

NEXT ADAM

A novel written by Brian Alberts

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Romance/Thriller
CHAP 1,2,3 for
submission only.

PROLOGUE

LANDON KANSAS, TWENTY TWO YEARS AGO...

Stepping on the grimy rubber mats covering the thin aisle between the seats aboard the school bus, 8 year old Alison Washburn found a seat alone. The twenty other kids, full of cereal-inspired energy were bouncing in their seats. They were a collection of ages as young as five and as old as eleven. Most of them were dressed in t-shirts and shorts. Alison wore sweatpants and her favorite sweatshirt that had a picture of an Appaloosa horse galloping across a field on it. She also wore her pink and red snow hat.

Alison stared out the window ignoring the exhaust entering the bus as it pulled forward on the county road and gained speed. She silently went over her Algebra homework from memory. Alison could picture equations in her mind. She could see the formulas dance into solutions without

having to scrawl them onto paper. This was a suspect practice to her teachers and Alison had long ago forced herself into the rudimentary ordeal of writing out proofs. Though Alison was in the second grade, she was working through secondary school assignments that her teachers fought to obtain for her.

It was hard for them to keep up.

Alison mentally checked through six of the problems when Bret Tait crept up from his seat at the rear of the bus and sat down behind her with his best friend Hunter Maddox. Hunter was probably the only person dumber than Bret in the entire fourth grade and he followed Bret everywhere. Bret was supposed to sit in the last row on the bus. It was a position forced upon him by the bus drivers who all knew his behavior rivaled any sociopaths' of the day. He'd been in countless fights. Once he'd even taken a swing at one of the bus drivers with a hammer.

Bret's smile could not mask his cruel nature. He stole every inch of ground from authority he could. Bret knew as they approached the intersection in town that the bus driver would be busy and concerned with the oncoming traffic. This was the perfect time for his move up to the seat behind the freak.

She always sat alone.

Freaks deserved to sit alone.

Freaks also deserved to be toyed with.

Alison didn't notice the advance until Bret snatched the pink snow cap off of her head.

Much of the laughter slowed as attention was redirected toward Alison.

At eight, Alison had not a hair on her head.

The kids knew. Some were fascinated by it. Many were used to it by now. But all of them were drawn each time one of Alison's various hats or caps were snatched. No matter how many times it happened in the past.

Alison ignored it.

Turning the other cheek when confronted by kids and their boredom-inspired rituals usually worked.

It didn't work with Bret.

He was large for his class because he'd been held back and would probably repeat the process this year again. He was eleven and a hog farmer's boy whose father had little time for him. Any farm was a tedious and time consuming ordeal. Bret's father's drinking drove their mother away long ago. That void caused Bret to be raised by his four older brothers.

"Try and get it," Bret taunted, tossing the snow hat across the bus to another child several seats away.

Being bothered by Bret was nothing new. Alison's mother Emma explained there would always be children who'd pick at the differences they saw in others. Unfortunately, Alison's mother could never fathom the profound cunning and persistence in a boy like Bret.

Alison sighed. She would eventually pick up her snow cap as the others exited the bus. It would have been trod upon, pressed into the grimy mats of the bus floor, kicked around until they'd all tired of jeering and calling her names like "cue ball" or "chrome dome" or "alien baby" or whatever monster of late night strike the kids' fancy. To fight back was akin to pouring accelerant on a fire. So Alison ignored it.

Unfortunately, Bret was as good as they come at pushing a peer to extremes. He picked on kids for months at a time to elicit a reaction. When he saw that Alison's stoic response threatened to deprive him of a victim that morning, he caught the next pass of the snow hat and began slapping it against the back of Alison's head.

"Don't ya want it Cue Ball? Huh? Don't ya want it back? Huh? Or maybe you need a shine, cue ball?"

Alison ignored the first hit, and then the next, but as Bret began rubbing the hat against her head, trying to work up enough friction to burn, she felt her anger swelling.

She caught herself and swallowed, leaning forward in the seat to gain a bit of distance. But Bret just reached out again and rubbed harder.

"Leave me alone," Alison said quietly.

"Leave me alone," Bret mimicked. "The cue ball talks! Come on, shine on. Anybody got some wax? Whoa, I got an idea." He spit onto the snow hat and then began to rub that against Alison's head.

She felt the wet liquid and succeeded in ignoring even that. Then Bret hawked up a gooey snot infested puddle and spit it into the hat.

"Here ya go, Freak, free shine!"

Then Alison turned. Her vivid green eyes focused on Bret with unnatural calm.

In the moment, all of the teachings of her mother and father, all of the cautions they tried to instill in their special daughter were burned away by the frustration she felt at the sight Bret's beaming face. He'd finally gotten through to the usually emotionless Cue Ball.

As her cheeks flushed, and her anger grew, Bret yanked the snow cap out of reach. This day was starting out great.

"Here it is, Cue Ball, maybe you *do* want it." Bret said. "Why don't you try and take it?"

"I have an idea," Alison said quietly. "Why don't you eat it?"

Bret stared at Alison, and felt the thought form. It was crazy he knew, and yet, it was overpowering, it pounded into his brain. He began to feel his arm bring his clenched fist, snow hat gripped tightly within, toward his mouth.

"What? Wha?" Bret managed as he glanced at his hand.

"Go on, eat it," Alison urged, *and then pressed the idea into Bret's mind*. She knew she was never supposed to. She'd been warned by her mother and by her father that it was dangerous for her. But she didn't care. Not right now.

The other kids on the bus went silent as Bret brought the thick wool snow hat to his mouth and tried to rip off a bite. He chewed with an otherworldly look etched on his face. He tried to talk, but could not get enough saliva on the material and the fabric muffled his speech.

"Hel... sotha wrong..." he managed. The kids thought it was a pretty good joke and began to laugh, but that trailed off as Bret continued to stuff the entire hat into his mouth with what seemed to be panic. He gagged as he fought to swallow the mass that was nearly impossible to chew. His fist slammed into it, thumb out, forcing the fabric deep into his throat. He split his own lip with the force of it, bloodied his own nose. His knuckles were cut by his front teeth as he pounded on.

Bret was turning blue.

He could not breathe.

Still he tried to chew. And still he slammed his fist into his mouth. His eyes pleaded for help, but the kids around him were frozen.

Behind the panic in his eyes, unconsciousness began to take him. His eyes rolled into the back of his head. His left hand waved spasmodically for help as his right hand continued forcing the fabric ever deeper into his throat. It was now completely inside of his mouth.

Bret squeaked and began to slide forward on the seat as the bus driver got around behind him and threw his arms around his chest, crushing it and performing the Heimlich

maneuver. That forced enough of the material into his mouth cavity that the bus driver could pull it from Bret's mouth.

At the window, Alison stared out at the fields of corn. Tears were running from her eyes. Her head hurt so much it seemed as if it was going to split right open. She felt the warmth on her neck and reached her hand to it.

It came away with the blood that was dripping from her ear.

Part one

LOS ANGELES 4:15 PM- THE PRESENT

"Okay, you wanna hear a story?" Elvis Bernard Lowry asked ask me as he slid into the vinyl booth. He never took much care in his appearance. His skin shone like he just chased a bus two blocks on an afternoon in August. His black hair acquired flecks of gray since I saw him last. That was maybe a year ago.

"'Cause, 'cause, I got something... I got a spin, it's something all right," Elvis continued, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jacket.

His eyes darted all over the dark recesses of the bar.

Lowry lost his job at the paper where I worked prior to landing my current position. Senior producer, Peter Green. That's me. I worked my black oafish behind off to get there four months shy of my thirtieth birthday. Even at six foot three, I could lose twenty five pounds. I've been

to the gyms. Who's got the time, right? Primetime news is the top of an impossible ladder. You fight and scrape your way up, or you fall off. Simple as pie. I had a rough gig to fill the two one hour programs under my thumb five days a week. The prime time crew consisted of eight producers, fifteen contract field reporters, and the six God-like anchors that spewed out the babble we scrambled together under the umbrella of strict and ever changing guidelines handed to the news department from the all powerful marketing department.

The job weeded out those unable to handle stress.

I worked my way to a plum sized ulcer before I realized everyone screwed up now and then. The public doesn't really notice much. If they do, they forget about it before the next evening's broadcast.

That's not to say that executives at the network forget the screw-ups. Their habits include never forgetting the tightly controlled guidelines mentioned earlier. And God forbid, we all knew, don't bring a lawsuit their way.

I guessed Elvis Lowry had to be pushing forty. Lowry never quite made his mark even though I thought he was a talented guy. I'd seen some of his pieces in the past. He could worm stuff out of interviewees better than most. I expected Elvis might show up someday with a book or something that would finally put him on the map. The few books Elvis completed humanized the common criminal. It wasn't as if Elvis had an agenda. I think he identified

with the arbitrary and difficult task of a criminal's freelance work outside the law. Cops hated Lowry because he'd hyped a couple of brutality incidents where some cop finally gave in to the terrible stresses of the vocation and unloaded on some dumb shit too messed up to cooperate.

We met at O'Briens on Figueroa. It's a cool little bar, lots of pseudo Irish atmosphere and just the right amount of darkness to lend privacy.

The darkness couldn't shadow the pain of Lowry's rough life. It lay in every line on his face.

He carried several large three-ring binders in a death grip. They were filled to bursting.

I groaned. If he planned to go through all that, we'd be sitting here until the next Emmy broadcast.

Lowry laid the binders on the red vinyl seat.

"Hello Elvis," I replied to his opening salvo.

"Well, do you wanna hear it?" Lowry went on without saying 'hello' or 'how's it been' or any of the other bullshit pre-meet ritualistic conversation I expected. At least he appeared deeply connected to whatever he wanted to say.

"Can I get you a drink?" I asked. Lowry shook his head then nodded. His eyes darted around the bar again with suspicion. If it was acting, he was better than most of the waiters in LA.

He was scared of something.

Or of someone.

That didn't really surprise me because I knew Elvis Lowry made a lot of enemies over the years.

"Yeah yeah, sure sure. I could use a scotch. Double. Rocks," he replied.

I nodded at the bartender. He sent Velma over. Velma was a fixture in O'Briens. A saucy forty year old woman who must have grown into the faded blue jeans she wore each night.

"Can you get my friend a scotch? A double?" I said. "And I'll take another one of these," I pushed a tea cup toward her.

"Some of the good stuff, huh? None of that blended shit. Rocks," Lowry said hungrily.

"Sure guys," Velma smiled with a flirt in her eyes that usually guaranteed her a decent tip.

I looked at my watch and Lowry caught the motion.

"You got some time, right?" Lowry asked worriedly.

"A little," I said.

"No no, this'll take a bit," Lowry insisted. He lifted the binders onto the table. "I collected it all. Wrote a lot of it myself. I got it all here. I had to, you see. It's the only way you'll understand."

"Maybe you could leave it with me, I could read it," I said. This was turning out to be a mistake.

"Thanks," Lowry said looking up as Velma set down his drink and a steaming cup of tea in front of me.

"You're welcome," she smiled again, then sauntered back to the bar and took a seat on a stool near the well.

Lowry took a huge gulp of the scotch and choked.

"Easy partner," I said. Lowry waved a hand and coughed a few times. He got control of his lungs and said, "I'm going to have to read through it."

I glanced at the binders and tried not to roll my eyes. It was an effort.

"Listen," I said, glancing again at my watch. "I don't have *that* much time."

"I collected as much as I could. From everyone. I spent months getting it together. You have to hear it in sequence, do you understand? It's the only way to keep it all straight," Lowry insisted.

"Tell you what," I continued, rising out of the booth. "Why don't you get yourself together, you know, get this thing in order so that you can tell me what you want to say in a nutshell. In the meantime, I got the scotch, 'kay?"

I rose and started away. Lowry fixed his eyes on the binders. He was obviously disappointed. So was I. It was another goose chase. I get 'em all the time.

It grew dark outside. LA cooled down quickly in the fall. The nights began early. I looked up and down the block momentarily forgetting where I'd parked. The six o'clock broadcast was still an hour off. I could make the ten minute drive and be back at the studio in easy time.

"I'm sorry," Lowry's voice rose from behind me.

I turned and saw him silhouetted against the dying glow of dusk. There was a gun in his hand. It aimed at my chest. Lowry's hand was shaking and he kept looking to all sides. His other hand was busy with the weight of the binders, still in a death grip.

"You have to listen. You have to help. You're in a position to help." Lowry said desperately.

"Whoa, Elvis, easy there," I froze. Time changes all, but I'd never heard of a violent streak in Elvis Lowry.

"You have to hear it, otherwise..." Lowry looked around, at the buildings, the cars, the sky. "Otherwise, it won't matter where you go, your shows won't matter, nothing will matter anymore, because it's all gonna end, see?"

"What's gonna end?" I asked.

"This! All of this! And right under our noses! *We are going to end!*" Lowry had raised his voice again.

"We?" I asked, a touch unnerved by Lowry's demeanor.

Lowry looked away again as if conscious suddenly by how insane his actions and words appeared. "All of us..." he said quietly.

"Living on borrowed time, right?" I suggested, trying to put him at ease. Lowry didn't look like he was going to use the gun, but who knew?

"Look," I continued. "Why don't we start over? Huh? It sounds like you got something important to say. And I want to hear it. So listen, Elvis, Saturday, huh? I got

time this Saturday. Why don't we meet then? Put down the gun, and let's just back up a few minutes and set a date."

"Because we gotta do something tonight. And I have just enough time to get this across to you. I don't get someone to listen to it tonight, I might, you know, *what we gotta do is dangerous*. Could be I'm not around on Saturday. You gotta listen now."

"Who's 'we'?" I asked.

"The others. It's not just *my story*. You gotta listen," he repeated.

I still didn't believe he would use the gun, but there was something about his eyes, it made me downright curious. What makes a guy lose it like this?

"Have you ever heard of Adam Corporation?" Lowry asked.

"Who hasn't?" I replied. Adam was one of maybe three or four models termed Super Corporations. They were a global entity. Some of these super corporations, it was rumored, ran the world.

"Did you know that they own nineteen of the deepest mineral mines on the planet?"

"You got me there," I said. "I thought they were primarily involved in communications."

"Yeah yeah, they got a satellite network, it's the largest. The fucking largest! Four times the size of its nearest competitor. It feeds the machine." Lowry all but spit in disgust.

"The machine, huh? Okay, so? Is that what you got? A monopoly? Is this some kind of anti-trust issue that's got you so bothered?" I asked.

"No!" Lowry's voice rose again. "I'm getting ahead of myself. I knew it would sound this way. It's complicated. You have to listen!"

"Okay, I'm here, man. You wanna go back into the bar?" I offered.

Lowry shook his head.

"How about you put the gun away," I said. "Is it loaded?"

"Yes it's loaded. I think it is." Lowry glanced at the gun turning it on its side. Then he pointed it again as if he was scared I would run. "I know how to use it," Lowry said with marginal confidence. "I'll put it away when I'm good and ready, understand?"

"Yeah, sure, I understand," I wanted to calm him. "So, we're gonna talk out here?"

Lowry shook his head again. "You drive, I'll read."

"Where are we going?"

"To one of their mines."

"Well where the hell's that?"

"Arizona."

"Arizona! Come on Lowry, be serious."

"I am serious," he said with the first hint of strength I saw that night. "And here," he dug into one of the

pockets of his coat and produced what looked like a small ear headset. "You better put this on."

"What is that? A phone?" I asked. It looked like a Blue Tooth, jerry rigged, like someone had made it in a garage without the idea of ever having to package it.

"It's a scrambler."

"A scrambler." I said, questioning the explanation with my eyes.

"It issues a point seventeen filtered decibel hiss. You can hardly hear it, but it'll protect you, it'll hide you," Lowry said as he fixed a duplicate in his own ear.

"What am I hiding from?"

"You're gonna get me ahead again and I gotta start at the beginning. Where's your car?"

In moments we had found it and the freeway.

The 405 was clear. Go figure.

We got on the 10 and headed west. Lowry opened the binders and glanced through for a few moments.

"Here," he said, "it begins here."

"You're actually going to read all that?" I asked. I was tired. I hadn't been sleeping too well lately because of the heat wave.

"Some of it, yes," Lowry replied. "It'll take six or seven hours to get there."

"To some mine," I reaffirmed.

"Yeah, exactly. Where they're taking the device."

"What device?" I asked.

"Listen. Shut up and listen." Lowry finished as he opened up the first of the monstrous binders.

"It's really about this woman, Alison Washburn and a man named John Eversoll."

"Okay, who are they?"

"Two people who fell in love."

CHAPTER ONE - ALISON

Thirty thousand feet below, Alison Washburn's wild tumble from the corporate jet passing overhead wasn't even a speck. There was no one to notice anyway on the forested floor of the Tenaha Wilderness in Northwestern Montana.

Eighteen seconds later a parachute became visible to indigenous wildlife in the area.

Alison only imagined the experience and not the physical effects of leaping from an aircraft moving at nearly four hundred miles an hour. Unconscious from the concussion of the wind, the lack of oxygen, and the depressurization as she was sucked out of the jet, Alison fell limply until the altimeter automatically triggered her chute.

The helmet and pressure suit Alison wore spared her body the injuries it could have sustained. Consciousness began to return as the first tree branch clipped Alison's slender body. Spinning wildly she was whipped and buffeted

by more branches and six seconds later, the chute snagged on the limbs of a dense pine tree half dead from infestation of bark beetle.

Alison hung motionless for nearly two minutes mere feet above the soft ground of the moist forest. She became conscious of a low sucking sound.

It was her breath.

Alison's eyelids fluttered beneath the helmet.

Understanding slowly returned. Her arm began to move, reaching and then finding a Velcro tab on the flight suit. Fingers dug and found the survival knife inside the pocket.

Alison cut the chute lines and fell to the ground. Quickly, she ripped open the Velcro tabs attached to the forward pack.

The computer drive bay was intact.

Boldly etched in the metal casing was an Adam Corporation logo and serial number beginning with an A-46 designation. It indicated data contained on the drive was "eyes only to" corporate security.

The helmet came off.

Shoulder length sandy blond hair spilled out.

Alison looked up, green eyes adjusting to the surroundings. Her ears were ringing and her head felt like it was going to split open. She dug into the strap-pack across her chest and retrieved the GPS unit packed in another of the canvas pouches.

She flipped it on, checked her coordinates and calculated a direction. Her green eyes found a pair of distant peaks. She'd make them before dark.

But before starting off, Alison sat down on the ground, and concentrated, driving the escape from the corporate jet, the drugging of her escorts and the theft of the computer drive bay from her mind.

The several moments of concentration were enough to raise a shield that would hide her from those who might begin the search to find her. It was interrupted by the grinding warning growl of a cougar that'd been spooked and cut off from its lair by the arrival of this strange entity in its domain.

The cougar roared again, and sank down on its haunches preparing to spring. The strange entity looked hurt, and than meant it would be easy kill.

Alison broke concentration and fixed her green eyes on the cougar.

The cougar would not usually think to challenge something this odd but wildfires in the region due to the previous year's record rainfall made game short. The large cat lived in a constant state of hunger.

The cougar broke its stare. It shook its head in pain as if icicles had invaded its brain. Then it sneezed and galloped off in the opposite direction.

Alison went back to her concentration. In the reflection of the knife's surface, she noticed no blood at

either of her ears. The fright she'd "pressed" into the cougar had probably not ruptured anything. Its brain was not nearly as strong or complex as a human being's.

Moments later Alison rose and started off in a fast jog for the distant peaks.

According to the scheduling data on the drive bay, Alison had two and a half days to reach the island in the Caribbean.

CHAPTER ONE - JOHN

Rain fell at an angle with the violent wind. The sailboat continued to drift. Below tattered banners advertising corporate sponsorship fixed to the deck rails, the warm water of the Caribbean ocean seeped into the three holes torn in the hull of the boat. As the storm woke with angry roars of thunder, pelting rain and eighty mile-an-hour gusts of wind lashed at what was left of the NevCraft 35.

In the galley, three and a half feet of water rolled over the floorboards. The water rose an inch every seven minutes. Most of the cabinets had been thrown open and their contents spilled into the central channel that was filling with water.

A young dark haired man named John Eversoll lay unconscious on the starboard bunk. He was thirty nine years old but it was difficult to tell in the halting light.

A ribbon of dried blood tattooed the skin beneath his left nostril. He blinked dully and fought to open his eyes.

His otherwise manicured face squeezed in apparent pain and his brown hair, blond streaked from the sun spilled across his forehead. He blinked again, fighting for consciousness and began to hear the clanks and clatter of loose debris floating in the water beneath him. As his eyes finally, fully opened, the surreal sight that met them suggested the entire galley was cocked at an unnatural angle.

Then a larger swell outside struck the hull and the resulting shift rolled John right out of the bunk and into the water below.

John felt enveloping wetness and couldn't breathe. It pulled him from the dreary space between coma and life. He awoke instantly and burst to the surface. He struck his head against the galley table. That sent him below the surface of the water once more and into panic as he emerged. The panic temporarily subdued the questions that floated behind it. Most notably, *how in the hell had this happened? Had he fallen asleep? Bumped his head?*-- He stumbled through the waist deep water toward the hatch.

John reached for the marine latch that would open the small door that led to the deck. The knob turned, lock released, but the door would not open. He tried again slamming his shoulder against the hatch door.

The Nev 35 was hit by another wave, throwing John along with everything else to starboard at a forty five degree angle.

John fell against the edge of the galley table. The impact nearly cracked a rib. He stumbled back to the hatch and pounded again ineffectively. He turned drunkenly in the tight confines, searching for something, anything to help him escape. Through a porthole, John saw that his boat was starting to go under.

Considering only a moment longer, John dropped below the surface of the water.

With no swim mask, the area below was a murky blur. John swam forward, feeling his way along the galley toward the oven. Finding it, John pulled himself forward to the cabinet just aft. His fingers groped into the space and settled around the fire extinguisher he knew was inside.

The storm roared over the surface, as the sinking boat disappeared beneath the waves.

In the cabin, John popped back to the surface. There was now a mere twenty inches of airspace between the waterline and ceiling. He felt the calm outside of the boat and knew exactly what that implied.

The boat was below the waves and going down.

It was confirmed as his ears began to pinch. The pressure of atmospheres began to build. John raised the fire extinguisher and with what little leverage he could manage, slammed it against the galley's porthole.

The cap broke off of the extinguisher and John took a shot of fire retardant point blank in the face. Ducking back under the water, John cleared his stinging eyes. He emerged again. His air pocket shrunk to barely four inches. He forced his head back and struggled to take a breath. Feeling below the water, he found the porthole. Bracing his legs, he managed two good smashes at the glass. The first one cracked it the second one smashed it out.

Drawing in as much air as possible, John ducked once again. He had to feel one cabinet past where he'd found the fire extinguisher for the wetsuit stowed there. Grabbing it and a flare gun, John struggled to get out the small opening. For one terrible moment, John's body wedged in the porthole.

He was stuck.

His fright grew acute. The pressure in his ears was overwhelming. He struggled with raw panic, ripping his way out across the tiny shards of glass still wedged in the porthole frame.

And then he was free. He saw blurred flashes of light above and those illuminated the murky image of his sailboat as it sank into the black depths below. Clearing his ears, John kicked to the stormy surface.

He burst through just as he was sure his lungs would explode. He bobbed there, trying to catch his breath. He swallowed a mouthful of water and coughed harshly.

John's panicked eyes swept the dim horizon. He could see nothing but mounds of ocean in each direction. A wave washed over his face and he coughed again, going under.

John came up and once more willed his body to calm.

Salt water.

A body will float, John thought.

And you'll be a body if you don't calm down!

He managed the impossible and slowed his breathing.

John struggled out of his clothes and began to pull on the wetsuit. He knew that despite the warm water in the Caribbean, he'd need the insulation. Even eighty two degree water gradually cooled a human body. The wet suit would help him stay warm and add to his buoyancy.

Ten minutes later, John's struggles with the neoprene jellyfish paid off and he was floating on his back cradling the flare gun in his hands.

Initially, the wetsuit compressed his chest. John felt himself beginning to hyperventilate. Each time the constricting suit seemed to give under a long draw, water splashed over John's face and he swallowed too much and drew it into his lungs, bringing with it a fresh coughing fit. He remained right there on the edge of a panic despite the fact that he'd extricated himself from the deathtrap of his sunken vessel.

Now he faced the deathtrap that was the open ocean.

He was completely disoriented.

The sky and the ocean in the dark was one until the momentarily flare of distant lightning brought him from black to gray. He felt hung over, possibly from what must have been a blow sustained to his head.

Had he hit his head?

He couldn't remember.

Searching his thoughts, he seemed to remember eating one of the countless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches he'd consumed along the race route that began nearly a week ago. He must have gone to sleep and, what happened to the sailboat?

Had he somehow struck a reef?

Then he'd be near some land, but that would mean he was hundreds of miles off the race course.

It was impossible to tell and his panic grew again because he knew he was being swept along in the current and had no way of knowing if he was going toward or away from land. *What happened?*

He shut his eyes as another wave splashed over his face.

First things first.

Calm down.

He had to calm down or he'd black out. He remembered lessons learned from the scuba diving he'd enjoyed in his past. He knew if one remained calm, there was little likelihood of an accident.

Calm.

Get control of your breath, John, he told himself. He settled on his back. He was floating easily enough.

He fought to relax. Another wave washed across his body and he expelled a breath, blowing it from around his mouth. He floated. He was at equilibrium. That was a start. That was good.

What the hell had happened?

Calm, he reminded himself. He was floating and not going to die in the next five minutes. That was an improvement from ten minutes ago. He'd rest, then after his breath slowed, he'd pop up and see what he could see after the next flash.

Maybe he was near land. The gentle motion was surreal as the dark night melded sky and water.

Another flash lit the sky overhead. John swung his feet down and kicked, trying to see above the waves in the waning light. There was nothing but mounds of water in every direction. His view was limited. He'd have to wait until it was light. He'd have to hope he could last the night. John chose to believe that if he was not destined to survive this ordeal it would have ended in the sailboat.

What had happened?

It continued to plague him.

And why wouldn't the hatch open? Something must have fallen against it. He couldn't remember when he'd gone to sleep.

There, oh yes, *the jib cleat broke.*

He remembered that much, but not much more. He was glad he'd chosen to insure the sailboat. Hah! That was funny! At least before the race started, he insured himself against the boat's loss!

Another lightning flash lit off and John pushed up again. Again there were only limitless mounds of gray water. It would do no good to expel the energy.

I'm alive, John thought. *I should have died and I'm alive.* Using that as a sort of mantra, John lay on his back again and floated.

CHAPTER 3 - ADAM CORPORATION

Andy Vanderoose swore as the nozzle briefly pinned his finger to the intake hose on the side of the Chinnock C35 troop mover. That's just great, he thought as he yanked his hand away. Why don't you loose a finger Vanderoose. That would just about cap off this day.

It was bad already.

Andy already wished he'd taken the advice of his wife when he mentioned the tickling of flu in the back of his throat. But, the company he worked for, Desert Air, forced ground employees to use vacation days as sick days and Andy was storing those up for a seven day trip to Cabo and what the hell, work was miserable anyway, why not work with a flu?

He could be miserable at home, or he could get paid to be miserable at work.

Today was miserable.

Today was work like he'd had once when he loaned his services out to the Tucson International Airport. That was an experience he chose to never have again. Today, of all days, he had to get stuck with this strange migration of business tycoons to some corporate rendezvous in the desert. For God's sake, by Andy's count there were over two thousand of the bastards being ferried on seventeen leased Chinooks. And he'd been humping the nozzle all day long in the heat.

With the flu.

He hadn't even had a break so he could call his supervisor to tell him he needed to go home.

They were a quiet group for the most part. They waited patiently in their heavy clothes in the too-hot and poorly air conditioned hangar lobby. When called, they quickly ascended the short ramps to the Chinooks which were flying roundabouts in a continuing stream.

All Andy knew was, whatever company or corporate retreat-like picnic these guys were planning, it was a two hour or so stopover before they'd all have to be ferried back. Andy hoped that in the interim, he'd get the chance to call his boss and ask to go home. Otherwise, he'd be here until midnight for sure.

What he didn't seem to notice in his own misery, was that each one of the well dressed men and women assembled,

were thirty three years old. Their births were at most, days, and maybe weeks apart.

Near the natural red rock amphitheatre known to all of Adam personnel as "the resting canyon", the entire group assembled in the heat of the shade free desert. They were roughly two hundred miles from the nearest dirt road. The area had been scanned, as it was each time an assembly took place, with thermal imaging devices that would signature subtle enough changes to mark anything alive in the vicinity. They stood patiently in their business suits, waiting until the last of the ferrying helicopters managed to assemble all to the area.

It was a solemn occasion. There were seven among them who'd traveled from as far away as Russia and New Zealand. Nine others from the mine offices the company owned on the Northern edge of Finland. That was a terrible post. Yet there had never been even a moment's complaint to those forced to work in the bitter climes.

Most of the world was a bitter clime to Adam personnel.

The last of the helicopters, flown by two of Adam's own pilots remained near the site. The materials had been unloaded and set up near the edge of the amphitheatre.

It was a small generator, a PA system. A tiny six by six raised platform that would act as a stage.

The three coffins that Mr. Slotter and Mr. Pal had accompanied from the launch site in the Caribbean were

positioned before the group. The sight of the coffins exuded grief from all of those assembled. Some cried openly in the heat, unable to contain their emotions. The trio died when the missile exploded on the private island five miles off of Isle Carta Meja in the Caribbean Sea.

It was murder.

In the midst of grief, anger rose in Mr. Slotter as he stared at the coffins. As head of corporate security for Adam, Mr. Slotter felt personally responsible for the deaths. He should have recognized something like sabotage could occur.

Mr. Slotter was the same age as all of those gathered. His nose had been broken twice during adolescence. Both times, he ground the bones back into place himself, silencing the jeering school children watching another of the countless incidents Mr. Slotter's rare appearance created. He suffered the same as many of those gathered growing up different. Early on he believed correctly he was better than his peers. A stoic arrogance caused him to stand out even more in the melting pot of the various schools he'd been beaten in. His pride drew those eager to rob him of it.

They never had.

Mr. Slotter, like all those assembled and grieving over the deaths of three of their precious number became aware of the force in his extraordinary brain as a child. He'd explored its power. It was a painful experience. It once

put a particularly malicious young peer in a coma. The exploration of his power could have killed Mr. Slotter before he became aware of the danger its use invited.

He should have sensed the incident aboard the corporate jet.

She ran from them!

Alison Washburn stole scheduling information and disappeared in a spectacular display of cunning. Then she'd gone to the island and sabotaged a launch. It inserted fear into the psyche of the entire group.

What could she want with the information? She could not stop them, it was unnatural, it was--

"Patience, Mr. Slotter," came the voice from Mr. Bron standing beside Mr. Slotter.

Mr. Slotter realized that in his anger, he let his guard down and in present company, his thoughts were transparent. "We're here now to bury our dead." Mr. Bron finished.

Behind the coffins were gravestones.

They were made of natural red rock and were nearly invisible from more than a couple dozen yards away. There were seventy five of them. Each marked simply with a name and a date. Every time it had been necessary to add a stone, each and every member of Adam Corporation was called to assembly in the desert.

Just as the two thousand one hundred thirty seven who remained assembled today.

Mr. Bron allowed his tears to flow as he gazed at the coffins. The cause was closer than ever and here three more of them would never see it attained. The treachery of the woman was as incomprehensible to Mr. Bron as it was to Mr. Slotter.

That she had been powerful enough to hide it from them! What else could she be hiding? And what did she think she'd accomplish with the scheduling information? It frightened Mr. Bron because a break in the schedule would set them back. The destruction of a launch! Treachery from one of their own was frightening. It was a new face they'd never conceived could happen, it--

Mr. Bron controlled his thoughts. Wiping at his eyes, he spoke:

"Friends, let us begin."

The amplification of Mr. Bron's voice was hardly necessary. Their minds were attuned. They would never be as close as they became at a time like this. United by their grief and empowered by their proximity to one another. It was a rare occasion. It only happened when they were forced to honor those that had fallen for the cause.

Mr. Bron could have probably projected. He was powerful enough. Projection was never as dangerous when the recipients were open to it as those assembled were. And proximity was not an issue. Their early tests indicated that with brethren, projection could occur without the damage a search caused to their special minds. A search was

dangerous. Real damage was guaranteed if that search were into a defiant mind.

All human minds were defiant to infiltration from outside sources. It was natural. Forcing infiltration could kill even a gifted reader trained to limit the damage in him or herself. Many had died in the past testing those limits. There were the gravestones to remind of it. It was why Mr. Bron was so hesitant to sanction what they termed forbidden protocol.

"We come to bury three of our soldiers," Bron said. He dropped his head. "And in their honor, we cast off that which we are forced to present to the world."

In response to his words, all two thousand one hundred and thirty seven of those assembled removed their heavy clothing and laid it neatly folded at their feet.

Then each of the two thousand, one hundred and thirty seven pulled a hair piece of some kind, long, short, exceptionally well crafted, from their heads.

They stood naked in the hot sun. They were near perfect physical specimens of the human form. Better than human, was the joke. Though it was true of their minds, their physical perfection was a thing of hard work. Physical perfection was part of the cause.

They stood as a group, revealed before the sun. What a joy it was to feel that heat on every part of their bodies! What a joy it was to be revealed when so much of their lives remained hidden.

Here, in safety, they were offered the honor to expose the nakedness of *their absolutely hairless bodies*.

There was not a single thread of sexual heat between the young men and the young women gathered. That would come, one day. For now, their muscles shimmered with sweat in the reflection of the hot sun.

"Brethren, each life of ours is precious. To bury three of our own is to bury yet another piece of each of our souls. What we take from this terrible tragedy is renewed strength. In the midst of grief, we remember that sacrifice is a necessary piece of the cause. Our grief brings strength not known by present man. We celebrate in the knowledge that each sacrifice brings us one step closer to our goal."

One hour later, in the helicopter, Mr. Bron gazed out at the limitless desert of Arizona as it rushed past at one hundred forty miles an hour some five hundred feet below. On the opposite side of the chopper, Mr. Slotter looked out the other window. Behind them, Mr. Pal drifted in sleep. Strapped into his seat, he slumped awkwardly.

"How is he?" Mr. Bron asked. Though Mr. Slotter was as remarkable as they came in the guarding of his thoughts, his face alone was an open book.

"We'll be back here soon." Mr. Slotter said. Mr. Bron nodded and shut his eyes.

"And, how are you?" Mr. Bron asked.

"Angry," Mr. Slotter replied, eyes on the desert.

"Understandable," Mr. Bron said.

"It's intolerable," Mr. Slotter replied. "She's employed forbidden protocol."

"As have you!" Mr. Bron said. His anger was swift. Mr. Pal's condition was proof of the charge. Mr. Slotter neither confirmed nor deigned it.

"I will find her," Mr. Slotter said.

"You'll bring her back to us, carefully. You will bring her back *alive*." Mr. Bron admonished.

"If possible," Mr. Slotter said, looking at Mr. Bron for the first time.

"We are still bound by the greater good that patience brings us," Mr. Bron reminded.

"As close as we are, I believe it is time to abandon patience. I believe the time has come for more aggressive action."

"I know." Mr. Bron said, returning his gaze out the window and to the desert floor. He understood Mr. Slotter's frustration. Mr. Slotter was as ever devoted to the cause as any of them. He only suffered in that he allowed his superiority to gain control of his feelings. He had been hurt growing up an outcast. They all had been.

Mr. Slotter hated.

In his heart, he hated present day man.

That would have to be watched.

Bron considered it, raising a shield to guard his thoughts. He imagined the desert below and the heat and how good it felt on his body at the ceremony. Beneath that shield, he considered how far he should let Mr. Slotter go. A violation of protocol was profound. Mr. Bron knew that Mr. Slotter could be, should be sentenced because of it.

But the woman left them. *Left them!* She was now an unknown in the equation. What was in her mind that she must have hidden from them all! At this juncture for this to happen!

"Okay," Mr. Bron finally said.

"That is a yes?"

Mr. Bron looked back at Mr. Slotter. He felt tired. But he put it away. There was not the time for fatigue in their fight. He nodded.

"Alive," Mr. Bron repeated. "We'll need to know what sent her from us."

"And those who might be involved with her?" Mr. Slotter asked.

"You don't believe there are others with her? Others who know what she knows?!" The thought was alarming to Mr. Bron.

"I am only considering the options. I'll know the answers when I drag her back."

Mr. Bron hesitated. His eyes fell on Mr. Pal. He will die by this, Mr. Bron considered behind the mental shield of desert and heat and calm he projected. Mr. Slotter will use

Mr. Pal's gifts until brain damage completely claims him. They he'll look for another strong one among the group. There were others. And Mr. Slotter found it easy to sacrifice for the cause.

Maybe he was right, Mr. Bron thought, behind his shield. Either way, he bit back the fear he felt at such a gamble.

So much of their existence depended on the veil of secrecy they'd grown their company under. It was easy enough to co-exist with present day human beings. They were immune to the change in species occurring in their midst. Mr. Bron allowed himself to feel what freedom would be like, but only rarely. He allowed himself, in his most private moments which were few to be sure, to feel what the cause would bring.

It was corrupting.

Patience had to be maintained. Yet Mr. Slotter was right. They were too close now.

"Forbidden protocol is sanctioned," Mr. Bron said. He turned away, fighting to maintain the shield over his momentary fear.

"Outsiders with knowledge must be memory wiped or terminated."

"Very well," was all that Mr. Slotter said.