

THE **JOSHUA** FILES

THE DESCENDANT CODE

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 DARKWATER

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For David,

*While I was writing this with my broken
leg, you were taking care of all of us.
Thank you so much for helping me begin
an exciting new career.*

Abu Shahrain, Iraq, January 2003

In the midst of the desert, the weapons inspectors found a well. There was little visible sign of it, only a vague discoloration of the sand between rocks. A young airman's foot found it and under the sun's scorching stare, it swallowed him.

Powerful flashlights beamed deep into the void, without sight of the bottom of the well. Light simply fell, apparently endlessly, towards the center of the earth.

Lieutenant Connor Bennett stumbled into the well. It was his first tour of duty outside the US – he'd hit the jackpot. He'd been escorting the team from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission. They'd crossed the desert near Abu Shahrain, about two hundred miles southeast of Baghdad. They'd pored over crumbled mounds; the ruins of the ancient city of Eridu.

Deep inside the darkness of the well, Lieutenant Bennett's voice was clearly audible. Perched on a ledge about twenty yards down, he'd managed the drop with only an injured wrist. Moments later he flashed his torch down to reveal a plunging void. The embarrassment of his tumble vanished, replaced by a rush of relief, the thrill of discovery.

The political pressure to find concealed W.M.D. – weapons of mass destruction – was increasing by the day. Each member of the team held their breath. This well appeared on none of the detailed maps of the region. It was long-forgotten, or perhaps a well-guarded secret.

The team made preparations to the background of an energized hum; quiet anticipation. Their Geiger counters had detected only a normal, background level of radiation. If the weapons of mass destruction were indeed hidden down this ancient hole, they were efficiently shielded.

The managed descent of their infrared video camera was an exercise in patience and control. The inspectors gathered around the video monitor which they had set up near the opening in the ground. Long minutes passed during which the camera sent nothing but images of wall, wall, yet more wall.

Then, collectively they blinked as an image burst onto the screen. The camera panned slowly, revealing the subterranean chamber. The lead inspector tapped the monitor, indicating an area of intriguing complexity. The camera zoomed in.

The team members shuffled slightly as the images appeared on the screen. "Hieroglyphics?" breathed one.

The sole female of the group, Dr. Harper Fletcher spoke. "Not hieroglyphs; cuneiform. Ancient Sumerian."

"Did the city of Eridu extend this far?" The team members turned to Fletcher. She said nothing.

The lead inspector frowned. Satellite scans had ruled out the existence of any underground structures this far from the main ruins of Eridu. Yet, there was no denying the images on the monitor. There were buildings down there. From what he could see on the monitor, these remains were remarkably well preserved.

"I need volunteers to go down."

Lieutenant Bennett watched as Dr. Fletcher's eyes came to rest on him. With a mere blink, Bennett acknowledged her silent instruction. He stepped forward.

"Let me go, sir."

The lead inspector peered from under his baseball cap at another of his team. "How about it, Adams, you want to make the discovery too?"

Bennett waited, wondering why Fletcher hadn't volunteered. That had been their agreement, quietly made at the airbase that morning when in front of his superior officer she'd shown Bennett her CIA identification card. "I'm representing the National Reconnaissance Office, airman. If I need assistance, you're my guy."

He could see Fletcher breathing lightly through open lips. She looked watchful, tense. He leaned back as one of

the team attached a winch to the equipment which stood over the shaft, then clipped one end of the rope first to the weapons inspection team member called Adams, then to Bennett.

They began to lower Adams into the shaft. He vanished into the gloom. Bennett followed, no more than a minute behind. When Adams reached the bottom of the well, he called out. Bennett could see a flashlight dancing against the wall below. It disappeared down a tunnel as Adams began to walk. Bennett switched on his own headlamp, watched the light bounce back against the rock, less than one yard away.

"There's a bunch of inscriptions," came Adams voice. "Some kind of chamber. Looks like we got some of them there . . . what are they called? Sarcophagi. Yeah. We got some kind of burial thing going on here."

Bennett's boots hit the ground. He unclipped the rope, drew his weapon. He took six steps down the tunnel, following Adams. Then he heard it: air sucked in, a brief gasp of astonishment. Within seconds, the sound had transformed into a wail of abject terror. A scream of pain followed. For a moment fear gripped Bennett, held him breathless against the wall.

Adam's voice rang out, piteous, horrified. "Oh God, help me, please . . . help me!"

In another second, Bennett overcame his own reluctance to budge. He rounded the corner into a hollow in the midst of space, dark shadows which hid walls that Bennett could instantly see, were man-made.

In the middle of this blackness Adams had fallen to his knees, a helmet light beaming from his forehead, his voice a prolonged scream of agony. Caught in the beam of Bennett's own flashlight, dark fluid streamed from his eyes and mouth.

Bennett couldn't move. "What did you do?"

But Adams could only turn to Bennett, his features now gruesomely disfigured by the blood pouring from openings in his face. From Adams's hand an object fell, clattered to the ground and vanished into the shadows.

Bennett stared, struggling to regain the use of his own voice. In his earpiece he could hear the demands of the lead inspector above. Everything he saw was being transmitted to a monitor on the surface, where the team watched in silent, disbelieving horror.

"What's happening? Lieutenant, report, now!"

Bennett's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Sir . . . there's something in this room . . ."

The voice in his ear ordered, "Get out of there!"

"Don't leave me . . ." Adams begged. The words were barely audible as he began to choke on his own blood.

Bennett wanted to go. But his legs wouldn't obey him. Instead, he found himself reaching out, taking the hand of the dying man. The light from his headlamp kept catching fragments of the walls in its beam. Wherever the light fell, he saw inscriptions.

A moment later, it was over. Adams slumped to the floor, landed with his face on one side. Bennett couldn't take his eyes off him. So much blood. What was the explanation? A booby-trap? Poisonous gas?

"What the hell is going on down there?"

"Adams is dead."

Then he heard Fletcher's voice. "Airman, report."

Bennett began to back away from the body.

"Is it W.M.D.?" insisted the inspector. "Bennett, did you find weapons?"

Shaking his head, Bennett spoke into his microphone, "It's not W.M.D."

The lead inspector stifled a curse.

Bennett began properly to examine the chamber. If there was some kind of poisonous gas, why hadn't it affected him? His foot touched something on the floor – the object that had fallen from Adams fingers. Was that the source of the poison? He aimed his flashlight directly at the object. It was flat, roughly six inches long, appeared to be made of some pale, alabaster-type stone, its surface covered with inscriptions. Cautiously, Bennett turned around. In the center of the chamber was what looked like an altar.

The chamber had to be ancient. Maybe thousands of years old. Yet something within was still very much operational.

“There’s a reason they don’t want us down here,” Bennett murmured into his microphone. “This is something worth hiding.”

He wondered again about Fletcher, her last-minute reluctance to enter the chamber. He stared into the dead, blood-soaked eyes of Adams’s corpse. Only an airborne toxin could have ravaged the inspector’s body so swiftly. Bennett had never been more than two yards away – surely close enough to be affected.

Why wasn’t Bennett dead?

Vial In Pocket

Thin brown air simmered over Mexico City. Jackson Bennett leaned against the airplane window, pressed his cheek against the cold glass, gazed down at the city below. A dull ache was in his guts, as though a cold stone had become lodged there.

The anxiety wouldn't go. He took a gulp of iced whiskey from his plastic tumbler. A burst of acidity rose from Jackson's stomach as the liquid hit. Within seconds though, the alcohol began its soothing effect. He drank again, eager for relief from unsettled thoughts. He plugged the earphones of his iPod back into his ears and ran his fingers over the screen. He selected an Eminem track; "Mockingbird". He hadn't planned to think of his brother Connor but he did so anyway; he remembered the Christmas three years ago when they were still talking, when Connor had given him the CD.

Connor was older by a matter of minutes, but he had a way of making Jackson feel at least ten years younger. Now they were both nearly thirty. How could it be that his twenties were going to run out soon when it seemed like yesterday that he'd turned eighteen?

The airplane juddered as the undercarriage was lowered. The captain's voice broke in over the in-flight entertainment system.

"We're just making our final approach to Benito Juarez, Mexico City Airport. Please adjust your watches to the local time of 10.45am. May I take this opportunity to thank you for joining us on this Mexicana flight from San Francisco."

In the right pocket of his jacket, Jackson's fingers located the tiny objects of his disquiet; two small plastic test-tubes. Each contained a mere droplet of liquid; droplets which could land him in jail if discovered. Or at the very least in serious proceedings with the customs authorities.

But danger was theoretical – Jackson had never faced any serious consequences. Maybe this was the

blissful naiveté of the inexperienced. Or maybe there was something special about his instinct for survival. After all, he reflected, wasn't his twin brother a decorated US Air Force captain, a veteran of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? His brother had been flying fighter jets since he'd left college, and always at war. If Connor Bennett had something special which helped to keep him safe, maybe Jackson had it too.

Technically, what he was doing was smuggling, no denying it. But he had more important things to do than to fill in some dumb, pointless form. He was three months overdue to submit his doctoral thesis and still had two chapters to write. His lab bench was a mess of partially completed experiments. He'd foolishly agreed to review the latest college textbook written by a good friend of his lab boss. Now this errand to Mexico City, quite out of the blue. There wasn't time for everything.

Jackson knew perfectly well that the micro-organisms that he carried in those tiny test-tubes were harmless if handled correctly. His lab boss knew it too, but probably hadn't realized that Jackson was planning to travel 'vial-in-pocket'. The guy wasn't a stickler for rules; he cared about nothing but the bottom line: results. Yet he'd stick Jackson with one hundred percent of the blame if he were caught.

It wasn't unusual for biological scientists to bend the rules this way. Even so, Jackson always felt apprehensive when the moment came to stroll past the customs officials at the 'Nothing to Declare' desk. Lying didn't come naturally and he didn't get much practice.

The samples were harmless. They might, however, turn out to be worth a small fortune to the biotech industry. But that was in the future. Until the experimental evidence was in and the patents filed, these samples had a nominal value.

Definitely not contraband. At least, not in Jackson's mind.

He knew that customs officials looked for signs of nervousness in the eyes and body language of travelers. Drug traffickers were their main prey, but he felt sure

that they wouldn't pass up the chance to bust a *gringo* carrying strange vials of an unknown, potentially lethal micro-organism.

So before landing, when travelling 'vial-in-pocket', Jackson made sure to steel his nerves, to relax muscles with three small bottles of whiskey.

Moments later he was waiting in the disorderly crowd that had formed at the customs station, just yards away. Ahead of him in the makeshift line, his neighbor from the flight glanced around. "I'll say this for the system here: it's pretty fake-proof."

"Pardon me?"

"See those buttons?" explained the passenger. "You press the button. It's attached to a random circuit which chooses – red or green. If you get a green light; that's it, you're through. Even if you look like Bin Laden. A red light, that's different. Get a red light and you're searched down to unrolling your socks and underpants."

"You gotta be kidding." Jackson felt sheen of sweat appear on his forehead.

"*Narco-trafficantes* – the Mexican drug gangs. They know all the tricks to fake out the customs officials. But there's no way to beat this system. Everyone takes the exact same chance."

The passenger was saying this as he stepped up to the line and pressed the large red button indicated by the Mexican official. He made a face of mock anxiety and then exaggerated relief when the light turned green.

Jackson took a couple of quick breaths, forced a grin at the waiting official. He took his place in front of the button. He hesitated for just a second, wondering if any last minute reprieve could possibly save him from the potential disaster of a red light.

"Just press the button please, sir," insisted the uniformed woman. There was the subtlest hint of force in her voice.

He blinked hard as he pressed the button. A second later he opened them to register the verdict.

It was green.

"You look just a little nervous there, sir, you got something to hide?" asked the customs official. It was impossible to tell whether or not she was joking.

"No, ma'am." Jackson had rarely worked so hard to seem relaxed. "I just got a bus to catch. Didn't wanna be late."

With a dismissive wave, the woman lifted his suitcase onto the conveyor belt for the X-ray machine. Seconds later he retrieved it. He itched for a reassuring touch of the plastic test-tubes, but didn't dare to reach into his jacket pocket until he'd cleared the crowded arrivals hall.

He glanced at his watch. Six hours since he had removed the samples from storage at minus 70°C. Jackson knew that the sooner he managed to get them onto ice, the better the chances of their viability. He looked around for any sign of Dr. Pedro Juan Beltran, a scientific collaborator based at the Institute of Biotechnology of Temixco, Mexico. Beltran had promised to arrive in good time, with a thermos of ice with which to rescue the vials.

Jackson soon spotted Beltran eating a cinnamon bun and cradling a paper coffee cup in a small café.

"PJ?"

Beltran stood, grinned and stuck out a hand that was still hot from holding the coffee. "Hey! Jackson! Well, well; the newly minted Doctor Bennett, correct?"

Jackson stuttered slightly. "Not exactly. I'm kind of behind schedule."

"Ah. I looked you up on the Web. Found your blog. *Doctor Jackson Bennett*."

Jackson could feel his cheeks burning with embarrassment. That stupid blog. There was nothing there except a photo of him snowboarding. He'd named it prematurely, a joke, because the name "jacksonbennett.com" had already been taken, but "drjacksonbennett.com" was still available. It seemed idiotic to explain all that right now, so he simply continued to blush.

To his relief, Beltran chuckled. He had the grave, worn face of someone who worked in a concentrated and urgent manner. The sudden smile was a surprise.

Beltran pulled a small Thermos flask from his inside pocket. He unscrewed the top to reveal a densely packed mound of tiny ice flakes. This was it, the moment to perform the simple task he'd been sent all the way to Mexico for – the handover of precious biological samples. Jackson glanced around for the briefest of seconds to check that he wasn't observed, then moved a swift hand to his pocket. He palmed the vials, passed his hand over the top of the flask to drop them in with the minimum of movement.

Beltran's features broke into a wide beam. "Hey that's very good, my friend! You take a magician seminar or something?"

"An old Vegas trick I learned when I was a professional croupier," Jackson replied with deadpan humor. Beltran's smile lingered, with a hint of puzzled curiosity. It was clear that he wasn't sure whether Jackson was joking.

Beltran gestured broadly. "Bennett, make yourself comfortable. Take off your jacket – you're sweating like a pig!"

It was true. The alcohol may have helped to relax his face, but the heat of the hall and tension of the customs line had proved too much. Reluctantly, Jackson removed his beloved brown suede jacket. He folded it carefully over the seat next to his so that the pockets were not exposed to passers-by.

To Jackson's astonishment, Beltran leaned forward, his face instantly serious. Close to Jackson's ear he whispered, "There's a reason he sent *you*. I couldn't tell you via email. Or over the phone."

Jackson leaned back to look into Beltran's eyes. There was no hint of humor. He waited for a few seconds but Beltran continued to stare at him with a penetrating gaze. Eventually he said, "Are we still talking about my work with the *phoenix* gene?"

"What else? The thing is, I've stumbled across something. It's strange, unexpected. I thought I was working on something interesting, maybe something I could sell to the biotech industry. There's something more here, Jackson. Something big. There are other people involved. To be honest, there are things I haven't yet talked about."

"Sounds like maybe you should be talking to my boss?"

"No. This relates directly to your work. You need to know *directly*."

Jackson was speechless. High-level discussions with a scientific collaborator almost never by-passed the head of the lab. Jackson could scarcely believe that his boss had permitted it.

"Before you ask, no, your boss doesn't have any clue about what I'm about to tell you."

All Jackson could do was to nod. "OK. . . I guess! Thanks."

"Don't rush the gratitude. The first thing I need to do is to make something of a confession. Throughout this collaboration, there are things I have kept from you and the rest of the team."

"What are you saying? You haven't told me and the guys at UCSF? Or do you mean your own guys too?"

"I haven't shared this particular detail with anyone at the University of California at San Francisco. Nor anyone from my own team in Mexico, either."

Jackson stared at Beltran. The situation was becoming more confusing by the second. Withholding information from a collaborator could be a serious business. Research funds were hotly competitive. Without a promise of mutual openness, two teams of researchers could scarcely risk so much as a conversation.

Maybe this was why Beltran had asked to deal directly with him. Unlike his boss, Jackson was no scientific big shot. He wasn't particularly volatile either. His boss would probably punch a collaborator for holding out on him, then proceed to shred the guy's career.

Beltran's eyes hinted at contrition. "You know how it can be when your research is funded privately. Legally, I'm completely silenced. Just lately, however, I'm starting to get more than a little bit . . ."

The Mexican scientist stretched his arms across the back of the booth, knocking down Jackson's suede jacket. Jackson made to stand up but he was effusive with apologies. "Listen to me, I get so melodramatic. Let me get that for you." He picked the jacket off the floor, made a show of dusting the surface clean. He handed it back to Jackson as carefully as if it had been a kitten.

Jackson couldn't stop himself checking the jacket himself. The floor of the café was sure to be sticky with coffee spills. He'd managed to act easy-going about Beltran's clumsiness but he was actually pretty irritated. The suede jacket was his most expensive item of clothing; the only garment he could count on in which to look semi-decent.

When he looked back at Beltran, Jackson was bewildered to see that the scientist had become suddenly very still, staring right past his shoulder. He glanced around, following Beltran's gaze.

A man approached, dressed in pale grey, unremarkable, ill-fitting suit, white shirt and anthracite-colored tie. He didn't look like a businessman or a scientist. When he looked back at Beltran, who was now pale with tension, Jackson's pulse began to race.

Mexican Customs.

Had they somehow caught up to him?

Stiff with tension, Jackson gave the newcomer a coolly polite smile. "Hi."

Their new companion stopped level with Beltran. He took a seat next to him and flashed what a perfunctory smile. His hair was immaculately cropped, as though he was fresh from the barber. It was thick, but almost uniformly silver-grey. From his face, Jackson wouldn't have guessed the man's age any older than thirty-five. Perhaps he was prematurely grey?

His attention shifted to Beltran. An unmistakable frisson of fear crossed Beltran's face as their eyes met for

less than a second. Yet all he said was “Doctor Bennett. This is an associate from the Institute. It seems I’m on an earlier flight to Monterrey. So I gotta get going, Doctor Bennett. I’ll see you around, OK?”

Two “Doctor Bennetts” in quick succession. Beltran had already poked fun at him being overdue with the doctorate. He was on the point of asking Beltran what kind of point he was trying to make.

The grey-haired man nodded. Speaking English with the merest hint of a Mexican accent, he murmured, “A pity we didn’t get time to talk, Doctor Bennett. Perhaps we’ll catch up in at the Institute, in Temixco?”

“You’re leaving . . . ?”

Beltran’s face was curiously devoid of expression as he turned away. The newcomer picked up the Thermos containing the test-tubes, which stood, quite forgotten, on the table.

“Your flask,” said the man to Beltran.

For several seconds after they’d left, Jackson remained half-seated, half-way to standing up, unable to decide whether he should follow Beltran or not.

The grey-haired guy couldn’t be with Customs – or else it would have been Jackson who would have been asked to leave.

Yet something was wrong – very much so. Beltran had looked frightened, yet his words had been bizarrely at odds with such a swift change of mood. All he’d said to Jackson was *Doctor Bennett this* and *Doctor Bennett that*.

In fact, that in itself was strange.

Why did Beltran keep calling me “Doctor Bennett”?

The Grey-Haired Man

As he left the coffee shop, PJ Beltran had to force himself not to glance back at Bennett. His mind was racing, trying to fathom the motive of the man who was leading him away. The truth was, PJ had never met the grey-haired man before, had no idea who he could be.

Inside the man's jacket pocket, there was a gun – PJ had felt it when the man had taken a seat next to him, in the café. He'd felt the hard, blunt nose of it against his side. As they'd walked away, PJ had been given a glimpse of the weapon.

"Please, Doctor Beltran, be calm. Ten minutes of your time is all I need."

The grey-haired man hadn't introduced himself further. But PJ knew without a doubt that he'd be shot if he dared to disobey.

The next two minutes had passed as though in a dream. As the two men walked down the airport concourse he spoke in Spanish, asking, "What happens now?"

"I'm a government agent. We're onto you, my friend. We have cameras everywhere. We need to know what kind of material you are carrying in that flask. I have your flask, but also, there'll be some questions."

PJ wanted to believe him. Aspects of the story rang true. Clearly the man had been observing PJ and Bennett. He had some idea of what was happening. Maybe PJ's darkest fears were unfounded. But his fear wouldn't entirely abate.

'Government agent' sounded convincing. The clandestine gun shook PJ's confidence. Did Mexican government agents threaten people with guns, practically in public? Maybe the guy is going to ask for a bribe, PJ hoped. He found himself clinging to the idea. The Customs Department could make difficulties for PJ. It might be worth risking a bribe to avoid trouble.

The alternatives were far scarier – what if this was a prelude to a kidnap?

Yet a darker, more ponderous fear scratched at the edge of PJ's thoughts; the anxiety he'd been trying to indicate to Bennett. The research he'd been doing had taken a surprising turn. He may have wandered into dangerous territory. Was it possible that PJ had underestimated just how dangerous?

PJ's thoughts went to Jackson Bennett. Why hadn't this 'agent' gone for the American scientist? Or maybe someone else was taking care of Bennett.

PJ had only been able to think of one way to signal caution to the American graduate student – calling him 'Dr.' Bennett. After the joke he'd made, Bennett was bound to have found that odd. Scientists this close to their doctoral exam tended to be hypersensitive to the issue. Fervently, PJ hoped that he'd understood.

Jackson sipped his coffee slowly. What the hell just happened? He didn't have any illusions: scientists as eminent as PJ Beltran often didn't have time for new kids on the block, like him. The grey-haired man was clearly more important than Jackson but there was something weird about the whole thing.

Beltran had looked scared.

Leaving, Beltran and the stranger had stuck close together – he spotted that they had even paused when other travelers had tried to walk between them, forcing them instead to walk around.

"Almost as if they were handcuffed together. . ."

Then it hit him: the reason for Beltran's odd behavior, his making such a point of calling Jackson 'Dr.' Bennett when the two had already established that he was anything but a 'Dr' yet. The grey-haired man had followed Beltran's lead. He didn't know that Jackson wasn't yet Dr. Bennett.

Beltran was trying to send him a coded signal.

Could it have been a warning?

The anonymous grey suit wasn't a businessman or a scientist. Maybe a government man?

With a gulp, he swallowed the coffee.

Beltran had been arrested. The flask, the test-tubes – the whole game was up. Yet somehow, Beltran had kept Jackson out of it.

He reached for his cell phone. Someone at Beltran's lab had to be warned. If the government were involved then reprisals might be swift. The only number he had for Beltran was a mobile number. There was an address for the Institute in Temixco, but no phone number. Jackson hesitated. He had to do something.

He picked up his jacket, peered down the airport concourse one last time to see if there was still any sign of Beltran or the stranger. There wasn't. Jackson rapped the table with the edge of his phone, thinking. The Institute was a long way to go, something like a two hour drive. What else could he do? He couldn't leave things like this.

At the Alamo office, he hired a car. With as much haste as he could muster, he stashed his rolling suitcase in the trunk of the car and slid into the driver's seat. He turned on the satellite navigation and tapped in his destination: 'Temixco'.

He was more nervous by the minute. The government was onto the whole illegal exchange. Presumably they would interrogate Beltran. It was just a matter of time before they were after Jackson, too. Presumably Beltran's colleagues in Temixco could advise him. Did he need a lawyer? Or would he do better simply to leave the country, right away?

No – that would be pretty cowardly. Beltran's colleagues might need help to cover Beltran's tracks. It wasn't cool to let someone else take the hit for something that also involved him.

Sweat flushed from every pore of Jackson's body. What was he taking on?

The drivers in this city were every bit as bad as he'd been warned. They drove almost intimately close in eye-wateringly narrow lanes, with an informality that made the sweat patches under his arms grow larger by the second. Jackson held his breath. He probably needed

eyes in the back of his head to get to his destination without at least a minor crash.

If he'd been less frazzled, Jackson might have noticed the black Ford Explorer drop neatly into the southbound traffic, just two cars behind him.

PJ began to wonder where the expressionless man at his side was leading him. Brisk steps took them further down the marble floors of the airport concourse. PJ had expected simply to be led into one of the many discreet, unmarked airport offices. They had already passed at least a dozen.

Things were happening faster than his ability to process. Finally it struck him that it was odd that they were heading for the far end of the airport. They'd passed all the check-in desks for the domestic departures. Now the number of people around thinned to just a handful.

"I need to use the bathroom," the grey-haired man said. He stopped and gripped PJ's shoulder. His weapon dug hard into PJ's ribs. There was something forced about the man's tone, as though he wasn't used to sounding quite this accommodating. "You should take the opportunity too, Dr. Beltran. For you, this is gonna be a long night."

PJ flinched. So, there was going to be an interrogation. Who was in charge?

Abruptly, PJ felt himself steered into the men's room. It was empty, apart from a uniformed attendant who sat slouched over on a low chair reading a dog-eared, semi-pornographic comic book. With a cursory glance around the room, the grey-haired man held out a fifty peso note to the attendant. Politely, he asked him to fetch some more hand towels. The attendant's eyes boggled for a second at the size of the tip. He snatched the fifty pesos, tucked the comic book into the waist of his uniform trousers and left.

PJ's heart began to pound so heavily that his chest shook. For the first time, he was alone with the man who had escorted him away from Bennett.

"OK, Dr. Beltran. You first. In this cubicle." The grey-haired man reached inside his suit jacket, pulled out an automatic pistol. Beltran froze. He opened his mouth but the sound that came from it was muted. In silent disbelief, he watched as the man's hand went to a trouser pocket and pulled out a thick metallic cylinder. PJ's mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. PJ felt his breath turn to ice. Very calmly, the grey-haired man twisted a silencer onto the muzzle of the pistol.

PJ's hesitation ended as rapidly as it had overtaken him. He flung himself forward, only to find himself knocked back hard, into the cubicle by a swipe of the semi-assembled weapon. Sticky blood poured into his left eye. A wave of concentrated terror flowed through him. In that instant, PJ Beltran understood that he was going to die.

His muscles seemed to have become locked. He heard the grey-haired man's order to sit on the toilet seat as though from a great distance. PJ watched, almost detached, unable to move as the revolver was raised. At that moment he sensed the crumbling of the foundations of his ordered universe; this was the abyss that people talked about, the final abyss of terror.

PJ Beltran was staring deep inside.

A Test-Tube

The bullet entered PJ's eye with almost no sound.

It blew his eyeball out of its socket with a slight pop, streaming easily through his head. Bone shattered as the bullet exited and sank with a faint thud into the soft plaster wall behind the toilet. Blood and brain tissue spilled freely from the open wounds. The assassin stepped into the cubicle and locked the door behind him. He pulled hard at the pale blue shirt that Beltran was wearing, yanked the garment over the dead man's head. He made a makeshift knot at the top to stem the flow of blood. The assassin spooled out bunches of toilet paper. With meticulous care he wiped away all drops of blood and flecks of brain which had spilled near the neighboring cubicle.

The man then picked up the Thermos flask which lay, discarded on the floor. He manipulated PJ's body so that it sat quite stably. Finally, he hoisted himself over the barrier to the right, leaving PJ's body locked inside. He flushed away the handfuls of blood-soaked toilet paper, and left the cubicle empty. For a couple of minutes he stood at the sink, calmly washing his hands.

A moment later, the attendant returned.

"My companion doesn't feel so good," the grey-haired man stated flatly. He didn't look up. "A touch of amoebas. I think he'll be a while"

The attendant muttered sympathetically, "Poor thing." It probably meant a big clean-up job for him when the guy was finished, but in his job it usually paid to be extra polite.

Without stopping to check himself in the mirror, the grey-haired man left. He strolled rapidly towards the nearest airport exit and into a waiting black Ford Explorer.

Jackson finally caught sight of the welcome signs; toll booths for the fast road south to Cuernavaca, a large city close to Temixco. As he drove his car slowly through the booth, Jackson decided to stop at the nearby roadside

service station. He'd pick up some Diet Coke and some spicy chips. A change of shirt also seemed like a good idea. His green polo top was soaked in two rounds of nervous sweat. As the air warmed up, his body was beginning to give off a sharp, acrid stench.

Jackson opened the trunk of the car and selected a blue pique polo shirt from his suitcase. Inside the men's room, he hung his suede jacket on the back of a door. He peeled off his shirt, thoroughly wiping his torso, then changed into the blue shirt. He rinsed his face and hands with cool water and used the old shirt to dry his face. He slid the jacket over his shoulders and dug his hands into his jacket pockets. He looked critically at himself in the mirror. Not too bad – considering the stressful morning he'd had. Presentable enough, especially for a scientist. Better than he usually looked when he went to his own lab in San Francisco.

To Jackson's surprise, the fingers of his left hand touched something unfamiliar in his jacket pocket. He drew out a green Post-It note wrapped around a small plastic test-tube. It was similar to the test-tubes he'd brought over from San Francisco. This test-tube was unlabeled, apart from something written in black marker pen on the lid. It seemed to be empty. He held it up to the light and flicked it a couple of times. A small volume of liquid coalesced in the bottom of the tube. The lid was sealed with Parafilm – a stretchy, synthetic membrane. He peeled away the film so that he could examine the writing on the lid.

It was long number, divided up by the occasional dash. It didn't take a genius to work out that it was probably a telephone number. There was no name.

Jackson's bewilderment lasted only a couple of seconds. Then he saw something that made him freeze.

Reflected in the mirror, he could see a part of the window giving onto the car park. Two men in grey suits, from their tanned appearance probably Mexicans, were walking around his rented Honda Civic. They tried the door and peered inside.

Jackson's eyes went to the test-tube in his hand.

Beltran must have planted it. That little accident with his jacket had been no such thing – Beltran must have used it as an opportunity to slip something into the pocket.

Had Beltran betrayed him, planted evidence that would exonerate Beltran and throw all the blame on him? If so, why would he bother with a cryptic warning?

He glanced out of the window again. The two men in suits were walking away from his car. They were heading for the bathroom block.

Jackson moved fast. He dropped the test-tube back into his pocket, ducked out of view from the mirror and crawled to the far end of the bathroom. Scrambling around, he looked for another way out of the place. A high window gave onto the rear of the block. He launched himself at the window, managed to grab hold of the top of the frame with both hands. He squeezed himself between the open pane and the frame, then fell heavily on his side onto a plastic dumpster, just inches below the ledge. Jackson rolled off that and to his amazement, landed on his feet.

Heaving rapid, shallow breaths, he cast his gaze at the vehicles going through the toll booths. He couldn't return to the car park – it was way too open. Whoever those men were, Jackson guessed that they had been following him since the airport. Maybe they even knew where he was going. After all, it was no secret where PJ Beltran worked.

He felt faintly sick as he realized; it had been stupid to assume he'd escaped the attention of the official. A quick phone call had probably confirmed who 'Dr. Bennett' actually was.

Cuernavaca and Temixco were out of bounds. So where could he go? Jackson struggled to think of the name of even one place in Mexico. For the tenth time that day, he wondered at his boss's decision to send him on this errand. How had Beltran convinced him? Or had his boss had some inkling of the danger? It seemed paranoid even to suspect his boss. Jackson couldn't seem to stop himself racking up one paranoia after another.

He knew no-one in Mexico, his Spanish was only high school level and little practiced. Jackson belonged on the next flight out of the country, not stuck inside a roadside service station trying to think of somewhere to go.

Checking briefly that he hadn't been spotted, he ran behind the next building in the complex, a step closer to the toll booths. A small lorry approached. The words "Nieves de Tepoztlan" were painted on the side, intertwined around a wreath of lime-green leaves. He recognized the name of the town from having flipped through the Lonely Planet Guide to Mexico, before his flight. There weren't many tourist attractions close to Temixco, but Tepoztlan was one. From what Jackson could recall, the town was known for its exotically flavored *nieves* – water ices, as well as some spectacularly-situated Aztec ruins and a new-age, hippy scene. There'd be Americans there, and Canadians – lots of them. The ideal place to blend in and become lost.

He rushed to the driver's side, made urgent hand signals at the lorry driver until he opened his window.

"Please, sir, help me. Do you speak English?"

The driver's eyes narrowed. He shook his head.

Jackson groaned. "My car – stolen. Need go Tepoztlan," he said in broken Spanish. "Please. Fifty dollars, OK?"

"Toll roads?" the driver barked, in English. "Dollars *americanos*, tolls?"

Jackson nodded. He knew he was lucky to be given any help – Mexicans could be notoriously unhelpful to *gringos*. "I'll pay the tolls also," he agreed, grateful for the driver's limited grasp at least, of road terminology in English.

"*Horale, vamanos!*" shouted the driver. He slapped the passenger seat.

As they drove past the car park of the service station, Jackson bent low, fiddled with a shoelace. He couldn't risk being spotted, even though his curiosity was almost unbearable. The logical part of his personality had begun to reassert itself.

Now, Jackson wondered if he hadn't perhaps overreacted by running. He may have created more problems for himself. If those guys were indeed the authorities – maybe even the same people who had picked up Beltran – then failing to cooperate could be very risky in the long term. He might find himself refused further access to Mexico. The Institute of Biotechnology in Temixco – a government funded organization – could refuse future collaborations with him. That would just about ruin any chance Jackson had to continue the work he'd done during the past three years.

Yet, something else told Jackson that his quick reaction had probably saved him from a serious fate, maybe even worse than being arrested for trafficking in biological samples.

As incomprehensible as the idea was, Beltran must have planted the test-tube. Beltran's discreet warning, and his strange words, minutes before they'd been separated. *"There's something more here, Jackson. Something big."*

Jackson clutched the test-tube tightly in the palm of his left hand. The tube contained something important, something Beltran was desperate for him to have. Something he couldn't risk handing over in the open.

Beltran must have known he was being watched. A plan had been set in motion. The lorry rumbled over a pot-hole. Jackson gripped his seat-belt. He wondered, once again, about the telephone number on that test-tube.

Pyramid Sacrifice

The ice truck descended into the valley behind the Ajusco Mountains through which they'd just driven. As they approached Tepoztlan, the landscape changed; ridges in the rock rippled in a dramatic backdrop to the village. At the top of one of those ridges was the small 'Tepozteco'; a white stone pyramid dedicated to Ometochtli-Tepoxtécatl, a god of the fermented maguey drink known as *pulque*, of fertility and the harvest.

After squaring his deal with the driver, Jackson made his way to the market and found something to eat. He realized that he had little idea of how Mexican justice worked. For all he knew, people could be held with no charges and no reason, if they were suspected of bio-terrorist activity. This, Jackson knew in his darkest thoughts, was the most serious suspicion which he and Dr. Beltran might face.

Jackson couldn't risk a call to Beltran's lab from his cell phone. The officials were bound to ask for the phone records of the lab, and the moment that his cell phone number was revealed, that was the end of his freedom. He'd need to call directory enquiries for the number. He paid for a phone card and headed for a call booth, dialed the number of Beltran's lab. It was best to be open with Beltran's colleagues. They were the only people on whom Jackson could count for help.

"Jackson Bennett! Hey, man. How come you aren't here yet?" Simon Reyes answered the phone, Beltran's newest doctoral student. Simon had graduated top of his class at university before he'd started a PhD program in University of California, San Francisco. He'd rotated through a couple of labs there before Beltran had persuaded the young man to join him in Temixco. Jackson had never actually met Simon, but his own boss at the lab spoke highly of the young graduate student.

"Simon. Listen, I think that Doctor Beltran - PJ - and I are in trouble. This is the scariest shit that's ever happened to me."

Jackson could tell from the silence that Simon was totally taken aback.

"Simon, you know anything about what PJ was working on? His personal research project, I mean."

"You're talking about *phoenix*, yes? Not too much. PJ's been real secretive about it. The funding comes from a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland."

Jackson closed his eyes in frustration. Beltran hadn't mentioned that he was also collaborating with a pharmaceutical company. That was fair enough; there were many aspects to any research project. Some might be of particular interest to a 'pharma' and most labs wouldn't turn away that kind of money. And pharmaceutical confidential disclosure agreements were notoriously troublesome. They could make productive scientific conversations almost impossible. "Anything you know, Simon. This is real important."

There was a long silence. "PJ doesn't tell us much. But . . . come to think of it I'm pretty sure that recently, he's made some kind of breakthrough. He didn't tell you?"

"He started to tell me. And then. . ."

"I had the impression that PJ's meeting with you had something to do with what he'd found. I saw him prepare a sample for you to carry, 'vial-in-pocket'."

Simon's words confirmed what Jackson had begun to suspect; Beltran was aware of a threat. That the same fate might pass to Jackson. What could be in the test-tube? Something which would protect him? Or the very item which had placed Jackson in the path of the people who'd taken Beltran?

Jackson said, haltingly, "Some guy was onto us at the airport. He may have been there when I gave PJ the samples. Then some goons showed up sniffing 'round my car on the way to you. They could have been government. I guess the Mexican Customs department isn't cool with me bringing this stuff in, undocumented. So I got the hell out of there. I'm in Tepoztlan. You know it?"

"Sure." Simon hesitated. "You need me to come pick you up?"

"I think maybe I shouldn't go to the Institute. These customs guys probably know that I was heading there. Can you take me somewhere safe nearby, and then I can meet with the rest of the lab?" Jackson gnawed anxiously on his lip. "So. . .seriously, PJ hasn't been in touch with you at all?"

There was an empty crackle on the line, as though Simon's doubt and growing anxiety was audible. "No."

"OK, let's talk when we meet up Tepoztlan."

"You have somewhere in mind?"

"How about on the pyramid? I wanted to take a look at it properly anyway. That way we should be able to see anyone approaching us from a ways off."

Simon breathed noisily. He didn't seem to like the idea much. "You sure, Jackson? It's quite a climb."

"It's fine. Simon, listen; you need to know something." He then related, as calmly as possible, how Beltran had left him at Mexico City airport. The phone was silent for a long time. Jackson continued, "PJ was trying to keep me in the clear. I guess he wanted me to carry some sort of message. If only I knew what."

"OK, so you don't go with anyone but me; I'm wearing, like, this orange Hawaiian shirt with, ah, a kinda pineapple design. And black jeans. You got that?"

Jackson raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like you're dressed to impress."

Simon Reyes jumped up from the seat by his employer's lab phone. "I'm going to pick up Jackson Bennett, that guy from the lab in UCSF. He's in some kind of trouble," Simon told the rest of Beltran's research group. He didn't want to elaborate, didn't have the time. Jackson had sounded pretty shaken. Simon didn't even want to think about what could have happened to PJ Beltran. But Jackson seemed to assume that PJ had been led away by the officials from the government. Whereas Simon was aware of another, even darker scenario.

Sequestrantes – kidnappers – had been the word he had not dared bring himself to use in his conversation with Jackson. A word Simon couldn't keep out of his thoughts now. Everyone in Mexico knew what kidnap-

pers were capable of. Recently the gangs were branching out beyond the simple fare of cash-for-victims, exploring the corporate possibilities of industrial espionage. If anyone had got wind of what Beltran and Jackson were exchanging at the airport, kidnapping was a genuine and chilling possibility.

In the parking lot of the Institute of Biotechnology, Simon Reyes hastily maneuvered his old, silver Nissan Tsuru out of its position and made straight for the highway to Tepoztlan.

A black Ford Explorer which was parked across the road from the Institute pulled into the traffic behind him. Simon's heart began to thud as he watched, in his rear view mirror, the Explorer take the same lane as did he towards Tepoztlan.

Today, there could be no coincidences.

Desperately, Simon began to hunt for a way off the road, back into the tiny town of Temixco. It was hopeless; as soon as there were no cars in the immediate vicinity, the Explorer drew so close behind him that slowing down or turning off the road was an impossibility.

As the two cars moved further into the winding road to Tepoztlan, Simon began to feel the keen edge of fear. "They torture people," he remembered, with barely controlled terror. "They slice off your fingers, your balls."

Then it happened; the moment he had dreaded. The Explorer drew level with Simon's car, taking the other lane. As the window of the Explorer drew down slowly, Simon could see a pistol in the hand of the man in the passenger seat. Waving the pistol, the man gestured to Simon to get off the road. For good measure, a warning shot rang across the bonnet of Simon's car.

Shaking, Simon parked. He began to pray silently as he watched two men get out of the Explorer and walk over.

"Get out." The door to his car was opened; the order was barked by the younger of the two men, who pointed a gun at Simon's head.

They motioned to Simon to move off the road, into the woods alongside.

"God have mercy on my soul. . ." Simon mumbled, his voice cracking.

"Don't worry Simon. We won't hurt you bad, I promise. It'll be easy, quick." The older of the two men, a grey-haired man in his late thirties, spoke with apparent sincerity.

Simon broke down.

"Come on, come on. We all have to die. Finish your prayers like a good boy. Think of it this way; we're saving you from a cancer. Or Alzheimer's. Who knows, in the future maybe something even worse. You scientists invent new diseases to kill us as fast as you find the cures."

Simon sobbed uncontrollably. He was twenty-two years old, the first person from his family to even dream of being 'Dr. Reyes'. Simon didn't even bother to beg. The men were completely serious, carrying out their jobs with consummate professionalism. The grey-haired man took his arm, gripping him firmly but not painfully.

"Simon. We'll make this quick. Trust me, you won't feel anything. But you have to do something for me. Take off your clothes. The shirt, the jeans. Nice and slow. It's nothing weird or sick, don't worry. Just don't want to get blood on them."

Then, with unbearable clarity, Simon understood everything. The older man saw the light of recognition in his eyes.

"Yes, that's right. I'm glad you understand. I'm sorry. Dr. Beltran's phone is tapped. It has been for a while. We know all about PJ's research, and about your meeting with Jackson Bennett. We really need his help, you see. But I don't think he'll want to speak to us. So now, we need your clothes. Come on, Simon. Finish your prayers."

Moments later, the two men lifted Simon's body, rolling it into a ditch, where the dense undergrowth partially obscured it.

As he began to remove his own clothes, Simon's assassin commented, "I like the merciful touch, boss. It's classy."

"You think so, Fernando?" replied the grey-haired man, holding out Simon's discarded clothes for him to change into. "You should see me with the ones who struggle, or fight back. Violence is a precision weapon. You don't waste too much of it on a good man like this. Save it for the dangerous bastards. Because it ages you; it destroys you inside. If you want to last in this profession, you've got to have a plan for psychological longevity."

Fernando buttoned the orange shirt, hooking the pistol into the back waistband of the jeans. He lifted his palms and grinned. "What do you think, boss? Do I pass for a genius?"

The grey-haired man gave him an encouraging slap. "Son, you're Nobel prize material already."

On The Tepozteco

Legend holds that the Tepozteco pyramid marks the birthplace of the Aztec God, *Quetzalcoatl*. Jackson blinked in the harsh early afternoon light. He tried to spot the white stones of the cliff-top pyramid from the far end of Tepoztlan. As well as a walk to the other side of town, past a collection of Mexican handicrafts stalls and people hawking the trappings of new age, alternative lifestyle, there would be a brief hike through the thick vegetation, to the top of the hill on which the Aztecs had, hundreds of years ago, built the pyramid.

Jackson glanced at his watch. Just under one hour to get to the top. He sauntered casually down a wide cobbled alley, flanked with white adobe cottages covered with bougainvillea flowers, birds' nests clinging limpet-like to the eaves. The alley offered a direct view of the pyramid, visible merely as a stone structure perched on top of a sharp cliff edge, on a hill known as *Ehecatepetl*, or 'hill of the wind'.

As he walked, he was besieged by small children, imploring, "*Señor, señor*, a massage? A fortune by your palm? Incense sticks to help you reach enlightenment?"

Passing by one of the empty seats of the massage stalls, Jackson relented. A neck massage would certainly help loosen him up for the steep climb ahead. He nodded and took a seat. The strong hands of a stern-looking middle-aged Mexican woman took hold of his shoulders and began kneading his muscles. As he began to allow himself to relax, a girl about fifteen years old, dressed in a tight-fitting white T shirt and worn blue jeans, stopped in front of him. She gazed at him intently with solemn, brown eyes.

"*Buenos días*," Jackson said, politely.

"I tell your fortune, yes?" the girl asked him, in English. "Twenty *pesos*."

Jackson sighed. Why not? He was perfectly aware that people disliked tourists who refused to part with a few dollars in the name of getting value for money,

especially if they were American. With a wan smile, he dropped the money into the girl's grubby, outstretched hand and held out his right palm. The girl gazed into his eyes for a second, then took his left hand. "We use this one." She studied it for a few minutes, and looked back into his eyes.

"You are a thinker. You like puzzles – no that's not what it says. You like *questions*. Your love line is strong, but there's disappointment."

"I still haven't found the right girl," he said.

"You've been disappointed in love, and you will be again. Your life line is strong, but you live a dangerous life; there are breaks. Sickness or accidents – I can't tell."

"Accidents, probably," agreed Jackson. Most winter sports enthusiasts broke some part of their body, sooner or later, and he was obsessed with snowboarding. He felt himself immortal, naturally. The statistics were against him in the long run.

"Your fate line is deep; your life is controlled not by you but by things that happen to you."

He eyed her with a touch of cynicism. "You got any advice? Something I can actually use?"

"Look; where it crosses the life line. You see this tiny break in the life line? This means a serious betrayal."

Jackson smiled uneasily. "Ooh. Sounds serious."

"A girlfriend, perhaps? Or maybe someone in your family."

His masseuse spoke for the first time. "You should listen to my daughter. She has the gift, the third eye. If she tells you there is danger, then there is danger."

With this, the masseuse slapped his shoulders, the blow stinging very slightly at first, the warmth then spreading to his neck. Amazingly, for five minutes' work, Jackson actually felt substantially more relaxed.

It was nothing but new-agey garbage, he told himself. Normally Jackson would have nothing to do with unscientific superstition. But Beltran's planting of the test-tube on him had obviously unbalanced him. He took it out of his pocket once more and looked at the liquid in the tube. It was crystal clear, didn't look

anything like a bacterial suspension. The fact that Beltran didn't seem to mind the test-tube being at room temperature made Jackson suspect that it could only contain one thing: pure DNA.

Why would Beltran give him an unlabeled molecule of DNA? To answer that, he'd have to analyze the sequence of the DNA, track down its molecular significance within the vast repository of information within the world's genetic databanks.

He had to get to a lab.

A little further down the road, Jackson came across a young, bearded man with a reflector telescope. Beside the tripod was a sign: "See the pyramid without the climb! Ten *pesos*."

He asked in English, "How good is it? Can you see the people up there?"

"You know someone up there?"

"Maybe."

The bearded man stood aside, letting Jackson put his eye to the telescope's eyepiece. He stood back for a second, impressed. The view was clear enough to see individual people clambering over the staircase of the pyramid, and some of the people on the way up. Slowly, he panned the telescope around the entire area occupied by the pyramid, then down the path leading to it. Then he found what he was looking for; Simon was on his way. He couldn't see his face but the orange pineapple shirt and black jeans could clearly be seen. Simon drew a wrist across his face and there was a flash of a golden watch glinting in the sun.

Jackson swung the telescope back to its owner. "Thanks. That's all I need." Moments later, he reached the end of the town, and looked up into the forest where a rocky path wound higher. Here and there he could see a few groups of tourists making the ascent. It was easy for an experienced hiker like Jackson. The first group he passed comprised some Americans in their early sixties, dressed in walking boots and tropical print shirts.

After another twenty minutes, he was sweating profusely. The day was not particularly warm, but his

suede jacket was no good for a hike. He caught up with another small group of German tourists. They carried a large water bottle and when Jackson politely asked for a sip, they equally politely offered to fill his empty Diet Coke bottle.

The light was beginning to dim as he neared the summit of the climb. He looked with some satisfaction at his hand stitched Italian walking loafers – they were barely scuffed. He could see Simon sitting on a small platform next to two carved stone columns. Jackson approached the younger man, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Jackson Bennett?” The man in the orange shirt stood, smiling, his right hand outstretched. His left hand remained by his side, the gold watch gleaming on the wrist.

As Jackson reciprocated, the image of a watch glinting gold in the sun jumped into his mind. Where had he seen that before? The image resonated, and with it, a lurch of dread. He thought back to when he had first seen this man, observing him from afar with the telescope. That was it; that was when he had seen the watch. Despite this, the sense of danger associated with a flash of gold on a wrist remained disturbingly close.

He shook the young man’s hand. “Simon. It’s good to meet you.”

“Same here. Doctor Beltran is always talking about you. We’re all worried about him. So, let’s get you to safety. Ready?”

“I just wanna take a couple of photos.” He took out his cell phone, began recording images of the pyramid and the deservedly famous views.

The guy in the bright shirt watched him closely. When Jackson was finished, he asked again. “Ready to go down?”

Jackson glanced at the path. The Germans had reached the top now and were clearly enjoying the prospect of having the ruins almost to themselves. The group of American retirees was almost ten minutes behind. Why couldn’t he stop thinking about that watch?

"OK Simon, I've seen all I want to see. Let's go."

They began the descent, passing the Germans.

"Did you pass many tourists on your way up?" asked the newcomer, his tone light, conversational.

Then Jackson remembered where he had first seen the glint of gold in the context of danger. As clearly as though he had seen it for a whole minute instead of a just a second, Jackson recalled the image of the two men who had been searching around his car as he changed shirts in the washroom at the service station. One of them had been young, lightly built, and wore a shiny gold watch. Sunglasses had obscured the man's face, but 'Simon's face looked familiar enough to be sure that his suspicions were correct.

"Quite a few," Jackson lied, trying to stay calm. "Some old dudes should be along any second."

For the second time that day, adrenaline surged through him. Only furious concentration concealed his anxiety. Jackson clamped his jaw shut and reviewed his options. This guy – almost definitely *not* Simon Reyes – was probably armed and planning to attack him as soon as they left all witnesses behind. The forest at the side of the path was thick, the drop treacherous. At this time of day, a body could be quickly disposed of with minimal disruption.

Just so long as you had the element of surprise.

Jackson on the other hand, had no weapon. He'd taken a few kick-boxing classes, years ago, but doubted that he could seriously disable a determined assassin. Escape, therefore, was his only chance. Other assailants might be waiting, but for certain, this one had settled on a target. He stopped to sip from his Diet Coke bottle before offering it to the other man.

"It's just water," he explained, managing a genial smile. When the guy accepted and raised the bottle to his lips, Jackson made his move.

He spun hard, raised his leg in the only kick-boxing move he had ever seriously practiced. As his body swung around, Jackson's foot connected satisfyingly with the imposter's ribs. The guy was already going for

a weapon under the back of his shirt, but Jackson had taken him entirely by surprise. The would-be assassin was thrown off the path and into the forest at the side.

Jackson bolted down the rocks on the path. A shot exploded from a gun. The bullet whizzed past his ear, a sound as terrifying as any he'd heard in his life. He faltered, lost his footing and hurtled to the ground. He rolled a couple of times before he felt something sharp rake across his upper left thigh. He gasped loudly then immediately clenched his teeth together, to stop any further outburst. A fallen tree lay beside him, one broken end of a small branch now coated in his blood.

He was shocked by the sudden burst of searing pain. A survival instinct had him in its grip. He leapt off the path and into the forest. In the corner of his eye he could just see his assailant, about twenty yards above. The man was taking aim. Jackson lunged forward, and skidded on pile of rotting leaves. Another bullet thumped into a tree trunk, just ahead of him. The air erupted with splinters; one shot straight into his cheek, just below the eye. He didn't stop, or look around again. He kept running, zigzagging through the forest, hearing shots ring out and the heavy rustle of the imposter giving chase. Jackson continued until his heart was hammering, his lungs ready to explode.

The guy wasn't going to give up. Jackson couldn't see him any longer but he could hear him crashing through the dense forest. The pain in his left leg rose to a sharp crescendo. A splinter of wood was lodged deep in his cheek. It stung like crazy, made his eyes water. He hardly slowed enough to pluck it out. His trousers were sticking to his skin, damp and heavy with blood. If he didn't stop soon, he might pass out.

After what seemed like ages, but was barely ten minutes, he paused behind a large tree with exposed roots.

Underneath the roots was a hole just large enough to contain one person, doubled over. Jackson scanned the undergrowth, and then climbed under the roots, pulling a pile of loose twigs and leaves over the entrance.

Seconds later, the assassin thundered past his hiding place. Jackson stilled every muscle. Inside his head, blood flowed as loud as a waterfall. It didn't seem possible that no-else could hear it. Any minute now, he'd be found. The assassin would catch him, and this time there'd be no element of surprise. Only a slightly delayed, professional execution.

His entire body was concealed by the tree. Under cover of darkness, with any luck, he'd be impossible to find, without search equipment.

Jackson remained there, unmoving. Time passed, perhaps an hour. There was no more sign of the assassin. At least, not yet.

Silver Beetle

Night fell; Jackson stayed put. There was no sense in moving, not until he had a plan. The assassins must know he was still somewhere on the pyramid hill. They'd be watching the exit points. He had nowhere to go. The Institute was obviously being monitored. The airport was crawling with customs agents.

He made a mental checklist of all the items still in his possession. His cell phone was intact, but was almost out of power. Jackson knew his device well enough to realize that there could be no chance of risking the GPS location app. A couple of minutes of that would gobble whatever was left in the battery.

His passport and wallet were in his jeans back pockets. His house keys were in the pocket of his jacket. To Jackson, his data was everything; phone numbers, credit card numbers, PINs, he couldn't feel comfortable without any of these. So really, he figured with a certain amount of optimism, he was almost as good as new. Except for a raw, bloody, gash in his left thigh.

The wound would be a problem. Blood had soaked the lower part of his trouser leg. He examined the laceration by the light of his cell phone. The broken branch had inflicted damage deep enough that blood loss could become a serious concern. He pulled off his jacket, tore the left sleeve away from the shoulder of his shirt and used the fabric as a makeshift bandage. He grimaced and pulled it as tight as he could bear. In movies, tough guys stitched themselves up with their own needle and thread.

Jackson couldn't help wondering if he'd be capable of that. He doubted it. For one thing, he'd never learned to sew. The wound would have to be repaired, somehow. A hospital would ask for his insurance papers. It seemed too much to hope that the Mexican Customs officials wouldn't be tracking him through all the databases. Would an insurance claim trigger a response?

Then it struck him. His entire hypothesis had been wrong. Had he totally lost his mind?

The guy who'd tried to kill Jackson was obviously not Simon Reyes. Yet he'd had been dressed in the clothes Simon had described. This could only mean one thing: their conversation had been overheard. Jackson's guess was that Beltran's lab phone was bugged.

Bugging phone lines sounded like government behavior. Murdering an innocent graduate student and using his clothes as a disguise for a second assassination – that was surely going too far. Jackson liked to think he was suitably suspicious about the government, but even he balked at something like this.

Either the government had some real evidence to link Beltran with something like bio-terrorism and Jackson himself had been lied to by PJ – or else the guys that were after Beltran and Jackson had nothing to do with the government.

As for poor Simon Reyes, Jackson guessed that the outcome had been pretty bleak.

"Damn, PJ," he muttered. "What the hell have you gotten me into?"

There could no longer be any doubt; Beltran's cryptic message, his warning, the appearance of the test-tube in Jackson's pocket: Beltran was trying to lead him along a path of discovery. Now that he'd had time to get his bearings, the next step seemed inevitable; the telephone number taped to the test-tube.

Jackson typed the number into his cell phone and waited. The line rang three times.

"*Bueno?*" A woman answered; she sounded tired.

In faltering Spanish, he mumbled, "Uh. . . You don't know me. Sorry. Pedro Juan Beltran gave me this number and ah. . ." He stopped, already out of his depth in the language.

There was a brief silence, then, "You wanna try English?"

"English! You speak English, great! OK well, Miss, frankly I don't know why, or who you are, but I know that PJ Beltran wanted me to call you."

"Who's speaking?"

"My name is Jackson Bennett. I'm a molecular geneticist, I'm doing some research in collaboration with PJ Beltran. I'm here visiting from San Francisco; from UCSF. Earlier today, he gave me this number, in case I ran into trouble. Which is what happened. And I could sure use some help."

Her silence was lengthy. Was it his imagination, or was this woman seething?

"OK, Jackson Bennett, molecular geneticist: If Pedro Juan told you to ask for help, then I'll help. Just tell me this: where is he now?"

Jackson's heart sank; he had dreaded this question, because what he had observed and been told, he somehow knew, did not match up with what had actually happened.

"Honestly, right now, I don't know." He ventured another question, this time in Spanish. "May I ask, with whom do I have the pleasure?"

He heard the reluctant smile in her voice. "Very nicely put, Mister Bennett. Or is it Doctor?"

"Almost, ma'am, almost."

"You work with my cousin?"

"Ah. You're PJ's cousin."

"Yes I am. Marie-Carmen Valencia Beltran. Pedro Juan is like a brother to me. And you?"

"Well, I'm no-one. I mean no one important. Just a messenger from a lab in UCSF. PJ is one of our most important collaborators. My boss asked me to bring him some stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Genetic stuff. It's kinda technical."

"I'm an archaeologist. Not entirely unacquainted with the ways of you geneticists."

"Subcloned DNA samples," Jackson replied firmly. "Genes that Beltran and I were studying."

"OK, all very intriguing. But you know what? It's kind of late in the night for a girl like me to be talking genetics over the phone with a total stranger. So Jackson: long story short?"

"I'm going to owe you big time for this." He took a deep breath. "I'm near Tepoztlan. In the woods. I'm lost. Someone just tried to kill me."

"Sounds terrible," Marie-Carmen said, clearly unimpressed. "And you're calling me, why?"

"Could you come get me? Please? You're the only one I can trust. Please."

Marie-Carmen paused. There was a mirthless chuckle. "I'd say that's one hell of a debt to repay."

There was thick cloud cover, and almost no ambient light. Jackson checked the battery on his cell phone. The call to Marie-Carmen had all but depleted the power. If he used it as a torch now, that would probably finish it off. Anyway, a sudden burst of light in the woods could expose him to the assassin.

"There's a road next to the hill of the Tepozteco pyramid," Marie-Carmen had said. "Keep going downhill and I'll find you. My car is a silver VW Beetle, the old kind, like the taxis. Keep hidden until you see my car; I'll be driving by real slow. Put something at the side of the road, something I'll notice; a shoe. When I see it, I'll stop; then, so long as there's no other car around, you get in. If there's another car, Jackson, I won't stop; you got that? Wait. Maybe I'll come back for you later."

She was right, thought Jackson. Whoever had tried to kill him would not be likely to give up so easily. They might have abandoned the search for him in the forest, but if Marie-Carmen could work out where he was, then so could they. If they discovered Marie-Carmen, nowhere would be safe.

He made his way gingerly through the forest, concentrating hard. He focused on the slope of the ground. Always downhill; it made for a few slips and grazes, but basically, the strategy seemed to be working. After twenty minutes he could hear cars as they sped by on the road below. The forest was too dense to see the

road yet, but he knew it was close. Just a few minutes later, he could see the lights.

The traffic was relatively sparse on this minor thoroughfare; only one car passed every five minutes or so. Jackson descended to the road's edge, crouching low. He pulled off his right shoe and with calculated effort, tossed it into the road. Then he sat down. The pain from his thigh made him wince, but he bit his lip, prepared to wait.

"What kind of loser gets himself followed all the way from the airport?" Jackson muttered. He could still scarcely believe that he'd allowed it to happen. But now he was thinking like a marked man. This morning, he had been just another innocent.

He began more carefully to observe the cars, mentally tallying the make and models.

After half an hour, there was no doubt in his mind which car represented the threat. A black Ford Explorer had driven by three times before he thought to look at the registration. The fourth time, there was no question.

Finally, Jackson saw the round headlamps of a VW Beetle approach, moving slowly. He glanced further down the road. According to his observations, the Ford Explorer was due any minute. He waited.

The VW Beetle slowed to a halt near his shoe. Still Jackson waited. He dare not risk it until the Explorer had completed its reconnaissance. The door of the Beetle swung open and he heard a voice hiss into the hum of the forest: "Jackson!" He did not move. Then there were two sounds; the click of heels on the tarmac and the rumble of an approaching car. Jackson retreated into the shadows of the forest. Marie-Carmen moved her head; she'd heard him.

The black Ford Explorer slowed to a stop in front of Marie-Carmen's VW. A man stepped out, walked over to Marie-Carmen. They were close enough that Jackson could hear every word. His Spanish was good enough to understand most of their conversation

"*Señorita*. Can I be of assistance?"

"I thought I saw an animal in the road. But look, do you see? It's just a shoe."

"Oh yes, you're right." The man's tone was courteous, yet unmoved.

"I would save an animal."

"No harm done."

"No, thank goodness. I would hate to have hurt a living creature."

"Sometimes it is unavoidable."

"Well, that's true."

"You shouldn't stay outside, alone, *señorita*, in a place like this."

"You're right. Thanks for stopping to help, you're a gentleman."

The man dipped a small bow, watching as Marie-Carmen stepped back into her car and under the watchful eye of the driver of the Explorer, drove away.

After she had left, the driver peered suspiciously into the scrub at the edge of the road. He took out a torch and shone the beam around. Jackson froze in his hiding place, behind a tree. If they bothered to venture into the woods to search, he knew he would be forced again to run. He breathed a sigh of relief when a minute later, he heard the door of the car slam shut and the squeal of the tires against the road.

Now alone, Jackson swore profusely. That was it; his one chance. Maybe if he'd been quicker or if Marie-Carmen had happened along just a little earlier. Now it was over.

How would he possibly get away? The Ford Explorer, patrolling the stretch of road as regularly as it was, would not be fooled a second time by Marie-Carmen's car.

He dared not move, however, nor stray from the plan. Jackson was amazed that they had actually failed to regard the shoe as a potential signal.

Or maybe they had, and were just waiting for him to show himself. Eventually, he knew it, he would have to emerge.

Marie-Carmen

In the next half hour four more cars passed and the Explorer made six more passes. Jackson began to feel helpless. A brown Nissan Tsuru screeched to a stop at the side of the road. The passenger door opened and Jackson bolted for the car. Just before he reached the car, he moved to pick up the shoe. The Tsuru jolted forward, almost knocking him down. He heard Marie-Carmen's voice: "Are you insane? Leave it! Now climb in the back and lie down. Do it now!"

As he jumped inside, Marie-Carmen's foot leaned hard on the accelerator. They were clear of the scene with still no sign of the Explorer.

"Would you like to leave them a sign: 'Been rescued, see you in Mexico City?'"

"I'm sorry, sorry, I wasn't thinking." Jackson groaned. So much for his casual, Italian loafer look.

"I don't think you can afford to slow down on the thinking, do you? I think maybe you need to keep your wits about you."

He changed the subject. "Where did you get the car? D'you steal it.?"

Marie-Carmen swore roundly. "No, *pendejo*, I swapped it for the Beetle. You think I'm safe in that thing now?"

He hesitated. "That was pretty good thinking. Can the new owners trace this car to you?"

"A beautifully restored, old-style VW Beetle, with all the papers in order, for this piece of junk? Ha – no. They thought it was Christmas. They didn't ask any questions."

"That was seriously good thinking," he repeated. "Really, I'm impressed."

"That's nice for you. As for me, I'm amazed you've survived this long. Also you owe me a new car."

Jackson lay back across the rear seats, exhausted.

"You realize I can't afford to pay you back."

"God, I am so not surprised."

Marie-Carmen drove in silence as they passed through Tepoztlan, took the toll road back to Mexico City. Jackson leaned against the door, a hand nursing the piercing pain in his thigh muscle. The relief he'd felt at being rescued had almost gone. His anxiety levels were escalating again. How was this irritable woman going to be able to help him? He was in trouble with some pretty terrifying people. Jackson just wanted to get fixed up and get back to the USA. PJ's mysterious test-tube might hold the answer to why he was a target, but right now he was too exhausted to care.

Marie-Carmen glanced over. "You're in bad shape?"

"I'll survive. Thanks to you." Another thought struck him. "Jesus. My rental car; I can't even pick that up. My credit card account's going to explode."

"Jackson, stay calm. Things like that are fixable."

He said nothing, surprised at how resentful he felt at being told to stay calm.

"Look, I can see you've been through something here." Marie-Carmen appeared to pick her words carefully. "Forget what I said before. I was scared, OK? Those guys looked pretty violent to me. I've never dealt with anything like this."

"Me either. I'm sorry that you got involved. Wish I knew what was going on."

"Well Jackson, you know *something*, that's for sure. We'll go to my home, dress that wound. Tomorrow, you and me are going to figure out what the hell this is all about."

He exhaled, slowly. He just wanted to rest and now he'd hooked up with an amateur detective.

"I'm guessing this is something to do with my cousin's research?"

"That does seem the logical answer."

"Hey, you know more than that. I lost my car because of you, Bennett! You owe me some answers."

"Maybe it's safer if you stay out of it."

She snorted. "Maybe, no. *Definitely!*"

"Why don't you just take me back to your place and let me worry about it?"

"I don't think so. The way things are going you're going to wind up dead."

Jackson smiled slightly to himself. There was urgency and passion in her voice. He had to admit, it was nice to feel she was worried about him.

"You're going to wind up dead and my cousin will never be found."

"PJ is missing . . . ?"

"Yes, missing." Marie-Carmen's tone had turned sardonic, angry. "Don't pretend you didn't know."

He dropped his head.

With an obvious effort to be calm she said, "When were you going to tell me?"

"I was going to tell you what happened to him. Didn't know if he'd checked in yet."

"No, he's missing, his wife is going crazy with worry. She's in hospital, my niece Gabi is home alone. Pedro Juan's wife is too scared to tell the girl what's going on. So, Jackson Bennett, if you have some answers then you'd better start talking."

Jackson was silent. Part of him welcomed the chance to talk things through with someone, especially someone as obviously intelligent as Marie-Carmen. It didn't hurt that she sounded sexier by the minute or that could see the outline of her figure in the shadows – it looked pretty terrific. Jackson was already looking forward to the inevitable tension of spending a night alone in a stranger woman's apartment, with all the possibilities it might bring. On the other hand, he was under no illusion. PJ had dragged him into a dangerous situation. He'd tangled with some well-connected people who weren't afraid to use extreme violence. Jackson had known Marie-Carmen for minutes but his basic urge to protect a desirable female was already kicking in.

Hesitantly, he began. "Marie-Carmen, did you ever call PJ at the lab?"

"Not usually. Why?"

"You ever visit him in Temixco? Have anything to do with his work?"

"No, why?"

"This is really important. Is there any way that you could be connected with his work in any way whatsoever?"

"I can't imagine how."

Jackson shook his head. "Someone was onto Pedro Juan. They knew about his work with the *phoenix* gene. They knew he was meeting someone from the San Francisco lab to receive samples. Maybe they even knew I'd be the one bringing them over. I just need to be sure that they can't know of a connection to you."

"Your work with Pedro Juan; that's why someone is trying to kill you?"

"I don't understand yet. Our work was potentially exciting to the biotech industry, but that's as far as it goes. Least, that's what I figured. But I think PJ was onto something new."

"Like what?"

"I need to get to a lab to figure that out. Until then, we need to avoid contact with anyone else at PJ's lab, the police, the hospitals. Anyone connected to the government. And especially those guys in the Ford Explorer."

"You want to disappear for a while?"

He managed a wan smile. "It couldn't hurt."

"Then we're going to the right place. Mexico City; twenty millions of us there; we should be able to get lost."

She turned on the radio. It was tuned to a classical music station. A pensive piano sonata was playing. "You like Beethoven?"

"That's Beethoven?"

"Sonata number twenty-five," she said, softly. "And you didn't answer my question."

"Do I like Beethoven?" He hesitated. Another woman, he might have tried to bluff. "Honestly, I prefer rap. You like Eminem? Or reggaeton, you got some of that?"

"Reggaeton?" She turned to him with a quizzical smile. "Sure, why not?" She pressed another preset button. The heavy bass drop of Latin rap began to pound

through the car. Quietly, Marie-Carmen chuckled. "Interesting. . ."

Jackson glanced over at Marie-Carmen. She was dressed as though she had just left work, in heels, slacks and white blouse. As discreetly as he could, Jackson stared at her legs working under taut fabric. Her upper arms and thighs were those of a dancer or, perhaps, a yoga enthusiast. Curvaceous but well-toned.

Marie-Carmen turned to him, her lips tightly pursed, eyebrows raised with a hint of questioning in her expression.

He looked at her directly for the first time, almost having to catch his breath when he caught the look of knowing amusement in her eyes. His apparent transparency before her embarrassed him. He forced himself to stare back into the road ahead.

If Marie-Carmen had been thinking of saying anything then, she evidently decided to hold her peace. "That's a nice jacket," she ventured diplomatically, after a few moments.

"Thank you. Probably the only decent piece of clothing that I own."

"Don't like clothes?"

"Don't like to shop."

"You're all about the work, hey, Jackson?"

Wincing slightly at the steady pulse of pain in his thigh, Jackson shook his head. "You're really not seeing me at my best."

"It's not been a very good day for me either," she conceded.

"Oh, I'd say you're coming out of this a hell of a lot better than me. My hero," he said, with a sidelong glance.

"I'd do anything for my cousin," she murmured. "I just hope you're worth it."

In a darkened car, driving through the mountains with the hazy, neon lights of Mexico City just visible in the valley below, a comfortable silence enveloped them.

Jumping Genes

Ninety minutes later, they reached Marie-Carmen's home in Tlalpan, a southern suburb of Mexico City. Marie-Carmen's apartment building was in a gated complex and as they passed through, Jackson heard Marie-Carmen ask the security guard if there had been any visitors for her. "No, no, Doctor. No visitors, no calls. But where's your Beetle?"

"You're going to laugh: I lost it in a bet. But if you see it, don't let it pass, deal? I didn't part on good terms with the new owners."

The security gate opened and Marie-Carmen drove through.

Jackson regarded her with a mixture of respect and misgiving. "*Doctor Marie-Carmen?*"

"Oh that's right, you don't have yours yet."

He changed the subject. "Lost it in a bet? You know something? You're a pretty convincing liar."

Marie-Carmen flashed a smile. "Yes I am. Don't ever play me at poker."

"Can you lie like that to anyone, about anything?"

Marie-Carmen parked the car wordlessly. "You're asking me if I'm someone who can be trusted."

Jackson was aware of his own heartbeat. "Yes."

"Do you trust me?"

"You saved my life."

"Maybe I'm saving it for later."

"Marie-Carmen. I don't know what's going on. I don't know what happened to your cousin. But PJ is the reason why someone tried to kill me. I don't know why he gave me your number. I'm sorry if I seem a little paranoid."

"I have to know if you trust me."

Jackson looked into her eyes, transfixed. They were a light, almost honey-brown. Fear gripped his heart. In that moment he realized that trust didn't come into it; he wanted to do whatever this woman asked of him. He felt powerless against his own desire, even though he sensed where it might lead.

"I trust you. Do you trust me?"

Dismissively, Marie-Carmen shook her head. "Jackson, we just met. But I trust Pedro Juan; for now, that's enough."

In the dim light of the apartment, the leaves of trees in the gardens cast jagged shadows across the large windows. Marie-Carmen led Jackson into the kitchen, switched on the light and pulled out a chair by a round wooden table.

"Let's see that leg."

Jackson slowly removed his jacket. The sharp pain in his leg had reduced to a throbbing ache. Still, he was apprehensive about actually confronting the damage.

Marie-Carmen touched his arm. "Try to relax. I can go out and buy dressings from the pharmacy."

Jackson said nothing as he unbuttoned his jeans, dropping them below the knee before sitting on the chair.

Marie-Carmen knelt down, carefully unwrapped the blood-soaked cotton sleeve which had served as a bandage. She was quiet for a few seconds as she examined his wound.

"This really needs medical attention. It's too deep to heal quickly without stitching."

"No hospitals," insisted Jackson. "You don't have some buddy who's a doctor?"

"Not the kind that I can disturb at this hour. And you shouldn't wait; there could be infection. You were in the woods; God knows what you could have picked up in this wound."

"Can you do it?"

She raised her eyebrows doubtfully. "I can buy all the stuff, sure. But stitching?"

"How hard could it be?"

"Presumably there's some kind of knack to it. Or else, what's the point of medical school?"

"You wouldn't be grossed out?"

Laconically, she replied "You should see the condition of some of the human remains I come across."

Marie-Carmen left Jackson to enjoy slices of *manchego* cheese, pickled chilies and a bottle of tequila, closing the apartment door quietly as she left to fetch supplies.

Jackson hungrily ate the food and began on the tequila. Marie-Carmen had advised him to drink at least six shots to prepare for the minor ordeal of the stitching. By the time Marie-Carmen returned, Jackson was feeling almost mellow.

At her behest, he stretched out on her bed, wearing only his one-sleeved shirt and boxer shorts. She began with cotton wool pads which she soaked in surgical alcohol from a fresh bottle. Meticulously, she cleaned the wound. Jackson struggled not to flinch. Then she produced a metal tool in a disposable wrapper, which she removed from its sterile environment. She held it against his thigh.

"Staples," she said wryly, "so you don't have to make do with my crooked sewing."

"Great," he murmured. "Metal spikes being fired into my skin; that's what this whole experience was missing."

"Quit fussing," she whispered, "and hold still."

With the surgical stapler, Marie-Carmen fastened the three-inch tear in his leg with a rapid succession of four painful, tattoo-like movements.

Jackson looked down at her handiwork.

"There you go." Marie-Carmen gave a smile of relief.

"You just keep amazing me."

She tore open another wrapper and removed a large waterproof dressing, then pressed it over the stapled wound.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"How much do I owe you for all this medical stuff?"

"Since I'm just a beginner, I won't charge for the labor. The parts, well, that will be five hundred pesos."

Jackson sat up, leaning back on his elbows. Only inches separated them now. Watching him, Marie-Carmen's expression was surprisingly tender, concerned. Jackson badly wanted to kiss her.

"And how," he asked slowly, his words charged with meaning, "Can I possibly thank you?"

Marie-Carmen exhaled. "I haven't even begun to think about that."

They were staring into each other's eyes and Jackson found himself wishing that he weren't drunk. She might be receptive, but could well be beyond making an accurate judgment.

The moment was broken as the telephone rang. Marie-Carmen answered it, clearly perturbed to be receiving a call so late. Jackson watched the tension in her shoulders as she took the call, saying almost nothing to the caller, except, "*Ay por Dios, no!*"

Marie-Carmen replaced the receiver, her hand shaking.

"What is it?" inquired Jackson. He'd already guessed.

Still facing away from him, Marie-Carmen spoke in a low voice. She was barely audible. "That was my brother. The police found Pedro Juan. He was in the airport. In a bathroom. His eyes were shot out of him. He was dead. My aunt and uncle are completely devastated. They've just found out, from Pedro Juan's wife. My niece Gabi is still alone. My God, Jackson..." She looked up at him, accusation in her eyes.

Jackson held rigidly still, afraid to move a single muscle.

"Marie-Carmen. . . I didn't know. Believe me! PJ went off with some man I didn't know...I thought he was being arrested. I don't know why this is happening, I promise you. Remember what you said: you trust me because you trust PJ."

Marie-Carmen stared at him. Her eyes filled with tears. She moved away, wiped her cheeks with the back of one hand.

"Start talking, Jackson. I want the whole story of you and Pedro Juan. From the beginning."

"I met PJ three years ago, at a conference in Keystone, Colorado. Do you archaeologists ever get have meetings there, in the Rockies? That's how I found out I wanted to be a scientist. When I left high school all I wanted was to be a snowboard bum. Pretty soon I was working as an instructor in Aspen. A lot of it was teaching idiot rich kids with more money than skill. But also, I spent some time working at the Keystone Symposia. It's a series of real high-level biology meetings, always in mountain resorts. Sometimes I'd have a few beers with the scientist types. One of those scientists helped me to get accepted into a genetics program at UCLA, which is a real good school. About four years ago I started my doctorate, at UCSF. After a year, I got enough data together to present a paper at a Keystone Meeting. And there I was, finally, doing what I'd seen those scientists do back then."

"Which was?"

"Spend all morning talking science. All afternoon on the mountain. Then back to the hotel for three or four martinis."

"That's your idea of a good time?"

"Pretty close to it," Jackson smiled.

Marie-Carmen nodded, thoughtful. "I see."

"So what do you archaeologists like to do?" he asked. Marie-Carmen ignored the cue. "Let's get back to you and Pedro Juan."

"PJ was this real eminent Mexican scientist, right? I offered to give him some snowboard instruction - actually he was already quite good, so he didn't want to join in with all the beginners. I told PJ we could go right up to the top and I'd show him how to get down the black runs."

"You're very good then?"

"I know a few tricks."

"I'll remember that, if I ever want to take lessons."

"I'll offer you a lifetime of free lessons, right now." He tried to stare into her eyes but Marie-Carmen smiled and looked away. "Continue."

"Afterwards, in the martini bar, I guess we got a little carried away. We got talking and decided that our research projects were pretty compatible, and if things went well we could earn millions if not actually win a Nobel Prize."

"Ah, you said you don't like money."

"I said I don't like the kind of people with money who go to Aspen. I have no problem with money, per se. I just don't have any."

"What a relief, I thought you were a socialist."

"You've got something against workers having rights?"

"No, but I dated a very earnest communist once, very dreary. Always wanted to pay his respects at Trotsky's house, in Coyoacán. It got boring."

Marie-Carmen wore a look of casual diffidence. Combined with the traces of sadness, it was somehow irresistible. Jackson could only think of how he might impress her.

"PJ and I really clicked. I phoned my boss and he agreed that I could try some experiments with PJ's lab."

Scientific protocol dictated that after that, the two senior scientists had managed the collaboration. Jackson, although he'd initiated the project, was relegated to junior partner. Even so, Jackson had enjoyed a couple of trips with his boss, to PJ's lab in Temixco, which boasted a Biotechnology Research Institute of international fame, thanks largely to its co-founder, Mexico's most famous molecular biologist, Francisco Bolivar.

Marie-Carmen poured them both a cup of coffee. "The real hook," explained Jackson, "was that it turned out that Pedro Juan and I were working on something incredibly similar. Even though his gene was from a variety of maize, and mine was from a fruit fly. I saw his poster, where he'd predicted the structure of the protein which his gene would produce. I'd only just sequenced my own mysterious bit of DNA. Even so, I could tell that the way Pedro Juan's protein folded, the DNA sequence had to be really, really similar."

"How could you tell?"

"I sort of 'see' protein structures in my mind. I've read so many DNA sequences that I tend to know what sort of amino acid sequences they code for – and since amino acids sequences make up protein structures, well, I also tend to have a knack for knowing what kind of sequences fold in which way."

Marie-Carmen looked impressed. Jackson grinned. "It's more like a parlor trick, or like having a photographic memory."

"I can see that – it's the same way with the hieroglyphs; people like me who learned to read them the hard way can still do it without computers."

It was Jackson's turn to look impressed. "You're not old enough to have started reading hieroglyphs before most of the texts were computerized."

Marie-Carmen hid a modest grin behind her cup. "I didn't wait until I was a doctoral student; I've been reading Mayan scripts since I was a teenager."

"Ah, a child prodigy?"

"It isn't so unusual. There are some smart people out there. Pedro Juan really is – was – the brilliant one in the family."

Jackson gazed at her, warmly. "I'm not so sure."

The memory evoked in her a sudden shift in mood. Tears once more appeared in her eyes, spilled over, rolling silently down her cheeks. Marie-Carmen seemed unable to speak, for several minutes just holding her fingers to her temples as very slightly, she trembled. Jackson could say nothing, he too was moved to silence, his breath held in check. He reached out tentatively to touch her shoulder, but at the last stayed his palm just millimeters away. She seemed lost for those moments. Her lips whispered inaudibly, in her eyes he caught a glimpse of a light flickering.

Neither of them spoke for what seemed like a long time. Marie-Carmen drew heavy, ragged breaths. Jackson found his gaze drawn uncomfortably to her rising breast, the tremble in her hands and shoulders. He longed to hold her, to comfort her, but he couldn't quite

get past the suspicion that his attention might be unwelcome.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I just suddenly thought of him, when I was a little kid. He'd won some prize at college. And my aunty bought a special cake from Sanborns. The whole family was inspired by him. Growing up it was always, 'you can be like your cousin!' His parents, they worshipped him. They'll never get over this, never. And my poor niece, Gabi . . . now she's lost her father."

Then, almost as if emerging slowly from a dream, she looked at Jackson. She focused, as though she'd only just noticed him.

"You were telling me about how you and he started to work together."

"It can wait. You're tired, you're upset."

Marie-Carmen smiled almost grimly. "Yes I am, but I don't want to stop. Somewhere in what you know, there's the key to why he died."

"OK," Jackson continued reluctantly, "If you're sure. So, PJ and I began to collaborate, comparing our two genes; he called his maize gene *phoenix*, and suggested I call mine *joust*."

"Strange names."

"They're Atari video games from the eighties. Fruit fly geneticists are like that; once someone starts a fashion, people follow on. For example, there's a gene called *sevenless*, because when it doesn't work properly, segment number seven in the fly's body is missing. Then some guys discovered other bits of DNA, genes with similar sequences, and called them things like *son of sevenless*, *bride of sevenless*. There's a 'jumping gene' in fruit flies, called *frogger*. PJ and I were following that tradition."

"These pieces of DNA, are they the reason Pedro Juan is dead and why you're here with me after someone tried to kill you?"

Jackson was pensive. "I thought maybe bringing the samples had gotten me into trouble with customs. It's

illegal to take genetically-modified organisms across a border without declaring them.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“PJ’s been killed and I’ve been shot at. Would the government do that, do you think?”

Marie-Carmen shrugged. “In Mexico you can never be sure who might be on the payroll of who. I agree, it seems strange. Did you have another explanation in mind?”

“There was a chance that the samples could be very valuable. PJ’s protein, for example, seemed to help his maize resist a high salt content in soil. That could be worth a lot to the biotech industry.” Jackson stopped for a minute, thinking. “But what I think they were *really* after, was something that PJ gave me, along with your telephone number.”

“Which was?”

“A test-tube with something inside. I have a hunch what it might be, but we need to go to a lab to check it out properly.”

“Then it can wait until tomorrow. You and I need to get to bed.”

Jackson’s eye’s widened just a fraction, he felt the rush in his heart-rate, his mouth went dry. One second later, though, it all came crashing down as Marie-Carmen declared with a note of finality. “Well come on, help me to make up the sofa bed.”

The Poborsky Lab

Early the next day, they ate breakfast in a small coffee house on La Plaza Constitución of Tlalpan – a little square which Jackson noted contentedly, had all the charm of colonial Mexico; narrow stone alleyways lined with trees, venerable old houses painted in bright ochre and blues, heavy wrought iron gratings. Gazing at the large menu of Mexican-grown coffees – Jackson tried to distract his thoughts from Marie-Carmen.

By daylight she was even more attractive – dressed in tight-fitting jeans, cowgirl boots and a tailored, white linen blouse which emphasized her incredible figure only too well. In the evening, her long brown hair had been tightly pulled back, but now she wore it loose, tumbling across her shoulders in a manner that Jackson found entirely disarming.

When Marie-Carmen turned to fetch sugar and napkins, Jackson enjoyed the momentary freedom to rest his gaze on her particularly curvy, round ass. When she turned around, Jackson realized that he'd been a little slow to move his eyes. There was distinct amusement in her expression as she approached.

Even better, he thought. She wasn't annoyed.

"This is really great coffee," she said with one eyebrow raised. "They roast the beans in the shop. All from Mexico. You better not let me catch you drinking at Starbucks while you're here."

Jackson held up a conciliatory hand. "'Made in Mexico'. That's my motto when I'm here." He gazed at her with warmth. "It's a relief to see you smile again."

"You did such a good job with me last night," she said, letting the full weight of her meaning sink into the conversation. Jackson did his best to keep his expression even, and they almost stared each other down in a competition of earnestness. "Well," he murmured. "It was mutual."

"Your leg? That was nothing. But talking to me about Pedro Juan," Marie-Carmen continued. "Telling me

about his work, your friendship. In Mexico, that's how we mourn; we remember our dead right from the first minute. No time wasted, we get right on with honoring them."

"I'm glad I could help."

Marie-Carmen took a sip from her steaming coffee cup. "My brother called again. The funeral is in five days."

Jackson considered this. "You should go. You should try, as far as possible, to do everything that you would normally do. They'll be watching for anything out of the ordinary to do with PJ."

"You think they'll be watching me?"

"At this stage, why would they? But if some close cousin doesn't turn up at the funeral, it could be just the thing to put them onto us."

Wordlessly, they drank coffee and ate Mexican breakfast rolls smothered in fine, powdered sugar. Jackson looked around the square. It would be so easy to believe he was now safe. The tranquility of the setting, with the raised central gazebo, the little park crammed with shrubs and flowers, tall trees casting a cool shade as the morning sun began to warm the air.

How could anything bad happen to him, he wondered, in a place like this?

After breakfast, they drove directly to the campus of UNAM – the National Autonomous University of Mexico at Mexico City. It was an immense campus, with its own parks, museums, highways and even security force. Marie-Carmen navigated expertly through the confusing maze of turnings, to the Biomedical Faculty.

"OK," she said. "Let's hope that my friend Magda feels in the mood to let us use her lab."

Dr. Magda Poborsky was a Mexican-born child of Polish immigrants, in manner as Mexican a woman as Marie-Carmen knew, but in physique, a statuesque blonde woman with high, Slavic cheekbones and a no-nonsense attitude.

She looked doubtfully at Jackson, clad very casually in the cheap jeans, grey T-shirt and sneakers that he'd

picked up at the supermarket that morning. To Marie-Carmen, she said nothing, but her eyes said it all: *Where did you pick up this gringo loser?*

"I need a spectrophotometer, an electrophoresis gel and maybe a bit of time on a DNA sequencer," Jackson said. He and Marie-Carmen had agreed not to discuss the project in detail; instead he was claiming to have mixed up some samples and wanted to clarify the situation before he walked into the labs at a biotech company and lost all his credibility.

Clearly, to Magda he had already lost that.

"You got it. You can use this bench; it should have all the equipment you need. I'll book you a slot on the DNA sequencing machine in an hour's time." She shot a pertinent look at Marie-Carmen. "Better be thankful you got friends in the right places."

Marie-Carmen and Magda embraced. In Spanish Marie-Carmen murmured, "Thanks, Blondie, I owe you one," as she kissed Magda goodbye.

Marie-Carmen watched Jackson remove the test-tube from his back pocket. He placed it carefully into an orange acrylic test-tube rack and began to prepare more test-tubes, labeling them with a black marker pen.

"You think it's DNA?" she asked.

"Pretty sure. It's in a water-based solution: I can see that from the viscosity. It's obviously stable at room temperature, or else PJ wouldn't have supplied it to me that way. Other biological molecules, like protein, or RNA, don't tend to handle that kind of abuse too well. They just fall apart. Even whole organisms, like bacteria, or fungus should be looked after a bit better; at least refrigerated. DNA, on the other hand, can be incredibly stable. That's why you archaeologists and the paleontologists can get useful information from DNA found in mummies. So, I'm betting that it's DNA. I'm going to take just a tiny bit of it. . . "

He dipped the tip of a small pipette into the sample, and removed an almost imperceptible amount.

". . . and see if it absorbs light at a wavelength of two-sixty nanometers; hence the spectrophotometer. If it

does, it's probably DNA. Then I'll run a bit out on a gel, to see how long it is."

"How long?"

Jackson concentrated on his work.

"DNA molecules have an electrical charge, which is directly proportional to their length – how many bits of code they have. If you separate them electrically in a gel-based medium, you can compare how far they've travelled in that gel with some other DNA molecules."

"Of known length?" ventured Marie-Carmen.

Jackson grinned. "Exactly. Now, let's just hope that this one isn't too long, or your friend's gonna be mad at me for using up time on her sequencer!"

Three hours later, Jackson removed a CD from the DNA sequencer. Now to cross-reference the data against all known gene sequences in the world's most recently updated data banks. Outside the faculty, Marie-Carmen was waiting in her car. With an air of triumph, Jackson slapped the CD against the window.

"There's an open reading frame."

"A what, now?"

Jackson dropped into the passenger seat. "Open reading frame: it's what we call the part of the gene which the cell machinery would translate into a protein. The rest of the gene is a set of instructions which tell the cell when to make that protein, and how much. Think of it like the introduction and index of a book; it takes up space and has important information, but the real 'story' is in the open reading frame. What's weird," he continued, "is that I don't recognize the sequence at all."

"Is that so unusual?" she asked, diverting the car to a nearby store selling *tortas* – large rolls spread with refried bean paste, stuffed with ham, cheese, pickled chilies and salad.

"When you work with a particular sequence of DNA, or a family of those sequences, you get a feel for it. Like I told you last night: you get to recognize portions. The

same stuff pops up again and again all over the genome you know. You'd be surprised. Well, I got nothing from this sequence. It's like nothing PJ or I work on. But I really need to look for it properly in a gene data bank. Those are updated all the time – if anyone else in the world has published a sequence like this, I'll find it."

"What if they haven't?"

"It's not just the human genome that has been entirely sequenced by now. Lots of other organisms, too. For this to be unpublished, even as a sequence of unknown function, would mean that it was from some bizarre organism. Or else that it was from a very rare gene. A really rare gene might not have been picked up by anyone yet. The human genome project only sequenced a few peoples' genes. It wasn't the most representative of samples."

"You mean there could be entire genes that only some people would have?" asked Marie-Carmen.

"It's unlikely, sure. Most species have the same genes, just different forms of the genes. That's part of what makes individuals different. So it wouldn't be entirely out of the question. For example, like I told you, *joust*, the gene I work on, and PJ's gene also, are 'jumping genes'. They didn't originate in the fruit fly. At some point during evolution, they just appeared in the fruit fly's DNA."

"From where?"

"Probably a virus. *Joust* and *phoenix* are retrotransposons – in their DNA structure they look a bit like some retroviruses, like the kind of virus that causes AIDS. The human genome is riddled with those kinds of mobile genetic elements. They wouldn't necessarily actually work as genes. And they wouldn't be in every person."

"What do you mean – they wouldn't 'work as genes'?"

Jackson thought for a moment.

"Imagine a gene as a freight train carriage. It can't produce a result – deliver its load – without an engine carriage, a driver, the train signals, a whole load of equipment and events which need to happen to make the delivery. If any of those are disrupted; like, for

example, if the signal lights are worn out, or the engine isn't working, then the freight doesn't get delivered properly, or at all. The freight carriage, engine carriage, driver, can all be there. It's just that something crucial, one element is missing. That's how it can be with a gene. Most of what you need to be there could be there, but just the wrong bit missing or altered and . . ."

"No delivery."

Jackson nodded. "Right – the gene doesn't make a protein. *Joust* and *phoenix* look like a lot of 'jumping genes' – they *look* like they mightn't work. Yet, they do. They make really interesting proteins. Also, not all fruit flies have *joust*, or maize have *phoenix*."

Marie-Carmen pondered for a second. "Maybe Pedro Juan found a new 'jumping gene'?"

"Maybe he did."

They sat side-by-side in front of the large flat screen monitor of a computer in the university library. Jackson loaded the CD with the freshly-sequenced DNA, then cut and pasted a section of the DNA sequence code into another browser window.

"This website has 'BLAST'," he explained. "A computer program that will search for your sequence in a huge gene data bank and process the result. I'm only checking for things that match up with the open reading frame; the bit which codes for the amino acids, the protein-y part. In fact a protein this small," he paused to count up the letters in the sequence; "only fifteen amino acids, is known as a 'peptide'."

"You're going peptide-hunting?"

"BLAST will show us all the similar sequences, in all species."

They waited for two minutes, Jackson impatiently refreshing the browser window every few seconds.

After this time, the program returned the result.

No significant similarities found.

Jackson sat back, shocked. "Wow."

"That just means that no-one's published it, right? It doesn't mean they don't know about it. People could be working on it."

Jackson thought for a minute. "You're right. Maybe instead of publishing, they patented it. That would mean we should be able to find some reference to it in the patent databases."

He brought up another browser window, typing in the Web address of a patent search engine. He copied a section of the DNA code from PJ's molecule and entered it into the search box.

Again, the search returned no results.

Jackson was pensive. "You mind if I check my email?" he asked.

Marie-Carmen shrugged. "Go ahead."

Among twenty-five new messages was one dated that day, from PJ.

"That's weird," Jackson said. "This was sent after PJ met me. I don't think he could have sent it. Maybe his email account has been hacked?"

"Unless he set up some kind of automatic email," Marie-Carmen suggested. "You know, like when you use the vacation settings on your email? You can configure it to send an automatic email. Unless you change the settings back."

"Can you set it to send a specific email to a specific person?"

"It's not difficult."

Jackson clicked on the email. "If PJ figured out that someone was onto him, maybe he did set something up to send automatically. He sure-as-hell covered himself."

He sensed, suddenly, an intake of breath from Marie-Carmen. Then Jackson saw what had alarmed her.

A warning icon had appeared in the bottom right hand corner of the screen: "Warning. Someone is trying to trace your IP address."

"And now," murmured Marie-Carmen, "they'll be onto us. Those searches you did must have tripped someone's IP tracing system. Your IP address is the address of your machine as it appears on the Internet."

"I know what an IP address is," Jackson said. "But someone can actually trace your computer's address down from a Web search?"

"Sure. You performed those searches on the Web, openly. A Web search is a query, a string of characters that is sent out as a request across the Internet. Whatever you search for will form part of that query. That search bounces the Internet; a message, waiting for an answer from the search engine.

"If someone else put a program out in the Internet, sniffing out searches with specific characters in the search string, they could easily trace the origin of that search; the IP address of this computer. They could quite easily trace that search down to this library."

Thoughtfully she continued, "I'm guessing the same thing happened to Pedro Juan. It led them to him. Jackson, we have to go. If they're in Mexico City, it won't take them long to get here."

With that, Marie-Carmen picked up her bag, removed Jackson's CD and methodically deleted all references to the work they had done that day.

Jackson sat back, saying nothing. He was beginning to understand why PJ had given him just one phone number as an escape route.

On the way back to Marie-Carmen's apartment, they stopped at a shopping mall, where Jackson picked up a cheap laptop to replace the one he'd left in his suitcase in the rental car he'd been forced to abandon. Afterwards, Marie-Carmen insisted he buy some decent clothes. To her amusement, Jackson had taken less than eight minutes to pick out three polo shirts, jeans, chinos, black jeans and a pair of dark brown, leather brogues.

"What?" he said finally, unable to bear her obvious and barely contained mirth.

"It's just - you are so conservative! Look at you; I bet that's all you ever wear."

"For your information, it's a successful combination, and it doesn't take any planning. Low overhead, see?"

Marie-Carmen continued to smile, a hint of flirtation playing about her lips. "I didn't mean to offend your ego. You should let your girlfriend take you shopping sometime."

"If I had a girlfriend, I'd just let her pick up whatever she wanted to see me in."

"And you'd wear it?" she asked, in fascination.

"If it made her happy, sure. What do I care?"

"You'd never hear a Mexican guy talk that way."

"Why not?"

"Because clothes send a signal. They are a kind of code. Mexican men like to be in charge of those kind of signals."

Jackson stopped in his tracks. "You know what? Maybe you're onto something."

"Meaning what?"

"The DNA sequence, Marie-Carmen. What if it isn't meant to be a real, biological sequence, but a code we're meant to be able to *read*; a message?"

Beltran Sequence

Later in Marie-Carmen's apartment, they sat together at her computer. Earlier in the day their physical proximity might have been pleasantly distracting. Now however, Jackson was overtaken by the enthusiasm that always gripped him when discussing his work. It was strong enough to displace almost everything else that preoccupied him.

"DNA is a biological molecule made up of four types of building blocks. We assign each of these a letter: A, C, G, T. A DNA sequence reads as a long string of various combinations of ACGT."

"Difficult to convey much meaning with those four letters."

"Precisely. But that DNA code is 'read' by the machinery of the cell, and translated into a code for making proteins. It takes three letters in the DNA code to code for one amino acid. For example, the DNA triplet codon 'AAA' is translated by the cell into an amino acid named 'lysine'. Proteins are made from around twenty different building blocks; each represented by a single letter code. With *twenty* letters, you can make a lot of words in English."

"Or Spanish. After all, it is Pedro Juan's code."

"We'll check both."

They watched as Jackson opened a Web browser window to a Web site entitled "ExPASy". He stopped for a second.

"Wait up. Can the IP tracing whozit get to us here?"

Marie-Carmen smirked. "The 'IP tracing whozit'?"

"Don't make fun."

"Not make fun of you?" she mused. "Then how would I pass the time? But the answer to your question, by the way, is 'wait and see'. I have a level of control over my own computer that I don't have over the one at the University. And I'm even more paranoid. Mayan archaeology is pretty competitive."

Jackson nodded slowly. "OK then. Here goes."

He pasted the DNA sequence into the box under the words 'DNA Translate tool' and watched the website return the translation of the DNA into a protein sequence.

They scrutinized the resulting string of fifteen letters for a few seconds. Jackson clicked the 'Print' button. A nearby printer stirred to life.

"It doesn't look very promising. You see anything in Spanish?"

"Nope. Nor English. Maybe it's an anagram?"

"Good thinking." He opened another browser window to Google. "Let's throw this at an anagram decoder." Jackson pasted the amino acid letter sequence into the anagram tool's box. This time, after a few seconds, the screen began to fill with a long list of possible anagrams, in alphabetical order. The possibilities streamed past, seemingly interminable pages of them. Patiently, they scanned the entire list. Finally, Jackson leaned back, heavily.

"This is stupid. PJ wouldn't do this. It's too vague; there are too many permutations."

Sighing, he opened another browser at the email login page. He looked again at the email sitting in his Inbox, from PJ and tried to open it. The virus warning message came up. Just then, Jackson's cell phone, which had been charging since last night, began to buzz. A yellow flashing light indicated a call from his boss's lab. He hesitated, then let the call go to voicemail.

"Look at that," Marie-Carmen exclaimed, staring at the computer screen. "It's just one of those automatic virus emails. You're sure it's from Pedro Juan?"

Jackson pondered. "Could be. Or maybe the warning just came up because it's got an *exe* file attached. Viruses often have an attached *exe* file; that alone is enough to set off the antivirus warning. But maybe he meant to send me a program that would run by itself."

"You want to run something that could be a virus on my computer?"

Jackson gave Marie-Carmen a lopsided grin. "Would you mind very much? After all, I'm already in to you for a new VW Beetle."

"Don't forget it!"

"I'll admit it's weighing on my mind. Some of us are still just graduate students, you know."

Marie-Carmen leaned across Jackson, taking the mouse in her hand. Jackson caught his breath for a second as her fingers brushed his aside.

"Some of us didn't throw away our teenage years on a snowboard."

"Wait until I teach you, you're going to have such a different perspective."

"Fine, snow bum, we'll run Pedro Juan's program."

He double-clicked on the email's attachment. The entire screen suddenly went black; then, a small animation beginning as a colorful blob began to grow larger, magnifying to the size of the full screen.

Marie-Carmen whispered, "What is it?"

"A 3D animation of a protein structure. I wonder . . ." Jackson muttered, staring at the screen in fixed concentration. "I think that's a three-dimensional structural model of Pedro Juan's *phoenix* protein. He's got a lot further with this research than I'd imagined."

"How can you tell?"

Jackson pointed to the animation, under which a stream of text was beginning to appear. "This is a recording of an experiment; a computer modeling experiment. What we see represents just a fraction of the time the experiment actually took. PJ's been looking for amino acid sequences which bind to this protein. It's a really new technique. From the target protein – the *joust* or *phoenix*, for example – you calculate the most likely binding sites. Then you use ask the computer to create a virtual peptide – a short stretch of amino acids – which has the right shape to fit such a site. Finally, you ask the software to test each one in a virtual reality binding reaction. It takes hours. The computer suggests possible, three-dimensional matches; sequences which

could, in theory, bind to the protein sequence you're looking at."

"Does the match have to be perfect?"

"In biology, you need a fairly good match. An analogy would be a computer program which matches an outfit to a really fussy dresser. It takes up so much computer power that you have to use a supercomputer to do it. Costs a fortune to get time on a program like this. And plenty of people don't think it works."

As they talked, from the string of texts which were streaming rapidly under the animated structure, one emerged, enlarged, transformed into a bright blue- and pink- colored three-dimensional model and aligned itself against a portion of the much larger model of PJ Beltran's protein.

"Look. It found a match." Looking around for the printer, Jackson pulled out the printout of the amino acid sequence. He examined it for a few seconds, before tapping the paper. "I'll bet you a new Beetle that PJ's DNA sample - let's call it the BELTRAN sequence - is actually the gene for *this* peptide." He touched a finger to the blue-and-pink colored animated structure that had just materialized on the screen. The two animations now rotated together slowly, as if locked in a tight embrace.

Marie-Carmen rose to her feet. "Would you like something to eat? Some *quesadillas*?"

Jackson continued to stare, transfixed, at the screen. "Please!"

She paused by the kitchen door. "You know I'm not taking that bet, right?"

"Why would you? You know I'm right."

He was still glued to the screen when Marie-Carmen returned. She picked up a lime-green iPod nano that was lying, headphones attached, on a sideboard made of rustic, antique pine, and pulled out the headphones. She docked the iPod, selecting a tune. The sound of melancholy piano music filled the room. It sounded vaguely familiar.

"Beethoven?"

Marie-Carmen grinned. "Sonata twenty-five, second movement. You didn't give it a chance in the car yesterday. It's better than Eminem."

"Are you kidding? Beethoven was an eighteenth-century Eminem."

Her grin broadened. On the table, next to his right hand, she placed a blue-and-white patterned plate containing six folded tortillas filled with melted cheese. Jackson took one of the *quesadillas*. They were made from maize tortillas, the stringy melted cheese inside spiced up with pickled carrots and *jalapeno* peppers drizzled with oil. He picked up a pen and jabbed at the screen.

"This blue-and-pink thing; that's the best match the computer program came up with. The most likely of all the millions of structures it tested, to bind to the *phoenix* protein. That's why PJ sent me this recording of the experiment. He's telling me that the DNA he's given me can be used to make this binding peptide."

"Look, I can see it's an interesting find for you and everything. Why all the cloak-and-dagger stuff? How can this be worth killing someone over?"

Shrugging, Jackson said, "The way I hear it, life can be very cheap in Mexico. You got these gangsters who'll kidnap people for a ten thousand peso ransom. Imagine what people would do for a valuable bit of biotechnology. PJ must have had some inkling about what this protein could do, in maize. Maybe it's the key to some incredibly salt-resistant strain of corn. Imagine what that could be worth to countries with soil salinity problems from salty river deposits?"

"Millions?"

"*Billions*," Jackson said. "Well, I'm guessing that I'm PJ's secret backup. PJ had reason to believe that he was in danger. For some reason he couldn't trust, or didn't want to endanger his own research team. So, he passed on the BELTRAN sequence and his key experimental results to me."

A note of disappointment entered Jackson's voice. "It's kind of upsetting to see how far PJ got on this,

without saying a word to me about it. He's way ahead of me. I've only just worked out a 3D model for the *joust* protein. I think PJ would have been prepared to go all the way to publishing this. I always knew he was a competitive bastard! But something scared him off, Marie-Carmen."

An imperceptible shiver ran through both as they regarded, with wonder, the glowing images on the screen.

"Well, PJ, now you're dead," Jackson muttered. "Why didn't you trust me sooner?"

He picked up his cell phone and checked his voicemail. He listened with astonishment to the long message from his boss's personal assistant. "This is kind of unexpected," he told Marie-Carmen, who was opening two bottles of Dos Equis lager. He took a sip from the bottle she offered; the beer was ice-cold and salty. "I've just been invited to a meeting in Switzerland with a group of neuroscientists who are working on a *joust*-like protein in the human brain."

"And you sound so surprised because . . .?"

He shrugged. "I've never heard of anything like *joust* in the human genome. They must know that I'm working on the structure of the *joust* protein, because I keep talking about it in scientific conferences. But I've searched all the human gene banks and never found anything like *joust*. Also, get this; it's not just any group of neuroscientists; it's Melissa DiCanio's team."

"Is she famous?"

"She's one of those super-successful scientists; a Cambridge University professor, head of one of the best neuroscience research groups in the world, not to mention something pretty major at Chaldexx BioPharmaceuticals. The only thing she's missing is a Nobel Prize. And from the rumors, it's just a matter of time before she bags that too."

Marie-Carmen smiled slowly. "Sounds like you're keen to meet this famous DiCanio."

Jackson feigned disinterest. "I don't even think the meeting is with her. It's with one of her groups at

Chaldexx. Anyway, I already met her, a few years back. Although I doubt she remembers. I was thinking of going to work with her, but in the end I stayed in San Francisco."

"She's British?"

"Actually, no. She's a good ol' gal from Texas."

"Beautiful?" asked Marie-Carmen, mischievously.

"Not bad-looking, for her age. I'd guess she's mid-forties."

"Some guys like older women."

"Some guys like *all* women," he countered. "DiCanio's attractive in a WASP-ish, Martha's Vineyard kind of way."

"I have no clue what you just said."

"You wouldn't think she's from the American South," he explained, taking another slug of beer. "She's like a typical East Coast intellectual. I'm not surprised she left Baylor, in Houston. I'd guess that Cambridge couldn't believe their luck when they recruited her. After Tripoxan, she could have taken her pick of positions at Harvard, Princeton, Stanford. It must have been quite some package to tempt her."

"You want to 'get into bed with her', don't you?" Marie-Carmen said with a sly smile.

"What?" Jackson seemed genuinely taken aback.

"Don't you use that phrase for scientific collaboration? Like in business?"

He laughed. "DiCanio's name on my papers could not hurt one bit."

"What's her big achievement?"

Jackson frowned slightly. "You must have heard of Tripoxan? The wonder-drug?"

"The anti-depressant?"

"It started out as an anti-depressant. But often-times a drug's secondary effects become more significant. Like Viagra – that was meant to be a drug for hypertension. With Tripoxan, it turned out that there was a significant effect on people with OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. You know, that thing where people have to do all these rituals or they go nuts with frustration?"

Marie-Carmen said, "The hand-washing thing?"

Jackson nodded, took a second to bite into his cheese taco. "It can be hand-washing, or counting elements of a pattern in a wall, or a carpet, or a floor; each patient chooses their own personal purgatory. Anyway, the existing treatments are all some kind of anti-depressant, like Prozac and stuff. So it wasn't too much of a surprise when Triproxan had an effect on OCD. What was really lucky for DiCanio was that not only did Triproxan have a good effect, but it worked at much lower doses. It had fewer side effects than the existing drugs. Even better, she managed to get a handle on how it works. Which, to be honest, was a big black box as far as it goes for all the other drugs."

He remembered hearing the news of DiCanio's discoveries, exactly six months after he'd turned down a chance to work with her. It had been hard to avoid the odd pang of 'what if?' Jackson was a victim of this torturous game, like most scientists he knew. He'd been more annoyed with himself that he was letting on, that he hadn't after all gone to work with DiCanio. This invitation felt like a second chance.

A Second Chance

Marie-Carmen dangled the green beer bottle by the neck, between her thumb and forefinger. She stared at the shiny red-and-silver label, momentarily lost in thought. "OK," she said, slowly. "Melissa DiCanio discovered Tripoxan, then what?"

"Tripoxan was a big deal, something which could begin to dissect the molecular basis of the brain-mind connection. That's kind of a holy grail for the neuroscience community."

"Did it make her rich? Famous? Both?"

"It made DiCanio's name at the university where she had her first lab. As I remember it, a few years ago she was headhunted to a biotech company in Switzerland; Chaldexx BioPharmaceuticals. Cambridge University offered her a chair, in return for which Chaldexx funded a whole new floor in the Department of Neuroscience and the Chair of Neuroscience.

"By then she was calling the shots. See, her name was on the patent for Tripoxan. DiCanio sold the patent to Chaldexx. She raised around \$250 million for the clinical trials; not bad for a new biotech company. They wanted to do all the clinical trials themselves. Huge risk; if the drug hadn't worked, they'd have been in deep, deep shit. It's pretty common too, for a young company to blow that kind of cash on a drug candidate, only to have it tank. It was a long shot. For once, it paid off."

Marie-Carmen shook her head in wonder. "Wow. This kind of thing doesn't really happen in the world of archaeology."

"Are you kidding? You guys discover lost cities and ancient scrolls!"

"I was talking about the money side of things. No-one's getting rich out of archaeology. At least not legitimately. For that you have to get into the illegal antiquities trade."

"Oh, lucrative?"

Marie-Carmen shook her head, wrinkling her nose. "They make for scary company, the customers for that kind of business. Jackson, when's this meeting? And where, exactly?"

"Two days from now, in Interlaken, Switzerland. That's the headquarters of Chaldexx. Actually, they were supposed to be meeting PJ. PJ was also collaborating with Chaldexx, something to do with the three-dimensional structure of *phoenix*. DiCanio got word that PJ's been murdered. She called my boss to ask if he had someone who could take over the seminar slot."

"The show must go on," Marie-Carmen remarked, sadly.

"Hey, it's a listed company. Don't expect sentiment."

"I guess."

"So anyway, the meeting is two days from now."

Marie-Carmen looked askance. "Two days? How are you going to get out of here in time? You can't risk the airport; the Ford Explorer guys found you there in the first place; they're sure to be watching the flight departures."

Jackson hadn't even thought of that. "Jeez, you're right! And if they really are connected to Customs..." He stood, took a couple of paces around the room. "I'm gonna make a couple of calls, OK?"

He disappeared into the kitchen, where Marie-Carmen heard an occasional excited exchange as he discussed, first with his own lab, then someone from Chaldexx, the arrangements for his transport. Five minutes later he emerged, grinning with satisfaction.

"No problemo. It's all fixed; they have someone flying the private jet from Chetumal tomorrow; they'll swing over to in Mexico City, pick me up around 8am in the airport and take it from there."

Marie-Carmen frowned. "Chetumal? What is their private jet doing in Chetumal?"

"I don't know, is there something wrong with that?"

"It's kind of a nowhere town."

"Where is Chetumal?"

"Right at the south of Quintana Roo state. The same state as Cancun," she said, when Jackson merely looked at her blankly.

"Maybe someone went to the beach?"

"Not in Chetumal."

"You think it sounds weird?"

Marie-Carmen hesitated. "Not necessarily. I just can't think of a good reason for a biotech company to be dropping in."

"You want me to ask them?"

"Yes. Maybe. Oh, wait. It could be the Si'an Ka'an bioreserve, just north of Chetumal. Maybe they're doing some research there."

"I guess that's it. So, you think I should go?"

"It gets you away from the guys in the Ford Explorer. Also, the police."

"You mean the Customs guys?"

"No." Marie-Carmen lowered her eyes. "I didn't want to mention it. But the murder of my cousin is getting some coverage in the papers. The police are looking for you."

Jackson gaped. This was a total curve ball. When he recovered his breath he said, "Unreal."

"Do you think your friends at Chaldexx can get you out of the country on a false passport? Because that's probably what it's going to take."

"What the fuck! Am I a suspect?"

"I don't think so, not yet. But they've found out that you were meeting PJ. They know you're in the country."

"I guess they've spoken to PJ's lab." Jackson thought of Simon Reyes. The poor kid was almost certainly dead. When they found his body, things would turn very nasty indeed for Jackson. Chaldexx would probably want to wash their hands of him.

"Jackson . . . I think maybe you should leave right away." She stared at him with an intensity that made him catch his breath.

"I guess I have to." He hesitated. "Is it OK if I take a shower? I should probably leave, like around six tomorrow morning. If I'm gonna get to the airport."

"Make yourself at home." Marie-Carmen leaned back on her elbows and gave him a long, appraising look. Jackson held her gaze for a moment and then turned away, confused.

Was it possible that she was flirting with him, that he'd missed her cues all evening?

He thought back over their conversation as he made his way to the bathroom. He stared with hostility at his reflection in the mirror. Some things – like women and his family – should be more important than work. Intellectually, he knew that. Why did he keep remembering when it was already too late?

When he emerged from the shower dressed in jersey boxer shorts and a T-shirt, Marie-Carmen was sitting on the sofa. It was obvious that she wanted to talk.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that this invitation should come out of the blue?"

"Yeah. I already said it was unexpected."

"I mean, with all that's going on here. In case you've forgotten, people are looking for you, with a view to ending your life. Now it seems likely that in a few hours if not already, you're going to be a suspect in a murder case."

Darkly he added, "Or two. Yes, I have been thinking about that. But what choice do I have?"

Marie-Carmen appeared unconvinced. "Something feels wrong about this. Believe me. Call it a woman's intuition, if you have to be macho about it."

He was both touched and disturbed by her unease. His own instincts were also sounding a quietly insistent note of caution; at this stage he was putting it down to paranoia.

Maybe she's as disappointed as me that I have to leave?

Marie-Carmen disappeared into her bedroom for a moment. When she returned, she presented him with a small, black-and-orange sports bag. "You should pack."

"It'll take me all of five minutes." He watched as she departed, into her bedroom, shutting the door. And although he desperately wanted to say something before

the moment passed, he couldn't. "Bennett," he muttered, "you dumb fuck."

Jackson was packed and already making up the sofa bed when he heard Marie-Carmen's bedroom door open. He stood up straight as she entered the room. She stopped by the door. She was dressed for bed, in red, plaid shorts and a white camisole top.

"You arrived so unexpectedly; now it seems you have to leave just the same way."

There was no doubt. Her voice was tinged with regret. Jackson knew that this was his final chance. "If you asked me to stay, I'd stay."

To his relief, Marie-Carmen displayed no surprise, saying only "But I know you have to go to this meeting. This is your big opportunity. The private jets leave from a different part of the airport, if you're worried that those guys are still looking for you."

"Even so, Marie-Carmen; if you asked me . . ."

She interrupted, speaking very softly. "How about if I just asked you to spend the night . . . with me?"

Jackson swallowed, once. In that instant he felt the dull ache in his leg vanish. His eyes lowered slowly, from the secretive smile that touched Marie-Carmen's mouth, down to her shoulders, then to the clinging fabric of her camisole which revealed the shape of her breasts. Quite suddenly he forgot how to breathe.

Unsteadily, he walked over to the door, took her hands in his. "I was afraid you'd never ask."

Eventually, they moved to the bedroom. Marie-Carmen was the first to relax into sleep. Her fingers curled provocatively near his hip. Jackson pulled away, watching her.

He was dazed, bewildered by the unexpected release. A peculiar combination of feelings assailed him. It would be so easy to seriously fall for this woman. But the heady delirium of that sensation was almost swamped by a new fear.

What if, because of him, Marie-Carmen was now in danger? How could he protect her?

As the night wore on, Jackson lay restless. Until only hours ago his thoughts of Marie-Carmen were a barely coherent mixture of respect, gratitude, lust. But these had crystallized into a recognizable bombardment of feelings; feelings he hadn't felt for many months, hadn't thought he'd feel again since his last serious girlfriend had thrown him aside in favor of his more-successful, former best friend. It was a memory he tried very hard to suppress.

Although devastated, Jackson had tried to move on. He'd had hated what it had done to him, the time it had taken out of his personal and professional life. It was as though a shard of ice had become lodged inside him and instead of melting, was freezing him from within.

Marie-Carmen had done more in one hour to erase that memory than he'd managed in almost a year. He turned to look at her as she lay peacefully beside him and felt a pang of longing. For the briefest moment, a terrifying clarity overtook him: *he very badly didn't want it to be over with Marie-Carmen.*

Jackson made his decision quite suddenly. He checked his watch; it was early morning in England. There was still time to change his plans with Chaldexx. He would email them right now so that they received the message first thing.

Stealthily, he maneuvered out of the bed to avoid disturbing her and went directly to her computer. On top of the desktop, the browser was still open at Google.

He pasted some text into Google's search box, assuming it was still the text containing DiCanio's name which he'd used to investigate her before. But evidently, Marie-Carmen had been looking over the sequence code again, because what he pasted in was in fact the amino acid code for Pedro Juan's peptide - the BELTRAN sequence.

Although he had searched across all manner of databases, Jackson realized that he had not actually

searched for the occurrence of the sequence openly available on the Web.

Google returned just one result: a website which encompassed the entire amino acid sequence – and nothing else – into the domain name:

www.agylihrppreikgr.com

With a sense of disbelief, Jackson clicked on the link. The browser window went instantly black and then a smooth transition as a Flash animation began to play. A low sound crackled through the speakers. The hairs on his neck prickled. A series of strange, flame-colored hieroglyphs began to appear. The sound grew louder and more ominous, until it was a steady humming buzz – almost white noise but with an unsettling quality; that of a crowd, whispering.

A box resembling a chat window appeared. A series of numbers flashed past, beneath the box. Jackson watched for a few seconds. The sequence was counting down. In the white space for text, a cursor flashed, invitingly.

He clicked the mouse. Tentatively, he typed:

Hello?

Astonished, he watched as words began to appear on the screen in reply.

Hello, Mr. Bennett. I see you are still in Mexico City.

Jackson was too stunned to move. More letters appeared:

You may as well talk to me. You've already made your mistake. Here you are. Just a matter of steady, number-crunching, time before I track you down.

Cold dread swept through Jackson. But he couldn't tear himself away. His fingers moved almost mechanically: **Who are you?**

My name is Hans Runig.

The name meant nothing to Jackson.

A symbol appeared on the bottom right hand of the computer, just as at the library:

WARNING. SOMEONE IS TRYING TO TRACE YOUR IP ADDRESS.

You were at the university library today weren't you? Rude of you not to wait to say hello. My men have put a lot of effort into meeting you. Make no mistake, before long, they will.

Jackson pushed back the chair. He had to wake Marie-Carmen. But before he turned around, he noticed a yellow shield symbol flash momentarily on the screen, giving way to a grey dialogue box on which the words: "IP Masking Software in use. Advise you disconnect Internet connection within 5 minutes."

From behind him, he heard Marie-Carmen's sleepy voice.

"You see. I'm not just a pretty face; and I don't like people who snoop on me over the Internet."

The text box where Hans Runig's words appeared sprang to life once more.

What's this? IP masking software? Impressive. I think you've found someone to help you, Mr. Bennett. You're not that smart around computers, are you? At least that's what Dr. Beltran used to say about you. So, who's helping you? Is it that pretty girl from the Beetle? That silver Beetle?

They both froze. Marie-Carmen's fingers touched Jackson's. Then she leaned over the computer, pulled out the connection from the wall plug into the DSL modem, effectively removing her computer and modem from the Internet.

On the screen were the final words typed by their correspondent:

The channels of investigation may encounter arbitrary resistance, Mr. Bennett. But clarity will prevail. This is

mere digression. Everywhere we go, we are observed. Someone, somewhere, will be willing to talk.

Jackson and Marie-Carmen stared at each other for a few seconds, before Jackson managed to ask, "What the hell just happened?"

Marie-Carmen was already gathering belongings into a pile, hunting in a closet for a suitcase.

"I pasted PJ's sequence into Google. There's a website with that address?"

She stopped moving. "But . . . why?"

"Some kind of trap. Anyone who searches for that sequence on the Web is going to wind up clicking on that link. Someone called 'Hans Runig' starts getting all chatty."

"You know him?"

Jackson shook his head. "Nope. You?"

"Never heard of the guy. Looks like you tripped his IP tracing software again, like at the university. The software I installed can mask our computer's IP address, for a while. Then it becomes like a battle of wits. Their software tries to crack our software. My money would be on theirs. I didn't pay for mine, just downloaded it for free on the Internet. It gives you a five minute warning to disconnect."

"So – we're safe?"

Marie-Carmen shrugged. "Seems this Hans Runig has put a couple of facts together since last night. I'd guess they've realized that my stopping the car right there was just too much of a coincidence. They must have tracked down the new owners, got the license plate and model of the car I took, that heap-of-junk Tsuru."

He began to dress. "Come to Switzerland with me."

Marie-Carmen sighed, irritated. "Don't you get it? We can't be seen together anymore. We need to go right now, take a taxi, then separate. You go to the airport and wait for your ride to Switzerland."

Jackson took hold of her hands, stopping her as she moved busily, nervously around the apartment.

"I'm supposed to leave you to be found?"

Marie-Carmen gave him a tender smile. "Don't worry. I'll take a bus out of state. I've saved up some money and technically, I'm still on sabbatical. I'll go to Acapulco and hide in a hotel. I'll always be around people. We'll stay in touch over the Internet."

"Alone? In Acapulco?"

"Sure, I'll read books by the beach by day and go salsa dancing by night."

Indignantly, he blurted, "Guys will hit on you!"

She gave him a little shove in the chest. "Listen to you! How long will it take you to forget me when you're with the famous scientist lady in Switzerland?"

"But what should I do," Jackson asked, his eyes wide, innocent, "if she wants me bad?"

Marie-Carmen raised a highly doubtful eyebrow. "You tell her she's too old for you, *maldito*!"

"See, using bad words like that with your 'gentleman callers' could be the reason you aren't married."

Marie-Carmen's eyes flashed with genuine anger, obviously hurt. She shoved him again, harder this time. "Hey, where's *your* wife? Or are you one of those who likes to play the field until he's over forty?"

"I'm trying to be serious, just for a second. Is there someone else I should know about? Because I'd kind of like to know."

"There was. I made a big mistake."

Jackson ventured, "Was he . . .?"

"Married? Yes. I was stupid."

"There's no-one now?"

She replied, "I don't know, Jackson. Is there?"

In response he kissed her, easing her back down on the bed.

"Promise me you won't go with some stupid, fucking Italian whilst you're in Acapulco," he murmured, quoting broadly from his favorite Mexican movie, *Y Tu Mama También*.

She chuckled, kissed him back and whispered, "I won't 'go with any stupid, fucking Italians'. Or Brazilians, Frenchmen, Americans or Mexicans."

"Good." He tried to sound satisfied.

“Don’t you go with the glamorous rich lady.”

“I won’t,” he said as he kissed each corner of her mouth. “Even if she begs.”

Parting

Less than one hour later they left the apartment, strolled into the cool dark of the condominium's gardens. The sky was an opaque, rusty orange, the reflection of the city lights a solid barrier to the night sky. As they walked past the security post, the guard stirred to life.

"You're leaving, *señorita*?"

"Taking the bus to Valle de Bravo. Stupid car can't be trusted to make the trip!"

Marie-Carmen observed the guard carefully. He asked, "Is there a contact number?"

"Thanks, that's OK. My family knows where I stay in Valle."

They walked into the street, in which shadows danced between the old wrought iron lamps and the tall trees which lined the road. "Valle de Bravo, hey?" murmured Jackson. "That's quite some diversion from Acapulco. Are you suspicious of your security guard now?"

"When they work out where I live, which we have to assume they will, the first thing they'll do is to bribe the security guard." She paused briefly. "Jackson, you really don't know anything about Hans Runig?"

"No clue at all. I was going to search for his name on the Internet but . . ."

"You should be very careful about what you search for on the Internet. Until you buy some secure Web surfing software."

"What's that?"

"There are programs that you can use to surf the Web anonymously. That way, your searches and emails sent via the Web can't be traced back to you. I'll look out for something and email the link to you."

"When will I see you again?"

Marie-Carmen just stared at him, shaking her head. "I don't know yet, but we'd better think of a plan."

They walked to the nearest taxi rank - Marie-Carmen refused to risk picking up a passing taxi - and

rode together to a large shopping mall near the *Universidad* metro station where they found a late night VIPS café. The place was relatively busy with a mixture of the excitable post night-club crowd and exhausted shift workers. They picked one of the red leather-seated booths and held hands, sharing coffee and frozen lemon cream pie.

Jackson picked up the fresh paper drink coaster. An idea hit him. He removed the DNA sample from his pocket; at the lab he had diluted it further, so there were now almost 250 micro liters – a volume roughly equivalent to two teardrops. He flicked the tube so that the sample landed, blotting onto the coaster. He asked for a clean, sharp knife. With immense precision, he sliced the coaster into two parts, placing each in a clean napkin. On each he had written a brief note of instructions, a name and address; two people in San Francisco.

He handed them to Marie-Carmen.

“Can you mail these for me? As soon as possible? It’s really important that you don’t touch them with your fingers, or anything which could be moist.”

She received them into an open paperback book.

“Now, that’s *my* secret backup.”

At 5am the café closed. The clientele spilled out onto the steps next to Plaza Universidad. It was still dark when they emerged. To one side was the rare sight of Avenida Universidad relatively free of traffic; to the other the empty parking lot of the now sleepy shopping mall.

Jackson sensed a sudden awkwardness between himself and Marie-Carmen. He could hardly believe that the moment had finally arrived to take their leave from one another. It really felt as though he should take the initiative, set the tone for the farewell. But he balked. Words, phrases that had been forming in his head already sounded trite as he imagined himself mumbling them.

As Marie-Carmen stood next to him, waiting expectantly on the steps in front of VIPS, Jackson found himself speechless, reduced to an uncertain smile.

"What's wrong?" she asked him. "You don't want to kiss me goodbye?"

Marie-Carmen clasped her arms around his neck. He couldn't resist returning the embrace. Even through their clothing, he could feel the warmth of her body. With her fingers she traced the line of his jaw. He shivered at the memory of her skin flowing beneath his.

"I don't want to say goodbye either," she said, "But since I don't know when I'm going to see you again . . ."

She kissed him deeply and without reserve. Jackson clung to her for minutes, refusing to let go.

"Make me a nice farewell," she insisted.

He replied with a helpless shrug, "It's no good. Can't do it."

Marie-Carmen pulled away, brusquely. "You're going to have to do better than that," she said, walking away.

He gave her a conciliatory wave and called out, "I'll see you again real soon. In the meantime, I'll write."

"Sure; I can imagine. The last of the Great Romantics." Marie-Carmen turned on her heel as she approached the taxi rank. She rewarded him with an unexpected, adorable smile.

Marie-Carmen took a taxi to the southern bus terminal, Jackson to the city center. He walked the streets of the old colonial heart of the city, a few moments of quiet tourism before taking a Metro train to the airport.

Even at this hour the airport hummed with activity. Jackson bought a paperback and hid behind it at a coffee bar. He was well aware that he'd chosen the furthest one from where he'd met PJ Beltran, just two days ago. Jackson doubted that he'd ever again be able to eat anything; the thought of what had happened to PJ made him feel queasy. With just ten minutes to go before his rendezvous with the Chaldexx representatives, an

impulse took hold of Jackson. He went to the Internet café and paid for the minimum five minutes.

Straight away, he logged onto Hans Runig's site. In the crowded, noisy hall of the airport, the animated, flashing symbols and gloomy music had nothing of the impact of the night before. Jackson waited, watching the ticking of the counter for his Internet access. With just two minutes to go before his time ran out, text began to appear in the window.

Quite a surprise, Mr. Bennett.

Jackson typed: **What's your interest in all this?**

I'm someone whose business interests were being threatened by Dr. Beltran. That had to end.

What makes you think I'm Bennett?

Because the only other person who knows the code sequence is dead. Unless you told your friend, your helper.

You're on the wrong track there. The girl who gave me a lift dropped me at the university. You're wasting your time looking for her.

Now . . . why would you tell me that?

Jackson's heart almost stopped. His adversary was clearly no fool, why had he risked such an obvious lie?

I think you're lying. You're trying to protect her. She matters, doesn't she? Who is she? A friend of Dr. Beltran's? Whoever she is, Mr. Bennett, we'll find her. We'll find you both.

The Internet access timed out. A deep chill began to invade Jackson's chest, a sense of his own stupidity and the desperate consequences that might now follow.

The Princess

The lobby of the Fairmont Acapulco Princess Hotel bustled with the daily arrivals and departures; white-uniformed porters whisked about, their trolleys piled high with luggage, guests queued to check in and out.

Marie-Carmen stepped out of the taxi, enjoying the cool breeze which swept in directly from the Pacific Ocean through the hotel's marble lobby. It was a huge space; the hollow center of a pyramid-shaped hotel which had once been the most famous hotel in all Mexico.

As Marie-Carmen waited, she noticed a large poster board on which was written "Fairmont Acapulco Princess welcomes the 15th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Ancient History Teachers." A few nervous-looking pale, predominantly white, Anglo and female persons had begun to aggregate in the vicinity of the poster; it seemed that the conference was beginning that day. Just then they were joined by a tall, good-looking man in his mid-thirties. He sported a crisply-ironed *guayabera*, similar to those worn by the hotel staff, and an infectious grin. The group immediately perked up. His sandy-brown hair was short at the back but with a long, unruly fringe. Twice, while Marie-Carmen was looking, he ran a hand through his fringe as he stared into the middle distance, like a yachtsman in a sea breeze.

Behind a hand, Marie-Carmen smiled. In her experience, guys like that were perfectly aware of every ripple of attention they drew. Every gesture was calculated to reinforce the initial, usually favorable impression. She found herself thinking immediately of Jackson. There was a good chance that he didn't even realize how attractive he was. He certainly didn't seem to spend much time worrying about what impression he made.

The sandy-haired guy was surrounded by his apparently admiring, mainly female colleagues. Out of the

corner of her eye, Marie-Carmen thought she sensed his eyes on her, just for the briefest minute.

She was well used to such glances, often covert, usually investigative. In this case, however, her response was modified by an additional factor; the uncomfortable sense of being hunted. Her eyes wandered around the lobby, watching for anyone whose gaze might seem to be fixed for anything more than a fraction of a second, on her. Some people returned her glances, but only for acceptably short stretches of time.

She forced herself to calm down. There was no way she could have been traced to this hotel, or even at this stage, to Acapulco. Marie-Carmen had thought carefully through the trail she'd left, concluded that it could lead no further than the security guard at her condo building. He'd been briefed to divert attention to the lakeside town of Valle De Bravo, a popular holiday destination from Mexico City.

Anxiety was useful only as far as it kept her alert. Rampant paranoia, she figured, was best avoided.

Within the hour Marie-Carmen had checked in and changed into a deep orange bikini and a green silk sarong shot with golden thread. Anywhere else it would have been an arresting outfit. At the Acapulco Princess, Marie-Carmen was fairly certain that it would help her to fit in. She looked out of the window of her 19th floor room, staring at the view over two 18-hole golf courses studded with palm trees and glittering blue water traps.

In its eighties heyday, the Princess had been a retreat for the rich and famous. The spectacle of a huge, modern architectural homage to an ancient Maya civic center in the midst of tropical gardens, lagoon style pools and waterfalls became one of the best known postcards of Mexico.

Although the splendor of the surroundings and service were still as impressive as ever, Acapulco itself had taken a blow as Mexico's premier beach resort. Other resort developments such as Cancun and Huatulco and lately, Cabo San Lucas, had siphoned off the cream of the tourists and seen to it that the Princess

was now – just – within the reach of Marie-Carmen's salary as an archaeologist. One who liked to live extravagantly, at least.

Marie-Carmen reasoned that it would be one of the last places anyone would search for a modest academic. She opened her MacBook laptop computer on the glass table, in front of the open balcony.

First she searched for some cast-iron secure Web surfing software, which she quickly purchased and installed on her computer. Then she opened her webmail and emailed a quick message to Jackson, with a link to the software. Now, provided that they both surfed the Web from behind the protection of the software, there would be no way to track down the IP address of their computers; no way to link them to an obvious commercial, academic or geographical location.

With meticulous care, she typed in the sequence of Pedro Juan's DNA molecule, transcribing from a printout. Marie-Carmen was not yet satisfied that Jackson had searched thoroughly enough. Yes, he had searched in the databases of known DNA and protein sequences, and also in the patent databases. However, that still left plenty of places where they might find mention of the sequence.

Many authors were now publishing information straight onto the Web, not waiting for the slow process of print publication. Maybe some geneticists somewhere in the world were discussing something similar?

Marie-Carmen determined to search thoroughly, leaving no stone unturned. One hour later, she was satisfied that she had exhausted all possibilities.

The BELTRAN sequence – in its entirety as a DNA sequence or as its amino acid translation – appeared nowhere on the Web.

What about a sub-section? What if some scientists had discovered a smaller section but not the entire sequence?

Marie-Carmen's knowledge of molecular biology had reached a limit. For all she knew, a match with a smaller section would be irrelevant – a mere coinci-

dence with no biological impact. Even so, the whole sequence of what Jackson had called the ‘open-reading frame’ – the part which made a product – was only 45 DNA bases long. That was short enough to try a few sections, just for fun.

Marie-Carmen took the first fifteen bases, and searched for them. Nothing. She took the middle section, then the last section; still nothing.

She glanced outside; the sky was beginning to darken. By now, however, she was gripped; she had to get a result, one way or another.

Opening a Visual Basic application, she wrote a short computer program which would submit the entire 45 letter sequence to the search engines, in a series of pieces, starting with nine letters and increasing by three letters at a time.

GCAGGUUAC

GCAGGUUACCUA

GCAGGUUACCUAAUC and so on.

Then the starting position would shift, starting at the second letter in the sequence:

CAGGUUACC

CAGGUUACCUAA

CAGGUUACCUAAUCC and so on, until the entire sequence of 45 letters had been sectioned.

Being on the cutting edge of her specialization – ancient Mayan writing – had required Marie-Carmen, years ago, to learn some simple programming. It had been a challenge, but one which had served her well. To Marie-Carmen, deciphering puzzles and codes was almost a compulsion – once she had begun, she simply had to make some progress before she would allow herself a break.

Satisfied that her scappily-written program would at least cover a large number of the huge range of possible sequences, she coded into the evening. It was dark before the program was finished. The day’s sun had been entirely wasted.

“If I get this done tonight,” she promised herself, “I can go to the nightclub”.

By the time her program was ready to run, she was exhausted and parched. She strolled to the cold drinks machine in the corridor, returned with sodas and a bucket of ice. The computer screen displayed a number of search results. She poured herself a tall, ice-filled glass of Mountain Dew, and began to examine the list.

This was exactly the distraction she needed, Marie-Carmen reflected. How easy it would be to fret over her cousin's murder and the insane stories that her brother had told her were now appearing in the press. It really was beginning to look as though Jackson was a suspect in PJ's murder. The injustice of it made Marie-Carmen seethe, but she reminded herself that the police didn't know what had happened to Jackson since he'd left the airport.

She and Jackson simply had to track down the identity of Hans Runig or any of his hired killers. Or at the very least, they had to find a witness to Jackson's story about being attacked in Tepoztlan.

Otherwise it would be Jackson's word against that of the police. In most justice systems, including Mexico's, that wouldn't count for much. Even though Jackson was out of Mexico for now, if the Mexican authorities put a case together, there was a good chance he'd be extradited right back.

Marie-Carmen decided to avoid thinking about this. She had to concentrate on cracking the puzzle that her cousin had left for Jackson to solve. Somewhere in that DNA, there was a message.

When she thought of Jackson, Marie-Carmen found herself experiencing an unexpected sensation of guilt. She'd allowed things to get pretty intense. Now she thought about it, she'd made all the running. It was possible that Jackson might read more into the development than she'd intended. But he'd been almost impossible to resist. Unusually vulnerable and kind of pathetic; obviously desperate to please her but without any clear strategy. Desire had oozed out of Jackson from the minute she'd picked him up in her car. The more he'd tried to conceal it, the more attractive he'd become.

Jackson couldn't have been more different from the men she usually dated, who were confident to the point of arrogance, typical machos. Not that Jackson wasn't manly; she'd sneaked a peek at some of his snow sports photos on the Web and decided that he looked pretty hot on skis. But when it came to dealing with women, he was either relatively inexperienced, just plain shy – or maybe scared. He wasn't too young to have had his heart broken, either. Maybe that was the problem? Marie-Carmen wasn't sure how she felt about that. Her own insecurities hadn't taken long to surface when he had teased her about why she wasn't married. What if there was a similar misery tucked away somewhere in Jackson's past?

Marie-Carmen forced herself to stop daydreaming about what would probably turn out to be just a one-night-stand. The more work she could do on the mysterious BELTRAN sequence, the more information she'd be able to send Jackson, in case he did wind up being arrested for PJ's murder.

After a while this turned to disappointment. She clicked on website after website only to find a partial match to the BELTRAN sequence appear in a totally irrelevant, non-biological context. Finally, one of these caught her eye; an article entitled: *Ancient Sumerian Biologists: Did the Sumerians know about the genetic code?*

The bad news was that the article was on a website whose domain name made Marie-Carmen's hopes slide:

www.archaeologyconspiracies.com