere land, striving to maintain his identity as an artist, but couldn't, as long as there were people like Rick Forstein in the world.

As Eva listened to him and imagined what the source of his troubles were, she tried to put them into the context of what she was going through. It occurred to her, that here was a man with deep convictions similar to hers and they shared in struggles the average man or woman wouldn't consider as important. Through art, he wrestled and expressed his understanding of the greater issues of life. Though his impressions may have seemed impractical and abstract, they were nevertheless, relevant. She understood as well the importance of art, that in its abstractions it also had a way of being brutally honest about life. She, on the other hand, was practical in her desire to change the world for the better. Due to that practicality, she was forced to face head-on

those who abused the laws and to hold them accountable for their actions.

She gazed into the sky above. It was taking on a mud puddle diffusion of approaching blackness. The forest still had detail to its elements, but behind them in the direction of her car was nothing but blackness. She thought of Derrick and wondered if he was lurking somewhere, then looked at Stace. The last thing she wanted tonight was to be alone. But there was more to it. She liked this man…she more than liked him.

In his weakness she discovered a peculiar strength, a man who had the courage to face his vulnerabilities. She'd not seen this quality in men. The extent of his confession revealed he lived well above the testosterone challenges other men associate with their own rites of passage. And he had said something to her that continued to impress her. He'd said, "There is more to life than fighting—even fighting for what you believe in." As she thought about that statement, she wondered what it would be like to give up her own fight, to begin focusing on other things in life beyond her work at the Schwarz Monatlich. The thought was totally foreign to her, but acknowledging it as a possibility electrified her with a sense of hope. She was beginning to realize her attraction to Stace was deepening and it was based primarily on his openness and not hers. She knew that if their relationship was going to continue—if she was to one day know this man—then she would have to be much more honest with him than she'd been. A full disclosure of her work was not warranted, but he would have to be made aware of the possible dangers.

"Stace…I haven't been totally honest with you."

He looked towards her tentatively. She was staring out into the distance with an expression he'd never seen.

"I haven't been entirely dishonest with you, but there are things you should know."

"I'm all ears."

"We were followed by someone into the shopping center."

"Followed? Are you sure?"

"Ja. The man showed up outside my office this morning. He waited for me to leave then followed me to where you work. I lost him in the parking lot."

"Are you sure he's not still around?" Stace asked, glancing towards the car.

"Pretty sure."

"Do you know who he is?"

"His name is Derrick Sachs. He's a member of an organization called the Christian Reform Movement in Frankfurt."

"Why would they be following you around?"

"I don't know."

"I think we should head back to the car," he said jumping to his feet. He gave Eva his hand and pulled her up.

"Are they dangerous?"

"I have no reason to believe they are, but then again, we haven't discovered what they're all about."

"This sort of thing is common in your line of work?"

"Not really. Never a situation like this."

It occurred to him that whoever had followed her now knew about him.

She stopped and faced him. "I didn't mean to get you involved. I was scared this afternoon and without even thinking about it I ended up at your work."

"Don't worry about it. It's probably nothing."

He didn't believe this, but thought she needed to hear it. They found the car and wound their way down the mountains.

"Do you know what this guy looks like?

"Ja."

"Do you have a photo of him?"

"A small one, in my briefcase, along with some of the other members of the CRM."

He took that as permission and yanked her briefcase out of the backseat. “Do you mind?” he asked clicking the locks open.

“Actually I do, let me get them.”

He opened the case towards her and flipped on the dome light. She pulled out the envelope with the prints.

He spread the small photos out in his hand like cards. “Three men and one woman. Which one’s him?”

“That one.”

He brought the picture up to his face and leaned into the light. “Are you sure this is the same man that was following us today?”

“I’m sure.”

“I need to see a larger photo.”

“Those are the only one’s I have.”

“Then let’s get them enlarged.”

“I don’t want you involved. Besides, I can’t let the prints out of my sight.”

“You won’t have to. I’ve got a copy machine at my apartment, along with a make-shift photo lab.”

“You have a photo lab in your apartment?”

“It’s what I do. Would you expect anything less?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, you don’t need to be involved.”

“I already am. We can do it right now. It’ll take less than an hour and you can watch. Besides, I’d feel better if I didn’t let you out of my sight.”

CHAPTER 16

Tasha slipped a cotton glove over her left hand, grabbed a wooden spoon with the other, bent over the pot of kartoffelsuppe simmering on the stove, and carefully lifted a spoonful of broth to her lips. The potatoes were perfect and mingled well with the diced celery and onions. The dill and salt were fine, but the pepper was lacking. She sprinkled in a few dashes, freckling the creamy surface. Satisfied, she moved the pot over three bowls and poured. At that moment the oven buzzed and she pulled the huhnerkeule out of the oven. She knew about five ways to prepare chicken, but thought it best roasted. Within a few minutes, she had it sliced onto plates, garnishing each plate with a fork full of relish and two dinner rolls.

Through the door of the kitchen she saw Neil working out of his briefcase as usual on the dining room table. She never asked about his work, even though he performed the ritual every night. As his custom was, he would finish the work he brought home from the office around 7:00 p.m., before turning his attention to the work of the ministry. She'd learned from experience there was only one thing he could be interrupted with from the moment he got home to the time he retired at night. That was dinner and he liked it hot. So, without hesitation she carried the plateful of food out to him and set the bowl of potato stew next to it. She smiled, even though she didn't expect him to

return the gesture. She liked to believe he appreciated dinner just the same, and all the other things she did for him and Derrick and for the cause. She returned to the kitchen and ripped off a sheet of aluminum foil, folding the edges around the lip of Derrick's plate and wondered what could be keeping him. She debated on whether to put his dinner in the fridge or to leave it covered on the counter. Either way, there would be consequences if she failed to make the right choice. The door handle turned, making her choice an easy one.

Derrick had reason to be in a good mood. He'd had a productive day following the black man in the Fiat to the Schwarz Monatlich, then following the woman in the Opel around. He would not tell Neil he'd lost her in the parking lot of the mall, rather, that the hour had gotten late and he thought he should return to the apartment. Since Tasha was present at the table, he would sit on his report until later.

While Tasha and Derrick ate in silence, Neil returned to his work behind his briefcase. This routine had become unbearable to Tasha. Every evening Neil scribbled figures and shuffled papers behind his briefcase. Derrick would say little if anything, grunting and slurping his way through dinner. And she would quietly listen to the rhythm of her own food crunch and slide down her throat. Tonight was no different, except that Neil suddenly collected his papers, tossed them into the briefcase, closed the lid with a slam and dropped the case with a thump on the floor beside him. He moved so quickly even Derrick stopped chewing and looked up.

"Was?" Neil asked. "I'm sick of working for these people. They suck the life right out of you."

Tasha and Derrick glared at him. He never lost control. No matter what the circumstances he was always calm. Actually, Tasha was wondering why Neil even bothered to work in the first place. Like other ministries, the CRM regularly solicited for donations. These donations were sufficient enough to allow all three of them to quit their jobs and devote their entire energy towards the ministry. But Neil insisted they run the ministry like a business. What income they received from

donations was returned back into it, so they could continue to reach more people. It was a labor of duty.

Tonight, however, his attitude was different. Perhaps he was finally considering it time to resign his position, so that he could actively pursue what he considered to be the Lord's work. This coming Monday evening, he would be expecting a call from Stautzen in the United States. He looked forward to this call with great anticipation. If the news from Stautzen was good, if the virus could be built, it would signal a turn for the better in the CRM's ministry, and it would be irresponsible for him to continue working.

But work wasn't the only thing on his mind. For he believed that his ministry, in conjunction with the ICC, was designated by God to carry on the final work of bringing the gospel to the world. He knew Satan and his angels would do anything to stop them. That assault had already begun. Neil could tell from the expression on Derrick's face that he was anxious to fill him in on the details of the assault.

He turned to Tasha. "Tasha, that was good. I know I don't often say so, but I appreciate the meals you make."

She smiled coyly, enjoying the moment and thought the gesture sincere.

"If you don't mind, Derrick and I need to discuss something."

Tasha missed the hint.

"Do you mind?" Derrick said raising his voice slightly.

"No, I'm sorry. I'll start on the kitchen."

"You can wait on that until later," Derrick pressed.

"Well, okay," she whispered and backed into the hallway.

"What did you find out?" Neil asked after hearing Tasha's bedroom door close.

Derrick recapped for him everything he'd found out, giving him detailed descriptions of the black man and the German woman. Then he reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a folded copy of the Schwarz Monatlich and tossed it on the table.

"What's wrong?" Derrick asked after Neil noticed who the publisher was.

"You don't know?" Neil explained to him that the Schwarz Monatlich was notorious for its success when investigating corrupt organizations. Derrick understood. The danger was clear. If the Schwarz Monatlich had begun an investigation of their ministry, then their entire plans regarding the implementation of the virus was in jeopardy.

"What else?" Neil asked.

"I also followed the woman into Hattershiem. She picked up an American at a place called Stroof's Photo."

"An American…are you sure?"

"Not entirely. He may have been European, but he definitely was dressed like an American: blue-jeans, high-top tennis shoes, English words on his shirt—"

"I see what you mean. What's his interest in the woman, or more specifically, his connection to the Schwarz Monatlich?"

Derrick was silent.

"Stroof's Photo…the developing company?"

"He probably works there, maybe developing film or something—"

"I don't like it," Neil said, stabbing his chicken with his fork. "Where'd they go?"

Derrick thought of the excuse he was going to use but it escaped him. Neil would probably know if he wasn't telling the truth anyway. "I followed them to the shopping center just outside of Hochst. The Main Taunus Einkaufszentrum."

"And?"

"I lost them in the parking lot."

Neil took a deep breath. He twirled the fork in his fingers then balanced it carefully on the edge of his plate. "I see."

"Do you think they discovered you were following them?" His words came sharp. He expected the truth.

"I don't know."

"We're going to assume they know we're on to their investigation. They'll move even quicker now, because they'll expect us to be covering our tracks."

"You suppose they know about Stautzen and the virus?"

"I doubt it, but we don't know what the American knows. We don't know who he's working for. He could be assisting the paper with their investigation. He could even be working with Trojan Security."

"This is not good, Neil."

Now both of them were thinking. "Why the investigation? Who was the American? Had the program been compromised?" Both of them turned the ramifications of these questions over in their minds, and both arrived at the same conclusion; the program was God-ordained. There might be a few setbacks, but it was destined to succeed and with that as their assurance, they must do everything in their power to ensure that it did.

"What do you suggest?" Derrick asked Neil. He made few decisions on his own, especially one of this magnitude.

"To start, you should quit your job."

"Then what?"

"Tomorrow, go directly to Hatteshiem and Stroof's Photo. If the American does work there, follow him after he gets off. Find out where he lives."

"What about Tasha?"

"We leave her out of this. The less she's involved the better, but I'm going to tell her to quit her job too. We need someone here at the apartment in case they try something."

"What about you?" Derrick asked.

"I'll hand in my resignation Tuesday. I should give them at least a month, but I'll give them a week. I can't just quit on them. If the paper comes sniffing around, I want them to know I left on good terms."

"Maintain the appearance?"

"Exactly. Everything's business as usual, as if we know nothing about the paper's investigation." Neil said.

CHAPTER 17

"Just follow Wiesenfeldstrassa around the corner," Stace told Eva.

She followed the single lane asphalt road as it curved to the right. On her left was the Nidda Canal, running black as night.

"Last house on the right, under the street light. Park behind the BMW."

"I didn't realize you were so close to the pool. They'll be closing this weekend for the winter."

Stace stuck his hand out the window and felt the chill on his fingers. Ahead near the streetlight stood an old poplar tree. Most of its leaves had already fallen. Those that remained spun in the breeze of a cold front blowing in from Bremerhaven in the north. In the headlights of her car, a flurry of leaves danced. "I didn't know. I still can't read most German signs. I probably would have showed up the following weekend and been the only stupid American standing in front of the gates waiting for them to open."

They walked down the pebble driveway running along the right side of the house. Next to a downstairs window on the lower level was an opening lit by a light on the wall. Beyond the opening, a skinny staircase led up to the second floor and his apartment.

"Let me take your coat and I'll show you my photo lab," he said, once they stepped inside. He walked down the hall and into the bath-

room, and turned on a switch that bathed the room in a warm, reddish glow.

She had no idea what a photo lab might look like, but this one seemed like it had it all. In fact, she completely overlooked the bathtub to her right as her eyes drifted towards a conglomeration of stuff to her left. Most of the equipment lay on the long table against the wall. An enlarger stood in the far corner. Along the front of the table was a neat row of plastic pans full of liquid. Behind the pans were four or five coffee cans filled with strange utensils and several gallon sized metal containers listing ingredients with unrecognizable names.

"I still prefer the old methods of taking pictures and developing. I refuse to go digital."

He switched the red light off and the room was swallowed in darkness. She felt the heat of his body move within inches from her.

"Do you have the negatives?" he asked in a whisper, his breath teasing her bangs.

"Negatives? I've got prints, Stace, and the disk."

He took a step back. "I forgot. Give me the prints and I'll enlarge them on the copy machine."

"I forgot them in the car."

"Why don't you run back downstairs and get them?"

While she went to the car, Stace headed for the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of apple wine off the counter, two jelly glasses from the cupboard, and poured. When Eva returned, he handed her a glass. "Here you go."

"What's this?"

"Exactly what it looks like. You've had an exciting day. The prints…" he said, holding out his hand and leading her down the hallway.

"So, tell me about the investigation you're working on."

"The assignment was Mr. Schwarz's idea."

"And it's not exciting enough for you?" he asked, placing a print on the glass of the scanner.

"I'm used to investigating other kinds of crimes and people. But I wouldn't say any of those investigations have been dangerous."

He listened to her synopsis with great interest. From the way she carried herself, one would never have guessed the line of work she was involved in.

"This religious organization…what did you called them?"

"The Christian Reform Movement."

"Kind of dull? Same old run of the mill, save the world kind of stuff?"

"So far, yes. Until Derrick, one of their members, started following me today."

"Us, you mean."

"But you've got nothing to do with it."

He pushed a button and the machine starting making a copy of the print. "You and I know that, but do they?"

For a moment she considered how it must have looked to Derrick when she picked Stace up at work. "I didn't really think—"

"Don't worry about it. What's the worse they could do? Chase us down on the street and shove literature down our throats?"

"That would be embarrassing," she said.

"Seriously though, there must be more to their interest in you, otherwise, they wouldn't be following you."

"Could be. The movement might be linked to another organization known as the International Christian Coalition."

"The ICC?" he asked, looking at her for the first time after placing a second print on the glass.

"Yeah. Have you heard of them?"

"I don't know all the details about them, but they're well known in the states. Based out of Munich I believe."

"How'd you know?"

"Common knowledge. Tell you what, the bottle of wine is on the kitchen table. Do me a favor and refill my glass. I'll finish and meet you in the living room."

A full ten minutes passed before he came walking down the hall. "Hungry?" He asked, poking his head into the living room.

"Starved."

"I'll get something and be right with you."

She started to rise.

"I'll get it. Relax."

He dropped a few copies of the prints off in his storage room and went into the kitchen. A few minutes later, he'd whipped up a couple of tuna sandwiches and set them on a plate along with crackers and Swiss cheese.

"That was quick."

"Eating's a necessity. What I buy makes up fast and just keeps me moving. The tuna should go great with the apple wine," he said, twisting his lips in disgust.

"You have quite a CD collection."

"You're joking, right? Think I've got about fifteen or so at last count. My real love is in the storage room where I keep my photos."

"Small collection but a good one. I like your taste in music, but there are a few artists I'm not familiar with."

Her use of the word "artists" struck him. Most people consider an artist to be someone who paints. Some might go so far as to call a musician an artist, but to Stace her choice of the word indicated the depth to which she understood the nature of those who create. "Artist…" he thought silently to himself. "I like how that sounds."

They finished eating and polished off the bottle of wine, discussing insignificant details of life. Stace ceased to be distracted by the way her nose had a slight bend upwards. She disliked that he smoked. An hour passed before Eva blurted out, "What did you do with the prints?"

"Guess you distracted me. I left them in the bathroom."

"Right."

He returned a moment later.

"Who's this?" he asked, gawking at the photograph of the young woman coming out of the apartment walking a dog.

"This is Derrick," she said, making Stace focus on another picture. "The one who followed us today."

He looked at the shot of the man coming up a sidewalk. He was slouched over as though he were counting cracks in the sidewalk. Though the angle was a little off, Stace could still make out the features of his face.

"This is Tasha Matyastick."

"I noticed."

"I know."

He turned and smiled. They were as close as breath. "And what makes her so mysterious?" he whispered.

She turned towards the picture. "That's the problem. We know very little about her—much less about Neil or Derrick."

"This is Neil."

"Ja. All we know are minor biographical details about them that don't amount to anything. Derrick seems to be the one in charge, or perhaps, he's the gofer who takes care of the details. Tasha…well, I just don't know. She works at a department store in the daytime and she's from Czechoslovakia. In fact, they are all immigrants to Frankfurt."

"What does Neil do?"

"He works for a computer accounting firm by day. We also think there's a fourth person involved, Joseph Stautzen. He works for the ICC, but we think he's connected to the CRM as well."

"So what you have so far is your boss's intuition, these pictures, and a hunch."

"Correct. If it wasn't for the hunch, I'd say I've got nothing."

"Except for the cat and mouse routine this afternoon."

"So they know my paper is on to them."

"And we know they're on to us."

The implication escaped her. She grabbed the photos and stood up.

"What's your hurry?" he asked.

"I thought I'd get back to my place. I think better there."

"Now? It's late. Stay here tonight?"

A curious expression rippled her face.

"I'll sleep on the couch and you sleep in my room. Or, if you think you'd be more comfortable you can sleep on the couch."

Before Eva could answer, he voiced his concern. "Does Derrick know where you live?"

"I don't think so, but it's possible." She imagined him sitting in his van near her house plotting who knows what. "I'm not going to run from these people. I told myself years ago that I will not live in fear."

"I'm not asking you to hide. I'm just asking you to stay and relax. Tomorrow you can reevaluate the situation."

She considered the idea. The hour was late and she felt a bit tipsy to drive anyway. "I'll be more comfortable on the couch."

CHAPTER 18

At precisely 6:30 a.m. the following morning, Alfred drove his utility van along Hugelstrasse and crept past the CRM's apartment. He took a hard right onto Kurhessenstrasse, which cut into Hugelstrasse like a jackknife blade. A steady mist had fallen over Frankfurt through the night, which glazed the roads like a heavy coat of corn syrup. The wheels under the van slurped as he continued down Kurhessenstrasse behind the apartment, took a right on Ricarda Huch, and parked. Grabbing a set of binoculars, he walked down the street and into the park. A hint of dawn was forming in the surrealistic oranges and grays glowing low across the sky. From where he stood, propped on the side of a monstrous cypress, he watched the lights in the buildings across the street flicker on one by one, like squares on a yellow and black checkerboard.

He stood there for nearly an hour, turning over the photos Eva had given him of the CRM members until he could no longer stand to look at them. As dawn came and went, the traffic along Hugelstrasse increased to the point where the cars and buses seemed linked together like railroad cars hooked together as one. He expected to have seen Tasha walk her dog by now, but perhaps she'd done it earlier. Finally, at 7:20 a.m., Derrick and Neil emerged out of the front entrance. After exchanging words, Derrick left to continue another day of stalking Eva

and several minutes later he saw Neil in his BMW take a right onto Hugelstrasse. Last to go would be Tasha and he knew she left for work at 7:45 a.m. This morning she was two minutes late. He walked back to his van and grabbed his tool belt and the devices he'd be installing.

Tasha had caught the 8:00 a.m. U-Bahn and at that moment was exiting the train under the intersection at Miquel Adickesallee. Apprehensively, she made her way up the underground corridor onto the street level and walked along Miquel Allee towards work. She hated confrontations. Meanwhile, Alfred ascended the stairs up to the third floor and knocked sharply on the door of the CRM's apartment. If anyone was still in the apartment he could easily act confused, as if he'd knocked on the wrong door. After a moment of waiting and getting no response, he reached into his bag and pulled out a tool of his own making. Forty-five seconds later he was inside.

Tasha turned right onto Hansaallee and walked into Schnell's department store. The night before, Neil had asked her to quit her job under the pretense the ministry was growing and they needed her around the apartment to help with the increased workload. She'd been anticipating that news from Neil for a long time, but confronting Mr. Schnell with the news wasn't going to be easy. Mr. Schnell, was an exacting man who ordered his employees around like a disgruntled varsity coach. Truth be told, she hated the man, but needed the work. In the back of the store, Mr. Schnell kept a cubbyhole of an office. Tasha crept slower with every step as she made her way down an aisle towards the back.

When she knocked, he was seated at his desk facing the door unwrapping a crumpled piece of paper. Filbert's distributing had overcharged him for a case of toothpaste. He had made three inquiries to the company the day before, but no one returned his calls. His first call this morning would be less diplomatic. He would demand a hearing with their general manager.

"Mr. Schnell?" she asked timidly, tapping the doorframe.

"What is it?

"I need to talk to you about something." She took a half step in his direction.

Behind Mr. Schnell was a filing cabinet full of employee files of workers which had been fired or quit. He read the tone of her voice and knew what she was going to say even before she spoke.

"Today's my last day. I'm sorry, but something's come up and I can't work here anymore after today."

"Why work today?" he asked, pushing his swivel chair away from his desk.

She was taken back by his response. "I don't—"

"Why work today?" he repeated and stood up.

She lurched backwards into the hallway.

"If what you need to do is so important then take the rest of the day off!" His voice tweaked another notch higher.

Mrs. Schnell had been lining up bottles of vitamins on a shelf nearby. She heard the roar of her husband's voice and was moving towards them.

Mr. Schnell had stopped just outside of his office, legs parted like a fighter bracing for a blow. Contempt wrinkled his face. He caught sight of his wife moving down the aisle towards them, but never took his eyes off Tasha. Her mouth hung open, void of words. Deep within her, she could feel something involuntary moving through her body. She managed to break free of his gaze and turned around. Through her tears the tidiness of the products on the shelves lost their shape and form, swirling into a blur of color. She didn't notice Mrs. Schnell walk past her. She didn't hear her raise her voice at the brute. She could barely find the door. When she did, she stepped outside into the nip of the morning, overwhelmed with embarrassment. She leaned against the glass front door and patted her eyes with the sleeve of her red blouse. She didn't collect herself until she was back at the train station and gazing out over the tracks.

It took Alfred only a few minutes to find the phones. One was in the living room sitting on the windowsill. The second was located in one

of the back rooms on a desk by the door. He returned to the one in the living room. Unscrewing the plastic cap of the mouthpiece, he laid it on the windowsill next to the phone and took out a tiny audio device from a pocket in his tool pouch. The miniature transponder, shaped like a crescent moon, slid neatly into the uncapped part of the handset, which he secured with two strips of electrical tape. He screwed the plastic cover back on and walked down the hall.

The phone in the back room was a much older model. When he unscrewed the cover of the mouthpiece, he discovered it to be full of dust and fuzz. Holding the handset over the rug, he vigorously blew into it. Particles of light gray dust floated to the floor, but the fuzz remained. He removed a rag from his pouch and swirled it around the mouthpiece to remove the residue. Blow, swirl, blow, swirl…the delay cost him a precious four minutes. Tasha was halfway home when he'd finished with the phone.

His next task was to place other audio bugs in a few choice locations around the apartment. The best location he could find was underneath a table pushed against the back of the couch in the living room. On top of the table was a vase of half dead wild flowers. Next to the vase was a stack of brochures about the CRM and a laser printer. Directly underneath the printer was a half-inch stack of printing paper. He knelt down and peered at the underside of the table. He removed the bug out of his tool bag and curled his fingers around its edge. With his other hand, he removed a pre-cut piece of two-way adhesive tape from his top pocket. Carefully, he removed one of the paper seals on the tape and attached it to the bottom of the bug, then shoved the paper seal into a pouch on his tool bag—or so he thought. In the far corner of the table he located a dark cavity between two bolts and leaned over and pressed the bug in place. When he stood up the paper seal from the adhesive tape perched on his pant leg fell to the floor near the printing paper.

Tasha was five minutes away.

He decided to take a quick look around the apartment and went back to the room where he had installed the first bug. He took a quick look into the closet, then rummaged though the dresser against the bed. He glanced over the desk and bookshelves taking a mental picture of everything in sight. With the same manner of precision, he took an inventory of the contents of the other two rooms and within three and a half minutes had returned to the living room. Along one of the walls were two cheap office tables placed side by side. On the tables were a couple of computers and a printer. He removed a video and an audio-cassette tape from a box under the tables and slid them inside the top of his overalls. In the dining room was a similar arrangement; three identical office tables lined the left wall. On top of the tables were stacks of audio and videocassette dubbing machines. He reached inside his tool pouch and this time pulled out a small black aluminum box. Inside the box was a transmitter, and protruding out of the box was a video camera lens. The quickest he'd ever installed one was just under thirteen minutes.

He checked his watch. The longer he stayed the greater the risk. Even though he suspected the occupants of the apartment to be gone for sometime, he found himself experiencing an unpleasant sense of anxiety. It was a familiar feeling to him; one he usually worked around, but an inner voice told him something wasn't quite right. Walking over to the far side of the window, he pulled the curtains back and peeked outside. He first looked down Hugelstrasse towards the train station, but something at the bottom of his peripheral vision alarmed him. There was a flash of a person passing underneath the cement overhang of the main entrance to the apartment. When he looked down it was too late. The form was no longer visible. He closed the curtains and held his breath, listening for sounds.

Deep down in the stairway, he heard the slamming of the outer door. The inner door opened and he heard a shuffle of footsteps. Someone was coming but whom? His mind rapidly replayed the flash of the form over and over and he recognized in the sequence the shiny,

black, short-cropped hair of a woman. Whether it was Tasha or not, he didn't know, but the same voice that told him to look out the window was now telling him to get out. He raced to the door and stepped into the foyer. The woman was just stepping onto the first flight of stairs. Anticipating that the door of the apartment might close with a pop, he faked a cough to cover the sound. Safe in the landing, he made no attempts to conceal his presence, descending the staircase with more noise than necessary. He met Tasha on the second floor landing. The two exchanged glances. Since she'd been crying she dropped her face towards the floor to avoid his glance.

"Guten morgen," he said. She didn't respond.

Relieved to be outside, he tossed his stuff in the back of his van and headed for the Schwarz Monatlich.

CHAPTER 19

Reverend Eisner awoke on Saturday morning with a renewed sense of determination. He'd received a call late Friday evening from Stautzen, who'd confided to him that the program would be built using the ICC as a model. If all went well, the program should be complete in less than two months. Stautzen's admonition to the reverend was that he should prepare his ministry for a dynamic explosion in growth.

Despite the excitement of the news bubbling within him, the reverend felt compelled to carry out his morning ritual of reading from the word of God. While an undergraduate student in theology classes over forty-two years ago, he'd gotten in the habit of reading a specific number of chapters from both the Old and New Testaments daily. He kept a tally of his progress in the cover of his worn, leather bound King James, which he carried in his heart and hand for more years than he could remember. He resigned himself to the task every morning, seated in the high back chair behind his desk in the study of his home. After completing his daily reading, he would fill his pipe, ignite it with a blue-tipped match and as the tobacco sizzled and snapped he'd watch the smoke rise in a curling stream into the stillness of his study. As dizziness began to cloud his mind, he'd push his chair away from the desk, turn slightly in the direction of the window and ponder the words he'd read.

What the reverend reflected on most were the individual characters of the Bible. He admired those who should be admired and despised those who should be despised, while keeping in mind that each character had their place in God's plan. Although no one would ever catch him saying it, he thought the character of Christ to be somewhat passive. He was much more impressed with the patriarchs and prophets of old, who seemed to represent more of the true nature of God. They were quick and decisive, ever ready to do battle against the enemies of God. Over the years, the reverend had selected from their personality traits all of the most important qualities to duplicate in his own life, purposely overlooking the more subtle qualities of the life of Christ, which made the reverend little more than a patchwork of the characters he idolized.

He believed every person who had ever lived was involved in a divine chess game played between God and the devil. "People were like pawns," he often said, and "moved by the whims of angels under the command of God." In his own mind, he knew the game to be fixed from the beginning. That is, that God would eventually win, but in the meantime, every player on the board was predestined to fulfill a specific role to the overall outcome of the game. His relationship to Watson verified his thinking on this point. Watson had a plan to promote the cause of God, and although the reverend might have considered him to be materialistic, it was not beyond reason that God could manipulate the ideas of Watson to assist the reverend in God's overall plans.

The reverend was also no stranger to the art of compromise. He knew his lavish lifestyle resembled little in comparison to the example of the patriarchs. He recognized this weakness, but justified it under the assumption that his true call from God had not yet come. For the reverend understood the limits of toleration that disciples will give to those who proclaim to be ministers of God. Ministers were expected to be wealthy and successful. What other justification was there that God was blessing their lives? The facts were evident; he'd devoted his life to

God and God had blessed him for it. Who was he to deny those blessings?

He lived in one of the finer mansions in southern Munich with a splendid view of the Austrian Alps. His handsomely furnished home rested on seventy-six acres of untouched land speckled with flowering meadows set in a lush forest—not to mention a charming lake. Although the reverend didn't fish, he kept a rowboat and in times of great stress would row out into the middle of the lake and refill his hectic life with tranquility. He needed only one automobile, but had three. The one he drove into Munich and back everyday was a Mercedes he exchanged every year for the newest model. He possessed a thick and well-diversified financial portfolio, but only he and his private accountant knew the exact value.

Even so, the reverend was acutely aware of the fact that before the second coming of Jesus he must give those riches up and completely forsake the world. But this must be a give and take situation. God must provide him with overwhelming evidence that such a time had come. The last thing he wanted to do was give up his lifestyle prematurely. The worst thing that could happen to him at this point in life would be for him to misread the signs. If he gave it all up and Christ delayed his coming, then it was entirely possible he could end up a poor and broken man, embarrassing himself before the world. History was already riddled with the lives of men who died and left nothing more than the example of what over-zealousness and fanaticism can do.

Having considered all of these ramifications and consequences, he tapped the crusty ashes out of his pipe. It was now or never…a time when great men of great faith act…the stuff of history books…and he was the man of the hour.

CHAPTER 20

In the Summersheim's garden, earthworms were still dozing in the crust of topsoil. Faded yellow broccoli blossoms, left in the ground over the course of the summer were laced with frost. Not even the birds had risen. The rainbow snapdragons along the driveway had yet to swallow a bee. Stace had spun all night, like a snake wrestling free of its outer skin. The night, still hanging in his room, awaited the enlightening rays of the sun.

Sometime after 4:00 a.m., he tiptoed into living room. In the blue light filtering in from the street light he admired Eva's shape beneath the flimsy evergreen blanket. She lay on her back with the blanket pulled up under her chin, her arms gracefully folded over her stomach, fingertips barely touching. Her head was nestled in a pillow and cocked towards the stereo. A halo of mangled blond hair sprang madly around her face. Her lips begged for his. The rise of her bosom…the traceable, circular peaks of her nipples took him back to the memory of her exquisite form when he first met Eva at the pool.

He'd never met a woman like Eva. She wasn't preoccupied with the millions of inconsequential details of life as other women might be, who focus on following the latest in fashion, fads or social etiquette. What he admired most about her was her passion towards her work, and whether he realized it or not, it was her passion that was reac-

quainting him with his own lost dream. To say that it was lust he had towards Eva would not do justice to his wanting. Neither would admiration or worship.

Words that describe such wanting have not been breathed. They have not been written and forever remain unspoken, like a thought from the gods, so sacred that mortal men can only wonder how the miracle of love begins and where it ends.

He leaned over and stroked her cheek with the backside of his hand. She didn't seem to mind. He caressed the form of her jaw and moved his finger over the fullness of her lips. This time she stirred and he withdrew, and she rolled over onto her side and extended her legs, which allowed the blanket to slide off her breasts. Then like a child, she brought her knees up into a fetal position, leaning them towards the back of the couch. She was wearing one of his cotton T-shirts and in the soft light he could see the darkened flesh of her nipples and the weight of her bosom stretching the cotton fabric. Involuntarily, he reached out again—but stopped short. If and when the time came, the sharing of their bodies would be one of mutual consent. His hand still outstretched over her bosom, he contented himself by feeling the heat of her body, as though he were warming himself in the flames of a fire. He whispered good night and went back to his room.

Eva had been tossing and turning all through the night. The couch was short and the cushions, mushy. Each time she moved, the cushions would separate from themselves or pull away from the back of the couch, leaving some portion of her body slipping between the cracks. She'd heard a noise at Stace's entrance, like she'd heard many strange noises that night in the unfamiliar apartment, but the shuffle of footsteps through the living room carpet was unmistakable. She continued to pretend to sleep, even as the creaking of the coffee table suggested he was sitting just inches from her. She was fearful and anxious at his presence. Not fearful in the sense that she was afraid of what he might do, but fearful of her own reaction to his advance. So she pretended to be asleep, frozen in a state of anticipation. She'd known him now for just

a couple of weeks, and she was confused by the trust she placed in him. She'd known few men, but never had she wanted one as much as she felt she needed one now. As much as she longed for his embrace, she couldn't help wonder if everything was moving too quickly and yet at times, not fast enough.

She didn't hear the movement of him leaning towards her and when his first touch graced her cheek it was barely perceptible. The tender stroke of his creative hands seemed to be stroking her innermost soul. Then he withdrew. Why? Before she had her answer, he touched her once more with a stroke that desired much more than a mere touch of her flesh. From her earlobe, down her jaw line, over her chin and lips, he caressed. She had a knee-jerk reaction. Suddenly he stopped. Then she heard his heavy breathing. Would he try again? She had her answer when she heard his footsteps shuffle lightly down the hallway.

A few hours later, Stace awoke for a second time and with a quick glance out the window, saw a subtle change of lightness in the sky. "Is she awake yet?" he wondered. He thought about going in to see her, but didn't want to get caught gawking at her. He was feeling a little ashamed for sneaking in to see her earlier that morning. He hopped out of bed and drifted down the hallway towards the kitchen to make breakfast. With breakfast made and the morning half broken into a blossoming glow, he walked down the hallway carrying a tray full of coffee, eggs, toast, and sausage links. She didn't move as he set the tray on the coffee table.

"Eva, it's time to wake up," he said. She stirred and slowly opened her eyes. Seeing him seeing her, and wearing the disarray of morning on her face, she yanked the blanket over her head. He snapped the blanket down.

"I'm going to jump in the shower. Have some breakfast while it's hot."

When he returned from showering, she was dressed and had finished eating.

"The bathroom's free if you need it."

"What time is it?" she asked, looking around the cluttered coffee table for her watch.

"About 6:45 a.m. Do you need to get going?"

"I usually get to work around 8:30 a.m., but my schedule's flexible. They won't start missing me until the afternoon. Why don't you let me give you a ride into work? It's the least I can do."

"Sure, sounds good. Hey! Since we have some extra time, would you like to take a look at some of my photographs?

"I'd love to. Give me a few minutes," she said, heading into the bathroom.

Like an excited boy, he snatched his portfolio out of the storage room and hurried back into the living room. His portfolio consisted of a number of large photographs wrapped within protective envelopes of see-through plastic. He carefully pulled them out and started laying them on the couch, over the coffee table, against the stereo, and across anything else that would prop them up. By the time Eva returned a few minutes later, he'd created a gallery.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed when she returned.

"Let me guess, these are what got you thrown out of the exhibit."

"Very perceptive," he replied.

"Frankly, I don't see what the fuss was all about."

"Then you like them?"

"I don't dislike them," she replied. "I mean, I don't think they're offensive, if that's what you mean. I've seen far more revealing and suggestive art than this. What was their objection again?" she asked, having forgotten the details.

"I believe their exact response went something like this…'Mr. Manning, we regret to inform you that the committee finds your photographs unsuitable for public viewing. We feel your work runs contrary to the values held by the university. It has always been the objective of the administration to promote decent Christian virtues to the students given under our trust. We regret any inconvenience this may cause

you. Should you desire to resubmit work of a more suitable nature, please contact Rick Forstein.'"

"And that was that."

"Downhill from there."

"To be honest, Stace, I don't understand them."

"The university?"

"Your photographs." She looked at him cautiously, gauging his reaction.

"I—" he started in.

"Wait. I'm not finished. You asked me what I think about them and I'll tell you, but I'm not sure you're going to like it, so I'm treading lightly."

His face crinkled, waiting for the verdict.

"I find them very stimulating. Perhaps that's why the committee rejected them. I don't consider myself to be a religious person, but I know from experience that religious people are usually conservative and they're not looking for this kind of stimulation. I think the photographs are tastefully done—though obviously sexual and erotic."

He smiled.

Stace had prepared himself for the usual reaction people had toward his work. He'd expected her to be evasive, then reluctantly agree that she enjoyed them. It was what most people did. But she didn't respond in the usual way. Quite the contrary, she was forthright and because of this, believable. Since he believed her, he was ready to accept her opinion as genuine. He could overlook the fact she didn't understand them. This he welcomed, because he was perfectly comfortable with being original

Eva was only half-truthful of her response. The rest was unspeakable. If Stace had this much passion for his art, how much more passionate would he be with her?

He pointed to the photo of the woman and the tree. "This is the last really creative project I completed."

"Why's that?"

"When I found out I was excluded from the exhibit, I lost my desire."

"That was years ago, Stace!"

"I know."

"What about your photo lab?"

"I still use it, but not for anything I'd consider serious."

"Don't you think it's high time you begin again?"

His eyes shifted over to a floor lamp in the corner and he analyzed its trunk of brass, which curled at the top like candle wax. At the curl was a frilly, corrugated paper lampshade. A fly was smacking itself between the light bulb and the lampshade. Stace reached over the couch and knocked it out of its self-imposed prison. "Actually, I think its time to go."

During the drive to Hattersheim the two sat in silence. When they were near Stroof's Photo, she broke the silence. "You're off this weekend aren't you?"

"I am."

"Why don't we get together tomorrow?"

"I don't know, why don't we?"

"No," she began, then realized he was at it again.

He looked at her with a silly grin. She smacked him on the thigh.

"Let's do," he replied.

"Do what?"

"You know, get together."

She didn't answer.

"I'm glad you stayed last night," he said, after they arrived at his work and he got out of the car. "What time?"

"I'll pick you up at 9:00 a.m."

CHAPTER 21

Rick never questioned the legitimacy of his promotion until now. His most pressing suspicion was the nature of the project itself. It occurred to him as highly unorthodox. Most of the security programs built by Trojan Security were built out of necessity. Programs begin with the understanding that there is a perceived threat and are built to combat this threat. He could understand that someone might want to create a virus designed for psychological warfare. There were certainly enough kooks in the world willing to do just about anything to get their point across, but the idea still seemed to him as too far-fetched.

Another thing bothering him was that Trojan Security was completely bypassing their own criteria; time proven guidelines that form the prerequisites to any security program. Prior to any program being built, normal operations call for the designers to meet with the responsible parties within the contracted corporation. Countless hours, which sometimes span months of talks and negotiations between the corporation and Trojan Security, are logged. These steps were absolutely essential. If the programmers don't know the exact areas needed to be safeguarded, then they have no working basis in which to begin. The psychological stimulus element provided no working background information to build any worthwhile security program. It was a flimsy,

half concocted list of imaginary ideas designed to stop a perceived ideological threat.

Another cause for concern was the team players. He knew absolutely nothing about them, least of all the German, whose position on the team seemed rigged. While they were hammering out the details of the psychological aspects of the program, Rick couldn't help but sense that the entire outcome of the meeting had been prearranged. For a time he dismissed his thoughts, thinking his concerns stemmed from Stautzen's charismatic ability to direct their sessions. Rick thought he'd been designated the leader of the group, but that assumption was quickly shattered and Stautzen had emerged as the unspoken leader.

By far the strangest idea Rick kept turning over and over in his mind was that Trojan Security had no intention of building the secondary security program to over-ride the virus. Neither Watson nor Pruitt gave any indication they wouldn't carry through on the intent. "Was the security program ever in the overall plans?" Rick wondered.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," Pruitt said as he entered the committee room. "You've accomplished a great deal this week."

Rick looked at his longtime friend with renewed suspicion.

"Mr. Watson is also pleased you've been able to cover so much ground in so little time. Today we'll begin phase two of the project. We'll be splitting into two groups. Dr. Loran, Joseph Stautzen, and Davia will work on one team and Rick, you and Jean will work together in putting the technical mechanics of the program into motion."

"I'm still not exactly sure how we are going to proceed," Rick stated, concealing his frustration.

"Understood, but that should become clear to you in a moment."

"Stautzen and the others will continue to work on the psychological stimulus element. Their main objective will be to outline the specific teachings and doctrines of the International Christian Coalition. They'll be using the Reverend Eisner's book to get their information. It will be their job to extract from the book any relevant material the ICC

uses to obtain converts. Especially the psychological elements they use in leading others to follow their particular belief system."

He turned to address Rick and Jean specifically. "Rick, you were uncertain how to proceed. In the most simplistic terms, you'll be taking the information provided by Stautzen and designing a way to disseminate this information on the Internet."

"But—"

"I have complete confidence in you. You know how things operate here. You're familiar with our equipment and resources. This afternoon, we'll be bringing in all the equipment you may need and setting it up in your office. Jean, you're the expert on Internet protocol and have a good working knowledge of the scenarios that may be unfamiliar to Rick. So work together."

"Mr. Watson is anxious to see the program completed. I've indicated to him it might take as long as two weeks. Does that sound about right?"

"Two weeks!" Rick exclaimed.

"Just kidding. I was thinking more along the lines of four."

"Months?"

Pruitt said nothing.

Rick thought the time-frame ridiculous.

"Possible, correct?" Pruitt asked him.

"Perhaps."

"I'll take that as a yes. Just one more thing. Keep your Saturday's open."

Rick was even more certain now that his suspicions were justified. Judging from the demeanor of Pruitt, Rick felt he was in some way involved in the deception. If he was involved, then Watson was involved. He glanced around the room to ascertain who else might have full knowledge of the program's purpose. Dr. Loran was a possible candidate, but he was diametrically opposed to religion. What of Jean Thompson? She was an expert when it came to understanding the workings of the Internet. Her brilliant military history proved nothing.

The military was full of patriots and traitors. For all he knew, she might have had a grudge against the military and this was her way of getting back at them.

His suspicions turned again to Stautzen. Rick couldn't dismiss the week's proceedings as coincidental. Stautzen had deliberately led the group towards focusing on the ICC as the potential entity that might use the program. The premise he used in his argument was lethal. The program in theory, could weaken and cripple the psychological makeup of anyone who came into contact with it. Stautzen proposed a worthy goal and built a model program around the ICC. It all sounded good in theory, but what if the ICC actually used the virus?

Shortly thereafter, Watson sat in his leather bound chair twirling his monogrammed silver pen nervously over his thumb. Three hundred sixty degrees one way, then three hundred sixty degrees back the other way. He could perform the sequence every second flawlessly, perfecting the habit through years of sitting at his desk reviewing and signing paperwork.

"Do you think he's on to us?" Watson asked Pruitt, who sat complacently in front of his desk.

"I don't think so, but then again, Rick's a pretty sharp guy."

Watson had considered there might be setbacks to his objective. "I knew we should have hired an outside man to lead the group."

"We would have still run the same risks. You know we needed to keep the program in-house as much as possible. Rick may not be the best, but he's certainly capable of building the program. He's perfect, capable, and expendable, should the occasion arise."

"But what if he resigns or worse?"

"I wouldn't worry about that. The files will show our main objective all along was to build the security program. That's clear on paper. Rick and the others were fully informed that this was our objective. As far as the law is concerned, we are in the clear. If it did go to court, you know we have the resources and legal staff to back us up. Rick's smart enough to figure that out."

"True, but what about after the virus is complete?"

"Then it's out of our hands and halfway around the world. We are in the computer security business. We saw a security threat and we started the process of designing a program to stop it. If someone was to say…steal the virus, then that's something that can't be prevented. Naturally, we'll make plans to build the security program to stop the virus, but we have all the time in the world to do that."

"And the ICC?"

"I know how you feel about them Fred, but ultimately, they run their own risks."

"Nevertheless, I'm still worried about Rick."

"Understood."

Watson leaned back in his chair. "I want you to get in touch with security so that they can watch him. I want to know where he goes, who he talks to, and what he's doing until we've completed the project."

"I'll put a man on him twenty-four-seven.

CHAPTER 22

Eva's arrival at the Schwarz Monatlich shortly after 9:00 a.m. in the morning went unnoticed. On a corner table against the wall, Alfred and Ruben were busy hooking up cables and power cords to Alfred's equipment. Earlier that morning, he'd brought in a receiver to pick up incoming audio signals from the CRM's apartment, an encryption device, an amplifier to boost the signal, and a CD recording machine to document any traceable conversations. Alfred was an electronic genius who could build just about anything the newspaper needed from scratch. They'd been using this particular set-up for the last three years. No one knew exactly how it worked except Alfred, who tried to explain the system to them years ago, but every time he set up the equipment, he had to explain the process all over again.

"The bugs in the apartment are powerful enough to pick up whispers of conversation. They send these conversations a short distance to a receiver in the trunk of my car parked around the corner from the CRM's apartment. Now, the last thing we want is for someone else to pick up these conversations, so I designed a piece of equipment that scrambles the conversations into digital garbage. That signal then leaves my car through the radio antenna and is picked up by a dish I've installed on the roof of this building. The signal travels by cable into this amplifier. The amplifier boosts the signal and sends it to the

receiver. Tied in with these pieces of equipment is this de-scrambler unit. The conversations can be heard though this speaker or through the headphones. The CD recorder is for backup."

"Guten morgen, Eva," Ruben said, walking up to her desk.

"Did you find out anymore about Neil?" she asked him.

"Noting." He glanced down at her desk. "Where'd you get de photos?"

Alfred interrupted. "We're set up." He flipped on the switches and set the frequency on the receiver. His fingers spun over five gear-like dials on the encryption device as he locked in a sequence of numbers. The CD recorder hummed.

"From a friend. A photographer." Eva said to Ruben.

"A friend?" Shelly asked. The others took note of her tone.

"Yes, a friend, and he's quite a handsome fellow," she added.

Shelly seemed pleased.

"How long have you known the man?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"A couple of weeks," she responded, bothered by his inquiry.

"Two weeks?" he questioned.

"Seems like a decent young man. An American," Alfred said, coming to her defense.

"You've met him?" Ruben questioned.

"In passing," Alfred said.

"What does he know?" asked Mr. Schwarz.

"Nothing. I just asked him to enlarge the prints I had."

Mr. Schwarz kept silent, but stewed.

"That's all!" she persisted, raising her voice.

Mr. Schwarz didn't twitch. "Two weeks? You don't know anything about the man."

"Look. He enlarged a couple of prints. We've been taking our stuff to commercial developers for years."

"Less eyes the better, seems to me," Alfred said. His words were convincing enough to stop the inquisition.

"Alright, we need to divvy up shifts to monitor the CD recorder. Any volunteers?" asked Mr. Schwarz.

"No need!" Alfred said. "I've done some modifications, and if I might say so, you seem a bit on edge."

"Spare me the advice."

"Two CD's. When one finishes the other engages. If there's been no audible signals of voice communication on either machine, they'll rewind themselves for another session."

"And what happens when they both run their length?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"Even with voice signals they'll run for twelve hours. You don't need anyone here to watch the equipment run, you just have to make sure the CD's get exchanged every twelve hours."

"Thank God!" Shelly said.

"But, we still have to arrange a schedule over the weekend to change out the CD's correct?" Mr. Schwarz sought to verify.

"Correct."

"That's what I needed to know. Shelly, I want you to make out a revolving schedule for the weekend. I want a one-hour window. That way, if there's any trouble with the equipment—"

"There won't be, sir," Alfred interrupted.

Mr. Schwarz looked at him comically. "As I was saying, just in case there's any trouble we can page Alfred and he'll run right over."

"Can't think of anything else I'd rather do this weekend sir."

"Now, about the apartment, Alfred," Eva said.

"There are books, files, and stacks of paper everywhere. Also, boxes full of brochures and pamphlets, along with hundreds of audio and videotapes. I took a few samples." He reached into his toolbox and pulled out a couple videotapes, then tossed them onto Eva's desk with a handful of brochures. "They have a bona fide production studio in there."

"Anyding interesting in de bedrooms?" Ruben asked.

"Not really."

Mr. Schwarz snorted with disappointment.

"Maybe it's what you didn't find that's important," said Shelly.

"What do you mean?" Ruben asked, but Alfred answered for her.

"Well, I expected to find three bedrooms, which I did, but everyone of them was being lived in. With all the equipment they have, you'd think they'd use one of the rooms as an office. Apparently, Neil, Derrick and Tasha each have their own room."

"What's dat supposed to mean?" Ruben asked.

"Only that Tasha's probably not sleeping with Neil or Derrick," piped in Shelly.

"Relevance please," Mr. Schwarz said.

"It's hard for me to imagine the three of them leading separate lives. You'd think as long as they have been together Tasha would be close to one of them," Eva added.

"So dey practice abstinence," Ruben said.

"Still doesn't mean they're not all in this together," Mr. Schwarz said. "We know Neil and Derrick were friends long before they met Tasha, but I see no reason to believe she's an outsider."

"I doubt she is either, but for the sake of argument, let's say she just rents a room from them. Maybe she's only there to give them a hand with the office details," Eva added.

"If dat's de case, she may not be too involved with deir cause. We might be able to get some information from her," Ruben said.

"You didn't get the chance to slip in a video camera did you?" Eva asked.

"No I didn't. Actually, I just made it out the door before Tasha came home."

"I thought she worked through the day?" Shelly questioned.

"So did I," Alfred answered, ticked by the memory of just having escaped before she came back. "Well, she's home now."

"Did she see you?" Eva said with concern.

"Yeah."

"Let's just hope she didn't get dat good a look at you," Ruben said.

Alfred looked at him. “Seems that I recall Derrick followed you to this office.”

“Point taken.”

“Be careful,” Eva said as he walked towards the door.

“You too big sister.”

“What’s next, Eva?” Ruben asked.

Mr. Schwarz spoke up. “Eva, have you finished reading the reverend’s book?”

“Not yet.” She lied. She just didn’t want to argue with him and she was still digesting the contents.

“Read the book.”

“Why is it so important—

“Because there’s a lot a radicals in this world. You may even need to take a trip down to Munich to watch one of his shows. In fact, plan on it. Next weekend. You don’t have plans do you?”

“They can be modified.”

CHAPTER 23

"You have to think like a criminal," Jean said, from the couch in Rick's office. They had been brainstorming throughout the morning on the possible ways the program might be built.

"Then you're thinking of a Telnet operation," Rick said.

"That's what I'd do. I'd use a remote pay phone and tap into the Internet to distribute the virus. It's completely anonymous."

As she voiced her ideas he watched her mouth form around words and phrases. She'd stroked her lips with a dash of cherry color that morning, nothing too loud or obnoxious, just a trace to bring out the contours, which begged for a taste. The green patterned sweater dress she'd slipped into that morning was cut modestly above the knees, but at the present time, was pulled up near the middle of her thighs. Her crossed legs were wrapped in neutral colored panty hose, which she wore only to conceal the slight variations of tone in her otherwise tanned legs. He'd never seen her hair up and this morning it fell as usual over her shoulders, mahogany brown with streaks of highlights.

"Whoever is going to build this virus will likely be a single person or a small group of people. They'll lock themselves in a lab and figure out how to do it by eliminating all the risks," Rick said.

"They might also spread the virus by hiding it in an specific program," she said.

"A commercial software package?" he questioned.

"It would have to be a software program that everyone wanted to buy—"

"Virtually any software program would do, but that would be a bit too complicated don't you think?" he asked.

"Complicated, risky, not to mention passive. The last thing you'd want is your virus sitting in computer software stores around the world waiting for some hack to discover it."

"Pruitt was right. I don't really see anyway around it. The Internet is the most viable option. It reaches the most people in the quickest amount of time," he said.

"And it's the cleanest. The risks are extremely low in getting caught."

"But if you ask me, I think it's an impossibility. Granted, on a small-scale people throw viruses into the Internet on a daily basis. But this has to be much bigger in scope to be able to work."

At that moment Pruitt, followed by two service technicians dressed in tan work overalls and carrying a folded office table, interrupted them. In the course of the next ten minutes, they'd filled Rick's office with boxes of new equipment.

"The latest and the best. You'll be looped through the mainframe computer in Building G. I've been giving this a lot of thought and I think the toughest thing is going to be integrating this program into the Internet," Pruitt said.

Rick and Jean glanced astonishingly at each other.

"There's one more thing we'll need," Rick said.

"Name it."

"I'll be needing an Internet HTTP Retrieving Device."

"Never heard of it."

Jean looked puzzled as well.

"Ah, perhaps they don't make them yet, but then again, they'd be illegal even if they did." He turned towards Jean. "Guess we'll have to

build our own." She tried to look as though she knew what he was talking about.

"Just what is this device?" Pruitt asked.

"I'll fill you in on that later, because we've got to have one before we can start building this program," Rick said.

"Well, I'll be back first thing tomorrow," Pruitt said leaving.

"I think it's time for lunch," Rick said to Jean. "It'll be a while before we can get down to work." The tech's had already started opening boxes, turning Rick's office into a trash heap of papers, plastic bags, and Styrofoam molding.

"I'll drive," she said.

"You like barbecue?" he asked, once they were outside and heading for the parking lot.

"Depends."

"I know a place where they serve great barbecue brisket."

"Alright."

He followed her to her new Lexus, gold with a hint of metallic flake, parked at the far edge of the lot.

"New?"

"Off the shelf. Picked it out before I drove down from Colorado Springs."

"When do you plan to park it a little closer?"

"When it gets its first scratch."

"Home's in Colorado?"

"For now. So, Rick, what's this HTTP thingamagigger?"

"I'm surprised. A woman with your obvious skills and expertise?"

She grinned. "Let me guess, since we have to go through the Internet, we'll have to get the virus into the main hubs responsible for the most Internet traffic."

A few minutes later, she pulled the Lexus into a spot outside Rudy's Barbecue.

"Order for me," she said, "and where's the ladies room?" He pointed her towards an opening in the back where a rusty Texaco sign was nailed to the wall over the doorway.

The cashiers were at the end of a series of stainless steel rails that ushered patrons up to the counter like cattle. Rick barked his order out to a teenage cowgirl dressed in jeans and a bright red, western-style shirt. The kind with pointed pockets and buttons. Behind the girl, young studs in white T-shirts worked the open flame broilers, cooking brisket and chicken. One stud wrapped his order in white butcher's paper, and handed it to the cashier. The girl dropped it into a plastic basket and threw in three slices of white bread.

"Anything to drink?" the girl asked, her hand poised over the cash register waiting for his answer.

Reaching behind him, he grabbed two bottles of Pepsi swimming in a livestock tank full of ice water. After paying, he took a seat at one of the long rows of picnic tables in the dining area.

Jean came up behind him, thought to scare him, decided not to, and sat across from him.

"I've got beef or chicken, what do you want?"

"Little of both, thanks. Now business."

"Like I was saying, the best way to do this is to build a virus that will infect the various Internet servers."

"All of them?"

"No! No. There must be hundreds of mom and pop companies. I'm talking about the big corps."

"The ones Pruitt's hooking up for us?"

"Yeah, makes you wonder doesn't it?"

"About what?"

He opened the wrapper of brisket and chicken and slid them to the center of the table, dishing a little of each onto paper plates. "Enjoy."

"But you're talking about accessing the mainframes of these corporations," she said, then looked around and brought her voice down to a whisper. "First you'd have to break into them, then you'd have to find

a way to download the virus into their system." The thought excited her.

"Hence, the need for a program that will reach inside of their computers and get the information we need."

"That would be the thingamagigger," she reasoned.

"But of course, that's just an idea," he said, as though it were a joke.

"No, it's a good idea," she said, picking up her drumstick. "It's worth looking into."

Brainstorming was one thing, implementing the plans was another thing. His idea was certainly plausible, but he would have never considered actually doing it. He was after all, an expert and knew just about any system could be infected with any virus he could think up. But the idea was highly illegal. He was struck with anxiety and took a swig of Pepsi.

Jean pressed on. "I really think you've got something here—attacking the web browsers that is. It would infect the greatest amount of people. It's also a program that could be done by any hacker worth half the price of their equipment. More importantly, it fits neatly within the restrictions. A few disks, one hacker, a few isolated telephone locations…whammy!"

"You actually believe it could be done don't you?"

"Yes I do. And it will be done. By you and me."

He sunk his teeth into a slab of brisket to buy himself time, eventually swallowing and wiping his mouth with a paper towel. "I know I asked you about the money before, but let me ask you in a different way. Just why did you decide to hire yourself out to Trojan Security for this project?"

She wasn't the slightest bit disturbed by his assault on her ethics, and set her drumstick down to free her hands. "I gave the best years of my life to the Army. The Army put me through college and I did my time." She paused for a moment, as though she were recalling a speech she'd memorized. "When I joined, I believed in what the military was being used for. We were in Iraq at the time fighting against Saddam

Hussein, helping to keep the Iraqis free and combating terrorism. You know, that kind of patriotism gets your engine running. Shortly after that, we were back in Bosnia again, fighting Serbian forces. Still in South Korea, protecting its citizens from the North Koreans. Still cleaning up in Afghanistan." Her hands were flying now, like two frazzled parakeets. "We were in Panama, Honduras, Germany, and dozens of other places, keeping the world safe for democracy. And you know what happened after 9-11, all hell broke lose. Terrorism became our new war. America at that time was still free. With that freedom came power. The kind of power that makes every other nation quake in their soil or covet our prosperity. Those who coveted that prosperity were pledged the blood of our young men and women. Those who opposed us ran the risk of sanctions or military force. And through it all I learned every bit of electronic and computer warfare I could, so I might share in the pride of being an American. I believed all that, do you understand?"

She took a deep breath. Rick cringed when she continued.

"Then came the changes. No one saw them coming except a few underground rebels of American ideals. Most Americans excused them as humanists and pessimists. Those rebels made a stink about every piece of legislation they claimed violated basic rights of privacy—like the Patriot Act. I hated them. It was so obvious. Terrorism and crime were both out of control and legislation demanded tougher restrictions. But, laws were finally implemented and things seemed to be looking up. These fools opposed school prayer amendments. They lost. And grade school children across the country became more obedient and compliant. They promoted laws for the legalization of drugs. They never won that war from the start. They opposed restrictions against pornography and the censoring of literature, art, and the media. They lost there too. Then later, they even opposed mandatory church services for prison inmates. Can you imagine? Who wouldn't want our criminals converted? Everyone thought they were crazy back then. By

the year 2010 everyone knew they were crazy. But who could argue with the results?"

"It's amazing how fast things can turn. People can change. I certainly did. If you were alive during that period and lived in America, which you were, you know from all outside appearances America had been the Babylon of decadence. Within a short period of time, we'd completely reversed that perspective. We became the model for all other nations to follow. We became the most ethically and morally balanced nation in existence. But living in that environment today is another story. Almost every freedom we had has been taken away. Some governmental agency or law restricts almost everything we want to do now. We've become a nation of mice living in a spotless cage running a circular path of existence. We can only move and think within the limitations of the walls of our maze. Climbing the walls is unthinkable. In fact, anything thinkable is unthinkable! And we owe this sterilization of thought to all the Christian conservatives who took control and took away our freedoms. I have only one way to thank them, by putting myself in a position to make sure the power of their influence never takes root in another country. If this program can do that, then I'd do just about anything to see it built."

The chicken was cold. The brisket was like brick. The Pepsi's were warm and swimming in a puddle of condensation. The slices of bread had turned to stone. Rick sat poised with plastic fork in hand ready to devour, but had suddenly lost his appetite. He didn't know what to say and furthermore, didn't want to respond to what she'd said, because he didn't believe her. She'd over exaggerated the situation and it wasn't his intent to prove her wrong. Only one thing was for sure, she'd dissolved any fears he had that she was involved with Watson's creation of the program to use it for yet unknown reasons. It was time for a subject change.

"Why didn't you quit the Army when you no longer believed in its goals?"

"The goals of the military never changed. They never do. We were sent to more countries than ever before with the same objective, to protect American interests and to make the world safe for democracy. As I was alluding to, no one can argue the military succeeded in carrying out that objective. Where I began having a problem was when I finally began to disagree with the political goals and ambitions of Washington. Suddenly, I found myself employed by an institution I loathed and was forced to subscribe to its ideologies due to my position. By the time I changed, I'd been in for eighteen years. I could retire in another two, but I really didn't have all of my thoughts together and hadn't made any emotional decisions until I was in my twenty-first year."

"And now you have a new mission in life?"

"I'm through with missions. To be honest with you, I was offered good money to work on what I saw to be a worthwhile project," she confessed.

"But you seem to be really into this program."

"Well, don't think too highly of me. In the end we all serve ourselves, don't we?"

CHAPTER 24

A quilt of woven clouds had been loitering over Frankfurt since yesterday, obscuring the sun, yet bringing no promise of rain. That evening, a warm front of clear skies had crept its way up from Austria. Saturday bloomed a glorious day, unusually warm for October, with a blazing sun hanging halfway to noon as Eva drove to Stace's home to pick him up.

"What's on the agenda?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment and rolled her window down. "We're taking a drive up to Bad Homberg. There's a house on a hill I'd like you to see. After that, the museum will be open."

"What kind of museum?"

"The Frankfurter Kunstverein. It's a museum of contemporary exhibitions. This month it's exhibiting work by a few prominent photographers. I thought you'd like to see it. Later this evening, we'll take a walk around Sachsenhausen. There's a lot of clubs and excitement down that way on Saturday night."

"Tomorrow?"

"It's supposed to be even warmer tomorrow, so we'll drive out to Rudesheim and take a boat ride on the Rhine."

"Intriguing."

"Yes, intriguing," she repeated, wishing he'd said, romantic.

An hour later, they parked along the curb on a side street in Bad Homberg and walked through the town towards the house. A winding, crushed gravel path scattered with sightseers led them up to the entrance.

"Quite a house," he said.

"I exaggerated, but it's not near as large as some of the other castles."

The home of the nobleman was an enormous sprawling estate resting in the foothills of the Taunus Mountains. The nobleman's wealth had been incalculable and it was doubtful whether he knew how much he possessed. For him to even ponder such a minute detail would have been demeaning. He paid his accountants handsomely for seeing to this nightmare, which gave him time to do what he liked doing best, hunting and more precisely, discussing with other noblemen how his accountants kept track of his wealth so he didn't have to.

The home was a palace, simply because it lacked all the delightfully crude elements of a castle. Efforts had been taken by the German government to make sure the palace maintained its thousand-year-old authenticity. The main hallway on the third floor reeked of the hunt. Running seventy-five feet in length, it was decorated with the stuffed animal heads of the nobleman's many kills. The lifeless eyes of deer, bears, and dozens of other furry creatures peered over the hallway. The palace contained about thirty rooms, most of them dressed in silk wallpaper. The floors were crafted of intricately laid wood, polished to a mirror shine. There were ceilings carved out of imported hardwoods and sporting intricate engravings. Enormous egg-tempura paintings scattered throughout the palace could have been on loan from the Louvre in Paris. Off the master bedroom was located what was believed to be the first indoor toilet in Germany.

After Stace and Eva had their fill of the palace and surrounding gardens, they walked down a secluded path towards the unpretentious lake, where its surface seemed as if it had been sliced from a chunk of cerulean blue ice that had been laid on its side by a giant's hand. A family of swans cut three lines of waves like arrowheads as they swam

to the other side. Stace and Eva sat on the banks at the far end so they could view the palace on the hill. Reminiscent of a boy attempting his first efforts at romance, Stace finally gained enough courage to reach out and take Eva's hand.

"I live for moments like this," he said, his neck stretched back, face soaking in the rays of the sun.

"They're too few and far between," she replied looking at him. "Sometimes I even avoid these experiences, because I don't want to suffer the let down of going back to work on Mondays."

"I know what you mean."

"I used to enjoy what I do, but lately, I'm losing interest. Scares me in a way," she said.

He took his eyes off the sky and turned towards her. "Why's that?"

She thought long before responding. So long, that Stace did not expect her to answer. "Because my work is so much a part of who I am, but the energy I once had for doing it is no longer there. I feel a part of me is dying off."

"You take things too seriously. You're too intense."

"Tense?" she asked.

"No, intense. You're too driven."

"You think so?"

"I do. Or maybe you're just changing. I know I've certainly changed."

"What changed?" she asked.

"Guess I settled into life. I stopped worrying about the rest of the world and started to consider that life was too short. That it was time to do what I wanted to be doing."

"But what about your photography interests?"

"I came to the conclusion I wasn't God's gift to the world. I'd still like to become a renowned photographer. I just stopped pushing the idea upon myself."

She had a difficult time understanding his logic. He'd never see his dream come true with that kind of wishy-washy attitude.

"I'm not sure how all that applies to me. Take my boss Mr. Schwarz, he hasn't lost any of his zeal and he's almost seventy."

"But what does he do?"

"He runs the paper. Without him nothing would happen."

"Sure about that? Does he go out on assignments? Does he do surveillance, or write any stories?"

"Not any more. He orchestrates everything from his desk."

"And if he died today would the paper cease to exist?"

"I doubt it. Ruben and I would probably pick up where he left off."

"You'd have to stay back in the office and run the show, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe."

"You'd have to hire another reporter just as energetic and capable as you are, right?"

"I suppose," she said, wondering.

"Mr. Schwarz may still be providing the vision, but it sounds like you and the others are doing all the leg work."

"I don't understand your point." She straightened herself up and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Just that you really never lose what's inside you. You may have to slow down, change the way you do things, but the passion is always there."

"Alright, I concede your point. But I wouldn't know the first place to begin."

She suddenly jumped up and ran to the water's edge. One of the swans had waddled onto the shore and she felt like chasing it back into the water. Its squawk bounced over the lake and startled a boy walking along the banks on the other side. Stace was standing when she came back.

"Get it out of your system?"

She ignored his remark. "Let's get a bite to eat and head to the museum," she said.

It was early afternoon when they arrived at the museum. They made their way up the escalator to the third floor in silence. Stace was bubbling inside with bursts of creative inspiration. It seemed to Eva that his creative juices were beginning to flow, and she was pleased that she'd contributed to his turn of thoughts.

The third floor was swarming with people murmuring amongst themselves about the beauty of the work being shown. The photographs on display were portraits of people, children playing in a playground, and a few nudes.

"You photograph many nudes. Why nudes?" she asked him.

"I find the female form interesting and sensual. I could lie, tell you I'm a professional and only interested in things like form, shadows, and texture, but I won't. I find nothing wrong with my attraction as a man towards women. Aside from that, there is the artistic challenge of creating a good photo from an already great subject."

"You make it sound simple."

"It should be. As a man I'm attracted to women…women are attracted to men. In some cases, women to women, and men to men. So, any photo of a nude man or woman is bound to create a reaction. Why some people are uncomfortable with nudity is beyond me."

"You mean sex?"

"Sex, but more than sex, it's also the desires that lead to sex. It's the way people find fault with their own desires and actions, as if these desires are evil. Take lust. We're told from day one that it's wrong to want something we don't have. Lust is really just another term for desire, and a way of describing sexual desire. Can you imagine any relationship without it? Hell, you might was well choose a lover out of a box of cereal. Every relationship begins with lust. To say that lust is evil is not really sensible—don't you think?"

"Well…"

"I know I'm talking terminology, but I know what I'm saying. Some of the pictures I take are of the human form. I enjoy taking them, and

I think the women I've taken pictures of wanted to have their picture taken. You've seen my work, do you find it tasteful?"

"I'm really not sure where 'tasteful' begins and ends. If you're asking whether I get the same response with your female nudes as you do, I'd have to say no. But that one of the male…"

"Greg was his name."

"Is interesting."

"Would you say I've succeeded in making an emotional connection?"

"I'll grant you that."

"I wish I could accurately describe how my photographs make me feel beyond what I find stimulating about them. Taking a picture of a nude female is as natural as taking a picture of a naked mountaintop or a naked shoreline. Who can say one form or another form of nature is less important than another? Who can say one form of nature is more evil than another? It's ridiculous. I can take a picture of an armpit and the back of a woman's head and it's acceptable. Drop the camera down a notch and catch the exposed portion of a breast and suddenly, I'm a pervert with a camera. Same body, same woman, and if you believe it, same creator who made them both, yet one particular curve is deemed more offensive than the rest. Frankly, I find that kind of thinking offensive!"

Right before her eyes Stace was coming alive. His soul seemed bottomless and whether she knew it or not, the journey she was taking into his soul was also rejuvenating her. She was finding answers to questions she'd never even thought to ask herself.

"Do you want to get out of here?" she asked.

"If you'd like."

From the museum, they walked a few blocks to Mainzer Gasse where she knew of a great restaurant perched on top of the eighth floor of a classy department store. She chose a table near the window overlooking Frankfurt. It was still early in the afternoon and the fest halls

had not yet come to life. They wouldn't be in full swing until midnight. But Stace and Eva would never make it to them.

Much of what they said to each other over the course of the remainder of the evening would not pass through words. It has been said that people fall in love with each other, but that distinction rests with those who consider love to be a mutual trading of interests and desires. With them, love is a precious commodity, dispensed only when all the possible risks have been eliminated. Others, however, carry love with them like a bouquet of flowers. It's not a question of finding a person worthy enough to receive their bouquet, but of passing the bouquet onto another before it's had the chance to wilt and die. Stace and Eva understood this kind of love, and it was inevitable that the two would find themselves together, alone.

Once back at Stace's apartment, Eva propped her feet up on the coffee table and laid her head against the back of the couch. Her next sensation was an almost imperceptible touch. Stace had sneaked up behind her and without a sound had dropped to his knees and caressed her neck. Then he reached up with both hands, running them down over the contours of her head and shoulders. Leaning closer, he buried his nose into the aroma of her hair. Delighted with the sensation, he clawed his fingers into her hair taking in fistfuls, whispered her name and sucked the nape of her neck as if the taste of her flesh was ointment to his soul. He'd not shaved since Friday morning and strands of her hair were getting caught up in the rakes of his whiskers. She could feel his hot breath lingering over her hair, the song of his panting increasing. A race of goose bumps traveled at lightning speed down her spine, over her thighs and down to her toes still wrapped in socks. She let her head fall forwards towards her chest.

With a finger, he parted Eva's hair in the middle of her head, then reached up with both hands over her earlobes, fingers stretching like cat paws in parallel rhythm over the line of her jaws towards her lips. With one of his fingers, he found the flesh of her lips and caressed the outline. Her lips wrapped around his finger down its length, entomb-

ing his finger in seas of warmth. She swirled her tongue and pulled his finger down deeper into the depths of her mouth. He felt a twitch of pain as her teeth locked down. Maddened, he took her neck into his mouth like a vampire, gripping, nearly penetrating. She moaned, then parted her lips, releasing his finger from its slippery womb. He nibbled his way up the side of her neck and devoured her earlobe. Numbing sensations rippled over her body, pricking the nipples of her breasts into submission. He slid his hands around her throat and suddenly hesitated…as if electricity were housed somewhere beyond the first button of her blouse. He would suppress his instincts no longer.

CHAPTER 25

"No Pruitt! I won't do it!" Rick said fuming with anger, jugular veins in his neck popping out like ropes. He'd never spoken to Pruitt in this manner, but he thought it justified. There was no possible way he was going to hack into major web browsers, which was the only possible way that he and Jean had determined was necessary to unleash the virus.

"Then how are we going to do it?" Pruitt asked.

"We'll have to find another way," Rick said.

Pruitt was trying to think of a reason not to fire Rick on the spot.

"We'll have to simulate the conditions, but we certainly can't hack into those systems."

"Rick's right," Jean said. She looked into Pruitt's glaring eyes. "I can tell you from first hand experience you don't want to screw around with those companies. Nothing can save you if you are caught. And all the money in the world couldn't get me to risk the next twenty years of my life in jail."

Pruitt took a few deep breaths and composed himself. He had sense enough to understand Jean knew what she was talking about. He looked at Rick, who was at that very moment working out the details of a resignation letter in his head. Pruitt may have wanted to fire Rick, but he needed him.

"I'm sorry, Rick. We've got a lot riding on this project. You're right of course. Legally and ethically there's no reason we should hack into their systems. I was wrong for asking you to do it." He was lying. He'd do anything to get the job done, especially if it was someone else's ass on the line.

Rick didn't budge. He stood by the window looking into the hill country imagining the sound of the wind blowing through the oak trees, but all he could hear was his own heart throbbing in his ears.

"I have a lot of confidence in you, Rick. As far as I'm concerned you're the most capable programmer at Trojan Security." He put his hand around Rick's shoulder and drew him close. He dropped his voice down to a whisper. "I'm going to recommend to Mr. Watson we give you a bonus when this is completed. I should think $25,000 is a workable figure. I know you're a man of principle and we can't buy your support, but what else is a company to do?" He grinned and gently shook Rick's shoulder. "We pay for performance, that's business and there's nothing unethical about it. I want you here and I want you to be happy with us. I won't ask you to do anything illegal again."

Rick hesitated a few moments before answering. "Alright," he replied. Then to himself he thought, "It better be the last time you ask."

"Great!" Pruitt said. He turned and faced Jean. "I've got confidence in both of you. If you've got to simulate what needs to be done then so be it."

When Pruitt left, Jean was the first to speak, "I can't believe it! He actually pressed us on the idea. I believe in what we're doing, but I'm sure not going to risk jail time for it!" Her words bounced off Rick like water in a frying pan. Jean left him alone. She walked over to the equipment and fired it up. The hard drives started to whine.

In a way it seemed like yesterday, the passing of time obscuring events and faces like dusty images in the broken mirror of a ghost town saloon. He remembered the name, Stace Manning, but the only detail he could recall of Stace's face was the rage in his eyes when Rick had

told him about the committee's decision to not let his work be shown at the exhibit. Deep down, he knew he should have supported Stace. "And what the hell ever happened to that guy?" He wondered.

Rick wasn't at all impressed with the offer to buy his cooperation for $25,000, but it could buy a little tolerance. Maybe it was the way the transaction went down, like the way Pruitt expected him to just shut up by waving numbers in his face. Maybe it was the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach when he thought about what he could do with the extra money. Or maybe it was this same old version of himself, which kept rearing its ugly head every time he looked in the reflection of a picture window…

Meanwhile, at a distant northeast country club in Austin, a golf caddie answered the phone. "I'm sorry sir. Mr. Watson has given specific instructions he's not to be disturbed."

"Tell him this is Pruitt. He'll talk to me."

"I'm sorry sir, but—"

"Listen! What's he doing now?"

"He's on the seventh sir, shooting from thirteen feet for a birdie. Are you sure you want to interrupt him?"

"No, but hold the line. When he sinks the putt and hands you the club give him the phone."

The seventh green sloped gently to the right about three degrees. Just beyond the tee, it tapered about five degrees into a sand pit. Watson's putt called for him to perform a feat just beyond his level of skill. He must drive the putt slightly up hill to the left and calculate the power without error. The last six holes had put him two over par. Not the best he'd done, but a promising start nonetheless. If he finished the front nine with less than seven over, he would pocket a token twenty dollars from his competition, Jeff Mitchell, an executive with Dell.

The air was still, the green soggy. A thunderstorm had rolled through the night before dropping an inch of rain on the course. Watson's cleats swished on the grass as he approached the ball. Squatting, he held his putter as a pendulum, lining the ball up with the hole and

analyzing the slopes. The sand pit loomed like quicksand in the background. Rising, he moved in just behind the ball and drew his putter back. Black crows sitting in a nearby mesquite tree cocked their heads and held their throats.

Pruitt cracked his knuckles until his patience gave out. "Well?" he shouted. The caddie shoved the phone against his pants to muffle the sound.

A smooth even swing struck the ball with a *prick* and sent it shooting towards the hole. Mitchell grinned. Too much power. Even Watson thought he'd hit it too hard. The ball bounced three times then rolled, water spinning off of it in a spiral like the flares from a whirly bird firecracker. Three feet from the hole it slowed down drastically, crept to the lip, hung for just a moment, then rolled in.

"Is that Mr. Pruitt on the phone?" Watson asked his caddie nonchalantly, as if he expected to make the putt all along

"Yes sir. Outstanding shot sir!"

The caddie exchanged club for phone. Watson moved to a stand of trees beyond earshot.

"Watson!"

"What's going on Pruitt?"

"We almost lost Rick this morning."

Watson waited for an explanation.

"He and Jean have come up with some good ideas, but it was going to require—"

"Is he staying, Pruitt?"

"I believe so."

"Is the program still on line?"

"Yes sir."

"Then the only thing I need to hear about is if we're running into the snags we discussed."

"No sir. Nothing like that. But I had to twist his arm with a bonus."

"Under fifty grand I hope," Watson replied, looking over to the green so that he wouldn't miss Mitchell's putt.

"Yes sir."

"Good."

"And what did security find out."

"They've got photos of him and Jean having lunch together. The cameras set up in his office haven't caught anything yet."

"And how often do employees have lunch together?"

"Often, sir."

Back at Trojan Security, Rick had managed to lay aside his doubts for the moment. He sat next to Jean, who was tossing computer manuals back into one of the empty boxes.

She looked at him "You don't need these do you?" she asked.

"If I do, we're in a lot of trouble."

She spotted another manual on the other side of his computer monitor, and as she reached for it her arm rubbed the back of his hand. The warmth of her skin through her cotton sleeve enchanted him. She was wearing a thin, lightly colored blouse, and as she backed into her seat, he saw the form of her breasts dangle momentarily in the backlight cast from the window. The aroma of her perfume followed, mingling with the warmth of her body. Her action seemed deliberate. When she settled in her seat, the unpleasant thoughts associated with Pruitt's visit had escaped him.

Much of their time for the remainder of the day was spent in close proximity to one another. So close at times that their knees often brushed together while discussing some possibility over another, or an intricate programming detail that would have to be written. They spent as much time discussing the program as they did thinking about each other, though the conversation stayed within the boundaries of technical jargon. The hidden video cameras concealed in Rick's office recorded every subtle touch, every nuance of their gestures, and even the moment when Jean brushed off a crumb from Rick's lips with her fingers, which was left over from a sandwich he'd just finished.

Before they knew it, it was 6:20 p.m. At Rick's home, Julie was just now setting the table with little Rebecca tagging along behind her holding two spoons in her dimpled fingers.

"It's late and I need to get going," he said reluctantly.

Jean put her hand on his knee. "I know. Would you like to get together tomorrow?" she asked.

"To work on the program?"

"Yes, of course. We made good progress today. I'd hate to break the rhythm."

"I know what you mean. But I can't tomorrow," he replied, for the first time regretting the dawning of Sunday, church, and an afternoon with the family.

"I understand." She sucked in the corner of her bottom lip.

"I'll see you on Monday then," he said, reaching to shut down her computer. She prevented him from doing this by grabbing and holding his hand.

"I'm going to stay a little longer."

"You sure?"

"I've got nothing better to do tonight."

He grabbed his briefcase and didn't turn around at the door. She watched him leave.

As he drove home that evening, he couldn't shake her lingering memory from his mind. He found this infatuation stimulating. Throughout his short married life, the thought of even considering another woman was unthinkable, because the sanctity of marriage had brought him great comfort.

"Certainly Jean's actions were deliberate? Like when she reached for the manual, hovering over me like a flower waiting to be plucked. Then later, when she rubbed her knees on my thighs. And she sure didn't wait long to pick the crumb from my lip." Rick wondered about all of these events and leaned his head towards the window, letting the breeze tug at his hair. As he pulled into his driveway and set the parking brake, his thoughts and actions turned mechanical.

CHAPTER 26

The first thing Eva did upon awakening was to suck in a mountain of Stace's memory then exhale with a complete sense of satisfaction. Deep within her the world was blooming like the first day of spring, when the flush of love is bursting everywhere and there's not enough time to run from one place to another and enjoy the aromas. What spawned her euphoria was her surrender to a new cause; that of devotion to the man she loved. Everything in her life suddenly become secondary, as though she were mysteriously flipped around and pointed in a different direction. She didn't sense any repercussions to her actions from the evening before, because there were none. No guilt, no fear, not even a hint of impropriety. Those obsessions had been swept away like darkness banned to the outskirts of the universe.

The alarm clock next to his bed read 5:40 a.m. in bright, blood red numbers. They painted the room in a faint, scarlet glow. Stace lay curled behind her, their bodies molded together as one. He stirred as she rolled to face him, but didn't wake. His long inky hair sprawled frantically down his face, the rhythm of his breath was deep and hard. He was somewhere far away, lost in dreams. She looked at him intently. Not pretty, he was rather unique, possessing the kind of face that invites inquiry as to the origin of its sensitivity.

After a few moments, she slipped out of bed. In the living room she dressed, having found her clothes contorted on the floor where they'd been left the night before. She switched off the stereo, grabbed her bag, and tiptoed down the hall and almost made it past his room.

"Will you be back?" he asked.

"There's some equipment I need to check on at the office. I'll be back in an hour."

"I'll have breakfast ready by the time you get back," he said, rolling out of bed.

She watched him move towards her and take her hand.

He walked her down the hall and grabbed his coat from a hanger near the door. "Wear mine this morning. It's cooler now than it was last night."

"Thanks."

After helping her into it, he gently turned her around by the shoulders and buttoned her up. She stood silent and compliant like a toddler being dressed. When he finished he bent over and kissed her on the forehead, then pushed her loose bangs behind her ears. "You hurry back now."

"I will."

At work she quickly changed out the CDs, setting them on the stack of others that had been recorded over the weekend. She had no intention of running them through the scanner to listen to any conversations they might have recorded. She hopped in her Opel and headed back to Stace's apartment.

By 8:30 a.m. they were headed northwest towards Rudelsheim, the quaint romantic city set along the banks of the fertile Rhine River. Tourists from the surrounding areas were beginning to arrive and they strolled along the spotless mercantile streets. They found a place to park near one of the many ports along the river built for the Brandenburg's massive seventy-five foot touring yachts. Eva purchased tickets and they boarded one of the yachts, landing a table on the upper deck

overlooking the lower deck, where they could watch the bow cut a path through the calm river.

The sky was clear, of the variety in which one can scan from the horizon up into the heavens and witness the gradual wash in color of pale blue to imaginary blackness. The sun was warming everything it touched, dispelling any illusion of an approaching winter. Aromas hung in the air, such as the waft of river water soaked in mountain fragrances, which co-mingled with the smell of diesel smoke as the yacht broke free of port. From Rudelsheim, a stream of civilized smells poured out of restaurants, bakeries, and coffee shops. Further along, the aromas of remnant grape blossoms and the recent harvest mixed with the musty smell of turned soil, broken twigs, and grapes that had bloomed too late for picking.

Stace sat opposite Eva, holding a cup of coffee between his hands, wondering just where heaven began and earth ended. Behind her, he watched the scenery drift by like the journal of an ancient countryside lost in the culture of a forgotten time. Around every corner, a fortress or castle pierced the sky. It was scenery that would cause even the most practical of men to wonder. For a photographer like Stace it was breathtaking.

"You look free, Stace."

"Not entirely. True freedom is for those without a conscious. I seem to have been blessed with an unusually active one."

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said.

"I share the artist's burden."

"Burden?"

"Sure. I compare the artist's burden to baking a cake. You take all of life's pain, sorrow, injustices, and ironies, and put them in a bowl. Then you capture all the beauty in life, the emotions of the human spirit and throw them into another bowl. Then you take all of the spiritual qualities of life, such as the ideas and dreams of mankind and put them into another bowl. After you have all these ingredients, you pick an artistic medium such as painting, music, poetry—or in my case

photography—and create something that will enrich the lives of others."

"I had no idea the process was so complex," she replied.

"It's not, if you're an artist. Fact there is no process, just the frantic desire to express yourself and the faint hope that your expressions will connect with others."

"Imagine that. And all this time I thought you were just a lazy son of a bitch!" she said sarcastically.

Suddenly, the tables behind them began clearing as the other passengers stood. The bow of the yacht started making a gentle turn to the right towards an open port and its engines slowed.

"Are we getting off?" he asked.

"Look to your right."

His eyes wandered up to an ancient castle on the hill.

"Ehrensfels' Castle," she said. "You'll enjoy it."

After debarking and crossing the street they came to a wide uphill path lined in overgrown trees. Ten minutes later they came upon a circular cobblestone entrance graced with a three-tier fountain. The cobblestone shimmered in the sun, having been buffed to a high gloss over the centuries by the sandals of noblemen and modern day tennis shoes. The castle walls zigzagged in ninety-degree angles around the circular entrance.

She took his hand and led him up a skinny wooden staircase along one of the outside walls. Joined by walkways along the top of the castle were a number of observation points bordered with waist high walls of stone figures, which made them look like rooks on a chessboard. Each guard post overlooked a different angle into the surrounding countryside. After half an hour of exploring each one of them, Stace and Eva returned to the main walkway running parallel with the river below. They leaned against the wall, arms dangling over the edge, gazing at the magical world below them. In the river far below, a coal barge was pushing its way upstream.

"Have you always just floated through life, Stace?"

"Actually, I think I'm rather grounded."

"When it comes to religion you're not."

"Seems like we've had this conversation before." He stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her stomach, resting his chin on her shoulder. She tipped her head towards his face and their cheeks pressed together. "You and I live in two different worlds," she whispered.

"I think we are very much alike," he reassured her.

"I don't know how to say what I would like to say without frightening you."

"I don't think you can frighten me."

"I've never met a man like you," she said softly and tucked her head underneath his chin. He wrapped his arms around her and looked at the distant hills. With her ear pressed against his chest she listened to the sound of his pounding heart, feeling secure in the warmth of his presence. After a few minutes, she looked into his face and searched his eyes intently. "I would like what we've begun to never end. But I'm afraid…afraid I'm not enough for you."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you're an intense individual, deeper than any man I've met."

He stepped back slightly and took her face in his hands, searching for the reason for her lack of faith. "You're the intense one, Eva. I drift around hoping I might find a way to connect to this world and whether I crawl out of bed each morning makes no difference to anybody. Your work is very important. I can only dream of making half the impact in this world that you've already made."

She turned her head to the side again and buried it in his chest. He held her tightly, then sighed deeply. She could feel his hot breath penetrating her scalp. Moments turned to minutes. Finally she whispered, "I love you, Stace," but her words were carried away in the breeze and barely reached his ears. She waited.

For a flash of time he was uncertain of what she'd said. He wanted to believe—but disbelieved—and had to know, so he reached down and gently took hold of her face and looked into her eyes.

"What did you say?" he questioned eagerly.

"I love you," she repeated without delay.

She could see he was confused. For a moment she doubted. "But if—"

He stopped her words with a kiss and pulled away.

"There is no 'but if.' I was looking for a way to return what you said that wouldn't seem trivial. You're a special woman, Eva. I knew that from the first moment I met you. It seems like I've known you for years. I've never felt the desire to care for anyone such as the way that I feel compelled to care for you—"

"I'm not asking anything from you, Stace. I just wanted to let you know how I feel."

"I know, Eva. I'm just not sure that I can promise you anything. I can't even promise myself anything."

CHAPTER 27

On Monday, October 15, at precisely 7:00 p.m. in the evening, Stautzen placed a call to Neil in Frankfurt. Neil was awake and sitting at his desk, the light from the florescent desk lamp illuminating an open Bible and a stack of notepaper. He picked the phone up on the first ring.

"The computer virus is about four weeks from completion. Are you making all the necessary arrangements?" Stautzen inquired.

"We've begun the preliminary preparations. I've been working on a series of messages to be sent out to our churches. The transition of our members to the ICC should go smoothly. We should have everything finished about the time the virus is complete."

"Gut. I'll be speaking with the reverend later. I'll let him know everything is on schedule."

"What do you know about the Schwarz Monatlich?" Neil suddenly asked.

"Never heard of them. Why?"

"Because they're doing on investigation on my ministry or the ICC."

"How'd you find this out?"

"They've been watching our apartment."

Stautzen sat up on the edge of his bed and propped his elbows on his knees. "How much do you think they know?"

"How much could they know? Only Derrick and I know what's going on."

"What about Tasha?"

"She knows nothing and never will. I'm concerned though about the American."

"What American?"

"The one we've seen tagging along with one of the reporters. You sure nothing's going on in Austin?"

"I've seen nothing out of the ordinary."

"I'd look into the members of your team more closely."

Stautzen took a mental inventory of every participant on the team. He'd check with Pruitt first thing in the morning.

"Call if there are any changes," Stautzen said.

"Likewise."

Stautzen spent the next hour fuming about the untimely involvement of the Schwarz Monatlich. He propped a few pillows against the headboard of the bed and searched for clues in the sterile implements of his apartment. He was at a loss for reasons why an investigative paper would be looking into the ICC. The ICC's reputation was impeccable and its extensive global assistance programs were helping thousands of needy individuals. As for the CRM, they were similar in mission with the ICC, though on a radical scale, and there was really no connection to the two on paper.

Still, the fact persisted like a canker sore. The Schwarz Monatlich was doing an investigation and there were only two logical explanations for it. The most pressing conclusion he could come up with was that the paper had discovered the existence of the virus and was building a case against the CRM and the ICC. The presence of the American was disturbing and seemed to verify that a member of the team might have leaked information to an outside source. The program however, was still weeks away from completion and the only danger

would come when it was put into operation. The other possible explanation was that the paper was doing an investigation strictly on the CRM.

Stautzen recalled the day when Reverend Eisner disclosed to Neil and Stautzen his meeting with Fred Watson of Trojan Security. The three of them discussed the idea in the reverend's office behind closed doors.

"I think it's one of the most risky ideas I've ever heard," Stautzen stated.

The reverend and Neil remained silent, possessing the same relative amount of indifference towards Stautzen.

Stautzen continued. "I think it's against the Lord's will to work with a secular organization in spreading the gospel. You would be jeopardizing this entire ministry by doing so."

After some silence Neil spoke up. "You need to be careful, Jeremiah, but God works in mysterious ways. If he's using Trojan Security to further his work, you need to be receptive to that fact."

"Those were my thoughts as well. We have to look at the big picture."

"But manipulating people's minds? Surely the Lord doesn't work in that manner?" Stautzen pressed.

"Doesn't He?" Neil interrupted. "Is it not the work of the Holy Spirit and angels to interfere with the consciousness of man?"

"But by deception?" Stautzen asked.

"I don't see it as deception. The Lord has the right to use whatever means he wants to reach sinners. Throughout the course of every individual's life God drops hints to let them know he's alive and trying to speak to them. And the only way he does this is through common everyday events. He uses what's available to his advantage." Neil said.

Stautzen remained silent.

"We also have to consider that Satan and his demons are trying to influence people. Can we not assume that Satan himself would use

such a method to his advantage if given the opportunity? He'd use the program, so why not beat him to it?" Neil asked.

"With all due respect, Neil, I still don't think that makes it right."

"Your point is taken," the reverend responded quickly. "I don't think there is a right or wrong here. There's only a possibility to further God's work."

"I have to agree with you, Jeremiah. We don't often know the way in which to proceed with our responsibilities. It helps to stay focused on the primary objective, saving sinners. The question is always, "Will our actions further that cause or will they take us away from it?" It is no different with the decision on whether to use this program," Neil concluded analytically.

"I believe in providence gentlemen. I think the ICC is what it is today through the hard work of dedicated individuals led by the Spirit of God. We've succeeded because we've listened to his guidance. I admit there may have been a time at the beginning of our ministry when I wondered if God was with us, but I do not for one instant, doubt he has been with us through every step of the way. Millions of people use the Internet on a daily basis. I would suspect many of them are not saved. So, we use a method of getting their attention, of bringing the Gospel to them. I can only come to the conclusion this would be a good thing." The reverend was now absorbed in one of his many moments when his logic becomes indisputable. "Ethical? Ethical questions are reserved for philosophers. Gentlemen, we're not in the business of philosophy. As ministers of God we possess what philosophers only dream of obtaining."

He turned towards Stautzen and addressed him warmly. "Joseph, I appreciate your concern and respect your opinion. That's why you're here and why I want you to be personally in charge of this project from the start. I'm not telling you that you should go, but I'm asking you as a friend. Would you meet with the Trojan Security team that will be putting this program together?"

"Where sir?"

"America. You leave in a week. If during the course of putting this together you feel it's not in the best interest of the ICC to proceed than you have my full support to pull out."

"I'm still not sure how to proceed."

"I've spoken to Fred Watson at length about this. He's made it clear to me the program is to be designed specifically to assist in the ICC's ministry. It will be your responsibility to help steer the team you'll be working with in that direction.

"I'm still concerned about the legalities."

"I've considered them as well. Mr. Watson has explained to my satisfaction that the program will be built in the most secure of environments. I assure you, I would not ask you to do anything which your conscience would lead you to think unjustified."

Stautzen considered the doubts in his own mind and the recommendation by the reverend and Neil to proceed. He had a great deal of respect for both men and a humble realization that the two held a position in the work of God that far exceeded his. The reverend's urging that he should be in charge of the development of the program gave him a fresh sense of confidence, and he was able to reconsider his position and follow their lead.

CHAPTER 28

"Ruben! Listen to this!"

Shelly spun the CD back to the point where the conversation between Neil and Stautzen had been recorded early that morning.

Ruben slipped the headphones over his ears. "One more time," he said, his eyes twitching with anxiety.

"Where's Eva?" he asked.

"She hasn't been in all day. Hasn't called either."

"Page her."

Eva arrived about forty-five minutes later. Ruben, Shelly, and Mr. Schwarz were seated around the equipment discussing the recording. At her arrival they ceased talking.

"What's wrong?" she asked, setting her bag on her desk.

"We've got something."

"That's good."

"No it's not. You need to hear this," Ruben said.

He escorted her to the old, olive colored swivel chair sitting in front of the equipment. She sat down slowly and he helped her put the earphones on. He flipped the switch and the CD lurched forward. He stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders.

Shelly watched for her reaction through slanted eyes. Eva sat motionless, listening through the preliminary exchange with compo-

sure. She flicked back a stand of hair that had fallen over her nose and adjusted the headphones, then set her arms over the ripped armrests of the chair. A moment passed. Her hand twitched, a forefinger extending tensely into the air. She clenched a fist. Her eyes fierce now, then confused—then fierce again. Suddenly she leaned forward, her hands catching the fall of her face as she bent towards the table.

Shelly came to her side and leaned towards her. She placed her hand on Eva's head and stroked it reassuringly.

"You okay?" she asked.

Eva didn't respond.

Everyone waited for her to break down, but she didn't.

"Will you be alright," Shelly asked a second time in whisper.

"I'll be alright," she sighed, her words whistling through her flattened hands covering her face. "I always am aren't I?"

"Yeah, you are," Shelly agreed, and handed her a tissue from the box that Ruben had gone to retrieve.

Eva refused it. Instead, she defiantly wiped her tears with her fingers.

Mr. Schwarz spoke. "What do you know about this man you've been seeing?"

She took a deep breath and for the first time since she'd met Stace she felt she knew nothing at all about him. She looked at Shelly, who'd backed against the equipment and stood looking down at her. "I know very little about him," she said, regrettably.

"Then we've got to find out more," Mr. Schwarz said quickly.

She turned in her chair and gazed at him in disbelief.

Mr. Schwarz realized the impulsiveness of his comment, but didn't take it back. "If the American you're seeing is involved with the CRM or the ICC, then we must find out who he is and what he knows.

"Do you have any idea what you're asking me to do?" Eva pleaded, her voice trembling. Mr. Schwarz remained silent, but looked to Shelly for backup support. Shelly understood his intent. She dropped one knee on the floor towards Eva and looked into her sullen face. Eva's hair had fallen around her head providing a natural covering from all

the shame and she refused to push it back. Shelly pulled some of it behind her ears. Looking into Eva's twisted face she said, "Mr. Schwarz is right, Eva. If this American is involved with the program we need to know."

She glanced at Shelly incredulously, the bottom of the whites in her eyes glistening with tears.

"More importantly, Eva…you need to know."

Eva knew she was right.

"Let's talk about what we do know," Mr. Schwarz began. "We know there's a definite connection between the ICC and the CRM. We know they're working with a company named Trojan Security to build a virus." Raising his voice a notch or two he added, "If any of you have doubted my concern in the past it's time to lay those doubts to rest. The tone of the conversation in the recording reveals they are planning something significant."

There was no opposition to his comment.

Mr. Schwarz looked at Eva sympathetically, "Are you sure you don't know anything more about the American?"

"His name is, Stace Manning. And no, I don't."

Mr. Schwarz looked at the others. "Does anyone have any suggestions regarding this American, assuming of course, he's not a victim of circumstance?"

They were silent for a moment, not wishing to offend Eva with any further suggestions that the man she was seeing might have other reasons for getting involved with Eva.

"Very well," Mr. Schwarz said, "then I see a few possibilities. He might be working for one of the Christian groups or he might be working for an outside agency.

"Perhaps he's with another paper," Shelly said.

"Or de law," Ruben added.

"Or he's with some other group," said Mr. Schwarz.

"Like who?" Eva asked.

Mr. Schwarz was hesitant to conclude. "Well, we really can't assume anything until we know more about this virus."

"If he's working with de ICC or de CRM in implementing de virus, we can only assume he's using Eva to distract us from dis investigation," Ruben said.

"That's impossible!" Eva erupted.

"Why, Eva?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

She was almost too embarrassed to say it. "Because I approached him, he had no interest in me until—"

"Where?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"At the Freibad public swimming pool. He was sitting up the hill from me. I introduced myself."

"But if he knew who you were, Eva, it's possible he could have been following you for weeks. You may have initiated de contact, which saved him a lot of trouble," Ruben said.

The thought of such a deception was unbearable to her. She couldn't bring herself to imagine everything she'd experienced with the man had not been real. She felt like a fool.

"If that's the case, then it would be dangerous for Eva to see him again," said Shelly.

"There's still de possibility he's working for an outside agency. He might just be trying to get some information from us," Ruben said.

A few minutes lapsed while everyone considered who Stace was and what he might want. Eva was the first to break the silence. "There's only one way to find out what he's up to."

They all understood what she meant.

"There's still a lot that we don't know," Mr. Schwarz continued in his previous mode of thought. "Let's assume that he's working with one of the Christian groups. More than likely, he has already told them about our investigation."

Eva thought it ironic that Stace had been willing to help her enlarge the prints. She also wondered why it took him so long in the bathroom while she waited in the living room for him.

Mr. Schwarz continued. "Since they know we're watching them, I suspect they'll try to cover their tracks. So we'll have to work fast. Let's find out what Trojan Security is and what they do. We also need to dig a little deeper into the backgrounds of the CRM members. What did they do in East Berlin? Tasha is still a mystery. We might be able to get information out of her. Shelly, I want you to get with our contacts at the phone company and find out if they can trace the origin of the phone number that originated to Neil last night. That could lead us to Trojan Security."

"Eva, I know this is going to be difficult for you, but we need you on this," Mr. Schwarz said.

"I know. I know what I have to do."

"Are there any questions?"

"Good, I've got an old friend at the polizei station I need to talk to," Mr. Schwarz said.

CHAPTER 29

Silly with despair, Eva spent the next three days submerged in despondency. At every waking moment she thought of Stace and at every waking moment she tried to push those thoughts aside. The irony was that it was entirely possible that Stace was not involved with her investigation. But if he was involved, then his love towards her was a mockery.

Stace had called Monday evening, then Tuesday, and just now, late Wednesday night. Her answering machine recorded his swelling distress, this evening's message sounding more desperate than all. But Eva wasn't emotionally stable enough to decipher the tone in his voice. She thought she could sense in the tone of his voice that he was expressing genuine concern for her whereabouts, but then again, he might just be trying to obtain more information from her. An hour after his call she was able to wrestle stability into her thoughts. She knew for the sake of her own sanity that she must glue the shattered fragments of the situation together. She picked up the handset and dialed his number.

"Hello," his voice sounded on the other end.

She considered its sweetness, remembering for an instant its power to lure her.

"Hello!" he said louder.

"Hi, Stace."

"Hi, Eva! I've been worried about you. Where are you?"

"I'm at home."

"I've called several times. Did you get my messages?"

"I did, but I've been working late at the office and didn't want to wake you up. I just stepped in, so thought I'd call you."

"I'm glad you did. It's good to hear your voice again."

She didn't reciprocate his compliment.

"Listen, Stace, if you aren't busy this weekend I need to drive down to Munich. I was wondering if you'd like to come along."

"Work or pleasure?"

"Work," she said flatly.

"The ICC's down that way isn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"You told me once remember?"

She thought about it for a moment and couldn't remember.

"Sure, sounds like fun. Can I see you tomorrow night?" he asked.

"I've got too much to do this week."

"I see. Any way I can help you out?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm worried about you."

"I know."

"What about Friday night?" he pressed.

"I'd like to, but I've got to prepare for the weekend. I'll pick you up Saturday morning."

"Alright—Eva!"

"Ja."

"If you need anything please call."

"I will. See you Saturday." She managed a quick "goodbye."

He let down the receiver sluggishly.

One can never know a person fully, nor can one make any judgments about a person without the benefit of evidence. Yet, one can tell to some degree whether a person is inherently bad or reasonably good. What Eva lacked was evidence.

Throughout the week she had relived every moment, every conversation, every touch she'd experienced with Stace, hoping to find evidence of his dishonesty. She could only conclude Stace was definitely not bad—deceptive perhaps—but not evil. By Saturday morning she felt confident she could suspend any emotional connections she had to him. She also understood she would still have to maintain the appearance she cared for him. To get the information she needed she'd have to play his game. She pulled up along the curb in front of his place on Saturday and waited in the car.

He'd been watching from the window. When she didn't come up to the apartment he grabbed his coat and backpack and walked out to the car. He slid into the front seat and without saying a word leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Good morning," she said, interrupting his passion.

They said little to each other as they drove south through Frankfurt on the A66.

"Have you been down this way?" she asked, trying to appear comfortable.

"I've been as far south as Worms."

"You'll like the drive. When we drive further south it gets more mountainous."

He looked out his window and watched the tall pines at the edge of the autobahn drift by in a blurry unbroken wall.

"What did you go to Worms for?"

"For my father. He's a history nut, especially when it comes to religious history. I shot nine rolls of film there. Got all the cathedrals inside and out, pictures of the old wall and gate, and close-ups of every reformer in the statue in the main square."

"It's a Mecca for Protestants."

"Yeah, he got a kick out of the photos."

"You've never mentioned your parents."

"Are you sure? Must have slipped my mind. Not much to say really."

"Where do they live?"

"He lives in Oklahoma."

"And your mother?"

"She died when I was young."

"Was it an accident?"

"Breast cancer."

She ceased the interrogation momentarily. South of Worms the autobahn squeezed into two lanes. She took the far left lane and picked up speed. They zipped by trucks and busses hugging the right lane.

"What does your father do?"

"He's in construction."

"He builds houses?"

"Yes, but he doesn't swing a hammer any more. He works for a developer as one of their supervisors. Most of the time he sits in an office trailer scheduling contractors."

"Got any brothers or sisters?" She was genuinely curious about his history, but at the same time she hoped she might be able to trip him up. She was looking for the slightest bit of hesitancy in his responses, anything that might lead her to believe his past was as phony as he was.

"A younger sister."

"How old?"

"Let's see…she'd be twenty-four now."

"So, she was thirteen when your mother died."

"Something like that."

"Where is she now?"

"She still lives at home with my father. She's a junior at the university, working on a degree in physical therapy."

"What's her name?"

"Samantha. I've always called her Sam."

The interrogation was going nowhere. Either Stace had everything rehearsed or he really did have a family somewhere. She could find nothing concrete to either believe or disbelieve. In the absence of proof

she could feel the love she had for him stirring in her heart again, looking for a way out.

A few hours later as they were climbing the steep hills just outside of Stuttgart, Stace had a few questions of his own.

"Your brother seems like a serious fellow. What kind of work does he do again?"

She weighed her answer. "He works for the telephone company."

"Not an operator correct?"

"A technician."

He was looking out the window. When he turned to ask her another question she snapped her head towards the road.

"What's so interesting about the ICC?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm just trying to understand what the ICC has to do with us."

"I don't understand," she said looking over to him.

"You've been avoiding me all week, and you seem a bit sharp this morning. I'm hoping it has something to do with the ICC and not with me. That's all."

"It's the ICC and then some. I just haven't had time to think about us."

"Have you had a breakthrough in your investigation?"

"Yes, but nothing important. This week has just been busier than usual."

"And it has nothing to do with me?" he persisted, speaking into his window.

"Sorry if it seems that way."

He recognized her deception, but decided not to confront her about it.

"Has the ICC got anything to do with Derrick who was following us a few weeks ago?" he asked.

She was becoming uncomfortable with his line of questions. "Was he making conversation or trying to get information from her?" she wondered.

"It's possible," she said.

"Are you expecting him to be at the ICC's complex?"

"No."

"Oh, and all this time I thought I was tagging along to protect you." He smiled.

"You are."

"What does the ICC have to do with your investigation?"

"I'm not sure," she replied evasively.

"Then what's the plan?"

"The ICC has a show this afternoon I need to see.

"I'll probably wait in the car, thank you."

She wondered why.

"And then?"

"We'll play that one by ear."

They'd entered the outskirts of the Munich in the middle of the afternoon. Stace took notice of the mixed array of buildings, some modern, some ancient, but everything clean and tidy just like a typical German city should be. The autobahn they'd been traveling on split into more lanes to accommodate the volume of traffic. It wove its way through the heart of the city; an antiquated path paved over to accommodate the modern age. Passing the central business district, Eva found the road she was looking for. She headed south towards the Southern Alps towards Austria. She stopped once to look at a map and check her notes. She finally found the right turn she was looking for and within ten minutes they'd reached their destination.

The entrance to the ICC was marked by a fifteen-foot tall cement impersonation of Christ struck in a serene pose holding a baby lamb. The statute stood isolated in deep grass and from the angle at which it stood from the road it towered above the backdrop of the mountains to the south. Below the sandals of Christ was an inscription bearing the name, "The International Christian Coalition." Eva turned onto the entrance road bordered on each side with rolling mounds of flowerbeds in full bloom. Behind the flowerbeds was a row of leafless trees. Their

shoots twisted crankily into the clear sky and looked like bundles of forks wrapped together.

The complex was surrounded entirely by a six-foot high, white plastered wall. Within moments, they'd reached the main gate where a security post rested in the middle of the road. A guard dressed in a white uniform greeted them. He handed Eva a visitor's guide and pointed towards the direction in which she should park. The immense parking lot was half-full. Eva parked on the right side in the middle of row thirty-four, guided into her space by a young man with a red vest waving an orange flag.

Stace took a moment to look at the brochure. In it, there was a brief synopsis of the ICC's history, color photographs of the complex, and on the back panel an artistic rendering of the grounds. "Ah! The donations of the faithful hard at work," he said, folding the brochure and slipping it into his coat pocket.

They got out of the car and walked towards the center of the parking lot where they met up with other visitors. The tops of the main three buildings of the complex loomed in the distance. Most significant was the sanctuary in the center of their view. To the left of the sanctuary was a long three-story building seen from its side, and towards the right, a flatter two-story building, which housed the production studios. An invitation to experience the beauty of the ICC complex lay ahead. Before the sanctuary was a small park.

They reached the end of the lot and stepped onto an enormous, skillfully laid out area paved in brick of various designs and colors. This patio measured a stone's throw in depth and twice that far in width. Fully-grown trees grew out of holes in the brick, providing shade. Beneath the trees were raised bedding plant areas full of geraniums, pansies, and assorted colors of carnations. All the flowers were set in flowing patterns amidst boxwood hedges, and all the boxwoods were sheared with precision as if a military barber had pruned them. By far though, the most impressive area of the park was at its center.

It measured at least forty meters in length and fifteen meters wide. It was an enormous fountain by any means and exceptionally beautiful. Its shape was like a crescent moon, although its corners were rounded instead of coming to a fine point, and contained by a short wall made of flagstone. Though the pool was only two feet deep, it looked bottomless. Dozens of tiny fountainheads scattered just above the surface of the water delivered a fine mist over the surface. Above the mist, twelve life-size figures appeared to be walking on the water. They walked towards a small fishing boat where a figure of Christ stood with outstretched arms. Stace had to admit it was one of the most beautiful statues he'd ever seen.

Beyond the fountain was the church. Stace was not at all impressed with the church, which is to say, it was much too excessive for his taste. The entrance resembled the front of a flying saucer tipped at an angle. It was higher in the center and tapered off towards the sides. Stace and Eva stopped at the base of the church where circular marble steps rose up towards the entrance.

"Afraid you're on your own."

"You're not coming in?" she asked.

"I'll wander around and meet you later at the fountain."

She hesitated for a moment, then went inside and took a seat in the upper balcony. She leaned forward in the cushioned seat and peered over the rail far below. A blur of people moved through the aisles looking for seats. They were escorted by men in white. Other people were leaning towards each other talking and embracing as if they were friends who'd not seen each other for years. Children were sitting compliantly next to parents. Directly below her, a little girl in a frilly yellow dress with ruffles sat on her father's knee giggling at the faces he was making. There was a piano melody playing somewhere, but she resisted the mood it sought to put her in.

She was pissed—pissed at the world. In fact, she had a mental list of everything she was pissed about. There was the paper, which passed onto her its demands. Mr. Schwarz, who required her to perform the

impossible at any given time. There was the CRM, whom she deemed as innocuous, but due to the urging of Mr. Schwarz, she had to visualize them as dangerous. Then Shelly screwed up the directions causing her to nearly miss the cut off to the ICC. And what of the ICC? Things seemed pretty peaceful around here, although Stace would like her to believe that demons lurked in the shadows. Then there was the recording about the American—or Stace—that a weeks worth of twisting through its implications had gotten her nowhere. Finally, there were the confusing ramifications of her life, which a few months ago seemed all in order.

"Well, how was it?" Stace asked, as she walked up to him after the show at the fountain. "Did you get the answers you were looking for?"

"All that I expected and then some."

CHAPTER 30

"What the?" Neil mumbled.

Tasha looked over at Neil who was squatting under the table behind the couch and thrusting his arm in the air. She could see a tiny piece of yellow paper about the size of a quarter pinched between his fingers.

Tasha got up to get a closer look.

"Derrick!" he shouted down the hall.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" he asked Tasha.

"No."

He asked her again with a look of suspicion.

"I don't, Neil," she sheepishly replied.

"Let me take a look," Derrick said. He clasped the edge of the paper by his fingers as though it were fragile. Something was written across the back. He blew the dust off it and held it up towards the light. The word heftplaster was written diagonally across it over and over. "Adhesive tape," he replied.

"I know what it is! Do you know where it came from?" Neil asked.

"I've never used that stuff."

"What's it for?" Tasha asked, eager to appear concerned.

"It's double-sided, Tasha. You stick something to it then you stick it to something else," Derrick replied.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked Neil.

"Right here under the printer. I ran out of printing paper and I was setting this ream of paper on the floor."

They both looked under the table and it took Neil only a few seconds to find the bug. He reached over and slapped Derrick on the leg.

"What's the problem?" asked Tasha.

"Shut up!" Derrick demanded.

They crawled out from under the table and walked into the dining room. Neil cleared a spot at the edge of the table and set the device down. They took a seat next to it and examined it as though it were a resurrected skeleton from the past. Tasha thought to ask what it was but kept her mouth shut. What she saw was a tiny, metallic object, circular in shape, and about a quarter inch in diameter with a black wire screen covering it. Through the screen she could see electrical circuitry. She was clueless.

Neil took a notepad out of his briefcase and clicked his pen open. After scratching a quick note, he flipped it around, laid his pen on it, and slid it over to Derrick.

"What do you think?" Neil asked.

Derrick looked at the note, picked up the pen, and scribbled his response. "First rate," he wrote, sliding it back to Neil.

"Tasha?" Neil wrote.

"Possibly." Derrick.

"Doubtful." Neil.

"I've never trusted her." Derrick.

"I think it's the Schwarz Monatlich." Neil.

"Could be right. How'd they get in?" Derrick.

Tasha was mystified by their behavior. All she could do was watch the volley of the notepad sliding back and forth between them.

"Maybe Tasha let them in." Derrick penned.

After reading Derrick's last note, Neil thought long and hard. He couldn't believe it—didn't want to believe it.

At this point they both looked over to Tasha. She read their expressions as hostile.

"What?" she asked, tilting her head.

It took Neil and Derrick two minutes to find the other two bugs and another thirty minutes of looking to make sure they were the only two. Neil was disturbed they'd located them within the phone receivers. He knew that at the very least, whoever had planted them had heard his conversation with Stautzen in the early hours of the morning. The virus was no longer a secret.

Tasha thought she deserved an explanation. "Neil, What are those for?"

Neil looked up to silence her but saw she would not be silenced.

"Wait," he said, gesturing to her with an uplifted hand.

Neil took the bugs and set them in the middle of a sheet of paper. Methodically, he began folding the sheet of paper into a tight little ball. Walking into the kitchen he snatched a roll of masking tape out of a drawer and started winding the tape around the paper. He ended up with a tape ball about the size of a baseball, sufficiently silencing the bugs. He set the ball down on the table and looked at Derrick then Tasha.

"What do you know about the Schwarz Monatlich?" he asked her.

It was not the explanation she was looking for. "The Schwarz Monatlich? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Tasha, I want you to think real hard." His words came slowly, but his expression was sinister. He rolled the ball around on the table under his palm and stared at her. She'd never seen the look before on him.

"I've heard of the paper, but nothing more."

Neil looked at the ball. His next question would be spoken more deliberately. "Has anyone at the Schwarz Monatlich ever made contact with you?"

It was obvious to Tasha he hadn't believed her first response. She would articulate her next response so it would be much more simple for him to understand.

"NO!"

Neil glanced at Derrick who sat disbelieving. Neil, however, was almost convinced of her innocence. Nevertheless, he pressed her again.

"Tasha…this is serious. Have you or anyone at the Schwarz Monatlich ever spoken to each other?"

Tasha flew out of her chair. It made a *gruff* sound as it slid over the wooden floor. She stood silent for a moment looking from one disapproving face to the other.

"No, Neil! and you're scaring me. I told you I've only seen the paper around town and nothing else!"

She crossed her arms in defiance and turned towards the window. She could feel their eyes burning through the back of her head. She felt like running to her room, but for some strange reason she froze. She might have been moved to cry if she knew exactly what to cry for. Her pupils spun frantically in the whites of her eyes looking for something to land on. Eventually they did. In the yard below two boys were kicking a soccer ball around.

Her movements, her expressions, and the tone of her voice led Neil to believe she was innocent of what they suspected. He was a good judge of character, but this was only a partial reason for him to believe her. For he was in a strange way infatuated with her. It was a crazy type of infatuation; one confused by his natural lust and his commitment to celibacy.

Confronting her had been necessary and he felt no need to apologize. He also knew he'd have to devise an explanation for her. An explanation that would set her mind at ease and at the same time keep her out of the present dilemma which he and Derrick faced. He sat quietly distilling in these thoughts, while she stood with her back against them looking out the window. What he forgot to do was anticipate Derrick's reaction.

Derrick had always known how Neil felt about her. He knew that some day Neil's infatuation with her would jeopardize their ministry. She'd come between them many times before. Derrick's resentment towards her was keen, like the edge of a blade sharpened in stone. He

was convinced she'd participated in the planting of the bugs. If not directly then indirectly, by her own carelessness. Either she had let someone into the apartment or she'd given someone opportunity to enter by leaving the apartment unoccupied. He looked at her back turned defiantly against them, and saw her dog, Pauli. Tasha walked Pauli in the park every morning and every evening. This left ample time for someone to have come into the apartment. His conclusion to the matter was swift.

Leaping out of his chair, he grabbed Pauli by the back of the neck. Yelping in terror, Pauli awakened Tasha out of her stupor. As Tasha turned she could see Pauli twisting and kicking and Derrick hauling her up to his chest and wrapping his brutal arms around her neck immobilizing her. Then Derrick made a run for the door, but Tasha was quicker. She sailed around the table behind Neil and used Neil's shoulder to propel her even faster. This brought Neil up out of his seat. Within a few seconds, all three stood in front of the solid oak door leading out into the stairwell.

"Give her to me, Derrick!" she yelled, eyes no longer shifty, but fierce and filling with tears.

"Derrick!" Neil commanded, clawing Derrick's shoulder from behind.

Derrick advanced another step towards Tasha.

Tasha felt a sharp pain smack her skull as her head hit the door. She would not let him pass. She had a firm grip on the handle and was braced against another wall. But her grip failed and her socks slipped on the wooden floor. She hit the floor with a flop, but never took her eyes off Derrick. She was as much bewildered as terror-stricken. In the three years she'd known Derrick, she had never seen him display such an expression of horrific potential.

Derrick didn't hear Neil call out to him the first time, nor the second. Now, the call of his name sounded in his soul as if it were rising like an echo from the depths of a bottomless well. When he finally did hear his name, he awakened out of his rage and realized where he stood

and what he'd done. He looked down at Tasha, huddling by the door. Her eyes were terror stricken. Her lips tensely twitching with anxiety.

"Tasha's got nothing to do with this!" He heard the roar of Neil behind him. At the same time he felt Neil's hands yanking him backwards by his shoulders.

Derrick now looked at Pauli, which he still clutched in his hands. His grip was so tenacious that the skin on her face was pulled out of position exposing her discolored fangs. She was panting heavily, but dared not yelp, as if a cry of protest would bring her destruction. Derrick let loose his grip, and Pauli ran her long red tongue around the edges of her dry mouth.

Tasha saw Derrick return to coherence and quickly grabbed Pauli out of his arms. She ran down the hall and disappeared in her room.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Neil asked, spinning Derrick around by the shoulders.

"How do you know she's not involved?" Derrick shouted.

"Because I know," Neil replied.

"Jesus Chr—shit Neil! How long have those things been around?"

Neil left him at the door with his hands on his hips and went and sat down at the kitchen table. He took a long hard stare at the object of their present conflict. It looked like a crinkly dried pear. He grabbed a hold of it and hurled it into the kitchen. It slapped against the door of a cabinet with a solid thud, bounced off the counter, and rolled to a stop on the floor.

CHAPTER 31

Sluggishly, like a snail, Neil crept down the hall and stopped before Tasha's door. He reached for the handle then abruptly withdrew. She'd never locked the door in the past. Now she had reason to. Dejectedly, he turned and went into his room.

He plopped on his bed, tucked his hands under his head, and gazed up at the ceiling into a long forgotten memory of Derrick. It seemed like ancient history, how swift and brutal Derrick had been, but time hadn't changed the man.

After an hour had passed, Neil walked over to his desk. The necessary chore of notifying Stautzen about the discovery of the bugs would have to be done. He could only imagine the frenzy of paranoia that would invade Stautzen's mind. Stautzen never had the heart for the project in the first place. He'd probably flip. But Neil was a man of action and without further hesitation he picked up the phone and dialed Stautzen's cellular phone.

The sights and smells of Austin had been asleep for many hours and Stautzen was wrapped up in a comatose state. The sterile ring of his cellular phone called him back to reality.

"This is Stautzen."

"This is Neil. We've got a problem."

Stautzen fell back on the sofa, fearing what he feared the most. He stared with glazed eyes at the faucet on the kitchen sink, sparkling in the diffused light coming from the lamp next to him.

"What kind of a problem?"

"Derrick and I found recording devices in our apartment tonight."

At first, his comment didn't register.

"You still there?" asked Neil.

"I'm just trying to figure out why someone would need to bug your apartment."

Neil anticipated such a reaction and would have to be delicate.

"Any idea who did it?" Stautzen asked.

"Yeah. You just let me worry about that."

Stautzen walked towards the living room window overlooking the parking lot three-stories down. He slid the window open and peered through the dusty screen. He saw no movement. The fact that he saw no movement didn't alleviate his fears. People in the business of watching other people shouldn't be seen. "Alright, then we're pulling the plug on this right now."

"We're not pulling the plug."

"If those bugs have been around since our last conversation then someone else knows about the virus."

"They know nothing."

"You're not the least bit concerned?"

"From a legal standpoint no. Illegally planted bugs is still illegal. Whatever information they heard can't be used."

"Provided it wasn't the authorities that planted them."

"It wasn't. I told you, I know the organization that did it and it's not your concern."

"Then what is my concern?"

Neil took a deep breath. "Your concern is to see that the virus gets completed. As far as everyone is concerned, you're just the consultant from the ICC who is lending his expertise to build a security program."

"But it's not a security program, Neil."

"We've been over this, Stautzen. But I thought we all understood—for the sake of what we're striving for—that we can't be expected to confine ourselves to all the limitations of the law."

Stautzen didn't respond. Who was Neil to question his commitment?

Neil took his silence as an affirmation of his acquiescence. "Is the virus still on schedule to be completed by the end of October?"

"Ja."

"Then we're shooting for an execution date of November 8th." Neil found a notepad and a pencil on his desk and jotted down the words, *"Execution Mandatory—Nov. 8."*

"Have you spoken with the reverend? Is he aware of this little snag, as you describe it?" Stautzen asked.

"It's not a snag and no, I haven't. I see no need to sound an alarm. He's got other problems of his own to focus on."

"So he's given the sermon and set things in motion?" Stautzen questioned.

"This afternoon. I watched the broadcast."

Having worked with the reverend for many years, Stautzen knew the reverend's sermon must have served up a severe blow to his unsuspecting flock.

"So, you see why the project is still a go?" Neil stated.

"Yes. There will be no turning back."

"Exactly. Now, have you found out any more about the other members of the team?"

"Only that they were contacted just weeks before the program was due to start. All selected by Fred Watson himself through a confidential process. Which means—"

"It eliminates the probability they have any connections with the Schwarz Monatlich," Neil concluded. "And what about the company man?"

"Rick Forstein?" Stautzen questioned.

"He's been with Trojan Security the longest, correct?"

"Going on four years," Stautzen said.

"How long has he known about the program?"

"According to Mitch Pruitt, even less time than the others."

"No way he could have known about it beforehand?" Neil questioned.

"Not according to Pruitt." Stautzen thought for a moment. "Still doesn't mean he's not involved. He's had a couple of weeks to contact all kinds of people. We're safer to assume he is feeding information to the Schwarz Monatlich."

As Neil listened to Stautzen he jotted down the name *"Forstein"* below his previous note. He also wrote down the name *"Burtman"* next to it. He drew an arrow between the two signifying the possible connection between them."

"I don't see the logic. Forstein works for Trojan Security. Why would he risk his job by going public with the program?" Stautzen asked.

"He's the only explanation as to why the Schwarz Monatlich would be suddenly interested in us. I suspect he's feeding information about the program to the American here, who is in turn passing that information on to one of the reporters at the paper. Neil scribbled *"American"* after Burtman's name on his notepad and added a question mark.

"This is getting to be a fricken nightmare, Neil! What am I supposed to do?"

"I think it's time you make Pruitt aware you're concerned about Forstein."

"And if he asks why?"

"Tell him what you want, just don't mention anything about the paper's investigation here."

Upon hanging up the phone, Neil reviewed the notes he jotted down on the notepad. He tore the note off the pad and rolled it up into a little ball. For the longest time he sat at his desk considering his options. He rested his feet on the steel support beams of his office chair and leaned back, juggling the note ball from one hand to another.

His most pressing problem was what to do about Tasha and Derrick. He was convinced of Tasha's innocence. Her loyalty to the CRM was without question, but then, she never knew what they were really about. She'd become indispensable to the everyday workload of the ministry. Furthermore, they would need a third person to watch the apartment. At least one of them would have to be there at all times.

He stopped juggling the note ball for a moment and listened. He heard noises in Derrick's room, but Tasha's room was deadly quiet. It suddenly occurred to him that Tasha might be capable of doing something stupid to herself. He spun out of his chair and reached for the door. At the same time he tossed the paper ball towards the wastebasket on the floor next to his desk. The ball hit the plastic rim before settling along the baseboard.

Pauli lay curled up on Tasha's pillow, paws folded with sophistication. Over her forearms she rested her weary head, but had yet to drift asleep. Her black eyes swayed back and forth like a mirrored pendulum, keeping pace with Tasha as she moved back and forth between the dresser and closet. At the knock on the door her ears shot up.

"What do you want?" Tasha asked, setting a jar of lotion on the dresser.

"I wanted to see if you were okay."

"Go away!"

"I'm not going away until I see you."

She felt a sense of relief at his persistence. Pride had prompted her to hastily start filling her suitcases, but she didn't want to leave. What she really wanted to do was talk. She knew Derrick would make no attempt to apologize, so she expected Neil to mediate on his behalf. An hour ago she was flinging everything into the suitcases. Now full, she'd have to make good on her intention to leave, but she had nowhere to go. So with reluctance and yet, expectation, she unlocked the door and returned to her task without looking at him.

He sat down in the chair by her bed and noticed she'd been crying. But the tears were long gone and only the swelling remained. He

looked at the suitcases and watched her fiddle with the cosmetics on her dresser. Then she drifted from the dresser, to the closet, then back to the dresser in search of something, knees now slightly bent, as she peered into her bottom drawer. He could see it was empty. She remained there confounded by its emptiness. After a moment, she rose and shuffled towards the closet, but Neil got out of the chair and prevented her from continuing. She complied with his gesture by wobbling to a stop just inches from him.

She stood before him with her head dangling towards the floor, overwhelmed with the weight of her thoughts. He looked down onto her head into the part of her short, black hair as it cut a white line across the middle of her scalp. The heat of her body rose up into his face, and her aroma moved him. He tipped his head back and looked into her eyes. They were empty of hope. He raised his hands up to her shoulders, but held them suspended and away from her, as if her body was as hot as fire. He'd never touched her before and questioned his weakness for having the desire to do so now. The choice to embrace her, however, was not his. She collapsed into his chest. Involuntarily, he wrapped his arms around her to support her. There she wept quietly for sometime, the wetness of her tears eventually reaching his chest through his shirt.

"You believe me don't you, Neil?"

"I believe you," he said without hesitation. "Just where were you planning on going?"

"No place…I guess."

"Good, because I don't want you to leave."

She looked into his eyes searching for truth to his words.

"I've known Derrick for a long time, Tasha. I know he can be harsh. I wish I could tell you more but I can't."

"Neil, I don't want to know anything. Don't explain anything to me. Just promise me one thing."

"I'll try. What is it?"

"Promise me you'll keep him away from me."

Neil tried to reassure her with a smile.

She looked at his smile and into the eyes expressing it. The assurance she was looking for was not there. She backed out of his arms and walked towards the door, turned off the light, then set the lock on the handle. Shocked by the sudden darkness, he heard her walk over to the bed and flip the suitcases over the side. Suddenly she was directly in front of him, her hands delicately clawing their way from his stomach up towards his chest. She took a step forward and pushed him onto the bed. He knew what she was doing, but couldn't believe it. From underneath the crack in her door, rays of artificial light invaded the room, just bright enough to pass through the airiness of her cotton dress and reveal the sharp outline of her form. What was she thinking? Her face showed no details. It was obscured in shadow. His instinctual drive now awakening, he watched as she lifted her hands above her head and placed them around her neck. A tug of hand…a quick jerk with the other. When her hands fell to her side, her dress followed effortlessly to her waist. She twisted in the light and it drifted the rest of the way to the floor, curling around her sandals. Like eager fingers, the light wrapped around the features of her body, revealing highlights of egg-white, virgin breasts curling into focus and the jutting roundness of her hips curving inward. Her nipples and navel were now dark as chocolate; the fold of her womanhood, suspended in the fine lines of her panties.

A possessive sensation was stirring within him commanding him to sit up and take hold of her, but the sensation was immediately overtaken by the feeling of being in the raw chill of the wild. Still he watched. She stepped out of her dress, and for a brief moment, he caught the profile of a breast, round and elegant. She crouched down for a moment, loosening her sandals, kicking them aside. The wilderness he had found himself in was becoming a frightful place. Shadows lurked and the musty aroma of that wilderness was overtaking him. The fire in his groin was becoming unbearable. She was relentless. Her hands rose above her waist, thumbs catching the strings of her thong.

She slipped them over her hips and pressed them down over her thighs. He glimpsed the dark soft curls through the hollow, then the fall of her panties to the floor. She was an angel! But no!

Moving over the edge of the bed she straddled herself over his knees and felt the warmth of his thighs through his slacks and the coldness of the bedspread below her knees. The contraction of her nipples iced over in a sea of tingle as she crawled over him slowly. His expression, confused, almost frightened. She tried to ignore it, tried to use her weakened skills of flirtation to change it into something more wanting. Positioning herself above him, she tipped her head down and kissed him softly on the lips. They were like paper. She tried again. Construction paper. Letting her legs slip out from underneath her, she pressed the full warmth of her form on his petrified body. She sensed his arms rise above her. Would he have her? They came to rest in the small curve of her back, then with apprehension, slide over the rise and fall of her open hips. When he reached the back of her inner thighs he abruptly stopped. She held her breath in suspense. Without warning he flung her off of him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, sitting up without looking at her.

She clutched at the bedspread and tried to pull it over her, but it gripped the mattress and would not yield. He stood up facing the door and tucked in his shirt. He walked across the bedroom floor and stopped at the door. Tasha's naked form lie huddled on the bed. A moment later she was sucked into darkness.

Neil staggered into the dining room. Nothing had changed since the bugs had been found. All the lights were on, the computer was running and the printer was still waiting for a fresh ream of paper. He paced back and forth between the couch and the dining room table.

"Yes!" he surmised, having resisted the temptation offered by Tasha. For a moment the victory appeased him, but soon came frustration and with it, anger. He considered the whole episode morally base; an action he'd prided himself in being too holy to engage in. Yet, he couldn't hide the fact that he wanted her. He coveted her from the depths of his

being. But he couldn't have her, couldn't partake of the pleasure. He'd given his life to the work of his ministry. His abstinence from the lust of the world would in the end have its own reward. This he believed, yet that belief had not been able to curb the desire of his flesh. This bewildered him. Had he not been promised that the power of God would allow him to overcome such evils? But this promise had not reached its fulfillment. In fact, it didn't even put a dent in his desires. If anything, his abstinence had only fueled that lust.

He shuttered to think a woman such as Tasha was living under his roof. She was a vile creature! A prostitute of passion! And he would have no relationship with her other than on a spiritual level. He must avoid her at all cost, lest she bring him down. "And that son of a bitch Derrick! What an idiot!" Neil mumbled. Derrick's outburst had exposed Tasha's carnal nature and made him the target. It must not happen again. Not bothering to knock, he lunged through Derrick's door with wrath bursting from his lips.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

His outburst caught Derrick by surprise, but he was quick to respond. "You should have never let her come here, Neil. I tell you she's no good!"

"You might have blown it tonight." Neil countered.

"How? By getting rid of her before everything gets in full swing?"

"She's never been a part of this until tonight. She's never had a reason to question what we're about. Now she does. You put that doubt in her mind and now we don't know what she'll do next."

"All the more reason to let her go."

"I'm not going to just dump her on the streets."

"Then she's your responsibility, but I swear, Neil, if she does anything to jeopardize this project she will have to go!"

They were silent for a few minutes, with nothing but the sound of their panting filling the room.

"Now, what are we going to do about the investigation?" Derrick persisted. He had his own ideas and was looking for concurrence from Neil.

"We do what we have to do, as we've always done."

"They must not be allowed to stop the virus."

"I know," Neil responded.

"So what do we do?"

"We wait."

"Until when? Until they have all the information they need?"

"They don't have much."

"They have enough to justify their suspicions. And if the American here is connected in any way with Trojan Security, then they may already have all the information they need."

"I doubt that's the case."

"Neil, where's your head? All it will take for them to effectively shut this down is to leak one article to any of their media connections. Hell, real or not, a simple editorial just mentioning the possibility of such a virus would be enough. Neil, I've never questioned your authority until now. Tasha's got your head spinning and you're not thinking too clearly. We need to do something to get them off our backs."

"And I say we wait. This isn't Berlin."

"You bet it's not. The stakes are much higher now. You've been in charge of this ministry from the start and I've supported you, but you may have forgotten I'm just as much a part of this as you are. If you're not capable of making rational decisions then I'll have to make them for you."

Neil took his eyes off the floor and burned them into Derrick's memory. "You wait. Do you understand? You wait until we both agree on what to do."

Derrick didn't concur, but ended boldly. "I'll give you two weeks. If you haven't come up with some reasonable options then something will have to be done. Now…do you understand?"

CHAPTER 32

She looked as if she'd been sucking on lemons, and didn't have a clue as to what the word hospitality meant. Eva argued with her for what seemed to be five excruciating minutes. Stace knew they were talking about room rentals and something to the effect of there not being one. Eva was insistent. In the end, the hostess handed Eva a registration form.

The hostess waddled out from behind the counter and with little more than *"ugh,"* and invited Stace and Eva to follow her upstairs. Stace carried a backpack over his shoulder, a gym bag with a change of clothes in one hand and Eva's overnight bag in the other. Halfway up the sliver of a staircase he got stuck. He backed down a step, turned sideways, thrust his gym bag out ahead of him, and proceeded. From beyond the cheery yellow wallpaper, the odor of wet wood, like the smell of a tree trunk decaying in a mountain meadow, filled his nostrils. He followed the two up another staircase and onto the third floor. The hostess opened the first door on the right and waited for her guests to pass though. Eva took the key from her. He dropped his load on the bed and fell onto a couch against the wall.

"Rather quaint don't you think?" he asked her. She plopped down next to him without looking around. "What's this?"

Eva looked around him to his side of the couch. "A refrigerator."

"Anything in it?" he asked, opening it and checking for himself. "It's full! You want anything?"

"Not hungry. But be careful how much you eat. We'll have to put it on the bill in the morning."

"Figures," he thought to himself. He pulled out a bottle of coke and a bag of peanuts. He opened the bag and tossed a peanut in his mouth, rolling it around on his tongue. Sweet and sour, coated in sugar and salt, not unlike the vibrations he'd been getting from Eva all day.

He decided he'd made a complete fool of himself earlier in the day. "Should have kept my mouth shut," he thought to himself. He'd broken one of his most treasured values. That people should be free to make their own decisions, especially when it came to religion. If people needed religion and it gave them a sense of purpose, then by all means let them use it, even if that someone was Eva. But how much had the service affected her?

She was at present, trying to figure out a bunch of random thoughts. Throughout the week, everything had swirled together and hardened like an enormous pile of tangled twine. She'd picked at it constantly throughout the week, freeing one strand, disengaging another, and now it appeared that her confused mind was beginning to disentangle itself. One of her thoughts had to do with her position at the paper. Would she keep it or would she follow her heart into unknown territories? Much of that decision depended on another idea she was tossing around; who was the man sitting next to her? Did they have a future together? The last situation had to do with having a spiritual point of reference in her life. Just exactly where was she going to obtain the answers to the questions she had?

Stace finished the bag of peanuts and crumpled the cellophane wrapper in his hands. It sounded like shattering plastic across linoleum tile, but not half as annoying as the unbearable silence he'd been sharing with Eva since the ICC's service.

"Eva, you really need to help me out here."

"What do you mean?" she asked without looking at him.

"I would like to know if I've done anything to upset you."

"It's complicated."

"Then let's make it uncomplicated. I miss the Eva I knew last week."

He watched the corner of her lips curl upwards. "I'm still the same, Eva."

"You look the same. Then maybe it's me."

She didn't answer. He downed the last of the coke and set the bottle on the top of the fridge. The light filling the windows had darkened. Shadows clung to the corners of the room and oozed towards the floor. The ceiling was closing in from above. The old home groaned with the sounds of guests creeping about like ghosts.

He stood and turned on the light. "I'm going to get some fresh air." He checked for a pack of cigarettes in his coat pocket. "Do you want to come?"

"Not now. I think I'll take a warm bath instead."

"Perhaps I should stay then. You might need some help," his voice pleaded.

"No." Then as an after thought she added, "But don't stay away too long."

She listened to the sound of his footsteps creak down the stairs. She rose, walked into the bathroom and started a bath. In the corner cabinet she found a jar of bath suds, opened the top and poured a generous portion into the running water. The aroma of wild raspberries moistened with steam rose up to greet her as the water turned a delicate shade of pink. The mirror above the sink began to fog. She went back into the room and slipped out of her clothes then returned. After closing the door, she tipped the toes of her right foot into the water, letting out a sigh of pleasure and pain. She brought her other foot over the edge and stepped inside. A numbing sensation of fire surrounded her ankles. She reached over and turned off the tap. Silence again filled her night. Ever so slowly, she eased down into the water and laid her head against the back of the tub. When she was accustomed to the heat she

drifted even further down until nothing but her face, the tips of her breasts, and knees were left un-submerged. Closing her eyes she told herself over and over everything was going to be alright.

How much time had passed she didn't know. The water had chilled and the bubbles vanished. She was interrupted by the sound of the door as Stace came inside the room. She heard the door of the refrigerator open and close and the slush as he fell back into the couch. She rose. Sheets of raspberry scented water slipped off of her body producing an orchestration of plinks and plunks rippling the surface. She took a towel off the rack and patted herself dry before the mirror. The fog had cleared, leaving a collection of beads on the silvery mirror. She took the edge of the towel and cleared the condensation, then looked at the woman standing before her and considered her happiness. Without a second thought she wrapped the towel around her damp body, synching the edge in a knot between her breasts and stepped out into the room.

Stace watched her glide towards him with a curious expression. She leaned over and rested her hands on his knees. Steam clung to her presence. Her bosom hung ripe with the aroma of berry.

"You are simply—"

"*Shush!* No talking."

He was no fool.

CHAPTER 33

The following Monday, Eva hurried off to work with the same sense of reckless abandonment to which she'd spent the weekend with Stace. Over the weekend she'd almost forgotten about work and it felt good. She'd succeeded in laying all her fears and concerns aside. And that felt good too. She'd tasted the secrets of her own desires. She would not be tamed. On the autobahn, she looked into her rearview mirror into the flashing lights of a sleek BMW, which had pulled up ten feet off her bumper. She pulled into the right lane to let it pass. At the Schwarz Monatlich her boss and the others were expecting a good report. How would she pacify them? No doubt, they would question her about the infamous Stace Manning. Who did he work for? What did he know about the virus? Why did he come to Germany? Would she tell them that she loved the man? Hardly. She would for the first time in her life put something ahead of her work and devise a reason to elude their questions.

If that didn't strike enough of a blow to their confidence in her, the absence of answers to the other questions they would ask surely would. What could she tell them about the ICC? It had been the first time she'd ever set foot in a church and what she'd discovered was something far less threatening than what Mr. Schwarz had imagined. Would she tell them she'd never experienced an atmosphere in which

complete strangers could come together laying all their prejudices and vices at the door? How her flesh tingled and her spirit reached up to something greater than herself? How she'd never heard such beautifully orchestrated music, which yanked at the very fabric of her being? Hardly. She would tell them the reverend was a charismatic facilitator of dissension. She would tell them how he had the power to breathe life into the hearts of children one moment and in the next moment rain terror upon the heads of their parents. She would tell them if he was an impostor, then he was an impostor to only the fools who wished to believe him. This too, would be a lie, but it would buy her time. The confrontation however, would have to wait.

At the last moment she decided to visit her parents at the backerei. Seeing them always had a way of bringing her back in touch with what mattered most in life. Her parents enjoyed one of those fantastic romances, which matured with age like a fine wine. The reassurance that such love existed in the world was something Eva needed far more than an interrogation at the office.

The bell over the front door rang as she stepped inside, but her mother was too busy to notice her. Three other customers were standing in front of the display shelves and she was ringing up another customer at the register. Without hesitating, Eva walked behind the counter and started assisting those who waited to make their selections.

"Eva! What a nice surprise!" her mother said.

"It's good to see you too, Mama. You stay there at the register and I'll help the folks at the counter."

Leda smiled and walked back to the register. Eva watched her out of the corner of her eye. Her mother was as busy as she'd always been, but she had never lost her courteousness, no matter how busy the work got. It reminded Eva of the days when she would help her mother out in the mornings. She missed the sounds; like the chime of the silver bell above the door when customers arrived, or the sounds of the cash register opening and closing. She missed the smells; the aroma of sugar and cake frostings, of yeast mingling with heat in the ovens, of maple, nuts,

and molasses, of sugar glaze coating spilling over plate sized cinnamon rolls.

"Hi!" Eva yelled, poking her head through the kitchen door.

He barely heard her. The two mixers in the corner were spinning flour into dough at high speed. "Eva! How are you?" he asked, looking up from a cake he was frosting.

Thirty minutes later the crowd thinned down and she sat at the table along the wall waiting for her mother to finish with the last customer.

Her mother sat down in front of her on the stool and propped herself up by the wall. After wiping the beads of sweat off her forehead with a damp cloth, she tucked a loose strand of hair under her hair net and sighed with exhaustion. "What brings you around, Eva?"

"Can you believe it? I got a ticket for running the yellow light on the corner."

"Who got you? The polizei, or one of the cameras on the pole?

"The camera."

"You say the light was yellow?"

"I'm sure it was."

"You should give the traffic polizei a call. The neighbors tell me the timing of the camera needs to be adjusted. A lot of people are getting tickets around here that shouldn't be."

"I'd rather not mess with it."

"You didn't come all this way to tell me you got a ticket did you?"

"Actually, I came to ask you a favor."

"Of course."

"I have someone I'd like you and father to meet."

"The American?" she asked, sitting up and leaning over the table towards Eva.

Eva thought her expression comical. Something in the range of serious excitement followed by a dreamy look of poetic wonder.

The bell over the door chimed. A little boy about twelve walked in.

"Do you love him?" her mother asked, after she'd returned.

"I do."

Her mother leaned back against the wall with hapless wonder. Her daughter was in love.

"I wanted to bring him over for dinner on Wednesday night."

"This Wednesday?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No, of course not," her mother said.

The bell chimed again and in walked a young woman.

"I should let you go now," Eva said reaching for her bag on the table. "You sure you don't need anymore help?"

"I've got it under control. You go on now and take something with you for your friends at the paper." She shoved a bag into Eva's hand.

At the Schwarz Monatlich the situation was just as she'd expected. Mr. Schwarz, Ruben and Shelly were all seated around Ruben's desk waiting for her to arrive. She came in and set the bag of pastries down on her desk. No one said a word to her and she started thinking through the lies she'd rehearsed.

"They found the bugs," were the first word's spoken.

She leaned back into her chair indifferent to the revelation, but the significance quickly sunk in.

She watched Shelly flip the machine on and Eva tried to put the fragments of the conversation into perspective.

"What the?" Neil's voice.

"Derrick!" Neil.

"What?" Derrick.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" Neil.

"No." Tasha.

"I don't know, Neil." Tasha, insistent.

"Let me take a look." Derrick. Pause. "Adhesive tape."

"I know what it is! Do you know where it came from is my question?" Neil.

And so the conversation continued, right up until it recorded the sharp sounds of crunching paper, growing quieter and quieter until

reaching a muffled hollow hum like the sound of space in a giant sea shell.

Shelly switched off the machine.

"Does Alfred know about this?" Eva asked.

"I called him this morning," said Mr. Schwarz.

"So that's it. They know everything," she said sinking back into her chair. "If they were up to anything at all then you can bet there's no evidence of it around now."

"Which is why we must work fast," Mr. Schwarz said quickly before they lost morale.

"What's the point?" Eva blurted out, lifting her hands in a display of defeat. "From day one I've never understood the purpose of this investigation."

Mr. Schwarz turned towards Ruben, "Tell Eva what you found out over the weekend, it might change her perspective."

Ruben looked up at her apprehensively.

"On Friday, I contacted de *Berliner MorganPost* and spoke with de editor of de paper dere in Berlin. I asked him if he'd ever heard about Derrick Sachs or Neil Usher. He said dey'd scan deir computers and find what dey could. By the end of the day he faxed me two articles dat had been written by his father during de earlier years of de paper. Both articles connected Derrick Sachs with an organization known simply as the Menschen."

"The people?" Eva verified." What kind of a name is—?"

"Let him continue, Eva," said Mr. Schwarz.

"Both articles spoke of de organization as one of a slew of underground movements existing during the 1980s. Derrick Sachs was listed as a possible suspect in one of de articles. At the time he was under investigation for arson. Seems he might have set fire to de city courthouse. He was acquitted."

He paused from his notes and looked at Eva. "Now all of dis is virtually useless. It was a long time ago."

"But he was acquitted right?" Eva asked.

"Correct."

"That doesn't eliminate the suspicion. Never has, never will," Mr. Schwarz added.

Ruben continued. "Dere's more. Seems dat de current editor, Boris Ulricht, spoke to his father Max dat Friday about my questions. Max began *de* paper just after WW II, retired in 1989 and den he—"

"Get to the point, Ruben," Mr. Schwarz said.

"Now you won't find what he told me in any public records, so searching dem is useless, but he said dat he and a member of his staff during the '80s had an ongoing investigation of de Menschen. Despite all of the information dey'd gathered on de movement dey could only legally publicize de two articles in question and—"

"Ruben!"

"I'm getting dere sir. Ulrich believed dey were responsible for no less than 30 percent of all de terrorist related activities dat occurred during de '80s in and around Berlin. While other organizations were sponsoring public sit-ins and non-violent demonstrations, de Menschen was busy setting fires to public buildings, planting car bombs and mail bombs, and as far as Ulrich was concerned, dey were personally responsible for at least two assassinations of public officials.

Ruben paused to gauge Eva's reaction. She had turned to face him now, listening to every word.

"Did the authorities ever discover it was the Menschen who'd made the hits?" Eva asked.

"No, but one more thing, Ulrich was familiar with Neil Usher and Derrick Sachs. When de wall fell in 1989 he knew dat dey disappeared into West Germany, but what became of dem he didn't know."

Mr. Schwarz turned towards Eva. "But we do know what's become of them, so we pick up where Ulrich left off. Now, what did you find out about the ICC and Stace Manning?"

The question hit her like a bolt of lightning. Ruben had given the group a detailed report. She told them the ICC was just what they expected, an organization run by a charismatic leader who had more

concern for his personal glory than for his followers. Her revelation of Stace, however, was even less descriptive. "As far as Stace is concerned, I haven't found any discrepancies in his story. He seems to be what he says he is. In fact, he's entirely antagonistic towards any religious organization."

"That doesn't say much. A lot of people oppose organized religion," said Mr. Schwarz. "The question is, who does he work for?"

"Why does he have to work for anybody? He's not the only American in Frankfurt. Just because I met up with him doesn't mean he's connected with our investigation."

"You may be right, Eva, but I'd suggest you don't get too involved with him on a personal basis," Shelly said.

"Best keep your distance," Ruben added.

Eva lifted her hands above her head. "I'm confused, I thought you wanted me to find out what I can about him, to flush out any information. Now you're asking me to stay away from him?"

"I'm just asking you to be careful, Eva. Use your judgment. If you can find out what he's up to than good. If you can find out he's got nothing to do with Trojan Security or with any other organization, than that's even better," Mr. Schwarz said, finally taking a seat.

For a moment or two they just sat there. A truck rolled by on the street and the windows along the wall buzzed, followed by the sound of more cars, and the clops of shoes along the sidewalk. Eva watched the sounds and shadowy forms pass by. She wondered where they were going or where they were coming from. She envied the way they carried on with their lives without any clue of the things she had to contend with.

One particular shadow drew her attention, just a woman wearing a long skirt passing across the windows. A woman that could have been her and for just a moment, Eva wondered what it would be like to just get up and leave. Leave her briefcase on the desk; leave the in-box full of urgent notes and leads to other stories; leave the Post-It notes requiring her immediate attention right where Shelly had stuck them on her

computer monitor; leave it all behind and take a long slow walk into another life…

"You mind if I have one of deese?" Ruben asked.

Eva awoke from her daydream to see Ruben leaning over her desk ripping open the bag of pastries she'd brought.

"No." When she looked back up the woman was gone.

"What's next?" Shelly asked.

"The ICC, the CRM, and Trojan Security have got to be connected. And it's obvious that at least the CRM knows we're on to them," Mr. Schwarz said.

"Or worse," Eva added.

"They could take the bugs to the polizei," Shelly said.

"I doubt it," Mr. Schwarz said. "They're not going to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. We've got more pull with the polizei than they do." He thought for a moment. "Someone has got to make contact with Tasha."

"Why would she give us information?" Shelly asked.

"Well, she's only been with Neil and Derrick a few years. It's possible she has no idea of their past history in Berlin."

"Den she's pretty damn stupid," Ruben said.

"Perhaps not," Mr. Schwarz added. "If you were Neil or Derrick would you go around advertising your past?"

"Not exactly, but what about now? Surely she knows all about the virus," Shelly said.

For the first time that morning Eva offered her insight, letting the others know she was back with them. "Let's assume she does know about the virus, but not about Neil and Derrick's past; we might be able to convince her to cooperate with us."

"How do we know she's not as dangerous as dey are?" Ruben added.

"We don't. But if they found the bugs they have enough reason to retaliate already."

Suddenly the air was thick with potential hostility.

"Eva's right," Mr. Schwarz said rising out of his chair again. "We don't have the luxury of time. We've got to find out what the virus is all about. She'll either talk or she won't."

"I think it would be best if I contacted her on my own," Eva said.

Ruben looked up from his desk feeling resentful at being left out. "Why?"

"I don't want to intimidate her—yet. If she is not entirely caught up with them, than what I tell her will be frightening enough. I want her to feel she's in way over her head. I want her to know we're here to help her swim. That's better done woman to woman."

CHAPTER 34

Days before Eva and the rest of the Schwarz Monatlich staff had debated the coincidental emergence of Stace Manning, Derrick had implicated Stace without question. Derrick was convinced Stace was working jointly with the paper's investigation. Nothing could persuade him to believe otherwise. Neil had always been the one who made the decisions between them. Yet, the present crisis, which in Derrick's estimation was the most significant crisis of their lives, would have to be handled by him.

Throughout the week until Wednesday, he'd been following Eva like a hound follows scent. She'd not made contact with the American, but knew she would in time. She'd done little more than go back and forth to work with one exception; this morning she'd made a mysterious trip to an obscure backerei. Determining why'd she gone to that particular backerei hadn't been difficult. A cast-iron sign written over the entrance in cursive letters read, "Burtman's Backerei."

Nothing must stand in the way of implementing the virus. He deemed his own life as expendable, cherishing with twisted logic the notion that the greater the sacrifice on his part, the greater his reward would be in the kingdom to come. If he was expendable, those who opposed his plans were expendable. His world was full of demons lurking around every corner in human form. He knew exactly who they

were. They were those who disagreed with him. His bedfellow was terror and its offspring—intimidation. For intimidation is the tool of terrorists, chiseled by insecurity and randomly dispensed to all whom they feel represent a threat to their beliefs.

Later that Wednesday evening his watch ticked 6:17 p.m. He was seated in Neil's car a comfortable distance from the entrance of the paper, when he was interrupted in his thoughts when Eva exited the building. She got into her Opel and he followed her home. At 7:53 p.m. she reappeared under the porch light and got back into her car. He followed her at a distance as she zigzagged through Hochst then onto an obscure road leading into an area of open fields dotted with isolated homes. When she parked in front of a house at the end of the street he waited. His days of surveillance finally paid off. When she got back into her car, the American accompanied her.

He followed them back into Hochst where they made a brief stop at a flower shop. The American got out and returned five minutes later with a bouquet of flowers. When they parked in front of Burtman's Backerei a few minutes later, he pulled into a slot just up the road. From his rearview mirror he watched them get out of the car and go to the front door of the backerei. Deciding to get a closer look, he got out of the car and walked along the sidewalk on the other side of the street. The embankment to his left was covered with brush and dwarfed trees, providing cover. The road along his right side was lined with a solid row of parked cars. When he was nearly opposite the backerei, he darted into the brush. Within a few moments the downstairs light of the backerei came on and a woman stepped out the front door.

Eva's mother greeted Eva with a hug and kissed her on the cheek, while Stace noticed their similarities. Following their embrace, Mrs. Burtman stood back to observe him more closely, as though she were trying to ascertain whether or not he was fitting enough to share her daughter's life.

"So you're the one I've heard so little about," she said, turning a wink towards Eva.

Stace took her hand and gave her the flowers he'd been hiding behind his back. She let go of his hand and inhaled their aroma. "Thank you so much," she said, obviously pleased.

She handed Eva the bouquet and took hold of his arm. "Let's go upstairs," she said.

After leading Stace arm in arm through the bakery, she opened the door leading up to the apartment. An imposing figure stood at the top of the staircase waiting for them. Dwarfish, yet stout, he had a chest as round as a barrel of dough and arms like an ape. He shoved a meaty hand into Stace's, and shook it vigorously.

"Stace, it's nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"We're all ready to eat so let's just have a seat at the table," Mrs. Burtman said.

Outside, still hidden in the brush, Derrick flipped up the collar on his coat and cinched the top button. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets and shifted his numb feet from side to side. Other than a few casual glances at the nearby intersection, his eyes never left the building, darting between the two lit windows on the second floor. After forty-five minutes, not even a shadow had passed in front of them. He had the whole place photographed in his memory within five minutes of his arrival. The rest of the time was spent warding off the chill.

Just a few cars had turned off the busy intersection onto the quiet street in front of the backerei, so when Derrick saw a utility van swing around the corner he followed it with his eyes. It looked vaguely familiar as it approached, and he tried to make out the logo on the side panel in the light from the corner post. Frankfurt Bundespost, the logo of the Frankfurt telephone company. The van took a hard left into the alleyway and parked with its tail end overlapping the sidewalk. His curiosity peaked to suspicion.

"A last minute repair?" Derrick questioned. The bright red taillights went dim and the engine puttered to a stop. Moments later, the shadow of a man appeared, but the darkness of the alley obscured his

face. The man's movements and uniform struck Derrick as someone he'd seen before, recently in fact. The man stepped onto the sidewalk and walked towards the backerei, where he stopped, reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He slipped it between his lips and struck a match. His face was momentarily set aglow in the yellow light of the match and Derrick instantly recognized him as the same technician that had parked in front of him at the Schwarz Monatlich.

"What were the odds? Million to one? The telephone man at the Schwarz Monatlich is the same man now standing in front of the backerei." Derrick reasoned with himself, "Now, technicians know the basics around communication wiring. One thing's for certain, all of them know how to get into an apartment with little suspicion."

The man stood on the sidewalk and glanced down the street, then over in Derrick's direction. The cigarette sailed from his hand and send orange embers shattering in sparks across the asphalt. He reached for his keys and went inside.

The connection had settled in Derrick's mind. "The Schwarz Monatlich, the American, and the technician are working together. The three of them are meeting in the upstairs apartment of this obscure backerei in Hochst to discuss what? How to plant more bugs? How to get more evidence against the CRM? The virus?" Derrick had no way of knowing, but he was positive they weren't baking cookies.

CHAPTER 35

Thursday morning snapped open with a hint of winter to come. Eva was out the door by 6:45 a.m. After parking her car along Hugelstrasse, she crossed the street and slipped into the park through a side gate. Far longer than it was wide, the park stretched for what seemed to be at least 2 kilometers. A cement path meandered through it, connecting several clusters of playgrounds with intricate rope mazes. Poplars and maples were also sprinkled about, providing shaded areas in the summer for family picnics or respites for lovers.

Once a jogger had passed, Eva took a seat on a bench near the playground closest to the apartment. In her bag was a three-page summary consisting of two photocopies of the articles that Ruben had obtained from the *Berliner MorganPost*, and a one-page synopsis of Neil and Derrick's history in Berlin. She hoped the evidence would be intimidating.

She checked her watch. Tasha walked her dog in the park every morning and evening and with the delay Eva was growing impatient.

Hiding off to the side of one of the apartment buildings behind Eva was Derrick. He was leaning against the white plaster of the building, eyeing her movements with suspicion. Her conduct perturbed him. What could she hope to accomplish by sitting in the park across the street from their apartment? Tasha and Neil were both in the apart-

ment and would not be leaving soon. Since the discovery of the bugs, they'd been extra cautious, making sure at least one of them was in the apartment at all times. It might be a long morning.

No sooner had the thought passed when he spotted Tasha setting that stupid little dog of hers down at the beginning of the walkway into the park. Pauli ran ahead of Tasha looking for just the right spot. Tasha followed from a distance, walking as though she'd just awakened, oblivious to everything except the cold. Derrick pushed himself off the building and moved to get a better view. It was obvious to him the two were there to meet.

Tasha was now almost perpendicular to Eva, about fifty yards away, and Eva was well aware of her approach. Her plan was to wait until Tasha had passed and then creep up behind her on the path. After Tasha had passed Eva rose quickly. Through the night the grass had gathered a thick, frosty crust. It crunched under her feet as she walked, leaving a trail of darkened green patches. When she reached the walkway Tasha bent over and picked up a branch that had fallen from a tree. Eva watched Tasha heave the stick out into the center of the park. Pauli pranced after it, tiptoeing through the frozen grass as Tasha walked on. Eva took advantage of the distraction and settled into a pace along side her.

"Excuse me…Tasha?"

Tasha turned towards her, shaken by the sound of the stranger's voice appearing out of nowhere.

"Ja?"

"Sorry I startled you."

"Do I know you?"

"No. We haven't met. My name is, Eva Burtman. I'm with the Schwarz Monatlich."

Tasha took a step back. "What do you want?"

"Just a minute of your time," Eva said, looking as entreating as possible.

Tasha's eyes darted quickly around the park. It was the reaction Eva was hoping for. Fear might be unpredictable, but it can be manipulated.

"It will only take a few minutes. I'm here to help. Let's take a walk."

Eva gambled with the directive, but it worked.

"I really shouldn't be talking to you. What makes you think I need help?"

Eva left her question unanswered. The dog had found the stick and was dragging it sideways up the path towards them. "She's cute, what's her name?"

Tasha pulled a short leash out of her pocket. When the dog approached, she snapped the hook on its collar. "Pauli."

Eva bent over and stroked Pauli on the back of her head. Pauli shifted towards Eva, tugging against the leash and feverishly wagging her tail. "I have a shepherd at home."

"I really need to get back," Tasha said, taking a step in the direction of her apartment.

"Wait!" Eva said, gently taking hold of Tasha's coat. "I've had the last three days to think about what I was going to tell you when I finally met you. I was hoping it might have gone a lot smoother. So, let me just come right out and say why I'm here. We have reason to believe that Derrick Sachs and Neil Usher were involved in at least two political assassinations back in the eighties."

Tasha looked at her with an expression mingled of disbelief and confusion. The leash she'd been holding popped out of her hands. Pauli took the cue and darted off towards a row of hedges. "I don't believe you. Why are you telling me this?"

"They were part of an underground movement called the Menschen. It was an extremist group. The authorities in Berlin tried to catch them for years, but were never successful."

Tasha stumbled a few steps backwards, driving her hands into her pockets. She turned a full circle then stopped to face Eva again. "I don't believe you."

Eva could see by her expression that Tasha had no clue of Neil and Derrick's past. If those details were hidden from her it was possible other things were being kept from her as well. "You have no idea about the kind of men you are living with do you?"

"Why are you telling me this?" Tasha asked a second time.

Her terror seemed extraordinary to Eva.

"Wait a minute," Tasha said suddenly. "You're from the paper right?"

"Yes," Eva replied calmly. Tasha's memory was fragmenting. She called for Pauli and started walking in the direction of her tinkling tags near the hedges.

"Wait, Tasha!" Eva called after her.

"I don't want to listen to you," Tasha mumbled without turning around.

Eva decided to gamble. She was running out of options.

"Do you realize you could be connected with anything they may have done during the time you've lived with them?"

Tasha had reached the hedges and snatched Pauli up in her arms. Eva caught up with her. "We know the CRM is in the process of building a virus. We don't know exactly what it's about, but we've got a hunch it's not good."

The fear in her eyes seemed to be replaced by curiosity.

"We know the virus is being built as we speak by a computer firm in the United States. We also know an organization called the International Christian Coalition is involved. We believe that Neil and Derrick are working with both of them and suspect they've been hired to take care of any problems that might arise by the implementation of the virus."

"I don't know anything about a virus."

"Given the nature of Derrick and Neil's violent history and the political pursuits of the ICC, we believe this virus to be highly dangerous. When we have enough evidence we'll be turning that information

over to the polizei. Now, we know you've been working hand in hand with the CRM for years, so you'll be implicated along with them."

"But I don't know anything!" she burst out.

Eva knew she'd finally gotten Tasha's attention and looked sympathetically into her eyes. "Let's sit for a moment," she said. She led Tasha over to a nearby bench. Eva pulled out the information and handed it to her.

"This first article links Derrick to an arson investigation. No one could prove anything, but it's believed he burned down the city courthouse." She flipped to the second page. "In this next article you'll find information about what the Menschen did in Berlin long before you met Neil and Derrick."

"You said assassinations!"

"I know. The original Editor of the *Berliner MorganPost* followed the developments of the Menschen throughout their history. He swears Derrick was personally responsible for the murder of a man named, Hans Lofter. He can't prove it. I can't prove it, but you've at least got to be suspicious."

Tasha was no longer looking at Eva. Her eyes were fixed in space and on a recent memory of Derrick.

"Tasha…you with me?"

"I heard you."

"This final page is a list of the details we know about them so far."

"How do I know you didn't just make all of this up?"

Eva folded the papers up and shoved them into the envelope, then gave the envelope back to Tasha. "Take this with you. There's nothing here those two aren't aware of, but I wouldn't tell them you have it."

Tasha took the envelope and rammed it into the inner breast pocket of her coat.

"I could be wrong, Tasha, but I don't think you're mixed up in all of this mess. Unfortunately, what I think is not important. The authorities will assume you're guilty of something. They're not going to believe you were totally oblivious to what's been going on."

Tasha jumped off the bench and turned towards Eva. "Why for Christ's' sake are you telling me all of this? What do you want from me? If you've got all the information you need then—"

"We don't have all the information," Eva confessed. "We'll get it one way or another, but we're running out of time. We have reason to believe the virus is near completion. We'd like to stop it before that time, because after it's implemented it will be too late. I know this all sounds crazy to you right now, but you must have suspected something."

"Nothing. I told you. I don't know anything."

"Surely you must have heard or seen—"

"All I do is copy tapes. I put them into packages and send them out. I do a little of their computer work, some bookkeeping—that's all."

"We could really use your help. And unless you help us out…"

Tasha sat back down. Pauli was wandering aimlessly in the sand under the swing set nearby. Tasha was oblivious to her whereabouts, staring at a spot in the grass in front of her. She was quiet for a long time.

"I just don't know," she whispered finally. Eva watched the steam from her breath roll over the top of her head.

"We don't have much time," Eva said.

"I wouldn't even know where to start looking. I don't know what to look for. And if they caught me…" she mumbled pathetically, "if they catch me…" Suddenly she sat up and looked around for Pauli. Sighting her under a nearby tree she called to her. Pauli walked compliantly over to the bench and stood in front of her. Tasha bent over and stroked Pauli on the head. She smiled tensely as though she'd just discovered some irony in life.

"Look, I really need to get back now," she said.

"Alright," Eva said, then pulled out a business card. Tasha reluctantly took it. "Call my cell first and if I don't answer leave a message or a number where I can reach you. I'll call you right back. I promise."

Tasha stood up and started towards the apartment without saying a word.

Derrick witnessed the encounter between her and Eva with a keen sense of indignation boiling in his bones. He'd told Neil the woman couldn't be trusted and now he had verification of that fact. With steam snorting out of his nostrils he watched Tasha walk towards the apartment and when he was sure Eva had left, he headed across the street. When he entered the apartment and slammed the door shut, Tasha had not yet made it to her bedroom. Neil was sitting at the table reading the paper and drinking a cup of coffee when he saw Derrick whizzing by the table. He dropped the paper and leaped to disrupt the confrontation.

Derrick spun Tasha around and thrust his hand into the breast pocket of her coat for the envelope. Tasha wrapped her arms around her breasts.

"What's going on?" Neil demanded.

"Why don't you ask her?"

Neil looked a Derrick, then Tasha. "What's this about, Tasha?" He flipped on the hallway light and it lit up Tasha's horror stricken face. She couldn't speak.

"Ask her about the information she has in her coat pocket she just got from Eva Burtman."

Neil gazed at her in disbelief.

"Go ahead. Ask her how long they've been meeting in the park. How many months, Tasha?"

"Is that true?" Neil asked her.

Her eyes twitched between the two. She was without answers and full of questions. She didn't know where to begin, or when it would all end.

"Let me see what you have," Neil demanded.

Without hesitation she reached into her pocket, pulled the envelope out and laid it in Neil's outstretched hand. She managed to utter a few

words. "Neil, I don't know what's in there. I…I was walking Pauli and she came up to me. I've never seen her before in my life—"

Neil stopped her rambling with an uplifted hand. He pulled his hand back and with one continuous motion flipped open the triangular flap of the envelope and pulled out its contents. Derrick took a step in his direction and the two stood side by side examining the first page.

Tasha checked their reaction. Neil remained calm. Balls of muscle twitched in Derrick's cheeks. Neil flipped over to the second article, then giving it only a few seconds flipped to the last page. It was obvious to her they were acquainted with the contents. On the third page Derrick shuffled in closer and Neil tipped the page in his direction. Neil finished scanning it before Derrick and looked at Tasha.

"Seems you know everything now doesn't it?"

Her tongue felt swollen and lodged in her throat.

"And that presents us with a serious dilemma," Neil continued.

Tasha's fear forced her tongue loose. "I'll leave. I'll pack my things right now and I'll go. You've got to believe me, I don't know anything and I don't want to know anything. You'll never see me again. I promise." She spoke deliberately, but her actions testified to her lack of courage. She couldn't move, partly for fear they would stop her, so she just waited, hoping they'd agree to her arrangement.

"I'm afraid that's impossible now," she heard Neil say, and coming from him she knew the decision was final.

"You see, Tasha, you don't know everything, but everyone seems to think you do. This means of course, you're with us whether you like it or not."

Derrick looked crossways at Neil. "Are you crazy?" he thought to himself, but didn't say a word.

"Not that you'll find anything here you might be able to use against us," Neil continued. "We've kept you out of this from the beginning. These articles mean nothing! Old news! Past history!" He yelled, flipping the articles about in front of her face. She turned sideways avoid-

ing has taunts. "Everything important is up here," he said, rapping the papers against his head.

"You can't keep me here!" she blurted out.

"Miss, you have no idea what we can do," Derrick yelled back. She didn't dare imagine what he meant.

"You're right of course. We can't force you to stay. In fact, you're free to go right now if you like." Neil took a step backwards.

Derrick remained in place and glanced at him with a look of profound bewilderment. "What are you thinking about, Neil?"

Neil turned towards him and snapped, "She knows nothing, Derrick!"

He walked back into the dining room and tossed the papers on the table near his cold cup of coffee. Derrick followed.

"We can't let her stay, Neil! And we sure as hell can't let her leave either."

"So what do you want to do, Derrick?" He took a seat at the table in front of his paper, arms folded in a tense sort of way and waiting for Derrick to respond.

"Well?" Neil asked.

Derrick said nothing.

"This isn't the '80s and we're not in Berlin, Derrick."

Derrick stood on the opposite side of the dinning room table facing him.

"The stakes are higher, Neil. I thought I'd made that point."

"And we're a lot smarter now aren't we?"

Derrick clenched his teeth. Muscles popped.

"Well, aren't we?"

He was still silent and his expression hadn't changed. Neil grew concerned. He leaned across the edge of the table and palmed his hands on the open newspaper. It crinkled under his grip. "Look. We were extremely lucky back then and that kind of luck doesn't last." He dropped his voice to a near whisper. "We are both lucky we're not rotting away in some German prison."

"Luck has nothing to do with it."

"Luck has everything to do with it," Neil replied, raising his voice a couple of notches. "What do you call it then?"

"Providence."

"Providence?" Neil blurted out then dropped his voice again. "You call killing people and getting away with it providence?"

"Yes I do. We did it for the cause, for what we believed in."

"We were young and stupid, Derrick. They came damn close to getting us on the second one, and lucky for us they didn't have a clue about the third murder."

Derrick's expression grew to painful desperation. "I thought you believed in what we did!"

Neil raised his voice along with Derrick. "I did."

"And now?"

"Now is different." Neil said more calmly.

"Now is not different. Nothing has changed except the level of intensity. We're still fighting for the same things. We did what we had to do then and we succeeded. Now the objective is much more important. It seems to me our actions should match the importance of the objective."

Neil sat down and folded his arms across his chest searching for a reason to believe what Derrick was saying.

Derrick walked over to the window and peered outside. The morning was clear, but a storm was brewing in his soul. He walked to the edge of the hallway. Tasha was still standing in front of her door. He knew she'd been listening. His eyes met her eyes, and she backed into her room.

After hearing her door shut firmly, Derrick returned to the kitchen table.

"She needs to go doesn't she?" Neil asked Derrick in a sudden switch of authority. He was not looking for an answer. He was looking for the courage to do what he knew had to be done.

Derrick leaned over the table so that he was only a few feet away from Neil and whispered his next words. “She not only has to go, she has to disappear, Neil.”

CHAPTER 36

Had it not been for the late President Johnson, the town would have remained just a hick of place, worthy of only a black dot on the state map of Texas. Since Johnson's reign, however, they'd changed the name of the place to Johnson City and tourist dollars had been pouring in ever since. There was his boyhood home, the ranch, and the sprawling country park established in honor of him just outside of town. These three tourist attractions kept the town afloat, for it was not yet large enough for a McDonalds to take root.

Rick downshifted into third gear. Typically Texas, the weather had been cool last week, would be warm for a few days, then would turn cold again next week. Today was glorious. He took another left where a bronze colored Texas recreational sign pointed the way to President Johnson's boyhood home. He passed under yellowing pecan trees and decade old homes splashed in white, nearly all of them set back in shaded grassy yards surrounded by short picket fences. Rick and Jean were early for the next tour, so they took a stroll around the small estate.

Adjacent to the house was a rectangle garden wrapped in a low fence to keep the deer and rabbits out. Rows of cool weather vegetables were still growing in it like peas, radishes, lettuce, and tomatoes. Nearby, was an outhouse that hadn't been used in decades. Tourists now used

the modern facilities just across the yard. Beyond the barn stood a wooden windmill stretching halfway up into the trees. The water pump below it was still active. Aside from these features the rest of the grounds consisted of smooth green grass growing under the ever-present pecan trees and a few scattered scrub oaks holding onto their dead brown leaves.

They had spoken little during the hour-long drive up from Austin. In the back of their minds both of them were aware their time together would be coming to an end. They'd been working side by side on the project for weeks now, flirting with the possibilities of sharing an intimate moment with each other. The pressure of that moment had reached its peak.

It happened before he knew it. He'd thought of doing it many times. Perhaps by some subconscious imperative in which the body responds to an unspoken desire, he reached out and took Jean's hand. He didn't dare look into her face, but sought her reaction to his gesture in the slight impulses of her hand. Within a moment after taking it, he felt her fingers curl around his palm. Her grip disclosed a mutual and reciprocating affection.

He now felt powerless to resist his own desires, which to him seemed sinister and all the more exciting. At home, his wife Julie would be doing what she normally did on Sundays, light housework, perhaps running a few errands, or spending time with their daughter. Under normal circumstances he would have been right there with them, tending to the insignificant details of life. The truth be told, he liked the kind of marital chastisement that some men find oppressive. He and Julie had enjoyed a life which up to this point resembled a glassed over Texas lake, serene and peaceful. Little did he realize that somewhere lurking in the coves of that lake there existed a suffocating stagnation, which threatened to ripple the entire surface of their marriage. Which is why his attraction to Jean was loaded with potentially disastrous ramifications. Yet, at the same time, ripe with fresh expectations.

Jean knew full well the hand that had taken hers would be the same hand that would caress the contours of her face in one significant gesture of goodbye. As a woman who followed the path of career, affection had often come in the form of such comings and goings. When she was young, she'd resented the limitations of such affections. As she matured she'd learned to accept them as reality. Now, with middle age looming around the corner, she'd adjusted to their ebb and flow like the life cycle of a perennial wild flower, which blooms in spring and dies in vain with the coming of winter. She'd never experienced commitment from a man and thus took affection wherever she could find it. She knew Rick was married and knew he would never leave his wife, but that didn't stop her from cherishing the moment. She had used all of her powers to lure and seduce him. She would take whatever affection from him she could seize. In the end, she would move on just like all the other times in her life and try to forget.

After the tour of the Johnson's boyhood home, they drove another forty minutes into the town of Fredericksburg. Here, Admiral Nimitz, a once brilliant commander had been born in a shack across the street from the modern museum now housing his memorabilia. They drove into the heart of town by way of Main Street, that was lined with century old buildings remodeled into quaint, German-style shops and restaurants. Rick pulled into a slanted parking space in front of a Dulcimer shop. They spent the rest of the morning walking hand in hand over the wooden sidewalks window-shopping. They also spent a few minutes sampling Texas wines in a tasting room and left with a bottle of chardonnay, feeling silly, and looking for the best German restaurant they could find. After lunch they headed out of town. Rick took a right a mile down the road and pulled into the parking lot of the Pine Tree Inn.

He killed the engine and squinted out the windshield. Unlike how he reached out and took Jean's hand earlier in the day, this move had been planned, though not discussed. He sat quietly for a few moments listening to the sound of passing cars behind him. A minute passed and

he'd heard no objections from Jean. He turned to her with a rather serious but playful look and said, "Wait here, I'll see if they have any rooms."

Five minutes later he came out of the office and drove around the back to room seven on the bottom floor. He hopped out of the car and she waited for him to open her door. Without a word spoken he led her into the room that was buzzing with the sound of an air-conditioner in the window.

No sooner had they entered the motel room, when a white, four-door Chrysler, belonging to the Trojan Security Corporation, pulled to the far end of the building. It parked underneath a giant scrub oak tree with a good view of door number seven.

CHAPTER 37

Tasha didn't venture out of her room for the rest of the day. That suited Derrick just fine, since it would be easier to watch her. When she finally did come out to walk her dog, Derrick went with her. He followed her from a distance into the park and waited. After Pauli had taken care of business, he followed Tasha back to the apartment. She stayed in her room the rest of the night.

Tasha had never gotten the chance to read through the information Eva had given her, but whatever it contained she concluded that it substantiated Eva's words. She feared for her life. They would not let her stay indefinitely. They would not let her go. So whether she stayed or went they were sure to haunt her. She fought sleep with her light on, pacing the floor at times, looking out her window, rummaging through her things, packing then unpacking—anything just to keep moving. She'd locked her door, but that wouldn't stop Derrick from entering. At 1:10 a.m. she cracked her door open and discovered the apartment in darkness. She'd not eaten all day nor had Pauli. The door to Derrick's room was open and no doubt he was awake and lying on his bed listening for her. She closed her door.

By 5:00 a.m. in the morning she was desperate with hunger. Still, she remained in her room. At 7:45 a.m. Derrick and Neil were awake

and whispering in the kitchen. Pauli had been standing at the door of her room for the past hour waiting for her walk.

"I need to take off for a few hours. Watch her," Neil said.

Without hesitation Tasha threw on her coat and hooked Pauli's leash. She would not be left alone in the apartment with Derrick. She grabbed her wallet and shoved it into her coat pocket. They were standing at the end of the hall when she darted between them.

"Where do you think you're going?" Neil asked.

"Where does it look like I'm going?" she asked, holding up the end of Pauli's leash.

Derrick followed her as she descended the stairs.

She walked along the path into the heart of the park and didn't look back. At a playground in the center of the park she sat down on a bench in front of an enormous contraption with triangular ropes knotted together into a huge maze. It looked like a giant spiders web. She felt safe here. Two children were stuck in the web like frantic bugs. A woman sitting on a nearby bench was nursing her baby. Behind her, boys were picking teams for an impromptu soccer game. She turned and saw Derrick behind her, met his gaze and turned away.

By 11:00 a.m. the sun had melted the frost on the grass into sparkling drops. Tasha could no longer see the steam in her breath. Pauli had been running around all morning and now lay curled up beneath her feet. The boy's soccer game was in full swing, the maze was crawling with children, and the benches around her had filled with parents.

The tension in her stomach and mind were mounting. She felt dizzy for lack of food and recalled the convenience store near the train station down the street. She looked towards Derrick. She found him propped against a tree in the far corner of the park near the street. "I must look repulsive," she thought. She'd thrown her coat over yesterday's clothes and hadn't combed her hair since…well, she couldn't remember. She reached up and patted it into some kind of order. Rolling her tongue over her teeth she wished she had a toothbrush. After snapping the leash on Pauli's collar she stood up awkwardly. Not hav-

ing moved for a few hours, the cold had stiffened her limbs and her leg had fallen asleep. It tingled in pain and for a few moments was utterly useless. Derrick stepped away from the tree he was hiding behind. At that point she could care less about him. She pretended to head towards the apartment, but at the last moment turned on the sidewalk and headed for the corner store.

At the entrance to the store, she grabbed two apples out of a box and set them in a basket she took from a stand near one of the registers. Inside the store, she picked out a half-pint cup of drinkable yogurt and a tin of soft cheese. On another aisle she grabbed a box of crackers. On a rack nearby she found a package of sausage. After paying, she headed to the park. While crossing the street Pauli's leash got caught up in the plastic grocery bag and knocked one of her apples out. It landed on the sidewalk with a *thump* and rolled into the street. An Audi flew by and squished it under its front wheel, plastering the curb with green chunks. "Shit!" She said. A cluster of kids walking behind her giggled at her misfortune.

In the park she took a bench underneath a group of poplar trees and ripped open the box of crackers. She opened the container of soft cheese and dipped a cracker into it. The cheese was cold and the cracker so brittle it snapped in half. She opened the yogurt and chugged it down. Satisfied, she looked at Pauli sitting on her hind legs in front of her, wrapping her long pink tongue around her muzzle over and over.

"Sorry girl."

Reaching into the bag she pulled out the package of sausage and ripped it open with her teeth. Pauli danced on her hind legs as Eva handed her a sausage, and she quickly swallowed it whole.

Tasha looked over her shoulder and found that Derrick had plopped himself down on a bench. In a few short weeks she had learned to despise the man. She shuddered with the thought she'd lived with the stranger for so long. Glancing in the direction of the apartment, she guessed Neil was probably back at the apartment and work-

ing on another sermon. Her mind flashed back a few nights to when she so foolishly opened herself up to him. She had never felt so naked in her life.

And she could not find God anywhere. She watched the children crawl through the maze in the distance. They were laughing and oblivious to the horrors of life. He was not there. A boy was juggling a soccer ball past a swarm of boys towards the goal. God was not there either. A woman was pushing a stroller with her infant wrapped snugly in blankets. A soft breeze was blowing through the poplar branches high above her head. The sun was warm and bright. The heavens were endless. Clouds rolled across the sky like puffs of cotton balls whipped in a deep blue sauce. Everything around her seemed to breathe life; to everything there seemed a purpose—except for her.

What she knew about God was what Neil had told her. His God was demanding of the utmost in discipline and dedication; a God of rewards and punishments, who forgave, but who also kept a detailed book of record of her sins. His kingdom would consist of those who followed his preachers to the letter. There was an acute sense of order to Neil's version of God. She'd latched onto that version, which gave her life purpose and meaning. It was the only version of God she had known. Now, through no fault of her own, she was suddenly swept into a world of darkness. She could think of only two explanations for the change; either God was not of the character to which Neil described him, or there was no God.

She traveled back into her mind looking for the point of deception. To the exact moment she felt the courage to believe and the ignorance to follow. What she was hoping to find was a significant spiritual event that would let her continue to believe God was still with her; some point where she could legitimately claim God had breached the dimension of reality to lead her in the right direction. The search was hopeless. What she knew about God was nothing more than a series of ill-interpreted circumstances that were glorified to the point of mysticism.

Who could she blame for such a deception? She'd followed God to the best of her ability, but he had let her down. Had she not tried hard enough to do what was right? And if everything was so wrong now, why wasn't God telling her what to do? It seemed far easier to simply blame herself, or better, that she had probably never done anything right. What a fool she'd been to have ever hoped God cared enough about her to keep her safe and protected! Surely, if he was alive, he would at least had the courtesy to correct her actions, or the decency to tell her she wasn't chosen in the first place! But he kept his mouth shut.

Her outlook turned from shadows to universal blackness. If God was the kind of God Neil said he was, then she wanted nothing to do with this God. If he were the God of rewards she'd been told he was, but had rewarded her in this pitiful manner, then she would let the consequences of her actions bother her no more. Whether she knew it or not, she had a decision to make, and the choice she was making was to never be the victim again. She would help Eva if she could. If there was any information in the apartment she would find it. She would right the injustice of what Neil and Derrick had done to her, even if she died trying.

Sunday evening drifted into night, leaving no opportunity for Tasha to do what she needed to do. Derrick had posted himself in the living room and watched television until 2:30 a.m. Neil had busied himself at the kitchen table then retired to his room about midnight. She knew if she was going to find anything it would be in Neil's room. Sometime after 3:00 a.m. she fell asleep on her bed and jumped to the sound of scratching on her bedroom door shortly after 7:00 a.m. Pauli needed her walk. She jumped out of bed and cracked her door open. The local news was pouring out of the television. She combed her hair and threw on her coat. Derrick was asleep on the couch as she passed by and Neil was in the kitchen fixing breakfast. She slipped out the door and walked Pauli downstairs. Before she reached the bottom flight of stairs she heard the apartment door open behind her and knew it was Derrick. After walking Pauli in the park she came right back.

By the time she returned she'd reached the conclusion that she'd be better off taking an entirely different posture. It would be the only way to keep them off her back and maintain her dignity as well. She would not cower around the house like a frightened little animal any longer. She would eat breakfast, feed her dog, and begin working like she'd done for the past three years.

When she stepped through the door Derrick was gone and Neil was working in his room. She made herself breakfast and started a fresh pot of coffee. Halfway though her eggs and toast she heard Neil's footsteps down the hall and looked towards him with the most stoic face she could muster. He sat down across from her at the table and was the first to speak.

"Derrick and I have decided you'll stay for a while."

She took a sip of her coffee and looked at him. "Why? So you can keep watching me?"

He was taken back by her resolve, but not intimidated. "Yes."

"And whose idea was it?"

"It was my decision."

"I suppose I should thank you then."

"We're not the enemy, Tasha."

"Neither am I. I've done nothing wrong and you're treating me like a prisoner." She took her plate into the kitchen to get away from him.

He followed her. "You're not a prisoner. You're free to go anytime you like."

"That's reassuring. You know I have nowhere to go. Besides, you and Derrick just want to make it easier on yourselves. The closer I am the better you can watch me."

"Derrick doesn't trust you."

"And you do?"

He remained silent, thus speaking his mind.

She swung around to the sink and noisily scrapped the eggs off her plate then flipped on the garbage disposal to drown him out. "This is not going well," she muttered to herself.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" she managed to ask.

He hesitated for a moment. "Ja, you can pour me a cup."

She poured it black with no sugar.

"Neil, I told you a few nights ago, that was the first time I ever met that woman from the paper. She snuck up behind me. If you and Derrick got something else going on that you don't want me to know about I really don't care."

"We still have to take the necessary precautions."

"Then take them. I've been with you for over three years. I've always believed in this ministry. I've always believed in you. Can you think of any other reason I'm here and not somewhere else?"

Neil remained silent. She took his silence as another affirmation of his distrust in her.

"Good. Now is there any reason I shouldn't use the computer?"

"What you mean?"

"Because I've got work to do. If you've got something in the files I shouldn't see then tell me now before Derrick comes back home and goes ballistic again."

"Like I said, there's nothing in the apartment for you to find."

She flipped on the computer then walked over to the dubbing machines.

"What about here? Anything I shouldn't touch? Any part of a sermon you don't want me to review?"

Neil looked bewildered and almost found her demeanor humorous.

She didn't wait for him to answer. She walked over to the computer and set her coffee beside the keyboard.

"Have you finished the sermon for next week's service in Adelsried?"

"Excuse me?"

"The sermon. You know, the ones you write up on the weekend and I type in order for you to proofread so I can re-type them."

"Not yet."

"I see. Then I'll work on last month's newsletter, then start processing last week's sermon for distribution. Will that be okay?"

"Yeah, that will be okay," he said, and walked down the hall into his room.

When she heard his bedroom door close, she wrapped her face in the palms of her hands and fought back the tears.

Lunch time came and went. Neil came out of his room twice, once to use the restroom and another time to make a sandwich. Tasha was too nervous and upset to be hungry. She'd decided earlier she would make a great dinner, nothing too extravagant, but something out of the ordinary they would hopefully appreciate. She shut the computer down and went into the kitchen.

She beat the steaks tender then marinated them in a special sauce. She put the dish of scalloped potatoes into the microwave and set the steaks under the broiler. Then she set to work on the salad and dressed it in a glass bowl. When the buzzer went off, she took the potatoes out of the microwave and set them on the table. She checked the steaks. Another five minutes and they'd be done. She leaned up against the counter in the kitchen and tried to gather herself together. She could not even imagine sitting down with the two of them and eating. The buzzer went off and she walked down the hallway and knocked on Neil's door. "Dinner's ready."

"Start without me."

With a sense of relief she walked to the table and ate as fast as she could before he came out. She'd almost finished when she heard his door open. He looked at the table for a moment then sat down.

"Derrick won't be home until later," he said without looking up.

She knew what to do with his food. She cleaned the kitchen then went to her room and waited.

Derrick returned at 9:15 p.m. She heard him sit down at the table and scarf down his dinner. The television clicked on and she knew it would be another long night. At one point Neil came out of his room and he and Derrick talked. She made out a few details of their conversation. Something to the effect of, "calling the states later," and "they are probably monitoring the phone lines." She passed most of the time

sitting on the edge of her bed thinking about what information she might be able to find and where it would be located in Neil's room. Perhaps he kept some old photos, or a secret computer disk. Perhaps he had a file stuffed away with some papers, or maybe even an address book.

At 11:30 p.m. the television was still blaring away at a steady drum. She cracked the door to her room open. Neil's light was still on. She walked down the hall. Derrick was stretched out on the couch. She didn't have the courage to see if he was awake. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of milk. She walked to the beginning of the hallway, looked over at Derrick again, and noticed he hadn't stirred while she was in the kitchen.

Back in her room she leaned against the headboard of her bed and guzzled her milk. Pauli lay curled up beside her with her head against Tasha's leg. Tasha stroked her head over and over without giving it any thought. As the clock ticked on she flipped over in her mind the things they'd said and done to her. Things she'd just brushed aside at the time without giving them much thought. She'd worked like a dog for them without pay. Hell, she was a mother to them! And they were like two brutal sons who lacked even the common courtesy to thank her for cooking them dinner.

"Shit!" she muttered, jumping off her bed and bolting towards the door. Pauli popped onto her squatty legs and looked at her quizzically. She flipped off the light and walked back to her bed. "How stupid of me," she said, falling back against the headboard. The soft blue light from the crept underneath her door. She watched the subtle faint patterns reflecting against the hard wood floors. Another hour passed. It was 1:00 a.m. She had given up all hope Neil would leave and the thought relieved her. She closed her eyes.

Ten minutes later, she was startled by the sound of his creaking door. She tiptoed to her door and heard his footsteps slip down the hall and stop in the living room. The television went silent and the apartment went dark. The front door opened and clicked shut. There was a

shuffle in the foyer and the sound of shoes in the stairwell. A moment later came the groaning of the outside door. She guessed he was running down the street to make the call he'd talked about earlier. She could allow herself only five minutes. To make matters worse, she could not risk turning his light on. His room faced the street and if he happened to look up he'd know she was snooping around.

She turned on her light, opened her door, and let the light from her room fall across his door. She walked halfway down the hall to make sure Derrick was still asleep on the couch. She crept back down the hallway and carefully opened Neil's door. The diffused light outlined his desk, a bookshelf, and the end of his bed. She grabbed his briefcase and took it back into her room where there would be enough light to check the contents.

She went through the file pockets in the lid of the case first and pulled out two manila folders. One was full of accounting information about the financial status of the CRM. Nothing there. She put the file back in the way she found it and looked into the other file. There she found several letters of correspondence from Joseph Stautzen of the ICC. She'd met Stautzen just once and looked for anything in the letters that might be incriminating. They were worthless. Next, she looked through the address book in the back and saw nothing of use. There were a few miscellaneous numbers of people she didn't know, but she didn't have a copy machine handy. The smaller pockets held nothing of significance. She put everything back in the case and quietly ran it back into his room. After setting it on the desk she backed up into the doorframe and held her breath. Derrick was still breathing heavily, a car passed along the street. No sound of Neil—yet.

She looked around the room. She ran around the side of his bed and slipped her hand between the mattress and the box spring and came up with nothing. At the desk she tried to open the top drawer. It was locked. She noticed the trash can on the floor beside the desk and decided to take a gamble. Bending over to pick it up, she felt it was full, but still had the presence of mind to gather up several other rolled

up balls of paper lying along the baseboard. She tossed them into the can and dashed to her room, frantically spreading half the papers from the can all over her bed. "Damn! Too much noise," she thought, stepping into the hallway to listen again.

Footsteps were coming up the stairwell! She panicked and turned around twice in the hallway, not knowing what to do. Coming to her senses, she grabbed the wastebasket off her bed and fluffed up the remaining papers to make it look full. She ran it back into Neil's room and closed his door. As she was just about to close her door, she noticed a slip of paper that had fallen to the floor in the hallway. Dropping to her knees, she scrambled to grab it and backed into her room. Ever so quietly, she closed her door.

Neil had not yet closed the front door when he heard the spring on her lock snap into place. There was only one sound like it in the world and in the stillness of night it might as well have been an air horn from a truck echoing down the hallway. He walked to her door and listened intently. Little did he realize she was curled in the corner with her back against the door, peering into the darkness of her room trying desperately not to breathe. Not hearing a sound, he went into his room and turned on the light, taking a quick inventory to make sure everything was in order.

When Tasha was sure it was safe she scurried to the chair in the corner. Pauli jumped onto her lap and curled in the seam of her thighs. Tasha just sat there, eyes fixed on the shimmer of the pale light from Neil's room seeping underneath her door. About a half hour later her room went black and she sat there for another fifteen minutes until she got the courage to turn on her light. She moved to her bed and pulled back the comforter. The sight of Neil's trash on her bed revolted her and she sat next to it feeling an overwhelming sense of defeat. She began picking up the pieces of paper one by one. Some of them were whole pages, some of them were bits and pieces of notepaper and tightly wadded balls full of useless information. She was methodical in her approach and before long had a stack of paper growing beside her

in a neat little stack. About two thirds of the way through the pile she opened up one of the smaller balls of paper and ironed it out with her fingers. It was difficult to read in the soft light. She held it close to her face and muttered its contents.

Execution Mandatory—Nov. 8.
Forstein—Burtman/American?

CHAPTER 38

When Eva's cell phone chirped deep in her bag, she and Stace were standing at the counter of Kriftel Cafe eating hamburgers for lunch. She licked the ketchup off her fingers and flapped her hands to dust off the sesame seeds. Derrick was just down the road in Neil's car.

"Important?" Stace asked, as she checked the number.

"Could be. I'm going to step outside and make a quick call."

She'd been hoping her contact with Tasha had been successful, but the number of the originating call written across the window of her phone didn't look familiar.

The receiver picked up on the other end. "Tasha?"

Tasha looked out the windows of the canary colored phone booth, her eyes darting here and there, wondering where Derrick was. In her other hand she clutched a wadded piece of notepaper.

"Tasha?" Eva questioned louder.

"I…I'm scared, Eva."

"Where are you?"

"At a phone booth on the corner."

"At Escherscheimer and Hugelstrasse?"

"Ja."

"Where's Derrick?" Eva asked, stepping onto the sidewalk and looking down the street.

"I don't know. He took off earlier this morning."

"What did you find out?" Eva asked.

Tasha squeezed the slip of paper in her pocket. "I'm not sure what it means."

"What did you find, Tasha?" Eva pressed.

"Just a note. A note I found in Neil's trash last night. I looked through his briefcase…it was dark—I didn't have any time."

"Listen, Tasha, take a deep breath."

Eva took another look down the street then walked around the side of the building. "Now tell me, what did you find?"

Tasha took another look out the windows of the phone booth. She pressed the note against the front of the telephone. The letters were hard to read and she leaned forward to get a better look.

"Execution Mandatory—Nov. 8. Forstein—Burtman/American…What does it mean, Eva?"

Eva was silent for a few moments trying to decipher the meaning.

"Execution of what? Of whom? The three people on the list? No way. Possibilities…think, Eva! Execution of the virus? Possible. But what about the names? Forstein, me, and the American—Stace? Shit."

"What's wrong, Eva?"

"Nothing. Just give me a minute. I'm thinking—"

"I haven't got a minute. He could be anywhere."

Forstein. The name sounded vaguely familiar. Eva looked down at the ground. A chip of concrete was wedged in the dirt. She moved her shoe over it trying to jar the memory of the name Forstein loose. The American…Stace? She kicked frantically at the chip. Just a piece of it sticking out, the majority of it lodged deep in the dirt. She dug the tip of her shoe into it. She came at it backwards with the heel. It was starting to budge.

Stace had almost finished his sandwich and was wondering what was taking Eva so long. He looked out the window and saw her head jerking about. "Who was she talking to?"

"You still there?" Tasha asked.

"Still thinking."

The fact was she didn't want to think about it. She stopped kicking the stone and looked into the window at Stace. His back was turned towards her. Any mention of an American had always centered on him. Mr. Schwarz thought he was involved. Shelly and Ruben thought he was involved. What was he *really* doing in Germany?" She looked down at the stone and attacked it. The name Forstein popped back in her head. She tried to recall the connection of this name to Stace, and the animosity that existed between them. She gave the stone one final kick and broke it free. They were somehow in this together.

"Tasha, you stay put. Don't go back to the apartment. I'm coming to get you."

"But—"

"Stay there! I want you to hang up the phone and walk into the store. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay."

Stace finished his sandwich and reached for a napkin. He grabbed his drink and looked for Eva. She was not in the side window, nor the front window. Once outside, he looked in both directions for her car and caught the tail end of it whizzing down the road.

The decision to follow Eva instead of watching the American was an easy one for Derrick. He'd watched her talking on the phone then watched her run to her car. She drove right past him and he could see the intensity in her eyes. She was up to something.

Minutes later, Eva pulled along side the curb in front of the convenience store and parked. He drove by and watched her enter the store, then found a space on the next block. He left the car running and with the power control adjusted the right mirror so he could get a view of the entrance of the store. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and waited.

"Doing some shopping?" Eva asked as she approached Tasha. Tasha turned towards her with a frazzled look.

"What's happening at the apartment?" Eva asked.

"Neil and Derrick saw us meet. They took the envelope away from me right after I came home from the park." She was quivering and her eyes were dark and sleepless.

"Did they hurt you?"

"Not exactly, but I'm willing to trust you at this point. I can't believe I've lived with them for this long and never suspected anything. Never had any idea what kind of people they were."

"It's not your fault. They've been able to fool a lot of people for a long time." She was speaking at Tasha, but not to Tasha. She was speaking to herself and thinking of Stace. "Can I see the note?"

Tasha pulled the note out of her pocket. Eva uncurled the edges and read for herself the same words she'd heard over the phone. Somehow, having the hard copy of the message in hand seemed more forbidding. She hated to have to press Tasha for more information, but she needed more to go on.

"Do you think there's any more information in the apartment that might help us?"

"I told you on the phone I can't do this. If Neil ever finds out I even went through his trash—"

"I'm not going to ask you to look anymore," Eva interrupted her. "And you're not going back to the apartment."

"I'm not?"

"No. It's too dangerous."

"But I've got no place else to go."

Eva could see her trepidation building. Tasha started shuffling from side to side. Pauli moved out of the way so she wouldn't get stepped on.

"I know a safe place where you can stay for a while."

"But my clothes, all my things."

"Don't worry about that either. We'll get your things as soon as we can."

Tasha began to calm down.

"Okay. Now let's see if we can't get you and…" Eva looked at Tasha's dog on the floor. "What was her name again?"

"Pauli."

"That's right. Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"Me too. How about fresh hot apple fritters?

"Apple fritters?"

"I know a great place to get some."

The image Derrick witnessed in the mirror of the BMW didn't compare to the surprise awaiting him when he followed Eva and Tasha to the Burtman Backerei. All his suspicions were suddenly confirmed. Tasha was supplying the Schwarz Monatlich with information. Just how much information, he could only imagine. He knew what had to be done.

At the backerei Eva introduced Tasha to her parents then took her upstairs into the apartment. Knowing she was finally safe, Tasha sat down on the couch, but within a few minutes had drifted off to sleep. Eva covered her with a comforter and headed to the office.

"I was just about to page you, Eva," Mr. Schwarz said as Eva walked in the door.

"Stace called looking for you," Shelly said interrupting him.

"What'd you tell him?"

"Told him you weren't here. Was I supposed to tell him something else?"

"No. If he calls back I'm not here for him. Ever."

Shelly had heard that tone before in Eva's voice. She stopped pecking on her keyboard. Mr. Schwarz and Ruben looked up expecting her to elaborate.

"Seems you all were right. Stace is involved with the program after all," she said, tossing the crumpled note onto her desk. It teetered for a moment on a sharp crease like a seesaw.

Shelly walked over to her desk and picked up the note. She uncurled the edges and read it, then looked at Eva with a sense of regret.

"What does it say, Shelly?" asked Mr. Schwarz walking towards them.

She extended the note in his direction and he snatched it out of her hand.

He took a moment to read it then passed it to Ruben.

"This is serious everyone. I'm guessing the reference to 'execution' refers to the virus, but I could be wrong. You need to be very careful, Eva."

"I will," she replied.

It was clear to all of them that the investigation had taken a dark turn.

"We do have a bit of good news," Mr. Schwarz said. "Shelly was able to get some information on Trojan Security."

Shelly jumped in. "Finding the company wasn't much of a problem. They're based out of Austin, Texas. They even have a European branch in Heidelberg. When I got the number I spoke with their director of marketing, Brad Winston. Told him I needed a program written for my company and a friend had given me their name." She took a seat in the empty chair in front of Eva's desk.

"Mr. Winston started telling me all about Trojan Security, such as how long they've been around and the type of programs they build. Trojan Security is in the business of designing corporate computer security systems. About 80 percent of the programs they build are designed to guard against hackers. I told him that was exactly what I was looking for and gave him a fictitious story about my business. Then I pressed him a little. I said I'd heard they were building a program for the ICC and I was interested in having a similar system designed for my company. He was at a loss for a moment, then patched me through to another man, Mitch Pruitt. And here's where the conversation got interesting.

"Mr. Pruitt gets on the line and asks me where I'd gotten my information. Of course, I lied, but I don't think he believed me. He told me that I'd been misinformed. Trojan Security was not building a pro-

gram for the ICC, and he'd never heard of them. I pressed him, but he was insistent. That's as far as I got."

"So de virus is a secret. Noting special about dat," Ruben said.

"Not necessarily," Mr. Schwarz said. "We know they're building a virus for the ICC. That's a given. We also know they're exhibiting a great degree of paranoia over this virus. We know this because the CRM is involved. Their previous history in Berlin tells us there's more to this than just the ICC wanting to keep evangelistic secrets."

"So where does Stace Manning fit in?" Eva asked. "Seems to me he's either with the ICC or the CRM."

"Why would he be tagging along with Eva?" Shelly asked.

"Perhaps he's working for one of dose groups. If dey've got something to hide like de evidence suggests, and if dey know we're watching dem, den I would think having a man on de inside would be beneficial to dem. Stace might simply be keeping an eye on us and informing dem of what we're doing."

Ruben's comment hit Eva hard.

"Let me see that note again, Ruben," Mr. Schwarz asked.

They watched him as he studied the note more carefully. He paid particular attention to the word "American," followed by the heavily penciled question mark.

"What are you looking for?" Ruben asked.

"I'm just trying to figure out the meaning of the question mark."

"Let me see," said Eva.

"It's possible that the ICC or the CRM may not know who the American is. That would explain the question mark.

Eva twisted her head towards Mr. Schwarz. "Is he with them or not?" She shrunk down into her seat.

No one dared speak except Mr. Schwarz. "I think we can all agree on one thing; Stace Manning is involved with this investigation in one way or another. Whose side he's on is uncertain."

His words pounded in Eva's mind. He was dead right. Stace was involved, but how? She would now have to go with her instincts. She

would have to break all ties with him. She also knew she'd have to disclose to the others the one piece of information she'd been holding out on them.

"There's one more thing about the note I haven't told you," she said.

They turned toward her in disbelief.

"Forstein and Stace are connected," she stated flatly.

"Connected?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"Connected, and not just because their names are written on the same piece of paper. She stood up and walked around the side of her desk. "When I first met Stace at the pool he told me a long story about his college days."

"A story?" Shelly asked.

"Yeah, a story, Shelly. You know, one of those things people tell you about themselves that you want to believe is true."

Shelly shut her mouth. It was obvious that Eva was speaking out against the hurt.

Eva threw her hands into the air. "Look, I don't know what to believe at the moment. I'm only telling you that in the story Stace mentioned the name, Forstein."

Mr. Schwarz turned his chair towards her desk. "Perhaps you should tell us this story," he firmly suggested.

She proceeded to tell them about the events surrounding the Marbel Art Exhibit. She went into as much detail as she could recall and was surprised she'd remembered as much as she did. She explained to them how Stace was working on a series of photographs for the exhibit and that Forstein had been in charge of the committee that oversaw the work to be displayed. The exhibit was to be covered by the local media and a nationally recognized art gallery in the city was to display the winning entries from each category. Stace expected no glitches in being able to present his work and felt he had a better than average chance of being noted as one of the most prominent artists. "The way he put it to me, he was fully expecting the exhibit to launch his career."

"And let me guess, they pulled the plug on him," volunteered Mr. Schwarz.

"Something like that. At the last minute the committee met and disqualified his photos from the exhibit."

"And this Forstein guy orchestrated the whole thing?" Shelly asked.

"Stace never said he did, but I got the impression he holds Forstein personally responsible. He may even blame Forstein for the course his life took after the exhibit."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

She thought about the question for a few moments. "Stace is a drifter, a dreamer." After she'd spoken, the words churned in her mouth like the taste of moldy bread. It was the first time she'd ever verbally denied she disliked him.

Ruben sat at his desk spinning a pencil in the palms of his hands. "Did he ever say why he came to Germany?"

"Something about wanting to see the world." Eva said, swallowing the moldy taste.

"Sounds pretty flimsy to me," Ruben added.

"It does," Eva concluded.

"Question is, Eva, do you think he may still hold a personal vendetta against Forstein?" Mr. Schwarz asked.

"It's possible," Eva said without hesitation.

"More like probable!" Ruben interrupted.

"Then he's acting alone?" Shelly questioned.

"No. He's tied too much into the investigation to be working alone or on his own. He knew about Eva and the paper and our investigation. If he's connected to Forstein he's connected to Trojan Security. The note also suggests he might even be tied up with the CRM or the ICC." Mr. Schwarz concluded by rubbing his face in his hands and shaking his head.

"I would say dat makes him a little unpredictable," Ruben said.

"And dangerous," Shelly added.

Mr. Schwarz looked at Eva. "I know I told you before to stick with him and see what you could find out."

"And now you want me to stay away from him—right?"

"Yes."

"Consider it done."

CHAPTER 39

Just when the demons of extremism had entered Derrick's mind was a mystery, but he took those demons with him on a chilly night in November to the Burtman's Backerei, along with a lighter and a small syringe full of gasoline. When he pulled the van along the curb just beyond the backerei at 2:45 a.m., he knew at least four people were present in the upstairs apartment: the telephone technician, who had planted the bugs in their apartment, the older woman and her husband, and his primary target, Tasha.

The nature of his terrorism had changed since his days in Berlin. An assault rifle with a single bullet would have been much quicker, but now his targets were numerous. He had decided since the backerei was a safe house, it probably contained incriminating information about the CRM and the ICC. No bullet could eliminate that kind of evidence, so his preferred choice of terrorism was one of mass destruction. An all consuming fire was the only option. He also wanted to make it appear as though what he was about to do was an accident. Or better, an act of God. For surely all those who opposed him also opposed God, and would ultimately perish by fire anyway.

He stepped out of the van and walked the short distance towards the intersection where the backerei was located, glancing around to make certain no one was watching. He noticed a car approaching from

beyond the intersection coming in his direction. The headlights of the car were bouncing on and off like a flickering candle from the bumps in the road. He thought for a moment of doubling back into the darkness of a nearby alley, but that would look suspicious. He looked up at the lights of the intersection and noticed they'd changed to red. He suspected the car would stop at the light, but it increased its speed and sailed through the intersection. Then he saw a flash of light from the traffic camera on a pole. "A week from now, when he gets the ticket, he'll be sorry he was in such a hurry," Derrick said to himself with a chuckle.

His next task was to get inside the backerei. For this he was well equipped. The door and locks to the backerei were over forty-five years old. He knew from an earlier visit to the backerei to buy a loaf of bread that the backerei possessed no security system.

The bell above the door tingled as he entered and he muffled the sound with his hand. He took a few steps away from the door waiting for his pupils to adjust to the blackness, then headed for the kitchen door. He cracked it open—*eereeek*—then stopped and listened. When he was certain there was no sign of movement in the upstairs apartment he slipped inside. A barely perceptible hint of blue light shone in from a window located high on the wall towards the alley. A film of flour dust covered the window. After a brief moment his eyes adjusted more to the darkness. He could make out the stainless steel tables in the center of the kitchen, and the half-moon shapes of overturned bowls on the shelf against the wall.

He reached for the lighter in his coat pocket and spun the dial. A tiny flame erupted and the aromas of the kitchen were temporarily obscured with the smell of butane. He held the lighter high above his head like a miniature torch and looked for his target. What he was searching for was a wall socket, one preferably located down near the baseboard and on the inside wall. He found one close to the stairwell, which was ideal for his purpose. When the fire gutted the staircase there would be no method of escape for the occupants.

He dropped to his knees and ran his hands along the wall. He felt a smooth surface of paint and underneath it wooden panels. He put the lighter down and reached inside his coat pocket for the syringe full of gasoline. He pulled it out and held it with the tip towards the ceiling. With the other hand he reached up and pulled off the rubber cap from the tip. He spun the dial on the lighter. Very carefully, he inserted the tip into one of the two round openings of the socket and slowly squeezed out the gasoline. It completely saturated the electrical connections and the surrounding insulation. Then, holding the lit flame in front of the opening he squeezed out the remaining gasoline in the syringe so that it acted like a torch, driving a flame through the opening and instantly setting aflame anything that had been soaked with gasoline.

He waited, hoping the flames within hadn't suffocated. With his finger he touched the plastic fixture and quickly snapped back. He flipped on the lighter and looked at the wall. The outside coating of paint was shimmering as it melted and two trickles of smoke were escaping from the holes of the socket like snake tongues. When he heard the sound of wires popping he knew he'd succeeded. He backed out of the kitchen and into the street. He didn't wait to see the results. Ten minutes later as he was just driving by the Ginnheim tower, Tasha's dog was just becoming aware that something was dreadfully wrong.

The fire spread quickly. Within minutes flames were devouring the insulation in the walls just inches from where Tasha was asleep upstairs on the couch. From there the flames shot upwards, licking the insulation within the wooden beams in the musty attic. From its point of origin it also spread horizontally, steadily advancing towards the corner of the wall by the stairwell. Shortly thereafter, the joists of the stairs themselves caught fire, followed immediately by the entire staircase.

At first, Pauli sniffed the foul odor and opened her eyes in the eerie darkness of a smoke filled room. She took another deep breath and sneezed, trying to shake free of the suffocating feeling. Her head was

spinning. She couldn't see across the room to Tasha, so she walked in the direction she remembered where the couch was located. She came face to face with the wall on the opposite side of the room and sneezed again, lifted her head up and yelped. She heard Tasha stir then cough and she ran towards the sound. She found Tasha's arm hanging over the edge of the couch. She nudged it and barked.

Within the fog of Tasha's mind she heard the barking echoes and the damp wetness of Pauli's tongue licking her fingers. The hot pungent odor of wood and chemicals seared her nose and she began to cough. When she opened her eyes it seemed as if they were full of butter, then came the burning and watering. She rolled over and sat on the edge of the couch clutching for her pillow and coughing uncontrollably. An eruption in her stomach filled her mouth with the remains of the evening meal. She puked on the couch and wiped the strand of saliva hanging from her mouth.

She rolled over onto the floor where the smoke was less dense. She could also see the flicker of yellow flames attacking the bottom of her door. She swung her arms wildly calling for Pauli, who yelped as Tasha's arm caught her in the ribs and knocked her over. Tasha grabbed her by the front leg, yanked her into her arms, and crawled towards the door. She fell against the inner wall cradling Pauli in one hand and the pillow in the other, ramming it against her face and trying desperately to breathe. Sweat saturated her body and she became aware of the heat lashing like claws at her skin. Through the thin cotton shorts she was wearing she felt the sting of the hot hardwood floors pricking her thighs. She shifted fanatically trying to transfer the pain, and for the first time realized she might die.

Alfred awoke to the sound of her thumping terror. "T*hump, thump, thump!"* and Tasha's muffled scream. He opened his eyes to the sparkle of reflected flames ricocheting around the walls of his room and the crackle of fire outside his door. He flung his comforter onto the floor and stumbled over to the door.

"Mom! Dad! Wake up!" he screamed. He placed his hands on his door feeling for flames through the wood. "Mom! Dad" he yelled at the top of his voice.

"Alfred, help me!" Tasha yelled.

"Wait, Tasha!" he yelled back. He ran to his dresser and threw on his boots. Then he grabbed a beer bottle and something else, and went back to the door and cracked it open. Rising heat rushed past him. The stairwell was entirely swallowed in flames. The flames lashed against the wall and ceiling like molten electricity feeding swirling colors of white and blue tips. He forced the door open and threw the beer bottle at his parent's door. The bottle landed with a solid *thump* on the hollow door and rolled into the stairwell where it disappeared into the flames.

Mr. Burtman looked into the orange fog suffocating the room and heard the walls sizzling with bubbling paint. The smoke from the paint was rolling like a fluid white blanket over the ceiling. He heard a second loud thud against the door and yelled to Alfred.

Alfred fought off the heat searing his eyelashes and hair. "The fire's in the stairs. We can't get out that way!"

Mr. Burtman was standing just a few feet from the door when it ignited. He threw himself backwards into the center of his room.

"Dad. Jump out the window!" Alfred yelled. "Use the sheets. I'll jump down and run around the front to help you!"

"We're going! What about Tasha?"

"Tasha! Did you hear me? You gotta jump out the window."

She tried to stand, but the smoke was hanging low in the ceiling and she fell back to the floor.

"Tasha! Jump out the window!" Alfred listened for a response but could no longer wait.

Tasha wiped the water from her eyes and squinted into the thick smoky blackness. Across the room she could see the sharp perpendicular edges of light from the window cutting through the smoke and falling onto the floor. She cradled Pauli in her left arm and began crawling

towards the window. No sooner had she started crawling when the door turned into a sheet of flames behind her. She scrambled frantically as the flames leaped onto the wall above the couch. By the time she reached the window, the staircase wall erupted sending flaming witch's fingers across the ceiling.

Alfred ran to his window and ferociously spun the crank. Taking hold of the center beam he crawled over the windowsill, teetered on his stomach and dropped his feet over the edge. His boots scuffled against the red brick looking for a firm footing. Peering into the darkness below he searched for a clear spot to land in the yard then pushed off. He lunged backwards and sailed fifteen feet onto the grass below. He felt a sharp pain near his right elbow as his arm helped to break the fall. Stunned, he lay there for a few moments watching coal colored smoke billow out of his window and over the edge of the roof. He shook his head violently back and forth, shaking himself out of his stupor. Then he ran towards the alley. He stopped at the corner near the back of his van.

"Tasha!" She looked in his direction. "Jump onto the van!"

His van was parked about five feet from the edge of the building. It would be about an eight-foot drop to the top of the van and from there she could easily make it to the ground. He looked towards his parent's window and saw his mother's feet poking through. "You gotta jump, Tasha!" he yelled one last time and ran to help his parents.

"Ease your way down," he said as his mother came out the window. She was barefoot and her nightgown flapped about in the breeze. Mr. Burtman was leaning out of the window above her, his hands tucked under her shoulders, suspending her as she tried to take hold of the sheet.

"Hold on tightly, Leda. I'm going to help you down."

"Don't let go!" she pleaded.

"I won't. Now trust me. Alfred's below if you fall. You've got to slide down."

She gripped the sheet and Mr. Burtman released his grip. Alfred watched from below as she dropped a few feet towards him, banging against the wall and flipping around like a fish on a plate. She looked down in terror. Alfred braced himself for her imminent fall. "Mom, slide down! I'll catch you!"

She panicked and looked up at her husband. "There's no time, Leda. Do it now."

She eased open her fingers and her weight pulled her down towards the ground. Her bare feet and ankles cut against the sharp edges of brick and mortar, but she didn't notice the pain.

"Let go!" Alfred yelled.

Her arms were raised tightly around her head and she tried to look down. She couldn't see Alfred, but she could see the ground nearby, and knew she was closer to it than before. Her feet were still ten feet above the sidewalk, but she knew from this height she could survive the fall.

She thought about it for another few seconds. "I'm coming," she yelled and let go.

Alfred broke her fall as she landed on top of him. Again, a sharp pain radiated through his arm as he hit the pavement. She rolled off him and onto her knees.

"You okay, Alfred?" she pleaded, looking into his eyes and shaking him by the shoulders.

He looked into her face and then beyond her as his father started climbing out the window. "I think so," he mumbled and tried to stand. He ran his hand up his arm and felt a stub of bone breaking the skin. His father would be on his own.

Tasha frantically scratched at the tears oozing out of her eyes. The top of the van seemed miles away, the heat behind her, just inches. Pauli squirreled around in her arm. She could not hold onto her any longer. Lifting Pauli in both hands she eased her over the windowsill. Without hesitation she tossed her feet first onto the van. Pauli landed with a hard smack and rolled over. Tasha pinched the tears out of her

eyes to see if she was okay. Pauli got up and started barking. "She made it!"

A sharp pain cut into the arches of Tasha's feet as she stood on the thin metal rails. She opened her eyes but could no longer see. The stink of burning hair stuffed her nose and the rush of black smoke roared like a freight train over her head. She tried to remember the position of the van and just how far she needed to jump. When she thought she had the memory in focus, she jumped.

For a brief moment she felt a sense of relief as her feet made contact with the top of the van, but then came the horror of imbalance and she knew she'd missed her target. She stiffened, hands flailing outwards as her body lunged backwards towards the brick face of the building. The last thing she remembered was the taste of blood as her head hit the wall.

CHAPTER 40

Eva had left him stranded at Kriftel's Cafe on Tuesday. He was irked at her disappearance, but unsuspecting, considering the type of work she was in. When he called the Schwarz Monatlich she was never in the office. Stace fully expected a call by Wednesday afternoon, but none came. Wednesday night he was really pissed. By Friday he'd had enough and stewed all day long trying to decide just how tactful he was *not* going to be when he finally confronted her. He would go looking for her at her home first thing tomorrow morning.

By 6:00 a.m. he was already on his way there. On his way, he cut through Kurmainzer Park and encountered several companies of American troops from the 32nd Signal Battalion out of McNair Kasern. One company was in the midst of a game of kill-the-man-with-the-ball. They looked like dirtied scrambled eggs in their yellow sweat suits.

He continued through the park along the crushed gravel pathway until he reached the large pond. Ducks squawked at his arrival. In the frosted grass to his right another company of troops squirmed on their backs doing sit-ups. He could barely make out the rhythmic calls of the company First-Sergeant that walked among them.

The sun was just awakening somewhere, painting the entire scene into an impressionist's version of sunrise. The sky was a deep

pink-magenta and the park, a mirage of romantic greens with just the right amount of morning mist to set the imagination on fire. But Stace didn't let that get in the way of his emotions. This morning he determined he would settle his relationship with Eva once and for all.

As he neared Konrad Glatt Strasse, he heard the rumble of yet, another company of troops. Above the thunder of their steps rang a growing cadence. One soldier belted out the first stanza and the rest of the soldiers sang the refrain like a polished men's chorus:

> They say that in the Army.
> They say that in the Army.
> The food is mighty fine.
> The food is mighty fine.
> A chicken rolled off the table.
> A chicken rolled off the table.
> And killed a friend of mine.
> And killed a friend of mine.
> Oh what a day what a day what a day to fight a waroooor…
> Oh what a day what a day what a day to fight a waroooor…

Stace was not impressed. He had his own battle to fight.

Minutes later, as he looked down Loreleistrasse, he could see Eva's orange Opel parked in front of her home. He unhooked the iron gate at the walkway leading up to her apartment, took a deep breath, and composed himself. Once inside, he knocked sharply on her door. Sheeba barked and sniffed under the door. He waited. "Was she still asleep?" he thought to himself. "Then I'll wake her up." He knocked louder this time. Sheeba returned to the door and barked again. "She probably doesn't want to talk to me, but she'll have to." He pounded on the door with his fist. This time the door behind him opened. He turned to see a neighbor poking her head out of her door and clutching her robe.

"I didn't mean to wake you, but I need to speak with Eva."

"You didn't hear the news? It was on the television this morning. Her parent's backerei burned down last night."

"Are you sure?" he asked, walking to her door.

"Ja. You just missed her. Her brother came by about thirty minutes ago and took her to the hospital."

His mind flashed back to the night he had dinner with Eva's parents. Mrs. Burtman's face surfaced in his mind like a portrait floating on water. "Are they alright?"

"Alfred had a towel wrapped around his arm and was bleeding. I think her parents are okay. There was someone else in the apartment that was injured. Can't remember the name though."

"Do you know what hospital they went to?"

"The University Hospital. They have an intensive care unit."

Stace was at a loss. "Do you now where it's at?"

"In Niederrad, near where the autobahn crosses over the Rhine.

"Thanks," he said moving towards the door.

He managed to catch a cab that took him to the main entrance. He stopped just inside the doors wondering how he should proceed. There was no visible information desk. He looked down the long hallway in front of him. At the end of the hallway was a wooden table, which in the distance looked like it belonged in a dollhouse. Behind the table sat a woman. He took a deep breath and prepared for the short journey. His tennis shoes squeaked unmercifully on the polished cement floor. The elderly woman behind the table rose at his approach.

"May I help you?" she asked, after the last squeak.

"Ja. I'm looking for the intensive care unit."

She replied in perfect English, "You're here."

He glanced at the wide double doors to his right.

"I'm looking for the Burtman's."

"Who?" she asked with a puzzled expression, reaching for her clipboard listing patients.

"The Burtman family."

She glanced at her list. "I'm sorry, there's no one here by that name."

He was at first relieved then skeptical. "Are you sure? I was told they were injured in an early morning fire," he said raising his voice.

"Sir, this is the intensive care unit. Most of the patients here are suffering from head injuries," she stated factually. "We had one person arrive early this morning, but her name is not Burtman."

He was confused. He'd been trying to figure out all morning who the other woman was that had been in the backerei at the time of the fire. "Was it possible she was the woman who had been admitted earlier?"

"If the people you're looking for are in this hospital, more than likely they came in through the emergency room. Would you like me to check?"

"Please," he replied impatiently, as if she should have thought of it hours ago.

She made a quick call.

"Sir, the Burtman's were admitted earlier this morning. You'll be happy to know their condition is stable and they've been moved to a step-down unit."

A sense of relief flooded him, but he still wondered about the other woman. "What's the name of the person who was admitted to intensive care this morning?"

"I'm not at liberty to give you that information," she said, sitting down with an air of finality.

"Can you at least tell me how she is doing?"

"Sir, I'm not—"

"I know. You're not at liberty," he interrupted.

"That's correct."

She rearranged her clipboard and the phone and noticed the visitor hadn't moved. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked.

"Some directions would be helpful."

CHAPTER 41

Eva deeply regretted her decision to not answer her phone that fateful morning. Thinking it was Stace she refused to answer it. Because of her decision, she'd not been there when her parents needed her the most, and it forced Alfred to have to come and pick her up. When she saw him she was sick with despair. He was a pitiful sight. When Eva looked through the peephole of her door she saw first his rumbled hair, a bruise above his right eye and the blood soaked gauze of his propped up arm.

Upon reaching the hospital she went immediately to see her parents. They were awake but could barely speak through the oxygen masks. She could tell by their tired expressions and nods they would be alright. Her next task was to get her brother taken care of. She took him back to the emergency room where they were waiting for his return. He collapsed in a wheel chair and they rolled him into an examination room. He would be in surgery for the next few hours. After inquiring the whereabouts of Tasha, Eva made the long walk through the maze of corridors and swinging doors until she passed unchecked into the intensive care unit.

She froze for a moment just inside the double doors and looked down the short hallway. From the first two doors on the right she could hear the daily sounds of the unit like things buzzing and beep-

ing, the voice of a mother reading a story to a silent listener, and the swish of water from a nurse trying to give a patient a bed bath. A child's voice moaned then let out a string of obscenities. She listened for any indication of Tasha's presence, but heard none.

Taking a few steps forward she peeked in the first door. The two beds on the right side of the room were occupied by young children. In the bed nearest the door lay a young girl, propped up with pillows, her face pointed towards the door, a white blanket tucked neatly under her arms. Her head was entirely wrapped in gauze except for her face, which seemed as though it were about to pop out of the head dressing. Her eyes were swollen shut. A young boy occupied the other bed. He was naked and his head was shaved. Two nurses were washing his legs. The young boy turned towards Eva with effort, as though he'd noticed her two minutes earlier and was just now getting around to looking at her. The right side of his face sneered. The left side of his face hung unresponsively. The nurse facing the door noticed this and looked up towards Eva.

"What is it, Henry? You see someone? Oh my! And you're all naked. You'd better hide before she sees you!"

He grinned and snorted then turned his head in the other direction trying to hide. Eva moved on, but one of the nurses who had been bathing the boy came to greet her.

"May I help you?"

"I'm, Eva Burtman. I'm looking for, Tasha Matyastick."

"I'm, Ruth. I'm sorry about the fire and your parents. Are you and Tasha related?" she asked before disclosing any information.

"I'm a friend of hers."

Ruth took a step back.

"Probably the only friend she has at the moment," Eva quickly added.

"I see. Do you know the whereabouts of her family?" Ruth asked.

"I don't."

"It's important we locate them as soon as possible."

"Can I see her?"

Ruth thought for a moment before answering. "Sure. She's in the room down the hall."

She followed Ruth apprehensively with her hands thrust deep into her jean pockets. Another nurse seated just inside the door stood up when Ruth entered the room. Eva froze outside the door.

"Tasha has a visitor," Ruth said to the other nurse.

Eva took a step forward.

"Hi. I'm Bridgett," the other nurse said and handed Eva a facemask. "Are you sure you're up to this?" She asked Eva.

"I think so," Eva replied, her soft voice muffled by the cotton mask.

Ruth smiled with her eyes. "Alright."

Tasha lay face down on the hospital bed. A gauzy, white cotton blanket covered her up to the bottom of her shoulder blades. Her arms had been carefully placed beside her and raised upwards, so that her hands rested beside the pillow. Her head had been shaved, exposing a paper-white complexion dabbed with sprinkles of black hair stubble. The only visible injury at the moment was a three by four inch patch of bandage located on the crown of her head. A plastic tube protruded out of it. Around the bandage leaked the residue of iodine, which had been swathed in haste on her head leaving long trails down her neck and across the side of her face, like the stain of rusty water on porcelain.

Eva shuffled along the side of her bed and looked into Tasha's face. Contorted by the force of her weight on the pillow, it was noticeably swollen, as if she'd suffered an allergic reaction to a bee sting. Her eyes were filled with a translucent milky substance. A wheeze came with every laborious breath, which could be heard through the mask feeding her lungs with oxygen. Eva fell into one of the two chairs near the bed. She propped her elbows on her knees, then her face into her hands, and mumbled through her cotton mask, "What's wrong with her?"

Nurse Ruth took the seat beside her and explained as much as she knew. The hospital was well equipped to handle most severe cases of

trauma, except in cases like Tasha's. They had to call in an additional physician by the name of Helmut Gurlict. He was a notable neurosurgeon with extensive experience in treating head injuries. He arrived around 5:30 a.m., looking much the same way he always did. Which is to say his frosted and roughly cut hair might have been combed or uncombed, but his goatee was as sharp as ever. Upon examining the patient's burns and CT scans, he immediately decided against opening Tasha's scull to relieve some of the pressure mounting in her cranium. The surgery would be too risky. She'd been in a coma since the fall and any additional trauma to the injured area would be dangerous. Tasha's first and second degree burns were not life threatening, but extensive. They ran from the back of her calves, up her thighs, and over her back. There was the likelihood that if Tasha were to awaken the pain would cause the pressure in her brain to increase.

While nurses tended to Tasha's burns, Dr. Gurlict drilled a tiny hole through Tasha's skull and inserted a monitoring device just below the surface. The device was held to her head with a few strips of tape. The device had but one function, to monitor the increase in swelling. Blood was rushing into the damaged area, yet at the same time, the additional pressure within her skull would affect the normal supply of oxygen. The loss of oxygen would result in the killing of incalculable brain cells. Time and additional CT scans in the weeks to come would begin to show just what permanent injury might result from her head injury.

The implement inserted into her skull was also attached to a monitoring device that recorded the pressure in Tasha's brain. In the window of the monitor, two numbers preceded a decimal point followed by another number. Any numerical reading above 87.5 called for an immediate response. They also hooked up an IV to the back of her left hand, which fed her with fluids and antibiotics. To her chest, they taped electrodes to monitor the rhythm of her heart. At various points on her head, they attached additional electrodes, which ran up to a separate machine that measured how electrical impulses were being pro-

cessed by her brain. Initial tests run by this machine showed a considerable delay in the time sequence between stimulation and reaction. Tasha was also suffering from smoke inhalation.

Eva looked with despondency at the series of electrodes, tubes, and wires twisting over her head and running into no less then five various machines. "Will she be alright?" she asked Ruth.

"It's too early to tell and I'm not going to lead you to believe otherwise. What I can tell you is she is stable."

"What about her head injury?"

Nurse Ruth sighed and turned to Eva. "She suffered a severe blow to her head during the fall. Injuries of this nature typically take a long time to heal. The initial CT scans show severe trauma."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that Tasha may lose some of her normal functioning capabilities."

"Will it be permanent?"

"Difficult to tell, but the brain is an amazing organ. In almost every case I've seen, there have been some genuine surprises."

CHAPTER 42

To the authorities, the cause of the fire was uncertain. At the moment, firemen from the first two responding units were in the process of rolling up hoses and securing their equipment. The district fire chief was writing his report. An insurance representative was on site gathering information. An arson investigation team was kicking through the soggy ashen mud, gathering scraps of information, taking detailed photographs, and trying to reconstruct how the fire started and spread.

Eva was intelligent enough to know that while she may have been responsible for Tasha being in the backerei, she was not responsible for the fire. Instinct also told her that the fire was no accident. She knew the fire had been deliberately set by the CRM. The only question in her mind was, which one of them had done it and why. If the fire had been set in retaliation for the paper's investigation, then why strike at the backerei? The location of the paper would have provided a much better target. She could only conclude the intended target had been Tasha.

She did not rule out the possibility that Stace was involved with the fire, but she did not take this thought seriously. However, the seriousness of the incident had brought her abruptly back to the gravity of the situation. It was not the time for emotional commitments and entanglements, and certainly not the time to be distracted from her investi-

gation. In fact, she couldn't help but wonder if the emergence of Stace into her life had been to do exactly that, to distract her from her investigation. Which meant of course, anything he'd said or done to her had nothing to do with whether or not he actually cared about her.

She pulled her sweater tightly around her and leaned forward into her chair. Although it hurt deeply, she took another long look at Tasha, drilling Tasha's predicament into her mind. The event was transforming. Like a chameleon changes the color of its skin to suit a threat, Eva was able to channel her anger into sheer determination.

Stace found his way into the emergency room. He took a quick glance around for Eva, but she was not there. Two young men sat on a couch in front of a glass coffee table. One of them looked up at Stace and continued scribbling in his notepad. The other man appeared to be sleeping. He had a video camera nestled in his lap.

"I'm looking for Alfred Burtman," Stace said, stepping up to the chest-high counter.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Burtman is in surgery," the nurse said.

"Can you tell me why?"

"Are you a relative or a friend of the family?"

"What difference does that make?" Stace was getting tired of the run around.

The nurse pressed her question with a blank stare.

"I'm a close friend of the Burtman's. I learned about the fire just an hour ago and I'm just trying to make sure everyone is alright."

This satisfied the nurse's requirements. "Mr. Burtman is going to be just fine, sir."

Stace was grateful for the information. "Thank you. Do you know if his sister was here? I'm trying to find her."

"I just came on shift and haven't seen anybody else."

"What about any of the other nurses? Surely someone here can tell me if they've seen his sister or not."

"Sir, it's 8:50 a.m. The previous shift has gone home and we haven't seen anyone else."

"Alright. I appreciate the information."

"Not at all."

Stace backed away from the counter then stepped through the set of double doors leading outside. He'd been running around all morning trying to locate Eva without success. She would not have gone into work. Her entire family was in the hospital. She had to be around somewhere.

He turned around and ran right into the young man who'd been scribbling in his notepad. Behind him towered the lanky man with his video camera hoisted onto his shoulder. A tiny, red beacon light flashed signifying the camera was rolling.

"I couldn't help notice you were asking about the Burtman family."

"And you are?" Stace asked looking into his eager brown eyes behind perfectly circular, wire-frame glasses.

"Daniel Talbot with the Frankfurt Post. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"I do," Stace said turning around.

The reporter turned to his cameraman. "Turn that damn thing off." Then faced Stace. "How's that?"

"Better, but I've still got nothing to say."

"Then off the record. You said inside you were a friend of the Burtman's and you're looking for Alfred's sister."

"What does that have to do with you and me?"

"Nothing. I just thought you'd like to know where she is," he said starting to walk away.

"Wait a minute!"

The reporter stopped.

"Sorry. I could use a little help at this point," Stace said.

"Thought so." The reporter looked at his notepad. "I got to the backerei at about 4:45 a.m. this morning. Mind you, after all the excitement had passed. Witnesses said the Burtman's crawled out of their window. Can you believe that? They tied a sheet to the window frame and hung out over the ledge."

"What about the young woman?" Stace asked trying to speed him along.

"Her name's Tasha Matyastick. She threw her dog onto the top of a van and jumped out herself. Quite a story! On her way down she must have hit her head on the side of the backerei or the pavement. Paramedics doubt she'll pull through."

"Where's she now?"

"Intensive care. She a friend?" the reporter asked, pulling his pen out of his pocket again and flipping his notepad about.

"Never heard of her."

The reporter capped his pen and shoved it back into his pocket.

"Now what about Eva?" Stace asked.

"She brought her brother to the emergency room a little while ago."

"Do you know if she left the hospital?"

"Doubtful. She left the emergency room through the inside doors."

"Do you know where she might have been headed?"

"Not for sure, but I suspect back to intensive care to see her friend."

Stace stood there motionless for a few moments retracing the run around he'd been through all morning. The thought occurred to him that while he was arguing with the receptionist outside intensive care, Eva had probably been inside the unit all along.

The receptionist was looking over a new recipe in the German edition of Bon' Appetite when she heard the familiar squeak of tennis shoes coming up the corridor. She slipped a pencil into the magazine.

The long walk back to the intensive care had given Stace time to cool off. He'd been prepared to confront Eva earlier, but now he wanted to make sure that she was going to be okay.

"Good morning again."

"Yeah, good morning," he replied, and managed a faint smile. "I was told in the emergency room Eva Burtman is here in the unit."

She looked at her patient roster again. "I'm sorry, she's not listed as a patient."

Stace took a deep breath and tried again. "She would be a visitor. Her friend was one of the victims in last night's fire. She might have arrived before you came on shift."

"That's entirely possible," she replied. "I'll step inside and check for you."

"I'd appreciate it. Tell her it's Stace."

She stepped into the hallway just as Nurse Ruth was heading across the hall.

"Ruth. There's a young man here who's looking for a woman named Eva Burtman."

"She's in that room over there."

"Thanks, Ruth."

She took a few steps towards Tasha's room and greeted Bridgett at the door. With eyes conditioned to avoid looking at any patient in Tasha's situation, she quickly found Eva seated in the chair next to the bed. "Miss Burtman?"

Eva looked up.

"You have a visitor."

"Who is it?"

"He said his name is Stace."

Eva couldn't believe her ears. "Tell him I don't want to see him."

"Very well."

"No wait! Tell him…tell him I can't come out right now and I'll call him at home tonight."

"Well?" Stace asked the moment she stepped through the doors.

"The receptionist repeated the message.

"Wait a second!" Stace pleaded, stepping towards her and preventing her from returning to her chair. "Please. Please try one more time for me."

She frowned at the idea. "What do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell her it's very important I speak with her."

"Okay. I'll give it one more try," she said, backing away from his arm.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, Miss Burtman, but he says it's urgent."

She returned without a reply from Eva.

"Is she coming?"

"I have relayed the message to Miss Burtman as you requested. You'll just have to wait and see."

He let out a long sigh and for the first time that morning noticed the chill in the air. He looked down the long corridor towards the front door. Sunlight was pouring in from the windows along the wall. The warmth called to him, so he walked over to the first window and lifted his face towards the sun. He could do nothing but wait. Suddenly, he heard the double doors from the unit open.

He turned to see Eva stop and stand by them momentarily with her arms crossed in front of her. He took one look at the expression on her face and knew he'd have to scrap everything he'd planned to say and just be there if she needed him. She dropped her hands to her side and slowly walked towards him. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

It was a simple question, but her tone told him she resented his presence.

"I went to see you this morning and found out about the fire. I rushed over to see if you and your family were alright." He spoke with genuine concern, hoping to melt the ice in her eyes.

"I don't want you to go near my parents." She crossed her arms back in front of her and shifted on her feet.

The comment knocked him completely off guard. He took a step closer. She took a step back and held her hands up in front of her.

"Don't! I don't want you to come near me either."

He stopped his advance, utterly bewildered by her choice of words. He took his eyes off her and tried to figure out what to say next. Moments flew by.

"I don't understand, Eva. One minute we're eating hamburgers and the next second you're gone. You won't return my calls, and now you're telling me you don't want me to see me?"

"It's simple, Stace. I have just figured you out. It took me a while. I had to find a few pieces to the puzzle, but now I've got a clear picture of who you are."

"What do you mean, Eva?" He felt a sudden urge to defend himself.

"How long did you expect you could fool us—fool me?" she asked, throwing her hands up into the air.

"What the hell are you saying?" he asked more forcefully.

She took a deep breath and looked at him hard. For a split second he'd almost convinced her that he didn't know what she was talking about. But that was only for a split second. She quickly wised up.

"It's my job to know what's going on. How long did you think it would take me to discover what you were up to?"

He considered her question, but like the other questions, it made no sense at all. Any comment would have been silly on his part, so he decided to just shut up for the moment.

"I bet you thought you could keep on distracting me from my investigation until it was too late didn't you?"

Stace kept his mouth shut.

"And when you'd accomplished what you intended you were just going to walk out of my life. Just disappear and never come back."

She bit her lip and looked into the courtyard beyond him. There was pain in her eyes, something desperate to which he knew he was innocent of, yet still felt entirely responsible for.

"So help me God, Stace…" she began then stopped. Her words were fierce. "If I ever find out you were responsible for this fire, I will personally dedicate my life to making sure you pay for it."

He cocked his head in disbelief, eyes widening and probing for an explanation for what she was saying, searching for some response that would put her back on track. He took another step forward towards her and she backed away.

"OK!" he yelled. "I don't know how to answer you. I don't know the first thing to say to you."

She took her eyes off the floor and looked at him again. "And I suppose you know nothing about Trojan Security, the ICC, the CRM—or the virus?"

"What are you talking about, Eva?" he shouted. The receptionist squinted over the top of her magazine.

Eva pressed on. "And I suppose you don't know a guy named, Rick Forstein either, do you?" she asked.

He spun around and grabbed the rail by the windows with both hands, looking at a handful of dead leaves swirling in the dirt in the courtyard.

"Forstein," he thought to himself, "Rick Forstein? What has Rick got to do with any of this?" he wondered.

"Stace, I'm going to make this really clear for you. I'm only going to say it once." She paused to gather courage. "I don't want to see you anymore. Don't come by the house, because I won't come to the door. Don't call me, because I won't return your calls. I've got an investigation to finish. I know you and Forstein are involved with it and it's only a matter of time before I find out to what extent. So, you do what you need to do, because I'm certainly going to do what I need to do." With that, she walked back into the intensive care unit.

CHAPTER 43

All the members of the team were present with the exception of Jean Thompson. The occasion should have been a happy one for Rick. He had announced the completion of the program to Pruitt late yesterday afternoon. Pruitt preceded Fred Watson into the conference room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank each of you for your services. Without your individual efforts," he stalled for a moment searching for words, "well, let's just say we couldn't have done it without you."

"As all of you know this program will now enter its second phase, which is the designing of the secondary security system that will in essence, totally eliminate the possibility that the work you've done actually gets put to use." He smiled at having said this and Dr. Loran chuckled. Watson got serious again. "Which I'm fully confident our own teams here at Trojan Security will be able to create."

"I hope you don't find it too crass, but Mr. Pruitt has your checks. I have another appointment scheduled. Again, thank you for your hard work."

"Where's Jean?" Rick whispered in Pruitt's ear.

"She called this morning. Said she wasn't going to make it in."

Pruitt stood and pulled out several white envelopes from his coat pocket. "I would like to add to Mr. Watson's thanks with something

more concrete. "Dr. Loran," Pruitt began, reading the name off the envelope. Dr. Loran stood up. Pruitt handed him the envelope and shook his hand. "Best of luck to you."

"Davia Reese." She stood up. "Thanks so much for your help. Best of luck."

"Stoozen…Staupen?" Stautzen stood up. Pruitt smiled. "Just kidding, Stautzen. Stautzen took the envelope without comment.

"And last but not least, Rick." Rick gave him a puzzled look. "I told you to expect this didn't I?" Pruitt asked.

"Well, yeah."

"You've earned it."

"Folks, stay a few minutes and say goodbye if you wish. Rick, meet me in your office in about fifteen minutes and we'll tie up some loose ends."

Rick opened his office door to the sound of hollow space. In the last fifteen minutes, every piece of electronic equipment had been stripped from his office. Even his laptop was gone. He set his briefcase on the desk and snapped it open. What he was most concerned about was the copy of the program he'd made and slipped into his case. He reached in and felt for the disks, but at that moment heard footsteps at his door. Pruitt didn't bother to knock and stepped in. As he entered, Rick saw three security officers standing in the hallway with their hands resting on their gun belts. Pruitt shut the door behind him. In his hand he cradled a manila envelope.

Pruitt strolled across Rick's office and took a seat on the couch, possessing a silly smirk. Suddenly, Rick felt warm and sticky. He followed Pruitt's lead by taking a seat behind his empty desk, trying to retain his composure.

"Rick Forstein…" Pruitt said, cocking his head to the side as if he'd just heard the name for the first time and was trying to decide whether he liked it or not. "I am surprised." He slapped the envelope on his knee a few times. The noise was irritating to Rick, a prelude to the contents.

"You know, stealing computer programs is a felony."

Rick swallowed hard and adjusted his tie. He looked nervously at his briefcase. "I don't know what you're taking about."

Pruitt ignored him. "By the way, how is Fredericksburg this time of year?"

Rick was painfully aware he was not in control of the conversation and never would be. His face began to sweat and he felt a slight pain in his chest.

"My wife and I—you know Caroline don't you? We usually wait until April to head out that way. The spring rains have fallen by then and the roadside is covered with bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush. Beautiful sight really, but I suppose you had other scenery on your mind, eh?" Pruitt looked down at the envelope and smiled the same silly smile. "Yeah, you had other scenery in mind. "Of course, these photos don't really capture the entire naked beauty, but they tell the whole story nevertheless."

It occurred to Rick that Jean's absence was more than coincidental. Fact, she was probably on a plane right now headed God knows where. "Son of a bitch!" he muttered.

"What's that, Rick?" Pruitt asked looking at him.

Rick was tired of the game. "You know, it really wasn't too difficult to figure out what we were building the virus for."

"And what would that be?"

"For Stautzen and the ICC."

"You figure that out on your own, Rick? That was not classified material. You all discussed it in several meetings.

"You have no plans on building a security program do you?"

"Of course we do. That was our original intent, remember? It's too bad you won't be the one to build it."

"Where's Jean?" Rick asked nervously.

"Like I told you this morning, she won't be in."

"She's been with you all along hasn't she?"

Pruitt chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. "Your imagination's quite active this morning. Like the others, her work is finished here. She knew that yesterday. As for where she is now I have no idea."

Rick snapped open the top button of his shirt and slid his tie loose.

"Really nothing to get flustered about, Rick," Pruitt said rising. "I'll tell you what, you give me the copy of the program and I'll let you see what we're keeping sealed in your employee file for future reference. And I'll make you an additional promise just 'cause I'm a nice guy. You keep your imagination to yourself and I promise I will not personally deliver these photos of your affair with Jean to Julie. Sweet gal," he added. "I'd sure hate to see her upset."

Pruitt walked over to Rick's desk and stood over his briefcase. He extended the envelope towards Rick. Rick could only muster a look of disgust. He opened his case and handed Pruitt the copy. Pruitt tossed the envelope on his desk.

"I think you'll find everything in order there; severance pay, a nice recommendation written by me personally, and of course, some wonderful shots. By the way, we also have some video footage of you and Jean in the office here. Those I'm afraid do require a little imagination, but the underlying tone is easy to see."

Rick glanced around the room looking for the cameras and cursed his stupidity.

Pruitt headed for the door but stopped short. He didn't even bother to turn around. The inflection of his voice revealed the intensity of the encounter. "You've got ten-minutes to clear the grounds. After that, I'll have you arrested for trespassing."

As he left, Rick caught another glimpse of the security officers outside.

"You want us to keep watching him, Mr. Pruitt?" Officer Dublin asked after Pruitt closed the door.

"Like a hawk."

CHAPTER 44

There are two priorities that hold a man in place. Without them, he is like a feather drifting in the whimsical winds of the universe. They're not extravagant priorities by any means, but justifications for existence. They are in essence, work and a good woman. A man can live with either one or the other at any given time, but to have both is to be one step beyond the gates of heaven.

Once again, Stace Manning had neither.

He'd come to Europe to enrich his life and reawaken a passion for his craft. A year spent in Germany hadn't brought him closer to that goal. He was still just a step ahead of poverty, developing blurry photos of images he'd seen over and over and over again. And he was a man just like any other man. What he wanted was what all men want. A woman to call his own. A woman he could devote the best of himself towards enriching. He had thought—no hoped—that woman would be Eva. In his entire life he had never discovered a woman who could satisfy him on so many levels. She was the realization of all his expectations and a surrealistic version of his love utopia. His disappointment was severe.

By 10:00 a.m. he'd made it back to his apartment, but a transformation had taken place since he'd left it earlier that morning. The apartment now seemed stranger to him than the first day he moved in.

What had once been quaint and charming now seemed ugly and awkward. The wooden floors were not tiled. The appliances in the kitchen were 220 volts and not 110. The wallpaper lining the hallway was old fashioned and the furniture in his bedroom, depressing. The toilet in the bathroom had a silver button on the top cover and not a handle on the tank where it should have been. No matter how many lights he turned on, the apartment was still dark and lonely.

He grabbed a couple of boxes from the storage room and walked to the bathroom. "What a sorry excuse of a photo lab," he thought. He packed the enlarger and threw in the few utensils that would survive the journey. In the other box, he carefully packed his extra lenses and camera bodies. He would hand carry his aluminum photo case with his latest Nikon and a few lenses. Most of the rest of his stuff he could fit into his two suitcases. What could not fit in either the boxes or his suitcases would stay.

After packing, he went into the living room and booked a Sunday afternoon flight to New York with a connecting flight to Austin. After getting off the phone he walked over to his small stack of CD's and removed an ancient recording of Ozzy Osbourne's tribute to Randy Rhodes. He forwarded it to track eleven to a song entitled, "*Goodbye to Romance*" and cranked it up. It sealed his mood into a cocoon of despondency and hopelessness.

Meanwhile, back in Austin, Rick had said goodbye to no one. He threw his briefcase and the box of his packed stuff into the trunk of his sports car and headed north on I-35. He had no particular destination in mind. He just needed to drive—drive hard and fast.

Trojan Security had screwed him and left him out to dry. Jean had betrayed him and disappeared on a flight with a check written with a handful of zeroes. He was no better than the rest of them, but his bonus check would hold him for a few months. He could care-less about the virus. As far as he was concerned people could believe what they wanted to believe. If they were stupid enough to be followers then let them follow. Let them fall right into the ditches along with their

blind guides. The world was full of impostors, shamans, political and religious messiahs, and social pariahs. Rick was incubating a less constructive motive…he just wanted revenge.

He knew Stautzen was probably on a flight to Germany at that very moment. Finding him later at the ICC in Munich would not be a problem. Simply wrestling the virus out of his hands would do little. Stautzen could call Trojan Security and a copy of the program would be sent to him within a couple of days. He would have to come up with a better plan.

In Hillsboro, he got off the interstate and pulled into a Wendy's for a drink. He doubled back on the access road, then got back on the freeway heading towards Austin. He pulled into his driveway in the early afternoon and opened the garage door with his remote. In the garage he pulled the string hanging from the ceiling, opened the trap door, unfolded the wooden ladder, and climbed into the attic.

"What are you looking for?" Julie called up to him.

"The suitcases."

He quickly spotted them, four matching vinyl suitcases sitting side by side on a sheet of plywood. He backed the biggest suitcase down the ladder where Julie was waiting for an explanation.

"I've got to make a quick trip to Germany," he said walking into the house.

"Germany? Whatever for?" She followed him upstairs. His daughter watched her father pass without a hug. She dropped down onto her knees and climbed up the stairs.

"To work. We just completed a project and they're going to need help getting it set up." He started to lay the suitcase down on the bed and Julie grabbed a hold of it.

"Wait a second. This thing's filthy. She went into the bathroom, wiped the case clean with a washcloth and set it on the bed. "Where exactly in Germany are you headed?"

"Frankfurt, then Munich."

"You never mentioned you'd have to take a trip with this program."

"There's always an on-site installation. I didn't expect to be going, so I never mentioned it."

"But can't someone else go?"

"No. I designed it. It's up to me to get it up and running."

She thought the tone of his voice peculiar, but said nothing as she took a seat on the couch across from the bed. He unzipped the case and started stuffing it with clothes.

"How long will you be gone?"

"Probably not more than a week."

Their daughter had finally waddled down the long hallway and into the room. She giggled and walked over to her father then held onto his leg. He pried her loose, kissed her on the forehead, then sat down with Julie on the couch.

"When do you have to leave?"

"Right away. Fact, I should have left this morning. One of the other members of the team has already gone ahead and I'm supposed to meet him there."

"Do you have reservations?"

"No. I was hoping you could do that for me."

Julie got up. "Well, let me see if I can book you a flight."

"First class, if you don't mind."

Julie turned around. "First class?"

"Yeah. I've got some last minute planning to do and I don't need any distractions."

"Alright. First class," she said and headed for the door. "Watch her, Rick. She's starting to get into everything."

He glanced at his daughter who was walking along the dresser. She had one hand stretched along the top and was feeling for things to grab.

He finished packing his clothes and went into the bathroom for his personals. As an added measure he grabbed a spare suit from the closet. Julie returned ten minutes later.

"I've got you booked on a flight leaving at 6:50 p.m. You've got an hour layover in New York. You should get to Frankfurt late in the afternoon tomorrow. From there you catch a connecting flight to Munich.

"Good work," he said kissing her on the cheek. He grabbed his suitcase and walked to the top of the staircase. "Tell you what, why don't you get ready and we'll go out to eat before my flight. Threadgills if you like."

"It's three o'clock, Rick."

He looked at his watch. "Good, then it won't be too crowded."

He left Julie upstairs and took his stuff out to the car. He'd forgotten about his box of stuff from the office, but slid it towards the backseat anyway. He reached for his briefcase and took out the envelope Pruitt had fired him with. God forbid Julie should ever see the contents. He shoved them into the briefcase and locked it.

CHAPTER 45

No sooner had flight 347 reached its cruising altitude of 33,000 feet over the Atlantic that the fate of Rick Forstein was decided.

The calls originated from a pay phone at the Austin International Airport to Pruitt's cellular phone. Pruitt took the call on the deck of his home overlooking the winding Brazos River. Upon hanging up with the security officer from Trojan Security, he placed a call to Stautzen's home in Munich, and left a message with his wife for Stautzen to call him back upon his arrival in Munich. Stautzen returned Pruitt's call, understood the message, and immediately placed a call to Neil. Neil then spoke to Derrick, who would be the last to know, but the first man called upon to rectify the situation. Rick Forstein would have no clue when he cleared customs at Frankfurt Main International that he would be instantaneously submersed into the world of the subversive.

Having consumed a generous portion of chicken-fried steak, home-spun potatoes, and a fresh ear of hot-buttered corn on the cob at Threadgills, Rick passed up the invitation for airline food and opted for a glass of white wine to calm his nerves. His frame of mind hadn't changed since his meeting with Pruitt earlier that morning. He was still obsessed with a burning sense of vengeance. Had he considered the implications of his plan he might have been able to preserve some fragment of his future.

The hallways of Trojan Security were silent when Pruitt returned to his office shortly after speaking with Stautzen. Once inside, he unlocked the bottom file cabinet to his desk, and pulled out the file with the photographs of Jean and Rick. After slipping on a pair of gloves, he reduplicated the eight by ten photographs into brilliant color representations of the originals.

Thirty minutes later, he pulled his car up along the curb of Dolan Street a few houses down from the Forstein's house. He got out of his car and casually strolled up the sidewalk, stopping at the Forstein's mailbox for a brief moment formulating an impromptu plan. The living room light and the kitchen light were on downstairs. He walked up to the door and looked for signs of movement through the inlaid windows in the front door. He saw none and slid the envelope between the door and the doorframe. He rang the doorbell twice and strolled briskly over the manicured St. Augustine grass of the front yard, disappearing down the street.

Julie was upstairs giving Rebecca a bath when she heard the chime. "Shoot," she muttered to herself, wondering who it could be at this time of night. "Well, they'll just have to wait a minute won't they, Pumpkin." She finished rinsing her daughter's slippery body and tossed a fluffy towel over her head and around her chubby little face. "Now let's go see who that is."

Stepping onto the tile of the foyer she looked through the window in the front door. There were no shadows. Seeing no one, she turned the handle on the door. Something fell onto the mat and tumbled onto the patio. She peered out the edge of the door and noticed the manila envelope. After picking up the envelope she went back inside. Balancing it on the wooden railing at the bottom of the staircase she took her daughter upstairs to dress her and to put her to bed. When she came back downstairs she took the envelope into the dining room and opened it.

Pruitt had arranged the five photographs in chronological order, so that they would reveal the illicit fling between Rick and Jean as a pro-

gression of an all-consuming affair. The first two photographs were black and white copies of selected images from the video footage filmed in Rick's office. One of them captured Jean the moment she'd reached up and brushed the crumb off Rick's face. It was a tender gesture. The other black and white had been taken about a week later. Rick had come up behind Jean and was massaging her shoulders. The photo revealed Rick's hands slipping around the front part of her neck and gave the impression he was intending on reaching for more. Julie's mind flashed between bewilderment and rage. Suspicions she'd buried came to life in their most fantastic form. She wanted to believe the photographs were a cruel joke, but the evidence was unquestionable. Painfully, she flipped to the third photograph and her greatest fear was justified. The color photograph showed a frontal view of Rick and Jean strolling hand and hand across the lawn of the Johnson Estate. In the background were blurred impressions of tourists. Julie found it offensive in its boldness. She and Rick had themselves walked the same path a few summers ago. Here he was surrounded by strangers and showing the same degree of affection to another woman. The last two photographs she put side by side. The initial shock of opening the envelope had passed and it was time to see just how far they went. In the photo on the left, Rick had Jean backed up against a tree and they were engaged in a passionate kiss. The photo on the right lacked any sexual nuances, but the implication was clear. Rick was escorting Jean through a pink motel door. Julie knew it was the Pine Tree Inn. She remembered it, because she'd logged the name in her daughter's baby book, for Rebecca had been conceived there.

She pushed the photos to the middle of the table and laid her head down on the table. Emotions swirled in her mind like a tornado. Never in her life had she been confronted with the sudden absence of trust. She felt as if she were falling through space at an ever-increasing speed. All around her images and memories of her life were flashing by. She reached out to grab hold of them, but they were slippery and elusive. Some of the images were sharp, like the triangular pieces of shattered

glass cutting through her soul. She fell deeper and faster losing all sense of time until she felt a sore spot forming in the middle of her forehead where her head was resting on her wrist. She turned her head on its side. A single tear rolled down the bridge of her nose and hung for a moment on the tip of her nose. She got up and went into the bathroom. Warm water spun in the bottom of the sink. Cupping her hands she splashed some on her face. She reached for the hand towel nearby. The downy cotton had the aroma of a fresh home. She patted her face dry and opened her eyes to the broken woman standing in the mirror before her.

It was the face of a woman that no man desired. She'd aged ten years in twenty minutes. Her long blond hair was lifeless and without body, falling over her shoulders like straw. Her eyes were puffy and red. Darkened circles lingered below them. She leaned forward to check the lines on her face. They were still there, only deeper and longer, and originating from areas where she'd never noticed them before. She stepped back to get a full look at herself. She looked for reasons to disbelieve that she was not as beautiful and desirable as before, but there were none. She now desired only one thing, to run and hide from the man who'd caused her fall. If she were the loathsome creature to him she now saw standing in the mirror before her, then she would spare him the task of caring for her. She would free him and perhaps, just maybe, she would regain some dignity for herself. She turned off the bathroom light and went to the phone. Her sister was on the way. She ran upstairs to pack.

CHAPTER 46

In Frankfurt, Stace had decided sleep would be a mockery to his predicament. He was in the mood for self-pity and had good reason to be tormented. He wished to take full advantage of this sudden and inexplicable turn of fate in his life. Sleeping would rob him of his need to experience the full pain he wanted to go through. If there was a God and that same God was bringing him torment, then he'd just as soon go through the hell of it all and learn the lesson he needed to learn. That way, if he learned his lesson well, perhaps God would not permit him to go through the experience again.

He spent the evening trying to watch television. When he got bored of that he listened to the radio. At 2:00 a.m. he thumbed through old magazines and woke at 3:15 a.m. pissed he had the nerve to fall asleep. He hoped God wouldn't hold it against him. He went into the kitchen and fixed a pot of coffee. He made a sandwich with the last of the sliced ham and a dab of mayonnaise from a new jar. He ate in the silence of the living room. Although it was still early, it was time to go. There's no other feeling like watching a flurry of planes take off and land. It reeks of new beginnings, of comings and goings. Stace knew that regardless of how long he would have to wait, he could still find some comfort there at the airport.

The lanes of the autobahn were virtually empty. The Mercedes taxi was standard around Frankfurt and Stace was refreshed by its comfort and speed. The driver got him to the airport in less than fifteen minutes and dropped him off at the international terminal. He placed his suitcases inside near a bench where he thought they wouldn't be bothered. His photography case would stay right by his side where it belonged. His next order of business was to find a cash machine and empty his account. He spent a couple of hours walking the gift shops and perusing through magazines and paperbacks. He finally decided on a short novel he could finish during the flight over the Atlantic. Once hitting the states, he knew he'd never pick up the book again.

By 11:30 a.m. he had climbed his way up to the fourth floor of the terminal and into a tranquil lounge, taking a seat overlooking the main runway. Across the runway he could make out the sterile, gray buildings of Rhein Main Air Force Base. He counted seven C-5's and ten of the latest versions of the Cobra attack helicopter, all lined up perfectly as if set in place with a giant hand. He called for a Viesen beer, not because he enjoyed it the most, but because of its alcohol content. Later he ordered a hamburger and fries. He finished his lunch and the waitress brought him another beer. After eating, he shifted his chair around so that he faced the window and his back faced the door. His posture spoke for itself.

The clatter of dishes, glasses, and small talk behind him merged into a distant drone. Jet liners took off with measured accuracy. He could see a line of them waiting in position at the end of the runway. Like clockwork, every few minutes one would swing around and its nose would point down the endless cement runway. Then, ever so slowly, they would lurch forward and increase their speed. They had broken well over 200 miles per hour when they slipped past his line of sight. He followed each one as they eased their noses upwards towards the sky. Once free of the ground, the jets shot upwards like arrows, leaving behind a swill of dirty turbulence.

Having finished two beers, he discovered escaping his own thoughts was an impossibility. A year ago he'd left America under the false premise he was seeking adventure. Now that he was returning, he realized what he'd actually been doing was running. He didn't confront the rejection of his work at the Art Exhibit, and he was not confronting Eva's rejection of him now. Just when was he going to break his pattern of running at the first sign of trouble?

He tried desperately to understand his feelings for Eva, to find any possible explanation for her actions. Something beyond his control had set her against him. She was beyond reason. What had caused her to suddenly hate him? He tried to recall the exact words she said to him at the hospital. She said she had him "figured out." She said, he was "fooling her…distracting her from her investigation." And that when he was finished doing what he was supposed to be doing that he was "just going to leave her."

"I've never had any intention of leaving her. I was in love with her—am in love with her," he thought. "So what the hell am I doing here?"

"I'll tell you what I'm doing here. I'm here because she's flipped out. I'm here because she's so wrapped up in her work she can't separate it from real life. Shit! How the hell am I supposed to get around that? When this investigation's over she'll start another. And who will I be then? It doesn't matter what I tell her. Doesn't matter how much I try and reassure her that I love her and care for her. She thinks I started the fire. How did she come up with that idea? Paranoia…that's what it is, paranoia.

"It's just as well. I tried to warn her about the ICC. Tried to tell her they'd have her head all mixed up. She thinks I'm tangled up with them. Like I'm working for them or something. And something about another group, a virus, then out of the blue she talks about, Rick Forstein. I bet there's at least fifty Forstein's in the Frankfurt telephone directory alone. It's like Smith or Jones in the states. There's got to be hundreds of them."

"Rick Forstein, you son of a bitch, doesn't matter where I go you're going to follow me around the rest of my life aren't you?"

"No! I'd have to say she was pretty clear about the way she felt about me. You can't love someone who doesn't love you. You'd be stupid to even try. I can't hang out the rest of my life hoping she'll come around some day. She was as direct as she could be. She doesn't want to see me anymore. I can call her from now to eternity and she'd never answer me back."

He closed his eyes for a few minutes. The beers had taken effect. Add to that his lack of sleep and he was becoming irrational. He couldn't wait to get on the plane, just slip the chair back a few inches and take a long hard nap. Maybe, if he slept long enough and woke up in the states, the whole affair would seem like a bad dream. He checked his watch. It was 2:14 p.m. He'd been in the lounge for nearly four hours. It was time to head downstairs.

In the terminal, people from all over the world were zipping about in random chaos. He quickly found Terminal *C*, where he would be departing from. After walking under the terminal sign, he looked down the long corridor. The end of it seemed miles away, but he could see the preliminary security gates where he would have to practically strip naked and run his camera case through the X-ray machines. The corridor itself measured about thirty-five feet in diameter. Two conveyer belts ran from one end to the other. The belt on the right carried passengers towards the departing flights and the one on the left carried arriving passengers to the luggage claim area. They ran along the walls and were divided by a walkway about twenty feet across. Stace choose to ride and fell in behind a group of men in suits. Apparently, a flight had just come in and the left conveyer belt was full of riders heading towards the baggage claim area.

Suddenly, his eyes noticed a man moving up the conveyer belt on the other side. He was still about thirty yards away. The face seemed familiar to him and for an unknown reason, disturbing. He rubbed his eyes and focused a little harder. He was nearly positive of the identifica-

tion, but doubted the possibility. Perhaps it was just an illusion of circumstance. He'd been focusing on the name earlier and now he was seeing someone who resembled the very person he'd been thinking about. The figure passed by him and Stace turned around to check his backside. He couldn't believe who he was seeing. It had to be him!

Stace looked towards the approaching inspection point then back at the young man. The man was disappearing fast. To double-check his hunch he'd have to do it now. People eyed him suspiciously as he leaped over the handrail, dodged a few people walking in the middle, and leapt over the rail of the other conveyer belt. He could run to keep pace, which would attract attention, or he could hop a ride. He opted for the latter and jumped over the rail. Then he inched his way up towards the young man until he came to a spot just ten feet behind him. He was now more certain then ever he was staring at the back of the head of a man he once despised. The conveyer belt ended and Stace continued following the man into the baggage claim area. As a precaution, he hid in the background hoping to get a clearer sight of the man's face.

Suitcases, olive green duffel bags, and boxes of all sizes began sliding out of the center shoot and onto the steel carousel. The man stood with his back towards Stace, waiting for his luggage to pop out. Stace caught site of the man's profile, but would need a better frontal view just to make sure. Finally the man bent over and retrieved his suitcase. As he turned around and started to walk, Stace finally got a good look. He was, beyond any doubt, Rick Forstein. It was too unbelievable to be true, but before Stace could decide what to do, Rick was immediately confronted by a stranger who'd slipped up behind him. A man who looked vaguely familiar to Stace as well, like he'd seen him in a photograph. And it was clear to Stace by the expression in Rick's face that the man who took hold of his arm was not at all expected.

CHAPTER 47

The grip of a firm hand spun Rick around. "What do you want?" he asked shaking himself free.

"Mr. Forstein. I've been expecting you."

"Who are you?"

"That's not important at the moment. What's important is you know I'm not the only one here."

Rick glanced around the baggage claim area. Passengers were shuffling to get their baggage, but no one looked suspicious. He looked right past Stace, who turned as he faced his direction.

"Well, I don't care who you are."

"That's unfortunate. I'm sure Julie and your daughter would appreciate your cooperation."

Rick looked hard into the eyes of the stranger. "What did you say?"

"For the moment they're safe," Derrick said with a sleazy smile. "There's a van waiting for us out front." Derrick took him by the arm and escorted him out of the terminal into the late afternoon sunlight. Next to the curb in the waiting zone was a faded blue van. Derrick opened one of the back doors. "Get in."

Stace had little time to react. He'd not yet put it all together, but knew now that Eva's mentioning Rick Forstein's name had not been without reason. Rick was involved with her investigation. Above the

confusion of the moment there was some hope that he might be able to reconcile things with Eva after all. Exactly how was uncertain, but it would begin by finding out what Rick was doing in Germany. He walked out to the curb and flagged down a taxi.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"Blue van," he said, pointing to the van as it was pulling away from the curb.

Rick sat on the floor of the van leaning against the side panel. The tires whined with increasing speed. He knew they were on the autobahn, but had no idea which way they were heading. As he bounced around he tried to get a mental picture of each turn they made, but it was hopeless, he didn't know the city.

"So, Mr. Forstein, what brings you to Germany?" the man in the passenger seat asked.

"Seemed like a good time for a vacation," Rick replied.

The man turned his head to the driver and grinned. The van took a hard right and Rick looked out the back windows again. He caught sight of an enormous tower rising high into the Frankfurt city sky.

"No, Rick. You didn't come here for a vacation. If you were really going on a vacation you would have gone some place warm like Mexico. Don't get me wrong though, Frankfurt's a nice city, but it's gloomy this time of year. Perhaps you had some other place in mind, like maybe…Munich. Yeah, I bet that's it."

"What do you know about my wife?" Rick asked pointedly.

"Not much more than I've already told you. Staying with her sister I believe."

Rick was getting annoyed with the way the man was toying with him. "Why would his wife be at her sister's house?"

"You're probably wondering how I know that aren't you?" the man asked, turning around in his seat and looking at Rick. "Seems that while you were on the flight over, Julie received a package from Mr. Pruitt. Next thing you know, sister drives over and picks her up. Parting is such sweet sorrow don't you think?"

Rick felt the van slow down and make a couple of sharp left turns. He looked out the back window and saw they were pulling underneath a steel awning. The driver stopped the van and got out. Rick heard his footsteps disappear in the distance. The man in the passenger seat turned around again. "We're here. Let me lay down one simple ground rule. We just want to have a talk with you. If you were to say, suddenly run at this point, then no telling what might happen to your wife and your little girl. So, I'm going to let you out the back and I want you to walk ahead of me up the stairs like we're old friends. Can I trust you to do that, Rick?"

Rick didn't answer.

"That's not a good sign, Rick. Do I need to explain the consequences of breaking—"

"No," Rick said with disgust.

Stace's taxi pulled on a side street in view of the back parking lot of the apartment. While counting out sixty euros, he watched Rick and the two men enter the building. Running briskly to the back entrance of the building, he looked up the three flights of stairs to see which apartment they were going in. Then he walked back out to the street and stood at the entrance of the driveway near an old cement wall, considering his options.

Notifying Eva, or anyone else from the paper was out of the question. He could only tell them he knew the whereabouts of Rick Forstein, which they probably suspected he knew anyway. Calling the polizei would be worthless. They'd never understand the relevance of how he'd cornered the man who had screwed him over in college and who was now responsible for ending the relationship of a lifetime. Sure, he suspected something downright illegal was going on, but that was only because he knew the Schwarz Monatlich was investigating Rick Forstein. But he didn't want to blow Eva's investigation.

"Rick Forstein," Stace muttered his name while walking in circles. He'd heard stories of how people can cross the same pathways in life. Like the story he'd heard of the two college professors who'd met in

undergraduate school and wound up teaching at the same university later in life. But that's understandable. Some people run in the same circles and it's inevitable they'll bump into each other again. This was different. Why Rick Forstein? Why this skeleton in his closet?

Stace didn't believe in the notion of fate. To believe in fate you have to believe in a God with a warped sense of justice. You'd have to believe the events of your life had been predetermined and fixed. Quite frankly, it was much easier for Stace to believe the random events of life are brought on by mere circumstance. Life is much more fair that way. There's no obligation to perform. It puts everybody in the same boat. Take the ride down Terminal *C* at the airport for instance. Stace could have been looking right instead of at the passengers arriving on his left. He could have been looking at the pretty stewardess standing just in front of the three guys in suits on the escalator. For Christ's sake, he could have sneezed and missed Rick altogether. But he didn't. He looked left and suddenly boom, life throws him onto an entirely different escalator.

He was growing tired of thinking about it. He could still catch a cab back to the airport and probably exchange his ticket for the next flight out. Forgetting about Rick had not been easy the first time around, but he could do it again. Forgetting about Eva would be much harder, but it could be done.

He thought to himself, "All it takes is a little time and a diversion. Find something to occupy yourself with and time can pass rather quickly. You can postpone the pain until time has erased away any of its impact. At that point it becomes a memory and just a useful piece of information telling you what not to do the next time you're placed in a similar position."

This sounded all well and good to Stace. Even so, he found himself wandering over to a nearby bus stop across the street from the apartment trying to devise a plan to get Rick out of the apartment.

"Suppose I just go on up there and knock on the door. Just introduce myself. Say I'm an old friend of Rick's and just happened to know

he was in town. That'll go over well. Next thing you know I'm taking a ride in the back of the van—my last ride. Who were those guys in the van anyway? Definitely not the ICC. Wait a second…I've seen them before in the photographs I enlarged. They're with the CRM. Why's Rick connected to them?"

The more he thought, the more confused he got. He had just a couple of acronyms floating around in his head that had nothing to do with him anyway. What he did know cut him deeply. Rick Forstein was a demon from the past, who had somehow managed to walk back into his life and destroy something much more meaningful than a potential career. Eva was convinced he and Rick were working together. As long as she thought that, Stace didn't have a chance with her. There seemed to be only one possible solution to his dilemma. He had to confront Rick, directly, alone, and in a manner that Rick would be forced to confess his involvement.

He didn't know the area of town, but remembered passing a convenience store down the street. He hoped it was still open, though he had only a faint idea of what he would buy when he got there. Convenience stores weren't in the market of selling items to be used for pernicious intent. He'd throw a plan together once he knew what he could buy. Behind him was a park. He walked into it a short distance and looked around. No one in site. He darted into a thick covering of shrubbery high enough to swallow him whole. He set his camera case down and covered it with loose leaves and branches, then walked to the store.

The woman behind the register tweaked her face slightly at the array of trivia he laid on her counter. Thrown together with a bag of groceries they might not have seemed unusual, but in and of themselves, they looked quite peculiar. There was a roll of nylon twine, a cheap eight-inch kitchen knife, a package of woman's stockings, a roll of electrical tape, and a small flashlight with batteries.

"Will that be all?" she asked eager to see him on his way.

"I certainly hope so."

Back in the cluster of shrubbery, he ripped open the plastic molding wrapped around the knife with his teeth. With the knife he opened the flashlight and batteries. He popped the two AA's in and was surprised to discover the damn flashlight actually worked. Holding the flashlight in his teeth he set to work. First he modified the pantyhose by cutting the legs out and shoved the piece he was going to use in his pocket. He unrolled half of the ball of twine, cut it clean, rolled it up loosely, then forced the wad into his back pocket. The remainder of twine he put in his right coat pocket. The tape he put in his other pocket. He gathered all the trash and stuffed it back into the bag from the store, then shoved the knife into his pant pocket over his left hip. On his way to the apartment he dumped the bag into a wire trash basket at the bus stop.

Finding the manager's apartment wasn't difficult. It was on the bottom floor marked with a sign. However, what was required of him beyond that point was to simulate a ferocious nature to which he did not possess.

He knocked on the door and stood in front of the peephole.

"Who is it?" asked a woman in German.

He saw a shadow form in the peephole and tried to look pleasant as the woman studied his face, and he fumbled for the pantyhose mask. "My name is, Karl Morgan. I've come to see if you have an apartment available."

"Ich verstehe nicht," she said, without so much as a jiggle on the door handle.

So much for minor victories. She didn't speak a word of English. "Wohnung?" He tried again.

"Es tut mir leid," she replied.

It was time to get desperate. "Helfen sie mir!" he pleaded, a phrase he'd learned just in case of an emergency.

She hesitated for a moment, still peering through the peephole.

"Helfen sie mir. Wohnung?" he repeated, trying to sound as if there was a real emergency.

"Augenblick mal," she replied. Light filled the peephole and the lock on the door turned. He ripped the stocking out of his pocket and rammed it half-cocked over his face, just barely slipping it under his chin when the door cracked open. Like a rhinoceros he shoved his way inside. The woman let out a weak scream as she fell backwards over the armrest of the couch. He slammed the door closed, rushed around the back of the couch, and capped her mouth shut.

"Shut up! I'm not going to hurt you!"

The comment had no effect. He'd just yelled at her in a language she didn't understand. He might as well have said, "I'm going to kill you now." Her eyes were white with terror, hot breath snorting out of her nostrils over his hand. He'd have to improvise.

He pulled the knife out from his pants and waved it in front of her face. She turned her head away from its direction trying to scream. He moved the blade slowly over his lips and whispered, "*Shhhhh*," then waited a few moments until she calmed down. "Ruhig," he said calmly, finally remembering the word.

"Are you allein?"

"Alone," she understood, and nodded her head yes.

"Wo ist schlussel?"

She cocked her head in confusion, looking as if she excepted worse.

"The keys," he repeated.

She understood him okay. She just couldn't talk with a hand forced over her mouth.

"Nicht sprechen," he said, returning the knife over his lips. Then ever so carefully he removed his hand. Once it was away she gasped for breath and let out a whispery cry. Her face was as white as flour, except where the grip of his hand had left neat red lines on her face.

"Gut. Now the schlussel."

She moved towards the cabinet against the wall and he was right behind her. At this point she'd begun to sob. How he wished he could talk to her. Maybe sit her down on the couch and pour her a cup of coffee, then explain the whole misunderstanding to her.

She opened one of the cabinet doors and reached for the keys. He heard the keys jingle and he let out a sigh of relief, but when she handed him a ring of about twenty keys he shook his head in confusion. This would not do. It would take him all night to find the right one.

"Drei-*A*, or 3-*B*," he said.

That much she understood. She took the keys out of his hand, pinched two keys in her fingers, and handed him the set.

"Danke. Now, Wo ist der toilette?

For some reason this sent the woman into another fit of panic. She backed herself against the wall and her lips were beginning to quake. "Nicht sprechen!" he yelled, reaching for her face again.

"Der toilette?" he repeated. She walked towards the hallway.

"Gehen," he commanded, pushing her into the bathroom. She took a few steps and turned to face him. He stopped at the door. "Nicht sprechen. Do you understand? She nodded her head. Stace closed the door behind her and hoped she wouldn't do anything stupid. He grabbed the roll of tape from his coat pocket and wrapped the end around the door handle. The linen door was behind him. Working frantically, he spun a web of tape between the two handles. Before he left he found the two phones in the house and cut the cord with his knife.

"Tell us again why you came to Germany, Rick," Derrick demanded upstairs.

"I've told you—three times!" Rick said, rubbing his face in his hands. He sat on one side of the kitchen table and the two men sat on the other. Neil had not said a word to him yet, and Rick wondered who was really in charge of the two.

"You seem like an intelligent man, Rick. You should know the virus is out of Stautzen's hands. Of course, we have no idea where it is. He tells us it was stolen from him on his drive down to Munich last night."

"You expect me to believe that?"

Neil finally spoke up. "Of course not, which brings us back to why you're here. Surely you know even if you got your hands on the virus another copy would be sent out."

His tone lacked the other man's sarcasm and Rick judged he was the brain behind the two.

"I knew that. I didn't make any plans. I was hoping I could just reason with them, talk them out of using it."

"Talk them out of it?" Neil questioned. He folded his arms across his chest and settled into his chair. "You have no idea what you're up against do you?"

Rick said nothing.

"This is much bigger than the three of us, much bigger than the ICC. Much bigger than anything you've ever imagined! There are lives hanging in the balance here. The salvation of souls is at stake. And you thought you were just going to stride on into the ICC and politely ask for it back?" There was a rising crescendo to his words. They were disturbing, pulsating with fanaticism, and spoken in the tone of a person absent of reason.

"Are you aware you're the only one standing in the way now?" Neil asked.

Rick looked at him then at the other man, who now wore an eager smirk. He realized they had no intention of ever letting him go.

"Look, I admit it was a bad idea for me to come here. What do I care what you do with the program?"

"That's right, Rick, what do you care?" Derrick asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, what you do is between you and Trojan Security. It's just another security program anyway. That's what Trojan Security does. There's certainly nothing wrong with that is there?" he asked groping for words.

"And we've gone to extreme measures to ensure everything's as it appears to be," Neil added.

"So, I'll just take the first flight back to the states and go about my business," Rick said quickly, hoping his request would sound reasonable.

Derrick smirked again and turned towards Neil. "What do you think, Neil? He says he's willing to forget about the whole thing."

"I think you can't expect a leopard to change the color of his spots," Neil replied.

"My thoughts exactly," Derrick said suddenly standing. And just as he stood the front door flew open.

CHAPTER 48

Derrick turned to see the madman rushing towards the dining room table. It took Stace only a split second to reach them, cutting through the air with wild knife strokes as if he had a room full of enemies to kill. Derrick slammed against the wall avoiding the arch of the knife.

"Get back! All of you!" Stace shouted.

Rick fell out of his chair and against the baseboard. Neil, with slightly more finesse, stood and backed up.

"Over there!" Rick blasted with another swing of the knife forcing Neil and Derrick into one of the corners.

"What do you want?" Derrick yelled. He was stalling for time, trying to see through the nylon wrapped over Stace's head. It was no use. The man's face was all contorted, nose smashed in, eyes all askew, hair matted over his forehead.

This was Stace's second act at intimidation in the past ten minutes and he was getting good at it. The image of Rick plastered against the wall also gave him satisfaction. "I said back up!" he yelled jumping towards Derrick and waving the knife just a foot from his throat. Derrick jerked his head back, slamming it into the wall behind him.

"OK! I hear you."

Stace grabbed the edge of the table, throwing it to the side. Sheets of paper fluttered to the floor.

"Now get down—face first—both of you!" He thought they were moving a little slowly so he lunged in their direction. "Now! I said." It took them only a second to drop, face down, side by side next to each other. He looked at Rick to see if he was thinking about going anywhere. He wasn't. Stace almost smiled.

Stace leaned over the two men's feet and poked the tip of the knife into the back of Derrick's thigh.

"Yeaaah! What did you do that for?"

"Shut up! Just give me the keys to the van."

"It doesn't run," Derrick was stupid enough to say.

Stace drove the knife deeper and this time in cut though his pants and penetrated the skin.

"Shit!" he yelled.

"Bull shit. I know it works!"

"Alright!" Derrick reached into his front pocket for the keys and held them above his head.

"You!" Stace said, taking a few steps towards Rick. "Take this twine and tie them up. Use it all up and make it tight. I'll be standing over the back of you to make sure you do it right."

Rick took the twine from him and began to tie them up.

"Not like that you idiot! Do it like they do in Texas, like you're roping a calf. You know, feet first then the hands, then tie it all up in a bundle in a good strong knot."

Rick thought the reference to cattle roping in Texas peculiar, but did as he was told. When he finished a few minutes later the two were permanently immobilized.

"Not good enough. Here's some tape. Use it!"

Three minutes later Rick was done. When he stood up, Stace grabbed a hold of the back of his sports coat and rammed his face against the nearby wall. He brought the point of the blade between Rick's shoulder blades. Rick arched his back avoiding the tip. "What do you want?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"You're going to walk downstairs and out to the van. I'll be right behind you with this reminder positioned just over your spine. Don't make it the last walk you take. Understood?"

"Yeah."

Stace pulled him away from the wall, forced him out the door and down the stairs. He stopped for a moment at the manager's door, pulling Rick back into the point of the knife. Hearing nothing at her door, he shoved him through the hallway and out the back door. At the van he gave Rick the keys. You've got five seconds to open the door."

The first key fit the lock and Stace shoved him into the back. With some extra rope he tied Rick's hands and legs up behind his back and covered his head with an oily T-shirt he found crammed under the driver's seat. "Finally!" he said to himself, ripping the stocking off his head and jumping into the cool night air. "I did it!" On the way out of the parking lot he tossed the apartment keys out the window.

Stace took a right onto Hugelstrasse then a left on Ginnheimer Landstrasse, past the Ginnheim tower. The sky was black and he could see the lights protruding out of the windows of its saucer-like observation deck. Human forms, cut out like silhouettes from a sheet of cardboard paper, looked pasted against the windows. Within moments he entered the A-66 traveling west and headed out towards Eschborn and his final destination, the Taunus Mountains in Kronberg. He'd been there once before with Eva under a different set of circumstances. The location would suit his purposes. He and Rick had a lot to discuss.

A thousand sordid thoughts had passed through Rick's mind since his abduction at the airport. He left Texas on the mistaken assumption he could get back at Trojan Security for the fool they'd made of him. He cursed himself for proving they were right. He should have forgotten about the whole thing and gone on with his life. Now, everything was ten times worse than he could have imagined. His marriage was probably ruined. Julie had the photos in hand, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He was just hoping and praying she and his daughter would be alright. He'd take a broken marriage any day of the

week just to know they were safe. Words came back to haunt him. "This is much bigger than anything you've ever imagined. There are lives hanging in the balance here. Whose life? Mine? My wife's? My daughter's? Who else?"

Stace exited the autobahn at the Taunus exit. The force of the turn flipped Rick over and he went bouncing across the rippled steel floor of the van. The T-shirt around his head provided him with some padding, but it stunk of burnt oil and dirt. Through it, he could hear the tires whining and picking up speed again. Momentum pulled him towards the back door and he knew they were traveling up hill.

"Where are you taking me? What do you want from me?" he yelled through the T-shirt and above the noise of the road. Stace ignored him.

"Do it like they do down in Texas, like you're roping a calf," the madman had said, like he'd been there before. "An American?"

"Did Trojan Security send you?" he yelled.

Still no response.

"Tell them I'll forget the whole thing. Tell them I appreciate all they've done for me and I'm willing to forgive and forget." Rick was desperate now and fumbling for reasons to stay alive.

Stace drove fast, but cautiously. If stopped, he would never be able to explain why he had a man tied up in the back. The polizei do not screw around.

This was the second time Stace had heard the name, Trojan Security. Eva spit it out in the hospital and now Rick had mentioned it. Rick Forstein was another name and then there were the other two groups. Were the two creeps he left tied up in the apartment part of one of those groups? He also remembered a time not so long ago during his first visit to Eva's place. There was a stack of boxes near the couch where he was sitting. On the side of one of the boxes was a file with a label marked, Christian Reform Movement. Eva also mentioned something about a virus, which could mean just about anything. "How much did Rick know?" It was something he'd have to find out. Eva

had dropped him under the assumption he was mixed up with one of the groups—or Rick—and he was damn sure not going to let something like that come between them. He cared far too much for her. If he could put the pieces of the puzzle together, she just might be willing to listen.

"Hey! You from Texas?" Rick asked.

"Shut the hell up will ya?"

"Sounds like you're from Texas to me. Tell Trojan Security I—"

"I said, shut, the fuck, UP!"

Rick shut up. Now he'd pissed him off.

The van made a few more turns and shifted into a lower gear. It was climbing at a steeper rate now. Rick also knew by the winding turns that they were somewhere on a mountain. He listened hard for any another signs of life like a car passing by, but they were alone. It was a worse case scenario. His life would come to an end thousands of miles from home and no one would ever find his body. He started to sob quietly, but willingly.

Stace shifted into second gear then first gear. The headlights lit up a familiar sign and a few meters later the dirt road came into view. Stace took the left and parked in the deserted lot. The mountain forest was cold and black as envy. Only a fool would be up here after sunset, or a man such as Stace with a guest.

Rick felt a rush of cold air seep under his pant legs when the back door opened. "This is it," he thought. A firm hand slapped down on his leg and pulled him to the back. He heard a snip and felt his arms and legs fall free.

"Time for a walk. Don't try anything stupid."

Stace heard what he thought to be whimpering and smiled. He was beginning to take some pleasure in his reversal of fortune. He shoved Rick in the direction of the path and lit the way with his flashlight. Rick stumbled and fell. Stace picked him up and held onto his coat to guide him. It took them fifteen minutes to reach the crest of the hill. Rick had resolved that at any moment he might be pushed over a

ledge, stabbed with a knife, knocked unconscious, shot, or anyone of a dozen other scenarios. He'd begun weeping uncontrollably. Stace almost felt sorry for the bastard. But he also knew the more terrified Rick was the more he would be willing to talk.

At the top of the ridge, Stace pushed him to the left and they followed the crest of the hill by weaving in and out of the mammoth pines standing like barrel-chested warriors. "Sit down!" he snapped, throwing Rick to the ground and up against a tree. Stace went around the back of the tree and tied Rick to the trunk with the last of the twine. The restraint was far from adequate. Rick could have broken free easily, but he'd degenerated into a pathetic excuse of the man he once was. Stace stood in front of him for a moment admiring the depth of despair he'd brought Rick to, then sat down in front of him.

He tried to remember Rick as the all around guy at Marbel University. Rick wasn't the most recognizable man on campus, but he was popular and well liked. He carried himself with confidence and had the presence of a young man who might go places someday.

Stace tipped the flashlight towards Rick and over his ragged form. The T-shirt wrapped around his head was filthier than he thought. He had forced it tightly over Rick's head and now the neckline cut across Rick's mouth leaving some of his teeth and gums exposed. His expensive sports coat had been ruined in the grime and grease from the van floor. His wingtips were scuffed. If he only knew who sat in front of him. If he only knew who had the power now.

Minutes passed before either one of them spoke. Rick was the first to speak. His words were slow and painful, spoken as if he really didn't expect an answer. "What do you want out of me?"

"Some information would be helpful," Stace said.

"You're not going to let me go are you?"

"That depends how helpful you are."

"Why should I believe you? If you're going to kill me anyway, then why should I give you the satisfaction of answering your questions?"

As he spoke, Stace remembered the little nuances of his voice. It was much deeper now, and laden with half sobs, an indication of his grief.

"What do you know about my family?" Rick asked.

"I'll tell you what, you answer my questions and I'll consider answering yours. If you tell me what I want to hear I might consider letting you go."

Rick didn't answer, but he needed hope.

"Now, who do you work for?" Stace asked.

"You know who I work for."

Stace leaned over and jabbed the edge of the knife into Rick's throat. Rick threw his head back against the tree trunk. "Do you want to get down from this mountain alive?" Stace asked, clenching his teeth and sounding as mean as possible.

Rick attempted to lick his lips and let out a wimpy, "yes."

"Then answer my questions!" Stace snapped.

"I work for Trojan Security."

"What do you do at Trojan Security?"

"I design computer security programs."

He couldn't remember what Rick's major had been, but by the sound of things that made sense. He removed the knife from Rick's throat and sat back down.

"Where do you live?"

Rick cocked his head to the side as if the question seemed irrelevant. "I live in Austin."

Stace ignored the tone in his voice. He was entitled to some frustration. "Tell me about your family."

It suddenly occurred to Rick the man seated in front of him didn't work for Trojan Security. It was a frightening thought. He'd only just discovered the true nature of the likes of Pruitt, a man he'd known for years. And though he still thought Pruitt to be above the act of killing, he was not beyond hiring someone else to do it for him. "If this man doesn't work for Trojan Security then who does he work for? What's he capable of doing?"

"Why the sudden interest in my family?"

"I'm curious."

"I have a wife and a young girl."

"The perfect little family," Stace replied. "Who'd you marry?"

Rick repeated the question in his mind. "Who'd I marry? What kind of a question is that? A better question would be why'd I marry? But even that's a stupid question."

"Tell me her name," Stace demanded.

"Her name's Julie."

"Last name."

"Norvel…Julie Norvel."

"Ain't that special—and your daughter?"

"Rebecca. Now what do you know about them?"

"You tell me. How long have you been married?"

"About four years."

"How old is your daughter?"

"She's two. What does all this have to do with anything?"

"Don't you watch television, Rick?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because if you did you'd know how to cooperate. The smartest thing any hostage does in the movies is to tell the terrorist about his wife and family. He tries to befriend the terrorist. That way, if the terrorist has compassion he might decide not to kill him. It's much harder to kill a friend don't you think?"

Rick realized he was being a fool. There was definitely something peculiar about this man.

"So tell me about Julie, about your daughter. Just how are things going, Rick?"

"I met my wife in college. She's all a man could ever want: beautiful, intelligent, loving. She's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You say that as if you're never going to see her again."

"If you were in my position wouldn't you think so?"

"Things do seem up in the air right now. Funny how life has a way of flipping on you doesn't it?"

Rick didn't answer. He was trying to picture his wife's face and the last time he saw his daughter laughing.

"A bit ironic how you hope and dream…how you make plans and work to make sure those dreams come true. Then somebody comes along and screws it all up for you. Makes you just want to run and hide doesn't it, Rick?"

It actually made Rick feel like fighting, but he played along. "Yeah, I guess it does."

"I bet you wish you were somewhere else don't you?"

Rick didn't answer. The question didn't need a response. There was a psycho sitting in front of him, someone with a past to reconcile, someone willing to use a stranger to take out his frustrations.

"You strike me as a coward, Rick. I think if you had to make a tough decision, one that was ethically and morally right, but knew you might personally suffer from making that decision, you'd fold. You'd go with the flow. You'd save your ass and your reputation. Wouldn't you?"

Rick was silent for a long time. Stace let him stew.

The fact was the psycho with the knife was right. He thought of no less than three specific situations in which he had saved his ass and let another person suffer as the result. He even recalled the decision he'd made at Marbel University. Some pervert had wanted to display pornographic pictures. Rick had sought advice from the most respected professor on campus, who advised him he couldn't ethically prevent the artist from displaying his work. But he'd gone with the flow. He sided with the committee and cast the deciding vote. "What the hell ever happened to that guy?" he wondered.

"I don't suppose you know what it's like to be rejected Rick, so let me explain it to you. First, you feel like running, so you do. It's a good thing really. Gets you out of the situation and away from the people who pissed you off. Cause you really feel like killing them. You even start dreaming of little scenarios. Start making plans on how you can

kill them. If you're sane, you bury those thoughts, but you still find yourself thinking of more creative and intelligent ways to get back. You know, something much more civil, but just as cruel nevertheless.

"Then time sets in. You cool off. You stop dreaming about killing at night. You stop making plans through the day, but you see…the damage is done. You've got this scar in your life that you feel is so grotesque that you still think you need to hide. Go somewhere where nobody knows you. Someplace where you can start all over again. Of course, this is all a part of the running.

"A year goes by, maybe three or four. You think about what happened sometimes, but it's like a bad dream. You can't doubt the evidence of it in your life. Can't hide from the concept you really are a coward, that you really don't have what it takes to make it in the real world. You look for reasons to disbelieve what you're thinking, but you can't find any, because you're nowhere. You're living in a dump, trying to make ends meet and you're not even close to being where you thought you'd be."

Stace paused for a moment to take a breath. He ran his sleeve across his forehead as if he'd worked up a sweat. "If you're lucky, something extraordinary happens. You're suddenly presented with the opportunity to set things right. To get the monkey off your back."

"What do you think you'd do, Rick, if you were in that situation? Would you have the courage to do what you needed to do?"

Rick thought quickly. Nothing in his life even resembled the situation the man was talking about. He agreed nevertheless, "I suppose I would."

"Would do what, Rick? Keep running or have the courage to do what you needed to do?"

"I'd do what needed to be done. I'd do what I had to do to set it right."

"You have no idea how that makes me feel, Rick, to hear you say that."

Stace stood up. His legs were cramping and the chill was reaching his bones. Rick heard him rise and cringed as though he were expecting a blow from the knife. Stace smirked. He had him right were he wanted him. Rick's few hours of suffering had come nowhere near to what Stace had gone through over the past few years. Rick could suffer a little longer.

Stace stared over the tall pine trees beyond the open meadow and into the sparkling lights of Wiesbaden far below. "What do you now about the CRM?"

Rick looked up under the confines of the mask he was wearing searching for the direction of the voice. "I've never heard of them before."

"Never? Hard to believe."

"Maybe they work for Trojan Security. I don't know."

"And the two guys in the apartment, who were they?"

"Never met them before in my life. Until one of them grabbed me at the airport."

Stace thought about this for a moment. "Do you suppose they're with the CRM?"

"It's possible."

"There's a religious organization headquartered in Munich called the International Christian Coalition."

"The ICC." Rick stated.

"You've heard about them. What do you know about them?"

"I know their executive director, Joseph Stautzen."

"Now we're getting somewhere. How do you know him?"

"I met him in Texas a few months back. We were building a security program and he came to the states to assist us with it."

"You are referring now to 'the virus.'"

"Yes."

"And where is the virus now?"

"The master copy is at Trojan Security. Stautzen has the other copy. I came to Germany to get it back from him."

This puzzled Stace and he shined the flashlight at Rick's head. "Who told you to do that?"

"No one. Those two goons at the apartment told me someone stole it from Stautzen when he was driving back to Munich, but I don't believe it."

"Why did you need to get it back?"

Rick thought to himself. "He's either playing games with me or he's got no idea what's going on." Honesty seemed the best approach. "Because Trojan Security framed me. They set me up. I figured if I could get the virus back I might be able to expose them. I could get back at them for what they did to me. If I'm lucky they've probably only ruined my marriage. They know where my family is. They've threatened to kill them if I don't cooperate."

"Who threatened you?"

"Those two knuckle heads in the apartment."

"That's an interesting story, Rick."

Rick sat up and spurted out into the night air, "Well I don't give a fuck what you think. Because of you they probably think I'm still after the virus. They probably think we're working together. So, if they think we're working together to expose them, what do you think they're going to do to my family?"

Stace turned the flashlight off and looked above him through the treetops into the clear night sky. The stars were brilliant. He didn't know what to believe, or perhaps he didn't want to believe what he was hearing. Every time Rick opened his mouth the problem grew more complex. If Rick was telling the truth, it meant they were both after the same thing. Both of them had a need to stop whatever the hell was going on. Rick had his reasons and Stace had his.

Primarily, Stace had to disassociate himself with Eva's investigation. He had to prove to her he was in no way connected to it. This would be hard to prove, seeing that he was indeed, associated with Rick. They had a past together and now they were inexplicably thrown together into the same future. He hated Rick Forstein, blamed him for every

rotten thing that had happened to him since graduation. He hated him even more when he realized Rick had been responsible for taking Eva away from him. Now, he was supposed to believe he might be responsible for the fate of Rick's wife and child? It was overwhelming—inconceivable.

He walked over to Rick and sat down in front of him. There was only one solution to the problem, a solution he hated to think about and one he doubted could even work. They must work together.

"What do you know about the Burtman fire?"

"Nothing. What happened?"

"I lost the most important person in my life because of that fire."

Rick sensed a tender spot in his interrogator and a possible reason for his abduction.

"Who was it that died?"

"No one, yet."

"I don't understand."

"The bakery belongs to the parents of the woman I love. She thinks I'm responsible for it. She thinks I work with the people who set the fire."

"It wasn't an accident?"

"It was no accident."

"Why would she think it was deliberately set?"

"Because she's an investigative reporter. She's in the middle of an investigation of the ICC, the CRM, the virus, and you."

"Me? Why me?"

"You built the damn thing didn't you?"

"Not entirely."

Stace took a deep breath. "It's time you told me what this virus is all about."

"You don't have any idea?"

"No."

"Why should I tell you?"

"Let me put it to you this way. I hold you personally responsible for ruining my life. My only hope of putting it all together is with the information you have in that greedy little head of yours. I'm mad enough to kill you right now, the question is whether or not you're going to supply me with enough information to convince me I shouldn't."

"You come right to the point don't you?"

"I don't have the luxury of time and it seems to me you don't either. Any minute you waste puts your family closer to danger. If I let you go, you might just be able to do something about it. But that's going to depend on what you tell me."

Rick was quick to respond. "I was in charge of a team of four individuals brought in by management to create the virus. Each one of these people brought to the table various skills. One was a neurosurgeon. One was a linguist. Another, a woman, had worked for the US Government for years. She was an expert on informational warfare and the Internet. The other person was Joseph Stautzen with the ICC."

"What was the purpose of the virus?"

"Vague at first. Basically, our task was to design a program that would infiltrate the Internet with psychological messages.

"What kind of messages?"

"Undetectable ones to the human eye, but not to the human subconscious. Anyone who's looking at their computer screens when the messages appear will be instantly affected without their knowledge. But it was more than just messages, really more like brainwashing, there were some technical aspects to the program—"

"And you built this thing? What hole did you stuff your conscience in while you were doing this? Surely you must have known this virus would be highly illegal, not to mention unethical."

"That was not the main emphasis of the virus."

"Explain."

"Trojan Security builds security programs. This particular program had two phases to it. The first phase was the one I've described. The

second phase was to design a security program that would be able to seek out and destroy the purpose of the virus."

"Let me see if I got this right. They built the virus under the guise that they were using it as a model to build a security program?"

"Yeah, and we did our job right. Without a doubt, in the wrong hands that virus could effectively manipulate the minds of millions of individuals."

"You mean it could actually change the way people think?"

"Exactly."

"I still can't believe you built the thing."

"Sure you can. Think about it. Timing is everything in the world of business. The technology exists to build such a program. If we didn't do it someone else eventually would. Our motives were clear. We were to build a security program to ensure that if a virus was ever developed there would be a way to stop it."

Stace thought about the logic of this for a moment. "So the plan was to market and sell the security program all along?"

"That's what I thought."

Stace shined the flashlight into Rick's face. "Don't stop there. That's what you thought, until—"

"Until they set me up and pulled me off the program."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because they had no intention of building the security program."

"What do you mean?"

"Personally, I thought something strange was going on only a week after we started."

"Like what?"

"Like Stautzen. While we were in the planning stages he railroaded through his idea the program should be designed around the mission of the ICC."

"Why the ICC?"

"He made it all sound so logical. The ICC is extremely influential and their mission is to convert souls to their way of thinking. They have everything in place to take advantage of such a program."

"He used reverse psychology?"

"Exactly. We were looking for the most fanatical and persuasive ideological power in which to design the program around. He suggested using the ICC as a working model."

"Smart."

Rick didn't respond.

"So, Stautzen and the ICC now have possession of the virus."

"Yes."

"And it's designed to do one thing, bring them more converts?"

"Exactly."

"And you didn't see this coming?"

"Not until it was too late."

"And I suppose Trojan Security has tied up all the loose ends."

"Air tight."

"But surely the virus must be detectable. If they were to use it on the Internet someone would notice it, wouldn't they?"

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, we cut no corners. A person would first have to know the messages were appearing on their screen, then they'd have to use some extremely sensitive monitoring or photographic equipment to detect it."

"What kind of equipment?"

"In the lab we used video cameras at first, but they were too slow. Later we developed a special detection program to help us see if the virus was working. But the only reason we found it was because we knew it was there in the first place and modified our detection methods with special equipment."

"So where do I get this equipment."

"You don't. You have to build it."

"What about using digital cameras?"

"That would be a shot in the dark. You'd have to have twenty cameras all pointed at the same screen constantly clicking off pictures. It might take a few weeks, it might take years to get any kind of evidence."

"Ain't that the shit?" Stace mumbled. "So there's no way to stop them from using the virus?"

"Not after they've put it into play. It could be halfway around the world by now."

"It can be used anywhere?"

"Anywhere there's a phone line."

"So stopping them is out of the question."

"I would say so."

"But exposing them might not be?"

Rick cocked his head in the direction of the last words he just heard. He would like nothing better than to expose the whole bunch of them. Expose the ICC, Trojan Security, and most of all, Pruitt. "Just how do you suppose you're going to do that?"

"I'm not going to do it. We're going to do it."

Rick couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"We?"

"I have one more question before I let you go. I was told you cast the deciding vote. Is that true?"

"Vote?"

"Marbel University…the committee met…the ballot was cast. You broke the news to me personally. You destroyed what would have been a great photography career for me. I just wanted to know if you cast the deciding vote."

"Stace…Stace Manning? Is that you, Stace?"

CHAPTER 49

Rick tried unsuccessfully to peer through the blackness of the shirt wrapped around his head. He could not believe the name he'd just spoken could be for the same man he'd once known. A soft breeze blew through the pine trees above and he listened to the groan of the massive limbs.

"Does this help?" Stace asked, lifting the shirt off his head and holding the flashlight just below his face.

It was the face of a phantom. A contorted image of the past coming back to haunt him. His eyes had to be playing tricks on him. He'd lived through a night to which nightmares are spun and if one could put a face to those nightmares, than this would be the face. It just could not be—but there he was: jaw line, nose, dark eyebrows looming over inset eyes, long spindles of hair dangling in curls below his shoulders.

"Stace?"

"Where you expecting someone else?"

"From Marbel?"

"One in the same." Stace took the flashlight off his face and shined it into Rick's. There was horror, anxiety, and confusion stretching across it like a portrait Van Goth might have painted.

"I don't believe it!" Rick said.

"Believe it."

Rick was dumb-stuck. He looked around into the darkness to get a feel for where he was and what was going on. It was no dream. He was sitting on the top of some fricken mountain in the middle of Germany with a ghost from the past. What was happening to his wife and child? Who were the two goons who grabbed him at the airport? Hell was unfolding around him. He struggled to free himself.

"Not so fast, the vote."

"For Christ sake, Stace, that was years ago."

"I know. It was the highlight of my life."

"It meant that much to you?"

"Yeah, it meant that much to me!" Stace screamed and the echo drifted down the valley below.

"I had no idea," Rick confessed.

That's because guys like you have contingency plans. Networking possibilities. If one thing fails you've got something else to fall back on. Photography was my life. It meant everything to me. I may not have won the exhibit, but I had a good chance of winning. Things would have gone much differently for me."

"I'm sorry, Stace. I really am."

"Sorry really doesn't cut it does it?"

Words were futile. Years of time hadn't erased the memory, another few minutes wouldn't help.

"I'd almost forgotten about you—you know? I almost had you erased out of my memory. Tell me its true. If you'd voted for me I would have been able to show—right?"

"I wasn't the only one who voted against you."

"But you didn't pull for me either did you?"

Rick fell silent and motionless.

"Didn't think so. The way I heard it, it was a tie. You cast the deciding vote. Tell me it's true!"

"IT'S TRUE!"

The wind picked up in the treetops and the calm of the night was replaced by a soothing whistling sound. It began as an almost imperceptible passage of air, built into an intense orchestration of noise, and slowed to a silence. Seconds turned into minutes.

Rick shivered. His hands were numb from sitting on them. Stace stood with his back against him, immobile as a granite statue.

"How'd you get mixed up with the ICC and the program?" Rick asked, breaking the silence.

"I'm not mixed up with any of it. I came to Germany for entirely different reasons and got stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. Your name came up in Eva's investigation."

"Eva?"

"Eva Burtman. I met her at a swimming pool a few months back. She was curious about why I came to Germany. In the course of telling her my story I talked about how you and the committee screwed me over."

"And she assumed we were working together?"

"I don't know what she assumed, but yeah, she drew a line between us."

"And here we are…"

"And here we are."

They both thought long about the irony.

"Would it be too much to ask for you to untie me now?" Rick asked calmly. "That is, if you still don't have plans to kill me." He was looking for some humor in the situation. As far as he could tell Stace wasn't smiling. Stace flicked the flashlight back on and walked around the tree. With one sweep of the knife he cut him free.

"They would have killed you," Stace said calmly.

"The guys back at the apartment?"

"I'm guessing they also started the fire at the bakery. Eva's mother and father, her brother, and her friend were in the upstairs apartment at the time. They barely made it out alive. They doubt Eva's friend will survive."

"So I owe you my life. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything, so don't flatter yourself. I did it for me."

Rick stood up wobbling like a newborn calf. He rubbed his wrists where the twine had cut into them. "You did a hell of a job in there. You even had me convinced I was going to die."

"You deserved it."

"I won't argue with that. You still want to get back at them?"

"Be honest with you, I just want my girl back. I don't give a damn about the program, or the ICC, or anyone else."

"You don't care about what that program will do to people, how it might change things?"

"No. I guess I just don't have a save the world mentality. I don't care that people want to follow stupid people. Guess I'm basically selfish. I just want my girl back."

"Well, I for one would like to turn the tables. Sons-a-bitches. I swear, Stace, if they even breathe on my daughter I'll devote my life to—"

"Then it sounds like we've got work to do," Stace said starting down the hill.

"If they think you're with me, Stace, they'll be looking to kill you as well."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"So what do you plan on doing?"

"I've got some ideas, but first I want to get off this mountain."

"Where are we headed?" Rick asked, once they'd gotten on the autobahn towards Frankfurt.

"First thing I have to do is pick up my camera equipment. I left my case in the park across from the apartment building."

Fifteen minutes later he took a left onto Lilienstrasse and parked the van where three small streets came together at the far end of the park.

"I'll be about twenty minutes. You stay put."

"I'm not staying in this van. What if the police are looking for it?"

"I doubt the polizei are looking for it. The guys at the apartment wouldn't have called them."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather be as far away from the van as possible."

They got out and cut through a path leading into the park that ran next to a brick wall. Then they walked along the winding path through the park past a dozen benches and playgrounds. When they passed the last playground, Stace looked towards the apartment. The apartment manager must have called the polizei, because there was a squad car out in front. Its revolving lights spun beams of red and blue spots painting the face of the building like a disco ball.

Stace stopped at the next park bench. "You wait here." He took out a piece of paper from his wallet and scribbled his address on it. He handed it to Rick with the keys to his apartment. "If I don't make it back take a cab to this address."

"Okay."

He left Rick and walked off the path into the grass. There was a long row of hedges running along the left hand side of the park and he followed them to the cluster of shrubs near the entrance of the park. As he got closer to the squad car he could see it was empty. All the lights in the manager's apartment were on. Three or four neighbors stood on the sidewalk just outside the front door, probably talking about all the excitement that went on. "The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime," Stace mumbled.

When he was about thirty meters from the shrubs the forms of two polizei officers passed through the doorway. The first one stood for a moment on the steps and looked towards the park. Stace made a quick dash into the shrubs. After uncovering his case he peered through the thickets across the street. The officers had walked to their car and were getting in. He waited. Seconds later, they merged into the incoming traffic. After watching them disappear down the street, Stace grabbed his case and trotted back to Rick.

"What were you doing?"

"I couldn't leave. The polizei were sitting in their car."

"I thought you said they wouldn't call the police."

"They didn't. It was the manager. Might have had something to do with me borrowing the keys to the apartment upstairs and locking the manager in the bathroom."

Rick glanced at Stace. Time and circumstances can certainly change a man.

They made it to the van and got back on the autobahn heading south towards Darmstadt and the Airport.

"How much money do you have?" Stace asked.

"About six-hundred and plastic."

"Good, cause we're going to need a lot of equipment."

"What are you thinking about doing?"

"Ditch this van and rent a car. Then we'll head back to my place."

"Do those guys know where you live?"

"Don't know, but that's a risk we'll have to take. First thing tomorrow morning we're going to pick up a few digital cameras, some tripods and a few laptops. Also have to get a few more phone lines to connect to the Internet."

"You're kidding right?"

Stace didn't flinch.

"Did you not hear me? I said it would be next to impossible to catch any proof of the virus with cameras."

"I'm thinking positive."

"You're dreaming."

"It's our only option at the moment."

"Why don't we just go to the police?"

"Two reasons. The first, is because I know the paper hasn't wound up its investigation yet. I know Eva's work and a little about the tenacity of the paper she works for. If they haven't got enough information to bring a conviction, then the evidence isn't there. Which brings me to my second point. Hard evidence is the only thing that is going to put these people away. They have to use the virus and we have to catch

them using it. Once we have that evidence we can go public and their whole scheme will come crashing down around them."

"I still say it's impossible," Rick said.

"We have another angle to work. Tomorrow you're going to make contact with Eva and you're going to tell her everything you know. You've got more information floating around in your head then they've been able to collect in months. I can tell you they're pulling teeth right now."

"And what if they have me arrested?"

"Not a bad idea really. You ought to be arrested."

Rick looked out the window into the passing fields dissipating into darkness.

"They won't arrest you. We'll figure something out."

Stace merged into the scattered traffic flowing to the right then took the airport exit. The airport would be as good a place as any to leave the van. After parking the van they walked into the terminal and found a car rental agency. After renting a car, Stace stopped by the terminal and made arrangements for them to return his luggage from the states. Rick placed a quick call to Julie's sisters house in Austin.

"Susan, this is Rick. Is Julie there?"

Susan knew exactly what to say. "She's here, Rick, but—"

"Thank God. Is she alright?"

"Alright? She got a handful of photos yesterday."

"I know, but she's okay?" She's there with you?"

"They're both here, but she doesn't want to talk to you."

"Listen Susan, I don't have time to explain everything right now, but she's in danger. Trojan Security sent the photos to her as a way to shut me up."

Julie walked into the kitchen to eavesdrop. Susan covered the mouthpiece with her hand, "It's Rick."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"I think you should."

"Is that Julie?" Rick asked hearing a bit of the exchange.

"Yes, but—"

"She's in danger Susan and you could be to."

"He says you may be in danger. Something about the photos and Trojan Security. You'd better talk to him."

Reluctantly, Julie took the phone and pulled it up to her ear as if it weighed a hundred pounds.

"Julie?"

"It's me."

"Thank God you're okay! And Rebecca?"

"She's sound asleep."

Rick looked through the phone booth for a second then bounced his head off the glass in the booth.

"I know you got the photos and you're upset."

"Why, Rick?

"I…I don't know, Julie."

"Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

Rick didn't respond. He had not considered her feelings through the whole affair and a mock attempt at it now would be useless.

"Do you have any idea how this changes things?"

"I know. I wasn't thinking…"

She sniffled and Susan went to get a tissue.

"Julie, I don't want to frighten you and I don't have time to explain everything to you right now. All I can tell you is that you and Rebecca might be in danger."

Having thought about how weak that must have sounded he spoke more directly. "Julie, you and Rebecca and your sister are in danger. I was grabbed at the airport by someone who knew you were at Susan's house, and knew you'd gotten the photographs. They threatened me, Julie. Told me if I didn't cooperate with them something might happen to you."

"You're scaring me, Rick. Who told you that?"

"I've never seen them before. They might be working with Trojan Security. They set me up, Julie."

"Who set you up?"

"Trojan Security. The whole thing was a set up."

"And the afternoon at the Pine Tree Inn, was that a set up?"

An excuse would only compound the problem. "Julie, I don't have time to explain everything."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm at the airport in Frankfurt."

"Are you coming back?"

"No, I can't come back yet."

"Why not, Rick?"

"I can't explain it to you now, Julie. You're going to have to listen to me. I know I've ruined things, but you've got to listen to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she replied, peering out the kitchen window into the bushes beyond the pool in the backyard.

"I need you to first call the police."

"What am I going to tell them?"

"Tell them you have reason to believe someone is trying to hurt you."

"Who, Rick?"

"Someone associated with Trojan Security."

"But who, Rick?"

"I don't know yet, Julie, but that will at least get them over to Susan's place. So you need to call them now. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Don't wait, Julie. Do it right after you get off the phone."

"Okay."

"The next thing I want you to do is go through the yellow book. There should be some numbers for bodyguards or private investigators. I want you to call some of them and see what you can find out. When the police get there they should be able to help you find someone reputable. I don't care what the cost is, you hire the best people you can find."

"Alright, Rick. I'll do it. But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm with an old friend. What we get done here may effect how safe you are, so I need to stay here. Do you understand?"

"No, Rick, I don't understand. Why can't you just come back?"

"Because it won't help you. I have to clear things up here. Right now you need to call the police and I've got to get off the phone so you can do that."

"Alright."

"I'm sorry, Julie, I really am, but I promise I'll call you back as soon as I can, okay?"

"Okay."

"Bye Julie—call them now."

"I will."

Stace was waiting outside the booth when Rick finished his call.

"Are they safe."

"So far."

Stace slid the shifter into drive and they sped away.

CHAPTER 50

Making a decision is like laying a cement foundation; once you've begun there's no turning back.

Before driving south to Munich, Stautzen had a meeting with Neil that lasted all of thirty minutes. During the meeting, Stautzen had run Neil through the dynamics of the program and had designated him as the person who would set the virus into motion. Stautzen had decided he wanted nothing to do with it and Neil was more than anxious to take on the responsibility.

The fact that Neil and Derrick had lost Rick the night before to the madman in the pantyhose mask was of little consequence to them. They knew the virus would be unstoppable and untraceable until a security program was built to stop it. They also knew Trojan Security would not be going through the motions of having that program built. As far as Neil was concerned, time was on their side—not to mention God.

Derrick understood his mission as well. There was no right and no wrong; there was only the mission and his mission was to do what God had called him to do. If there were future obstacles in their path, that path would be made straight. If someone tried to stop them at this point, then it was up to God to take care of that problem. And if God

needed a strong arm, Derrick was more than willing to lend God a hand.

It was "November 8, execution day." He and Derrick stayed awake late into the night and waited for the appropriate time. At 3:30 a.m. in the morning, they hopped into Neil's car and traveled north towards Bonames. When they reached the village of Nieder Eschbach they went east another seven kilometers into the quaint village of Nieder Erlenbach. There they parked across the street from an Episcopalian church. The journey was only twenty minutes from their apartment, but they were a world away from Frankfurt. The town was rarely patrolled by the polizei.

Just outside the car was a lone, dull yellow phone booth underneath a lofty sycamore. Neil took his briefcase into the booth while Derrick waited in the car as a lookout. They didn't expect any trouble and didn't find any. Neil was in and out of the phone booth in six minutes.

"Any trouble?"

"None whatsoever."

"Then everything's a go."

"This is where it all begins," Neil said somberly.

"The beginning of the end," Derrick replied.

They sat quietly for a moment, reflecting on all the events that had brought them to this point. It was to them the accumulation of a life's long dream and labor. Somehow it all seemed too easy, the sacrifices weren't nearly what they expected.

The virus instantly made its way through the intricate maze of wires and fiber optics, through 23,000 miles of space to distant satellites and back, and within moments was halfway around the world. It entered through one Internet provider and quickly swept into dozens of others. As each piece of e-mail was transferred and as more and more web pages were accessed for information, the virus spread from country to country. Within thirty minutes it would spread into tens of thousands of homes, business, corporations, and governmental institutions. By the time they arrived back at the apartment it would begin randomly

targeting computer screens around the globe simultaneously with undetectable, intoxicating messages.

Later that morning, at around 11:00 a.m., they packed Neil's car with a week's supply of personal items and everything essential to carrying out the business of the CRM. Munich was a short four hours away. The move was preplanned. Two large offices on the second floor of the ICC's administrative building had already been prepared for their arrival. They would move their base of operations out of Frankfurt, but more importantly, they would join forces with the ICC. They might loose a few converts in the transfer, but most of the CRM's supporters were already familiar with the ICC and its brand of faith. Neil had been prepping his churches for months with a barrage of sermons to ensure all of his disciples made the transition into the ICC without difficulty. Reverend Eisner would also be graced with a new right hand man in Neil, whom he'd come to admire for his leadership abilities and charisma.

In preparation for the increase in converts and donations that would result from the virus, the reverend had hired additional staff. Their main purpose was to analyze, record, and coordinate the various components of the ministry above and beyond the normal routine of day-to-day operations. Extra personnel were also called in to help in the audio and video departments, and to make sure an adequate surplus of tapes would be stocked for distribution. The publication department was beefed up. The ICC presses had been running non-stop for the past four weeks preparing pamphlets, booklets, flyers, and most importantly, Reverend Eisner's best-selling book. Two accountants and a statistical expert were called in to monitor the increase in donations. Beside these key positions, other areas were not left undone. Additional parking lot attendants and ushers were hired. The landscape received extra attention. The parking lot lines received another coat of white reflective paint. The fountain was drained and the blue tile scrubbed and polished. The bronze statues of the disciples in the fountain were scraped clean of bird droppings. Two additional

guards were hired for the front gate. The reverend left no stone unturned. When that great day of the Lord would come, the ICC would be ready for it.

The reverend had embarked on a daily routine of fasting and prayer. He searched his soul for any defects or deficiencies and found none. This was to be the Lord's finest hour and he would not disappoint him. He'd devoted decades to the Lord's work. Every hour he had delegated for Bible study…every hour he had crouched on his knees in earnest prayer…every sermon he had prepared had all led up to this moment. A new chapter in the history of mankind was unfolding and he'd been selected to be the mouthpiece of God. It was a terrifying experience. One he felt honored to be a part of.

Right and wrong no longer existed for the reverend. The same God, which had slaughtered thousands of heathen men, women, and children to prepare the way for his people, would be the same God who would assist in the success of the virus. It was certainly a small matter for him. Ethics and morality no longer seemed to exist for the reverend. God had created both and He could suspend both. God was in no way expected to work around inadequately constructed man-made regulations. In this hour, his finest hour, he had every right to bend and break the rules, for he had created them. They were his toys and no one could not take them from him. Reverend Eisner was proud to be a part of such omnipotent power. And on Sunday it would manifest itself.

CHAPTER 51

Beep…Beep…Beep! Beeped the monitor on the shelf above Tasha's head. Her legs were twitching and her fingers were jerking about aimlessly. Eva had been watching the monitor creep incessantly upwards for thirty-five minutes. When it sounded, she leaped out of her chair and the nurse in the room came rushing over to press the reset button. The monitor crept up another notch to 102.7. Each second the monitor registered a fraction of a point above 87.5 meant that irreparable damage was occurring within Tasha's brain.

A second nurse came in and lifted the oxygen mask off Tasha's face. She placed a long, black rubber device over her mouth and nostrils and began pumping away on the balloon at the other end. The device was designed to force much needed oxygen into Tasha's lungs. "Come on, Tasha. It's okay. Everything's alright," the nurse said. As she pumped, she kept her eyes glued to the monitor. Tasha groaned and tried to pull her face away from the device. Her right arm slid across the sheet a few inches. Her legs twitched again. The monitor shot up another four points to 103.1. "Come on girl, relax. We've got some medicine for you that will make you rest." The other nurse returned with a syringe and ran the medicine into the IV line flowing into Tasha's left hand. The other nurse kept pumping away. In a few minutes, Tasha stopped twitching altogether. The nurse with the syringe went back to the cabi-

net and discarded the needle, then returned with a chart. Eva watched the monitor drop below 102.

"What's happening?" Eva questioned.

"She's waking up," the nurse with the chart said smiling.

"That's a good sign isn't it?"

"Yes, that's a good sign."

"Then why did you put her back to sleep?"

"Because she's in a lot of pain when she's awake. Her brain was responding to that pain with increased activity. That causes more pressure. Right now we just want to make her as comfortable as possible. The more comfortable she is the lower the pressure will be."

"Is that procedure?"

"With these kinds of cases it is. The most important thing is to keep the brain relaxed so it can concentrate on healing. I can't promise you anything, but normally within a few days the pressure drops enough so we can allow her to wake up.

Eva fell back into her chair. She looked up at the monitor, which had dropped since the injection down to 99.4. She could only hope the nurse was right.

At 9:15 a.m. the receptionist popped her head in the door and called to Eva. "Mrs. Burtman, you have another visitor."

"Who is it?" Eva said rising.

"An older gentleman. Mr. Schwarz."

"Tell him I'll be right out."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She stroked Tasha's hand and looked into her placid expression. Her face was still swollen and contorted. Eva left her and went into the corridor.

Mr. Schwarz was waiting just outside the door. "I brought these for Tasha," he said, handing her a bouquet of flowers.

"Thanks. They're beautiful. I'll see she gets them."

"How's she doing?"

"She's waking up."

"That's great!"

"But they put her right back to sleep."

"I see. Well, at least she's coming out of it."

"At this point I'll take it as a minor victory."

"Let's take a walk." Mr. Schwarz took her by the arm. They strolled down the corridor towards the front entrance and stopped by the windows. "Have you found out anything about the fire yet?" he asked.

"They're fairly certain it was deliberately set. They still have to run a few tests to be certain."

"Of course, we knew it was deliberately set, but it's good the arson investigation is proving that true."

"What did the polizei have to say?" she asked.

"Fortunately, we've got some friends in the department, otherwise they wouldn't even give us an ear. I spent an hour this morning with Detective Macabre. I gave him all the information we had along with photographs of the CRM members."

"What did he say?"

"Unfortunately, Eva, all we have is a bunch of circumstantial evidence stitched together with intuition. He says he'll keep checking on the arson investigation. His hands are tied until they reach their conclusions. As far as the ICC goes, all the polizei can do is check with the Munich polizei to see if they've got anything on them. He said not to expect much. He did have something interesting to offer me though."

"What is it?"

"I told him we suspected Neil and Derrick as the two individuals behind the fire. We talked about where they lived and about how they'd been following you and Ruben around. Well, seems last evening two of their units answered a call to the apartment building."

"Did he offer any details?"

"The manager said a man came to the door at about 6:00 p.m. wearing a stocking over his head and waving a knife in her face."

"A burglar?"

"Far from it. He just wanted her keys to get inside one of the third floor apartments—guess which one?"

"The CRM's."

"Right. The perpetrator locked her in the bathroom."

"That's odd."

"It gets more strange."

"They found her keys in the back parking lot. The polizei questioned Neil and Derrick and they said they didn't hear a thing."

"Figures."

"Everyone else in the building was questioned and nobody saw or heard anything."

"So, someone breaks into the manager's apartment wearing a stocking, steals nothing but her keys, then leaves the keys in the parking lot on his way out."

"The polizei thought it might have been an old boyfriend or someone harassing her, but you and I know better. I was able to convince Detective Macabre that the fire on Friday night and last night's event are probably related. He said he'd look into it."

"What do you think happened there last night?"

"I think Neil and Derrick had an unwelcome visitor who was after something."

"Like the virus?"

"Or information."

"Suppose they got what they were looking for?"

"Hard to tell. Neil and Derrick aren't talking. Either way, it just complicates things more. Ruben still hasn't come up with anything substantial on the ICC. Shelly could only get so far with Trojan Security. Then there's the CRM. We still haven't figured out how they play into all of this. The arson team may rule the fire as deliberately set, but proving Neil or Derrick started the fire is an entirely different story. Even with the support of the newspaper in Berlin, getting a conviction on the CRM is going to be next to impossible." Mr. Schwarz looked dispassionately into the courtyard outside.

"You sound as though you're ready to give up."

He took his eyes off the courtyard and rested them on her face. "You know me better than that. I never give up. I was hoping to get something substantial by now and nothing is coming to the surface."

"But what about the fire? That's got to count for something."

"It does, Eva. Someone set that fire and everything points towards the CRM. But you and I have seen many people walk which should be rotting away in prison right now. It could have been set by an old enemy, someone who's waited a long time to pay you back."

Eva didn't respond. Mr. Schwarz was right. The fire could have been set by just about anybody.

"I just don't want you to get your hopes up," Mr. Schwarz said, putting his arm around her shoulder. They started walking towards the unit.

"We need a break, Eva. We need something substantial about the nature of the virus or how the ICC and the CRM are connected. Otherwise, we've got absolutely nothing and nothing doesn't pay the bills."

"Are you thinking about pulling the plug on this?" Eva asked, suddenly stopping.

"Not yet. I'm saying if I don't get proof soon, I'll have to. We've got other stories we need to be working on."

Mr. Schwarz shook her shoulder and urged her towards the unit. "Don't worry, Eva. I know you want this resolved and I'm willing to hold out a little longer to give you that opportunity."

"I appreciate that."

"Now I've got to head back to the paper. I'll let you know if anything comes up." Though it was not his custom and he certainly felt awkward in doing so, Mr. Schwarz leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "You take care now," he said and turned to go.

"I will. Don't worry about me."

"I never worry about you, Eva."

When Eva got back to Tasha's room her heart leaped, but not for joy. *Beep…beep*…not again," she thought. The nurse sat at her post

and thought nothing of it. Eva walked over to the bed and checked the monitor. It read 92.6. She listened closer and discovered the sound was originating from her cell phone inside her purse. She took it out and checked the number of the call she'd missed.

She stepped outside the unit and dialed the number. "This is, Eva Burtman, someone just called me from this number."

"I called you."

"Who is this?"

"Rick Forstein."

Eva didn't know how to respond.

"We need to talk," he pressed.

Eva smelled a set up. "About what?"

"About the virus."

"What's your part in it?"

"I designed it. I came to Germany to try and stop it from being put to use. I was told by a reliable source you've been investigating the ICC, Trojan Security—"

"Who told you that?"

"I can't tell you, but I can tell you all you need to know about the virus."

Eva was still cautious. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't, and I don't know if I can trust you. We're even. The last thing we both need is for me to be picked up by the police by a tip from you."

"What do you propose?"

"That we meet. Just you and me."

"Where?"

"Someplace busy, the Hauptbahnhof. Just outside the main entrance there's a cluster of flags. Can you make it there by 11:00 a.m.?"

"Make it 10:30 a.m."

She went back into the unit to collect her things. The door was closed and she entered with reservation. Two nurses were standing by

Tasha's bedside. The blanket that had been covering her was folded neatly over her feet. She was naked except for large patches of gauze scattered over her back and legs. They were in the process of checking her burns and reapplying clean bandages. Eva hated to look, but she had to.

"How bad are they?" she asked the nurses.

"Some are worse than others. Her calves have second-degree burns that will leave permanent scarring. The rest of the burns are relatively minor."

Eva looked at Tasha's calves to an exposed area of charred flesh. One of the nurses was busy picking and cutting away at the dead skin.

"Isn't that painful for her?"

"It would be if she were awake, but right now she doesn't feel a thing."

Eva reached for her bag. "I have to go for a few hours. If anything changes please call me."

"Alright, Eva."

The hospital was about fifteen minutes from the Hauptbahnhof. Eva pulled her Opel into the parking lot and spotted the flagpoles. She waited in the warmth of her car another five minutes then walked to the poles. Within moments, a silver BMW pulled up along the curb. The horn beeped and the tinted window slid down. She walked to the car, bent over, and peeped in the window. Behind the wheel was a handsome looking man with blond hair. He waved her closer with a hand.

"Hop in."

"Rick Forstein?"

"Yes."

She got in the car and he drove out of the parking lot.

"You're not exactly what I expected."

"He glanced towards her and noticed she was eyeing his rumpled coat.

"My arrival party was a little rude."

She looked over the hood. "Where are we headed?"

"For a drive. How do I get on the autobahn?"

"Going which way?"

"Doesn't matter. I just want to keep moving."

"Then take a left."

"Here?"

"Here—now!"

He swerved across two lanes of traffic and cut off a taxi. A horn faded in the distance.

"First trip to Frankfurt?"

"Yeah."

"Take the next left."

Rick cleared the entrance ramp and headed south.

"This will take you towards the airport."

"He loves you, you know."

Eva snapped her head towards him, but was unable to speak. Emotions flooded her mind. She turned her head and looked out the window for clarity.

"You should have seen him last night. He saved my life."

She looked at him wondering if they were talking about the same Stace Manning.

"I knew you two were in this together. Where are you taking me?"

"A drive. I told you that. When I have what I need and you have what you need, we'll head back. Point of fact, Stace and I were not in this together until last night. I haven't seen or talked with him since our college days."

"I don't believe you!"

"You can call it what you want; a quirk of fate, destiny, or just plain bad luck. Whatever it is, Stace has gotten the worst of it."

"Still don't believe you."

"Of course you don't and even after I tell you, you still might not believe me."

She looked over the sloping hood of the BMW into the expanse of autobahn stretching far ahead. She'd spent the last few days groping over the shattered body of a new friend thinking of dozens of ways Stace had been involved with the fire and her investigation. Believing he was totally innocent would be extremely difficult. "Who do you work for?"

"I worked for Trojan Security up until Friday when they fired me. Gave me a twenty-five grand bonus to shut me up. Framed me actually, probably ruined my marriage. If I'm lucky, when I get back to the states my family might still be alive."

Eva searched his expression for verification to his story. His eyes never left the road. They were passing everyone in sight.

"Maybe you'd better slow down."

Rick ignored her and merged into the right hand lane. A slower moving car drifted past them on the left.

"You'll get a ticket that way."

"I thought you could drive as fast as you wanted here?"

"You never pass on the right."

Rick looked at her as if she were joking.

"If you're in the fast lane and someone's in your way, flash your lights. They'll move."

Rick liked the idea. "I'll give it a try next time."

"Why'd they fire you? Why do they want to harm your family?"

"Because I know too much."

"You said they were blackmailing you."

"In a rather dignified and professional manner, yes."

She thought about this for a moment. "So how does Stace fit into all of this?"

"Like I said, he doesn't, or didn't, up until last night."

"What happened last night?"

"He was on his way back to Austin—"

"To Austin? For what?"

"Because you didn't want to see him anymore."

It never occurred to Eva that he would actually leave Germany. The thought of him being forever out of her life sickened her, even though she knew that was exactly what she had told him.

"He was on his way to customs and I was just coming into Frankfurt. He saw me and followed me. Thank God he did."

"Why, what happened?"

"Some goon grabbed me in the baggage claim area."

"What did he look like?"

"Gruff. Had wild black hair—not long, not short—just wild. Not too tall either. Told me he knew where my family was and if I didn't cooperate that…well, I don't even want to think about it."

"Then what?"

He dumped me in the back of a van. Another guy was driving—"

"Clean cut, short blond hair?"

"That's right, you know him?"

"I think so. Go on."

"They took me to an apartment and interrogated me for about a hour. Then suddenly this maniac comes in waving a knife, forces the other guys back into a corner and has me tie them up."

"The maniac was wearing a stocking over his face," Eva said. "Then you left through the back parking lot."

"How'd you know?"

"Not important. Did you know who he was?"

"Not at first. I honestly thought the guy was going to kill me. He tied me up in the back of the van and blindfolded me. Then he drove me up into the mountains and tied me to a tree. Questioned me for what seemed a lifetime. I hate to say it, but when he finally took off my blindfold, it was the most beautiful face in the world."

"And it was Stace?" she said, imagining the surprise Rick must have felt.

"I almost had a heart attack. You have to remember, I haven't seen him since college and we left as enemies."

A rest stop whizzed by. "You're right," Eva said, "I don't believe it."

"Then I lost twenty bucks."

"Twenty bucks?"

"Twenty dollars. I bet Stace you'd believe me. He said you wouldn't. Why do you think I'm trying to explain this to you?"

"Because I told him to never call me again."

"Exactly, and we don't have time to play that game. I'm nearly 100 percent certain the virus is already out there doing its damage."

"Then maybe you better tell me about it."

"I don't want to now."

"Why not?"

"If you're stupid enough to think Stace has got anything to do with this, you're not competent enough to handle what I've got to say."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it? How long have you been working on this?"

"Four months."

"And what do you know about the virus?"

Eva thought about making something up, but that would have been pointless. "Not enough."

"Thought so."

"So what do you know about the CRM?" she asked.

"Not so fast. You've forgotten about Stace."

Eva looked out the window and considered her options. It now seemed plausible that Stace might have just been a victim of circumstance. If so, she'd wronged him greatly. "I'm willing to consider he's not involved for the time being, but I need more to go on. Fair enough?"

"If that's the best you can do, because we don't have time."

"Did you know those two guys that grabbed you last night were part of a revolutionary underground organization in Berlin?" Eva asked.

"No."

"Did you know they're presumed to have killed or assassinated at least two people and probably more?"

"No."

"Did you know they tried to kill my family this weekend and that a close friend of mine is in a coma at the hospital as result of their handiwork?"

"I hadn't made the connection. No."

"Now what about the virus?" she asked.

"First things first. I want to nail these guys worse than you do. I'll work on putting together the evidence about the virus and you work on getting all the dirty little facts put together about the ICC and the rest of those clowns. Fair enough."

"Fair enough, but our investigation's at a standstill."

"It won't be after I tell you what I know."

"I think I can work with that arrangement."

"You don't have a choice."

"I'm curious, where's Stace now."

"Can't tell you, but we're working together. We're hoping to have something before the ICC's Sunday broadcast. We expect you to do the same."

"This is Monday."

"I know, but you don't know how dangerous this virus is. The longer it's out there the worse it's going to be. Whether or not we've got something or you've got something by Sunday is irrelevant. If we have enough evidence that would be great. If not, we'll embarrass the hell out of ourselves, but we still might be able to cause them damage. Either or, it has got to be Sunday."

CHAPTER 52

By Tuesday morning, Stace and Rick had settled into a frantic routine that was getting them nowhere. Their set-up was far too inadequate to get the job done. Their basic plan was to try and capture images of the virus that would be displayed as subliminal messages on computer screens. But Rick had made it abundantly clear to Stace that the feat was impossible, and his words were proving themselves true.

The beauty and effectiveness of the program was not limited to these messages alone. Through Dr. Loran's skills as a neurosurgeon, and his expertise in the field of neurotheology, he had developed a way in which the messages would severely effect various dynamics of the brain that were responsible for inducing spiritual experiences. Essentially, the program had the ability to alter the levels of serotonin and dopamine in the brain, which in turn, played tricks on the electrical impulses within the brain. This would create within individuals a desire to fill their spiritual needs. Once the mind had been tricked, these individuals would be more receptive to responding to the subliminal influences flowing through their computer.

Nevertheless, Stace insisted that they at least try and catch some of the images. To do this they placed a laptop computer on a table in Stace's living room. In front of the laptop they set up three digital cameras on tripods. Rick bought another laptop and digital camera and

they placed these on a table in the corner. The plan was for Stace to snap all the pictures that he could, while occasionally opening different Internets sites around the globe. When the memory sticks were full in the digital cameras, he would replace them with a new stick, and run the full stick over to Rick. Rick would then insert the memory sticks into his camera, so that those images could be downloaded on his computer. After Rick downloaded the images he would study them one by one, looking for any suspicious images.

Minutes passed into hours and the hours rolled into Wednesday. By late Wednesday evening their frustration was mounting. Not one photo they had taken had captured the images that Rick knew were included into the program. Reviewing the pictures required that Rick study each photo taken of a full computer screen, then pass a magnifying glass over the pictures in a desperate attempt to find subdued images or textual messages.

Stace had the luxury of being able to move about from one camera to the next, and being able to take a short walk across the floor to where Rick sat. He was always well ahead of Rick, and passed the extra time looking over Rick's shoulder or surfing the Internet.

"Shit!" Stace exclaimed, after another camera's power had failed for what seemed the hundredth time. He unscrewed the camera from the tripod to change the batteries. "I've got to get something to eat." He headed down the hallway and into the kitchen. Rick followed. They'd slept little and eaten practically nothing. They fixed a couple of turkey sandwiches. Rick got the one with the heel. They grabbed a bottle of Coke out of the refrigerator and returned to the living room. Neither one of them spoke as they ate. Stace finished and lit a cigarette.

"This is really beginning to feel like a waste of time. Tell me again why we're doing this?" Rick asked. He took out a handful of chips and shoved them in his mouth.

"I guess I just don't see the difference," Stace finally responded, but not to Rick's question.

"The difference in what?"

Stace smashed his cigarette butt into the ashtray. "The difference between what the ICC is doing with the virus and what the committee did with my work at the exhibit." He looked over at Rick to see if he was getting the point. The expression on Rick's face was like a blank sheet of paper.

"I submit a few photographs with only partial nudity of the female body. I'm told the university is disgraced, the staff is in an uproar, and students are offended. Then a committee is formed to make sure my work isn't exhibited. You cast the deciding vote against me. Then I bump into you after all these years and find out you've designed and built a computer virus that has the power to manipulate minds. A program that's now in the hands of one of the largest religious organizations in the world. And they're prepared to use it as a psychological weapon to indoctrinate people in mass numbers. All you're worried about is getting back at them for what they've done to you. That's pretty weak don't you think?"

"I never thought the ICC would actually use the virus," Rick said defensively.

"Ah, that's right. It was a security program wasn't it?"

"That's right. It was!"

"And you never considered that what you were doing was incredibly dangerous, not to mention stupid?"

"No. It was a security program, Stace. We had to build one phase of it before we could build the other." He'd been using the same logic for weeks now and it was beginning to sound even weak to him.

"Or did you just think that since it might be used by the ICC—a religious organization, that it would be a good idea?" Stace asked.

"Religion's got nothing to do with it."

"It doesn't? Are you religious?"

"I am," Rick replied flatly.

"You do believe the world is a much better place with religion don't you?"

"Not that it has anything to do with the virus, but yes. Don't you?"

"I think the world would be a much better place if people were tolerant of other people's ideas. It's one thing to share with a willing listener what you believe. It's entirely different to force your ideas on other people, especially by using psychological manipulation or fear tactics. I'd be more inclined to follow a religion that steers well clear of using those methods of persuasion."

"Any religion?"

"Any religion, but since I haven't found any that do, I prefer not to subscribe to any of them."

"And that's your only criteria for deciding whether or not a religion is justified?"

"Not the only one, but it's a start. There are thousands of religions in the world. Seems to me, if God had one particular religion he favored, it would be pretty obvious."

"There is only one, Christianity," Rick said. He wasn't sure if he really believed what he said, but he'd been defending the idea all his life.

"That's rather closed minded, Rick. Surely you believe that other religions are just as important as Christianity?"

Rick never even considered such a question.

Stace could sense by his expression that the implication had escaped him. "Rick, it's simple. A person cannot assume that the religion they were raised on represents the truth, and all other religions are false."

Rick opened his mouth but failed to speak.

"Here's the thing," Stace continued. "When the committee decided to pull my photo's from the exhibit, they were acting on their own definition of morality and not by principle."

"The principle was in the nature of your photographs. You stepped over the line, Stace."

"That was not acting on principle. I offended someone's perception of right and wrong and they used their power to stop me. The principle was whether or not I had a right to show my photographs."

"And what if you wanted to enter photographs that were more graphic? Where do you draw the line?"

"You draw the line on accessibility. You let people know what they're in for. If my photos were really that offensive, then the public could have been informed they might be offensive to some. It's quite possible someone might have even enjoyed my work. Did you ever stop to think about that?"

The thought never even occurred to Rick.

"My work was condemned from the start based purely on its content."

"True."

"There was never any consideration given that what I had to share might have been important?"

"We're talking about three photographs, Stace. Not about saving the world."

"We are talking about art. We are talking about one person having the right to express their opinion. Even if the whole world disagrees with that opinion, we still have to safeguard that right. I think anything creative and artistic in nature, anything that springs from the mind as a result of conscious thought and takes the form of expression, ought to be particularly safeguarded."

"Anything?" Rick stated.

"Everything artistic: books, paintings, music, photography, dance, theater, movies, everything."

"There should be no censorship whatsoever?"

"None, because art is the expression of the human predicament at its most raw form. It's reality, and it's important for people see and understand human nature."

"But what if that art expresses something evil?"

"You're assuming there is evil. Your definition of evil is nothing more than rules of morality that you want other people to live by."

"Listen, Stace. Your work was rejected because it was offensive. Some called it immoral. The bottom line is that people didn't like it."

"I seriously doubt that. My guess is people really liked looking at my photographs. They delved into human sexuality. It's a subject everyone likes exploring."

"Well, they offended people's religious sensibilities."

"They offended someone's perception of right and wrong. Pure and simple."

The comment escaped Rick. He walked over to the computer and opened another folder of downloaded pictures. It was the third photo on the top row that intrigued him.

"Stace. I think we might just have something here."

CHAPTER 53

The Frankfurt Herald, in its Sunday addition, printed a three-paragraph article about the backerei fire. Officer Rossittener worked as a traffic officer in the headquarters of the Central Polizei office at the Konstablerwach. She sat alone at her dining room table, sunlight pouring through the widows and across the newspaper unfolded in her lap. She squinted her eyes and glanced down at the article.

The short news clip was at the top of the third page. She probably would not have given the article a second glance had it not been accompanied by a graphic black and white photograph. The photograph was an after-the-fact shot taken shortly after the sun had risen of the once standing Burtman Backerei and home. Caught in the photograph were firemen. Two were still wearing their flame retardant uniforms with wide brimmed hats facing backwards like duckbills. The fireman nearest the camera had discarded his coat earlier and he stood on a giant pile of bricks. Near this fireman were the remnants of some kind of cabinet structure. It was nothing more than a pile of twisted, triangular shaped sheet metal. In the background, two burnt steel ovens stood as immobile as bank vaults. The trees in the backyard were dried out like old Christmas trees. Only the brick sides of the backerei remained intact. A van in the alley looked like it had escaped most of the heat's intensity. She was relieved as she continued to read that all

the occupants of the apartment upstairs had escaped. "Arson was suspected," concluded the writer.

Officer Rossittener had never personally visited that particular backerei, but she was aware of its location and recognized the corner on which it stood. She had sixty-seven traffic cameras under her command, cameras mounted on traffic signals at various locations throughout the city. There were two such cameras hanging at that corner. In fact, she processed on average ten citations a week from those two cameras alone. It had been brought to her attention just recently that one of the cameras at that location was malfunctioning. The other camera, however, always captured the backerei in the background when taking pictures of traffic violators. "It will be interesting to watch the rebuilding of the backerei in the photographs," she thought to herself.

Her job was as predictable as the rising of the sun. With the exception of malfunctioning cameras, the cameras never lied. All of them were equipped with sensors and triggering equipment that performed two basic functions, to photograph speeding cars and cars that ran red lights. Every photograph captured the car's license plate number. That number was then traced by computer to the owner, a fine was assessed, and a paper copy was forwarded to the owner.

Later that same week on Thursday, Officer Rossittener was sitting at her desk reviewing the next stack of photographs that had arrived from the developers. She was methodical in her approach, examining each photograph just as it came out of the package, and filling in a form that would notify the traffic violator of their infraction. About half way through the stack she slid a photograph under the clip to view and prepared to fill in her form. She hesitated when she saw the location of the photograph. She leaned back in her chair and studied it. The time stamp read "November 6, 02:33 a.m." She quickly understood the photograph had been taken early Saturday morning. The code indicated the camera had photographed the rear license plate number after the car had cleared the intersection. In the photograph stood the Burtman's Backerei, just hours before it had burned to the ground. Officer

Rossittener distinctly remembered reading arson had been suspected as the cause of the fire. It took her only a moment to recognize something suspicious. Near the front door of the backerei, a man was walking towards the corner. The passing car's headlights put him in the spotlight at the exact time the camera had taken its picture. "Was it possible this man was the same person who set the fire?" She wondered.

She reached above her desk and took a binder from the shelf. The binder held all the phone numbers of the various departments of the Frankfurt City Municipal Departments. It took her only a few moments to find the Arson Investigation Department. The department had arrived at its own conclusions on Tuesday. Their conclusion was that the fire had been deliberately set. It was highly fortuitous that Officer Rossittener had photographical evidence of a possible suspect. She was instructed to send her photograph to Detective Owens by courier.

When Detective Owens received the photograph, he immediately enlarged it and checked through the polizei's database of current criminals. He then placed a call to Detective Macabre, who'd contacted him earlier in the week after a visit from a friend, Mr. Schwarz.

"You say the photo was taken early Saturday morning around 2:30 a.m.?" Detective Macabre questioned Detective Owens.

"Actually, it was 2:33 a.m."

"And the image of the man in the photo is clear?"

"Every detail."

Detective Macabre fished through the department computers and within a couple of minutes had a clear eight by ten print of the man standing just outside the backerei front door. He took it back to his desk and laid it next to the photographs provided to him by Mr. Schwarz, positively identifying the man as Derrick Sachs. Finding Mr. Sachs was now a priority.

At the ICC complex in Munich, Stautzen gave three sharp knocks on the reverend's door before proceeding into his office.

"What's the word, Joseph?" the reverend asked, gazing out his windows overlooking the fountain area.

"The numbers are promising. I think the virus is beginning to have an affect."

"Publishing?" the reverend asked, turning around and walking towards his desk.

"Up 7 percent since Tuesday."

"What about the audio and video department?"

"About the same. Most of the calls we've been getting are requests for additional information."

"Internet hits?"

"Up 11 percent. That's the best indication we have the program's working."

"Donations?"

"They're lagging, but that's to be expected. Donations usually reflect the amount of information we send out, allowing time for people to digest what they've read."

Stautzen saw the reverend was satisfied with his verbal summary. He placed it on the reverend's desk and decided to add a bit more to it. "Everything is ready for Sunday. We've gotten two additional confirmations from television networks to carry our weekly broadcast, both of them in Central America. Of course, the satellites always carry the broadcast around the world, but it will be interesting to see the increase in numbers from those who randomly view the broadcast this Sunday. Mayor Baxter has still not called to confirm, and neither have any of the other government officials we sent invitations to."

"They are a proud bunch, may take some time. People in their position always want to make sure the train is headed out of the station before they're willing to jump on board."

The reverend took a seat behind his desk and stroked his beard a few times. "Overall, I'd say that's not bad is it, Joseph?"

"Much better than I anticipated."

"Faith, Joseph. It's all a question of faith." The reverend smiled and drifted momentarily into a lapse of contentment.

Stautzen waited patiently in front of his desk for any additional instructions.

"That's good work, Joseph. Keep everyone on their toes and let me know if anything changes. That'll be all."

CHAPTER 54

"I don't see it, Rick," Stace said, peering over his shoulder.

"It's right there." Rick moved his fingers across the computer screen underlining the words, "Follow Rev. Eisner."

"Look at the screen from where I'm sitting." Rick leaned his head to one side and Stace moved to a position where he could face the screen at eye level.

"You're right," Stace said. The words, "Follow Rev." were barely visible. The word, "Eisner," was brighter. All the words were superimposed over a beach scene taken from a web page from a travel company.

"We're lucky we caught this one. I can see it was beginning to fade off the screen. If you'd taken the shot a split second later we would have missed it," Rick said.

"So, that's it?" Stace was disenchanted with the evidence.

"What do you mean? This is great. This is the evidence we were looking for."

"Rick, anyone with a simple photography program could recreate that picture," Stace said taking a step back.

Rick looked at the picture again. "But it proves the virus has been put into motion."

"We can't use it, Rick. You may be able to recognize it, but who's going to back you up? Anyone on the team you worked with?"

Rick took a quick inventory of the team's participants. He didn't have a clue where to find any of them.

"Thought so. If we can find more evidence then maybe…but one photo is not going to sway anyone," Stace said.

Rick made a new folder entitled, "evidence," and copied the picture into it. He slid his chair back and stood up. "I'm calling it a night."

Stace flashed him a perturbed look, but understood. They had looked at thousands of photographs in the past two days. All they had to show for it was one single picture.

"What about you?" Rick asked.

Stace thought about Eva and the possibility that he could get together with her again—if they found enough evidence. "Not yet. I'm going to keep plugging away."

"Suit yourself." Rick walked to the other side of the living room, dimmed the lights, and plopped down on the couch.

For the next hour, Stace continued to shoot as many photos as he could then moved to the other computer to download the images for review. His pace slowed and his actions become more robotic, but he was determined. At the end of the hour he took a short break and brewed a cup of coffee. The caffeine stimulated him and he plugged methodically away for a couple of more hours with no success. Rick's snoring grew more laborious and Stace slipped in an easy listening CD to drown him out. Although the hour was late, Stace did not feel tired. Curiously, his anxieties began to melt away and his stress about reuniting with Eva dissipated. He grew tired of taking and reviewing the photographs, choosing rather to surf the Internet. He flipped through page after page, letting his mind wander to places he'd rather be, and of things he would rather be doing. He lost all track of time.

"You still up?" Rick asked, peering over the back of the couch.

"Yeah, can't sleep."

Rick looked at his watch. "It's 4:30 a.m. You should get some sleep. I don't want to be tackling this alone tomorrow."

"Does it matter?" Stace asked, linking to some site on the web that sold French wines.

Rick looked at him quizzically. "I rest my case. You need some sleep."

It was early afternoon before Stace came crawling down the hallway into the living room.

"It's about time," Rick said, reviewing more pictures.

"It's a waste of time," Stace said, walking to the windows and drawing the curtains back with this hand. "Any luck?"

"I've been through five thousand or more pictures since I woke up. Nothing."

Across the street on the other side of the aqueduct, two kids raced by on their bicycles. On the banks sat a couple on a bench. Stace's eyes drifted over the motionless trees and into the clear sky above. "I'm not up to this today," he said.

"This is Thursday, Stace. We've got until Saturday night to find more evidence. I thought you needed this to get Eva back."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. She was pretty clear at the hospital that she never wanted to see me again. I doubt I can do anything to convince her to change her mind about me."

"That's not what she indicated to me a few nights back," Rick said.

Stace let the curtains go and walked towards the door leading into the hallway.

"What about the ICC and the CRM? Have you lost interest?" Rick asked.

Stace stopped for a moment to consider what Rick was saying, but didn't answer. He walked into his room. A few minutes later Rick heard him leave out the front door. He reviewed a few more pictures and decided that he had to call Eva.

"Eva, this is Rick. Have you found out anything yet?"

"The polizei are looking for Derrick Sachs. They got a picture of him standing outside my parents bakery shortly before the fire started."

"Circumstantial at best."

"I know," she replied. "And while I know the fire is related to his involvement with the virus, that doesn't mean that the courts will be able to prove that connection. Anyway, they can't find him—or Neil—they've disappeared."

"Doesn't surprise me. They've downloaded the virus already. I'd expect them to lay low."

"How do you know?"

"Stace and I managed to capture an image of the virus on our computers. But don't get your hopes up. It doesn't prove anything. Stace isn't impressed anyway."

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"He's gone. Walked out just a few minutes ago."

Eva couldn't help but think that Stace was at it again. He was either running from the task at hand or drifting into one of his artistic moods. "Where did he go?"

"Didn't say."

"I'm not sure you can count on him, Rick. You're going to have to keep looking for more evidence. We've still got nothing on our end."

"I wouldn't count on us finding any more evidence either. If you don't come up with anything substantial, we'll all look like idiots on Sunday."

"Let's not give up hope just yet. I'll let you know if we come up with anything." She paused for a moment. Her mind was drifting back to a recent confrontation with Stace. "When Stace gets back, give me a call."

"I will."

Stace walked along the aqueduct for a few minutes before plopping down in the high grass along the banks. Just ten feet below, the dark current moved with a life all its own, with no known beginning or end. Stace could almost hear the water breathing, not so much by the

sounds it made as it bubbled along its way, but in the sense that it seemed to have a life and soul of its own. He wished he had a camera, but on second thought, considered that no image could capture it's beauty.

A bumblebee landed on a nearby blossom. He considered the rhythm of its wings buzzing in his ears. The buzz first began as a low drone, but emerged into a loud roar, threatening to disrupt his silent and tranquil heart. "Such a finite miracle! So delicate, so minuscule as far as living organisms go, but yet, so full of purpose and life!" Stace thought.

Children rolled by on their bikes behind him. He turned and caught them in mid-laugh, their faces radiating innocence and purity. This saddened him. He mourned the loss of his own laughter and innocence. "Why am I always so serious?" he wondered. Life could be so much more rewarding if I would just relax and enjoy it. What possessed me to lose track of all that is important and worthwhile?"

He wondered about God. His presence at the moment seemed so overwhelming that Stace thought he might burst with excitement. God was as vibrant and full of life as the water passing below him. He was as colorful as the flowing blossoms swaying in the gentle wind around where he sat. He was speaking through the drone of the bumblebee.

Stace thought for a moment about Rick back at his apartment. There Rick would be frantically snapping away shots and running them over to the other computer to download and review. "Follow Rev. Eisner," the message had said. A rather static message in itself, yet the intent of the message now seemed entirely benign to Stace. But there were other foreign thoughts passing through Stace's consciousness. He was thinking about the religious awakening of mankind; the dissolving of hostilities between people; about how these aspects of life could be realized by those who recognized God's awesome power and character.

Something must be done, but what? What might he do in light of these ideas passing though his mind? How could he express to others

the emotions he was now feeling in his newly found thoughts about God? Stace didn't know, but the ideas presented him with a disturbing uneasiness, like an itch in his soul that would not be relieved. He rose quickly and went back to his apartment.

Rick heard the front door open and Stace wandering down the hallway. "Where have you been?" he asked as Stace walked into the living room.

"Still at it, eh?" Stace said sitting down in a chair near the window.

"It's been slow going without your help."

"I lost interest," Stace muttered.

A camera's memory stick filled again. Rick opened the tiny compartment of the camera to remove it and slide in a fresh stick. "You've been gone a while." He looked at his watch. "Couple of hours. What's the problem?"

"No problem. Guess I just figured this was a hopeless endeavor."

"Could be, but I don't understand why you're giving up. You and I both have a lot riding on this."

Stace sighed and rested his head back on the chair. "My perspective has changed, that's all."

Rick thought it time reacquaint Stace with the right perspective. "Here's the deal. We get a few more pictures of the virus in action, present this information on Sunday to the ICC's congregation, the bad guys get caught, and you redeem yourself with Eva. Do I not have the right perspective, Stace?"

"I suppose that was the original plan. I just don't want to pursue it anymore."

"What do you mean? You are the one who rescued me from the goons at the airport. You're the one who was threatening to kill me unless we work together on this. Having second thoughts about Eva? What is it, Stace?"

"As far as Eva goes…I don't know what to think. A part of me wants her back, another part of me doesn't want to bother with the

hassle. As far as the ICC goes, I'm not sure anymore whether it's important to prevent them from doing what they're trying to do."

Stace rolled his head away from Rick so that he wouldn't have to face him. "Stace, you told me that people like the ICC must be stopped. Why? Because of the obvious, they can't be permitted to use the virus to win converts to their way of thinking."

"I know what I said. I'm not convinced that their way of thinking is entirely unjustified."

"I'm confused, Stace."

"Look, people need something, they need options, they need a way that helps them to develop their spirituality. Perhaps the ICC provides them with that option."

"That's not what you were saying the other night, Stace. What happened to the "principles" you felt so strongly about?"

"Does the end justify the means was what I was talking about."

"You tell me, Stace, does forcing people to follow a certain religious persuasion justify the means?"

"In certain situations it might," Stace concluded.

Rick stared at him for a moment then pushed off the couch. He went to the window, but didn't bother to pull the curtains to look outside. "What was Stace thinking? Shock. That's probably what it is. Eva dumped him. His self-esteem has been shattered, and he doesn't want to fight for her—or anything for that matter."

Rick wandered over to the chair in front of the cameras and fiddled with the Internet. He bounced around on a few sites to collect his thoughts. "What was Stace thinking," he thought again, but then flipped the question around. Perhaps it's not what he is thinking, but *why* he is thinking this way?" He linked to an engineering website that showed a schematic of a suspension bridge. "Could it be?" Rick wondered."

"Stace?"

"Yeah."

"How much time did you spend on the Internet last night?"

"I don't know. Few hours. I lost track of time. Why?"

"Because you've been infected by the virus."

Stace walked over to Rick. "Are you sure?"

"Can you think of any other reason your attitude would completely reverse itself from yesterday?"

Stace thought for a few moments. He was soul searching, analyzing his thought patterns and beliefs that he carried throughout his life and measuring those thoughts with the way he'd been thinking. "I can't believe it!" he yelled.

Rick tweaked his head and looked at him. "Change of perspective, Stace?"

"It's so subtle…I didn't suspect a thing. You're a son of a bitch, Rick!"

"No, I'm good at what I do. I warned you how effective this virus was."

Realty came crashing down around Stace bringing clarity to his thoughts and motivating him to act.

"How did it make you feel?" Rick asked.

Stace thought for a moment. "Wonderful, invigorating, peaceful. The virus works like a dream."

CHAPTER 55

The first visitors to arrive on Sunday to the ICC complex were Mr. and Mrs. Karl Montclair. They'd driven in from France the day before where they lived in a border town near Germany. Mr. Montclair had been writing a letter to his son on his computer on Wednesday. Upon completing the letter he sent it out over the Internet to his son via e-mail. For some unexplained reason, he suddenly felt the urge to drive into Paris and find a bookstore. He didn't need to write the name of the book down, because oddly enough, the title was permanently etched in his mind.

With assistance, he found the book, *Our Global Community*, Reverend Eisner's bestseller. Apparently, every copy of the book had been sold out the previous day, and the store clerk had just that morning restocked the shelf. By the time Friday evening rolled around, Mr. Montclair had completed the book and called the toll free number on the jacket seeking additional information. He inquired about the location of the ICC and where the services were held. Being retired, it was not beyond his reach to spend Saturday driving into Germany. He loaded up the camper Saturday morning and he and his wife took off towards Munich.

Before the Montclair's had gotten out of their camper, a Volkswagen van pulled into another parking slot. The owner of the van, a

Mr. Hertzfeld, lived in Stuttgart. His wife and two young children, as well as a friend he'd spoken with, accompanied him. Like Mr. Montclair, Mr. Hertzfeld was not exactly sure why he was there. He worked for European Airways as a ticket sales representative at the Stuttgart Airport. The computers located just below the counter top at the check-in area where he worked were on twenty-four hours a day processing ticket sales. Mr. Hertzfeld spent a great deal of his time accessing information from these computers. Sometime Tuesday evening, long after he had arrived at home and his thoughts had been given time to settle, he'd been talking to his wife in their bedroom and suddenly a telephone number popped into his head. He didn't recognize the number, but it stuck in his mind and wouldn't go away. He called the number. The voice of a young woman on the other end told him he'd reached the International Christian Coalition. He wasn't the slightest bit interested in what they had to say, but was compliant when the woman suggested she could send information his way.

The next car to pull in the slot next to Mr. Hertzfeld's van belonged to Jakob Schmitz, a member of the ICC. There was nothing unusual about his presence there. He simply came week after week as a matter of routine.

So it went throughout the next hour or so with the parking lot attendants ushering cars into the next available slot with their bright orange flags. Some who came were members of the ICC, but many were visitors attending services for the first time. By 8:30 a.m. the parking lot was nearly full. The security guards at the front gate had logged in over 475 cars. For the first time they had to concern themselves with where they were going to park additional visitors.

Stace sat in the sanctuary on the main floor in the third row from the back near the aisle. On the pew next to him was a hymnal he'd taken out of its rack to hold a spot for Rick. He was glad he did. From the moment he sat down, people had been rapidly filling into the pews around him. By now they were all packed in like toothpicks in a box.

"Where have you been?" Stace asked, when Rick finally arrived as the audience was quieting down in anticipation for the start of the service.

"It took me a while to find the projector."

"Did you make the switch?"

"Just in time. How's it coming?" Rick asked, looking down at the sheet of paper crinkled in Stace's hand.

"I'm nervous as hell."

Rick turned in his seat and glanced at the exits.

"Who are you looking for?" Stace asked. "You're making me even more nervous."

Rick settled into his seat. "I just wanted to make sure no one saw me."

Since it was Stace's first visit inside the church, he was unaware of the heightened sense of anxiety in the audience. Or, perhaps he was too preoccupied with his own fears while thinking about what he was planning to do. Stace took the church bulletin out of the pew pocket in front of him and refreshed in his mind the time when he must make his move.

At exactly 9:00 a.m., the organ pipes, which looked like giant irregularly cut stalks of steel bamboo shoots, billowed music into the auditorium. Children were encouraged to take their seats, toddlers were turned around and set on parent's laps, all eyes turned to the front, and those which had still been lingering in the aisles or near the exits moved quickly to find a seat.

"If you ask me, something's definitely up. Personally, I find the mood in this place a little discomforting," Rick said.

"Spooky, is the way I'd put it," Stace added.

At that point, the organist kicked in with the second stanza of the hymn being played. The choir entered, marching as it were with their weaponry of psalm and song, single file, all in step, towards the audience then abruptly turning in unison and filling up the choir loft.

Another door near the back opened and out flowed the entourage of the elite.

"I don't fucking believe it," Stace mumbled irreverently.

Rick looked at the stage and discovered the reason for his outburst.

The eight men stood like representations of deities; piously positioned in front of their thrones for a moment as the organist concluded the hymn. Rick instantaneously recognized the two men on the far left as the men who had abducted him at the airport. The organist quieted the hymn down with a sustaining note and the eight men sat down.

"This is getting interesting," Rick whispered.

Stace was suddenly consumed in a state of trepidation. "What have I gotten myself into? If I make it to the podium, will the two goons on the end jump out of their seats to silence me? Will I be carried out of the building like a madman?"

He returned to his senses when a man at the podium called out the name, Reverend Jeremiah Eisner. No time to think at this point, only time to react. He glanced at the bulletin and noted for the third time the reverend had been allotted forty-five minutes to speak, during which he would present his weekly slide presentation. Stace lifted his head towards the ceiling at the fifteen-foot crease where the silver projection screen was locked into position. "When will it be lowered? And when the first slide pops up and they realize something is dreadfully wrong, what will they do?" Rick was fidgeting next to him again. "What the hell for?" He decided not to ask.

The reverend began…"Brother's and sisters, distinguished guests, Mayor Baxter, your lovely wife, and to the millions of viewers around the world, this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!'" The audience erupted out of their seats amidst a frenzy of "hallelujahs!" Hands waved in the air like parallel cobras.

The reverend gripped the sides of the podium, as if a firm grip was necessary to keep him grounded. He raised his head to the ceiling. The sharp line of his beard cut across his neck like the arch of a snowy horizon. His face looked tortured, with an expression of both pleasure and

pain. The moment was his. The audience would not be calmed and he would not think of cutting them short. Moments passed into minutes before the audience finally began to settle down.

"I wish to tell you a story. It's about a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a distinguished member of the Sanhedrin. He wasn't just any Jew, for all Jews knew the scriptures in those days, but Nicodemus was a Jew who sustained himself solely by the words of God. He'd devoted his life to those words. There was not one element of truth to which he was unfamiliar. None that is, except one. And that was the work of the Holy Spirit.

"Nicodemus came to Jesus one day in secret. For you see, Jesus had become an object of hatred for the members of the Sanhedrin. It would be extremely embarrassing for anyone of them to seek counsel from the lowly carpenter of Nazareth. Strangely enough, Nicodemus had absolutely no idea why he was seeking out Jesus. No clear idea why he would risk the exposure of being seen with Jesus. I dare say it is not unlike many of you seated here today. Not unlike thousands of you who sit in front of your television screens at this very moment. You may not have any idea why you are here, or what prompted you to tune in our broadcast today, but I have the answer to that mystery.

"Nicodemus met Jesus underneath a tree, where only the slight sound of a soft breeze rippled through the leaves above them. Jesus talked to Nicodemus about being born again. Nicodemus questioned the logic in being born again. 'How is it that a man or woman can return back into their mother's womb and be born again?' Nicodemus wondered. Jesus answered his question much like he always answered questions, with an indirect statement. Jesus said, 'Listen to the wind and how it blows, for you do not know from which direction it comes or which direction it goes. And so it is with the Holy Spirit.'"

The reverend paused for a moment to daub sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief. The audience waited patiently.

"So how is it with you today? What prompted you to get up this morning and take the drive out to our services? What did you expect to

find here? A mystery? You will find no mystery here. It is the same Holy Spirit that moved the skeptical, but opened the heart of Nicodemus, that has brought you here today."

The reverend concluded his story with a long pause. Like all his actions it was calculated for affect. He was giving his audience time to process the story, to measure it with their experiences and to validate it. "There is something I'd like to show you," he said finally, and out of the ceiling dropped the projection screen.

Stace's heart shut down for a split moment before erupting into a throbbing volcano taking on a life all its own. It forced blood up through the arteries in his neck and into his head. His ears rang, but not enough to drown out the sounds around him. Quite the contrary, he acquired an almost superhuman sense of hearing. He could hear the *humm* of the motor in the projection screen and the breath of every person in the auditorium. He could hear the terror in the voices of those who would undoubtedly seek to silence him. He even thought he could hear a voice telling him to run, to get the hell out of there. But ringing a note above everything else he heard was the clear, bell-like tone of what had to be done.

While the screen continued to fall the reverend went into a brief introduction of what the presentation was going to be about. He'd strolled away from the podium and was making his way down into the audience. The screen itself hung beyond the steps of the stage. It was impossible for those on stage to view the presentation, including the reverend, so by way of habit he would venture out in front of it so he could use each slide as a way to cue himself. After descending the stairs of the stage he made his way up the aisle Stace was sitting next to. He stopped about mid-point and faced the audience.

"Several weeks ago we presented a slide presentation in which we outlined the history of the ICC. For those of you who had the privilege of seeing that presentation, I'm sure you felt a sense of pride for being involved with the ICC. We had some humble beginnings, but God has blessed us. I followed that presentation with a pointed message on

what I think God was calling this church to do. It was not an easy message to swallow. I realize this, but neither is the truth. I ended with an appeal to you as members and viewers to examine your life and to put things in order, because I believe we are living in the last days. If I might be more direct, I think the Lord's second coming is at the door, even as I speak."

The screen locked itself into place with little more than a gentle sway and the projector was turned on. The first slide was nothing more than a title to the slide presentation.

Stace looked at Rick and was about to speak. Rick interrupted his thought. "Next slide."

"Shortly before the service started I was informed by the front gate that the parking lot was filled to capacity. Some of you arrived a little late to find you had to park along the entrance road. That's a first here at the ICC and I think providential of what the Lord has in store for us. This is nothing short of a miracle. Even so, it's just the beginning. I've known it was coming for a long time. If you would now direct your attention to the screen above, I'll show you the reasons why we are witnessing this kind of explosive growth."

The projector switched to the next slide and the reverend continued. He didn't even bother to look up at the screen.

"To begin with, we have merged with another organization based in Frankfurt." The reverend turned to the stage. "Neil Usher and Derrick Sachs, would you please stand at this time?" The two humbly rose. "It's not very often churches with different theological backgrounds can come together with the same mutual understanding."

Neil was the first to notice an uneasy tension had drifted over the audience. Heads were turning between the reverend, the stage, and the screen. Whispers could be heard above the imperceptible hiss of the microphones.

The reverend didn't notice. "In the last ten years these two individuals have been steadily building a small army of Christian soldiers of

their own. People like you who love the Lord and are willing to sacrifice."

The whispers had grown into a disturbing rumble. Most of the audience had taken their eyes off the players on the floor and were gazing with confusion at the projection screen. The reverend noticed the disturbance and was indignant he'd lost their attention. Only a fraction of them seemed to be looking at him now, so he followed their faces upwards. This prompted the cameras to focus on the screen. Of the two shots Stace and Rick had managed to capture, this was the most clear and damaging. What started out as a barely readable image on Rick's laptop now ran across the screen in letters two feet high. It read, "Reverend Eisner, SAVIOR of the World!"

The reverend immediately recognized the message as one that he had personally approved, but under no circumstances was it ever to be displayed in front of the public in this manner. He was quick. "Ladies and gentlemen, someone has apparently decided to play a little joke on us this morning. If the projectionist would please advance the projector we'll get to the next slide."

"Follow Rev. Eisner," it read. The reverend stumbled on his feet as he spun around to assess the impact of the second message. People were clearly talking now, no longer whispering.

"Turn it off!" the reverend screamed, but it was too late. If the messages were effective in their impact on the subconscious at lightning speed, they were overwhelming when displayed in letters two-foot high for minutes at a time.

The cameras, by force of habit, centered once again on the reverend, who was turning in circles in the aisle formulating an excuse. Sweat collected in his cropped beard and on his forehead. He reached for his handkerchief. Every eye was upon him. For perhaps the first time in his life he felt extremely uncomfortable in the limelight. A flush of embarrassment crept across his cheeks. His eyes jerked for a place to rest away from the gaze of the multitudes. The choir was silent and motionless. The faces of the clergy seated on the thrones begged for enlightenment.

The organist turned and faced the crowd. Members of the orchestra reached for their instruments. They were always called upon at a moment's notice to smooth over the awkward moments of the service. The drummer, who was fiddling with his sticks, dropped one of them across the snare drum and broke the silence with a sharp, loud *pap*! The reverend daubed his lips with his handkerchief and spoke.

"Brothers and sisters, I really must apologize for what appears to an obvious prank. Someone has switched a few slides and inserted their own to disrupt our service."

Stace stood up about twenty-five feet from where the reverend was standing. "It's no prank reverend and you know it!" he yelled. A camera swung around and focused on the lunatic. It panned along with Stace as he stepped into the aisle and walked towards the teetering religious giant. The head elder stood up and walked to the podium. It wasn't the first time their service had been interrupted by a fanatic in the audience.

Stace stopped about six feet from the reverend, well within the pickup range of the reverend's microphone. He knew it would be only a matter of moments before they silenced him. "What you have just seen are photographs I took off a computer screen."

Out of the corner of his eye, Stace saw Derrick quickly rise. He glanced towards the exit and watched as other men lurched down the aisle towards him. Time was short. "The images came from a computer virus created by the ICC to manipulate your minds." The audience erupted into a chatter of confusion and accusation. The two deacons reached Stace and seized him by the arms. "You came here because you were infected by this virus!" he blurted out at the top of his lungs.

The elder at the podium attempted to gain control. "Ladies and gentlemen. We have a situation here that needs to be controlled. Deacons, escort the young man outside!" Derrick had made it up the aisle at this point. The two deacons turned Stace around and forced him towards the exit. Derrick followed right along behind them.

Suddenly, from an entrance behind the orchestra, two polizei officers emerged followed by a man wearing a tan overcoat. Simultaneously, at each one of the exits on the main floor other officers emerged, stood in force, and sufficiently sealed the exits. The two deacons that were escorting Stace stopped abruptly. The head elder was so stunned by the presence of such a show of civil authority that he backed away from the podium and granted the man in the tan overcoat access to the microphone. Every camera in the auditorium swirled about in the futile attempt to capture what was going on. Their signals went by cables into the production room, where they were processed and sent out around the world.

"My name is, Detective Macabre. I'm with the Frankfurt City Polizei. The other officers here are with the Munich Konstablerwache. We apologize for disrupting your service. If I can have your attention and cooperation, this shouldn't take more than a few minutes." He raised his right hand to the back of the auditorium and flipped a quick gesture. Additional officers filed down the main aisle and made their way towards the podium. At the bottom of the stage they split and panned outwards, lining up about five feet from each other, then faced the audience without so much as a twitch.

"We have evidence that shows that the ICC, along with a computer firm in America, have created a virus such as the young man just mentioned. We require your assistance in detaining several individuals that might be responsible for this crime. I have a list of names I'm going to read. When I call your name I want you to come down to the stage and place yourself into the hands of one of these officers. Given the nature of the environment here, I expect no resistance. Should you find it necessary to resist, let me assure you the entire compound is secure."

"Derrick Sachs," he began.

Heads and cameras turned, isolating the man even before the officers had identified him. He looked at all of the exits, but they were secure. He looked at Stace, who stood just a few feet away. Hatred ripped though his mind. His fingers extended then contacted into solid

fists, the only weapon available to him. He turned around and walked towards the stage. He stopped just inches from an awaiting officer, stiff and snorting like a bull. His eyes met the officer's eyes and he never removed them. The gaze was in itself an act of defiance, stemming from a lifetime of repulsion towards any authoritative figure.

"Turn around," the officer commanded. Derrick stood his ground. Calmly, the officer walked behind him, cuffed him tightly and with a sharp nudge urged him towards the exit.

Stautzen was sitting on the second throne from the right. He fully expected his name to be called next. In anticipation, he slid down into the folds of the throne and hadn't watched as they cuffed and escorted Derrick out.

"Neil Usher," came the second name out of the sanctuary speakers.

Neil slowly rose off his throne like a dethroned king. After standing, he instinctively adjusted his suit coat, even taking a moment to check the knot in his tie. His walk was proud though lifeless. He was promptly cuffed and escorted out.

"Joseph Stautzen."

There it came. Just a name, but with its mention a world full of dreams and promises evaporated. He buried his face in his hands and felt an earthquake of emotions rippling through his body. They rendered him powerless and he could not stand.

"Joseph Stautzen!" Detective Macabre said again. He looked over the audience in search of the man. Their faces were fixed on a location directly behind him. He turned around to see why. Stautzen was incoherent with grief. "Will two of the officers please remove Mr. Stautzen from the building."

The next name he read would be done in the same manner as the others, with no special tone or inflection, just a generic name on paper. "Jeremiah Eisner."

Up to this point in time the audience had been muted by incredulity. The fact that polizei officers were leading anyone out of their sanctuary was enough of an intrusion in itself. So much had taken place

within these holy walls that just the impression that a crime had been committed by one of their own would never be erased out of their minds. But the reverend? It was beyond comprehension. It threatened to suck the life out of hundreds of thousands of believers. It was just beyond believability. Every camera and eye in the room was fixed on the reverend. At any moment he would resist. Wouldn't he? Surely he would lash out with some kind of verbal assault that would put an end to the absurdity of it all.

"Reverend Eisner," the detective said again.

The reverend seemed powerless to move. What was he thinking? What would he say? Only moments passed by, but it was more like hours to the faithful. And with each moment that passed, the faith of the faithful evaporated like a thimble full of water nestled in desert sands.

The reverend looked at his flock. His expression was endearing, though pathetic. It was the look of a man who had worked his whole life to achieve one noble goal, and who suddenly realized that just shy of victory that goal had slipped elusively though his fingers. These were his people, his friends, his family. He could see in their faces that some still granted him the respect he'd earned over the years as their servant. These were the younger and idealistic ones, who simply couldn't accept the fact that their spiritual leader had erred. "Perhaps they just wanted him for questioning," they thought, but the reverend gave no sign that this was the case. No words of reassurance to comfort them by indicating that he'd be back next week.

The reverend offered an eerie smile. A smile that came off looking like something had suddenly snapped inside him that could never be mended. He cast his eyes towards the floor, his very lack of words an indication of guilt. An officer moved up the aisle and placed him under arrest. The sound of the metallic jaws of the cuffs cinching around his wrists was amplified through the sanctuary speakers. He was promptly escorted out of the auditorium.

"Rick Forstein."

Heads turned in a desperate search for the next man on the list. Stace was the only one who could identify him. The call of his name seemed unjustified. Rick had played a big part in bringing the ICC down. And yet, he had after all, created the virus in the first place. Stace was sure of one thing, he wasn't going to be the man to point him out. Their lives had become mysteriously intertwined; connected in a mix-match of ideals and purpose that had triumphed for the cause of justice.

Detective Macabre was about to call his name again when he noticed a lone figure rise out of a pew near the back. The man came out into the aisle and stood before Stace. Detective Macabre decided to be patient.

"You did it," Rick said.

"We did it." Stace replied.

There was a pause of mutual respect in their demeanor.

"By the way," Stace said glancing around, "what do you know about all of this?"

Rick flashed a warm smile, one that was playfully sinister. "You'll have to ask Eva about that. I'll be tied up for a while."

Again, there was some hesitation; it was one of those moments in which thoughts fly back and forth without words; where silence does a better job of bonding friendships faster than idle words can. Rick extended his hand and Stace took it. He turned and walked towards the stage. An officer escorted Rick un-handcuffed through the side door.

"I'd like to thank you for your cooperation. Please accept the apologies of the Frankfurt and Munich Polizei for disrupting your services." Detective Macabre exited and the rest of the officers quickly cleared the sanctuary.

Without delay the head elder returned to the podium. He summoned the minister of music to lead the congregation in a hymn. The minister of music nervously picked out a random hymn and cued the

organist to begin. As the organist played and he alone sang, the entire congregation left in a mass exodus.

Stace preceded the crowd and made his way up into the loft where the audio/visual room was located. He opened the door and found a young man still monitoring the images from the television cameras. Three monitors were focused on the exodus of the congregation and one monitor isolated the man singing at the podium. All the images were still being processed in the adjacent studio for the world to see. The man at the chair paid little attention to Stace, who simply walked over to the projector and pulled out his slides. Stace would keep them purely for the sake of nostalgia.

Stace took a seat in the loft awaiting the clearing of the building and the parking lot. Why the organist kept on playing was beyond comprehension to him. The organist finished a hymn and started another, then still another. Perhaps he just liked to play. Perhaps he knew it was his last opportunity to play. Perhaps he still thought there was someone in the auditorium willing to listen.

"Was it all worth it? How many souls around the world were at this moment feeling the pain of disillusion and deception?" Probably thousands of people, he reasoned, had placed all their faith in the ICC to lead their lives. "Would they realize they had the power to make their own decisions? Would they acknowledge the freedom they always had to think for themselves? Or, would they simply find another religion to follow?" Stace could only hope and wonder.

The organist was into his sixth hymn when Stace heard a voice behind him.

"I've been looking for you," Eva said.

He was startled, but didn't turn around.

She laid her hands on his shoulders and he could feel the warmth of her touch. "And now that you've found me…" he began, but let his thoughts dangle.

"I was hoping we might be able to make that decision together."

He brought his hands up and took hold of hers. She sat down on the chair behind him. He could feel her breath in his ears as she whispered, "I've made many mistakes in my life, Stace. Misjudging you was by far my worst."

He was silent for a few moments, listening through a soft refrain played by the organist before deciding what to say next. "I suppose you had good reason to. As it turns out, I was involved with your investigation from the start."

"Even so, I was wrong and I'm sorry. I quit my job, Stace. I no longer work for the paper. This was my last investigation."

Now he turned to face her. Her work had been the most important thing in her life. Could he ever replace it? There were no tears in her eyes. She was far too determined and independent for such sentimentality.

"Why?"

"It was time. I nearly lost my family, and as it stands, I may still lose you."

Rarely does a comment carry with it such explosive implications. It was an appeal for forgiveness. It was an affirmation that he was the most important aspect in her life. It was a blind declaration of her faith in him that left her completely vulnerable and exposed. Most importantly, it was the true expression of her love that he'd been hoping to hear.

He reached to caress her check with his palm. "You will never lose me," he whispered.