

Now, we see as through a mirror, darkly;
then, we will see face to face.
My knowledge is imperfect now;
then, I will know even as I am known.
There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love,
and the greatest of these is love.

- The Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 -
AD 56, approx.

CHAPTER ONE: IN THE COMPANY OF DREAMS

Sally Reiser bolted upright from sleep and clamped her teeth on the scream in her throat. Despite the chill of the dark room, sweat ran in rivulets along her temples, down her back, between her breasts. It soaked her matted blonde hair. Her knotted muscles ached.

A nightmare, she told herself, hoping it was so. Already, the details evaporated, leaving her only disjointed words and images, and a feeling of overwhelming dread.

Dead leaves, she keened within herself. Dead leaves in the wind.

Nightmares, she thought. Why won't they just go away?

Sally slid from the bed, willing her muscles to loosen, and staggered across the creaking wood floor to the bathroom. She didn't look at the time. Why bother? The dreams always came in the deep night, and sleep was impossible afterwards.

She showered, begging the spray to rinse the dry, dead leaves from her soul. She thought about monsters, and the hidden meanings of dreams, and for the hundredth time acknowledged the real monsters she had built in her life. She knew they would all catch up to her. One day as she wrenched awake, her eyes wide and a scream in her throat, she would fail to scrub the details from her brain. She would remember. Even under the warm spray of the shower, she shivered at such a thought.

Later, she pulled on jeans and that frazzled high school sweatshirt that still fit after fourteen years. Her clothes were easy to find in the dark; she just scooped them up from where she had dropped them whatever number of hours ago. She plodded downstairs, the house still dark, and started the cheap Proctor-Silex coffeemaker in her shotgun kitchen. Sally leaned against the refrigerator, hugging herself and staring at the building black dribble within the carafe. Her eyes were accustomed to the dark; its monochrome details revealed themselves the way friends share dirty little secrets.

She tried to blank her mind, to drown her thoughts in the squelch of dark liquid, but phantoms teased her, fading impressions of empty trains and of a guttural language, perhaps German. Mostly, though, she felt threatened by leaves, dead leaves in the wind.

Coffee in hand, Sally moved up the barrel of her narrow kitchen to the glass-enclosed porch at the back of her house. There she dropped onto her porch swing and steeled herself with her cup's steaming energy.

The porch light burned as it always did at night, illuminating a screen door held closed by a loop of coat hanger. Because of the light, the porch windows revealed not her tiny, snow-covered back yard, but the sad reflection of a slumping woman as careworn as the creaking swing on which she sat. The woman stared back at

Sally from hard, chiseled features. That face had once smiled prettily for the boys, and that body had once stood straight-shouldered and confident at the cusp of adulthood. The owner looked older than a mere fourteen years out of high school.

Sally sipped her coffee and stared at the thing that long years had made of her. She stared as if to face the woman down.

Yeah, she thought. That's me. Devoid of purpose, lost to dissolution. Sometimes Sally hated being a writer. The apt, if depressing, descriptive phrase was never long from her grasp.

Her mind returned to the shadows of monsters, guttural monsters on trains. Of course, those were monsters of the unconscious mind. She had plenty of real ones to cope with. That, as always, led her to Michael.

The thought of him defeated the porch light. Her sight turned inward, to a brooding gray like thunderheads.

Michael was a wound that refused to heal. He bled over all Sally was. She came back to that last day with him, there in the Greyhound bus station over twelve years ago. It rushed upon her as if in present tense, her porch swing becoming the hard metal bench at the station. Oblivious travelers once more swarmed around her. She was there.

Michael sat beside her on the bench, one ankle crossed over a knee, an arm resting across Sally's shoulders. It hung there not in affection, but on guard. He spoke with a smugness that frightened her. From across the gulf of time, she listened as she had listened then. "They call the place Millennium City. It's run by a guy named Jack Kordish. He's a self-made minister, a kind of modern prophet, from what they say. The whole place is built on faith, and isolated from distraction. It'll do you good."

Yeah, right, Sally thought, her face burning where Michael had slugged her an hour before. She had brought it on, she supposed, questioning his decision to clean out their bank account and move to this commune in the wilds of Montana. She had known what would happen before opening her mouth. She had known he wouldn't take backtalk lightly.

But, Michael's behavior had eroded her patience. He had developed a habit of disappearing, often for days, and his vanishing acts had come to define the last year of their two-year marriage. Sally had suspected philandering. She had never imagined the truth of the marathon, often impromptu Bible study groups and their growing hold on her husband. Fundamentalist Bible thumpers and her Michael Adams? The same carelessly agnostic Michael who had accepted a Jew as his wife? He had claimed to care little about her background, admitting only that it leant her an exotic flavor. Now, in hindsight, his courtship seemed a mask, an act to leash her, dropped away when no longer needed. He had changed from attentive lover to the monster her mother had warned her against: a Jew-hating gentile wrapped in inarguable rightness, badgering her to "Repent!" Repent from what? From not being him?

He had become this doomsday prophet person, convinced that the world would end that year, the turn of the millennium. What had bred such gross paranoia? God only knew, but Sally, he claimed, would soon face perdition because her people had murdered Christ. She was evil in Michael's eyes, an "other" to be converted or trampled, whichever worked. Only baptism could save her, and she had refused that ritual. So doing, she no longer deserved the simple human decency his religious doctrine prescribed. Michael hated her, and treated her accordingly.

Well, that kind of attitude cut both ways, she had thought from his side on the bench. She was done with playing the faithful wife. She had nothing to show for it but a numb face and rising bruises. Michael had literally beaten down her love.

Knowing her mood, her husband guarded her. He had shadowed her to the restroom, and had held her around the waist as they walked through the terminal. But, why imprison her if he hated her so? He had already taken their money, what little there was. Did he hope to reconcile by brainwashing her into his despicable fringe faith? Was that what he wanted, a doll lobotomized by dogma and fear?

Their gate began boarding. Michael led Sally into the line, holding her by the arm. Her elbow throbbed beneath his fingers. He continued his blathering religious monologue as if she cared what he said. He had always liked the sound of his voice.

He handed the bus driver his ticket and waited to pass through the gate. Sally held out hers, fingers trembling so that the flimsy paper rattled. Then, grimly, she folded it back into her hand. It was so clear to her, this crux of her life. From years in her future, sitting on a swing of her cold back porch, she saw herself doing it, heard her younger voice.

"I'm not going."

"Excuse me, Miss?" The driver blinked, his hand still poised to accept the bit of paper.

"I'm not going," she repeated with greater strength. She looked at Michael and licked her lips. He still held her arm. "I'm not going, and you can't make me."

"Sally..."

"Take your hand off me."

Michael's eyes were glacial. His fingers dug into her flesh. He caught the bus driver's disapproving stare.

"She's upset," he murmured, but his voice had a gravelly edge. "Give the man your ticket, honey. Your luggage is on board."

"You're hurting me," she complained, and pushed away.

His grip on her slipped, but recovered. "Honey, you're embarrassing me. Get it together, and get on the bus."

The driver spoke up. "Now maybe you ought to hold on a minute—"

"Mind your own business!" Michael snapped. Sally felt his coldness twelve years later, and shivered. He grabbed at her other arm. She twisted away and fell into a startled old woman behind her. Michael's hands lashed out and snatched her back to the gate.

"God damn it," Sally yelled, "can't you understand? Let go of me!"

"Get on the bus, you bitch, or I'll kick your ass through the door myself!"

"Leave her alone." Two young men had come to the front, leaving their places in line. They stood inches away, brows furrowed, shoulders squared.

Sally twisted again, emboldened by support. She punched at Michael's chest. Without the slightest change of expression, he released her, and she fell to the floor on her backside.

"Fine." He snorted. "Stay, if you want." He looked around at shocked faces, then down at Sally. "I don't need this. I don't need you. But, you're my wife, Sally Anne Adams. Eventually, you'll do as I say. Anything else is bullshit."

He turned away scowling, and stalked to the bus.

On her porch, her forgotten cup of coffee cooling in one hand, Sally blinked. The terminal around her faded, but the porch did not lighten.

A year later, after the divorce, Jack Kordish changed his commune's name from Millennium City to Base Apocalypse, sure that the final battle between good and evil would begin in his back yard. He wasn't all wrong. The authorities discovered his illegal stockpiles of weapons and, after a bloody standoff, seventy-six members of Kordish's cult died in a fire they probably set themselves.

Michael Adams was not among them.

No, Sally thought, but he should have been, the son of a bitch.

Sally felt a familiar, soft warmth at her ankles. She looked past her coffee and into the marbled blue eyes of her early morning companion. "Good morning, Ghost," she said to the cat, and stroked the short, white fur along his back. He purred, and shoved his head against her hand. Sally scratched him under his chin.

Her coffee gone cold, she returned to the kitchen with Ghost at her heels. He knew the routine. He paced figure eights on the worn linoleum floor, raising a bell-like serenade of mews until she placed his breakfast of kibbles before him. While he ate, Sally replenished her cup, then left the kitchen for her marginally larger living room.

She clicked on the television and settled down on her lumpy couch for the morning news. But the news wasn't on. It wasn't yet morning. Her face sagged at an infomercial on hair replacement therapy, and she reached for the remote. A moment later, she landed at a black-and-white Jimmy Stewart movie, and let her fingers rest. She sipped her coffee and watched, but little penetrated her mood. Jimmy and Jean and Claude were devoid of their intended goodness; they were little more than marionettes in some meaningless monochrome caricature of ... of what? I'm boneheaded, impenetrable, Sally thought. She was locked in a blackened tower, unable to listen, to feel, to trust. As much as she hated to think so, she met the whole night's world with wariness.

Well, no, that wasn't true. She trusted and loved her Eulie.

Her eyes turned to the ceiling beneath her baby's room. Poor, sweet, damaged Eulie, her six-year-old treasure, the rock that had altered the destructive course of her life and had shown her the true face of God. Such great work for such a damaged child, a child whose obvious retardation made strangers squirm. She owed her Eulie for everything good in life. Without him and the love he made possible, her dissolution would be complete.

She looked from the ceiling to the cup cradled in her hands, to the wrists just outside the frayed cuffs of her sweatshirt. She stared at the jagged scars bisecting the blue lines of her veins, evidence of a past conversation with God.

God, she thought with bile. A sadistic cancer on nature. He was not the God of her childhood, the God who had nurtured Israel in the desert, and had time and again forgiven weakness in his creations. Sally understood a disciplinarian God who punished reckless, hedonistic girls. She did not begrudge him her tight finances, her terrible luck with men, or even his curse of a fearless, tactless, and frightening mother. But what monster assaulted an unborn child, scrambling his brains just to get at Mom? On Eulie's birth, Sally had turned her back to such a God. She wished she could deny him completely, convince herself he had never really been. Then she could ascribe her baby's tragedy to anonymous, comforting randomness. But, her mother's work was too well done. Sally could not deny her God, but she could insist on hating him.

Ghost leapt to the couch. He stood staring at her with bright, blue, curious eyes.

"Can't sleep," she told him. "Nothing new, huh?"

The cat kneaded the cushion beside her. Good ol' Ghost. Always armed with perspective. If you can't sleep, you can always pet the pet.

Sally took him into her arms. She buried her face in his warm fur, smelled his freshness and listened to his purr. Such a friend, Ghost. She shoved aside monsters and dreams of monsters. She shoved aside vindictive gods. For a few minutes, anyway, she lost herself in Ghost and his abandonment to pleasure.



She shot over the dark landscape of upstate New York, the thin line of State Road 12 guiding her north out of Lyons Falls. The highway was a luminous ribbon winding through thick forest, vanishing from time to time beneath trees, always reappearing at some unexpected angle in some unexpected place. Following that line had at first been a game, but Rosa Vasquez had been airborne for more than an hour. Curiosities were now mundane. She yawned at the tranquilizing view through her windscreen, and looked at her watch.

0430. Just the look of that hour made her yawn.

"On approach, Agent Vasquez," the pilot said via intercom.

She nodded from her seat beside him, her eyes never leaving the windscreen. The pilot was New York State Police. She didn't know him and didn't want to. He had picked her up in an Albany Walmart parking lot, of all places, after a cryptic but urgent phone call from her agent-in-charge in these hinterlands. Whatever was up was the thing, she knew. Her people didn't snatch her across state for nothing.

She felt her stomach rise as they descended toward the earth, toward blue and red lights flickering just off the highway. Two police cars jammed a dirt track next to a shadowed barn. Other cars crowded the scene, sedans, a pickup truck, and one large van crowned with dead emergency lights. Someone waved a flashlight not far from the vehicles. The helicopter landed close to him in a roar of flailing rotors.

"Thanks," Vasquez said to her pilot, tapping his arm. "I'll get my own ride home." She minded her bulging parka as she climbed to the ground. She didn't want it snagged on some protrusion from the aircraft. That would be embarrassing.

The man with the flashlight intercepted her. He was dressed just as she in a heavy parka, gloves, and boots. Vasquez thrust out one hand, the other clutching her hood against the cyclonic whirl of snow from the rotors.

"Rob Banks!" she shouted above the noise. "*Que pasa, mi compañero!* It's been a long time!"

"A year, three months, and some uncertain number of days," the man shouted as he pulled her away from the ship. "You should never have taken that promotion, Rose! You left me with a gray, humorless crowd, and they're no pleasure to look at, either!"

The helicopter leapt skyward. In moments, it was gone, its booming rotor noise chasing its wake. Vasquez straightened on the dirt road and pulled her coat tighter around her. "I missed you guys," she said. "Too much paperwork down in Albany."

"I bet. At least, we suffer under the pile you shift down to us."

"Ha! *Touché*. What's the deal, Rob?"

They walked toward the cars, Vasquez relaxing as the snow, bereft of its helicopter agitator, settled back to ground. Banks pointed to people and vehicles as he spoke. "The whole cast is here, Rose, minus the villain, of course. We got your rattled local gentry over there, came out to visit his horse about eight hours ago and found an aught-9 Lexus blocking the road. Inside the Lexus, Mr. Alvin Whitmire, age forty-three, of New York City. At least, that's what his license and registration say. Bullet right through the head. Very fresh. Rigor gives us squat in this weather, but lividity has time of death at no less than ten hours. Gun in his lap, but the forensics guys are skeptical."

"Bet you a dollar the gun's untraceable."

"No bet. Anyhow, the horse owner calls the sheriff, who calls the troopers, who call the FBI. That big fella over by the Lexus is Captain Hardiman, New York State Police. You're here at his request."

"Why? Sounds like a standard, unembellished murder to me."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to blurt out the spoiler." Banks gestured with a flourish toward the huddle of uniforms near the Lexus. Vasquez took his hint and walked up to the group. She rummaged in her parka's cargo pockets for her bureau ID.

"FBI, Albany," she said. "I'm Vasquez, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of Terrorism."

The uniforms shifted, acknowledging her presence. The tallest man looked her up and down with narrowed, but humorous eyes. "Good morning, ASAC Vasquez. Have a nice flight out?"

Vasquez threw her hands palms up. "It was fair. Could have stood with an in-flight movie. You're Captain Hardiman?"

"Sure," the man said. "Sorry to snatch you out of bed like that, but it's your directive, not mine."

"Oh?" Vasquez raised an eyebrow. Hardiman had said the first intriguing words of the night. "So you wrangled up a state chopper, one that surely had other things to do, landed it against all FAA and law enforcement guidance in a Walmart parking lot to get me, then flew me way out here to the frozen left pinky of New York, all on a say-so I didn't even know I gave. I'm impressed, cap." She stepped close to the Lexus. Red and blue lights cast ghastly illumination against the mangled shell of Alvin Whitmire, still slumped in his driver's seat.

Hardiman crunched snow until he stood beside Vasquez. "We I.D. him as a hardware specialist for Intel Corporation, working with IBM. They say he honchos a special team developing some bioelectric microprocessor crap. Revolutionary. Fast stuff."

"You're suggesting an industrial crime?"

"Just filling in the info."

"Are the forensics people done?"

"Them and the line detective, about ten minutes ago. The medical examiner's behind us, fuming like a sidelined diva because we haven't released the body."

Vasquez leaned close to Whitmire's head, which lay against the window frame of the driver's door. Half of it was missing. More accurately, half of it was splattered elsewhere in the car. "Entry wound's on this side. Lots of blood on the console and passenger's seat. Splash on the passenger window. They shot him from here, then propped him back up."

"That's about right. We dug the bullet out of the passenger side door."

"Why'd you call us, cap? Looks local to me."

"Over here." He tramped around to the grill. He took a big flashlight from a pocket of his parka and directed its beam onto the hood. Someone had spray painted something across the metal:

DANIEL 12:4

Vasquez groaned.

"We got a fly from you guys a couple weeks ago," Hardiman said. "You asked we keep an eye out for religion-based criminal activity."

"Anybody have a Bible handy?" Vasquez asked, expecting no answer.

"Keep secret the message and seal the book until the end time; many shall fall away and evil will increase," Hardiman said. He shrugged at her stare. "We've been here for hours. Plenty of time to look it up. Anyway, I figured this sort of thing, you guys are better equipped to handle it than us."

Vasquez grunted. "The X-Files was fiction, cap." She turned away from the car, looking for Banks. "Anything other than the body and the car? Tracks, that sort of thing?"

"Our boys have been over the place like bloodhounds. We have two sets of footprints angling across that bean field, but they end in a drainage ditch lined with gravel."

"Smart little perps. Rob! Over here! Look, Captain Hardiman, you know the deal. We're experiencing a nationwide rise in faith-based initiatives, to be flippant about it. You get Agent Banks and his two men, and you have the courtesy of Bureau labs if you want. I want reports on all aspects of your progress and I want my people in on any interrogations once you round up the perps."

"Okay," Hardiman nodded, his tone cautious. "What about information downhill?"

"I'll round up what I can and send an agent to advise you. Understand that you aren't the only one dealing with this. Rob," she said to her approaching friend, "I need to wake up another dozen agents and get them into the Albany office. You think I could use your digs?"

"They're only mine as long as you say so," the agent answered, grinning.

"Good. But we'll have breakfast first. I can't shout people out of bed on an empty stomach."

"Thanks," Hardiman said, following her to Banks's car. "This kind of business is way over the top. You guys handle it all the time. That Waco thing, and the Freeman, and those other millennium crazies ten years ago." He watched, frowning, as she dropped into the proffered sedan and hugged her coat around her.

"I'm not doing any favors, cap. This thing is of interest to the federal government. Of course, if it turns out to be hopped up teenagers with guns, you're on your own."

"Fair enough."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm cold, I'm tired, and I'm getting hungrier by the second."

Banks closed her door, shutting her off from the bitter night. The trooper raised a hand to his parka hood in salute, then turned back to his crime scene.

"So, what do you think?" Banks asked as he turned the car around.

"I don't know. It's probably lowbrow thugs, or maybe a coke deal gone bad. I mean, it's been half a day, Rob. Wouldn't we expect someone to claim responsibility?"

They drove along the dirt track back to SR12, then Banks turned south toward Utica. "I don't know," he mused. "These kinds of things always creep me out. Political terrorists, I understand. Terrorists for money, I understand. Religious freaks, they don't make a lot of sense, not even according to their own rules. There was this guy--"

"Rob, it isn't even daylight. Could you wait until after breakfast to tell your gory story?"

Banks mugged umbrage. "I wouldn't say it was gory. Not in a Wes Craven way..."

He glanced at her now and then as they sped along the highway. She remained wrapped in her coat until the heater reached baking temperatures, then she relaxed, and stretched like a cat. She suppressed a grin as Banks averted his eyes.

"We'll be back," he said, drumming the steering wheel.

"I know."

"This one feels that way."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Their Bible scholar. He isn't done, you know."

"No, he isn't. It's only a matter of whether it's our problem, or Hardiman's."

They rode in silence a while.

"It's nice seeing you again," Banks said.

"Not so nice for me, *amigo*. Not with *mierda* like this."

CHAPTER TWO: LUKE 17:34-35

Gary LaMonte sat at a wobbly plastic table in a nearly empty food court on the university campus. Fiddling with the lasagna on his Styrofoam plate, he watched the government man across from him, a skeletal, balding apparition in an ill-fitting gray suit. He had deep-set, judgmental eyes and big hands knotted into fists on the table. Gary didn't like the look of the man, and was sure the man returned the opinion. The suit, for Gary saw him as such, had been told he would meet with an expert, a gilded academic. A cue-balled, skinny black man in a Lakers jersey, his jeans sagging below his ass and his floral print boxers out in the wild probably wasn't the suit's idea of an established college brainiac.

So fuck him.

"The professor tells me you're doing some research of interest to the state," the government man said, "a kind of national directory of religious wackos."

Right. Gary turned away from him to the other man at the table. Dr. Ikaru laughed through a mouthful of lo mein, then cleared his palette with orange cola.

"A high concept description, I'm sure," Gary's teacher explained, his round Japanese face beaming, "and not my words, but Mr. Tuttle's."

"Sorry," the skeleton said. "No offense meant."

Gary hadn't asked for this meeting. Dr. Ikaru had dragged him to it with a promise of free food. Gary's interest centered on his nearly completed degree, not on meetings with "bigshot lawyers," as the professor had characterized the visitor. No offense indeed...

"None taken," Gary muttered, wanting to return an insult, but thinking better of it.

"As I'm sure you were informed," and the bigshot glanced at Ikaru, "we in the attorney-general's office have been tracking an increase in religiously-based crime, everything from obnoxious episodes of disturbing the peace to weapons violations, spousal abuse, abduction, even murder. Their perpetrators all have one thing in common: they justify their actions through religion, usually quoting the Bible. We've handled weirdoes before, what with all that fuss in 2000, 2001, and most recently in 2012, but these guys we don't get. They couch their mumbo-jumbo in scary prophecies, but there's nothing there about aliens or ticking calendar time bombs or the other crap peddled by new-age doomsayers. It's all Christian mumbo-jumbo. The frightening part is that the mumbo-jumbo is spreading. They're organizing into groups, forming doomsday cults with paranoid militia leanings. Very dangerous. The federal government has posted bulletins, FBI, Homeland Security, initialed agencies I'd best not mention. The states are networking on this, trying to get ahead of a trend. The Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, Solar Temple, Aum Shinri

Kyo. Sounds like them all over again. And that Kordish bastard. We need to know what drives these people, what makes them grow."

Gary took a bite of his lasagna, his lasagna paid for by Dr. Ikaru. "You say they invoke religion? What do they say?"

"I could get you detailed reports, but it usually amounts to lakes of blood, dragons, ten-horned monsters, and Jesus Christ coming down from heaven. That sort of thing."

Gary nodded. "Apocalypse testimony. They aren't hiding anything, Mr. Tuttle. In fact, they're naked in the open. Do you know your Bible?"

"As well as anybody, which means I'd be hard-pressed to quote anything outside the Lord's Prayer."

"You'd better start reading your Bible. They do."

"You can interpret this weirdness? That's why I'm here. I need an expert. The professor here says you're the man." Tuttle's eyes made a slow, skeptical sweep over the so-called expert before him.

Gary refused to bristle. He glanced at Ikaru. "I'm no expert. I just wrote a paper."

"Gary, that makes you an expert," Dr. Ikaru said. His voice had a grandfatherly sound. "Your doctoral thesis is just what these gentlemen want."

"I just explain; I don't understand. These people's actions have nothing to do with scripture, or reality, for that matter. The Bible gets them all worked up. What they do with it is a function of how scrambled they are in the head." Gary looked around the table. Dr. Ikaru grinned, eyes wrinkled almost shut over his round cheeks. Tuttle's eyes were dead, his mouth a thin line. He wasn't getting his money's worth, and showed it.

Well. Time to give the rube a show, but not so much that his eyes glaze over.

Gary slumped back in his chair. He brought one ankle up onto a knee. "There's this end-of-the-world fever," he said. "Pre-millennialism, millennialism, post-millennialism. It came to a head in 2000, but nothing happened, no end of the world, no Jesus, no aliens or black helicopters. Not even the computers crashed. Then they discovered that their nice, round apocalyptic number was a year off, that the millennium actually began in 2001, and they got worked up again." Gary nodded at his thoughts and rubbed his shaven head. "Of course, nothing happened then, either, and a lot of these groups have been rudderless ever since. They tried getting up a head of steam in 2012, the end of the five-thousand-year Mayan calendar, convinced it ushered in the end of all time. Didn't pan out. Now they're clutching at bad forgeries of papal history, sixteenth century documents that assert the latest Catholic pope will reign over judgment day. None of it's new. The same thing happened at the last millennium, and we ended up with the crusades, over two hundred years of religious bullying. These groups have patterns discernible through history." Gary shrugged. "These things take years to build, and years to die away. They'll be with us for a while."

Tuttle nodded toward Dr. Ikaru. "The prof says that paper of yours is right on the mark, that you're the local expert on religious cults."

Gary shifted in his chair from embarrassment. "Not cults. Apocalypse groups and post-millennialism. There's a difference."

"Not to me, there isn't. When the paper's done, I'd like a copy, and I'd like to pick your brain from time to time. In either case, it'll be worth it - financially, I mean."

"You're offering me a job?"

"A consultantship, same as we offer the professor here from time to time. You've been his research assistant, so you know how it goes. He speaks very highly of you."

Gary saw amusement plain on Ikaru's face.

"How about it, kid? I need somebody like you on my side."

"I..." Gary began, not knowing what would follow. He needed money. As a student, he was perennially broke. But he was also black. He had no reason to trust government types. "I'll think about it," he finished.

Tuttle nodded. "That's fair." He extracted a business card from his coat. "Don't wait forever; I sure can't. Give me a call, or call the prof and he'll call me."

"Sure. I'll get back with you."

"Thanks for your time," Tuttle said, standing. He nodded to Ikaru, and was gone.

Gary watched him leave, forgetting Dr. Ikaru. He had never imagined such easy entry into the world of employment. In Gary's experience, nothing came easy.

"It's a surprise, I know," Dr. Ikaru said.

"A surprise?" Gary returned from his daze.

"Yes. Such a sudden and important offer."

"Why?"

"Because I'm retiring, Gary. See? Another surprise! I told Mr. Tuttle about you for the same reason I told Evans at the sheriff's department about you, and Clark at the state police."

Gary looked at him, eyes narrowed.

"I've done the psychotic pinhead analysis bit for years, son. That millennium nonsense was lucrative, but it just wore me out. Now, it's starting up again, for whatever reason. It's time for somebody else to play detective." He reached across the table and patted Gary's shoulder. "I can't think of anyone better to take over my extracurricular niche. You aren't a student anymore, Gary. You're a scientist in demand."

Not a student anymore, Gary thought. Time just flies...

"I imagine you could publish tomorrow," Dr. Ikaru said. "Your research is impeccable. I'm sure I'll have no arguments when I see the final draft. But--!" and, as was his habit, he let the qualifier hang. He munched another bite of noodles. Gary waited patiently, for he knew this man. After five years, Ikaru was more a father than an academic advisor.

"Your paper lacks immediacy. It's mainly historical research, Gary. That won't do with people like Tuttle. They deal with the problems of now, not a thousand years ago."

"I did the paper because of what's happening," Gary argued. "I remember back when and all the millennial things that went down -- the bombings, the hoardings, the computer scares and such. The cops treated it like something new, something unique. I found out later that it had all happened before. That's why I wrote the paper. How can the authorities deal with this latest if they don't understand where it came from?"

"A sound argument, but somewhat esoteric for the white socks and black shoes crowd, don't you think?"

"So, what are you saying, Dr. Ikaru? I should change the entire focus of my work? Maybe you should have said that a year ago."

"Look, Gary, you stand at a deciding moment in your life. You are the expert. There aren't a hundred respectable researchers on this planet as steeped in the lore, the science, and the sociology of apocalypse phenomena as you are. I'm not suggesting you redo your paper. I'm suggesting you annotate it, or add an afterward, a critical analysis, something to relate your historical data to present day trends. Make it more user friendly."

Gary's stomach tightened. He had written a historical analysis of Judeo-Christian doomsday prophecy, the stories centering on the end of the physical world and the reclaiming by God of the universe. To do as Ikaru suggested meant a reinterpretation of all the data in terms of how it explained doomsday groups today. Though the existing data still held validity and lent itself to other perspectives, a reediting process meant months of additional work.

"You're a creative person," Ikaru said, grinning. "A little imagination, and you could adjust your paper and still submit it in January, as scheduled."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have to write the thing."

"Yes, isn't it wonderful?" Dr. Ikaru gathered his dinner waste and looked around for a trashcan. "Well, it's just a suggestion, Gary. As I said, your paper stands well as it is. But, you must begin thinking beyond your degree. This change I suggest will increase your value in an extremely limited field of expertise."

Ikaru leaned forward, searching through his coat pockets. "Mr. Tuttle and I discussed this situation, as we've discussed many such situations over the years." His eyes sparkled. "We go way back, Lawrence and I. We share many concerns, if the beer's cold enough. I know you have no contemporary hook for your work. Where does your chronology stop, the Renaissance? Anyway, he gave me this." He slapped a scrap of folded paper onto the table.

Gary picked it up. "And this is?"

"Tuttle believes it's a jump start. The person on that paper is a reporter, of sorts." Gary noticed the hint of derision. "She writes freelance, mainly for supermarket tabloid rags, but Tuttle says she hoards as much anecdotal experience on cult groups as anybody he knows. And she's local."

"Tuttle reads the National Enquirer?"

"Tuttle collects information."

Gary opened the paper to find a name in neat block lettering:

SALLY REISER

Below the name was a phone number.

"What do I do with this?" he asked. "I can't use a tabloid reporter as a citation."

"Talk to her, that's all. You might gain some new and compelling insight." He said it with a grin at the silliness of his words.

Gary walked the two miles from campus to the house he shared with his Gramma. He huddled deep in his inadequate Colts stadium jacket, making himself small against the bitter winter chill. The walk, occasioned by a lack of bus fare, was a dangerous feat so long after dark, for Gary lived in a rough, even infamous neighborhood in Indianapolis. The highest number of violent crimes per capita in the entire United States, that was Gary's neighborhood. Yes, it was a terrible place and, yes, he would escape it, thanks to his Gramma and to the help of Dr. Ikaru.

Gary was a proud man, but knew to be thankful for those who helped him. His Gramma had taught him both confidence in his personal worth, and faith in God to provide. And God did provide, though in ways unfathomable by merely human means. Sure, God provided empty pockets. He provided a hungry belly. But he also provided the advanced education that made escape possible. And he provided bulwarks like Gramma and Ikaru, who had nurtured, pulled, and kicked Gary to the threshold of that escape.

Could Gary's natural parents have done as well? He couldn't know, for he barely remembered them. He knew that his father had died in a skirmish, your clichéd drug deal gone bad. Mom, in despondency, had killed herself not long after. In hindsight, man, woman, and baby had never been family as much as a doomed accident. Well, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. That, Gary often thought ruefully, put him near the front of the line into heaven.

He arrived safely at the tiny, broken house he knew so well. Its roof sagged, its cramped spot of a lawn lay sparse and brown, and its porch slouched where the concrete sank. Gary knocked on the front screen door and braced himself for the expected fretful grandmother.

She answered the door after a long minute.

"Gary! Come in, I was worried." She unlatched the screen door and pushed it toward him.

"Sorry, Gramma. Dr. Ikaru loves to talk." Gary entered the house. He smelled the rank odor of old cigarettes, noticed, as always, the decrepit furniture and yellowing walls in the tiny living room, the wood across one window where the glass had shattered and couldn't be fixed. Gunshots, and poverty. He noticed these things as he always did, and his mood changed from anxiety to melancholy, as it always did. But, he also noticed the neat precision underlying age and disrepair, the cleanliness of the dismal scene. "Do with what you have, and God will bless," his Gramma always said, and lived by her words.

"Dr. Ikaru, eh? Didn't you say he'd leave you alone until January?" She shuffled her heavy form stiffly to her ancient overstuffed rocking chair, then worked herself to a seated position by careful, arthritic stages. Gary locked the front door.

"That's when my paper's due. But he had other things on his mind."

"I don't like how he criticizes your work. I don't see him writing no paper."

"It's his job, Gramma."

"He takes his job too seriously. So, what did he have to say that kept you out past dark?"

"He found me some work, Gramma."

She turned slightly toward him, pleased. "Why, that's good, Gary. Another of those research assistant things?"

"No, this one's all mine. A consultantship with the state attorney-general's office."

She smiled, showing cigarette-stained teeth. "See? It all paid off. Now, hang up your coat. Stay a while."

Gary stepped away from the door. He slid his coat off and dropped it onto a chair in a connecting kitchen as neat and clean as everything else.

"How much does your new job pay?" Gramma asked from her chair.

"Don't know yet. Not much." He took a glass from a cabinet, then opened the refrigerator.

"When do you start?"

"Don't know. It's an 'as needed' kind of thing." He poured water into his glass.

"Well, Gary. You don't know the pay and you got no steady hours. You sure it's a job?"

He reentered the living room and settled onto its sagging sofa. "I didn't say I'd take it, Gramma. But, Dr. Ikaru does the same sort of thing and makes more than his university salary."

She turned to face him. He knew the effort she exerted to do so. His Gramma was older than her seventy-odd years, wracked by arthritis, diabetes, and God knew what damage caused by her smoking. It hurt her to turn toward him, so he focused on what she said.

"Dr. Ikaru, that old goat, isn't a twenty-eight-year-old student. He has that degree; he has that shingle, more than one. And he ain't black."

"I know, Gramma."

"Don't you quit school over this thing."

"I won't, Gramma."

"We sacrificed everything, me and your folks, God rest their souls. You're the first of our family to graduate college." She snorted, and reached for the cigarettes on the table beside her chair. "The first to graduate high school. You won't live in this place, Gary. You'll live out where the white folks live."

Plenty of unfortunate white folks out here, Gary thought.

"Don't quit school."

"I won't, Gramma."

She lit her cigarette and took a drag. She then struggled back to a comfortable position. "Have you eaten?"

"At school."

"Can you reach me that remote?"

The television stood six feet in front of her. Gary took the remote from atop its cabinet and clicked on the set before handing her the box.

"What's on?" he asked.

"Oh, the Reverend Bennington. Who else?"

"How can you watch that? You could go to real church--"

"I could not. I'm too crotchety. And the Reverend gives me all the churching I need."

Gary sighed and returned to the sofa. He tried to ignore the sudden flare of noise from the TV, but it seduced him nonetheless. The Reverend delivered an artful sales pitch. The lilting announcers, the gospel choir background, and the flashy sets seen through dynamic camerawork all combined into a slick production, as mesmerizing as any game show. But, this wasn't cable. Not even the miracle-working John Bennington, Jr. could clear the pixilation of poor reception. Gary rose from his seat again and adjusted the rabbit ears to a solid image.

"And who among us shall be saved?" the man on the screen asked urgently. He looked sincere with his chiseled tan face, his perfect, conservative white hair, and his intense blue eyes. His silver and green robes lent him authority beyond his natural charisma, gave him papal credibility. "Our driving question is clear, if also harsh. Who among us shall be saved? Certainly, many are dead to Christ. They refuse his love and attack his presence wherever they find it. God, have pity on these! When the appointed minute of the appointed hour comes on the appointed day, and the saints rise in glory to meet JE-sus in the heavens, and when those millions still living as one with the Lord vanish from the roads, workplaces, homes and prisons of our world to join JE-sus in his, when these things pass, God save those left behind in the company of the usurper, in the clutches of the Antichrist. For theirs is a terrible fate. They will live out their years as kindling for the conflagration to come, as animals to be butchered in the terror of Armageddon..."

Gary shook his head. So many Benningtons, and all with the same base goal: to prey on the fears of a gullible, guilty humanity. The uncertainties of the infant millennium exerted a powerful, distorting influence over the normally hard-shelled population of Earth. Supernatural fears clawed at the collective id, fears that rendered common sense inoperable and generations of religious tradition anemic. The major established religions lost membership to the crowing rabble of the doomsayers. They stood besieged, accused of subverting the very faiths they had built over centuries, while televangelism, never a bust industry, exploded with newfound wealth and power. The TV preachers assembled the new congregations of the 21st century, raking in tens of millions of followers, competing for parishioners and the money that followed them in a bizarre perversion of the free enterprise system. Raised Baptist and knowing what he did of post-millennial fever, Gary felt sickened at the thought of it all.

In that moment, he knew he'd accept work from Tuttle.

He left the living room, but the house was small, and the TV's voice hunted him with ease. He paced the kitchen, then remembered the phone number passed to him by Ikaru. Maybe he should call. Since the future's poor excuses for faith pursued him with such purpose, he might as well get some work out of the deal. Besides, the phone might drown out the television.

It did, but not for long. After four rings, Gary heard a click, then the telltale hum preceding a recording.

"Hey, this is Sally. If you're offering money, leave a message. Everyone else, use the mail."

Gary hung up at the beep. She got sass, that Sally Reiser.

He sat down at the kitchen table and buried his head in his arms. The television intruded.

"It isn't that we should hate them, or feel at all superior. But for the God-given grace of Christ Jesus, we would be them. Or, perhaps, we are. No one knows who will be taken and who will stay behind. We must be diligent, always aware of our heritage of sin. We must always seek perfection in Christ..."

"Amen, Reverend," Gary's Gramma said to the television.

Well, the Reverend Bennington had a customer, Gary thought. No wonder. His shtick convinced with a daunting mixture of ominous warning and friendly advice. Not all TV preachers treated their parishioners with as much patrician warmth. And on radio, they got downright abusive, virtually scaring contributions out of their listeners.

He thought of Davidson, that one personifying name of radio evangelism. Davidson made Bennington sound like a waffling apologist for God, and Bennington was himself disavowed by the religious media superstars, the Billy Grahams and Pat Robertsons of the world. Davidson was a red-eyed fanatic, a frothing zealot, or that was his persona on the air. With Davidson, there was no forgiving God, no salvation except for the purest elect of a tiny fraction of humanity. All others were destined for the flaming, blistering, rat-eaten hell of the immortal damned. Davidson offered only two acts of contrition that could save a soul from eternal torture: sending money now, and unequivocal allegiance to him. To him, not the Father, or Son, or the Holy Spirit. With Davidson on your side, you needed no one else.

Such nonsense might have attracted little more than ridicule fifteen or twenty years earlier, but the times had since turned ridiculous. Salvation was everything to otherwise ordinary people, and if you could buy it, more the better. Davidson claimed to lead over ten million converted, that is, those who gave money regularly. He reinforced this following with a formidable Internet presence, three books on the bestseller lists, and with the crown of his empire, the year-long Bible crusade and tent (read: stadium) revival that marched across America toward the Day of Christ's Coming.

That glorious day was the twenty-third of December, and for no reason at all, as far as Gary knew. The End of All Things. Seventy cities had already survived Davidson's contentious pilgrimage, each stop ballooning regional populations by as much as a million surly, unmanageable disciples. Each hosting city saw spiking crime rates, especially where disruption of the peace, vandalizing of abortion clinics, and terrorizing "unfit" churches were concerned. Davidson's hardcore disciples cared little for the law of man, nor, apparently, for the laws of their God. They heard only Davidson, and interpreted his goading vagaries into action. Nothing else mattered. They were saved, after all, only through him. God and the devil had failed them more than once. The people shopped for newer, more hands-on deities.

Yet, to clearer eyes, their modern messiah was nothing more than an opportunistic megalomaniac. He flirted the boundary between free speech and incitement to riot, admonishing his followers to ignore the rule of law in favor of the commandments of God, through him. Some rumored that he billed himself as appointed by Jesus himself to prepare man for His final coming. But Davidson never hinted such things within range of a microphone. Anything he said of such personal importance was a gift only to his closest disciples, who dutifully leaked his views to the press. The man was many unsavory things, but not an idiot.

Which was just the kind of insight Tuttle wanted.

Gary sighed. He pushed himself away from the table and back to the phone on the wall. He would leave a message for the Reiser woman, he thought as he dialed her number again. Tuttle thought it wise, and Tuttle held the pay stubs. But, as Gary listened to the steady progression of rings in his ear, he wondered what worth a politician found in a reporter, the enemy, especially one writing for--

"Hello?"

Gary hesitated, caught by an unrecorded voice. "Umm, is this Sally Reiser?"

"Yes..."

"My name is Gary LaMonte. I'm a doctoral candidate at IUPUI, that's Indiana University, Purdue University at Indianapolis, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, in Comparative Religion. A Mr. Tuttle of the state attorney-general's office gave me your number..."

"I don't know any Tuttle."

Gary heard irritation in her voice. He also heard its clear, feminine quality, a perfect telephone voice. He wondered what she looked like.

"Look, I'm sorry to disturb you, but this guy, an assistant to the attorney-general, thinks you might help me on a project. I'm doing this paper on post-millennial religious phenomena--"

"I'm busy, Mister-- whoever you are. I'm also a private person. I don't appreciate calls from strangers, and I don't answer surveys."

"Please, don't hang up. This isn't a survey. I was hoping we could meet. Mr. Tuttle and my advisor, Dr. Ikaru, think you might be a valuable resource for my paper."

"I don't consider myself a resource for anything, Mister ..."

"It's Gary. Gary LaMonte. You don't even know what the paper's about, Ms. Reiser." He found it odd that he fought so hard for this meeting. Was it the voice?

"I don't need to know--"

"Just one minute? Then I'll hang up. I'll do it happily, and never disturb you again."

He heard the sigh on the other end. "Shoot."

"I've done this study on post-millennial prophecy -- that's religious stories concerning the end of the world -- and I've documented individuals and groups that have used millennial hysteria to advance personal, political, and

social agendas throughout history. Well, the state has some interest in my research, but they'd like it to have a contemporary spin. I've been told that you're the local expert on millennial groups, doomsday cults, and such."

He waited long moments through dead air.

"A history of wackos in religion?" she asked.

"It's been called that."

"An obscure way to make a living, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Look, I appreciate that you're bettering yourself with an education and all ... well, no, I don't appreciate it. Sorry, Mr. LaMonte, but you have to find somebody else--"

Gary cursed. It just slipped out. "I don't get this," he said. "You don't need to crack on me. I just wanted insight from an expert. I'm not asking you for a lifetime commitment, and I'm not asking you to fall on your sword or flay your skin, or--"

"My, you're a passionate one, aren't you?"

"Where do you get off insulting me like this? I ain't done nothing to you."

"You called me up. And you said you'd hang up nicely."

Gary froze, gape-mouthed. Well, she had a point. Was this humor, or a needling attack? He noticed the reduced volume from the living room. His Gramma stared at him, curious and concerned.

"Okay," he said after a calming deep breath. "Okay, time out. Sorry I bothered you. I didn't think this was such a great idea in the first place."

"Nine tomorrow."

"What?"

"I'm free at nine tomorrow morning. Drop by and bring everything you know about the history of religious crazies, and maybe you can convince me to help you out a little."

"What?"

"Tell me, are you as cute in person as you are over the phone?"

What?

"Can I expect you?"

"Well, I guess..."

"Got a pencil? Here's my address."

He took it down, then she hung up. He stared at the handset for long moments afterward. It started to buzz.

"What was that about?" he heard from the living room.

"Nothing, Gramma. Business." And it certainly was, as in Sally Reiser giving him the business. Why had she played him? Did he misunderstand her, or was it all a subversive joke on the cute-sounding student telemarketer? Would she show up for the meeting tomorrow? The address on his note pad was likely that of a funeral home or some equally cutting location.

He dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. Why did he care? Tuttle and Ikaru aside, there was no incentive to interview rag reporters. He could never quote her, for none would take her seriously. She would sully his research even as an uncited source. So, why bother? Was it really her voice? Had he heard something there that tugged at him?

There, apparently, struck the hook. He would visit Reiser's funeral home, or gas station, or whatever she had given him. He would do so not for substantive gain, but for curiosity's sake.

Besides, the skeleton in the suit had wanted this to happen. Who was Gary to argue?

CHAPTER THREE: 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3

"Morning, buddy!" Sally said as she entered the room. "Rise and shine, and all that stuff!" The room was small, jammed with the meager accouterments of a bureau, a rocking chair, and the one twin bed. The bureau hid beneath a colorful icing of stuffed animals. Cheery posters brightened the walls: Elmo, Bob the Builder, and teddy bears. No hard toys on the floor, nor anywhere else in sight. Sally didn't trust her son with too many objects in too close a space. He had this thing for banging stuff...

Eulie lay butt upwards amid a tangle of blankets, his pillow dragged over his head.

"C'mon, sport, get up."

"No yet!"

"Not yet? Of course, yet. Look!" She pulled aside his curtains. The world had brightened to a subdued gray. "How about it, Eulie? What do you see?"

Brown eyes peeked from beneath the pillow, which then flew back revealing a wide, toothy grin. "Morning time!" Eulie chirped, and sat up in bed. "Shoo day, Mommy?"

"School day, yes. But first, let's change that diaper. Come on, on your back."

She changed his diaper, his extra large, biggest size they make diaper, hoping as always that it would be dry. It wasn't. She wiped him, sent him to the toilet just to build habit, felt relief at the tinkling sound that reached her as she made his bed.

Eulie's morning ritual was a grueling chore mitigated by love. He dressed himself under direction; he just had to learn. But, the process took forever even when he cooperated. First came the diaper-like pull-ups, then the sweat pants and t-shirt. Even tube socks had their pitfalls for uncoordinated limbs. But the final task was by far the most solemn. Sally laid Eulie on his bed and slipped his small feet into the plastic orthopedic braces that she could not afford, and strapped the braces tightly to control his untrained ligaments and muscles. Eulie had the muscular control of a three-year-old; anyone could see it. The braces were only the most obvious sign of his troubles. He was a mess both physically and mentally, but Sally fought for him, and made him fight for himself. She refused to accept the will of her mother's vicious God.

Downstairs, Eulie ran to the laundry basket in the living room corner, the one that contained his small cache of cars, trucks, and action figures. While Sally prepared his breakfast, Eulie went to work at noisy, energetic play.

"No throwing, Euland David Reiser. You want time out?"

"No! Eulie be good!"

"I hope so. How do you want your bagel, honey? Toasted?"

"No toas, butter and jewwy, peas."

"Butter and jelly it is. Only a minute, sugar, then it's time to eat."

"Eulie go shoo, this day?"

"Yes, honey, you go to school today."

Such was the framework of Sally's days. Questions, answers, then, a little later, the same questions again. But Eulie had taken three years to speak his first intelligible word, so Sally didn't complain. This memory thing, and its associated problem in grasping and retaining the nuts and bolts of language, it disturbed her, but nothing like the terror of those first three years. Then she had faced not speech difficulties, but the prospect of no speech at all.

It was time for school. She gathered her laptop into its protective sleeve and settled it deep in the canvas carryall she used as a purse and shopping bag. She bundled Eulie against the cold, encasing his mop of blond hair in a wooly cap, then beneath the flannel-lined hood of his puffy fiber filled coat. She slid his book bag full of diapers and spare clothes onto his stout shoulders, grabbed her own bag, and led him out the door past her ratty Nissan Stanza.

Sally felt both blessed and cursed to raise her boy in the Broad Ripple section of Indianapolis, a neighborhood of imposing junior mansions alongside small, old cottages like hers, all nestled within a wooded environment of maples, dogwoods, and huge old sycamores dwarfing the meager structures of man. Broad Ripple was as quiet as any non-suburban community in the city, with narrow streets that encouraged walking rather than cars, a beautiful, sprawling park along the winding White River, and the Village, a quaint, old business district replete with art galleries, used book stores, and an international taste from some of the city's better restaurants. But, for all its air of exclusivity and its cerebral reputation as an arts community, Broad Ripple was overwhelmingly middle class. Most of the residents could not afford the conspicuous luxuries flaunted throughout the Meridian and Butler neighborhoods to the west. They worked hard for what little they had, personally shoveled their drives, cared for their yards, and cleaned their homes. They were ordinary people who minded their own business; and that was the blessing. Sally's curse was living her Rockwellian existence on the charity of her mother, who had found her the house and paid all but the property taxes. Sally could not afford her home, and her mother made sure she knew it.

Eulie's Kindergarten day care stood two blocks east at the busy, six-lane intersection of Kessler and Keystone. He called it school because they taught the basics between playtimes: the alphabet, counting, and an appreciation of reading. They did what they could for Eulie despite their lack of special education expertise, and Sally appreciated their efforts. Little as it was, their work showed that Eulie could learn, that, with help from caring adults, he was not doomed to helplessness the rest of his life.

She took him inside, away from the rumbling trucks and honking cars, and said a cheery hello to Brenda, the girl in the outer office just inside the doors. Sally paid the weekly bill and passed pleasantries about nothing as she helped Eulie remove his winter gear. She fussed over him as he put away his book bag, greeted his caregiver in the great room beyond the foyer, and investigated the toys in the red and yellow cubbyholes along one long wall. Other

sons and daughters scampered about, and Sally's heart wrenched at how coordinated, oral, and self-sufficient they were, far more so than her broken child. The comparison was old, but its sting did not fade as its truth stretched into years.

Finally, Sally hugged her boy good-bye. "I love you," she said, but silently apologized, convinced of her guilt in delivering his troubles. She was, after all, his mother. Her body had made his handicaps possible. In this mood, she left him, departing into the working world to pay for Eulie's braces, his doctors, his childcare, and his home.

Sally walked north along Keystone, dispatching distance with a strong, purposeful stride against cold air and the fumes of heavy traffic. From that point on, the street was made for cars. Rather than a sidewalk beneath her feet, she crunched over the grey offal of a dirtied snowfall thrown aside by plows. She stopped at the Marsh supermarket three blocks up on 62nd Street and grabbed two tabloids at the checkout. Not any scandal rag met her needs. She took a copy each of the National Investigator (Largest Circulation of Any Paper in the World!) and the World Weekly Sun, and paged through them as soon as she left the cashier. The Investigator was mostly celebrity gossip, but she nonetheless folded it to one particular story toward the middle pages, a piece alleging improper financial practices by John Bennington, Jr., the TV evangelist. THE REVEREND'S HAND IN THE TILL-AGAIN! the headline proclaimed. She thought that a little strident, since the same intensity of corruption did not appear in the story. But, the headline was irrelevant; only the byline mattered. The byline was her own.

She tucked the Investigator into the canvas bag slung from her shoulder, then thumbed through the Sun. Its headlines revealed an editorial focus concerned more with selling copies than with journalistic credibility. SUCKED INTO A JET FAN-AND LIVES! shrielled one headline accompanied by an obviously faked photograph. GIRL BECOMES HUMAN CHICKEN! ANGEL CAPTURED, IMPRISONED IN AREA 51! JESUS SEEN IN ARKANSAS, HEALS THE LAME! Sally loved the Sun's irresistible tackiness. It might have made her feel superior, except that she was in it.

She stopped paging. There it was, her money story, five pages back from the cover, her name in eighteen-point, bold, red type:

MORE END TIMES WARNINGS BY ARTHUR DAVIDSON!
Millions to Perish in Rapture Fires, Radio Preacher Says!

The story filled two pages minus an advertisement hawking obedience pills for dogs. Pretty damned good, she thought, when you're paid by the line. She smiled as she scanned, more in satisfaction than pride. After all, she couldn't be proud at getting published in a tabloid, but the exposure could lead to greater exposure still, and more money. It could even lead to mainstream opportunities, a hope fanned by recent circumstances. What had that guy said last night? She was the local expert on millennial groups, doomsday cults, and such. A bizarre shingle to hang at her door, but exploitable.

She headed west on 62nd Street, which changed its name to Broad Ripple Avenue. Thankfully, the sidewalks were shoveled again. She passed the park, a pleasant walk except for the jerking, thick, aggressive traffic that snarled irredeemably at Broad Ripple High School. Students unloaded from school buses, city buses, cars, and bicycles. Herds of them wandered with seeming aimlessness everywhere except to the building. Some athletic type whistled at Sally.

She continued walking, but shoved one hand into her canvas bag.

She stopped in the Village at Ripple Bagels to stock up for the week. She got plenty of plain for Eulie, and her own favorites, as well. Her mother would cringe to hear that Sally ate cinnamon-sugar and raisin bagels. What sacrilege! What cultural assassination! But then, Sally wasn't a model Jew. She was more of an indifferent anarchist.

She ordered her one weekly treat, a cup of cinnamon-mocha coffee, but this time she got it for there, and sat down with her bagels and her two newspapers at a tiny table away from the counter. She positioned herself to see the sidewalk through the large shop window, then began to read.

Nothing surprising greeted her from the scandal articles. They were, after all, her own words. The Bennington piece drew more from conjecture than fact, but she had taken care to avoid that extra leap into fantasy. A dispute boiled between the Reverend's ministry and certain disgruntled former employees who claimed the books were cooked. The ministry dismissed their accusations as vindictive nonsense, yet also refused to open the records to independent evaluation. Still, with all the cash flowing into Bennington's empire, none of his favorite missions (of those big enough to absorb the money) had reported any appreciable increase in budgets. Where had the money gone?

None of this was new, but Bennington was a difficult, even political target, so the IRS approached him with caution. Perhaps they doubted the presence of a crime, or were afraid to upset Bennington's legions of voting followers. It didn't really matter, Sally thought, as long as she wrangled a paycheck from the mess.

She set aside the Bennington piece and took up the Sun. Her Davidson spread had been easy to write despite its considerable length. She had simply transcribed Davidson's telephone interview ravings, stringing his apocalyptic horrors together with little more than transitional phrases and commas. So little work, and her property taxes were paid for half the year.

She appreciated the money, but not the experience of earning it. Davidson was a nut. He was obsessed with biblical prophecy, and his loose interpretations of scripture conjured multiple terrors from his fertile imagination. Strangely, he couldn't wait for universal destruction. He called it the joyous return of Christ. Sally called it a death wish. But, his death wish sold copy, and his crusade drew ever closer to Indianapolis. She could milk more from Davidson. With luck, she might even land a face-to-face interview.

She sighed at the thought, and set aside the Sun. She dug into her bag and hauled out her laptop, releasing it from its form-fitted foam shell and opening it on the table. In moments, her machine found the local wireless network and Sally was clicking the tabs on her browser to check her regular assortment of blogs. The work took on a more relaxed character. Reading the blogs was Sally's education. They were vital to her awareness of the world. They were relatively unrestrained, free from the influence of advertisers and the needs of circulation, both of which hampered the printed newspapers. Here in the Internet's equivalent of journalism she found the news of the religious, the skeptical, the weird and the gamy. It wasn't always deftly written or objective in perspective, but the blogs were often more true than the printed word. Often the papers used the blogs as sources.

She scanned the headlines of the first four feeds, reading the leads that piqued her interest. Most fascinating was the story about a computer executive murdered out east, and the unsubstantiated rumors that a cult had left a message with the body. The authorities were mute, but the FBI might be involved, including their Assistant Director for Terrorism in Washington. Fascinating, but too unformed to work with as yet. She would watch how, or if, the story developed. She clicked on to the next feed.

Her daily ritual stalled on a posting from an editor at Nuvo, the city's counter-culture arts paper. Her name glared from the headline:

Does Reiser Uplift Tabloids,
Or Drag Down Journalism?

She frowned.

This is too much, the posting began. Sally Reiser has lurked in the background of journalism for years. For those who don't know, Sally Reiser is a writer, a fairly decent writer, to be fair, but her subject matter and medium relegate her to the fringes of her craft. One finds her work not in bookstores or the major dailies, but in the checkout line at the supermarket. Sally Reiser is a tabloid writer, part of that questionable offshoot of "journalism" that subsists on space aliens, devil worship, freaks of nature, and the Loch Ness Monster. The title "journalist" is undeserved--

Sally slapped the laptop shut. Undeserved? For pity's sake, that guy wrote for a paper whose primary source of revenue was graphically sexual personal ads! She scowled. She sat back in her chair with her arms rigidly crossed. She was sick of outsiders judging her life, finding her wanting in ethics, and morals, and responsible behavior. She was the parent of a six-year-old handicapped boy, for God's sake. Could responsibility chain you any more than that? She thought of her mother, who saw her as a complete social failure, who was embarrassed in her company, and who blamed her for Eulie's troubles. That blogger could be her mother.

But, why shouldn't all of them feel such disdain? Sally was a high school dropout, suckered into the loser class by a beautiful, smooth-talking bastard who preferred his naive bride at home. That same son of a bitch had sought to control her as a trainer controls an animal. He had beaten her. He had taught her doubt of her own self-worth. He had left her, finally, not for another woman easier to intimidate, but for barbaric, poor trash religious fanatics, of all things.

But Sally hadn't learned. There had been drugs, and depression, and ... desperate measures. She absentmindedly rubbed the skin of her wrists. There had been other men, too, including Eulie's father. They had used her briefly, become bored, and one after the other had thrown her away. Eerily, they had all hailed from that same fundamentalist Christian community, as if she sought men sure to rile her mother.

Now Sally's obsession with fundamentalism was second only to Eulie in her life. She needed to know what drove the fringe Christians, why they committed easy cruelties from within a philosophy based on love. Why did they hate her so, and all other Jews? She searched, and she wrote. The quest fed her baby.

She needed to cry. Instead, she hardened her face. Her life did not permit tears. Crying was a luxury for those with other recourse.

Then, she noticed him: black, a faded Colts jacket worn against the cold, a book bag slung from one shoulder. His black jeans piled, way too long and baggy, like waiting laundry about his slush-crusting court shoes. He stared at the address on the restaurant door, then at a piece of paper in his hand. He looked disgusted, peered up and down the street, then started to walk away. Sally looked at her watch. Nine o'clock. She considered letting him go; she really wasn't in the mood. But, he was so punctual, and her foul disposition was no excuse for rudeness. She pushed from her seat and jogged toward the door.

"Hey!" she yelled, leaning through the doorway. He was almost to the corner, looking for the bus stop across the street. He turned toward her voice. So did a middle class Barbie, who was walking a sheltie in a plaid dog coat.

"Mr. University Student?"

He nodded.

"Come on in! You're looking for me!"

He stared as she shivered against the penetrating cold. Then he turned back, approaching her at an unrushed, confident pace.

Moments later, he followed her through the doorway and toward her table.

"My office away from home," Sally explained, flourishing a hand at the papers, the laptop, the bagels, and her coffee. "The mocha's great, if you care to buy a cup. I come here whenever I can. It's a treat." Why was she so nervous? She had interviewed dozens, maybe hundreds, of strangers. Why did this one disturb her so?

Because he wants to interview you, she thought.

"Not a coffee drinker," the man said.

They stood at the table a moment, unsure how to proceed.

"Please, I'm Sally Reiser. I never learned my manners, I guess. I'm sorry, I don't recall..."

"Gary LaMonte." He put out his hand. She took it.

Mr. Gary LaMonte intrigued her. He was older than she expected for a college student. Twenty-five, maybe thirty. His rounded, boyish face contrasted with alert eyes and the grave line of his mouth. He might have been a soldier beneath those shabby, bargain store clothes and that worn canvas book bag. He had that confident, engaged look of one who has challenged life and wrestled it to a hard-won draw.

"The chairs are free," she said.

"I didn't think you'd come," Gary said as he took a seat and lowered his bag to the floor. "The way you came across last night, I thought this was just a punk job."

"Sorry, but I don't invite strangers to my home, not without checking them out."

"Fair enough. So. Do I pass?" He said it with hard, sparring eyes.

"You have ... potential." She threw him a wide, radiant, Julia Roberts smile.

"Should we get started?" he said.

"Sure. Tell me what you know about fundamentalist Bible bangers."

"Umm... my paper is over a hundred pages long, and modern fundamentalism is only a small portion of it. It might be more efficient if we start with the focus I mentioned over the phone--"

"I know the subject," Sally said, tasting her cooling mocha. "Contemporary doomsday cults, that sort of thing. But that isn't my interest, myths and legends aside. I need to understand the fundamentalist mentality. It's a thing of mine. If you want my help, that is my fee." She looked straight at him, her lips tight, her fingers interlaced on the table. "Of course, I could quote some outrageous consultant's fee that you couldn't possibly afford, and you could ask all the questions you want."

Gary nodded, his hard expression unchanged. "So, I teach you about fundamentalists, and you teach me about modern cults? That's the deal?"

"That's my thought."

He nodded again, curiosity growing in his face. "I can live with that," he said.

"Want a bagel?" she asked.



Vasquez hated paperwork. She read the last of the overnight reports without interest, then rubbed her eyes and rose to find some coffee. She left her cramped government hole in the Albany federal building and stepped into the outer office where plump, tired Anita, her secretary, banged steadily on her computer keyboard. The other four agents of the New York terrorism team shared two desks in the room, but were all presently in the field. Vasquez and Anita had the place to themselves.

"You look like crap," Anita said, never pausing her typing.

"Up late. That computer guy thing."

"I thought you had a date."

"That rumor was greatly exaggerated." Vasquez took the carafe from the cart in the corner. It yielded half a cup. "Anita, I can't handle this. I kill if I don't have my coffee."

The typing stopped. Anita took the carafe from her boss. "Then maybe," she said as she carried it toward the office entrance, "you should consider refilling it now and then."

"That's your job, honey. We have a deal: you make it, I drink it. Isn't that in a contract somewhere?" Vasquez leaned against one of the desks and sipped the stale sludge in her cup. She shifted her body. The holster under her suit jacket dug into her ribs.

The hall door opened seconds after Anita passed beyond it. Vasquez thought nothing of it. The Army recruiters down the hall sometimes came for sugar, or for coffee, her nonexistent coffee that was always better than theirs. Except for scheduled briefings, her own people rarely stopped by. Yet there it was in the door, the gray suit that served as the Bureau's distinctive uniform. It hung from a square-faced bruiser she didn't recognize.

"May I help you?" she asked, straightening.

"Special Agent Parker," he said from the door. "I'm looking for ASAC Terrorism."

"That's me. Rosa Vasquez."

Parker stepped forward, offering his hand. "Bill," he said. "Agent Vasquez, I have a plane at the airport. I'm to take you to DC, ASAP."

"Oh?" Vasquez dropped his hand. "Nobody told me--"

"Sorry, ma'am. He doesn't want any traffic on this."

Anita stood in the doorway, the carafe full of water. "What's going on, boss?"

"I don't know. Apparently, I'm going to Washington."

Anita huffed. "Well! That's organization for you. So, who's gonna drink this coffee?"



"Strains of fundamentalism have popped up in one form or another in different cultures for millennia, but we first got Christian fundamentalism in the last half of the 19th century, a reaction to advances in science thought to threaten the Christian faith." They had been talking for two hours. LaMonte was a yarn ball of technical details. The trouble was getting at the ones that counted.

"No, no," Sally interrupted, a hint of impatience in her voice. "Tell me about today's fundamentalists. That's what I need to understand."

"Sure, but understanding lies in the past. You see, with the discovery of dinosaurs, modern physics, carbon dating and such, the major religions were forced to adjust their philosophies, to accommodate new knowledge. See, you couldn't claim the world is only six thousand years old when people are digging up hundred-thousand-year-old humans and hundred-million-year-old animal bones. And the developing theories of evolution back then contradicted the world cosmology according to Genesis. That was the threat, but the major brands of Christianity accommodated the new discoveries and drove on, a little changed, but unruffled. Mainly, they characterized major sections of the Bible as allegory rather than historical fact; Genesis as symbolism of God's creative act, not documentation of it."

Sally was less interested in the history than she was in Gary's excited brown eyes. How could a guy so cute indulge in a passion so dry?

"Well, that insulted some of the Christian membership, who wanted no accommodation with modern science. These people formed new churches that defended the fundamentals of faith: the Bible as an historical document, with no possibility of error. There was no central organization to unify these people. They were essentially outside organization, renegades from the status quo. And they shared little between themselves, including any philosophical norms that might bring them together. They interpreted that historical Bible of theirs in often radically different ways. They had spokesmen, but only in a very informal sense. William Jennings Bryan, for instance, but that wasn't enough for a cohesive movement to form and survive."

Sally tilted her head, trying to recall some buried bit of trivia. "William Jennings Bryan. The Monkey Trial? Spencer Tracy in *Inherit the Wind*?"

Gary smiled. "Yeah, but Fredric March played him, and they changed the name. Bryan and other fundamentalists tried to remove evolution from school curriculums, but they failed. Their movement suffered worldwide ridicule, and they dropped into obscurity during the Great Depression and World War II. Later, starting in the sixties, the fundamentalists came back with a scheme to elevate Creationism, which adheres to the literal word

of the Bible, to the same level in academia as empirical science. They were roundly debunked by the scientific community, but they had grown in political clout, and could influence state legislatures and textbook publishing companies.

"Nowadays, the tactics have changed, but the fundamentals, if you'll excuse the word, are the same.

Fundamentalists still believe in the literal word of the Bible, they still have differing interpretations of that word, and they still live a combative existence, convinced that they're right and the revisionist Christian religious empires -- and other fundamentalist philosophies, for that matter -- are all irreconcilably wrong."

"Well, sure. This is the human race, after all. Who doesn't see the other guy as wrong? But, that's a difference of opinion. The stuff these bastards do-- I've seen things that go way beyond disagreement."

Sally realized her unintentional revelation, but blew it off with a flit of one hand and a cold sip from her cup. Her face grew hot at the curious glance Gary passed her way.

"Terrible things happen," he said, "but that's no reflection on the faith. Islamic fanatics destroy the World Trade Center, but that doesn't make Islam an evil religion. The IRA massacres a busload of school children, but that doesn't mean Catholicism sanctions murder. Evil people do evil things regardless of faith, and even use faith to justify their actions. But blame the people, not the religion. Remember, Jimmy Carter's a fundamentalist, too."

Sally fiddled with her newspapers, trying to recall anything at all about Jimmy Carter. She raised her empty cup to her lips, then put it down again. "I just don't get it, I guess. Maybe if I'd been more religiously involved myself... The Christian and Jewish religions are based on love, not hate. They're based on doing good works, not spreading misery. How does a guy claim to be Christian and still beat his wife, or take his girlfriend's money, or fuck her and leave her with a baby?"

The morning routine of the restaurant stumbled. Some of the help looked their way.

"I'm sorry. My language..."

"No offense taken," Gary said.

Sally looked around at the furtively watching restaurant workers. "Mind if we get out of here? They're starting to look at us, hoping we'll spend more cash." But, of course, that wasn't it.



Her meeting with Assistant Director Blackburn lasted five minutes. He did not welcome her. He did not ask her to sit.

"Your Bible scholar did it again," he said, and heaved a file across to her. It landed with a slap at the edge of his desk. "An early worship service in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Two hours ago. Episcopal church. Female minister recently active in championing the ordination of a homosexual minister within a province of the diocese of Philadelphia. Fella stood up in the middle of services with God knows how much TNT strapped to his chest and blew himself and thirty-two others to kingdom come."

"Are you sure, sir?" Vasquez thumbed through the file. "It isn't a coincidence, maybe?"

"He left a message."

Vasquez stopped at a Polaroid stapled to an evidence routing form. The photo showed a crinkled sheet of paper dominated by a blocky, handwritten phrase:

2 THESSALONIANS 2:3

"Uh-oh."

"An astute, if poorly voiced observation. Your office got first wind of this, Agent Vasquez, so you sail with it. I'm detaching you from Albany as of now, making you Special Agent in Charge of Bible Scholar. Look over the file, gather your team, and report back to me at three this afternoon. Any questions?"

Vasquez tucked the file under one arm. "I assume you believe these incidents might continue? Despite the fact that our Pennsylvania perp blew himself to bits?"

"Captain Hardiman in New York counted at least three sets of footprints around that car last night. We may have one less Bible scholar, but school is certainly still in session."

"Two incidents in two days."

"Yes. I have the same fear. I'm not doing you any favors, Agent Vasquez. Albany says you're good. You'll have to be, if this keeps up."

"Looking forward to it, sir. One more question: why the secrecy? You didn't have to send an unannounced aircraft. Fax or phone would have done just fine."

"Let's make a deal, Vasquez. I won't tell you your job if you refrain from telling me mine."

"Yes, sir."

"It happens that the boss is very concerned. He wants no stink. He wants no rumors. He wants no leaks. There'll be plenty of disinformation spread to separate these incidents. The boss chucks his job in January, and doesn't want the new guy saddled with a big, nasty hairball like this." He watched her flitting eyes as she analyzed his words.

"Sir, you don't mean the Director..."

"No, I don't."

Vasquez sighed. "I guess I'll need offices..."

"I grant you full authority. Anybody gives you problems, send them to me. And make sure they keep their mouths shut. Now, get out of here. I need to work."

Out in the reception room, Vasquez sagged against a wall. The secretary paid no attention. Probably, agents sagged there on a fairly regular basis.

So, she had her field status back. She owned a case of interest to the president of the United States, and it possibly involved a homicide or mass murder each day until she got it solved. Great.

"Can I use your phone?" she asked the secretary.

The woman nodded and released the lock on her phone with the fluid ease of practice. Maybe agents did this a lot, too. Vasquez dialed the only person she cared to hear. She closed her eyes and paced her breathing.

"Banks," the telephone said, and she smiled.

"It's me again, Rob. You won't believe how my day is going..."



They crunched snow beneath their shoes, and spewed clouds of breath toward the gray filigree of tree branches above. Gary hunched deep in his coat, frowning against the winter chill. Despite the hard set of his face, he felt fresh in Sally's company. He was alert to her dizzying mood swings, but amused by the cocky energy that powered them. She walked backwards ahead of him, strands of blonde hair whipped by gusts of icy air and by her own animated gestures.

"I don't buy it. Maybe I'm not as religious as I ought to be, or maybe it's just that I'm a Jew. But this image of God as Charlton Heston or James Earl Jones strikes me as wishful bullshit. He's more like Jeffrey Daumer, as far as I'm concerned."

"I'd think a Jew would lean toward Heston," Gary said with a smirk.

"Right. The great white father leading us to freedom. Bullshit! If he's so fatherly, then why the earthquakes in South America, the mudslides in India, the tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, car crashes, and lost puppies? And, if he's such a hot leader, why North Korea?"

"They're challenges, some of them," Gary mused. "Others are the natural order of things. God has more at stake than us, you know."

"Fine. Go on down to Riley Children's Hospital and tell that to a six-year-old with cancer."

Gary sighed. God took so much grief for every evil on Earth, but rarely credit for the overwhelming beauty that defined that evil in the first place. "Is that necessary?" he asked. "That backwards walking thing. I'm scared to death you'll fall and crack your skull."

She ambushed him with that bulldozing smile, so unexpected after the challenging, cynical face it replaced. "I want to see you while we talk," she cooed. "You speak so much with your eyes."

Now the smile challenged, as her cynicism had before. She's a big tease, Gary thought. "Anyway," he said, "you can't go off blaming God for every hurt that comes down the road. We cause most of it ourselves. It's freedom of choice, and our choices are often poor."

"Oh? So the six-year-old caught cancer from his own bad character? Now, that's religion for you."

"A child is all innocence." Gary said, tiring of this banter that she found so important. "He isn't accountable for any wrong he does, in this world or any other. But, the rest of us are another thing. Drugs, food additives, pesticides, global warming, pollution, ozone depletion, they're all our creations, and they all affect our children, both born and unborn. The kid has cancer because we likely gave it to him, not God."

"And this faultless, omnipotent God who could prevent or end such suffering by an innocent, this Baptist God - that's what you said you were? -- this Baptist God who controls our fates just lets the baby suffer and die. Why? What's the point? Does he like to watch?"

Gary just looked at her. She claimed to be a Jew, so hostile atheism wasn't her game. But her face, so bright and combative moments ago, now showed a hot mask of anger. The day seemed much, much colder.

"Where the hell are we going?" Gary asked, catching her dark mood.

"Don't worry, we'll get there."

"I am not an Eskimo. If we aren't going anywhere, if you don't plan to help me out, then I'd just as soon find a bus stop."

"Relax, already." She pivoted on one heel and fell into step beside him, this time facing forward. "You think I'd welsh on a deal? Or maybe I should have said 'Jew you out of'?"

"Oh, that's rich. Now look who's talking shit. I never said anything--"

"That's right. I'm sorry. Maybe we should change the subject."

They marched along in silence, puffing steam like locomotives in tandem. Sally stole furtive glances Gary's way. She was driving him nuts.

"I like your haircut," she said as she turned onto a narrow street.

"Excuse me?"

"I like your hair. It's very cool."

Gary stared at her. Was she psychotic? How do you go from God to haircuts in five seconds flat? And what haircut? He was shaved. Before he realized it, his hand had risen to swipe the slick skin of his skull.

"No, I'm serious. It's an interesting contrast. It makes you more black."

"Makes me more black. Blacker than what, come again?"

"Well, you have to admit, all that pseudo-professorial bullshit back in the restaurant. You didn't sound all that black."

"Thank-you. I take it your mother never sent you to finishing school?"

"You're definitely more black when you're angry."

"And you're more white when I'm angry. Now, let's stop all the baiting and backbiting and get to wherever we're going. I think you just want to see how long my African ass will last in your white folks winter wonderland. That black enough for you?"

"We're here."

It was a tiny frame house amid colossal sycamores, evergreens, and maples, sitting on a scrap of lawn covered in cat-tracked snow. It was old, with peeling wood siding, a sagging attached garage with an overhead door askew on its tracks, and a lot so narrow you could stand in the side yard and touch two houses at once. A decrepit Nissan sat in the gravel drive, a perfect match to the building it called home.

"My place," Sally announced with mock self-importance.

"Nice. Can we get inside where it's warm?"

He followed her into the house. He noticed the careworn nature of the place, so similar to his own on the other side of town. But Sally Reiser wasn't the neat freak his Gramma was; toys littered the living room floor while breakfast dishes lay untouched on a table in one corner. The vacuuming hadn't been done in a week; balls of animal hair drifted with the inrushing air. And despite his expectations, it wasn't all that warm.

"Dammit!" Sally shouted, making him jump. "God damned heat pump's at it again!" She pushed past him, took a left through a doorless opening just before the arch to the kitchen. He heard loud bangs and curses, then watched her stalk from there into the kitchen. She carried a hammer in one hand. A door slammed seconds later.

Gary stood at the front door threshold, immobilized by yet another change in her mercurial personality. A white cat eyed him from the kitchen, looking bored.

He heard another door slam, then violent pounding. A moment later, the house moaned with air through its ancient furnace ducts. Sally returned from the back of her house, looking disgusted.

"I think you fixed it," Gary said.

"God damned thing's been dying for years. You know how much a heat pump costs? Eight thousand dollars! That's for a cheap one." She dropped the hammer inside the doorless room. "Welcome to my house."

Gary remained at the door. He watched her move about the living room, removing her coat, kicking off her shoes, dropping her bagels on the coffee table before the couch. No pleasure informed her movements; she was more like an animal pacing its cage. The canvas bag remained at her side.

"Nice place," he said.

"Come on in. Make yourself at home."

"I thought you didn't want me in your house. You don't know me, and all that."

She waved him over to the couch. "Familiarity breeds carelessness. We're here. Yes, I'm all alone. I guess you'll want to rape me now."

"Excuse me?" He stiffened at her words and took a step back toward the door.

"That's what black men do, right? Rob liquor stores and rape white women?"

"What?" Gary, Jesus help him, wanted to hit her.

"Isn't that it? Isn't that what happens to women stupid enough to trust men they've just met? What the hell, it's nothing new to me."

"Jesus, lady, what is your problem? I mean, one minute you're Little Miss Barbie talking to Ken. Next, you're the only known survivor of the Donner Party! I'm not one to pry into other people's personal--"

"Then don't. I apologize." She sat at a table in the corner of the living room, next to a massive, worn bureau. She drew out her laptop. "You asked about modern cult groups. Well, there are plenty of them." She opened the lid and plugged a tangled power cord into the machine. The screen came to life, and she began a series of mouse maneuvers. "I'll give you a shipload of web addresses, and links that can lead you to others I don't even know about--"

"Hold on a minute. Let's not change the subject so quickly. You've made some accusations here, and I think we ought to settle them."

"I've made no accusations, just inferences."

"Well, excuse me for missing such a fine distinction--"

"You're raising your voice--"

"Damned straight I'm raising my voice. You've called me a rapist, a Jew-hater, a religious fanatic, and a race-baiter boogieman all in the last half hour. I mean, really, what makes you think I want your pale ass, anyway?"

"Now, you're being rude."

"I'm rude?"

She looked at him, deadpan. "This conversation won't go anywhere. I said I'm sorry. I am, really. And though my behavior was inexcusable, I do note that you didn't take the bait. Or that you did take the baiting, whatever. You could have just slugged me; you wouldn't have been the first. Now, let's stick to the deal, to the information you want, and we won't have any more arguments."

"No. Sorry. Tell me straight up. Do you believe those things, the things you said?"

"No."

He snorted. "Well, that was pat, and convenient, too. How do I know you aren't just blowing me off?"

"God, I said I was sorry. What does it matter?"

The quaver in her voice made him back off. Anger rolled behind that voice, but not anger at him. "It matters to me," he said flatly.

They glared at each other for several long seconds, Gary at the door and Sally at her desk. Then Sally dropped her gaze in clear contrition.

"Please excuse me," she said. "You could say I insulted you out of habit. I guess I pigeonholed you into bad company. I'm really sorry." She forced a smile, more low-key than the blast he had come to expect. "You really do speak with your eyes."

Gary looked away from her. Her words carried sincerity, but he wasn't quite ready to forgive.

"Look, I'm a monster," Sally said with mock expansiveness. She rose from her seat and stepped to the bureau. She took a key from a pocket and unlocked a narrow top drawer. "I guess if anyone makes a gesture of trust, it should probably be the bad guy." She opened the drawer and reached into her canvas bag.

She pulled out a pistol, a large, black automatic. Gary's eyes bulged at the sight of it. She deftly removed the magazine from the gun's grip. She dumped it into the drawer, then broke the weapon into three pieces, dropping two into the drawer with the ammo. "See?" she said, holding up a big hunk of metal, "I trust you."

"Jesus! You were gonna shoot me with that?"

"Only if you asked for it." She locked the bureau, then retook her seat at the laptop. She put the piece of steel into her bag.

"Lady, you are crazy!"

"No, just compensating. Now, you wanted information. That's easy to come by. But, I'm gonna give you some advice that might spiff up your research." She looked at him over her shoulder. "Well? Come on in."

He stepped toward her, not too eagerly.

"You're looking for cults," she continued, "basically, freaks of religious nature. I don't think that's productive. After all that millennium mess and the Mayan calendar nonsense, the more traditional groups are far more active than the freak shows. And if you look at the fringes of acceptable--" She looked at him standing a good six feet away. "Gary, for pity's sake, I'm unarmed. Come on over to see the screen."

"I can see just fine from here."

"Scared of girls?"

His face set. He stepped a foot closer.

"Suit yourself. Like I said, the fringes of the traditional base are generating most of the trouble. They have money, and they have the media savvy to recruit in large numbers. I'm calling up a forum on the Davidson Crusade. Are you familiar--"

"Yes. I know about Davidson. His crusade arrives in Indy the third week of the month."

"I know. I plan to scare up money for a ticket. Anyway, he doesn't control this group. It's pretty wide open. But his people monitor and reply to keep things under control."

They waited for the forum page to load, both staring at the computer as if at a flickering fireplace.

"The gun's my ex-husband's," Sally offered.

"I don't want to know," Gary assured her.

"There it is." She pointed to the mess of entries on the screen. "You can always tell the Davidson camp entries. They consistently have rather overblown titles. The rest are normally pretty lowbrow, kind of afternoon talk radio stuff. This one, though, is always interesting. Her name's Birget Hoffmann. Presumably, she's a ninety-one-year-old German hausfrau, a survivor of the bombing of Berlin back in the forties. She's claimed for months that Davidson is actually an ex-shadow functionary in the Hitler bureaucracy, that he was, in fact, an advisor to Hitler."

"An advisor to Hitler? What, when he was in diapers?"

"I didn't say she made any sense, just that she's interesting. There are plenty of others just as wacky. More importantly, you can catch dialogs between people who claim to have actually met Davidson, even talked to him, and that's a short list."

"It's an open Internet forum. You can't verify the identities of these people, let alone their stories. They could be anyone, and say anything. Your ninety-one-year-old grandmother might actually be a fifteen-year-old boy with a fertile imagination."

"Absolutely. But, the dialogs give you a sense of where things are going within this glassed-in community of Davidson followers. They feed on each other, like Harry Potter nuts. I've gotten a lot of accurate story ideas from here."

"And how many inaccurate ones?"

She looked at him. "Now, don't be rude, or I'll have to reassemble that gun."

A horn sounded outside. Sally glanced at the clock on her screen, and her face brightened. "Noon already. Excuse me, I have to meet someone."

She slid past him and out the front door, closing it behind her.

"Eulie!" Gary heard her sing. "How was school today?"

"Fine!"

"Well, give Mommy a hug. Now, come on in. We have company!"

The door opened. A gust of cold air ushered her in, along with a three-foot tall human, sex indeterminable under a heavy coat, gloves, scarf, hat, and boots.

"This is Gary," Sally said from her knees as she freed the child of outer garments. "He's very nice. He's here to get help from Mommy."

"Get shoo help, Mommy?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. But, Gary goes to a big people's school, not a little school like yours."

The boy looked sideways at Gary, smiling. "Too big widdle shoo!"

"That's right. Now, say 'Hi, Gary' and you can go play."

"Hi, Gehey." The tones were musical, endearing.

"Hi, little dude. What's your name?"

The boy leaned into his mother.

"Go ahead, Eulie. Answer the nice man." Sally had him peeled to a sweater and basics.

"Euie Eiser!" the boy crowed.

"That's right," Sally laughed, and kissed him on the head. "Now, go play."

Eulie shot for a pickup truck on the living room floor. "Euie pway porch!"

"No, honey, not today." Sally rose to her feet. "The heater went out again. The porch is too cold. But, as a special treat, you can play in my room while Gary and I do business, okay?"

"Okay. Mommy help?"

"It'll just be a minute," Sally said to Gary, then went to her son. She helped him gather a suite of favorite toys, then haul them up the stairs. All the while, she kept up an animated conversation about toys and school, the love plain in her voice.

As he waited, Gary sighed away his anger. He felt a dawning shame, felt like a bully for his words toward Sally. He had seen the boy; now he understood. After a moment, she returned.

"That was Eulie," she said. "He's my treasure."

"Fine boy," Gary murmured, unsure what else to say.

"You don't have to freak, Gary. Yes, he's retarded. Yes, he has problems communicating. Yes, his muscles don't work very well. They diagnose him as cerebral palsy and autism, which is doctor talk for 'Gee, I don't know.'"

"I'm sorry..."

"Thank-you. I used to be, but now I just live with it." She looked from him to the computer. "Could we get back to work? He won't be entertained up there for long."

"Sure. Where were we?"

"Addresses. Do you have Web access?"

"I use the university computer labs."

"Great. I'm printing this screen. You can use the addresses for the forums. I'm also printing the main Davidson web page, which is chock full of links to other resources. That ought to keep you in trouble for a while."

The printer next to the laptop hummed to life.

"How do you afford all this?" Gary asked. "No offense, but you don't exactly glow with dough."

"No offense taken, coming from Mr. Moneybags-Rides-the-Bus himself. It's a necessity. Without this machine, I couldn't earn my living. Besides, it's a gift from my mother."

The printer rolled out multiple sheets of paper.

"Gary, how come you don't use my name?"

"What?"

"I use your name, but you haven't used mine even once. Why?"

Gary shrugged. "I guess I was mad at you, and preferred to know you as 'that Reiser woman.' I'm not anymore. Mad, I mean."

"Then why don't you use my name?"

"We don't know each other that well..."

"Oh, come on. We don't have to be lovers to use each other's names. Telemarketers do it without even seeing you--"

"Okay, to tell the truth, it's a little awkward. Sally doesn't seem very Jewish to me."

She looked at him, that amused, teasing expression returning to her face. "You have a point there. It's short for Sarah. Feel better?"

"Hmmm, not any shorter."

"Well, you know how names are." She handed him the printouts.

"Sarah."

"Sally. Nobody calls me by that other name. Nobody but my mother."

"Well, Sally, I guess I'd better let you go. I thank you for the resources, and will put them to good use." He folded the papers and stuffed them into a jacket pocket. "Umm, do you mind if I see you again? In case I have more questions, you know."

"No, Gary, I wouldn't mind at all. You have my address and even my e-mail. I printed you off my business card."

"Oh! I didn't even notice."

She left the desk and escorted him to the door. "You know where to catch the bus?"

"Right up on Kessler. Thanks again for the help."

"And, thanks for yours."



She closed the door behind him, then stepped to the living room window. She stood near the frame to avoid being seen if he turned to look. Such an odd man, she thought. He seemed so straightforward, so unpretentious. She saw in his unguarded eyes none of the plots she had come to view as basic to the souls of men. What formula mixed a Gary LaMonte? she wondered.

Ghost rubbed across her ankle. "Meurrl," he said.

"Yes, Ghost," Sally agreed. "I like him, too."